

Portrayal of terrorism in film



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

- Luke Costen

Terrorism and the mutual influence of the British film industry, the genre of satire

- Terrorism is an exceedingly ambivalent topic and one that becomes particularly ambiguous when attempting to define. When trying to comprehend the motivations of a specific terrorist organisation, one must start by considering the context of the acts of terrorism, by exploring ‘ the historical, social, economic, ethnic and even psychological factors that have some influence on thought, behaviour and action.’ (Whittaker, 2012: 4) thus the notion of a universal and objective definition is virtually impossible. The dissimilarities between the United Kingdom’s and the USA’s definitions raise controversy over the evidently contextual and subjective nature of what terrorism is. ‘ The use or threat, for the purpose of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause, of action which involves serious violence against any person or property’ (Whittaker, 2012: 3). This definition appropriately legitimises the existence of state terrorism, theoretically defining the USA as a state terrorist, due to the atrocities taking place in the Middle East over the past decade. Whilst the USA’s equivalent contrasts this idea, it states that terrorism must be surreptitious and committed by subnational groups.

This essay will explore the notion of political communication, demonstrating the mutual influence between contemporary Terrorist organisations, particularly Jihadism and the satirical genre, within the British film industry. This essay will thus formulate the context of the

following case study; an analysis of *Four Lions* (2010), a black comedy that provocatively satirises Islamic terrorism, humanising the British born anti-protagonist terrorists, exploring indoctrination, islamophobia, and police inadequacy when combating the issue of terrorism. The 7th July 2005 London bombings resonate throughout the text, creating a social commentary on the event and the obsession that the conservative western media have with Islamic fundamentalism, that further assist the feeling of estrangement of British born Muslims.

The most important aspect in what politicises communication is not the origin of the message, instead it is the subject matter and the intentions of the message. (Denton and Woodward, 1990: 11) This defines political communication as accessible to anyone intending to make a statement about a political issue in society, emphasising that communicating politically is not exclusive to the government and the elites that control global and national politics. This therefore allows the public to convey political messages through any means possible, such as any form of media or even the body itself (the black or homosexual liberation). However this can be contested as acquiring a credible platform may require an already cemented position or political power, those who do, will find it considerably simpler to secure media coverage; hence it is far easier to express their message. (Wolfsfeld, 2011: 2) Film as well as other varying media can be seen as a process that allows an individual to reach a target audience as well as wider audience, in order to convey the intended political message, and can perhaps give some explanation to why bodies are used in extreme

forms of political communication. Both acts of terrorism and the film industry can be equally seen as diverse forms of political communication, in an attempt to highlight prevalent issues in society. Respectively terrorism, specifically suicide terrorism is the most radical practice of political communication and one that is almost impossible to entirely understand. In the context of religious suicide, an unfamiliar concept in secular society is still far easier to understand than the secular suicide. The radicalised Muslim; mujahedeen will be profoundly rewarded for partaking in the holy war and, completing God's will in destroying the infidel forces, his family will be cared for, and receive a payment for their loss a sort of life insurance. (Whittaker, 2011: 26)

Although the practise of film-making in its original form is not inherently politically or artistically charged, its malleability and diversity as a creative media allow for artistic and political expression. It is the director or producers of a film text that can therefore express artistic and political visions creating an immersive form of political communication. *Hunger* (2008) follows Bobby Sands, an imprisoned IRA member who sees the sacrifice of his life as imperative for the gain of political objectives. *Hunger* seeks to alter views on IRA as in Britain intrinsically evil, viewing the group as freedom fighters searching for independence. Of course the act of terrorism in itself is evil, but issues of context tell a Janus-faced story, ultimately humanising the individuals of a considerably inferior political group. *Hunger*(2008) demonstrates the political methods Margret Thatcher used against the IRA prisoners, she refused to politicise the IRA members. This would,

firstly define them as political prisoners, but more importantly humanise the individual people behind the acts of terrorism, thus accepting that their political ideologies were legitimate and subjective value systems, with historical, social and cultural contexts. Ignoring this would further alienate the IRA from the British public, rejecting any potential sense of compassion or empathy, forcing a prolonged, futile and failed attempt to reclaim their independence from the imperialist head of state. The terrorist group sacrifices their life for the progression and development of their cause; they are generally oppressed over an elongated period of time and see the act as the appropriate and imperious motives so that collective institutions are able to prosper. (Whittaker, 2011: 25-26)

Consequently comparisons can be drawn in the attempts to combat Jihadism and a similar rhetoric used by the mass-media in order to strip political legitimacy. However Thatcher's rhetoric of rejecting the political was already in place, as Jihadism, is the collective union of Islamic brothers and the ' holy war against the infidel.' (Whittaker, 2011: 47) So the context of religion is what takes centre stage, thus comparisons to similar consequences can be drawn. However religion can be politicised particularly in the form of terrorism, as political objectives exist simultaneously with religious ones. Martyrdom is highly regarded for the fundamentalist, and believes they will be rewarded for completing God's will, whilst the terrorist organisation benefits from political gain. (Noonan, 200: 97) The British mass media seldom politicise Jihadism terrorism, in order to maintain the public's

lack of comprehension, and detachment of the individual, preventing the public from seeing a rational person with emotions and a conscience. A stereotypical Arabian image of Islam has now become synonymous with the inimical image of world terrorism, due to the Middle Eastern origins of Jihadism. The mass-media has thus created an archetypal enemy with distinguishable ideologies, belief systems, creating the illusion that they oppose our own, and finally an image that can be applied to Asian Muslims. This has produced cultural alienation, a prominent issue in multi-cultural societies, where British born Muslims become estranged from their nationality and society, thus become easily radicalised. Attacks are unforeseeable and committed discreetly by inconspicuous people. (Whittaker, 2011: 71)

Essentially the film industries main purpose within a capitalist system is to make a profit, although the British film may have more artistic and political integrity than American cinema, its inherent principles are fundamentally neoliberal. These values rival Islamic fundamentalists of Islam, and represent USA's and the UK's dominating force of culture imperialism within the Middle East. In the wake of the Iraq war, markets previously out of reach of American influences, were placed directly under the control of a small group of American business' by means of government contracts. (Harvey, 2005: 7) British film can be interpreted as mutually influencing with terrorism, propagating the view that the Western economic and political ideology is culturally superior to that of the East, and the contemptible notion that it is the duty of the western world is to civilize Islam, exploiting the economic

gain of neoliberalising newly occupied nations and the continuous turning of the lucrative war machine. Thus western values inhabit underlining themes in film, such as the capitalist dream, the monetisation of practically everything, commonly denouncing religion, and neglecting equal ethnic diversity.

The Terrorist Act [2000] considerably increased policing power, and ‘has no such provision,’ (unlike previous counter-terrorist measures) ‘and this is its chief danger’ (McGovern, 2010: 138). Counter-terrorism is a self-explanatory process; acts are put in place increasing the policing powers in order to prevent terrorism in the process.

Conversely counter-terrorism acts can be abused placing too much power in the police force, this allows for the potential on infringement on civil liberties, thus placing too much power in the inevitable inherent prejudices that some police officers may have. It is therefore possible that this could cause a detrimental effect on society forcing an insurgence of ‘home-grown’ terrorists to emerge. It is conceivable to assume that the Muslim community can become disillusioned in British society due to ‘neo-conservative counter-terrorism’ in place.

(Whittaker, 2011: 77)The way that film and terrorism influence one another is not solely negative. Simply the inclusion of the subject matter of terrorism in British film is a significant discourse continually evolving the views on the existing ideologies around why people commit terrorism. A film with a strong political subject matter can influence the public’s perceptions, educating the inevitable confused and fearful opinion formulated by the mass-media’s outlook.

Theoretically this can be viewed as a counter-terrorist measure, in an attempt to reveal contexts of a side of the narrative rarely explored, assisting in eliminating ethnic and religious divides and the sense of estrangement found in British-born Muslims.

British Film often represents terrorism contrarily to that of the mass-media, creating thought-provoking representations of the individuals behind the terrorist acts. Through the exploration of cultural, political and social factors, British film generally humanises the terrorist but never legitimises or validates the actual acts. Conversely it understands that for oppressed groups there is usually no alternative course of action, showing that there is always more than one side to a narrative, usually told with a level of bias, in context to one's own political agenda. 'the term 'terrorist' is value-laden, and may be rejected by groups whose members may prefer to see themselves as 'freedom fighters' in 'national liberation' or 'resistance' movements, (McNair, 2011: 9) *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2006) authenticates the IRA struggle against the imperial empire and following young members of the IRA and the struggles against British imperialism.

Satire is the generic form of artistic and political expression typically used as a form of political communication, expressing itself through the use of humour and wit and critiquing existing social or political issues within the public sphere. The job of the satirist is to scrutinise the ubiquitous corrupt or immoral political issues in society. Satire was patented in the form of literary work but is now seen as 'the process of attacking by ridicule in any medium' (Hodgart, 1969: 7). British film

often represents the terrorist as the freedom fighter, politically satirising the perception of the differences between the two.

Brazil(1985)satirises the bureaucratic political system and the omnipotent authoritarian government. Harry Tuttle is an alleged terrorist; he illegally repairs citizens, thus breaking the rules of the bureaucratic state. In reality Harry Tuttle is a freedom fighter, liberating individuals from the endless administrative process that is required by the government.

The terrorist attack on the Danish cartoons and more recently the murders of the CharlieHebdomagazine exposed the limitations of the freedom of expression, and the fine line between political satire and the incitement of hate. ‘ It is an expression of free speech, [...] Among the several tests by which we measure the extent of individual freedom, the right to ridicule must be included.’ (Freedman, 2009: 164)

Forcefully instigating a reaction through the crass depiction of sacred figure will inevitably provoke a response fromIslamicfundamentals.

Political satire of the ‘ other’ is created in relation to the increasing social tensions regarding numbers of immigration, particularly in France were the rise of the far right-wing party in France; Le Front National, and a history of banning religious signifiers such as the Burka, create an unstable and fluctuating marginalisation of an already isolated Muslim community. When combined with the increasing and hostile islamophobic rhetoric frequently used in the mass-media, forces the estranged and isolated members of the society to seek collective

acceptance and meaning in extreme fundamentalism taking out the anger on the society that rejected them.

Political communication is how each politicised text interacts with each other, and practically anything can be politicised. In political communication, it is not the origin of the message that deciphers whether or not something can communicate politically but instead it is the focus and the objective of that message. Through the examples of British film as mutually influential with the actions of terrorist organisations is the idea of humanising the individual member's image of the terrorist. Underneath the terrorists political agenda is a person with thoughts and emotions, and reading deeper into the social, historical and cultural contexts help give the public or audiences they are attempting to shock a better understanding of the motives and intentions of committing such heinous crimes.

Bibliography

Denton, R. E., Woodward, G. C. (1990). Political Communication in American. New York, Praeger.

Freedman, L. (2009). The Offensive Art. London: Praeger.

Harvey, D. (2005). A Brief History of Neoliberalism. Oxford: OUP.

Hodgart, J. (1969). Satire. Hampshire: BAS Printers Limited.

McGovern, M. (2010). Ignatieff, Ireland and the 'less evil': some problems with the lesson. In: Discourses and Practices of Terrorism – Interrogating terror. London and New York: Routledge.

McNair, B. (2011). *An Introduction to Political Communication*. 5th ed. London and New York: Routledge.

Noonan, J. (2010) *Fundamentalist foundations of terrorist practice – The political logic of self-sacrifice*. In: *Discourses and Practices of Terrorism – Interrogating terror*. London and New York: Routledge.

Pollard, A. (1970). *Satire: The Critical Idiom*. Methuen & Co Ltd: London

Whittaker, D. (2012). *The Terrorism Reader*. 4th ed. Oxon: Routledge.

Wolfsfeld, G. (2011). *Making Sense of Media and Politics: Five Principles in Political Communication*. Abingdon: Taylor & Francis.

Filmography

Brazil (1985) Directed by Terry Gilliam [Film]. UK: Embassy International Pictures

Four Lions (2010) Directed by Chris Morris [Film]. UK: Film4, Warp Films, Wild Bunch

Hunger (2008) Directed by Steve McQueen [Film]. UK/Ireland: Film4

The Wind That Shakes the Barley (2006) Directed by Ken Loach [Film]. Ireland/UK: Sixteen Films, Matador Pictures, Regent Capital, UK Film Council