Transnational Cinema—Jane’s Research Report on *The Siege*

Glimpses of the (mostly white) Men (and one woman!) behind *The Siege*, some Reactions and Responses to the film, and the Money (eventually) Earned

I’ve focused my research on who has created the story and the representations in the film *The Siege*, particularly of Islam and Muslim Americans, and on the controversy about these images. We started the class with an introduction to the concept of representation in film and how/why representation is always a political act—always in some ways about the power to create and control portrayals of self and/or of others in mass media. I’m interested in how the range, depth, limitations, and details of the film’s depictions of Islam, Muslims, and Muslim-Americans came to be.

**Lawrence Wright is given screen credit for the story**—which I assume means he came up with the basic plotline, subplots, and key characters. Wright, a white American writer and journalist, got a degree in Applied Linguistics from The American University in Cairo (Egypt) and he taught English there—he was there from 1969 to 1971. He also acted as mentor to young reporters in Saudi Arabia, which he wrote about in an article titled “The Kingdom of Silence”([http://www.lawrencewright.com/artsaudi.html](http://www.lawrencewright.com/artsaudi.html)). Wright has gone on to write a Pulitzer Prize winning book called *The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*, a non-fiction investigation of the people and policies that led to 9/11.

Given his educational experiences and later research as a writer, I would credit him with the greater depth in plot and character development around the history leading up to the terrorist attacks—for example, Samir’s Palestinian and “guerrilla” backstory as well as the relatively complex cause-and-effect scenario of the US policy shift in the Middle East that Sharon finally reveals.

In an interview on the television program “Conversation with History” with Harry Kreisler, of the Institute of International Studies at Berkeley, Wright talks about how the film got its start and about the research he did for the project—I include a large quotation here:

This project began when a producer named Lynda Obst [who now has her own production company based at Paramount Pictures] approached me to write a script. Her idea was a woman in the CIA -- it was more of a notion than a real movie idea but we spent about a year with me prospecting ideas. But the Cold War was over and it was
difficult to see who the enemy was. I finally recognized that the CIA did have a real-life antagonist and it's the FBI.

[...]

So, once I realized that, the question was what were they fighting over, and what they really were fighting over in the mid-nineties when I was working on this project was who was going to be in charge of controlling terrorism inside the U.S. They were both struggling for this franchise. And so that became the aperture that the script is built upon.

I went to New York and talked to some counter-terrorists in the FBI. It was ironic, as it turned out. It pre-figured what would happen with my book. I was very surprised at their level of anxiety even then about the possibility we were going to be attacked by a radical Islamist group and it was going to do a lot of damage. I didn't have those same anxieties at the time. We had been attacked in '93, the World Trade Center bombing in '93, and there had been a plot that had been squashed to blow up the Lincoln and Holland tunnels and various other landmarks in New York, but we hadn't really felt that we were under attack. The FBI bureau in New York saw what was coming, and the movie reflected their anxieties that I was able to channel in the [script].

(http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people6/Wright/wright-con0.html)

What I note in particular from this source:

- Sharon Bridger's character (a smart, brave, powerful, professional, ethical, flawed woman with her own sense of sexual agency and expression) got her start because a female producer sought a writer who would develop a story about and around her...

- Wright knows his film has to have an enemy (he doesn't even question this because of the genre perhaps)—and he suggests it's hard to know who the enemy is after the Cold War. While he talks about the enmity between the CIA and the FBI, and although we ultimately see enmity between the FBI and the Army, the most salient, immediately identifiable “enemies” in the film are the terrorists. All American organizations are united at least in this way.

- His research here is with American law enforcement agencies—I don't know how/where he came by his understanding of US polices in the Middle East, the Palestinian situation, etc. nor how much research he did for the film about these topics.

As well as credit for the story, Lawrence Wright is also given credit for writing the film's script along with the director Edward Zwick and another writer.
Edward Zwick (director and scriptwriter) has a lot of big and small screen successes as director and producer. His films include Glory, The Siege, Blood Diamond, and Defiance. All these films can be read as having liberal political agendas about recognizing both the price of freedom and all those who fight for it (my personal analysis here.) According to British journalist Jeff Dawson in his 1999 article for the British paper The Guardian, entitled “How did a sensitive guy like Ed Zwick get labelled a bigot?,” “…the 46-year-old director/writer/producer has been hailed as a champion of the downtrodden…” (This article appeared a few days prior to the film’s opening in Britain.)

Zwick is also a producer—he co-helms a production company called Bedford Falls Productions which, along with 20th Century Fox, is credited with producing The Siege. This company produced thirty-something and My So-called Life, two successful and acclaimed television series; it relies on its television work for much of its income. Bedford Falls Productions still needs to raise funds for its film productions, but they do have the infrastructure—personnel, connections, bankable track record—that helps get their films made. (http://www.variety.com/article/VR1117997666.html)

In an interview, Zwick mentions one kind of research he did as script writer and developer for The Siege:

“I had had the experience in the research for the movie of spending a good deal of time with the Justice Department and the Department of Defense and many from the Joint Terrorism Taskforce, who looked upon these events [devastating attacks by Muslim extremists on American soil] with a certain tragic inevitability. They believe that it was not a question of if it would happen, but when and at what scale.” (http://www.thescreamonline.com/commentary/comment2-1/index.html)

What I note in this interview in particular:

- Zwick’s research named above was with American agencies predisposed to think about and see terrorists…this research might serve the “believability” of the plot and subplots, etc., but the lens of this research seems to necessarily involve an us/them kind of thinking…

- In this same interview, though not in this quote, Zwick also acknowledges that he’s making an action film designed to entertain and bring people to the theaters—he obviously knows that profit is the bottom line, then, that must be served.
Some Muslim-American and Arab-American objections to the film’s imagery and implications.

These quotes come from “In ‘The Siege,’ Hollywood Again Makes Islam the Easy Villain” written by Ibrahim Hooper and originally published in *The New York Times*. Hooper is (or was) the national communications director for the Council on American-Islamic Relations:

“Yes, the film does have a few positive lines of dialogue about Islam. But it is far more effective at linking Islam to terrorism. For example, the ritual washing Muslims must perform before praying is used to cue the audience to impending bloodshed. In one instance this act of religious observance precedes a shot of a detonator being inserted into a bomb; another time, hand washing is quickly followed by a shot of a terrorist leader strapping explosives to his chest.

Other images, characters and juxtapositions give the impression that every Muslim student, business owner and activist should be considered a possible threat. And one Muslim whom the film initially portrays as cooperating with the government turns out to be a terrorist. The clear message is, “Don’t trust them.” In defending the “Arab community,” the character played by Denzel Washington says, “They love this country as much as we do.” Just who does he mean by “we” and who are “they”?

[...]

“Much of the negative reaction to “The Siege” could have been avoided if American Muslim organizations had been consulted from the beginning. My organization became involved only after concerned Muslims in New York called our Washington office inquiring about “Islamic graffiti” being used by film crews in their neighborhoods. We met with Edward Zwick, the director, and Linda Obst, his co-producer, but they decided to alter only a few scenes that we found offensive.

Throughout our discussions, they insisted that “The Siege” dispelled stereotypes rather than reinforced them and that the movie took pains to make a case for preserving people’s civil liberties. But it seems likely that the average moviegoer may be slow in getting that message. One critic noted that at a preview screening, the audience cheered as the military officer played by Bruce Willis “tortured a suspect and then calmly shot him.”

(*IN ‘THE SIEGE,’ HOLLYWOOD AGAIN MAKES ISLAM THE EASY VILLAIN; [FINAL Edition]*)

What I note in particular in this source:

- Hooper does some close reading, not just of images themselves, but of the sequences and juxtapositions of images; he shares that he fears these read as equating Islam with terrorism. I actually remember reading some of these sequences and juxtapositions as contrasting terrorism and Islam the first time I saw the film. For instance, when the call to prayer goes out from the mosque in Brooklyn, shortly after the bombing of the barracks scene, I read the moment as an assertion of the beauty and peace of Islamic religious practice. The melancholy “Middle Eastern” music that plays seems to say “we true Muslims
mourn this violence and know we will all somehow pay for the terrorists’ extremism.” The film’s visual and audial cues obviously are able to support vastly different interpretations.

- Hooper also listens closely to the word choice of the dialogue—he picks up on the us/them implications of Hubbard’s supposedly inclusive line.

- Although Zwick and Obst (and others) don’t seem to have consulted Islamic groups before production, they were willing to meet with concerned folks and make some changes…I can’t know how much of this willingness comes from concerns about their film’s implied messages about Islam and how much comes from concerns about bad press and box office returns—definitely a both/and moment.

These next quotations are pulled from an article written for the British paper *The Guardian* by their reporter Julian Borger stationed in Washington D.C.

“ARAB-AMERICANS took to the streets yesterday to protest against Hollywood’s latest attempt to tackle terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism. Despite the new film being billed as a breakthrough in even-handedness, protesters claimed The Siege, produced by 20th Century Fox, caricatures Muslims as terrorists and whips up United States prejudices.”

[...]

The film makers also point out that one of the heroes is a patriotic Arab-American investigator, played by Tony Shalhoub. But The Siege’s detractors complain that the Shalhoub character is a non-practising Muslim who is shown drinking, cursing and flirting with women who are not his wife.

Cair’s executive director, Nihad Awad, said: “The positive character is never shown to pray. It leaves the impression that it is the true-believers who are the terrorists.”

Cair responded by opening mosques to the public at the weekend in an attempt to educate people about the lives and faith of the 6 million Muslims living in the US.

[...]

The Siege opens at a time of soul-searching in the US press about the sweeping counter-terrorism measures taken in the wake of the bombing of the World Trade Centre in 1993, and the attacks on US embassies in East Africa in August.

In an editorial yesterday, the Washington Post alleged that the government had skirted, and sometimes flouted, due process.

The newspaper said: “Sympathy flows to Arab-Americans who feel their community has been unduly targeted by federal law enforcement in its counter-terrorism efforts.”

(*Arabs in US vent fury at film about Islamist terror*)

**What I note from this source:**
• Wow, what a vague and potentially inflammatory statement it is to say “so and so took to the streets”—how many in which streets for how long?

• My non-Muslim lens tells me Frank’s character is a wonderfully complex and sympathetic portrayal of an Islamic American—and perhaps he is, but clearly there are distinctions to be made about levels of devoutness that I would never have thought about on my own.

• This reporter chooses to place these protests and criticisms of the film into a real-life ongoing context of potential injustices facing Muslims and Arab Americans in the U.S. This lends additional credence to the protestors’ concerns for me as a reader.

Director/scriptwriter Edward Zwick’s responses to the controversy, mostly in his own words:

Jeff Dawson, in "How did a sensitive guy like Ed Zwick get labelled a bigot?,” quotes Zwick about his intention for The Siege: ‘There are certain sad truths,’ Ed Zwick protests. ‘One of those truths is that there’s a very difficult moment with Islam trying to distinguish itself from Islamic fundamentalist terrorism. This movie actually tries to seriously ask what the resonance is of that issue.’

Later in the same article, Dawson refers to The Siege as “the director's attempt to draw attention to the notion that the US is responsible for a lot of its own foreign policy problems. ‘Americans exist in a kind of radical innocence,’ [Zwick] says. ‘We presume to take a hand in the affairs of the world and yet are quite ignorant of what the repercussions might be. The phenomenon of ‘blowback’, the notion that Osama bin Laden {the FBI's most wanted international terrorist} was an employee of the CIA, is not known by the average American citizen. We exist in a kind of national denial and this movie attempts to point that out.’ [...].’”You know, the myth of America is the myth of tolerance and rights and freedoms […]Do we walk it like we talk it? Do we really consider that important? I hope people will look at these stark and upsetting images and actually question their beliefs.’(www.guardian.co.uk/film/1999/jan/01/features1)

What I note in particular:

• Zwick identifies his intention to educate Americans about US foreign policies and their impact. The film delivers on this intention, depending on how closely the audience is attending....

• Zwick talks about a key “myth” of America “of tolerance and rights and freedoms”—I appreciate his use of the term myth here, a treasured belief that has some basis in fact but has larger scale as a belief than reality warrants....
Response to the controversy from Tony Shalhoub (Frank Haddad), from Ed Liebowitz’s article “Caught in the Middle” in The Los Angeles Times, Nov. 3rd 1998.

I don’t think the point of this movie was to instill fear and this sense of foreboding against Middle East terrorism, unless you walk out in the middle,” Shalhoub says. "The image of the U.S. military policing its own people, of Arab American victims being rounded up and herded into camps: That's the most stirring and the most interesting." The actor supposes there are those viewers who will show up just to watch the explosions. "But if people are really listening and following the story..." he says. "Terrorism is something to be reckoned with, but our response is equally frightening."

Writer Liebowitz continues: "Shalhoub went into "The Siege" aware that certain adjustments had to be made in the script and that a few things had to be toned down--some of them by the actors themselves. He now sees the character of Frank Haddad as 'completely sympathetic,' and the film itself as a 'balanced portrait.'" (http://articles.latimes.com/1998/nov/03/entertainment/ca-38733)

What I note in particular:

- Shalhoub insists on a reading of the entire film, not just specific images and their juxtapositions, to fairly assess its representation of Islam and Middle Eastern Americans.

- Shalhoub is reported to have said that the script would “need toning down” and “adjustments” would need to be made, to use Liebowitz’s language. The article implies that actors in the roles can make some of these adjustments…and I wonder how much of that adjustment has to be negotiated, how much of the power to adjust a character is “earned” by achieving a level of success and clout as an actor...

Money Spent and Money Earned.

Budget

$70,000,000 (estimated)

Opening Weekend—Film was released Nov. 6th 1998

$13,931,285 (USA) (8 November 1998) (2,541 Screens)
£845,954 (UK) (10 January 1999) (326 Screens)

Gross

$40,932,372 (USA) as of (14 February 1999)
£3,143,307 (UK) as of (7 February 1999)
(I remember reading (somewhere!!!) that the $40,000,000 gross was disappointing and that the protests and controversies around the racial/religious depictions were in part to blame.)

**Distributors:**

- 20th Century Fox Netherlands (1999) (Netherlands) (theatrical)
- Elliniki Kinimatografiki Enosi (ELKE) (1998) (Greece) (theatrical)
- 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment (Brazil) (DVD)
- 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment (1998) (USA) (DVD)
- 20th Century Fox (Far East)
- 20th Century Fox de Argentina (Argentina)
- Abril Video (Brazil) (VHS)
- Filmes Castello Lopes (Portugal)
- Fox Film Corporation (Spain)
- Gativideo (1999) (Argentina) (DVD)
- Gativideo (1999) (Argentina) (VHS)
- Hispano Foxfilms S.A.E.
- Home Video Hellas (HVH) (1999) (Greece) (video)
- SBS6 (2002) (Netherlands) (TV) (first national airing)
- Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation
- UGC-Fox Distribution (UFD) (France)

**Admissions**

890,141 (France)
1,632,793 (Germany) (**28 February 1999**)
1,237,097 (Germany) (**7 February 1999**)
931,317 (Germany) (**31 January 1999**)
493,015 (Germany) (**24 January 1999**) (opening week)
131,531 (Netherlands) (**31 December 1999**)
1,063,899 (Spain)

**Above budget and box office information is from**
http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0133952/

**Information below about box office receipts is from**
http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=siege.htm
THE SIEGE

Domestic Total Gross: $40,981,289
Distributor: Fox
Release Date: November 6, 1998
Genre: Drama / Thriller
Running Time: 1 hrs. 56 min.
MPAA Rating: R
Production Budget: $70 million

TOTAL LIFETIME GROSSES
Domestic: $40,981,289 35.1%
+ Foreign: $75,691,623 64.9%
= Worldwide: $116,672,912

What I note:

- The film made almost twice as much abroad as it did in the U.S. (Does that mean almost twice as many people saw it outside of the US as inside?!!)

- It earned its investors about $46,000,000 in the end, as far as I can tell; $46,000,000 is decidedly real profit...by my standards!

- Ten different companies took part in distributing this film—I assume they made profits...

Things I wish I knew:

- Who actually made how much profit from the net proceeds from the film? In the end, is this net gain considered a successful investment in Hollywood terms?

- I don’t know how much the writers were paid to write it and the director was paid to direct it, the producers were paid to produce it...etc.