

Objective *Obsession*?

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Throughout history, the United States has proven that our nation may not be the most responsible, in regards to standing up for the wrongs their people are suffering in times of crises. We treated the Japanese unfathomably, placing them in internment camps during World War II, and ruined so many lives during the period of McCarthy and the Red Scare. We have a reputation of injuring our own people when presented with inner conflict, and such is the case once more. After the vicious and revolting attacks on 9-11, the U.S. seemed to have a free for all against anyone or anything regarding the Islamic faith. Innocent Americans were bombarded by messages of hate in the media and they too found themselves victims of the tragedy. They dealt not only with the assault on their nation, but with the striking against the label they were given as followers of Islam. Since then, Muslims in the U.S. have done their best to educate and sway the minds warped by the escalating emotions of the times. They continue to encounter those hits, from the distorted media that set them back. “*Obsession: Radical Islam’s War Against the West*” is one such example.

The film plays out in the typical “expository mode, emphasizing verbal commentary and an argumentative logic” (Nichols, 33). It is formed accordingly, including all the ingredients needed for such a film: interviews, archival footage and a narrator’s voice that appears every so often to interpret the footage we are being shown. We are told the film’s goal is to lift the veil on fundamentalists so that it “challenges the way you look at the world” (“*Obsession*” site). If so,

¹ Dina Sayyed, an undergraduate communication student at Trinity University, wrote this term paper in December 2006 for a course on documentary film. The course was taught by Professor Aaron Delwiche. Student papers are available online at <http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/documentary/guides.html>

the future is looking quite bleak. From its opening, we are thrown into terrifying scenes, bombarded with shocking imagery and are told that we are getting an insider’s view of radical Islam along with the despicable acts committed throughout the world by terrorist organizations. So much is presented, and the audience is told to commend these filmmakers for their brave warnings and insight. Supposedly, they are giving us the true story on the foundations of terrorism that we have not yet heard. Yet, we should ask, is this so called documentary made ethically and responsibly? **Though presented as an unbiased and straightforward documentary, “*Obsession: Radical Islam’s War Against the West*” is dangerous propaganda against the Islamic religion, misrepresenting and dehumanizing a vast culture.**

One of the very first things we are shown in this film is a disclaimer. Typed out on the screen, in plain lettering, we read, “it’s important to remember, most Muslims are peaceful and do not support terror...this is not a film about them.” The message is clear and straight to the point: this is about the very specific issue of radical Islam and a certain group of fundamentalists. Therefore, we put down our guard and in the same instance give the filmmakers some credit for being so responsible. From that point on, we are supposed to keep this disclaimer in tow, no matter what is said or what we are shown. Less than twenty minutes into the film, the rhetoric begins to change. Those speaking seem to drop the “radical” from their terminology and lose the “Islamist” label as well, and instead begin to speak out on the problems with the broad culture. They turn instead to “Palestinians” and “Islam” in general. “Rhetoric is the form of speech used to persuade or convince about an issue with no clear cut, unequivocal answer or solution...convincing us about an issue for which more than one point of view or conclusion is possible” (Nichols, 17). The slight and almost unnoticeable change totally twists the objective of this film. Much more obvious indicators that the shift has occurred lies in the text put up during the film to distinguish one topic from the next. “The culture of hatred” and “the media of

terrorism” is used to section off the film’s assertions, yet they hit upon the entirety of the people and their culture, not just the terrorists. It implies that the entirety of these people are demonic and brainwashed by the evil media, when no such instances are backed up. We are given clips of music videos, which could be made by just about any individual, and flashy news introductions, that can be found with just about any news corporation in the world. The way they introduce these matters does not specify radical Islam, but generalizes the masses into being terrorists. These little semantic changes make all the difference, and what we end up with is “doublespeak...where meanings to words and concepts are shifted in order to confuse the citizenry” (Larson, 8). There is no clear message on who we are to fear.

The film pulls us back in forth with its rhetoric, confusing us to the point of sheer exhaustion. It is difficult to really see what we are supposed to believe. Denton (1995) argues that “language is the glue that bonds people, ideas and society together. It is a very active and creative process that...actively shapes one’s interpretation of the environment.” This film’s language, and the environment it presents, purports that terrorism, and radical behavior, indicate and are synonymous with Islam. It could also be said that they are employing “a form of epideictic rhetoric known as ‘covenant renewal,’ where we are engaged with the hopes of faith and renewal and are challenged to rise to the threat of terrorism just as our forefathers had confronted the threat of World War II” (Rodrigues, 112). This fear is heavily instilled upon us in “Obsession,” and the link with World War II is more than apparent.

No one can say that “Obsession” is not trying to parallel the Nazi movement with that of Islam. It is one of the main points of the film and it resonates significantly. “Nazi,” is a word that carries a large amount of preconceived ideas. With it comes the mental image of people tortured and treated in the most inhumane way. It is the lowest of the low, and a symbol of hatred and fear that we do not want to repeat. The filmmakers of “Obsession” connect Islam with Nazi culture in many ways. They provide

anti-Jewish cartoon comparisons and similar depictions, along with symbols of Nazi endeavors. Included are videos of radical Islamic soldiers marching menacingly, with the aid of some heavy set music in the background, and pictures strategically taken to mimic the arm movements of that of the Hitler salute. They do not provide any background or historical information as to the basis for these actions. The cartoons are political and concern the dealings of Israeli-Palestinian roots and the pictures are edited carefully. Also, we are quickly and confusingly introduced to a Muslim extremist that led a troop of Nazi fighters during World War II. The Holocaust was unacceptable and resulted in the loss of countless lives. The Jews felt it the most, but it would be reprehensible to ignore the other groups targeted, including gypsies, homosexuals and thousands and thousands of Muslims. Serbians, Romanians, Africans and Asians were all attacked by the Nazis during their reign of power, and a number of those included followers of Islam. We too cannot ignore the fact that many Muslim individuals stood up against the Nazis with the allied armies, like Princess Noor Khan, the first woman to be parachuted into France. Though she was later captured by the Germans and executed in 1944 at the infamous Dachau concentration, she is now looked to as a French WWII heroine (Shrabani). The documentary’s reference to this single fanatic that fought with the SS has no basis for the present times and is done to distract us from what is truly happening. This fear the filmmakers wish to instill in us is a very usefully persuasive tactic. In the face of such, “we repress the urge to panic” and as such “repress our ability to resist [persuasion]” (Rushkoff, 4). The fear, in effect, takes over. “We deny what we are feeling, and we disconnect further from what remains of our free will. As a result, we become even better targets for those who would direct our actions” (Rushkoff, 5). The object they use to assert this fear was a tactical choice, for the Western public is known to cognitively react to connections to the Nazi movement.

Mix this fear in with the images used throughout the film of the American flag being desecrated and stepped on. The flag has always

been “the primary symbol of unity, commitment, determination and our values of democracy and freedom” (Denton, 7). After the attacks of 9-11, the symbolic imagery of the flag was augmented, as the nation came together with Old Blue. “The US saw a dramatic increase in the number of Americans proudly displaying the Stars and Stripes on their cars, homes and businesses. This outpouring of flag waving signified a variety of sentiments- from identification with the victims of the September 11th attacks to a show of support for our troops...With this, the symbol gained momentum” (Dreler, 1). With the images of the flag’s destruction, the audience is coerced into the idea that Islam equals evil, relying on the “fundamental techniques of tracking, disorientation, redirection and capture” (Rushkoff, 15). In the end, the filmmakers have redirected us to greatly fear Islam and have manipulated our mindsets into capture.

Symbolic uses do not stop there. With the use of editing and graphics, even Islamic symbols of peace can be tampered with and contorted into images of fear. The title graphic is obviously one such instance. The Islamic symbol of the moon and star is used for the O in “Obsession.” An overpowering gun is used to make the N. Also in the film, a video of the Muslim holy site Mecca is shown. Here, masses of Muslim worshippers make pilgrimage every year to come together in unity, to dedicate themselves to God. Most individuals tell stories of their inner peace and the tranquility they encounter there. In the film, the images of the individuals praying are overlapped with ominous and frightening music along with the narration, “the question then becomes, what percentage of the Islamic world supports Jihad.” To connect this sanctuary with such rhetoric is unnerving. Calling Mecca a terrorist breeding ground is beyond unacceptable. Yet, we sit and we watch with fear, for the editing and musical choices picked force our emotions into captured and control.

We are left with a jumbled account of the issues with Islam. By confusing and distracting the audience, the makers of “Obsession” can very easily manipulate the

viewer. The spectacles used here are a tactic to throw us off course. The first five minutes of the film are an example of this. We are given flash after flash after flash of violence and destruction, said to have been caused by Muslim extremists, in a disturbing order. A computer generated map of the world is shown and we are thrown from city to city, all around the world, bombarded by the images they have chosen to give us. Loud music thumps along, exciting and thrilling, all the while the images become harder and harder to discern. According to the introduction, there is no where to hide from the attacks and the blockbuster film extravaganza pumps us up to react. “Spectacles function to suspend rational processes in favor of emotional ones. The intellect is neutralized, along with its ability to protect us from hateful or illogical rhetoric. We are made vulnerable” (Rushkoff, 145). This tactic was used adamantly in “Obsession:” the heart beat like drums, exclamatory statements and the Arab television show that depicted a Jew drinking the blood of a Christian. All of this is there for shock and awe; to revel at the great absurdities and “offer us rare access to the subconscious as well as the mythic sides of our individual and collective experience” (Rushkoff, 146). Together, all these persuasive tactics form a convincing piece of propaganda.

With all that is presented, it can be concluded that this was “a deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (Jowett, 17). The filmmakers of “Obsession” mask their underlying goal of instilling the hegemonic struggle for the now dominant idea that Islam’s culture and foundation is wicked. “It contains [the information it presents] in a specific area, and the responses are manipulated in an attempt to keep it in a contained area. The recipient of the propaganda message is discouraged from asking about anything outside the contained area” (O’Donnell, 17). By including the Holocaust and 9-11, we are unable to argue with the issues raised, for fear of political incorrectness or persecution. It is difficult to step into this territory, and the filmmakers know

this. Can we actually say that this democracy allows for the possibility of unlimited questioning (Laclau, 137)? The line drawn there is difficult to make out.

“Obsession” inevitably sounds like a call to arms against the Islamic world and its people. It is an issue of “us and them,” as Oktar inevitably explains in his essay on group dominance. We have always found it difficult to represent Muslims and Islam, for they are of a world we barely know or understand.

“Orientalism is an account of the worldliness of representation and the power of the representers” (Ashcroft, 115). This film depicts Muslims as evil beings, snarling, yelling and most often unintelligible. Should they have wished to, we could have been told this information in a just and ethical way, that truly instilled the wish to bring together Muslims and non-Muslims alike against the terrorists in our world. Instead, what we end up with is a heavily tinged piece of anti-Islamic propaganda.

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