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Most Loud Bangs Aren't Bombs – Representation of Islamic Terrorism in *La Désintégration* and *Four Lions*

RESUMÉ

Formålet med denne undersøgelse er en kritisk analyse af repræsentationen af islamisk terrorisme i europæiske film, og mere specifikt hvad sympatistrukturerne i filmene *La Désintégration* (2011) og *Four Lions* (2010) afslører om, hvordan vi taler om og forstår terrorisme. Ambitionen er ikke at foretage en normativ analyse af, hvilken repræsentation der er mest 'nøjagtig' eller 'etisk korrekt', men i stedet undersøge, hvordan drama- og komediegenren tilbyder to forklaringsrammer til et kompliceret og kontroversielt emne. Kun ved at omfatte begge forklaringsrammer, kan vi komme i nærheden af at forstå alle nuancer og modsætninger i vores forståelse af terrorisme.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to critically analyze representations of Islamic terrorism in European film, and more specifically what the sympathy structures in the films *La Désintégration* (2011) and *Four Lions* (2010) reveal about the way we talk about and understand terrorism. The ambition is not to do normative analysis of which depiction is most 'accurate' or 'ethically correct', but rather an examination of how the genres of drama and comedy offer two explanatory frameworks for a complicated and controversial issue. Only through encompassing both can we hope to understand the nuances and contractions of our interpretations of terrorism.

Introduction: What makes a terrorist?

Terrorism is by no means a new phenomenon, but ever since 9/11, it has taken on a whole new and all-encompassing dimension in Western societies. From attacks on national symbols to the killing of civilians, terrorism – or rather, fear of terrorism – has come to define Western life in the twenty-first century (Shaw 2014, 2). Each terrorist attack seems to follow the same news cycle: shock, outrage, condemnation, and political assurance that "we are not afraid" and we "will never waver in the face of terrorism," as prime minister Theresa May phrased it following the 2017 attack on Westminster in London (Dearden 2017). However, the terrorism-related news cycle often has a final stage characterized by a question as to whether the attack was terrorism at all. This semantic debate involves aspects such as ethnicity, religion, motivation, psychology, ties to a larger terrorist organization (such as ISIS), and whether or not the individual was acting as a 'lone wolf'. Was this the act of an insane murderer or was this, as May put it, an attempt to "silence our democracy" (ibid.)? Is it the motivations or the consequences that make a terrorist? The choice of words matters. It matters for our understanding of the individuals behind the attacks, and it matters for our understanding of ourselves.

Cinema has a unique possibility for weighing in on this debate through its function as an "empathy-generating machine", to borrow a phrase from the late film critic Roger Ebert. Having researched the portrayal of terrorism throughout film history, Tony Shaw (2014, 244) points out that the 9/11 terrorist attack was a turning point not just for the kinds of terrorism being committed but also for cinema's representation of terrorism. Suddenly, filmmakers wanted (or needed) to understand and explain the minds of these men and women who were compelled to commit such inexplicable acts of violence. Shaw does not specify who these filmmakers actually are, but two examples could be the British director Christopher Morris and the French director Phillippe Faucon. In 2010 and 2011 respectively, each directed a film about a group of radicalized young men who more or less successfully plan and carry a terrorist attack.

Even though there are obvious differences between the two films – such as their countries of origin and their modes and genres – these very differences emphasize what I regard as the inherently cinematic quality of the differing understandings of terrorism. The two films share a similar plot structure and a

common interest in portraying the radicalized mind of a militant Islamic terrorist, yet the genres of Faucon's drama and Morris' satire each illuminate distinctive and perhaps competing aspects of the ways in which we talk about terrorism and – above all – the people behind terrorism. Only by embracing the nuances and contradictions of this debate can we hope to break the oversimplified conceptualization of terrorists as 'monsters'. This will be researched with the following question in mind:

> How do *La Désintégration* (2011) and *Four Lions* (2010) offer
> different understandings of terrorism?

The films' two genres can thus be seen as two 'genres' of understanding terrorism, two lenses through which we conceive of reality. My ambition is not to undertake a normative analysis of which representation is the most 'ethically correct' but instead how each genre offers an explanatory framework for a complex and controversial issue.

This is carried out through an analysis of the *structure of sympathy* (Smith 1995) in both films because in each case the audience is asked to sympathize with a group of people performing an objectively evil act. However, this process of engaging with the characters occurs in two distinct ways and, thanks to the films' respective genres, produces two significantly different results.

One important difference is how each film constructs and subverts the stereotypes of the Muslim and the terrorist – as well as the arbitrary connection between these two categories. Because of this, the analysis also draws upon representational theory by Richard Dyer (1993), Stuart Hall (1997), and Rosello Mireille (1998) as well as research on violent radicalization (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010; Görzig & Khaled 2014), Islamophobia (Kalin 2011), and cinematic representations of Muslims (Shaw 2014; Shaheen 2003). The following section outlines this theoretical approach in detail.

Theoretical approach

In his book on character engagement, Murray Smith (1995, 74)describes fiction as a "quasi-experience" that allows us to grasp "situations, persons, and values which are alien to us". It is hard to imagine a topic more alien to Western

audiences than radical Islamic terrorism because it is defined (at least in the media) by its binary opposition to everything the West stands for.

Fictional narratives such as *La Désintégration* and *Four Lions* offer the chance to identify with a group of people normally cut off from any kind of empathetic treatment, yet in order to analyse this specific kind of imaginative engagement with characters, Smith (ibid., 73) proposes three more defined concepts: *recognition, alignment*, and *allegiance*. *Recognition* is the process of recognizing a character as being the same from scene to scene. Like most films, neither *La Désintégration* nor *Four Lions* does anything to challenge this fundamental aspect of the structure of sympathy, which is why this concept will not be included in this analysis. *Alignment*, on the other hand, describes how the narrative is framed 'through the eyes' of a character. This restriction of narrative information occurs in two ways: First, there is a *spatio-temporal attachment* with a character, whereby the audience either experiences the narrative alongside the protagonist or has more information about the narrative by following several characters and therefore knows more than the protagonist. The second function of alignment is *subjective access*, which describes the depth of information about a character, typically achieved through voice-overs, dream sequences, or flashbacks. Although neither film utilizes any of these cinematic tools for deep subjective access, I argue that this function nevertheless plays an important role in the analysis.

However, where the two movies significantly begin to differ is when the concept of *allegiance* is introduced, because it relates to the moral evaluation of the characters: For whom does the audience actually root? Allegiance is a relative term within the context of narratives, meaning that having allegiance with a specific character does not condone the actions of that character in the real world (e.g. murder, terrorism, etc.). The structure of sympathy is instead comprised of an evaluation of what the audience knows about a character (subjective access) and the context of the character's actions (spatio-temporal attachment). That is why allegiance often - but does not necessarily - arises out of alignment.

This is where the use of stereotypes becomes essential to the analysis of the two films. By analysing the representation of Arabs in Hollywood movies, Jack G. Shaheen (2003, 172) has identified certain characteristics that make up the cinematic stereotype: heartless, brutal, uncivilized, religious fanatics, enemies

of the West, and abusers of women, to name just a few. It Is important to note that this specific image is based on *Hollywood* movies, though this representation also resonates with the general European stereotype of Islam as oppressive and violent (Kalin 2011, 7), thereby validating Shaheen's research in the context of my analysis.

It would be unfair to hold an individual film accountable for the stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims (and the interchangeability of the two); it is instead the *repetition* of these images that constitutes a problem as it maintains a certain body as the cultural 'Other'. The power and instability of the stereotype lies in this repetition: It creates a consensus, a sense of absolute truth, that can be hard to contradict because the representation will always be in reference to its inescapable stereotype (Dyer 1993, 12). It is difficult, if not impossible, to decline a stereotype without also contributing to it, which means that the analysis will not (or cannot) focus on how the films subvert these representations but rather how they use the sympathy structures inherent to the stereotypes to navigate a complex subject.

La Désintégration

La Désintégration centres around Ali, a man in his early to mid-20s living at home with his Muslim mother in Lyon, France. Ali and his siblings (an older brother and younger sister) do not share their mother's religion or even language but, importantly, the mother is accepting of her children's secular and Western lifestyle choices. This is in contrast to Nasser, a friend of Ali's, who similarly lacks interest in Islam but whose mother scolds him for it and accuses him of wasting of his life. This is significant because it is Nasser's subsequent involvement in crime that eventually takes the characters down the road towards radicalization.

Early in the film, Ali is by no means a deadbeat like Nasser. He is doing well in school and applying for internships, though without luck – perhaps due to his Muslim name. This growing frustration with structural discrimination plants the seed for militant Islam that Djamel, a radical imam, notices and nurtures in Ali and his friends. Djamel is slightly older and is introduced when he offers to help Nasser hide from the police in an empty apartment normally used for practising Islam. This becomes the meeting place for Djamel, Ali, Nasser, and

the fourth member of the group, Hamza, who is already a devout Muslim. Here, Djamel introduces them to the Quran and the Muslim faith. Whereas Nasser seems eager to learn, Ali is more hesitant but eventually gets more involved as his frustration with French society grows. This leads to ambivalent conflicts with his mother, who is happy that he has found God but warns him about his increasingly radical interpretation of the religion because Islam "should be about forgiveness and respect".

Djamel pushes the three young men further from French society, first by renouncing their French nationality, then the mosque because it is "state-approved Islam", and finally by prompting them to cut ties with their families. He convinces Ali and his friends that they must commit Jihad, and the film ends with the three young men bombing NATO's headquarters in Belgium, though Nasser gets cold feet and runs away at the last minute. The final shot is of Ali's mother seeing the news on TV and running off screaming, "They killed my son!"

Sympathy structures in La Désintégration

The film utilises quite a broad narrative range, meaning that even though Ali is the protagonist, there is no direct spatio-temporal attachment to his character. We experience the narrative in glimpses from almost every character, e.g. Ali's mother's frustration at work, Ali's older brother's intimate moments with his French fiancé, and Nasser's desperation after having committed assault. This depicts a broad image of the context and the people surrounding the radicalization process, but it also comes at the cost of deep subjective access to a single character – the closest we get is to Ali. There is no doubt that he is the protagonist, as the narrative aligns mostly with him, and it is his character development that is in focus. He is the only one in the small terrorist cell who we get to see at home, and the many close-ups of his face portray a character gradually disintegrating.

It is this disintegration that is crucial to the narrative's shifting allegiances. At the start, Ali is portrayed as a wholly likable character: ambitious in his educational and professional life and loving towards his family and friends. Even though his challenges might be specific to Muslims living in France, character engagement is not necessarily limited to this specific audience. Smith

(1995, 93) argues that identification with a character is not restricted to "reconfirming and restaging the familiar" but instead involves *understanding* – rather than mimicking – the feelings of a character in a certain context. Thus, a white Western audience might not *relate* specifically to Ali's experience of being rejected by society because of his name, but it will *understand* his frustrations and feel empathetic towards him because of the aforementioned alignment structures.

This allegiance with Ali is further enhanced in the early scenes with Djamel, who is slowly seeking to manipulate the young men by explaining how they will never be accepted by French society. Whereas Nasser falls easily for Djamel's rhetoric and worldview, Ali keeps his distance and continues applying for internships. In contrast to Nasser, Ali is portrayed as hard working, determined, and morally superior to the other characters in this situation. Precisely because of Ali's idealism and good intentions, it hurts even more when he is rejected for the 100th time, making his fit of anger at the job centre seem entirely justified in the context of the film. From that point on, Ali is on a one-way street to radical Islam, and only eight scenes later, he and the rest of the group are shown renouncing their French nationality and declaring themselves *mujahideen* – a Muslim engaged in Jihad.

Phillippe Faucon obviously is not excusing the behaviour of radical Muslims like Ali, but throughout the first half of *La Désintégration*, he provides an explanation for those actions, and by utilizing specific structures of alignment and allegiance, he offers the chance of empathy and understanding. The second half of the film, however, takes a different approach.

The construction of a stereotype

In her research on violent radicalization in Europe, Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen identifies three types of explanations for the phenomenon – all three of which are present in *La Désintégration*, especially in its the second half. Faucon has mentioned in interviews that his film is heavily researched, which the similarities with Dalgaard-Nielsen's research seem to confirm (Volta VOD 2013).

The first school of thought is based in French sociology and emphasises the identity crisis inherent to the conditions of modernity in Western democracies.

This crisis is even more present for second-generation immigrants stuck between their parents' traditional lifestyles and the culture of the Western country in which they have grown up, a culture increasingly defined by individualization and loss of community. Not belonging *completely* to either culture, they are left with "a double sense of non-belonging" (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010, 800), especially if they experience structural discrimination, as Ali does in *La Désintégration*. In fact, Ali and his siblings frequently act out this "double sense of non-belonging" in the first half of the film. For example, Ali's sister tells her mother that she identifies as French, to which her mother replies that she must not forget her roots. Ali also distances himself from his mother's lifestyle by forgetting about an Islamic holiday and teasing her affectionately about her veil, while at the same time being continually rejected by French society, leaving him with no fixed value system to which to turn. Khosrokhavar and Roy point to militant Islamism as a "potential answer to the resulting search for identity" (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010, 800), but this does not explain why it is only Ali (and not his siblings or others experiencing similar structural discrimination) who becomes radicalized.

The second school of thought deals with this question by focusing on social movement theory. This approach accepts the double sense of non-belonging as a condition for - not as a decisive factor in - violent radicalization. If everyone is faced with the same structural influences, it is instead a question of who you know. Again, *La Désintégration* illustrates this with the coincidence of Ali's fateful meeting with Djamel through a friend of a friend. This explains how Ali's brother was faced with the exact same obstacles but came through relatively unscathed because he was fortunate enough not to encounter people like Djamel who would seek to prey on his weakness. The strength of this explanation is that it does not reduce violent radicalization to 'insanity', yet the weakness is that the process is reduced to a matter of chance (ibid., 804). In this scenario, a character like Ali is left with no agency and is simply a product of the people around him. I will return to this point again below.

The third and final explanation, as outlined by Dalgaard-Nielsen, is a less theoretical and more an empirical approach. It does not concern itself with the speculative question of *why* violent radicalization occurs but rather *how* it occurs, based on data from case studies (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010, 806). With this method, Peter Nesser has identified four general personality types within

several radical groups in Europe, and these four roles happen to describe the characters in *La Désintégration* perfectly: Djamel is the *leader*, also known as the *entrepreneur*, who in accordance with social movement theory is the driving and defining force in the radicalization process. The *protégé* is the intelligent and ambitious recruit, which in this case would be Ali. As mentioned above, he is portrayed as the only one actively pursuing a professional career until Djamel persuades him otherwise. Then there is the *misfit* and the *drifter*. The misfit in *La Désintégration* is Nasser, who joins because of his violent background in crime, which leaves Hamza as the drifter, "who appears to join the group through social connections" (ibid.): a vague but accurate description of Hamza's insignificant role in the overall narrative of the film.

In many ways, *La Désintégration* seems to be a text-book adaptation of the current research on violent radicalization in Europe, from the general explanations, down to the individual character types. The first half of the film dramatizes these theories by aligning with the characters, most importantly Ali, but after they renounce their French nationality and fully embody their archetype of the 'radical Muslim', the allegiance shifts. In several scenes, Ali is shown teaching his mother about Islam, aggressively disciplining his younger sister for not wearing a veil, and refusing to shake hands with his brother's French fiancé – all character traits that are undeniably unsympathetic to a Western audience. Whereas Ali was previously almost always the most likable character in a scene, the allegiance has suddenly shifted to his family members. Importantly, this makes a clear distinction between the radical and the moderate interpretation of Islam, but it also represents Ali as the classic 'radical Muslim', confirming all the stereotypical assumptions mentioned above: heartless, brutal, uncivilized, religious fanatic, enemy of the West and discriminating against women (Shaheen 2003, 172; Kalin 2011, 7; Goërzig & Hashimi 2014, 48). The film accepts and explains the conditions for this stereotype instead of seeking to transcend the stereotype. Ali's motivations may be clear in the first half of the film, but he is dehumanized once he is stripped of agency and placed on a downward spiral towards terrorism, where we never see him doubting his path. Ali is thus the vessel for a displaced stereotype that is easy for the audience to condemn because he becomes a wholly unlikable character in a matter of very few scenes. He becomes the quintessence of everything we fear.

Four Lions

A couple of months before the release of *La Désintégration* in France, *Four Lions* was released in the United Kingdom. Like *La Désintégration*, *Four Lions* follows four young Muslims as they plan a terrorist attack, in this case on the London Marathon. Significantly, the film does not show the radicalization process from A to B but starts where the first half of *La Désintégration* ends: with the characters declaring themselves as *mujahideen* and as enemies of the West in a home-made video recording meant to strike fear in the hearts of all infidels. The dark comedy of *Four Lions* is immediately evident when it becomes clear that the protagonists have no idea what they are doing and, as will happen many times throughout the film, their plans are stymied by their incompetence, sheer stupidity, and constant in-fighting.

The group consists first and foremost of Omar, who seems to be the leader of the pack and the only one with anything resembling intelligence and common sense. Omar works at a surveillance company and is happily married with Sofia, who works as a nurse. Together, they have a son. The family is well aware that Omar is playing terrorist with his friends in his spare time, and much of the dark comedy comes from the trivial way in which they discuss his plans of Jihad. The group's competing leader is Barry, a white converted Muslim, who is repeatedly portrayed as the most aggressive and violent. However, because of his ethnicity, he lacks the authenticity of Omar, who speaks Urdu and has spent time in Pakistan. Waj is Omar's best friend, and it is hinted that they have known each other since childhood. Omar often acts as Waj's protector from Barry's rage and as a (very unskilled and sometimes manipulative) spiritual counsellor because Waj himself has the intelligence of a small child. His interpretation of Islam is quite literally based on a children's book. The final member of the group is Faisal, whose incompetence blows him up pre-emptively as he is carrying explosives across a field. Faisal's role in the group is replaced by the wannabe-rapper Hassan, who Barry recruits at a panel discussion on moderate Islam.

Much of the film is based on the comic interaction between these characters as they exchange Western pop culture references, discuss what to bomb (Barry proposes the mosque; Waj proposes the internet) and how to do it (Faisal wants to train crows to deliver bombs). They spontaneously decide on the London Marathon as the target, for which purpose they dress up in silly costumes to

hide their explosive belts. Unsurprisingly, nothing goes as planned as their bombs go off one by one, mostly by accident, and when Omar tries to call off the mission but realizes it is too late, he walks disheartened into a drug store and blows himself up. This is portrayed as both tragic and comical.

During the final credits, we see the political aftermath of the bombings. Within the montage, Omar's peaceful but orthodox Muslim brother is called in for questioning, and it is hinted that he will be tortured by the police for information.

Sympathy structures in Four Lions

More so than in *La Désintégration*, *Four Lions* aligns primarily, though not exclusively, with one character: Omar. The narrative is spatio-temporally attached to his character when we see him with his family at home and when he travels with Waj to Pakistan for training camp. A few scenes are dedicated to the remaining group members while Omar is away, in which it becomes clear that the group is lost without him. Little subjective access is granted to the characters, with the result that the reason for their jihad is never made clear, other than farcical stock arguments against the West. The most intimate subjective access is to Omar when he is with his family, especially when he is telling his own jihad-inspired rendition of *The Lion King* to his son as a goodnight story. The scene offers a sympathetic glimpse of understanding into the motivation of his character as he clearly sees himself as the hero of the story.

More significantly though, the primary allegiance with Omar comes from his function in the genre. Every comedy needs a *straight man*, a character who acts and thinks somewhat normally and who can look at the absurdity of the situation through the same eyes as the audience, confirming that yes, it *is* absurd. Although Omar often does take part in the absurdity, both on a fundamental level by even engaging in a largely unmotivated jihad in the first place but also by sometimes playing the fool himself (e.g. when in training camp, he shoots a bazooka the wrong way), most of the time his role in a scene is the voice of reason. 'Reason' is obviously a relative term, but as allegiance is based on the moral evaluation of a character in the context of a narrative situation (Smith 1994, 84), Omar does emerge as the most sympathetic character overall.

Besides his plans of Jihad, Omar does other morally questionable things, such as lie to his friends and manipulate Waj when he starts doubting their mission. However, Omar recognizes his wrongs and tries to correct them, which only serves to reaffirm the allegiance with his character.

This relativity of sympathy is further challenged in a key scene with Omar's deeply religious brother, Ahmed. Omar is sitting in his living room reviewing one of their Jihadist videos, as Ahmed comes by to peacefully tell him that what he is doing is not proper Islam. Ahmed has a long black beard, wears a kufi and kurta, and as is revealed in this scene, he "keeps his wife in a cupboard". This is in sharp contrast to Omar, who has an equal relationship with his wife and looks and lives in a very Western way. The structure of allegiance enters a grey area as Ahmed *actually* is the voice of reason, but the identification still lies with Omar, his wife, and their Western lifestyle. This highlights the contradictions and nuances of Islam and terrorism (and their arbitrary connection) while also clearly separating the two. The scene further confirms that the problem with violent radicalization *is not* an over-identification with Islam (Goerzig & Al-Hashimi 2014, 47).

The film actually goes on to mock this precise notion in a scene that cross-cuts between the group planning the attack on the London Marathon and a police taskforce approaching a house. The assumption is obviously that Omar and his friends have been discovered, but as the police break down the door, it is revealed that they are actually raiding Ahmed's house where a group of Muslims are praying peacefully.

This critique of the authorities' discrimination can also be seen as inherent to the genre of satire. Nothing is sacred, and everyone inhabiting the world of *Four Lions* is essentially an idiot. That is why the allegiance with Omar is so meaningful. By making him the (only) *straight man* in the comedy, the audience is forced to sympathize with him all the way through, even as he is performing an objectively evil deed. The film does not necessarily root for Ahmed to succeed but simply insists on recognizing the very human and flawed qualities of his character – aspects that are lost from an outsider's perspective.

"Why shouldn't I be a bomber if you treat me like one?"

These words are spoken by Hassan at a panel debate as he highjacks the event with an action that is designed to prompt the (ironically mostly Muslim) audience members to reflect on their views of Islam. Hassan is wearing an explosive belt filled with confetti, and as he detonates the bomb, confronting the fear of the audience members, he asks: "Just because I'm Muslim, you thought it was real?". This is one of the ways in which *Four Lions* repeatedly acknowledges and subverts stereotypical representations of Muslims. The scene also points to Western societies' treatment of Muslims as a radicalizing factor while simultaneously making fun of that very idea as the characters never actually experience any discrimination. Or rather, only Ahmed faces discrimination ecause he *looks* like the West's stereotypical image of a radical Muslim. In a later scene, Omar goes to the hospital to say goodbye to his wife as he is on his way to the London Marathon, but she is speaking with two police officers who (ironically) are searching for Omar's innocent brother. Omar confidently goes up to Sofia and informs her in code that the mission is on, and as he leaves, he jokes with the officers, asking them if they are here to arrest him. The officers laugh, and he is free to go, apparently because he does not have the 'body' of a terrorist.

This self-reflexivity is further underlined by the stylistic choice of cutting to surveillance footage of the characters throughout the film, e.g. the scene in the hospital. There is never a real narrative pay-off to these cut-away shots because, as mentioned above, the police actually suspect Omar's innocent brother of planning the attack. These surveillance shots could also refer to Omar's job at a surveillance company, but more importantly, I would argue, they serve to constantly remind the audience of society's outsider perspective on these characters. Because of our alignment and subsequent allegiance with the characters, we might see them as loveable idiots in all their incompetence, but the surveillance shots remove all emotions and frame them unequivocally as society's 'suspects' or 'enemies'. The irony is that they actually *are* enemies of the West, confirming the stereotyped connection between Muslims and terrorists while also criticizing this very assumption.

Unpacking the stereotype

As mentioned above, *Four Lions* and *La Désintégration* share many similarities, which is of course the reason for this comparative analysis. Both films feature a group of young Muslim men in Europe, most likely second- or third-generation immigrants, who plan a terrorist attack. Both films align with the most likable character in the group, who leads a somewhat secular lifestyle, at least in the beginning. Both films make a clear distinction between the main characters' militant Islam and a moderate/traditional interpretation of the religion practiced by someone from the protagonist's family. And both films end with the main characters sacrificing their lives in a terrorist attack.

The fact that the two films originate from different countries is of limited relevance to my specific analysis. I am aware that France and the United Kingdom have distinct histories of home-grown terrorism, yet the fear addressed by the two films is not specific to any one country. Furthermore, the radicalization of young Muslims to militant Islamism seems to be the same all over Europe (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010, 748).

A more significant difference lies in the genres of the two films. The intention of drama is pathos and character development, whereas the main goal of comedy is to produce laughter. These aims are obviously not mutually exclusive, but the moods of *La Désintégration* and *Four Lions* are so radically different that it at first glance seems unfair to compare the two. However, as I have shown, the two genres demonstrate the (effect of) different perceptions of terrorism.

La Désintégration focuses on the dramatic development of Ali from a hard-working, ambitious, and well-meaning young man to the familiar portrait of the Islamic terrorist. He grows into a familiar stereotype of an 'angry Muslim' formed by society's discrimination and the people around him, and in so doing he represents everything the West fears, both in ourselves and in 'the Other'.

Using stereotypes to navigate these fears and fantasies is not inherently wrong, but the pitfall is that these stereotypes bring with them a sense of absolute truth (Dyer 1993, 12): The Islamic terrorist is *this*. The Islamic terrorist looks like *that*. This representation packs a lot of (empirically correct) information about violent radicalization into Ali's character, but it comes at the cost of

acknowledging the limits of this very representation. In fact, the film does nothing to challenge or subvert the stereotype of the angry Muslim; it only broadens our understandings of it by dramatizing the radicalizing factors at play. This is still repeating the stereotype and thus contributing to it (Rosello 1998, 18). Ali then reproduces the fear of the radical terrorist. He becomes a stock figure, an absolute sociological truth, who rejects all nuance and takes the fear of a nation onto his shoulders.

Four Lions denies this absolute truth. It subverts the representation by contesting the stereotype from within by self-reflexively using dark humour and exaggeration of character traits. The effect of a comedic strategy like this is exposure of the stereotype *as* stereotype (Hall 1997, 270) because it highlights the inherent contradictions and ambivalences in this type of representation, such as the scene in which Ahmed confronts Omar. Whereas stereotypes normally "insist on boundaries exactly at those points where in reality there are none" (ibid.), *Four Lions* continually challenges these boundaries by complicating the structure of allegiance. *La Désintégration*, on the other hand, creates and maintains these boundaries.

The question then is whether these boundaries are actually necessary when discussing Islamic terrorism. What good does it do to blur the lines between the moderate and the radical Muslim? Might this simply reproduce suspicion and fear of moderate Muslims? If Omar looks and acts moderate but actually is 'an enemy of the West', could others be the same? This is where *La Désintégration* uses stereotypes to clearly and importantly separate the two categories. Moderate Islam is portrayed as inherently good (the mother) while radical Islam is portrayed as manipulative, evil, and destructive (Djamel). In this sense, *La Désintégration* deconstructs the absolute Other by shedding light on internal complexities while *Four Lions* reproduces fear of the Other by blurring the lines between radical and moderate.

Nevertheless, the moderate/radical dichotomy in *La Désintégration* only lets us understand Ali as a terrorist. Everything leading up to the final scene is essentially the (sociologically plausible) explanation for this one single act that ends up defining his character. *Four Lions*, meanwhile, lets us understand Omar as a person; flawed, complicated, and - because of his function in the genre - relatable. The structure of sympathy essentially disarms the fear of the Other.

Conclusion

In many ways, *La Désintégration* is the more realistic and true-to-life depiction of radicalized Muslims. It separates the militant interpretations of Islam from the moderate and secular interpretation, but in so doing, it reproduces the image of the 'angry Muslim' as something to be feared. It offers an explanation for their actions but only by turning them into victims without personal agency, impossible to identify with and easy to fear.

In *Four Lions*, Omar is a secular Muslim who *also* interprets Islam radically, thereby mystifying other secular Muslims. At the same time, the film *de*-mystifies the role of the 'angry Muslim', points at the absurdity of it, and takes away the fear. Importantly though, the group's terrorist attack succeeds to some degree. They do not kill civilians or attack the London Marathon *per se*, but they do blow themselves up, thereby striking fear into the hearts of a country. It is because of the actions of Omar and his friends that the police feel like they have an excuse to torture Omar's brother for information during the final credits of the movie – consequently continuing the circle of fear and radicalization.

This means that both movies broaden the spectator's stereotypical idea of Islam and radical Islamic terrorism while at the same time reproducing that very image. Taken on their own, each confirm the worst stereotypes of radical Muslims, but together they offer the chance of encompassing the nuances and contradictions in understanding violent radicalization. Even while portraying the opposite, both movies seem to reprise the notion of the closing line in *Four Lions*, as spoken by Omar's colleague when interviewed about the terrorist attack:

"Most loud bangs are not bombs… they're scooters backfiring".

References

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