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ROUNDTABLE

Building Spectatorial Solidarity against the "War on Terror" Media-Military Gaze

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At the dawn of the 21st century the "War on Terror" ushered in an era in which some were besieged by wars and others by war-related imagery. For the fortunate who live outside of war zones, mostly in the Global North and West, the experience of war has been primarily a mediated one. With the advent of digital imagery and its many evolving and developing technological transmutations, the possibilities of reproduction, representation, manipulation, and circulation have grown exponentially in the past twenty years. Yet in the grand scheme of human communication history, the "pictorial turn" is a relatively recent phenomenon that requires further analysis.[1] In this article, I unpack and analyze some of the key media moments from the vast visual lexicon and iconography of the "War on Terror" to reveal its scaffolding and machinations and offer counterstrategies of resistance. I argue that the "War on Terror" is the orchestrated sum of literal and figurative imagery, a coordinated public relations disinformation media campaign designed to hide real wars and their true destruction and costs.

The media has been a key site for production and consumption of knowledge about the "War on Terror." In fact, the "War on Terror," as a unifying organizing trope that renders a complex messy prolonged and multipronged military apparatus stretching across vast space and time into a legible singular logic of a just and necessary global war, is a media construct. That does not mean that the "War on Terror" does not exist outside of the media; it does. In fact much of it is concealed from the public. Rather what I, and others before me, have contended is that most people's understanding of the "War on Terror" is constructed through the military industrial media complex (MIMC). In his controversial book, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, Jean Baudrillard, using the first Iraq War as a case study, argued that the media representations of war, via new technological optics of seeing the war, have created a simulacrum of war, wherein its signs, symbols, and images no longer represented the real war.[2] Worse yet, this simulacrum of war becomes its own entity and reality, what Baudrillard called the "hyperreal." The real dimensions and costs of the wars are overtaken by its glossy projections and shiny simulacra. Therefore, to fully understand the "War on Terror," how it operates and how we, as spectators and citizens, have been brought into it, we have to unpack and demystify the media spectacle that is the "War on Terror."

[1] For more information on the pictorial turn as it relates to the "War on Terror," see W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and W. J. T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[2] Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991). For more information on the simulacra and war, see Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations,* trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1981).

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As an Afghan American refugee of war, I, along with my family and communities, have experienced many of the regimes of real and representational violence that mark the "War on Terror." As a then New Yorker, it was horrifying to see the Twin Towers collapse from my Brooklyn rooftop and then see my country of birth attacked by my adopted country in retaliation. I knew that life for people from the MENASA (Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia) region was never going to be the same. The xenophobia was palpable in my building, on my block, in the city, and across the country. Thousands of Arabs and South Asians were forced to abandon their enclaves in large US cities due to domestic surveillance.[3] Islamophobic hate crimes against minority and immigrant populations peaked with the news cycle.[4]

My work in the two decades since has focused, in large part, on unpacking the regimes of violence that flowed from this event. I have analyzed the gap between the real violence of killer drones and their public relations discourse and virtual optics to demonstrate that modern warfare has become a smoke-and-mirrors spectacle that distracts people with dazzling special effects, while the real blood, flesh, and gore are hidden from view. Activists, artists, and researchers have been jamming the simulacra of war by exposing the realities of drone warfare and humanizing its victims.[5] Elsewhere, I have shown how the security state apparatus and its military industrial media complex incorporates African-Americans and casts them against other people of color in the MENASA.[6] I posit the concept of spectatorial solidarity as a way of realigning empathies between and among marginalized groups by identifying how imperial violence and national violence are intricately linked, and therefore our liberation is linked. Building on this work, in what follows I provide an expanded set of strategies for facilitating spectatorial solidarity and unified movements through critical and empathic viewership.

Making the "War on Terror" Reel

US media has a long history of being embedded in the US government's war-PR machine, working in tandem with its various intelligence and military institutions.[7] During World War I and World War II, the US government created the Committee on Public Information and the Office of War Information, respectively, agencies dedicated to producing pro-war propaganda through motion pictures and the news.[8] This precedent continued until the

[3] Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); Assia Boundaoui, dir., *The Feeling of Being Watched* (documentary), 2018.

[4] See Brigitte L. Nacos and Oscar Torres-Reyna, *Fueling Our Fears: Stereotyping, Media Coverage, and Public Opinion of Muslim Americans* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007); Katayoun Kishi, "Assaults against Muslims in U.S. Surpass 2001 Level," Pew Research Center, 15 November 2017, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/15/assaults-against-muslims-in-u-s-surpass-2001-level.

[5] Wazhmah Osman, "Jamming the Simulacrum: On Drones, Virtual Reality, and Real Wars," in Marilyn DeLaure and Moritz Fink, eds., *Culture Jamming: Activism and the Art of Cultural Resistance* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 348–64.

[6] This article is partially adapted from Wazhmah Osman, "Racialized Agents and Villains of the Security State: How African Americans are Interpellated against Muslims and Muslim Americans," *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas* 5, nos. 1–2 (2019): 155–82.

[7] See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) and *Covering Islam: How the Media and Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (New York: Random House, 1981); Herbert Schiller, *Culture, Inc: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) and *Mass Communication and American Empire*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1992); Daya K. Thussu and Des Freedman, eds., *War and the Media* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003); and Robin Andersen, *A Century of Media, a Century of War* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

[8] See Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990); Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Stephen McCreery and Brian Creech, "The Journalistic Value of Emerging Technologies: American Press Reaction to World War II News Reels," *Journalism History* 40, no. 3 (2014): 177–86; and Ralph Donald, *Hollywood Enlists!: Propaganda Films of World*

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Vietnam War, which is often touted as the first and last significant break from the status quo complicity of the US media. During the so-called first television war, images of horror were beamed into the living rooms of Americans. Many media scholars have argued that this brief window of freedom of the press is what shifted public opinion against the war.[9]

With the Gulf War or the first Iraq War, the US government, in conjunction with the news industry, began to control the vantage point of viewers and delimit the scope of the war via new technologies of long-distance viewing and killing.[10] Daily news coverage consisted of bombardment and missile strikes seen from a distance through night vision cameras and cameras on bombers. These new methods have persisted and evolved throughout the "War on Terror," along with the development of new military and sensory technologies. For example, with improvements in the speed, surveillance, and bombing capacity of drones, their use steadily increased during the "War on Terror." In fact armed and weaponized drones were first used in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. The "War on Terror" also became the testing ground for other war technology: In April 2017 the Trump administration dropped the Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB) bomb, otherwise known as the "Mother of all Bombs," the most powerful nonnuclear bomb, on Afghanistan. US news outlets only showed a five- to ten-second, black-and-white, long distance, state-sanctioned aerial clip of the bombing that a nearby surveillance drone had recorded. The government stated there were no civilian casualties and quarantined the entire area.[11] As a result, there was no on-the-ground coverage of the aftermath of the bomb: the scale of the destruction and its human, animal, and environmental costs.[12]

At the same time, a variety of factors have led to an overreliance on embedded journalism and prepackaged and managed wartime news, which further privilege the perspective of agents of the state. Studies have shown that embedded journalists, not surprisingly, tend to form relationships with the troops that they are embedded with and therefore tend to report from their perspectives.[13] Therefore, via mechanisms of scopic control and framing,

War II (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017). For an analysis of problematic World War II nostalgia films that were produced and released during the "War on Terror" era to rally for another "good war," see Elizabeth D. Samet, *Looking for the Good War: American Amnesia and the Violent Pursuit of Happiness* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021).

[9] Ray G. Funkhouser, "The Issues of the Sixties: An Exploratory Study in the Dynamics of Public Opinion," *Public Opinion* 66 (1973): 942–59; Bruce Cumings, *War and Television* (London: Verso, 1994); Lynn Spigel, "Entertainment Wars: Television Culture after 9/11," *American Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (2004); Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin, *The Revolution Wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 2013). Daniel Hallin's *The Uncensored War: The Media and Vietnam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989) challenges and complicates this conventional narrative that media criticism of the Vietnam War was robust and a defining factor in ending the war. Hallin shows how the editorial positions of most US news organizations lagged behind public opinion, overtly supporting the war long after the public had soured on it.

[10] Hamid Mowlana et al., *Triumph of the Image: The Media's War in the Persian Gulf* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1992); L. W. Bennett and David Paletz, *Taken by Storm: The Media, Public Opinion, and US Foreign Policy in the Gulf War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Phillip M. Taylor, *War and the Media: Propaganda and Persuasion in the Gulf War* (New York: St. Martins, 2016).

[11] See White House, "Daily Press Briefing by Press Secretary Spicer," 13 April 2017, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/daily-press-briefing-press-secretary-spicer-041317; "U.S. Drops 'Mother of All Bombs' on ISIS Caves in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, 13 April 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/13/world/asia/moab-mother-of-all-bombs-afghanistan.html; Amy Goodman's interview with me on *Democracy Now!* about the MOAB: Wazhmah Osman, "U.S. Drops Its Biggest Non-Nuclear Bomb on Afghans, Already Traumatized by Decades of War," interview by Amy Goodman, *Democracy Now!*, 14 April 2017, https://www.democracynow.org/2017/4/14/us_drops_its_biggest_non_nuclear; and Jessy J. Ohl, "The 'Mother of all Bombs' and the Forceful Force of the Greater Weapon," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 55, no. 4 (2019): 322–38.

[12] In the absence of visual data or proof from on the ground, we have to imagine the true cost based on the magnitude of a bomb with a blast radius of one mile and an explosive yield of 11 TNT, dropped on a location that was a thriving valley, like most valleys with water in that area.

[13] Bill Katovsky and Timothy Carlson, eds., *Embedded: The Media at War in Iraq, An Oral History* (Guilford, CT: Lyons Press, 2003); Douglas Kellner, "9/11, Spectacles of Terror, and Media Manipulation," *Critical Discourse Studies* 1, no. 1

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front line reporting management, and erasure, the mainstream US news media often supports the dominant viewpoints of the US security state apparatus.

In conjunction with the news-based media, an entertainment genre has emerged around the "War on Terror" that also privileges the voice and perspectives of the agents of empire at the expense of those on the receiving end of violence.[14] This genre has its roots in a longer genealogy of racist representations of MENASA people, one that began over a century ago, with the beginning of the Hollywood film industry carrying the torch of colonial European racism.[15] The volume and scope of negative portrayals has skyrocketed following 9/11, with the rise of what can be called the "War on Terror" film and TV genre.

The "War on Terror" film and TV genre uses four distinctive features of diegetic world-making that work together to justify US wars abroad. These features, which will be familiar to critical scholars of the Middle East, were already at play in the decades prior but took on new paradigmatic qualities after 9/11. The features include (1) strictly framing people in the MENASA region within the simplistic binary opposition of good (the US security apparatus) versus evil (Islamic extremists and terrorists); (2) rehashing colonial stereotypes of despotism and barbarism to represent the Global East and South as exotic and foreboding places in need of punishment, intervention, and saving; (3) casting the victim as perpetrator and oppressor, and vice versa, thus displacing guilt and empathy; (4) allowing some Middle Eastern people and other people of color the opportunity to move to the "good" side, and vice versa, thus permitting a degree of mobility across this divide while narratively reinforcing the binary and the hierarchy of imperial power.

The long-running television series *24*, which was released two months after the 9/11 attacks, popularized what has been called the "ticking bomb scenario," a filmic motif that uses real-time split-screen storytelling techniques to enhance the effect of impending doom.[16] This device is a favorite discursive tool of torture apologists, who use the race against the clock in a doomsday scenario in which an impending nuclear bomb or another weapon of mass destruction has been activated to justify the use of torture to those who rightly have moral and ethical concerns about it. Political scientist Darius Rejali has demonstrated that in reality terrorist acts rarely involve ticking bomb scenarios, and, in the rare cases they might, that the efficacy of torture is dubious in preventing such acts. Furthermore, these filmic depictions obscure the historical reality that democratic countries such as the US, Britain, and France, which purport to champion human rights internationally, have been at the cutting edge of inventing and spreading new torture methods.[17]

Likewise, *Homeland*, another long-running US TV series, based on the Israeli show *Hatufim* (Abductees), advocates for US drone warfare and reframes perpetrators as victims and vice versa. The two marine snipers, Nick Brody, along with his African American friend, Thomas

(2004): 41–64; Josef Seethaler, Matthias Karmasin, Gabriele Melischek, and Romy Wöhlerted, eds., *Selling War: The Role of the Mass Media in Hostile Conflicts from World War I to the "War on Terror"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

[14] Douglas Kellner, *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era* (Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2010); Roger Stahl, *Militainment, Inc.: War, Media, and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2010); Tricia Jenkins, *The CIA in Hollywood: How the Agency Shapes Film and Television* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2012); Simon Willmetts, *In Secrecy's Shadow: The OSS and CIA in Hollywood Cinema 1941–1979* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016); Tom Secker and Matthew Alford, *National Security Cinema: The Shocking New Evidence of Government Control in Hollywood* (CreateSpace Independent, 2017); Haidee Wasson and Lee Grieveson, eds., *Cinema's Military Industrial Complex* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018).

[15] See Jack Shaheen, *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11* (Northhampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2008); and Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 2014). Jack Shaheen's influential book *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2001) was the first comprehensive content and textual analysis of Hollywood's disparaging representations of people from the MENASA region. In the one thousand films that he studied with Arab and Muslim characters (from year 1896 to 2000), 12 contained positive depictions, 52 were neutral portrayals of Arabs, and an astounding 936 were negative.

[16] Incidentally, due to the popularity of *24*, USAID funded the production of *Eagle Four*, a terrorist espionage series, that was set in Afghanistan and aired on the partially US-funded Tolo TV in Afghanistan until the Taliban takeover.

[17] Darius Rejali, *Torture and Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

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Walker, are captured by al-Qaeda. Brody suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and a psychosexual disorder because of the torture he endured and because he was forced to beat his friend Walker nearly to death (which the viewer sees through Brody's numerous flashbacks), thereby outsourcing torture and racism. Meanwhile, the main protagonist, Carrie Mathison, a CIA agent and Brody's love interest, struggles with bipolar disorder and being taken seriously as a female agent with a mental illness.

Rather than underestimating the trauma of war on soldiers and other front line agents of the US security apparatus, I want to suggest that the vivid depictions of the marines being tortured and Carrie's struggles as a women in a male dominant space compounded with her mental illness operate here as empathetic devices to emotively connect viewers to the agents of the state and absolve them of their own violence. For example, when Carrie Mathison advocates for the use of drones, earning the moniker "Drone Queen," she has already been ascribed with a level of feminist empathy, thus mitigating the violence of her actions and by extension the violence of the US security state.[18] Whose vantage point and pain is prioritized reflects whose life is "grievable" in the broader "War on Terror."[19]

The Academy Award–winning films *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008), written by an embedded Iraq War journalist, *Zero Dark Thirty* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2012), based on CIA and Navy Seals accounts, and *American Sniper* (Clint Eastwood, 2014), based on the autobiography of an Iraq War veteran also have been critiqued for promoting torture and presenting empathic perspectives of US soldiers at the expense of overshadowing or negating the experiences of the Afghan and Iraqi people. *American Sniper* echoes *Rules of Engagement* (William Friedkin, 2000), a pre-9/11 film that also justifies the killing of MENASA children. In the former we see a little boy who may have explosives attached to him through the crosshairs of the American sniper's rifle, and in the latter we see a little girl with a missing leg pointing a gun at the camera.

The political economy of these films, including their production and funding, is entangled with the security state apparatus in a variety of ways, such as having US Department of Defense personnel directly involved as consultants, writers, or producers. So it is not surprising that many of the "War on Terror" film and television programs are told from the perspectives of the agents of the security state, and in many cases are based on the life stories of soldiers and other military personnel. This is accomplished not only narratively but, as in the news media, the actual optics privilege the view of bombs, snipers, and drones and frame people from the MENASA through the crosshairs of a "weaponized gaze."[20] Conversely, when we see lethal weapons pointed at the camera and therefore at the audience, people from the MENASA wield them.

Having Middle Eastern people involved in the production process of mainstream "War on Terror" media does not automatically generate a perspective shift. Instead, the resultant productions often operate within the same hegemonic structures and worldview. For example, the sitcom the *United States of Al* is created by an Iranian American scholar and has three Afghan Americans on its production crew; yet it upholds the same simplistic good-versus-evil binary. Although the main character Al, short for Awalmir, is one of the good guys, a dutiful interpreter and translator for the US Army, he is represented as an exception. The sitcom maintains the dominant tropes of Afghanistan as a despotic and savage place and the US as altruistic, democratic, and just. As I and others have written elsewhere, by foregrounding cultural authenticity and inclusion, the show appeals to liberal

[18] In a blurring of news and entertainment, during his presidency Barack Obama also earned the nickname "Drone King" for deploying more drone attacks on MENASA countries than any other president.

[19] See Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable* (New York: Verso Books, 2009); and Thomas Gregory, "Potential Lives, Impossible Deaths: Afghanistan, Civilian Casualties, and the Politics of Intelligibility," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 14, no. 3 (2012): 327–47.

[20] For an analysis of the "weaponized gaze" see Roger Stahl, *Through the Crosshairs: War, Visual Culture, and the Weaponized Gaze* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018).

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sensibilities while foreclosing critique of the imperial structures and imaginaries that underlie its world-making.[21]

Conclusion: How to Constitute Empathy in the Age of Global Terror

As a media scholar and refugee of war, I wonder about how war imagery and violence can resonate so differently for different groups. Is experiential knowledge a necessary condition for empathy and action? Do you need to be a refugee of war with vivid traumatic memories of being on the receiving end of bombs to feel compassion for the pain of others being bombed? Or, as the disparities in the Euro-American coverage of the war in Ukraine and in the reception of Ukrainian and MENASA refugees in Europe underscores, is being of the same racial, ethnic, gender, sexuality, or class identity a priori for feeling spectatorial solidarity? How can we extend the reach of spectatorial solidarity to embrace those outside of our own identity markers and affiliations? I will conclude by offering a few suggestions.

I have shown how the US news–based media represents wars abroad through the state's securitized gaze and lens while simultaneously censoring front line and on-the-ground reporting of wars abroad. This, in conjunction with the racist optics of the "War on Terror" entertainment industry, has contributed to spectators deeming MENASA people worthy of retribution and violence based on a false sense of threat and misplaced feelings of having been wronged by them. Therefore one of the main ways to disrupt the militarized gaze and its myopic focus is to seek ways to expand our viewpoints both literally and imaginatively to incorporate as many different vantage points as possible. Attaining this multifocal point of view requires a multipronged approach.

The most straightforward approach is for viewers to take an oppositional stance and approach media through the lens of refusal, rejecting outright the false and simplistic binary oppositions of good (the US security apparatus) versus evil (Islamic extremists and terrorists).[22] As feminist and postcolonial scholars have shown, binary oppositions are ethnocentric and maintain the hierarchies of power, defining marginalized groups in opposition to those in positions of power, in this case the righteousness and bravery of the agents of the security state. These binaries in conjunction with the new optics of war not only misrepresent messier geopolitical realities but render everyone outside of these two categories invisible. Indeed, as many scholars of the Middle East have pointed out, there is a long history of US allyship with Islamic extremists and despots in the MENASA, from Afghanistan to Iran to Iraq to Pakistan.

Furthermore, beyond the polarizing false binary of "us versus them," there are many people across all sectors of society and across nationalities who risk their lives every day to lay the foundations for democracy, self-determination, and peace. Therefore, along with rejecting binaries, we must insistently seek the stories and accounts of all of those who fall in between. Just as media has been at the root of the problem, it also can be a solution in this regard. Although corporate media have been intricately linked with dominant ideologies and exclusionary and racist nationalisms, alternative forms of media have been effectively mobilized for social change and creating counter-publics. Diverse and marginalized groups have used the media to negotiate and contest representations of themselves, while also making their own narratives a basis for cultural and political claims. There are many alternative media and media outlets and platforms that offer news, films, television, music, art, and

[21] Wazhmah Osman, Helena Zeweri, and Seelai Karzai, "The Fog of the Forever War with a Laugh Track in 'United States of Al,'" *Middle East Report* Online, 26 May 2021, https://merip.org/2021/05/the-fog-of-the-forever-war-with-a-laugh-track-in-united-states-of-al.

[22] Here I am influenced by Stuart Hall's encoding-decoding model, which suggests three types of reading: preferred, negotiated, and oppositional to the dominant ideology and hegemony of the media message. In oppositional reading, the viewer has an oppositional ideological position to the dominant meaning because of outside information they are exposed to. See Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," in Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, eds., *Media Studies: Keyworks*, revised ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 163–73.

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podcasts that do not conform to reductive binary depictions and privilege instead divergent viewpoints, including first-person accounts from those subjected to war and whistleblowers.

Whereas corporate media has often been complicit with the US war machine, a series of daring post–9/11 films and documentaries has been instrumental in exposing the hand of the US security state abroad and presenting alternative viewpoints, such as *Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan, 2005); *Road to Guantanamo* (Mat Whitecross and Michael Winterbottom, 2006); *Taxi to the Dark Side* (Alex Gibney, 2007*); Dirty Wars* (Richard Rowley, 2013); *Wounds of Waziristan* (Madiha Tahir, 2013); *Citizen Four* (Laura Poitras, 2014); *Snowden* (Oliver Stone, 2016); and *Official Secrets* (Gavin Hood, 2019).[23] As numerous human rights reports have documented, the US "War on Terror"–related military actions have had a devastating physical and psychological impact on the populations subjected to that violence.

Another set of films, either made by people from the MENASA and its diaspora communities or told from their perspectives, employs a first-person account with feminist, decolonial, and queer sensibilities to speak and push back against the dominant MIMC representations of Middle Easterners. These films include my own *Postcards from Tora Bora* (Wazhmah Osman and Kelly Dolak, 2007); *Lida Abdul's White House* (2005); *Norman Schwarzkopf Made Me Gay* (Sara Zia Ebrahimi, 2012); *The FBI Blew Up My Ice Skates* (Sara Zia Ebrahimi and Lindsey Martin, 2016); *The Feeling of Being Watched* (Assia Bendaoui, 2018); and *Flee* (Jonas Poher Rasmussen, 2021). Other counter-hegemonic multimedia projects include *Index of the Disappeared* (Chitra Ganesh and Mariam Ghani, 2004–present);[24] *Aman Mojadidi's Jihadi Gangster* (2010); the *War* and *Jang* series (Laimah Osman, 2012–present); and *Soup Boys (Pretty Drones)* (Heems, 2012).

By asserting alternative representations of MENASA people who have feminist, decolonial, or queer agency, these media have, to varying degrees, disrupted the tropes of the "War on Terror" MIMC. The degree to which these artists, musicians, and filmmakers have challenged imperial and masculinist projects and therefore the binary and assimilationist discourses of national, gender/sexual, racial, and genre conventions has had a direct impact on both the scale of their circulation and their commercial and critical success or lack thereof. Although some of these films have won awards and popular acclaim, many have not. The "War on Terror" media industry, on the other hand, is booming financially, with no signs of slowing down. Therefore, reading racist media critically and oppositionally is a key method to building spectatorial solidarity. Once we understand how the media text, be it news-based or fiction, is inscribed within the broader political economy and infrastructures of empire and power, we can expand our scopic vision to have a more holistic vantage point and in this way expand our reach and empathy to those on the receiving end of violence as well. Building spectatorial solidarity is a fundamental step toward building real movements of solidarity.

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[23] There also are a number of important post–9/11 documentaries that directly expose the workings of the MIMC. These include *Control Room* (Jehane Noujaim, 2004); *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (Jeremy Earp and Sut Jhally, 2006); *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death* (Loretta Alper and Jeremy Earp, 2007); *Militainment, Inc.: Militarism and Pop Culture* (Roger Stahl, 2007); and *The War You Don't See* (John Pilger and Alan Lowery, 2010).

[24] For more information on the *Index of the Disappeared* please see Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Ronak Kapada, *Insurgent Aesthetics: Security and the Queer Life of the Forevor War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); and Jeannine Tang, "Persons and Profiles: Chitra Ganesh and Mariam Ghani's Index of the Disappeared (2004-)," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 30, no. 3 (2020): 307–30.

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