
Critical Discourse Analysis of American Films on Arab Muslims: A Hegemonic Discourse or Clash of Cultures?

Noor Mubarak Bajuwaiber

Associate Professor, Media and Communication Department, College of Humanities and Social Sciences, King Saud University, Saudi Arabia
nbajuwaiber@ksu.edu.sa

Abstract

The Middle East in general and the Muslim world in particular has been plagued by cultural ravaging, imperial interests, and unequal partnership with the West, especially with the United States. However, since 2001, the Arab world has moved to the centre of cultural debates and received the major number of cultural misrepresentations in American films. This study explores the significant role of movies in presenting distorted information and creating irrefutable images of the Arab world, its people, its religion, its culture, and its way of life. Analysis in this study investigates the assumption implicit in the conception that American films is in solidarity with the States ignoring its hegemony and imperial ambitions in the region and its saturation with imperial practices. In response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, 2001, films have been one of the most effective mediums to represent the feelings of the American nation and the concern of the state. Therefore, this study will offer a different approach to the study of films, a semantic and semiotic analysis, in which cultural attitudes and political orientations of film directors allow movies to follow the mainstream politics and do not grapple with the hegemonic interests. Moreover, analysis in this study will contribute, in a good way, to suggesting a

systematic approach to the study of post-9/11 American films in order to evaluate the communicative and aesthetic impact as a powerful cultural medium.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, American Films on Arab Muslims, Hegemonic Discourse, Clash of Cultures.

Introduction

In his two latest books on the representation of the Muslims in American movies, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2002) and *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11* (2012), Jack G. Shaheen intensively investigates the inhuman representation of Arabs in American Cinema, Hollywood. Shaheen refers to a large number of films that has presented Arabs as incapable of building a civilization, brute murderers, sleazy rapists, religious fanatics, oil rich dimwits, and abusers of women. Prior to Shaheen's theses, Edward Said, in his milestone books, *Orientalism* (1978) and *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (1997), argued that western media has, in variable degrees, adopted vis-à-vis the cultural, social, and political realms of the Arab world: "it ought to go without saying that the media are profit-seeking corporations and therefore, quite understandably, have an interest in promoting some images of reality rather than others." (Said. *Covering Islam*. 49). According ho Said, the idea of the Middle East as an exotic place, inferior, subhuman, incapable of rational thinking is easily found in the early western visual cultural productions.

Theoretical Framework

Stuart Hall (1997) proposed a concept of representation based on a linguistic model and argued (echoing many writers before him, including Saussure, Barthes, Borges and Foucault) that representation is the production of meaning through language (Edgar, Marland and Rawle, 2015). All languages, whether written, spoken, audio, or visual, are therefore representation systems, since they use elements to express a

thought, concept, idea, or feeling. The elements used are symbols (connotative) or signs (denotative) that are organised in order to produce and transmit meaning (Hall, 1997 echoing McLuhan's sender/receiver model, 1967)). Shaw (2018) argues that members of the same culture must share a literal language if they are to communicate. Christian Metz (1974) who is the founder of semiotics of cinema, established as the aim of his book *Language and Cinema* to go to the bottom of the metaphor of language that had been used widely for describing cinema in film theory, however, without considering the knowledge about language that had accrued in linguistics.

CDA comes under the umbrella of discourse analysis, and assesses the language used concerning society. Van Dijk (2001) considers CDA to be an effective tool that exposes the delicate and indirect ways in which language has supremacy in revealing the issues of ideology and power. The major aim behind carrying out CDA is to show how different aspects, such as ideology and power, are produced with the help of language, text, or speech. According to Van Dijk (2001), discourse analysis primarily deals with the political and social context of text, conversation, or speech.

Furthermore, Malmkjær (2009) states that discourse analysis establishes a relationship between social-theoretical ambition and social criticism. Critical discourse analysts are inspired by the ideas of philosophers such as Michael Halliday, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida, who have worked in the fields of functional linguistics, social theory, and literary criticism. As Foucault argues that every discourse consists of a series of utterance, each generated at its place and time (Foucault, 1979, p. 19).

Meaning and truth are created principally through the discourse. Nonetheless, it must be underlined that discourse is not a single statement, although it is somehow a collection of assertions that come together in what Foucault (1980) refers to as, "discursive formation" (Foucault, 1980, p. 73). Across all ages, there are dominant discursive elements that individuals instinctively live on. We are presently living in

the second century of the age of Hollywood (Paglia, 1994, p. 12), and it can be claimed that “literature is no longer the dominant form of expression” (Kappelman, 2000, pp. 119-120). As a consequence, “scriptwriters, directors, and actors do more to shape the culture in which we live than do the giants of literature or philosophy” (ibid, p. 118). Hence, when Hollywood films inundate audiences with negative representations of Arabs, Hollywood limits audiences to a particular mindset, whilst depriving them of more positive images of Arabs.

Furthermore, the works of Foucault and Derrida will be discussed. Foucault drew our attention to the relationship between knowledge and power. Conversely, Derrida has determined how “signifying practices construct, rather than simply represent social reality, and how ideology works to make such practices seem transparent” (Chandler, 2003, p. 199) as well as he argues that “every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences” (Derrida 1982, p.11). However, Foucault claims power lies outside of these structures in society. He instead said that power operates in discourses rather than structures. A discourse is how we talk about something. An example of how power could be seen in society is through changes in society.

In addition, Foucault’s work will be considered. This idea has been declared by Foucault, whose work on power and knowledge form that provides an essential foundation for the conceptualisation of the East/West divide in the thesis. Foucault challenges the idea of power being a merely negative imposition, and instead defines power as being dependent and positive or productive (khatib, 2006).

Though, Foucault’s work augments to Said’s dimensions that are useful as tools undoing power relations in the films as Said claims that the representation of other societies and peoples involved an act of power by which images of them were in a sense created by the Western observer who constructed them as peoples and societies

to be ruled and dominated, not as objects to be understood passively, objectively, or academically (Said 1978, p. 43).

The most commonly used CDA method is presented by Fairclough (2003). It concentrates on the analysis of a text, speech, or conversation based on the grammar used, the structure of the text, and its relationship with the social factors that tend to influence the selection of the choice of language and its application. For every text, there is a specific and distinctive point of view, which is reflected in it. CDA tends to challenge the viewpoints of the writers. Fowler (1996) states that things can be presented in a very different manner through text, which can alter their significance. This implies that a major role of culture is played in the interpretation or discourse analysis of a text. Fowler states that text is viewed differently from a different culture's perspective (1996).

As mentioned earlier, one of the major analysts or theorists in the field of discourse analysis is Norman Fairclough (2010), who presented a framework of CDA that takes into consideration two structures: internal relations and external relations. Internal relations are linked with the grammar and vocabulary used within a text, which are further broken down into three categories: action, representation, and identification. Action refers to the format of the text, such as whether it is implicative, interrogative, persuasive, or declarative (ibid). Representation deals with the description of people, actions, and places in a text or conversation. Lastly, identification deals with the representations used by the writers for gaining an inclusive picture of the intent of the text (Jaworski and Coupland, 2014).

The external relations refer to the external factors that are included in the framework and presented by the personal beliefs and social effects of the authors (Fairclough, 2010). External factors are responsible for the determination of the language that is used in the text or the conversation to recover social meanings from the discourse. It can be concluded that what sets CDA apart from other approaches of discourse

analysis is the social aspect of the analysis. This thesis applied CDA to carry out a detailed evaluation of its chosen texts.

Articles illustrate how viewers make sense of and interpret the world as shown in films and the way culture is represented. Such articles develop further knowledge about films, which help us better understand the behaviour and perceptions of film directors and producers who work in the film industry. The article taken into consideration in this thesis is “Zero Dark Thirty, the CIA and film critics have a very bad evening,” written by Glenn Greenwald and published in The Guardian on 25 February 2013. This article was analysed using the CDA framework presented by Fairclough (2003) and internal and external factors were taken into consideration. The article was selected because it points out how film critics ignored or failed to detect the false representation of torture as instrumental in finding Osama bin Laden. This article represents how films can spread different discourses and how they relate to power in worldviews such as that which regards all Muslims as extremists. However, providing a critical analysis to the article language in attempt to identify the structural in the films analysis chapters later in the study as well as ideological changes in post-9/11 films.

The article provides a critique of the film Zero Dark Thirty (2012), an American political thriller that focuses on the “greatest manhunt of all time”, revolving around a dramatisation of the decade-long hunt for Osama bin Laden, who became the most wanted man in history following the terrorist attacks of 9/11. In the article, different textual quotations show the opinions of various film critics. Therefore, in the article, not only has the author presented his views regarding the film, but he has also presented the words of other critics, columnists, and political leaders. The discourse analysis presents an analysis of different texts that are important concerning the gist of the article, from the context of its grammar and text as well as the social and cultural context. Greenwald, for example, writes or Times Magazine’s Richard

Corliss's reaction to the film "OK, folks, you can plan something else for Oscar Night 2013... Zero Dark Thirty will win Best Picture and Best Director (Kathryn Bigelow)" (Greenwald, 2013, n.p.). This is a statement reveals an internal point of view that the writer wants to impose on people regarding how well the film has been received by him (whereby Corliss provides a voice). An internal analysis of the extract shows that the writer has used informality to attract readers to his opinion. In terms of the 'action' of the text, it can be stated that it is declarative because there is no argument whatsoever; the writer is simply stating his viewpoint. The sentence structure shows that the writer is confident in stating his opinion. From the 'representation' of the sentence, it is evident that the writer is talking about the event of the Oscars and social actors. The last component of the internal aspect is 'identification', which shows the positive view of the author regarding the film Zero Dark Thirty. With regard to the external context of this extract, it is evident that the social practice of Time Magazine here was to attract the attention of readers and increase its readership. There may be an integration of biased opinions in the article. The opinion of the film critic might have convinced a considerable number of people to watch the film.

Later, the article demonstrates a negative opinion of the film under discussion: "What is so unsettling about 'Zero Dark Thirty' is not that it tells this difficult history but, rather, that it distorts it," said the New Yorker's Jane Mayer" (Greenwald, 2013, n.p.).

Critically analysing the discourse, it is evident that certain significant differences exist between the first extract and the second. As stated by discourse analysts, this difference can be related to a difference in perspective. It should be noted that the first extract, which has been critically explained, shows a positive opinion regarding the film, but the second extract presents a negative judgement of the film. This extract is also explained in the context of Fairclough's theoretical framework. First, from the inclusive analysis of an internal aspect of this discourse, it is evident that the

grammatical structure of the second statement is much more formal compared with the previous one. The use of the words ‘but’ and ‘rather’ in the sentence structure shows the strong negation presented by the writer to their readers regarding the film. In terms of ‘action’, this discourse can be placed in the category of being an argumentative passage because the writer seems to be arguing regarding the unsettling nature of the film, which has been presented by other critics who have praised the film. The arguments presented by the author of this extract are based on the distortion of the facts in the film. The ‘representation’ in this extract is the negation of the previous positive view of the film.

Mayer seems strongly to nullify the authenticity of the film by stating that it has distorted the facts. The last component of the internal analysis is ‘identification’, which shows that the overall intent of the extract is negative. The external analysis of the extract in terms of social factors is that political parties have a significant role in the daily lives of people. A major reason for such a strong critique of the film by Mayer, Jane Mayer, might be to criticise the political parties of the US due to the wrongful depiction of pro-torture behaviour shown in the film during the manhunt for Osama bin Laden.

“This is not a coincidence. The CIA [the US Central Intelligence Agency] played a key role in shaping the film’s narrative,” reported BuzzFeed’s Michael Hastings; the CIA “couldn’t have asked for better product placement”, said the New York Times’ Timothy Egan; as a result, said The Atlantic’s Peter Maass: “Zero Dark Thirty represents a new genre of embedded filmmaking that is the problematic offspring of the worrisome endeavour known as embedded journalism”.

According to Cole (2008), embedded filmmaking is a term that refers to Western directors inserting themselves in remote regions, working in the native language, and utilising usually local and lay actors. Cole (2008) highlights also that the term is utilised to explain films that provide a voice to deprived cultures, for instance,

cultures deprived of traditions of filmmaking and infrastructure; however, behind the scenes, these cultures often lack a true home-grown vision.

The next phase in the extract is minimalistic because the whole idea is presented in a single sentence. The nature of the sentence is declarative because the writer has simply presented the information without any argument or negation. From the tone of the text, it is evident that the writer is presenting the information rather sarcastically and provocatively. The subject of the topic regarding the aforementioned statement is the CIA and the representation of the statement is carried out in a negative context. From the social context, it can be stated that most of the film critics who are against the film have a perspective that even though the image of the governmental agencies has been distorted by the producers and directors of the film, the CIA's image was protected.

The critics aim to highlight that the film is biased towards the CIA because they were the major contributors to the narration of the film. The next phrase is presented by Peter Maass and is argued to be the strongest and most negative when compared with the other statements. The negative words used by the critic refer to “embedded filmmaking”, “problematic offspring”, and “worrisome”. The major reason for such strongly negative comments regarding the film might be because it has been printed in a magazine, The Atlantic, which focuses on business and political news, rather than other, more general-interest magazines and blogs such as BuzzFeed and The New York Times.

“Zero Dark Thirty,” about the decade-long US hunt for Osama bin Laden, has received more attention in the US Congress than it did at the Oscars on Sunday, amid political fallout over its depiction of torture and alleged intelligence leaks to the film’s makers...

Just three months ago, the thriller, which culminates in Osama bin Laden’s killing by US Navy SEALs, was a strong contender to pick up the biggest prize of Best Picture, as well as the Best Actress and Original Screenplay awards.

By the end of Sunday night, however, it had picked up just one award – a shared Oscar for Sound Editing, which was a tie.

Internal analysis of the overall statement in the above extract shows that this piece of the discourse is presented in a rather mocking and sarcastic manner. The overall sentence structure and grammar of the context is informal. In the first paragraph of the extract, the writer presents a declarative point of view stating the facts and figures by recounting that the film gained more attention in Congress than it did in the awards function of the Oscars. To add weight to the statement, the writer also presents the rationale behind the sarcasm by stating that the filmmakers gave a wrongful depiction of torture during the manhunt. After the first paragraph, there is a break, which shows that the writer wants to present another notion.

Classifying the films tend to make it simple for the viewer to determine what people like and want to see. Putting a film into a particular genre or category does not diminish the quality of the film by assuming that if it can be put into a genre, the film is ordinary and lacks originality and creativity. The next paragraph presents a prologue, in which it was perceived that the film was going to receive awards and recognition. The writer has stated this to remind the readers of the background of the film and the way the situation has subsequently changed. The action for this paragraph of the extract is argumentative because the writer has presented the argument based on the above statement.

The representation of the paragraph is dependent on the Oscars and filmmakers. After presenting the argument, the writer closes his statement by stating the facts and declaring that in the present the film has only garnered a single award, not one of the prestigious awards listed in the second paragraph but instead an award for sound editing, clearly adjudged to be a lesser award. Regarding the social context, it is

relevant to note that politicians ‘political fallout’ and critics were outraged by the filmmakers’ misrepresentation of the facts.

Our choice wasn’t between a benign status quo and the bloodshed of war. It was between war and a graver threat. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. Not our political opponents. “Not – and certainly not – and certainly not a disingenuous filmmaker who would have us believe that Saddam's Iraq was an oasis of peace” (Krzych, 2015 p. 82).

Hollywood and the Muslim community have had disagreements over films that degrade Muslims and Islam’s image. It may be inferred that all of the films selected in the study to maintain Western perceptions of the ‘Other’ Orient through a range of multimodal means to sustain certain established attitudes and deliver specific messages from three films I selected in the study and more provided in the next chapter. Body of Lies functions within the West/East, us-versus-them paradigms, and its viewpoints are shaped as much by domestic American politics as by a desire to authentically portray the Middle East. The Orientalist concepts of backwardness and despotism are stressed to justify the war on Iraq. The Hurt Locker depicts Islam as a violent religion that cannot be developed to reconcile with the ‘Other’. American Sniper depicts all Iraqis as untrustworthy, violent, and primitive. Furthermore, to legitimise action in Iraq, the film emphasises the Orientalist theme of Christian-Islamic antagonism.

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