Fellowship Application
Study and Development Fellowships for Sessional Lecturers (CUPE 3913 Unit-2)

Terrorizing Media: The Politics of Depicting Terrorism and “The Terrorist Other” in Contemporary Media.

Applicant:
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PROJECT GOALS:
The overarching goal of this research project is to identify and analyse the effects and influences of contemporary media representations of terrorism and terrorists on Canadian audiences, government policy, global terrorism, and global militarism. As numerous media and cultural theorists have pointed out, media doesn’t just depict events and identities from the “real world,” it helps to create them. This is particularly evident with contemporary terrorism and terrorists which are today, as philosopher Jean Baudrillard and media theorist Andrew Hoskins have convincingly argued, inseparable from their media representations. In other words, terrorism happens in the media in ways that are even more symbolically potent than, if still inextricably linked to, how it happens to actual buildings and people. This project will seek to understand how particular media representations of terrorism and terrorists both influence and are implicated with their subject matter.

The first two deliverable outcomes of the project will be the establishment of the Terrorizing Media Research Group, and the creation of an extensive online resource database devoted to researching media representations of terrorism and terrorists. For the period of the Study and Development Fellowship grant, I will be the principle researcher with the aim of adding research assistants and associate members in later phases of the project. The goals of the research group and online database will be to monitor, archive, and analyze the current rise in the post-9/11 rhetoric of terror and terrorism in the media, and to interrogate the political, military, and human rights issues arising in conjunction with that trend. The online resource database will consist of a current archive of primary and secondary research materials—video, pictures, critical research essays, documents, bibliographical materials or web links (particularly in the case of copyrighted material), etc.—on the topics of contemporary media representations of terrorism and terrorists for use by students and researchers working on this urgent topic. A third outcome/deliverable will be the completion, by the end of the period of
the grant, of a scholarly publication authored by me on the topic of post-9/11 cinema. I will complete this scholarly activity using the research materials collected as part of the online archive. A fourth deliverable will be the production of shorter “working papers” which will become part of the online database of research materials. These working papers—produced by myself, other student research assistants, as well as users of the database who want to submit materials which will pass a scholarly vetting and editorial process—will survey and analyse the data collected for the project’s online archive. These working papers will ultimately be vital for summarizing and organizing the archival materials. Some will also be developed into more argumentative critical essays on the topics of contemporary representations of terror and terrorists in contemporary media.

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR THE RESEARCH:

One such guiding question informing the project is: How do different contemporary media representations of terror create stereotypes and/or misconceptions about contemporary terrorism and terrorists? The recent documentary film The Secret Trial 5 (Amar Wala, 2014) is an example of an award-winning, cinematic production which tells the story of how five Arab Muslim men were racially, culturally, and theologically profiled under Canadian Security Certificates shortly after September 11, 2001 (9/11). The subjects have spent collectively thirty years in prison without being charged with a crime. Drawing on media examples like this, as well as from mainstream news media, Hollywood-style cinematic representations of terrorism and terrorists, fictional and reality-based television shows, websites, radio, and a range of other media sources, the project will ask: Which ethnic, racial, religious, minority, and/or gendered groups seem to be most commonly identified—or “profiled”—as representing the “terrorist other?” How do particular media depictions impact on Canadian foreign policy decisions and contemporary Canadian legal practices such as Canadian Security Certificates and Bill C-51? Do contemporary media depictions of terrorism and terrorists influence such legislation—for example, Bill C-51’s focus on “jihadist” terrorism, as opposed to other types of terrorism? Does the production and proliferation of orientalist stereotypes in contemporary media have an impact on Canadian cultural tolerance of ethnic/cultural/racial/religious difference? Is a “culture of fear” being created via certain media depictions of terrorism? Does a media focus on particular images and stereotypes about terrorism mask less transparent implications of contemporary foreign policy, global militarism, and social problems at issue with contemporary terrorism that should be covered by the media? Identifying media representations that create social biases, prejudices, and cultural and religious misconceptions about “terrorist others” will help to broaden people’s collective understanding of the politics, ethics, cultural issues, religious implications, social stakes, and stake-holders involved with and impacted by contemporary media depictions of terror and terrorism. Alternatively, identifying media sources that produce more complex and balanced messages about these issues will help to debunk and decode orientalist and opportunistic “terror” rhetoric currently sewing fear and hatred via certain contemporary media depictions of and political discourses about terrorism.
Indeed, a central axiom of this project is the belief that effective approaches to anti-terrorism should begin with the promotion of better inter-cultural understanding, in particular via the media. Thus, the project will seek to improve media literacy on such issues as terror and terrorism, and thus decrease our Canadian cultural tolerance for racially-biased, politically and socially regressive representations of the “terrorist-other” in contemporary media.

PEDAGOGICAL INNOVATIONS:

RESEARCH METHODS: The research will be carried out primarily using the methodologies and approaches of critical theory, cultural theory, and media theory.

Critical theory (not the critical theory associated with Frankfurt School Marxism) is a branch of literary studies that draws heavily on the works of philosophers of power, epistemology, feminism, gender studies, postcolonial studies, Marxism, ethical philosophy, poststructuralism, semiotics, hermeneutics, deconstruction, amongst many other traditions. A critical theoretical approach to a concept such as “terrorism” might look at the etymology of the term for clues regarding what specific historical, political, ideological, religious, or cultural contexts lend the term meaning, or cause that meaning to shift over time and in different contexts. For example, “the Terror” of the French revolution in part signified the rise of democratic politics, whereas contemporary “terrorism” has very different political implications. In short, the difference between “terrorist” and “freedom fighter” is often at best an ambiguous, even empty distinction. Other critical theoretical methodologies include: 1. **semiotic analysis** (looking at concepts and ideas as parts of larger linguistically structured systems within which meaning is not static, but only differentially negotiated); 2. **close reading** (looking for intertextual links with other concepts, works, cultural objects, ideological systems, political regimes, historical resonances, as well as paying close attention to a text’s linguistic, grammatical, and semiotic structures—even attending to spelling, grammar, and punctuation for subtle nuances of meaning); 3. **literary analysis** (looking for symbolism, metaphors, allegory, literary devices, intertextual resonances with other works or ideas, historical specificity, recurring tropes or motifs, etc.). Note that a **text**, for a critical theorist, is a broader term than it sounds, signifying not only words but also pictures, images, symbolic structures, human bodies, cinematic productions—in short, anything that can be “read” for the ways in which it produces meaning.

Cultural theory draws upon many of the linguistic and philosophical methods that critical theory does, such as semiotics, aesthetics, philosophy, ideology, economic and historical analysis. It focuses more narrowly, however, on the **politics of representation**—particularly in regards to everyday examples of representation, ideology, and identity produced through cultural practices such as pop music, popular media, street signs, capitalist culture, architecture, social trends, political ideology, amongst other aspects of culture and everyday life.
My own approach to Media theory is closely related to cultural studies. For example, I am interested in the politics, ethics, and ideological implications of different forms of media aesthetics and how, when, and where they are produced. In other words, this type of media theory is preoccupied with the analysis of signification and how meaning is produced in different mediatized contexts. Media theory, therefore, must take into consideration the ways in which meaning is re-produced in inter- and re-mediated forms, and how those intermedial aspects are inseparable from questions of “content.” To paraphrase Marshall McLuhan, Richard Grusin, and Friedrich Kittler: how is the medium implicated with the message? What, for example, are the political, economic, cultural, and even legal implications of showing a modernized version of a Shakespearean play with contemporary references to terrorism as a videotaped television special remediated in the form of a free YouTube video? Such a question is simultaneously a media theory question (about the specific technological, economic, government policy, and structural issues related to mediality vs. transmitted messages), a cultural theory question (what are the politics of the particular media representations), and a critical theory question (how is meaning being produced and what are the ethical and epistemological implications of this meaning).

On the other hand, the project will be open to other approaches or interdisciplinary methodologies that complexify and/or productively inform the research outcomes. The particular methodologies used will depend on their application to the two basic phases of the project:

Phase 1: The first phase of the project is data collection and archivization. Researchers—myself and any subsequent research assistants that join the project—will collect primary data for the project’s searchable online archives by surveying mainstream and alternative media sources, peer-reviewed academic papers, blogs, internet archives, television, and government archives, amongst other sources. Research will be conducted using the University of Guelph and University of Guelph-Humber media archives, other University archives, sources from mainstream and alternative media, and scholarly research databases.

Phase 2: The second phase of the project involves analysis of the collected archival materials for the production of scholarly papers and “working papers” for inclusion in the archive, or for publication with external peer-reviewed journals. Researchers will close read and analyse the collected archival materials made available on the online database in order to identify current trends, ethical, cultural, and political implications, unforeseen complexities, and contradictions in the representations of terrorism and terrorists in a wide range of different types of contemporary media. Researchers will also produce scholarly “working papers.” The format of the working papers will be shorter, more informational types of scholarly essays meant to survey, summarize, and/or comment upon trends or specialized topics within the collected archival materials. These working papers will be added to the research project archive to help sign-post and summarize the archival data. The archive will also be used for researching and producing scholarly articles and materials for publication by external journals, scholarly presses, or as part of the project archive.
BENEFITS FOR STUDENTS:

In conjunction with my own scholarly activities as principle researcher on the project, I will also apply for a University of Guelph-Humber Research Fellowship Fund in order to hire students as research assistants to work on the project as it carries on after the period of the initial Study and Development Fellowship grant. University of Guelph-Humber Media students will be ideally suited to spot current trends in contemporary media sources that construct images and stereotypes of terrorism and terrorists. The research work will directly relate to students’ academic studies by developing their media literacy and competence in academic methodologies such as research, close reading practices, and scholarly writing. The project will also develop student research assistants’ familiarity with a range of different types of media and scholarly sources, focusing on the important political, aesthetic, and cultural implications of how these sources present their content. Further, the research will help support my ongoing scholarly publishing in the area of post-9/11 media, cinema, and aesthetics. Students will have the opportunity to become involved in this research by contributing to the online “working papers” archive that will be set up in connection with the project. Successful papers will pass an academic review and go through an editorial process that will directly benefit student authors trying to hone their scholarly writing skills.

DIRECT RELATION TO TEACHING:

The research directly relates to media and cinema studies courses I’ve taught for the last eight years at the University of Guelph-Humber. These courses include Film Study, Documentary Film, Power Perception and the Media, and Subcultures and Mainstream Media. The creation of a “working papers” archive will add to the scholarly materials available to me, other researchers, and students collecting secondary research materials for class projects or scholarly research. Further, the research the students engage in will add to the archive of materials used for course development, thus benefiting the wider University of Guelph-Humber and University of Guelph academic communities by ensuring that classes are based on the most current research available. Those engaged in teaching assistantships will also gain valuable professional academic research experience, not to mention the benefits of cash-money paid for work directly related to their studies.

Perhaps the most important and urgent benefit of the research will be to better inform students and the general public about the political, cultural, religious, and social problems now connected with media representations of contemporary terrorism and terrorists. In our current post-9/11 era, it is crucial that projects like this one reach out not only to the academic community, but also to the general public to help promote better strategies for reading and decoding media messages about terrorism and terrorists. As a programming advisor to the 2015 Guelph Film Festival¹, I can help facilitate community outreach by advocating for the public

¹ http://www.guelphfilmfestival.ca/
screening of particularly relevant films on this topic. The Terrorizing Media Research Group may also organize public events, screenings, and invited talks in order to better inform the public about these issues and thus empower citizens to act on them in a more informed and democratic way.

**PLAN OF SCHOLARLY ACTIVITY:**

The project will start in September 2015 and continue through to December 30, 2015. My first task will be to set up an online archival database which will house collected research materials, as well as the “working papers” produced as part of the project. My second task is to begin data collection. In the later stages of the project, I will draw upon the collected archival materials to produce a scholarly research paper, deliverable by the end of the period of the grant. To this end, the research project will directly relate to my current scholarly writing project, a paper on post-9/11 Arab cinema. The working title of this paper is “Arab-Israeli Politics in Post-9/11 War Cinema: The Multivalent Messages of Paradise Now and Private.”

The following chart lays out the different timelines associated with the project grant:

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<tr>
<th>Stage 1 (Start in September, then ongoing)</th>
<th>Stage 2 (by December 1st)</th>
<th>Stage 3 (start November 1, then ongoing as data collected)</th>
<th>Stage 4 (initial materials produced during Study and Development Fellowship grant period by December 30, then ongoing)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data collection (archival media research; secondary scholarly materials research)</td>
<td>Complete setting up the online Research Project Database/Working Papers website</td>
<td>Close reading/critical analysis of primary and secondary media sources/scholarly materials. Writing stage.</td>
<td>Produce “working papers”* and scholarly articles to be added to the online archive. Complete my article to be published in a peer-reviewed external journal (Dec 30).</td>
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* The delineation between “publishable” and “working paper” articles will be useful for including student-level research papers in the database, even if never intended for publication in an external journal, or if students are moving on in their studies and don’t have the time to go through a lengthy publication process.

**EXTERNAL RESEARCH AFFILIATIONS:**

I will conduct this research in cooperation with the Canadian Network for Research on Terrorism, Security, and Society (TSAS). I am a Senior Research Affiliate with this organization, which operates in association with the federal government of Canada, Simon Fraser University, University of British Columbia, the University of Waterloo, The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), amongst a number of other Canadian Universities, governmental agencies, and funding organizations. TSAS brings together academics, intelligence professionals, governmental advisers, policing professionals, and cultural representatives in an effort to combat terrorism. Papers and research produced in connection with my study may also be submitted for inclusion in the TSAS Working Papers archive to help Canada’s anti-terrorism
efforts. In turn, my project will benefit from research and funding opportunities, conference events, professional contacts, and the archive of research materials already produced by TSAS. Indeed, TSAS—the major Canadian think-tank on the subject of anti-terrorism—could be an important source of subsequent funding opportunities, partnerships, and opportunities to publish research after the initial period of the research grant.

A second research affiliation will be with the **University of Guelph-Humber Research Fellowship Fund.** I am applying for a grant from this fund in order to recruit teaching assistants from the University of Guelph Humber Media Studies program. The grant is maximum $10,000 which will be used primarily for funding student salaries, but also for some minor incidental costs involved in setting up and maintaining the website. I will apply for this bursary in fall 2015.