

12-23-2014

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### Recommended Citation

Kumar, Deepa and Kundnani, Arun (2014) "Imagining National Security: The CIA, Hollywood, and the War on Terror," *Democratic Communiqué*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/democratic-communication/vol26/iss2/5>

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# Imagining National Security: The CIA, Hollywood, and the War on Terror

**Deepa Kumar and Arun Kundnani**

***Abstract:** The era of the War on Terror has necessitated a security imagination that both justifies a gigantic national security state and provides security personnel with the scenarios needed to develop security practices and policies. While scholars have studied the ways in which cultural products are influenced by national security agencies, we seek to highlight the complementarity in the media-state nexus and the part played by the culture industry in furnishing the security establishment with the cultural imagination needed to meet its goals. Such a dialectical approach has the advantage of charting the flow of culture in multiple directions in order to develop a holistic understanding of how a national security imagination is mobilized. In particular, we focus on the show *Homeland* to explore the ways in which the workings of the national-security state under Obama have been naturalized through the activities of a new and rebranded CIA. We set out to contribute to the relatively small body of work on the CIA and Hollywood through this preliminary analysis of *Homeland*.*

**Keywords:** Hollywood, CIA, national security imagination, popular culture, *Homeland*

In September 2013, the US television show *Homeland* began its third season with record-breaking ratings.<sup>1</sup> The show's creators Alex Ganza and Howard Gordon, who previously collaborated on the popular series *24*,<sup>2</sup> seem to have worked out a successful narrative for the War on Terror during the Obama era. If *24* reflected the Bush administration's cowboy, shoot-em-up (and torture them) style, *Homeland* is about Obama's "smarter" war.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, President Obama loves *Homeland*, listing it as one of two "must-see" shows.<sup>4</sup> *New York Times* TV critic Alessandra Stanley commented: "*Homeland* is *24* for grown-ups."<sup>5</sup> Dick Cheney also seems to watch the show, stating that he could relate to a plot in Season 2, in which the vice-president is killed by terrorist-hackers who take control of his defibrillator. In 2007, Cheney had asked his doctor to disconnect the wireless system in his new defibrillator as a precaution against such threats, anticipating *Homeland*'s storyline by some years.<sup>6</sup>

The imaginary worlds created by Hollywood's film and television offerings shape, and are shaped by, security personnel and the various agencies of the national security state. While scholars have studied the ways in which cultural products are influenced by national security agencies, we seek to highlight the *complementarity* in the media-state nexus and the part played by the culture industry in furnishing the security establishment with the cultural imagination needed to meet its goals. Such a dialectical approach has the advantage of

charting the flow of culture in multiple directions in order to develop a holistic understanding of how a national security imagination is mobilized. In particular, we focus on the show *Homeland* to explore the ways in which the workings of the national-security state under Obama have been naturalized through the activities of a new and rebranded CIA. We set out to contribute to the relatively small body of work on the CIA and Hollywood through this preliminary analysis of *Homeland*. We use the term “Hollywood” symbolically to refer to television and film production even though increasingly these cultural texts are being produced in locations around the US and the world.<sup>7</sup>

### The media-state nexus

Government agencies have a long history of influencing cultural representations and determining how the public understands the work of the national-security state. All the way back in the 1930s, the FBI set up an office to shape and police its image in film, radio, and television shows. FBI press officers have sought since then to mystify the workings of the Bureau by encouraging fictional depictions that glorify its activities.<sup>8</sup> Other government agencies – the Department of Defense, the army, the navy, air force – followed the FBI’s lead soon afterwards, and established media offices aimed at systematically winning media producers’ sympathetic portrayals. The CIA and the Department of Homeland Security have most recently joined the trend.<sup>9</sup>

Troublingly, what used to be ad hoc relationships between the US military and Hollywood has now become systematized. Nick Turse (2008) points out that the military has set up a “one-stop shop” where, on one floor of a Los Angeles building, the army, air force, navy, marines, coast guard, and Department of Defense all have liaison offices.<sup>10</sup> The army, navy and air force joined together to sponsor the GI Film Festival where Hollywood executives and film-makers hobnob with top military brass.<sup>11</sup> Turse further argues that the logic of militarism has become so expansive and ubiquitous that the system is now more appropriately described as the “military-industrial-technological-entertainment-academic-scientific-media-intelligence-homeland security-surveillance-national security-corporate complex,” which he refers to as the “complex.” The most striking aspect of this new complex, he notes, is the “effort to project a cool, hip image, including military-crafted simulators that have become commercial video games; NASCAR events that feature race cars sponsored by branches of the armed forces; slick recruiting campaigns that use the hottest social networking technology to capture the attention of teens.”<sup>12</sup>

For the corporate media, such partnering with the security establishment is driven by financial incentives. In exchange for handing over some editorial control, they are able to shoot on location, use government personnel as extras, avail of stock footage, use expensive equipment, and have access to technical consultants – without the costs appearing in the production budget. For the for-profit media industry, it is cheaper to go along with government influence than to hire its own submarines and air force carriers. For instance, Robb (2004) shows that in the film *Golden Eye* an American admiral was to be seduced and killed

by a female Russian crime syndicate operative, but to receive military support they had to change the nationality of the Admiral to Canadian.<sup>13</sup> In order to get the CIA's assistance for the television show *Covert Affairs*, the producers shared the script with the Agency to demonstrate that they would depict them in a positive light.<sup>14</sup> Since then, the creators have routinely contacted the CIA in order to gather research and information to shape "the writing, the lingo, and the set design" of the show.<sup>15</sup> The upshot is a system where film and television become arteries through which the national-security state circulates its latest obsessions.

In his analysis of the depiction of Arabs in Hollywood, Jack Shaheen (2003) noted a pattern of Arab-bashing films like *True Lies*, *Executive Decision*, and *Freedom Strike* receiving equipment, personnel, and technical assistance from the Department of Defense in the 1990s. In 2000, the Pentagon even spent \$295,000 to host a star-studded dinner in honor of Motion Picture Association President Jack Valenti. Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon commented at the time, "If we can have television shows and movies that show the excitement and importance of military life, they can help generate a favorable atmosphere for recruiting."<sup>16</sup> The effort has paid off with the creation of a slew of films and television shows that whitewash the military and national security agencies, including recent films like *Rules of Engagement* and *Argo*, and the shows *JAG* and *Covert Affairs*. The 2013 film *Lone Survivor*, written and directed by Peter Berg, involved Berg "embedding" with a navy SEAL team for a month in Iraq in the process of developing the screenplay. The US air force made available a base in Albuquerque, New Mexico, for filming, along with helicopters, vehicles, and personnel. "Some days on set, the actual military personnel outnumbered the cast and crew," states the production notes for the film.<sup>17</sup>

The CIA, although late to this game, is now an integral part of it; it set up its Entertainment Liaison office in 1996. However, the CIA has had an informal relationship with Hollywood that goes much further back. John Rizzo, who served as the Acting General Counsel of the CIA for the first nine years of the War on Terror (and therefore was closely involved in the agency's torture, extraordinary rendition, and drone strike programs), writes frankly in his recent book, *Company Man*, on the relationship with Hollywood. As a person who worked for the CIA for well over three decades, he writes that:

... the CIA has long had a special relationship with the entertainment industry, devoting considerable attention to fostering relationships with Hollywood movers and shakers – studio executives, producers, directors, and big-name actors. There are officers assigned to this account full-time, which is not exactly a dangerous assignment but one that occasionally produces its own bizarre moments.

In my early years at the Agency [the 1970s], a veteran CIA liaison with Hollywood first explained it to me this way: These are people who have made a lot of money basically creating make-believe stuff. A lot of them, at least the smarter and more self-aware ones, realize what they do makes

them ridiculously rich but is also ephemeral and meaningless in the larger scheme of things. So they're receptive to helping the CIA in any way they can, probably in equal parts because they are sincerely patriotic and because it gives them a taste of real-life intrigue and excitement. And their power and international celebrity can be valuable – it gives them entree to people and places abroad. Heads of state want to meet and get cozy with them. ...

Their film crews are given free rein everywhere, even in places where the US government doesn't normally have it. And they can be the voice of a US message that will have impact with foreign audiences so long as the audience doesn't know it is coming from the US government.<sup>18</sup>

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, and more recently the events of 9/11, the Agency has consciously sought to rebrand itself so as to counter past negative portrayals and justify its changing role in the US security landscape. Tricia Jenkins (2012) argues that the CIA has historically been presented by Hollywood as an agency of rogues who operate unchecked, as killers who are bent on assassination, as people who lack morality or operate on morally ambiguous grounds, and as an organization that is disorganized and buffoonish. When the clandestine organization opened its doors to Hollywood (quite literally in the form of allowing films and TV shows to be shot at the CIA headquarters) it was met with enthusiasm by Hollywood. The attacks of 9/11 created an obsession with the Agency among film directors, so much so that CIA officials have been in high demand since then.<sup>19</sup> This convergence has resulted in a series of television dramas like *The Agency* (2001-2003), *JAG* (1995-2005), *Alias* (2001-2006), *24* (2001-present) and *Homeland* (2011-present) as well as various films like *Bad Company* (2002,) *The Recruit* (2003), and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), where the CIA has exerted its influence and rebranded itself.

During his recent visit to the CIA offices, *Homeland* co-creator Alex Ganza asked for suggestions for locations of future story lines. The agency pointed him in the direction of North Africa, which happens to be the most recent focus of US counter-terrorism efforts.<sup>20</sup> National security journalist Kevin Gosztola has written of declassified memos that point to the CIA's involvement in the production of *Zero Dark Thirty*. The CIA acknowledged the film was a fictionalized version of the killing of Osama bin Laden but noted that it would "help promote an appropriate portrayal of the Agency and the Bin Laden operation." The Agency was able to persuade the film-makers to re-edit two scenes in order to cast CIA officers in a more favorable light.<sup>21</sup> When they haven't been able to control the script, the CIA has refused to offer assistance such as with the films *Spy Game* (2001) and *The Bourne Identity* (2002).<sup>22</sup> It has also sought to use cultural texts as a means to intimidate its enemies by showcasing futuristic devices and portraying the agency as "more omnipresent and omnipotent" than it is in reality.<sup>23</sup>

But this has not just been a one-way relationship, in which the security establishment has determined cultural production. There is also a reverse impact, in that Hollywood has shaped the imagination of politicians and policy makers. In *Five Came Back*, Mark Harris

(2014) outlines the work of five film directors who worked closely with the US military to churn out war propaganda during World War Two. He notes, however, that their films didn't simply furnish war propaganda in a unidirectional manner; rather the directors' creative work also influenced how policy makers viewed the war. We see a similar dynamic in the War on Terror era.

In 2003, President George W. Bush's "Mission Accomplished" moment featured Bush landing a jet fighter onto an aircraft carrier in order to deliver a speech about the supposed triumph in Iraq. This dramatic moment, which cost over a million dollars, was nearly identical to visual sequences in the Tom Cruise's 1986 film *Top Gun*.<sup>24</sup> Robin Anderson notes that there was no justification for the use of a jet fighter since a helicopter could more easily have delivered the president; rather, the entire pseudo-event was meant to endow Bush with the "cool" masculine, militarist image of Cruise's character, Maverick. This shouldn't surprise us, since the "complex," as Turse notes, works seamlessly to integrate militarism into everyday life from video games to social media, NASCAR races, and golf courses.

The 9/11 Commission report, released in 2004, famously identified a "failure of imagination" as the basic problem with US national security policy. "Imagination is not a gift usually associated with bureaucracies," noted the report's authors. Preventing terrorist attacks in the future would require finding "a way of routinizing, even bureaucratizing, the exercise of imagination."<sup>25</sup> It was noted at the time that Tom Clancy's 1994 novel *Debt of Honor* had already imagined an airline pilot flying a Boeing 747 into the US Capitol during a joint session of Congress, yet intelligence agencies themselves had not anticipated this possibility. In the War on Terror, it seemed, the erstwhile inability of security bureaucracies to imagine potential threat scenarios might be remedied by drawing on the creativity of Hollywood scriptwriters and right-wing pulp novelists. What was needed, it was thought, was to get inventive in conjuring up potential threats, as well as breaking down pre-existing assumptions of how best to prevent them. Hollywood was elevated in its role and became as significant as Arlington, Fort Meade, and Langley in the landscape of the US national-security state.

One early documented case of this reverse impact occurred with the Fox TV series *24*. In effect, the show provided a weekly policy briefing to the nation on the myriad threats supposedly faced by the US and how best to counter them. Joel Surnow, the show's co-creator and executive producer, told journalist Jane Mayer, "America wants the war on terror fought by Jack Bauer. He's a patriot."<sup>26</sup> Since Bauer's main tactic in the show is torture, the implication was clear. In the fall of 2002, government lawyers responsible for authorizing new techniques of interrogation felt that the second season of *24*, then being broadcast, gave them the green light to approve torture techniques that had previously been considered unacceptable.<sup>27</sup> As Kumar (2013) has argued, the singular achievement of *24* was that, whereas earlier cultural representations of torture were associated with the "bad guys," this show established why "we," and why heroes, needed to use such methods.<sup>28</sup> The limits of acceptability had been collectively re-imagined, creating a new "common sense" of national security. The fact that a 2012 film like *Zero Dark Thirty* presents the use of torture as an acceptable topic of discussion rather than an absolute wrong is a good indication of how much the

terror war has permanently shifted earlier ethical norms in the name of a Hollywood-infused “moral clarity” against terrorism. The television series *Scandal* furthers the normalization of torture, this time against security personnel and co-workers, through the actions of its *B6-13* agents. The ultra-secret *B6-13* may be read as an avatar of the CIA which, in violation of its jurisdiction, has started to operate in the domestic US context. Potentially, it could also represent the National Security Agency (NSA).

When politicians and government lawyers invoke Hollywood productions as a way to measure what the public considers ethically acceptable, they tend to forget that these productions’ security narratives are themselves shaped by the national-security state. As a definer of ethical limits in national security policy, Hollywood is hopelessly compromised but, time and again, it provides the reference points with which political leaders frame their policy decisions. When then Secretary of State Hilary Clinton was asked by CNN journalist Peter Bergen about the bin Laden raid, she replied: “This was like any episode of *24* or any movie you could ever imagine.”<sup>29</sup> The implication was that Hollywood had already settled any lingering ethical doubts.

While *24* embodied the ethos of the early War on Terror, in more recent years a different narrative has emerged. The failure of the war in Iraq, the declining credibility of the United States on the global stage, and the backlash against George W. Bush’s approach necessitated a shift. Enter Obama and the age of “smart power.” The US national-security state now claims to be interested in winning “hearts and minds” as much as “shock and awe.” Cultural knowledge, targeted strikes, and patient intelligence-gathering are supposed to be the new methods of the War on Terror, rather than blanket demonization, military occupations, and fabricated *casus belli*.<sup>30</sup>

### ***Homeland* and liberal imperialism**

A marked departure from *24*’s ticking time-bomb scenarios, Showtime’s *Homeland* features storylines that center upon the psychological turmoil leading to what homeland security officials call “radicalization,” particularly when it involves Americans converting to Islam. In the early War on Terror, the prevailing analysis of terrorism among policy-makers was that it was an “evil ideology” that had to be confronted directly through greater violence in the form of war, torture, and incarceration. But from 2004 onwards, policy-makers became interested in the process by which terrorists are made and the potential for other forms of “soft intervention” that could complement the hard power tactics of the early years. To aid in developing such policies, academics in the field of terrorism studies (which had burgeoned with public funding after 9/11) developed models of “radicalization” that emphasized moments of psychological vulnerability as pivotal to the adoption of “extremist” ideology. Under Obama, the concept of “radicalization” has provided the chief lens through which Muslim populations are surveilled domestically and globally. The academic models of radicalization – adopted by the FBI and the New York Police Department, for example – claim to be able to provide a list of warning signs that a Muslim is on a path towards terrorism. In the

official accounts of radicalization, intelligence analysts list commitment to religious beliefs, anger at foreign policy, and isolation from family as signs that a Muslim is radicalizing, particularly if they occur in a context of psychological turmoil.<sup>31</sup> The CIA consultants reportedly involved in *Homeland*'s script development are likely to have drawn on such notions of "radicalization" and much of the plot, especially in season one, revolves around such warning signs.<sup>32</sup>

In season one, we learn that Nick Brody, a white American marine, was captured and held prisoner by al-Qaeda for eight years. The narrative of the show's opening episodes is driven by Brody's hiding the fact that he has converted to Islam. Viewers are teased into drawing the conclusion that Brody has become a terrorist – which, eventually, turns out to be the case thereby confirming the specious radicalization theories. The CIA's Carrie Mathison – whose character is reportedly based on the same actual CIA analyst that inspired the lead in *Zero Dark Thirty* – suspects Brody and initiates a rogue surveillance operation which proves her to be correct. Mathison obsessively watches Brody's every action, even in the bathroom, which then leads her to develop romantic feelings for him. The plotline not only justifies such invasive surveillance from a counter-terrorism point of view, but also shows it can be the basis for love.

To be sure, Brody and Mathison are complex characters, and the first season impressed audiences through its unpredictable and sophisticated narrative. Additionally, the show's apparently liberal stance, and the inclusion of scenes such as the one where Brody's daughter critiques US militarism, complicates the narrative. When her classmate suggests that Iranians are the enemies of the US and that a nuclear bomb be dropped on Iran, Dana pushes back against this argument. She further argues that all Muslims aren't bad people and that she knows this because her father is a convert. But at its core, *Homeland*'s key accomplishment is to naturalize the workings of the national-security state in the Obama era. If Obama's policy involved a shift in focus onto the "homegrown" terrorist, Brody came to personify what happens to good Americans when they adopt Islam. But because he is a white Muslim, with a traditional heteronormative all-American family life, he is not like Hollywood's typical irrational, one-dimensional (brown) Jihadist. Brody's suicide mission to kill the vice president is abandoned after an emotional last-minute conversation with his daughter. Brody then confesses to Mathison during an interrogation, and he agrees to work as a double agent.

In season two, the audience is told that Israel has bombed Iran to prevent it from developing nuclear weapons; this becomes the pretext for a focus on Hezbollah, which has implausibly allied with al-Qaeda in seeking to attack the US in revenge. Beirut is morphed into an imaginary terrorist enclave, and the season culminates in a devastating car-bombing at the CIA's headquarters. Like *24* before it, the series presents a homeland that is vulnerable to both internal and external threats, continuing a Hollywood tradition of transforming locations like bus depots, airports, and train stations into war zones.<sup>33</sup> One might argue that, because of its serialized nature in contrast to films, a show like *Homeland* serves to more effectively present a vulnerable homeland, through its exaggerated focus on domestic threats. Such a narrative not only fosters an elevated threat consciousness but also justifies the

CIA's turn to domestic security (which is beyond its jurisdiction) and the need for agents like Mathison. Mathison's obsession with connecting the dots in the hunt for Abu Nazir, the mastermind behind various attacks, leads her to spy on and observe wide swathes of people within the US. More recently, the NSA's talking point to justify its total surveillance used a similar logic, that future 9/11s can only be prevented by collecting ever more "dots" of information about US citizens.<sup>34</sup>

In the third season, the show shifts its attention to terrorist financing, with an Iranian intelligence officer funding terrorism against the US from Caracas, Venezuela, where Brody has also gone into hiding. This theme is poached from neoconservatives, who have in recent years fantasized that Iran might use Latin America as an "operational base to wage asymmetric warfare against the United States," in the words of an American Enterprise Institute report.<sup>35</sup> Venezuela's Hugo Chávez supposedly joined this new axis of pink and green evil. For the US far right, the phantasm of a Latin American Hezbollah is the ideal fear scenario, uniting the threats of terrorism, leftism, and Hispanic immigration in a single image of evil.

Mathison's thoughtful CIA mentor, Saul Berenson, is the true hero of *Homeland* and a character who fully embodies the contradictions and limitations of Obama's War on Terror. His Indian wife, cultural knowledge of the Middle East, and fluency in Arabic are emphasized, much like President Obama's own multi-cultural credentials. These traits enable him to pursue terrorist enemies more effectively, through the cultivation of reliable informants and carefully considered decision-making, rather than *24*'s gung-ho missions. Berenson even has a detailed knowledge of Iranian soccer, information that proves useful when the name of a player is used as a cover identity by the owner of a Venezuelan soccer team thought to be involved in terrorism. (Such cultural knowledge, a tool of "soft power," is also key to the pivotal moment in *Argo* when a Farsi-speaking US embassy official is able to convince Revolutionary Guards at Tehran airport to allow his group to board a Swissair plane and flee the country.) Yet Berenson also believes in racial profiling when necessary, on one occasion giving his team instructions on how to conduct an investigation: "We prioritize. First the dark-skinned ones." When he is assigned an assistant, Fara, who wears a hijab, Berenson tells her: "You wearing that thing on your head – it's one big 'fuck you' to the people that would've been your coworkers." Blatant racism, where all Muslims come to be seen as collectively responsible for the actions of Jihadists, is presented as natural and acceptable. The tone of the show is one where racial discrimination is a regrettable but understandable tactic that even America's most principled security officials are likely to succumb to when investigating terrorist threats.

As he assumes leadership of the CIA in season three, Berenson is depicted as so cautious and precise in his decision-making that he almost calls off a long-planned, coordinated series of extra-judicial killings of six terrorist suspects because one person cannot be located. This is exactly the picture President Obama has sought to portray of himself as a bearer of moral wisdom who reflects on philosophical questions as he authorizes the "kill list."<sup>36</sup> It is not surprising therefore that Obama is reported to have told actor Damian Lewis, who plays Brody, that he found the show believable.<sup>37</sup> Also suggestive are the parallels between *Homeland*'s Berenson and John Brennan, the current director of the real CIA. Brennan is

fluent in Arabic and has said of Islam that he has “respect for a faith that has helped to shape my own worldview.”<sup>38</sup> The *New York Times* reports that he is seen as “a priest” within senior national security circles.<sup>39</sup> But Brennan has also defended the CIA’s torture and extraordinary rendition programs, and is one of the chief architects of the use of drones to carry out targeted killings.

Torture is not the universal solution it was on *24*, but it can still be an essential item in *Homeland*’s counterterrorism tool kit, so long as it is used in conjunction with Mathison’s and Berenson’s soft skills. Brody is stabbed through the hand by an interrogator, but only so that Mathison can step in afterward and present herself as the good cop, using empathy rather than force to win his cooperation. US policies in *Homeland* are essentially benign but occasionally undermined by rogue cliques, who lead the government astray into counterproductive excesses. The show gives Mathison and Berenson some opportunities to voice their concerns about such excesses from within the national security system. But the only Muslim voices raising political issues do so as terrorists. In line with the official radicalization narrative, political dissent and terrorism are collapsed into each other: The only Muslim voice is the terrorist voice.

On a deeper level, then, the assumptions underpinning *Homeland*’s War on Terror remain very much the same as *24*’s, even as the show brandishes more liberal credentials. Howard Gordon stated that he was “disturbed” by the accusations of *24* “stoking Islamophobia and being a midwife to a public acceptance of torture,” arguing that they “actively engaged and reconsidered how we told stories.”<sup>40</sup> The response to these disturbing accusations is a show that is more liberal and has a more subtle enunciation of the same underlying counter-terrorism story, but one that remains Islamophobic in its basic structure. Ultimately, *Homeland* functions in the same way as *24*, providing a means for the national-security state to publicize fantasies of terrorist threat, while setting new norms of acceptability on issues ranging from surveillance to political violence that then feed back into national security policy. Through its liberal veneer it not only sells the public on the notion that the War on Terror requires a permanent state of emergency, but that educated, sober, ethical, and smart people are in charge, and that we should trust them to guard us. The CIA, an organization with few rivals in the use of political terror, is rebranded and presented as the sole agency that will protect us from al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, and Iran – all now fused in an image of fanaticism.

### **Beyond the National-Security State**

Even while Hollywood collaborates with the national-security state, this arrangement is not without contradiction. Their symbiosis does not constitute a perfectly synchronous system devoid of incongruities. Not all cultural products have such clear links to government propaganda, as culture exceeds the limits set by elite groups. Although NSA chief Keith Alexander modeled his control room – dubbed the “Information Dominance Center” – on the bridge of the Starship Enterprise (complete with sliding doors, gleaming chrome, a central

command chair, and massive screens), he is unlikely to follow the lead of the most recent Star Trek film, *Into Darkness*, that eschews the War on Terror path and instead reinstates the mission of peaceful exploration.<sup>41</sup> Preferring the darkness of the skies to the darkness of war, the film has an implicit critique of the War on Terror and the ways in which the powerful create threats against whom war becomes necessary. In one scene, Benedict Cumberbatch, who plays the villain, explains that his role as a threat serves to advance the martial agenda of a Star Fleet admiral; he then introduces himself by saying “My Name is Khan” in an obvious reference to the Bollywood film by that name about religious and racial profiling in the US. Another blockbuster film from the summer of 2013 that raises a subtle critique of the language of the War on Terror is *Iron Man 3*, in which a bin Laden-type character is shown to be a convenient enemy created by powerful white American elites in the pursuit of world domination. In short, Hollywood can and does offer limited critiques of the powerful as it tries to cater to and tap into the anxieties of the 99 percent.

Yet, what is largely absent is films and shows that humanize the Other. The real failure of imagination in the War on Terror is not the inability of security personnel to visualize terrorist threats; it is the inability of US mainstream popular culture to engage in the most elementary act of empathy – to imagine what it is like for those on the receiving end of imperial violence. Rapper Immortal Technique, for instance, manages what should be a basic commitment for any artist working on the War on Terror: to see things from the Other’s point of view. In his 2005 track “Bin Laden,” he raps: “They say the rebels in Iraq still fight for Saddam. But that’s bullshit. I’ll show you why it’s totally wrong. Cuz if another country invaded the hood tonight, it’d be warfare through Harlem and Washington Heights. I wouldn’t be fighting for Bush or white America’s dream. I’d be fighting for my people’s survival and self-esteem.”

In October 2013, Rafiq ur Rehman, a Pakistani primary school teacher, came to Washington to testify to Congress on the killing of his 67-year-old mother in a CIA drone strike. The rows of empty seats that greeted him mirror the empty space in Hollywood where there ought by now to have been a film that truly captures the Iraqi or Afghan experience of US military occupation, or the Pakistani, Yemeni, or Somali experiences of living under the constant threat of drone violence.<sup>42</sup> Nick Broomfield’s *The Battle of Haditha* (2007) offers one model of what such film-making might look like. Even as the national-security-Hollywood nexus churns out War on Terror propaganda, it is susceptible to shifts in the popular mood. Eventually, one hopes, such pressure will lead the US culture industry to confront state violence directly and acknowledge that its own government, as Martin Luther King once put it, “is the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today.”<sup>43</sup>

## Notes

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