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Glen Donnar: Troubling Masculinities: Terror, Gender, and Monstrous Others in American Film Post-9/11

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According to Glen Donnar in *Troubling Masculinities*, after the original 9/11 attacks, which eviscerated America's paternalistic and potent self-image, America fell back on reassuring Hollywood narratives and violent terror as a plot device became more prevalent. And like the 1950s science fiction B-movies, which reflected anxieties about the nuclear age and communism, once again unknown and unknowable 'terror-Others' and giant monsters started disassembling American life. However, unlike previous eras when masculinity and the American way of life were under threat and the competent military could neutralise the alien Other (*The Thing* [1951]); or in the 1980s, when the pushback against feminism was led by the muscular heroes of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone, finding redemption through violence (*The Predator* [1987]); recent re-assertions of American masculinity have been confused and conflicted.

The bulk of *Troubling Masculinities* is taken up by a thorough, detailed and fascinating textual analysis of four films released between 2005 and 2010 at the height of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, which according to Donnar, „directly depict encounters with 'terror threats' against articulations of America“ (p.24).

9/11 was a colossal failure of professional competence in military, intelli-

gence, and law enforcement institutions which threatened male-identity. *World Trade Center* (2006) represents the experience of living inside a terror event and „formally and narratively works to restore normative masculinity through the restitution of male agency [...] through the re-masculinization and militarization of uniformed masculinity“ (p.26). Donnar examines the tensions between private and professional aspects of male identity via the father/police officer figure and the symbolism of uniforms. However, *World Trade Center* doesn't depict the 'terrorist-Other' as it only deals with the aftermath at ground-zero, which undermines the reassertion of normative uniformed masculinity as „masculinities are performed and defined in relation to and interaction with others, including Other and alternative masculinities“ (p.63). The threat of the Other cannot be removed by simply absenting it.

Donnar then moves from disaster movie to science fiction/horror in the giant monster film *Cloverfield* (2008), which shows „how the violent eruption of terror overwhelms *less-than-ordinary* [author's emphasis] non-professional everymen“ (p.26). To a lesser extent, he looks at the home-invasion film *The Strangers* (2008), which explores the shame and emasculation of the over civilised male. *Cloverfield's* amateur, found-footage aesthetic, filmed by one

of the male characters, Rob, locks him into the masochistic victim-perspective proposed by Carol J. Clover, which „undermines notions of the supposed coherence and stability associated with the controlling male look“ (p.99; cf. *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992). Donnar believes that fears of national-masculine inadequacy are displaced onto the protagonist. Rob „most transgresses against American myths of masculinity“ (p.100) and must be punished for his inadequacy.

In many respects the Will Smith star vehicle *I am Legend* (2007) is the most complex film that Donnar discusses as notions of race and star-persona as well as masculinity have to be taken into account. As the last survivor of a virus induced zombie apocalypse, Smith as Robert Neville, a father/soldier/scientist is striving to find a cure. However, its closure „rather than reassuring, leaves the twinned restorations of professional-paternal masculinity and nation unsettlingly incoherent“

(p.141) and posits Neville as both saviour and monster.

The final chapter focuses on *The Kingdom* (2007), which follows the investigation by an FBI team sent to Saudi Arabia to identify the perpetrators of a terrorist attack on an American oil company's housing compound. The film morphs jarringly from a police procedural, in which the team is emasculated by restrictions imposed by the Saudis, to an action-war revenge fantasy revising the shame of 9/11. Unfortunately, the cathartic violent retribution „fails to reinvigorate protective-professional-paternal masculinity [...] being the same as, America's dark mirror, the monstrous terrorist“ (p.28) and may even make matters worse.

Donnar makes a convincing argument about these films that their reassertions of masculinity and national identity remain incoherent, and anxieties about the 'terror-Other' remain unrelieved, across genres in Hollywood cinema post 9/11.

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