The ‘War on Terror’ in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema: Ridley Scott’s *Body of Lies* and Jeffrey Nachmanoff’s *Traitor*

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1 Introduction

According to Andrew Martin, “Hollywood [...] has shaped, for many of us, the way we perceive contemporary history and the rest of humanity” (112). If this is true, the importance of given Hollywood films dealing with contemporary social, economical, or political issues is evident, and thus renders the analysis of them necessary for an understanding of the discourses they are part of. In this context, a topic that arguably ranks among the most controversial of recent years is the American fight against terrorism under the Bush administration (2001-2009).

The following analysis will show that in the wake of the September 11 attacks, President Bush established a rhetoric and strategy that became characteristic of the so called ‘war on terror’ and has a lot to say about the American self-understanding and perceived role in the world at the time. Accordingly, it will also be documented how Hollywood initially adhered to the notion of a fight of ‘good vs. evil’, in which the U.S. action’s were at all times deemed necessary, appropriate and morally unquestionable.

After that, this analysis will then also show that with the continuous exposition of details about the way this conflict was being fought, it was slowly revealed that the U.S. did not to occupy the transcendental moral higher ground it had always claimed to have. As will be described, Hollywood slowly but surely started to address the topic more critical in form of releases that questioned the general right-

eousness of American actions and called for a change in strategy and a different approach of the fight in the first place.

In this context, a closer look will be taken at Ridley Scott's *Body of Lies* and Jeffrey Nachmanoff's *Traitor*. Both films express the need for a change in attitude and strategy in the fight against terror and do so in form of an authentic and realistic portrayal of American attitude to and contact with Middle Eastern culture and religion. With an entertaining mixture of action and suspense, which supports the underlying conveyance of themes and messages, they are examples of a process, which ultimately saw popular culture revealing simplistic binary oppositions to "no longer suffice, no matter how adamantly the American government [...] insist[ed] that they do" (Schopp/Hill 37).

2 The American Self-Image After 9/11

2.1 The 'War on Terror', or 'Good vs. Evil'

With an almost exclusively civilian death toll at close to 3,000, and 6,000 more injured, the events of September 11, 2001 were the single most devastating hostile attack on U.S. soil in its entire history (9/11 Commission Report). As such, they were sure to have a significant impact on both U.S. foreign and domestic politics.

In reaction to the attacks, President George W. Bush and his administration very quickly established a clear-cut binary opposition of a morally superior U.S. being the eternal 'good' and terrorists around the group al-Qaeda being what threatened it, namely the embodiment of 'evil'. In his address to a joint session of Congress and the American people on September 20, 2001, Bush was sure to stress that nothing less than the very essence of American values and beliefs was now at stake as "enemies of freedom [had] committed an act of war against our country" (The White House September 2001). His speech foreshadowed a rhetoric that was to become characteristic of the Bush administration in the following years, as he carefully maintained the dichotomy of 'we' and 'they', and the battle of 'us vs. them'. At the same time, the speech hinted the far-reaching political and military reactions that could be expected from the U.S.

While the president generally saw "freedom and fear [...] at war", he also made clear that for the U.S. in particular "our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there" (The White House September 2001). Thus, for the first time he used what was to become a very controversial term, namely the so-called 'war on terror'. He left no doubt that the strategy it labeled was now the top-priority of both foreign and domestic U.S. policy and would remain so for many years to come.

However, the mere phrasing of the term, which Cynthia Weber would later describe as having emerged from "combining clash-of-civilizations arguments with cowboy posturing" (20), already revealed a fundamental misconception of the

entire conflict's nature on part of the Bush administration. In essence, "the phrase identified terrorism as America's new enemy [and] implied an objective of victory – conquest or suppression of terrorism" (Zelikow 103). But, by doing so, it failed to acknowledge the fact that "terrorism is a tactic and not an enemy or adversary [and that] it can never be completely eliminated, only managed and controlled" (Martin/Andrew 5). Thus, the logic behind Bush's rhetoric already displayed itself to be dangerously wrong. Nevertheless, the deliberately populist term would remain a legitimizing tool for military, intelligence and police actions at home and abroad for many years to come. Regardless of its flawed nature and despite scholars like Noam Chomsky even denouncing it as "propaganda", believing that if the U.S. were to abide by their own definition of terrorism, they would themselves be revealed as "a leading terrorist state" (Chomsky 47f.).

Still, as problematic as the Bush administration's rhetoric can be regarded today, at the time, it hit the right tone for a U.S. public still frozen in a state of shock and that had mutual desire for retaliation, waiting for Bush to fulfill his promise that 'evil' could and would be destroyed.¹ A prospect, which would quickly take shape in the form of the Afghanistan War, which started in October 2001, and which, only two years later, would be complemented by the Iraq War. Both wars, whose major combat operations were filed under the names 'Enduring Freedom' and 'Iraqi Freedom', respectively, were aimed at securing the 'good' and ultimately civilization itself (The White House October 2001, December 2005, January 2009), since "evil was to be feared and constantly attacked" (Birkenstein/Froula/Randell 16) in order to "defend [...] the freedom of people everywhere" (The White House October 2001).

As Richard Crokartt observed, the roots of such thinking and as such the basis for the Bush administration's rhetorical strategy date back to the Jeffersonian Enlightenment, most notably to the Declaration of Independence, which promotes "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" and "hold[s] these truths to be self-evident" (Declaration of Independence). To Crokartt, this "presumed self-evidence of the value of and meaning of freedom" is an integral part of the American identity, while "the extension of freedom to others is part of America's 'great mission'" (178). The fact that the Bush administration embraced this attitude is evident in various documents such as the 2002 National Security Strategy, which states: "The great strength of this nation must be used to promote a balance of power that favors freedom. [...] And this path is not America's alone. It is open to all." (National Security Strategy 2002)

Thus, it was up to other nations to follow on a mission "we did not ask for [...] but will fulfill" (The White House October 2001) and whose sole initiator could only be the U.S.; a fact of which Bush would remain strongly convinced until

¹ Polls showed approval of Bush's presidency to have risen from 57% to 87% after 9/11 (Newport/Carroll 2002).

the end of his presidency: “If America does not lead the cause of freedom, that cause will not be led.” (The White House January 2009)

In conclusion, America’s morally higher ground and the righteousness of all its actions in the fighting of terrorism were deemed unquestionable, self-evident, and only appropriate in reaction to 9/11. Ultimately, the ‘good’ that was omnipresent in the U.S. strategy even justified war, since it allowed for America to extend its values and beliefs to the Middle East, in order to protect itself by “defend[ing] its own freedom by using liberty to transform nations from bitter foes to strong allies” (The White House January 2009).

2.2 Bush’s Doctrine in Hollywood

Often times, popular culture picks up on the events that occur and the themes that circulate within its society. In this context, the mere magnitude of a war necessarily occupies a prominent position in the work of film-makers, authors, and artists, especially in America:

Popular culture in the United States is where war comes from and where it is made possible – even desirable – and it is where it ends up, as the lived experience of war is fed back to us in displaced forms and narratives (Martin 108).

A long tradition of Hollywood movies dealing with the various wars the U.S. has engaged in and numerous examples of fictitious as well as factual war scenarios it could engage in shows that this interaction must be taken for granted, especially when it comes to the medium of film.

In this context, the nature of a given portrayal of acts of war relies as much on the individual topic as it does on the particular movies genre. On the one hand, works such as Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* and Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* show real-life war for the horror they are/were. On the other hand, fictional tales of attacking aliens like Roland Emmerich’s *Independence Day* and a given story around the likes of Bruce Willis and Arnold Schwarzenegger pictures America or the typical white, male American (action) hero as all that stands in evils way. Of course, the latter kind fit Bush’s doctrine in the ‘war on terror’ perfectly, at a time when some believed “the cinema [to be] as much a battlefield in this war as were the ruins [of 9/11] and the cities and countrysides of the soon-to-be bombed Afghanistan, and, later, Iraq” (Weber 1).

According to Mathew B. Hill and Andrew Schopp, the Bush administration was very well aware of the influence the medium film could have on public opinion. Quoting Slavoy Žižek and Susan Faludi,² they sum up its efforts as follows:

² For a detailed analysis of the cooperation between Hollywood and the Bush administration in the aftermath of 9/11 cf. Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*

[I]n November of 2001, the White House met with Hollywood executives to explore how Hollywood films could help in sending the “right ideological message” about the “war on terror” and to determine how Hollywood could “help ‘communicate’ – or rather, market – the new war on terror to the American people” (Schopp/Hill 14).

Thus, naturally, the early stages of the ‘war on terror’, and, as declared inevitable parts of it, the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars, were accompanied by a range of movies that affirmed the righteousness of American military actions and embraced the theme of an American-led fight of ‘good vs. evil’.

For example, a surge of comic adaptations including Sam Raimi’s *Spiderman* series (2002, 2004, 2007), Tim Story’s *Fantastic Four* (2005) and Bryan Singer’s *Superman Returns* (2005) repeatedly addressed the eternal fight of the all-American super hero against arbitrary villains and evil forces. In allegedly more realistic settings, works such as John Moore’s *Behind Enemy Lines* (2001) and Antoine Fuqua’s *Tears of the Sun* (2003) portrayed the U.S. and its soldiers as humanitarians ready to override international borders and treaties whenever deemed ideologically required.

In addition, the post-9/11 atmosphere saw a reinvigoration of a genre, which Mathew B. Hill terms the “techno-thriller”:

Indulging in American fantasies of military power and technological achievement, the techno-thriller often features male American heroes using advanced technology and the tools of the military and intelligence establishment to respond, often violently, to threats against their country (Hill 128).

This type of character is most prominently displayed in such figures as Tom Clancy’s Jack Ryan, protagonist of films like John McTiernan’s *The Hunt for Red October* (1990), Phillip Noyce’s *Clear and Present Danger* (1994), and ultimately Phil Alden Robinson’s *The Sum of All Fears* (2002). Interestingly, being the only one released after 9/11, the latter most clearly pictures him as the intelligent and determined savior of America and even world peace.

But, as Hill concludes, the one figure that is most characteristic of the genre’s “post-September 11 descendant” and as such “one of the more popular means of representing this war [on terror]” (128), is the hero of Robert Cochran and Joel Surnow’s TV series *24* (2001–2010), Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland). While each episode of the series is designed to follow one in 24 hours of a day in the life of the member of a (fictional) L.A. Counter Terrorist Unit, Bauer himself is portrayed as the hero who is able to fight his evil counterparts based on the ability to think and fight just “like them, without remorse and without restraint” (Hill 134).

Accordingly, in his fight Bauer time and again struggles with laws and moral obstacles, which, eventually, he is willing to readily bypass in order to stop a given terrorist attack. He simply does whatever is necessary, regardless of having to act against some of the very cornerstones of the American democracy he is trying to rescue and defend, namely the freedom from torture, *habeas corpus* and due process. It is just this attitude that makes evident the fragility of the concept of American morality in this conflict:

Glorification of these characters as the pinnacle of American heroism in the War on Terror [...] suggests an implicit rejection of such democratic ideals as unnecessary, untenable, or undesirable when facing a determined enemy such as Al Qaeda (Hill 143-144).

Still, such a hero and his sometimes (highly) questionable measures in the fighting of terrorism remained popular³ and for quite some time Hollywood would not risk questioning the self-evident dichotomy of ‘good vs. evil’ in the ‘war on terror’, let alone even touch upon the topic in form of a major release.⁴

It would require some time, several failures to actually catch (top-)terrorists, the (questionable) modification of laws, and the uncovering of a few very controversial details of the handling of suspected terrorists and prisoners of war to have parts of the general U.S. public’s mood change and allow for a more critical discourse and with it some less biased Hollywood movies to be released.

3 Rethinking the Image

3.1 American Duplicity

As previously described, the post-9/11 atmosphere for quite some time defied the questioning of the Bush administration’s ideological and military reaction to the attacks. Eventually, “Americans came to feel that criticism of the Bush administration’s action was supportive of terrorism” (Cawelti 210) and “self-assured nationalism and patriotism replaced critical discourses seen as immoral [...], substituting moral uncertainty with moral certainty” (Weber 20-21).

Accordingly, even such measures as the 2001 USA PATRIOT Act which included several severe changes to American legislation in the name of the ‘war on terror’ were readily adopted. Designed “to deter and punish terrorist acts in the United

³ In 2002, Kiefer Sutherland was rewarded with a Golden Globe for Best Actor in a TV series and with a viewership of 13.7 million for the 2005-2006 season, 24 ranked 24 in the I.T.R.S. report (ABC 2006).

⁴ Naturally, Hollywood did not necessarily support the Bush doctrine for reasons of propaganda, but rather for economical ones, since a more critical addressing of the topic would have meant risking a box office failure.

States and around the world, to enhance law enforcement investigatory tools, and for other purposes" (PATRIOT Act 2), it included a range of controversial alterations of and additions to U.S. Code. Its institution, however, did not evoke much controversy in the post-9/11 atmosphere of fear and only seemed to alarm scholars like Mary N. Layoun, who saw it to have "drastically compromised" the rights of "citizen and noncitizen alike", all "in the name of security against terror" (48).

Nevertheless, the general mood in the American public slowly but surely changed, as the ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq continuously took a heavy toll on human lives on both sides, with American forces seemingly unable to establish the promised peace and democracy in the region. While in both countries, the Bush administration had prematurely declared major combat operations to be over (The White House 2003, Rumsfeld 2003), news of U.S. soldiers and local civilians being killed by suicide attacks and car bombs on an almost daily basis proved the actual wars far from over. Especially in Iraq, where in 2004, "the US military stated that they had lost control over many major towns and cities", which, eventually, led to "murmured parallels with Vietnam" (Oliver 40). In addition, the fact that the Bush administration ultimately failed to present any evidence for the initial justification for the Iraq War in the first place, namely the claim "that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction" (The White House August 2002), aroused more and more suspicion about the legitimacy of certain measures in the 'war on terror'.

The image of a self-evident and unquestionable moral superiority apparent in these measures further crumbled as details about prisoner treatment and intelligence-gathering procedures were made public. The most prominent examples included (the pictures of) prisoners being tortured at the Abu Ghraib prison in 2004 (Grajeda 219), "the open ended detention of prisoners without trial [at] Guantanamo Bay" (Crokartt 184), as well as "the revelation that the CIA had been using secret locations in a variety of countries to interrogate suspected terrorists" (Crokartt 170), a procedure to become known as extraordinary rendition⁵.

Ultimately, all these developments cast a conspicuous shadow on the whole 'good vs. evil' paradigm, as "US actions as narrated in unofficial stories about the war on terror increasingly marked the Bush administration's [rhetoric] as both hypocritical and dangerous" (Weber 89).

3.2 Criticism in Hollywood

As the general criticism of Bush's agenda slowly grew Hollywood too started dealing with the controversial topic of the 'war on terror' more critically and more openly. Admittedly, Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002) had already somewhat

⁵ For a detailed description of leaked CIA procedures cf. Horton, Scott. "New CIA Docs Detail Brutal 'Extraordinary Rendition' Process". The Huffington Post 28 Sept. 2009. Eds. Adriana Huffington, Roy Sekoff and Timothy L. O'Brien. Web. 9 August 2012 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/08/28/new-cia-docs-detail-bruta_n_271299.html>.

criticised the concept of pre-emptive punishment in possible relation to the motivations for the War in Iraq and Doug Liman/Paul Greengrass' *Bourne* films (2002, 2004, 2007) had left room for the possibility that not all figures in American intelligence were of the generally 'good' nature. Also, while Sam Mendes' *Jarhead* (2003) was set in the (first) Gulf War, the timing of its release and its telling of the disillusioning experience of a U.S. soldier in a conflict in the Middle East had it appear as a likely (negative) comment on current U.S. wars in the region. Andrew Niccol's *Lord of War* (2005) had even denounced the U.S. as one of the world's largest and therefore most ruthless arms dealers altogether.

But no film directly addressed the country's atmosphere after 9/11 or the 'war on terror' and its moral predicaments. Admittedly, Stephen Caghan's *Syriana* (2005) could be claimed to have been the very first major film to deal with the topic critically, but at the time, it did not spark a change of thinking in Hollywood. On the contrary, with Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* (2006) and Paul Greengrass's *United 93* (2006), Hollywood even seemed to continue its adherence to the Bush doctrine in reminding the American people in a most realistic and horrifying manner of just what the reason and legitimacy for this ongoing and difficult war had been and still were.

It was not until late 2006 before Irwin Winkler's *Home of the Brave* initiated a surge of dramas that directly and critically approached the topic, which included Paul Haggis' *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), Robert Redford's *Lions for Lambs* (2007), Brian de Palma's *Redacted* (2007), and Gavin Hood's *Rendition* (2007). In addition, 2008 saw the release of another two movies that dealt with the issue and which were of a more spectacular nature, namely Ridley Scott's *Body of Lies* and Jeffrey Nachmanoff's *Traitor*. The following analysis will take a closer look at each of them and show exactly how they achieved to address the topic in a previously unparalleled realistic and critical manner.

4 Ridley Scott's *Body of Lies*

In *Body of Lies*, which is the adaptation of the eponymous best-selling novel by journalist and author David Ignatius of 2007, Ridley Scott pictures the struggle of CIA-operative Roger Ferris in the fighting of terrorism emerging from the Middle East, starring Leonardo DiCaprio as Ferris and Russell Crowe as his superior, Ed Hoffman. The action thriller follows its protagonist around various countries of the Arab world, as he is continuously trying to cope with the predicaments that the ideologically impregnated agenda of the 'war on terror' embraced by Hoffman present on his efforts of gathering intelligence in order to stop future terrorist attacks. In this context, a closer look at the film's opening sequence already offers an insight on the different elements with which it comments on the general U.S. attitude towards Middle Eastern culture apparent in its counter-terrorism strategy.

The movie starts off with a black screen stating a quote from W.H. Auden's poem *September 1, 1939*, which reads: "I and all the public know, what all schoolchildren learn. Those to whom evil is done, do evil in return". Then, a low drumbeat sets in and a cut to an aerial view of a side street places us in what is supposed to be Manchester, England. What follows is a close-up of an old, grey-bearded man wearing the traditional Muslim headgear *taqiyah* who gives a determined speech in Arabic, which the subtitles reveal to be the claim of responsibility for past and future terrorist attacks on Americans exercised in order to "avenge the American wars on the Muslim world".

Notably, the word 'Islam' is most clearly distinguishable for the non-Arabic speaker and is accompanied by the setting in of the sound of an Arabic flute, as the camera zooms out and shows his utterances to be a video message to a group of young terrorists emerging from a TV next to one of them preparing a meal and another building a bomb. Also, the spheres of the old man and the young terrorists in the house in Manchester are clearly separated in colors, as the former appears in a warm and slightly brown palette, while the latter is of a rather cold blue and gray tone.

Next, an increasingly dynamic soundtrack underlines a panorama shot of the street around the house having been sealed off by police and a few rapid shots of them preparing to storm the house filmed with a hand-held camera. We follow the police inside, $\frac{3}{4}$ -shots of them alternate with close-ups of the terrorists speaking Arabic, before music and background sounds die down completely for the terrorists (aware of the coming police) to utter a last "Allāhu Akbar" ("God is great"). Then, a massive explosion pictured from various angles in both panorama shots and close-ups destroys the house, sends debris flying right at us, shatters glass and has people screaming terribly. Needless to say, the terrorists blew themselves up and by doing so also killed the police officers. The camera zooms out displaying destruction and thick smoke rising from the ruins, as again, the sound of an Arabic flute lingers frighteningly over the scene. The screen fades to black and displays the film's title within a rapid collage of unidentifiable aerial images, and the melody is joined by bits of radio conversation in English.

Now, while the use of traditional Arabic instruments and melodies as introduced in this opening sequence will be both a method for and a sign of the portrayal of Middle Eastern culture, the different color patterns employed throughout the movie will also continuously distinguish between the locations that stand in for it and others like the U.S. Also, as is the case here, international locations and terrorist attacks on them will secure the world-wide significance of the story. The different camera movements, the angles, the type of cameras employed and the rapid cutting in between them will make sure to have the movie appear as the action thriller it is designed to be, with the extensive use of aerial images being of notable peculiarity.

The fact that already the terrorists are pictured to have reasons for their actions that are a little more complex than simply emerging from 'pure evil', shows that,

while not trying to justify their actions, the film will nevertheless try to somewhat display these motivations. In addition, the initial quote immediately suggests that the following movie will blur the lines of right and wrong, as it assumes that just as in World War II, both sides in this conflict are bound to do ‘evil’⁶. Thus ultimately, this introduction hints that the film will paint a more sophisticated picture of morality in this conflict, which critic Peter Travers conceived as the deserved “hard kick in the teeth [...] to American duplicity” (2008).

4.1 Technical and Stylistic Aspects

As numerous documentaries and commentaries included in the movie’s Blu-ray steel book edition suggest, director Ridley Scott wanted its look and sound to be as realistic as possible, in order to give the film an aura of authenticity (“Master of the Craft: Ridley Scott”). In this context, lighting was deliberately kept as minimal and naturalistic as possible in an effort to almost exclusively make use of lamps and other light sources that were already present on location. For example, yellow street lamps in scenes designed to be located in Middle Eastern countries were not altered, the grim atmosphere of torture scenes is in part created by the use of only a few flashlights or fluorescent tubes, and in the majority of daylight scenes only the sun illuminates the characters and the action.

In terms of location, Scott’s emphasis on authenticity is evident in the extensive use of real outdoor sites, especially in scenes set in the Middle East. The fact that the nature of these places could not be more distinct, ranging from the desert, illegal junkyards and small alleys in poor neighborhoods to actual government buildings⁷, results in each location having a different look to it, which perfectly serves the particular scene’s atmosphere. At no time does this kind of portrayal feel unnatural or exaggerated, and it is safe to assume that the average American viewer will not even realize that they were exclusively shot in Morocco, which stood in for all Arab countries like Iraq, Jordan and the emirate of Dubai. Of course, the exchange and transformation of street signs and the use of appropriate costumes according to the particular country or region to be displayed intensify this effect.

While other geographical spheres such as Europe and the U.S. are more commonly featured in form of indoor locations, the film makes sure to clearly distinguish it from the Arab world and the employment of different color patterns for the two makes sure to establish them almost as opposites. As the action cuts back and forth between the two, it is obvious that a cold gray and blue tone used for the West remains in stark contrast to a warmer earth-colored, golden, and brownish “toast” (Scott, “The Color of Toast”) that is used for the Middle East.

⁶ With regard to WWII, Tony Sharpe described Auden’s poem as “a didactic historical analysis of what has happened” (2007: 23).

⁷ Allegedly, Scott’s repeated shooting of a major picture in Morocco granted him the right to use the rooms of the Moroccan Department of Interior’s building to stand in as the headquarter of the Jordanian intelligence Service (“Master of the Craft: Ridley Scott”).

Considering the camera work and cutting, the rapid alternation of angles, paired with the use of handheld camera footage, quick camera movements and debris and blood flying directly at the cameras makes sure to have the film's action scenes look spectacular and gripping. At the same time, here again Scott paid great attention to detail, with real explosions being hardly enhanced by digital effects and every dent in a car's bodywork being in the right place⁸. The one feature that stands out in terms of the way the movie is shot, however, is the continuous use of aerial images, which often times introduce new locations and constantly complement phone conversations between Ferris and Hoffman.

While such footage most notably displays the constant surveillance of Ferris and his operations by Hoffman, despite the latter being thousands of miles away physically, it also somewhat underlines the technical superiority of the U.S. in this conflict. Designed to resemble the images of unmanned, remotely-controlled drones termed 'predators', of which some 250 are allegedly in use over the Middle East according to Scott's remarks in the commentary, these aerial shots are used to an extent to which they almost become a character of their own throughout the movie ("Commentary", Scene 3). With Ferris repeatedly looking up at it and sometimes actually addressing it directly by asking Hoffman and the drone's operators to back out to not draw too much attention on him, it is indeed a character which is always present, looking at and lingering over the action.

Considering the cast and their preparation, Scott also made sure to create an authentic atmosphere by working with many actors from the Middle East and having the Western actors learn to speak in proper Arabic when needed. For example, the actress playing Ferris' acquaintance Aisha apparently was the first Iranian woman to star in a major Hollywood film and Leonardo DiCaprio allegedly pronounced his Arabic lines in various dialects so well that it even surprised his language assistant (Scott, "Uneasy Alliance"). Also, regarding the importance of the work of local intelligence services like the Jordanian one, the fact that author David Ignatius had himself met the actual head of the Jordanian secret service and could thus vouch for the authenticity of its fictional counterpart Hani Salaam (Ignatius 2009), awards Scott's portrayal credibility.

Finally, the sound and soundtrack of the movie naturally play an important role for its themes and the atmosphere of a given scene. Explosions and gunshots are loud and horrifying and each time the action gains pace, the soundtrack is sure to go along accordingly, with rocking electric guitars and pounding drums competing with the omnipresent Arabic instruments. As is the case in the introductory sequence, the latter are commonly featured throughout the film, often times aurally placing us in the Middle East, but more importantly serving as device for creating suspense. In this context, the melodies of the flute, or *santoor*, continuously serve as the menacing background music for terrorist speeches, as well the building up to

⁸ The documentary "Controlled hostility: stunts and special effects" shows Scott himself hammering the hood of a car, in order to make sure it looks like it was hit by large pieces of debris.

an aftermath of their attacks. Admittedly, such reduction could be regarded as slightly controversial and would probably tempt film scholars like Corey K. Creekmar who regards the entire soundscape of Hollywood movies dealing with the ‘war on terror’ as “limited and conventional” and only mediating “cultural difference” (91), to claim it only affirms stereotypes.

But, although *Body of Lies* does in fact use such aural elements and their interaction with distinctively used color patterns in order to establish a certain difference to Western culture, the careful attention paid to the authenticity with which the Arab world is portrayed already rescues it from being stereotypical. Ultimately, such stylistic devices only serve to underline the movie’s general themes and messages.

4.2 Characters, Themes and Messages

Given the complex nature of the movie’s storyline, its themes and messages are best analyzed through its protagonist Roger Ferris. His relation to and interaction with the other major characters serves to explain his character development, and on a broader scale needs to be regarded as a clear statement on the U.S. attitude and strategy in the ‘war on terror’. In this context, the relationship to his boss is of particular importance.

The first sequence after the introductory scene already quite strongly establishes the difference between the two. We are in Samarra, Iraq, the current location of operation for Ferris, who is introduced by a panning shot from his feet ending in a close-up of his bearded face. The cut to a few shots of him sitting by while a man is being tortured to death obviously picture some of his memories and thus immediately suggest that he is “already reflecting” and “constantly looking inward” (Scott, “Commentary” Scene 2), struggling with the morality of the measures he has to take as CIA operative. All this is complemented by Hoffman’s voice from the off, calmly elaborating on the legitimacy of U.S. presence in the region and the need for its continuation. His utterances display themselves to be a report he is initially dictating to his computer while at home wearing pajamas and bathrobe, shots of which alternate with close-ups of the troubled Ferris.

Hoffman is then shown to give said report to a group of people, which appear to be either his superiors or other influential figures in Washington. This time, his speech goes on accompanying horrifyingly realistic images of U.S. soldiers being attacked on patrol in what is probably an Iraq city, while he is coolly summarizing the terrorists’ goals: “They want the universal caliphate established across the face of the Earth and they want every infidel converted or dead.” He briefly mentions the difficulty of differentiation between enemy and friend and then quickly stresses the need for intelligence operations to continue in order to keep the U.S. and the world safe, barely squeezing this plea for further support into what little time his counterparts seem to have.

Thus, this first sequence powerfully pictures the fundamental difference between Hoffman, who is the calculating and confident personification of the Bush administration's ideology, and Ferris, who believes enough in the righteousness of American actions to do his job, but not enough to free himself from doubting the necessity of exercising morally questionable measures.

The film takes great care to constantly uphold this difference, repeatedly cutting back and forth between the spheres of Hoffman and Ferris, which, as mentioned earlier, are nicely distinguished by different color patterns. In addition, their phone conversations usually have Ferris right in the middle of some operation, chase or even shootout, while Hoffman is casually eating cereal, taking his kids to school, or watching his daughter's soccer game. The closest he gets to the action is indifferently watching it on computer and television screens displaying images of aerial surveillance. This results in a complementing opposition of dramatic and loud background sounds and music for Ferris and a calmer soundscape (and in part even the absence of such) for Hoffman.

Naturally, these stylistic devices add to their particular remarks, with Ed repeatedly and dismissively rejecting any criticism of the nature of his operations and the physical and moral dangers these put Ferris in, all the while displaying him to be of shockingly indifferent arrogance toward Middle Eastern culture and also the respect that Ferris has for it. Examples include the justification of not rescuing a local informant as he was merely "a terrorist a-hole, who turned out to be coward who wanted to go to Disneyland", the greeting of Ferris on a visit in Washington, D.C. by asking him if he enjoyed civilization as for being "back from the sandbox" and the explanation of him running multiple operations in secret even from Ferris in context of having to act quickly: "I ain't got time to play patience, Sidi, patience and sit around eating couscous."

Ferris in return grows sicker and sicker of Hoffman's attitude and the trouble it means for him as being the one in the field who has to react to it. While he continuously utters doubts about the practice of retrieving intelligence from informants and then leaving them to be tortured and killed by the terrorists they gave away, it is mostly the difference of perspectives in this fight that enrage him and which he believes Hoffman fails to acknowledge:

I am thinking straight. You're not, alright? You can't because you're a million fucking miles away. I'm here Ed, every day. And I see the unnecessary travesties of this war that the rest of you backstabbing political fucking bureaucrats only look at pictures of.

Thus, the contradiction of the U.S. approach embodied by Hoffman, which one critic described as "a creature of flabby immorality [...] acting like the master of the Middle Eastern universe" (Turan 2008), while his actor Russell Crowe sees him as "symbolic for American policy" ("Debriefing"), and A.O. Scott even as an analogy to George W. Bush himself (2008), is what forms the core problem of the

relationship to Ferris. It is this difference in attitude that is very much apparent in the way they each deal with prospective local allies.

After the first operation in Iraq has almost killed him, Ferris is sent to Jordan in order to contact the head of the Jordanian secret service, Hani Salaam. In this context, while Hoffman disrespectfully refers to Hani's intelligence by characterizing him as not being "your run-of-the-mill fingernail puller", Ferris is shown to be much more aware of the necessary respect with which someone like Hani needs to be met. For example, much to Hani's appreciation, Ferris immediately awards him "a personal honour" (Forbes 188) by addressing him with the traditional title of *pasha*. Also, whenever Hani tries to explain that he is as much an enemy for the terrorists as are the Americans he is helping, Ferris finishes the religious quote that describes this circumstance in perfect Arabic, ending reassuringly: "[W]e are together in this house of war, Hani Pasha, yes."

The fact that Hani is very much satisfied to see in Ferris someone that is "smarter than the Americans who are usually sent to Amman", showing respect for his elders and speaking Arabic, suggests that it is this kind of approach that is needed on part of the Americans in order to successfully cooperate with local intelligence services. At the same time, Hani's entire appearance, including clothes and every move, gesture and utterance, convey a strong aura of pride and confidence, which led critic Mick LaSalle to see in him "a character of conscience and refinement, set up in contrast to his slovenly American counterpart [Hoffman]" (2008). Accordingly, there is absolutely no doubt about the fact that it is he who is in charge of operations here. Repeatedly calling him "my dear", Hani makes sure to make Ferris understand that he should better not lie to him, as the seriousness of the statement is underlined by its repetition captured in a close-up of Hani's determined facial expression. This results in a seemingly intimidated Ferris having to realize that mutual trust is what is most important for their cooperation.

Needless to say, Hoffman's approach toward Hani is of a very different nature. While, as usual, he is operating from a room full of TV screens and computer monitors, Hoffman seemingly very much enjoys his running of multiple operations that both surprise the unaware Ferris, and at the same time act against Ferris' and Hani's agreements. Of course, whenever Ferris tries to make him understand the importance of the promises he has made to Hani, Hoffman could not care less, with his ongoing addressing of Ferris as "buddy" appearing more patronizing than ever. At the same time, he fails to realize the consequences that his actions have for Ferris on the ground, who, as we learn from the fact that Hani has him witness the "punishment" of one of Hoffman's men, is put in great danger by Hoffman's indifference. Finally, he leaves no doubt that he simply does not care about what Ferris repeatedly tries to stress, namely the fact that they need to earn Hani's trust in order to get his help:

- Ferris: Ed, listen, Hani does not trust you. Arabs will only help you if they trust you.
- Hoffman: What, are you moving here? I don't care about cultural in security issues. I don't care if Hani trusts me or not.

In this context, this arrogance toward the necessary respectful treatment of local allies is most evidently displayed in the way Hoffman meets Hani on the rare occasion of being in the Middle East himself. Despite having been told otherwise by Ferris in advance, Hoffman shows no sign of respect in giving no greeting whatsoever to Hani before going straight into asking for intelligence on a prospective informant. To the embarrassment of Ferris, he does not even say the informant's right name, and in an effort of stressing his power threatens to have the U.S. president call the Jordanian king to resolve the matter. Hani, however, is not at all tempted by Hoffman trying to talk down to him. He calmly refers to him being the king in matters of intelligence, and more generally relates to the necessity of operations remaining secret, refusing to give up any information to the utterly disrespectful Hoffman.

Symbolically expressed by Ferris translating Hani's Arabic 'no' to Hoffman, it is quite clear that Hoffman's approach could be seen as the exact opposite of Ferris', and as such doomed to fail. While his belief of Hani being "bright, but arrogant" is rightly suggested by Ferris to apply to himself, Hoffman's attitude is pictured as not at all suitable for this environment. It seems as though it takes someone like Ferris, who much better understands local culture, with its values and beliefs, to respectfully and thus successfully cooperate with people like Hani.

In this context, the fact that Ferris emerges into the local culture to an extent that surpasses the need to operate in secret is most notably displayed in his relationship to the local nurse Aisha. While this love story was allegedly designed "as sub story for Women's rights in the Islamic region" (Scott, "Commentary" Scene 15), the fact that –compared to the book- director Scott changed the woman Ferris meets from being an American working in a refugee camp to a local woman altogether, hints that it must be seen as symbolic for Ferris development. Adding to such details as his perfect Arabic, his wearing of a beard much like the locals' and sometimes the odd sign of something like his Coke bottle being the only one with Arabic inscription in an American military hospital, this story-within-the-story pictures just how much Ferris is ultimately embracing Middle Eastern culture. As a result, he more and more finds himself struggling with the want of not having to lie to Hani and rescuing local informants from torture and death, while at the same time having to work with Hoffman in order to get to top-terrorist Al-Saleem.

Frustrated by the fact that Hani does not want to cooperate with him, Hoffman carries out another operation behind Ferris' back, which leads to a safe house with alleged terrorists being abandoned and one of Hani's informants (which Hoffman also wanted to get to) disappearing. But again, Hoffman refuses to admit

any mistakes and answers Ferris' complaints by claiming that his actions, as opposed to Hani's, are part of the bigger picture in the world-wide fighting of terrorism: "Hani's interests extend only to his little fiefdom. Mine are global." Of course, such phrasing once more displays just what little respect Hoffman has for local allies like Hani and to what extent he believes in his own (moral) superiority.

Interestingly, though, it is Ferris who then comes up with the plan of faking a terrorist attack in order to attract Al-Saleem's attention and doing so without the knowledge of Hani. As he has an innocent local architect look like the terrorist responsible for an attack on a U.S. military base in Turkey, the victims of which are bodies from the local morgue, Ferris himself displays to be ready to take highly questionable measures in this fight. But, as opposed to Hoffman, he is very much enraged by not being able to protect the alleged terrorist he fabricated from being caught and killed by the real ones. Thus, he does have a moral conscience, a fact which is also evident in how much he hates having to admit to Hani that he has lied to him. Hani himself is more upset about the lie than the failed attempt to get closer to Al-Saleem, and his refusal of helping Ferris, who in the meantime discovered that Aisha has violently been abducted, by now feels almost deserved, considering the numerous times Hani has asked for Ferris' sincerity.

In addition, Hoffman, who only sees the possibility of getting to Al-Saleem in the context of Aisha's abduction, finally proves unable to secure or rescue Ferris. While Ferris lets himself be taken hostage in exchange for Aisha, the dust that is blown up by the terrorists' jeeps circling him in the desert deprives Hoffman of his so far effective tool of aerial surveillance. The fact that Hoffman is only able to utter a hardly convincing "sorry, buddy" as he cannot further aid Ferris, proves that ultimately, he cares as little about Ferris' fate as he does about the ones of informants. In the end, the metaphorical 'body of lies' that Ferris has created comes back to punish him and it becomes clear that he should have rather trusted in Hani than in Hoffman.⁹

This notion is also evident in the appearance of Hani's informant during the terrifying scene showing Ferris almost getting killed by the terrorists. Placed sitting at a table opposite of a camera in front of a flag with Arabic caption, the scene shows Ferris and Al-Saleem in climactic conversation, while a grim atmosphere results from the use of only a few flashlights as illumination in an otherwise dark cellar. While Al-Saleem rejects any criticism of his actions being against his religion and terrorism in general as a mere slave to capitalism, it is mostly his calm manner that has him appear utterly menacing. As he openly reassures Ferris in perfect English that the sole purpose of this situation is to kill Ferris in front of the camera, we can be as sure as Ferris himself that this scene, which ultimately resembles the horrible videos of actual beheadings of terrorists' hostages, will have Ferris dead in

⁹ Of course, in this context the film's tagline "Trust no one. Deceive everyone." appears very much ironic as it is just this attitude that leads to its protagonist's doom.

the end. It is only the sight of Hani's informant standing among the terrorists and a quick flashback to his 'recruitment' that has us hope for a rescue of Ferris.

However, just as Ferris, we cannot be entirely sure about whether or not he is going to be saved. Admittedly, Ferris has gained new confidence by this sight and even tempts Al-Saleem to lose his composure for a moment in cutting off one of Ferris' fingers. But at the same time, Al-Saleem leaves no doubt about the fact that nobody is going to rescue him, cuts off another one of his fingers announcing "welcome to Guantanamo", and then exits the room for Ferris to be straightened out on the table. Slow-motion shots of the terrorists holding down Ferris, who is screaming with pain and struggling for his life, alternate with flashbacks of him witnessing the torture of prisoners himself, and shots picturing the situation from the point of view of the terrorists' camera suggest that he is about to die after all.

Of course, in this context, the pairing of these images, as well as the mentioning of the U.S. detention and abuse of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay clearly gives a nod towards the immoral use of torture being a measure that renders both sides in this conflict 'evil'. Accordingly, the fact that throughout the entire movie the main terrorist is shown as being a calm, calculating and intelligent family man rather than a mad 'evildoer', does not render his or more generally all terrorists' actions less despicable or even justified. It does, however, suggest more complex reasons behind them than those that were given by the Bush administration. According to producer Donald Deline, the filmmakers' aim was to express just this to counter simple demonization: "It was important to show how people's different realities create these divides. You really need to be able to understand both sides. [I]t will help toward understanding and having a dialogue." (2009)

The agonizing suspense is finally dissipated by soldiers storming in shooting the terrorists and saving Ferris. However, it is the calm-as-usual Hani entering the scene that displays to have saved him, and not Hoffman. Accordingly, Hani is also the first one to visit him in the hospital, all the while quite obviously enjoying his superiority over Hoffman in this situation: "Edward could not find you. Not with all his aircraft, all his people, all his money and joie de vivre." Moreover, he has Ferris realize that it was his informant who granted him access to Al-Saleem and with it the rescue of Ferris, while he also tricked Ferris into letting himself be taken hostage in the first place, all resulting in the final capture of Al-Saleem. Naturally, we feel sorry for Ferris as for having been played on, but the efficiency of Hani's (sometimes admittedly questionable) methods also leaves us with the notion of the possibility that the work of local intelligence services can be more effective than that of its American counterparts.¹⁰

In a final conversation with Ferris, it then becomes clear that Hoffman is unable to understand the value of the respectful cooperation with locals and will always cling to a notion of American foreign policy that is simplistic and wrong.

¹⁰ The opinion that Americans do not know enough about the region and culture of the Middle East, itself the self-proclaimed main message of his book, is also most evident in the Blu-Ray extra "David Ignatius: Author Provocateur".

While he promises Ferris a future job that involves “no sunscreen” and “no cousins”, he fails to understand Ferris’ suggestion of the fundamental problem being that people like him see nothing to like in the Middle East. In addition, Ferris clarifies that he should better not mistake his idea of American values and the necessary manner with which these need to be defended to be that of all Americans:

- Hoffman: Ain’t nobody likes the Middle East, buddy. There’s nothing here to like.
 Ferris: Hmm. Well maybe that’s the problem right there, isn’t it Ed? Good luck on winning this war, Ed. I hope everyone thinks you did it all by yourself.
 Hoffman: You walk out on me, you know what that means. [...] Means you’re giving up on America.
 Ferris: Just be careful calling yourself America, huh, Ed?
 Hoffman: Nobody is innocent in this shit Ferris!

Thus, ultimately, Ed presents himself to be the embodiment of an arrogant, self-righteous U.S. attitude and strategy that neither functions well in this region of the world, nor is to be understood as representative of every American’s self-image. At the same time, he also ultimately admits that there are morally questionable measures taken on all sides.

The movie ends with Ed eating sushi while indifferently ordering to stop monitoring Ferris buying sweets in a market, with rapid shots of a continuously zooming-out aerial surveillance as the last images before the credits start to roll. On the one hand, this suggests a promising future for Ferris as having finally escaped the ‘body of lies’ around him, symbolized by the end of Hoffman’s constant surveillance. On the other hand, it also leaves us with the revelation that Ed will not for a moment consider any of what Ferris has said to him, much less change his attitude. Rather, U.S. mistakes and failures will continue as long as a fundamental change in the ideological approach of the conflict that is the ‘war on terror’ is not made. This impression is exactly what Jeffrey Nachmanoff’s *Traitor* also addresses.

5 Jeffrey Nachmanoff’s *Traitor*

With *Traitor*, first-time director Jeffrey Nachmanoff pictured another film that is centered around the notion of the lines of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ being prone to blur easily in a conflict as complex as the ‘war on terror’. Released about two months earlier than Scott’s *Body of Lies*,¹¹ *Traitor* is largely based on an idea of executive

¹¹ The fact that the two films were produced and released at almost the same time is the reason why this analysis does not treat them chronologically and does not assume them to have had much influence on each other concerning style or themes.

director Steve Martin, better known for his status as comedian, and was elaborated by Nachmanoff. Allegedly relying on the knowledge of numerous academics, authors, as well as espionage and intelligence experts (Nachmanoff, "Interview"), the movie pictures Don Cheadle as Samir Horn, a U.S. undercover agent, who is constantly torn apart by the mutual adherence to his Islamic religion and the duty to his country.

While "Horn might have the honor of being the first Muslim action hero in an American big budget film" (Harmanci 2008), the film feeds mostly on leaving open the possibility of him being a double agent. It does so in cutting back and forth between his immersion into a terrorist cell and an FBI unit around agents Roy Clayton (Guy Pearce) and Max Archer (Neil McDonough) chasing him around the globe. With Horn going as far as executing a terrorist attack himself, it takes until about half way into the movie before we can finally be sure that he has not switched sides. Even then, the fact that the FBI chasing him remains unaware of his real intentions further fuels the action and makes sure that the general theme of lies and deception that is central to any spy story is explored to the utmost.

Of course, as in *Body of Lies*, the movie's action scenes, including Horn and the terrorists violently being freed from prison in Yemen and repeated explosions of their bombs killing innocent civilians, look and sound spectacular and ensure it also is a gripping action thriller. But, at the same time, long conversations about the nature and justification of both the terrorists' and the American measures taken in this conflict, result in it being what critic Josh Rosenblatt described as follows:

[A] rare Hollywood creature: an action picture with ambiguity, a blockbuster with more questions than answers, a shoot 'em up thriller with a sense of moral and geopolitical ambivalence (2008).

Accordingly, the film also contains numerous slower paced scenes, which seem to aim at taking a look insight the belief system that underlies the actions of such terrorist groups as al-Qaeda. While it does not at all justify them, it does, just like *Body of Lies*, try to somewhat display them, suggesting their emergence to be highly complicated and not as simplistic as the Bush administration demonized them to be. In addition, with one of its major questions also being how far one is willing and morally allowed to take this fight, it gives direct nods toward the U.S. itself sometimes conducting highly questionable measures. Thus, ultimately, the film expresses a message, which Horn, asked by his wife to tell her the truth about his intentions, summarizes as this: "The truth is, it's complicated."

5.1 Technical and Stylistic Aspects

With a budget of about 22 million dollars, *Traitor* cost less than a third of how much was spent for *Body of Lies*.¹² As a result, its look is naturally somewhat different. In *Body of Lies*, careful attention was paid to the constant use of multiple cameras, from which Ridley Scott switched back and forth in order to be able to show numerous angles, mostly during action scenes. By doing so, he could then cut quickly from one to another and have a given scene appear fast-paced and spectacular. Of course, in order to employ this technique, Scott needed multiple camera crews operating at the same time, all the time.

For *Traitor*, on the other hand, director Jeffrey Nachmanoff often only used one or two cameras at a time, with cuts between them being significantly less frequent. As a result, the entire movie appears slightly slower in pace, often times allowing actor Don Cheadle to make use of the smallest gesture or facial expression to have us wonder about his character's intentions during the many long close-ups of him. In addition, Nachmanoff claims to have used only a very small crew for most scenes, in order to be able to film his protagonist using only a hand-held camera that follows him around the various locations ("Commentary" Scene 2).

In this context, the use of a smaller crew apparently allowed for the employment of a filming technique Nachmanoff terms "guerilla filming" ("Commentary" Scene 6), and which consists of simply going to actual places such as crowded streets in Marseille or the London underground to film without official permission to do so. Naturally, a scene that has been filmed this way does have a slightly more authentic look to it, as it is likely that the 'use' of actual pedestrians as extras will result in a given location appearing more natural than it would after having been fabricated to look a certain way. Accordingly, while the film, just as *Body of Lies*, used Morocco as stand-in for Yemen and thus the general Middle East, it makes sure to portray its locations in a most authentic way.

In accordance to an authentic portrayal of the Arab world which Nachmanoff and the producers claim to have aimed at (Nachmanoff, "Interview"), *Traitor*, much like *Body of Lies*, was careful to cast many actors from the Muslim community. Examples include British actress Archie Panjabi (Samir's wife), long-time Bollywood actor Ayy Khan (Fareed), and most notably French-Moroccan actor Said Taghmaoui (Omar). Also, Nachmanoff paid great attention to detail concerning the right representation of the Arabic language in having his protagonist speak proper Arabic, while in the Blu-Ray's commentary he even apologizes for some of the extras not talking in a proper dialect ("Commentary" Scene 3). Although Nachmanoff's claim to have talked to numerous authors and academics in order to authentically represent the Arab world cannot actually be verified, the fact that just like Ridley Scott, he was very keen on not falling into stereotypes of Arabic por-

¹² IMDB estimates the budget of *Body of Lies* at about 70 million dollars.

trayal, suggests, that he is very well aware of the necessary credibility that his display needed to convey.

As mentioned before, the movie, like *Body of Lies*, tries to pair this authenticity with entertainment in form of action in order to be what producer David Hoberman coins "a thinking man's thriller" ("Interview"). But, compared to *Body of Lies*, this action element seems even less important, as it deliberately takes a somewhat subordinate role to the mystery around Samir and thus ultimately the general topic of the movie, which director Nachmanoff believes to be a character drama within the framework of a modern political subject ("Interview"). Accordingly, concerning its images, *Traitor* is also less of a techno-thriller than *Body of Lies* in that it does not at all include a comparable amount of images of aerial surveillance suggesting a significant technological superiority on part of the U.S. in this conflict. Rather, the one image that seems most characteristic is the close up of Samir, who, as opposed to Roger Ferris, is never backed-up by a superior monitoring him.

Interestingly, the movie also uses different color patterns in order to distinguish the geographical location of a given scene. It does so in a very similar way to *Body of Lies*, with action set in the Middle East being of a kind of warm yellowish/brownish beige tone, and its American counterparts being significantly colder in a bluish gray. While critic Reyhan Harmanci believes this use of color patterns to simply be "bowing to convention" (2008), it nevertheless is very important for the distinction of the two cultural spheres. Of course, on a more pragmatic note, it helps to not get confused about the complexity of the plot, but more importantly, it maybe even subconsciously reminds us of a certain difference between them that is both origin of and fuel for some of the movies' themes and messages.

In addition, this alleged cultural difference is enhanced by the use of Middle Eastern instruments and melodies in the soundtrack. But, as opposed to *Body of Lies*, it is not mostly used in order to aurally place us in the geographical region. Repeatedly underlining close-ups of the thoughtful and seemingly self-reflecting Samir, the sounds of this music also symbolically represent his ongoing moral struggle resulting from being caught in between his religion, which is deeply rooted in Middle Eastern culture, and the duty to his country, itself rooted in American culture.

5.2 Characters, Themes and Messages

After the roll of the opening credits and the film's title presented along with kaleidoscopic images of oriental structures, we are introduced to the main character Samir through a flashback to his childhood. His growing up in Sudan of the late 1970s is depicted as peaceful and faithful, as he is shown to pray and play chess with his father, all the while joyful African-style music is playing in the soundtrack. But suddenly the atmosphere changes, as he has to witness his father being killed by a car bomb, leaving him alone in the face of terror. The close-up of his terrified self as a boy cuts to the grown-up Samir, resolutely driving through a city in

Yemen in what is supposed to be the “present day”. We follow him into a terrorist safe house and witness him easily countering suspicions about his intentions in claiming to want to sell them explosives and also show them how to use them without blowing themselves up “unintentionally”. A warm greeting by what appears to be the older terrorist leader suggests Samir has known him for a while, before suddenly a police raid sends them all fleeing. Some of the terrorists, including the older man, get shot, while Samir is knocked out, the screen fading to black just like his conscious.

Of course, this opening sequence strongly establishes the mystery that is Samir’s identity as deeply rooted in his biography. The movie leaves open the possibility of him being a double agent of some kind right from the start, since he could easily be acting in order to avenge an American-led attack on an alleged religious fanatic. After all, the backgrounds behind the car bomb that killed his father are never revealed, the only other direct reference to it in the entire movie being an FBI agent causally saying it remains unclear what side was behind it. At the same time, his perfect English and the slight mocking of the terrorists’ actions also suggest him having come into contact with Western, or rather American culture. Thus, despite the fact that he is seemingly not at all intimidated by the terrorists’ suspicions about him being a possible traitor (much like the film’s title already suggested), we cannot be sure about his actual intentions. Ultimately, we are left to figure out what side he is on, with the notion of truth in the movie already showing itself to be as complicated and even twisted as the initial kaleidoscopic images symbolically suggest reality to be.

The following interrogation of Samir by the two FBI agents Clayton and Archer, who were previously shown to be part of the raid that resulted in his capture, then further adds to the mystery around his character. Asked about the reason for trying to sell explosives to terrorists, Samir again leaves open the possibility of being anti-American:

- Samir: I sell them to whoever can afford to buy. Like the
United States government.
Archer: Only ours don’t kill innocent people.
Samir: Oh yeah, they do, genius. People just usually have
darker skin.

Of course, we later learn that he needs to disguise himself from the FBI in order to operate undercover, but the disapproval of the idea of the U.S. always doing ‘good’ will remain part of his character. As such, it is one of the film’s first nods towards the duplicity inherent in American policy.

This notion is also symbolically expressed in form of the fundamentally different characters of the FBI agents Clayton and Archer. A few shots of them among the local police prior to the previous raid already showed Archer to be an ignorant cowboy refusing to give up his gun, while Clayton was introduced as much more

aware of the necessity of meeting the locals with respect. Symbolically nicely separated by wearing black and white shirts, respectively, Archer and Clayton were thus shown as almost opposites concerning the ability of understanding the local culture. This impression endures as some of his utterances reveal Archer to be utterly disrespectful towards Middle Eastern culture, rendering him the arrogant American similar to Ed Hoffman in *Body of Lies*.

For example, he apologizes for hitting Samir during investigation saying "I must have forgotten my Bill of Rights at home", mocks a suicide bomber who survived by ridiculing the prospect of waking up in paradise, rejects any efforts of trying to learn Arabic by claiming to be only picking up "your basic jihadi", and never once doubts that Samir could be anything but a terrorist. Clayton, on the other hand, is portrayed as much more sensible and not near as narrow-minded. He understands the value of putting psychological rather than physical pressure on suspects, and puts into perspective Archer's views on suicide bombers referring to the Ku Klux Klan burning crosses as an example of Christianity also having "more than one face". In addition, he is revealed to be a minister's son having gained a PhD in Arabic studies and for a long time seems to doubt that Samir is merely a terrorist. Thus, ultimately, this difference between the two agents, which their actors Neil McDonough and Guy Pearce perceive to symbolize the 'old' and the 'new' FBI ("Interview"), is necessarily also a statement on a needed change in strategy in the gathering of intelligence on possible terrorist attacks.

The film also criticizes another aspect of the work of intelligence agencies, namely the lack of communication between them, which often times complicates their individual efforts or even renders them impossible. This notion, which Nachmanoff regards as one of the movie's central themes ("Interview"), is most evidently displayed in the scene picturing different members of various intelligence agencies in a meeting in Washington, D.C. Here, Clayton shares information on a possible terrorist attack about to take place inside the U.S., only for another agent (his identity is not revealed) to admit that his agency has long known about an imminent threat. A short argument about the need of sharing information sparks until another man in suit steps in and reassures the White House's wish for "everybody working together on this". Thus, evidently, the movie quite strongly suggests that these agencies are not nearly as efficient as they could be if they would only manage to work together. Of course, this is also expressed in Samir having to remain undercover even from the FBI for fear of being exposed as American undercover, while the one person that knows about his real intentions, a freelance agent for the CIA named Carter, never admits having an agent inside the terrorist network.

Again, the manner with which this agent emerges into the terrorist cell is of course what generates the most suspense in the movie. In this context, it is most of all Samir's strong Islamic belief that is interesting, as it not only attracts the terrorists' attention, but at the same time continuously has us wonder about whether he actually is an American undercover agent after all. Having refused to cooperate

with Archer and Clayton in the beginning, he is imprisoned in Yemen, where on-going shots of him in prayer, and the defending of an old man against bullies by referring to God being the only one able to decide over life and death, show him to be just as religious as the locals, if not even more so. His strong belief catches the attention of Omar, the young terrorist that had initially doubted his intentions of wanting to sell them explosives in the first place, who slowly realizes the value of both Samir's intelligence and his religious submissiveness. The conversations they share over playing chess show them to have a mutual influence on each other.

On the one hand, we see Omar trying to remind Samir of jihad being his duty, referring to the Americans also once having been terrorists to the British. The fact that he does not explicitly reject this idea, despite, as we know, having formerly been a U.S. soldier, shows that Samir is struggling with an inner conflict of different belief systems. All we are allowed to see are repeated close-ups of Samir, who seems to constantly be in a state of doubting his own actions, and we still cannot be sure at this point whether or not he might be tempted to actually join the terrorists for real. At the same time, their talks also have Omar thinking, who we learn was educated in a boarding school in Switzerland, is dreaming in English, and sometimes does not feel at home speaking his own language. Naturally, this comes as a surprise not only to Samir, but also to us as it leaves a very tiny possibility of Omar not being the stereotypical fanatic terrorist he first appeared to be. Ultimately, their relationship already suggests the further blurring of the lines of 'good' and 'evil' that the movie aims at.

Just how much Omar values their friendship is evident in him taking Samir with him when they are freed from prison. They board a ferry to Marseille and Omar invites Samir to join his terrorist cell, but asks him not to "decide lightly" as their "path is not for everyone". Once more, a cut to a close-up of Samir apparently considering the consequences this will have for him leaves us unable to decide whether he is just playing his role to stay undercover, or if he is actually thinking about becoming a terrorist. In the end, he does join Omar, but the way he encounters his superior, Fareed, hints that his belief in Islam is so strong that ultimately it will not allow him to kill civilians, which is the very aim of the terrorists he now surrounds himself with. Deeply confused by Fareed claiming the drinking of alcohol a necessity in order to blend in, Samir refers to a fundamentally wrong interpretation of the Quran, and is once more pictured as much better understanding their mutual religion.

Nevertheless, the extent to which Samir proceeds to actively take part in the terrorists' actions once more has us doubt his intentions. For example, in a scene that shows just how persuading the terrorists can be in luring young men into becoming suicide bombers, mixing the fun of playing soccer with the ongoing preaching of a necessary fight against the U.S., Samir joins actively. Admittedly, his claim that a man, who is not afraid to die can never be defeated, no matter how big the empire he is fighting, is more moderate than Samir's previous utterance, who accused Americans of having "spill[ed] the blood of innocent Muslims for dec-

ades". However, it is just as convincing, a fact which is symbolically expressed by a young French boy summarizing the argument as follows: "America has planes, missiles and bombs. But we have God on our side." Thus, with the boy then becoming a prospective executer of an attack, Samir is partly responsible for the 'creation' of such a suicide bomber.

Accordingly, the central question more and more becomes how far Samir is willing and able to go in case he is actually an American undercover agent. The movie continues to uphold the mystery around his intentions, alternating scenes showing Samir inside the terrorist cell with sequences of Clayton and Archer questioning his mother and wife and gathering background information on him. Although it is not clear whether Clayton fully believes in him being a terrorist, Samir nevertheless becomes a prime suspect for the FBI, while Fareed is pleased to have his own investigation on him also suggesting that he really is one of them. What adds to further confusion about Samir is the fact that he himself comes up with the plan of how to execute an attack on the American consulate in Nice. He does so pushing to have the terrorist cell take action, despite the initial plan including the boy as suicide attacker having failed.

At the same time, however, Samir insists on the use of a remote detonator, and combined with the tiny nod he gives the boy towards escape from getting killed for the exposition of the imminent attack, this still leaves the possibility of him wanting to avoid any casualties whatsoever. Then again, he could not stop the boy getting killed and the determination with which he builds, plants the bombs, and eventually pulls the trigger once more raises the question of whether an undercover agent would go this far. The fact is we still cannot tell, since Don Cheadle's acting skills simply leave open the possibility of his character being able to be both 'good' and 'bad'.

What finally gives him away, then, is his reaction to the news about the attack he carried out having killed eight people. Despite claiming that his shock about this outcome is merely due to the fact of having hoped to kill many more, his facial expression suggests that he really is terrified by his own actions. This notion is also evident in him quoting Martin Luther King when Omar once more tries to remind him that their actions as terrorists are for the benefit of their people and religion. Eventually, it is clear that while a close-up lingers on the utterly sad and seemingly self-reflecting Samir, his embracing of the value of finding something worth dying for (as expressed in his quoting of one of the most famous American free rights activists) is not meant to be the joke Omar perceives it to be. Evidently, for him such a cause is not the terrorists' actions, which to him are clearly based on a wrong interpretation of their religion, but much rather the stopping of them.

As the next scene reveals, what is the most troubling for Samir is not the need to play his role of determined terrorist, but the need to act against the values of his religion in order to uphold this cover. Taking great caution not to be followed, he meets with Carter, and it is revealed that the bomb Samir set off was not supposed to actually kill anybody. Instead, a few corpses should only make it look real, ren-

dering this measure very much similar to the staged bombing in *Body of Lies*. In this context, Carter seems hardly concerned by the outcome of having killed a few construction workers, claiming they could not control everything and reassuring Samir of such measures being necessary in order to further advance inside the terrorist cell and ultimately get to top terrorist Nathir. Thus, what he fails to understand is that he puts Samir into a situation of incredible struggle between duty and religion, with shots of him in desperate prayer for forgiveness stressing the seriousness of him now being responsible for having killed innocent civilians.

Nevertheless, Samir goes on and meets Nathir, who is portrayed as calm and thinking strategically, describing terrorism as “theatre” which is performed for the American people in order to provoke an American military reaction that will in turn generate more support for the terrorists. In this context, Samir is supposed to arrange the bombing of dozens of overland buses going through the U.S. on the same day, an attack designed to have Americans everywhere in fear. Of course, this means that Samir once more has to decide just how far he can and needs to go as American undercover with a strong Islamic belief. Again, Carter is not near as concerned as he is, as is evident in their second conversation. While Samir is deeply troubled by the possible need of giving the terrorists actual bombs in order to keep his cover, Carter once more expresses his willingness to take any given measure in order to stop them in the long run:

- Samir: How far are you willing to take this? We’ve got
 blood on our hands. We’ve killed innocent people.
- Carter: And if we stop now, they’ll have died for nothing.
 This is a war. You do what it takes to win.
- Samir: You know what you sound like, right?
- Carter: We’re the good guys.
- Samir: Oh, I know.
- Carter: Remember who you answer to.
- Samir: I answer to God, we all do.

Thus ultimately, Carter, whom his actor Jeff Daniels understands to be symbolic of “the old spies [...] blending in while doing whatever it takes” (“Interview”), is pictured to be just as convinced about the righteousness of questionable measures being required to be taken in this ‘war on terror’ as is Ed Hoffman in *Body of Lies*. As Samir rightly mentions, this is an attitude that renders him no different from the ‘evil’ he is fighting. To Samir, only God is the one true ‘good’ and neither side should be claiming to act in order to defend a self-declared superior version of it.

As the further plot shows, Samir is willing to fight for his beliefs, even if it means having to cooperate with the terrorist for a while longer, with his cover requiring him to both lie to his wife and deceive Clayton and the FBI. Accordingly, he travels around the country and hands out bombs to prospective suicide attackers and eventually cannot show any emotions when Omar kills Carter, who bursts

into a meeting of him and Omar. Rather, he has to even be happy about being put on the FBI's high value target list, since it means that his cover is not yet blown, despite him having met his wife, which Fareed perceived to be a sign of him being an unnecessary liability. In the end, the film cleverly plays with elements of dramatic irony and leaves open the possibility of Samir again killing innocent civilians in order to remain undercover. After all, it is only the last twist, which shows him to have put all bombers on the same bus, that finally also reveals to the other characters what we already knew: he never wanted to kill anybody in the first place, only Nathir and Fareed.

More importantly, though, the last conversations with him show Samir to not have given up on Omar understanding the wrong in what the terrorists do. As their talk about the need of resisting temptation shows, Omar really seems to reflect somewhat:

- Omar: You know, it's true what they say, war is the lesser
 jihad. To overcome temptation, to live rightly, that is
 the great jihad.
- Samir: Is that what we've been doing? Did you ever ask
 yourself that?
- Omar: Sometimes. But Nathir is the leader and my duty is
 to follow.

Thus, Omar is intelligent enough to see that the term jihad "has had other, more temperate, inflections in Islamic history" (Crokartt 77). But at the same time, he feels the need to follow his leader in accepting a wrong, more aggressive interpretation. Naturally, Samir tries to convince him to see this abuse of their mutual religion, an effort which is pictured one last time during the stand-off of the two that follows Samir having shot Nathir and Fareed.

In an emotional discussion that has Samir rejecting his status as traitor by claiming that such men only use them for their faith and that it is them who are the traitors for having betrayed Islam, Omar slowly seems to accept this truth. After Samir first drops his gun, the initially mad Omar also lowers his, but is then shot by the entering police. Thus, the movie leaves open the possibility of Omar eventually being able to see how terrorists misuse faith and faithful men for their purposes, while Samir is pictured to be the only one able to interpret Islam correctly.

Admittedly, all this could very well be interpreted as suggesting that the movie's main message is that the terrorists simply misinterpret their religion and that it is therefore still morally right to fight them with questionable measures and be content as long as they are killed in the end. But the very last scene sheds a different light on the matter. After Samir had also been wounded badly whenever the police led by Clayton and Archer stormed the previous scene and mistook him for one of the terrorists, we follow Clayton meeting him on the street after his recovery. Clayton congratulates him on finally being free and asks him to further

help him in his efforts of finding and fighting terrorists, as “this fight is far from over”. Samir, however, elaborates on the gravity of him having had to make “choices about people’s lives” and tries to have Clayton understand that the contradiction of duty and his religion is evident.

He refers to what Ahmad Ghazali identifies as “one of the *hadiths* (sayings)” of the Prophet Mohamed (105), in saying that the killing of innocent civilians amounts to the killing of all humankind. Clayton tries to counter this by claiming that the Quran “also says that if you’ve saved a life, it’s as if you’ve saved all mankind”, and even proclaims Samir a hero. But Samir rejects this label and refuses to go on helping Clayton. Thus, ultimately, the fact that he honorably served his country does not matter near as much to him as the fact that the measures he had to take in order to do so put him into deep trouble with his religion. In the end, he recognizes Clayton’s efforts at trying to understand his situation and meet him with respect, but at the same time stresses the need to approach the whole matter differently in the first place. A notion, which is symbolized in their final farewell in Arabic:

Clayton:	As-salaamu ‘alaykum.
Samir:	Wa ‘alaykum salaam. And you should start the conversation with that.

Thus, the “conversation” that is the treatment of and the approach toward Middle Eastern culture and religion needs to be started differently by the U.S. Ultimately, as the final images of the film consist of close-ups of the sun-bathed Samir praying, aurally underlined by an Arabic flute’s melody, it becomes clear that the movie symbolically expresses the fact that this is the main element to be reconsidered in the American strategy in what is the complex conflict of the ‘war on terror’.

6 Conclusion

Both Ridley Scott’s *Body of Lies* and Jeffrey Nachmanoff’s *Traitor* contain various themes and messages that critically shine a light on the Bush administration’s approach towards its “war on terror”. Above all, they reject the notion of a simplistic binary opposition of the eternal ‘good’ U.S. and the purely ‘evil’ terrorists, in that they show that both sides engage in actions that are morally and ethically wrong. They do so by documenting just what it means to fully embrace and adhere to Bush’s ideology.

In this context, it has been shown that characters like Ed Hoffman, Max Archer and Carter are utterly determined and confident about the righteousness of even the most questionable moral measures necessarily having to be taken in order to find and stop, or rather kill the terrorists. At all times, they see it a necessary ‘evil’ to engage in such measures and not for one moment consider the fact that in the

end, they render themselves on the wrong side of the 'good vs. evil' dichotomy. In addition, they show a strong ignorance toward the local Middle Eastern culture and are at no time concerned with the reactions that their arrogant and insensitive behavior will necessarily provoke. Thus ultimately, they must be seen as the embodiment of a U.S. strategy that ignorantly pursues its goal of obliterating terrorism, all the while unconcerned "with the consequences of its manner of doing so" (Rajaei 72).

Of course, both films also express this blurring of the lines of 'good' and 'evil' in form of their protagonists' moral struggles. While Roger Ferris is experiencing an inner conflict that stems mostly from the unscrupulousness of his boss, who has not near as much respect as he has for the local culture into which he more and more emerges, Samir Horn struggles even more with what he has to do as U.S. undercover due to his strong Islamic belief. What they both have in common is that they are much more critical about the measures they are forced to take in the fighting of terrorism than are their superiors. Unlike the protagonist of the TV series *24* and thus the typical hero of the post-9/11 (techno) thriller, they do not readily put aside all moral conscience to 'get the job done', but are displayed to be much more aware of the importance of actually remaining on the side of the moral 'good'.

In the end, they refuse to further engage in this fight against terrorism, as they cannot stand the way it is exercised anymore, both left to deal with the moral consequences of their previous actions. As such, their character developments need to be understood as a direct criticism of the duplicity inherent in the Bush administration's strategy, which Cynthia Weber attributes to be "so insistently self-referential (e.g. we believe we are doing the morally right thing, so we are moral)" (162).

Also, in an effort to counter a simplistic demonization, the two films show the terrorists to have more complex reasons for their actions than Bush had claimed them to have. While these are not portrayed as justified, they nevertheless are shown to partly be fueled by the above mentioned insensitivity with which the U.S. behaves in this conflict.¹³ Accordingly, both movies seem to be a plea for a change in attitude and strategy on part of the Americans. On the one hand, *Body of Lies* strongly suggests that the cooperation with and respectful treatment of local allies is indispensable in order to succeed in the fighting of terrorism and to do so in a way that does not further generate an atmosphere of resentment toward U.S. operations in the Middle East. On the other hand, *Traitor* pictures both the failure of U.S. intelligent agencies to work together and, more importantly, the necessity of understanding Middle Eastern culture and Islamic religion better in the first place, in order to be able to overcome what Robert Ricigliano and Mike Allen regard as a critical flaw in U.S. policy: "the failure to target the root causes that motivate terrorists and facilitate their actions" (92).

¹³ For a detailed analysis of the counterproductive results of American public diplomacy in the Middle East cf. Zaharna, R.S. *Battles to Bridges: U.S. Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy after 9/11* (Palgrave Macmillan 2010).

The most important aspect of the way all these themes and messages are presented is the authenticity with which both films picture them and which, in the case of *Traitor*, tempted critic Roger Egbert to describe it as “com[ing] uncomfortably close to reality” (2008). As has been shown, both movies put great emphasis on an appropriate representation of the Arab world and are careful not to fall into stereotypes. Of course, they establish a visual and aural difference in between the spheres of the West and the Middle East, but the way these are presented results in much more than simple ‘clash of civilization’ portrayals. Essentially, their stories rather seem to be aiming at a mutual understanding and the start of a respectful dialogue. In doing so, the two films can be regarded as not being part of what James Castonguay describes as a “limited repertoire of images of, and narratives, about Arabs and Islam before and during the war on terror”, which allegedly “served to keep much of the U.S. ignorant about Arab and Islamic culture” (152).

Rather, *Body of Lies* and *Traitor* form part of a number of Hollywood movies released between 2006 and 2008 that addressed the ‘war on terror’ in a way that shed a light on America’s narrow view on it, while at the same time displaying its own, ‘evil’ actions in this fight, ultimately exposing the Bush administration’s rhetoric as populist and simplistic. Despite the fact that they remained commercially unsuccessful,¹⁴ a circumstance which Jeff Birkenstein regards as resulting from them “hit[ting] too close to the truth to be enjoyed as entertainment” (70), these films publicized a less biased view on American strategy. In a political context, these films must naturally be put into perspective of the 2008 Presidential Election, which eventually saw Barack Obama become the current President of the U.S. But in a historical context, such films are also part of a form of criticism that dates back as far as the principles which the Bush administration so rigorously claimed for itself. After all, the Declaration of Independence also states that it is the people’s duty to throw off any government that “becomes destructive” of certain rights like life and liberty (Declaration of Independence).

Of course, with the American fight against terrorism far from over, it remains to be seen whether or not the current and future administrations will follow a less ideologically impregnated strategy. In the end, it seems likely that some of the central themes and messages of Ridley Scott’s *Body of Lies* and Jeffrey Nachmanoff’s *Traitor* remain highly topical and will possibly do so for many years to come.

¹⁴ IMDB estimates their gross at about 23 million dollars for *Traitor* and about 40 million dollars for *Body of Lies*, compared to estimated budgets of 22 million and 70 million dollars, respectively. Thus, despite a change in atmosphere, releasing a major film critical to the Bush administration’s behavior in the ‘war on terror’ still meant taking a great economical risk.

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