

## Third Cinema and Social Science

Written by Seth Cantey

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SETH CANTEY, AUG 17 2018

One of the most surprising aspects of the emerging body of research on terrorism in film is the relative absence of explicit argumentation about film's utility for understanding terrorism in the real world. Too often, analysis of terrorism in film is limited to the examination of film itself, where links between what appears on the screen and lived experience are implied but not fully explored. This gap represents a missed opportunity. Filmic depictions of terrorism and processes of radicalization – particularly in *Third Cinema* – draw on and provide insight into real-life phenomena. Consequently, they can be used to generate research questions that might otherwise go unasked. The purpose of this post is to make that case: to provide a proof of concept for the utility of comparative film analysis as a basis for social science research, and specifically to demonstrate how such analysis can lead to new and interesting research agendas.

Research at the intersection of international relations and popular culture has been gaining steam in recent years, so by now, it should come as no surprise that popular artifacts can tell us much about the political world. The relevance of specific artifacts to different research questions, however, varies. The films *Die Hard* (McTiernan 1988) and *True Lies* (Cameron 1994) may tell us something about popular conceptions of terrorism in a certain place, at a certain time, among a certain people, but they do little to shed light on processes of radicalisation or other aspects of terrorism in the real world. This is generally okay: the main objective of films like these is to generate profit, not to accurately depict terrorism and associated phenomena. To the extent that viewers understand this, and refrain from internalizing misleading or harmful stereotypes, there is certainly space in the entertainment world for this kind of film.

Third Cinema tends to be different than most mainstream fare on offer from Hollywood (though we should be careful not to draw a bright line between the two kinds of work). When dealing with radicalization and terrorism, for example, it tends to humanize terrorists, especially through depictions of logical paths to violence. These films tend to be rooted in the social and political world in a way that mainstream films are not, drawing more directly on the experiences of filmmakers – producers, directors, actors, and others – to generate understandings and interpretations from what are, paradoxically, untraditional angles. They do more to step inside the minds of those who would use violence than mainstream cinematography and, in doing so, more fully convey the complexities of terrorism. If the objective of the researcher is to use film to understand the social world, Third Cinema is more fertile ground than Hollywood.

To illustrate these points, and to show that comparative film analysis can usefully generate new research questions, the remainder of this post briefly draws on three Third Cinema films that deal with the phenomena in question. These include *The War Within* (Castelo 2005), *Paradise Now* (Abu-Assad 2005), and *The Oath* (Poitras 2011). Due to space constraints, I do little here to detail plotlines, jumping instead straight into comparative analysis and ideas for two questions (and their derivatives) of a potential universe of inquiry. My hope is that even if the reader is unfamiliar with these works (and few will be familiar with them all), the discussion will generate interest in reading the broader article, which provides more detail, and/or, better yet, watching these films to see what new ideas they generate for the viewer.

Among the first things one notices in Third Cinema generally, and in the aforementioned films in particular, is that the stereotype of an irrational fanatic bent on destruction is absent. The levels of doubt that protagonists exhibit about their intentions, however, do vary within and across productions. The most extreme of the protagonists considered

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here is Hassan, from *The War Within*, who after being radicalised shows little doubt about the righteousness of his pending action – a suicide bombing of Grand Central Station. Unlike characters in the other films, the first steps on Hassan's path to radicalisation are extraordinary rendition and torture. Protagonists from other films, like Saïd and Khaled from *Paradise Now* and Abu Jandal from *The Oath*, also have personal reasons for justifying violence, but none of their comments suggest a degree of militancy on par with Hassan's.

One research question that could derive from these observations is about whether a radicalised individual's level of doubt about perpetrating violence tends to be inversely correlated with the severity of the experience(s) that motivated radicalisation. Do more personal and/or more severe catalysts of radicalisation (e.g., rendition, torture, or prolonged detention without charge or trial) produce more enduring, harder commitments to violence than communal catalysts (e.g., knowledge of the plight of others in one's own community, nearby or farther afield)? One might further ask the related question of whether witnessing another person suffer humiliation, as in the case of Khaled (from *Paradise Now*) witnessing soldiers break his father's leg, is as likely to contribute to the radicalisation of the witness as it is to the person who directly suffered the humiliation.

A second question that such observations might prompt is comparative in a broader sense, one that examines *reactions* to films across contexts based on the content of the films. Bennett has observed that 'The specific cultural context in which films are viewed will necessarily frame their meaning...' With this insight in mind, what kinds of differences might emerge in reactions to *Paradise Now*, a film about Palestinian suicide bombers, among different populations in the Holy Land? One might assume (correctly or incorrectly) that Palestinians in the West Bank or Gaza would be more sympathetic to the protagonists' decisions than Jewish Israelis, but would the views of West Bank or Gazan Palestinians differ from those of Arab Israelis? Do differences emerge within these groups but across generational lines? What are the implications if they do? And what of state reactions? Are there films that Israel has banned, or that Israel would ban, just as France initially banned screening of *The Battle of Algiers* (Pontecorvo 1966)? Or might these states surprise us by *promoting* what may seem controversial in pursuit of dialogue across peoples?

These questions necessarily represent just a sampling of the lines of inquiry that can emerge from comparative film analysis, but they illustrate that film can serve as a launch pad for future research. Anthropologists, political scientists, psychologists, sociologists, and others may be spurred to different kinds of questions from watching film, all of them valid, and these can be explored through a range of methodologies. This should be encouraged, as it can only contribute to more holistic, interdisciplinary understandings of whatever phenomena happen to be in question.

*Author's Note: This contribution is based on research conducted for a journal article titled 'Filmic Representations of Radicalization and Terrorism: The Silver Screen as Catalyst for Social Science,' published in Media, War & Conflict.*

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### About the author:

Seth Cantey is an assistant professor of politics at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, USA.