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## REPRESENTATION OF TERRORISM AFTER 9/11 IN KATHRYN BIGELOW AND MARK BOAL'S *ZERO DARK THIRTY* MOVIE

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## REPRESENTATION OF TERRORISM AFTER 9/11 IN KATHRYN BIGELOW AND MARK BOAL'S *ZERO DARK THIRTY* MOVIE

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### ABSTRACT

Terrorism, as a global phenomenon, has been widely represented in various media, particularly in films. One of the films that represent terrorism is *Zero Dark Thirty* by Kathryn Bigelow and Mark Boal. This research aims to discuss the representation of terrorism in Kathryn Bigelow and Mark Boal's *Zero Dark Thirty* by using the qualitative approach and analytical descriptive method. To achieve the research objectives, we used John Fiske's semiotics theory which is divided into three levels: reality, representation, and ideological. Results and discussion involve the visual and narrative aspects which include appearance, costume, environment, behavior, voice, camera technique, music, and casting. *Zero Dark Thirty* represents terrorism that is in line with the real conditions in the world, portraying acts such as shootings and bombings—including suicide attacks—which result in fatalities, material losses, and widespread trauma. These elements contribute to reinforcing stereotypes of terrorism associated with Middle Eastern countries and the conflicts surrounding them. Critical awareness is needed in watching these scenes, because as media products, television series or films serve as a way to convey information, ideology, ideas, or propaganda that serves the dominant interest in society. *Zero Dark Thirty* in particular offers only a single perspective on terrorism which serves American interests. This study highlights the need for critical awareness in consuming media, as films play a significant role in shaping public perceptions of terrorism and global conflicts.

### KEYWORDS

9/11, film, semiotic, terrorism.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Film is a combination of various elements such as images, audio, music, and visual effects, whose end result can create an audio-visual product that feast the eyes. A film can function as an effective medium for spreading ideas, campaigns, missions, or criticisms, as well as a way for conveying messages through images, dialogues, and characters (Asri 2020). As such, the representation of terrorism in films may influence public perception and government policy and thus have often shaped global understandings of certain groups of people.

The term “terrorism” originated from the French word *le terreur*, i.e. a state violence during the French Revolution against anti-government individuals. Furthermore, terrorism has become one of the most important social issues because it involves not only political or sociological landscapes but also religion (Pratiwi 2020). Terrorism can occur due to the ideologies held by the perpetrators which are closely related to the issue of fundamentalism, radicalism, and religious fanaticism (Salenda 2017). In this regard, religion has been used by certain extremist groups as a justification for their actions. One of the key terms often cited is *jihad*, which the terrorists interpret as a means of self-defense against the perceived “enemies of Allah” by justifying various acts of violence, including murder (Grimland, Apter, Kerkhof 2006). Multiple meanings have been assigned to *jihad* over many centuries. During the Meccan period, *jihad* was interpreted as an invitation to humans to convert to Islam, to explain and understand Islam correctly, and then to practice and love it with sincerity. It was only in the Medina period, when the Muslims had become a strong community in many aspects—including from the military and political standpoints—*jihad* gained another meaning in response to the conditions at that time, i.e. a call to all believers to fight the enemies and disbelievers (Asmara 2019). However, this concept has been selectively reinterpreted by extremist groups to align with their political ideas. Similarly, the term *syahid* or martyrdom, which was used to describe an individual who die in a battle while defending his faith. Over time, it becomes the source of legitimacy for certain groups to engage in suicide bombings which are intended to kill the chosen targets in the process (Grimland, Apter, Kerkhof 2006).

According to Noor Azharul Fuad (2016) in his paper: *The Decline of Terrorist Group: Penyebab Menurunnya Aksi Teror Kelompok Al-Qaeda Tahun 2009 – 2013*:

Menurut *National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism* (START), ada lebih dari 600 kelompok yang terlibat aksi terorisme di seluruh dunia sejak tahun 1998. Dari tahun 1998 hingga 2008, Al Qaeda hanya bertanggungjawab atas 0,3 persen dari jumlah seluruh serangan di seluruh dunia yang lebih dari 21.000 serangan. Tetapi, Al Qaeda bertanggungjawab atas kematian 5,4 persen jumlah korban yang ditimbulkan pada periode yang sama (Fuad 2016).

The statistics documents the attacks launched by terrorist groups, including Al-Qaeda, from 1998 to 2008. Meanwhile according to the Statista Research Development, from 2000 to 2013, there were 1,089 attacks by Al-Qaeda, 520 of which targeted the government, police, and military. From 1993 to 2010, out of a total of 18 countries attacked by Al-Qaeda, most deaths occurred in New York, Washington D.C., with a total of 3,000 deaths. The incident is commonly known as 9/11 or the World Trade Center Tragedy (Statista Research Development, 2011).

Based on the data above, the concept of terrorism is a real condition in societies around the world and as such has become a material that can be represented, especially through films. Representation of terrorism is a form of reconstruction of the concept of terrorism or an violent act of terror with the aim of instilling fear to achieve something, especially political missions (Meisesar 2015). Since the 9/11, narratives about terrorist in film, news, and other media have often shaped the global understanding of certain groups. The media not only serves as a documentation of events, but also shapes public opinion on who is considered a threat and

how they are represented. Therefore, it is important to analyze how the media—particularly films—portray terrorists and its impact on public perception.

One film that represent terrorism is Kathryn Bigelow and Mark Boal's *Zero Dark Thirty*, which dramatizes the search of leader of Al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, after the 9/11 tragedy. During this search, several shootings and bombings occur in areas such as the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the United States until 2011 when Laden was captured by CIA. This series of events in *Zero Dark Thirty* can be a new research topic, which can contribute to field of history in that scholars can explore the impact of the World Trade Center tragedy on the world from the film's perspective. Besides that, this research is also expected to help people interpret a visual media as a means to convey information, ideas, or ideologies on certain issues, and to trigger discussions in the film and media industry on the importance of accurate and fair representation of global social and political issues. Thus, it can also encourage film creators to be more critical in presenting stories about global and political conflicts.

Based on that background, this research tries to analyze the sociological phenomenon of terrorism represented in Kathryn Bigelow and Mark Boal's film *Zero Dark Thirty* using the qualitative method and John Fiske's semiotic theory as the main research tools which include the analysis of audiovisual elements in the form of costumes, body gestures, camera engineering environment, dialogue, and sound. The research question are (1) How is terrorism represented in *Zero Dark Thirty*? and (2) How are terrorism stereotypes created in *Zero Dark Thirty*?

There has been some previous research on *Zero Dark Thirty*, but none relates the film to the attacks occurring in various countries. For example, a study by Joyce and Simm "Zero Dark Thirty: International Law, Torture and Representation" analyzes the relationship between international law and films and history and background theory, as well as predicting the development of international legal theories on images and relevant film criticism. The results show that *Zero Dark Thirty* shows scenes of murder and torture as entertainment without providing a moral message or rules pertaining to the legality of the act (Joyce & Simm 2015). Then research by Pautz entitled "Argo and Zero Dark Thirty: Film, Government, and Audiences", examines how a film has an actual effect on the audience, affecting their perception of the government. The results reveal that *Zero Dark Thirty* enforces a negative image of the government, e.g. through Maya, a character who opposes the system because the government is so optimistic about finding Osama bin Laden, even though most CIA members do not prioritize it. Negative depiction of the government is strengthened when Maya successfully hunts down Laden (Pautz 2015). There are similarities and differences between the findings of the previous studies and those of the current ones. This paper examines a different aspect of the same object, i.e. *Zero Dark Thirty*. Based on previous studies, new exploration of *Zero Dark Thirty* is required as part of semiotics, literature, and media studies which seeks to uncover how media represents a phenomenon in society. The novelty lies in the fact that this research focuses on a deeper examination of the post-9/11 terrorist attacks depicted in *Zero Dark Thirty* using John Fiske's semiotic analysis. It is intended to produce new insights through semiotic analysis in that it does not only explain an event but also explores its meaning symbolically in greater depth. This research explores an aspect that has not yet been discussed, i.e. the representation of terrorist attacks in the countries in *Zero Dark Thirty*. This paper complements the previous studies which focus on law, morality, and attitude towards the government.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As a form of mass media, films have an important role in shaping and disseminating social representations. It functions not only as a form of entertainment but also as an ideological instrument that can reinforce public

perceptions of a certain group. Through its narrative structure, cinematic technique, and characterization, a film can shape collective understanding of social issues, including terrorism. To understand how films construct social representations, a semiotic approach becomes a very relevant tool since it allows for an in-depth analysis of the signs, symbols, and codes used in film to convey meaning. By using this approach, it is possible to identify how visual elements, dialogs, and storyline work together to construct a certain meaning for the audience. Hence, this research applied John Fiske's semiotic theory to explore representation of terrorism in *Zero Dark Thirty*. According to Fiske (2011), meaning in media is constructed through three levels of analysis: (1) reality, which focuses on social codes such as appearance, gestures, and behavior; (2) representation, which involves technical elements such as camera work, editing, and sound; and (3) ideology, which shapes broader social meanings related to power, race, class, feminism, capitalism, and terrorism. Fiske's semiotic model is particularly relevant for this study because it provides a structured approach to deconstructing the film's visual and narrative elements, revealing how media representations contribute to creating social stereotypes, particularly that of terrorism.

Firstly, the reality level is about the fact that, according to Fiske, the reality shown on television has been encoded by social codes such as appearance, clothing, make-up, environment, behavior, way of speaking, body gestures, expressions, actors' voices, and others (Rivkin & Ryan 2004). This level is also interpreted as a social code that can be felt by human senses; in other words, the audience can directly feel what is shown in the media (Haquu & Pramonojati 2022). Secondly, the representation level is about how the existing reality is described through various tools such as camera, lighting, casting, music, and sound that transmit conventional representational codes that form representations of narrative elements, conflicts, characters, dialogs, settings, and others (Fiske 2011). Thirdly, the ideological level is about how the code of reality and the code of representation come together to create a logical and coherent meaning, i.e. to give rise to an ideology that fits the film. This analysis is intended to reveal the complexity of meaning and also suggests that it has an effect on the audience (Fiske 2011). This level is also interpreted as social codes that are linked with each other in society such as social class, beliefs, individualism, feminism, race, materialism, and even terrorism (Pinontoan 2020). While previous studies on *Zero Dark Thirty* have applied legal and political perspectives (Joyce & Simm 2015; Pautz 2015), this study focuses on how visual and narrative elements shape ideological meanings using Fiske's semiotic framework. This approach allows for a deeper exploration of how the film constructs representations of terrorism and the Middle East. Thus, Fiske's theory is used not only to analyze the messages conveyed by the film but also to dissect the cinematic structure and mechanism that make these messages work. It is also useful for seeing how the film's technical elements contribute to the construction of ideological meanings, not just how the film is influenced by external socio-political factors.

This study used the qualitative approach with the analytical descriptive method. The main data collection technique is library research. This study examines *Zero Dark Thirty*, a drama, mystery, thriller, and war film written by Mark Boal and directed by Mark Boal and Kathryn Bigelow as the primary data source. Meanwhile, secondary sources were taken from articles and books with similar topics. Literature study was used as data collection technique. While the scalpel used to analyze the data is John Fiske's semiotic theory, which focuses on television codes in three levels: reality, representation, and ideological. In this study, Fiske's levels of analysis were applied to specific scenes depicting terrorist attacks. The reality level was used to analyze characters' appearances, costumes, behaviors, and places; the representation level was used to examine voice, camera techniques, music, and casting; and the ideological level was used to assess the film's underlying messages about terrorism and Middle Eastern identity.

## 1. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Representation of Terrorism

Representation of terrorism is defined here as a form of reconstruction of the concept of terrorism, and it can be done through media, especially movie as a tool to convey an idea, concept, or even propaganda (Meisesar 2015). In this research, this representation is proven by analyzing five attack scenes in various areas around the world, including Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the United States. John Fiske's semiotic theory is the right tool to analyze this because he believes that television, including movies, is a media capable of broadcasting programs that are loaded with meanings, and television tends to focus on conveying meanings that lean towards serving the dominant ideology (Fiske 2011).

#### 3.1.1 Scene 1: Shooting in Khobar, Saudi Arabia

##### a. Reality Level



Data 1 (00:23:06 – 00:23:38)

Movie script:

“EXT. KHOBAR TOWERS SAUDI ARABIA - DAY

ECU : a magazine CLICKS into the receiver of a black assault rifle.

The weapon, carried by a BEARDED ARAB MAN dressed in street clothes, rises to shoulder height.

INT. KHOBAR TOWERS DAY

The man enters the hallway of the KHOBAR RESIDENTIAL TOWERS

- And immediately opens fire on TWO WESTERN MEN he happens to find inside, killing them both.

TITLE OVER: MAY 29, 2004

The CRACK of the shots sends the rest of the residents into a panicky, screaming dash for cover

- As he strides quickly down the hall, he finds three other RESIDENTS scrambling for safety, and shoots and kills them all.” (Boal 2011)

At the level of reality, particularly appearance, the shooter is described as a bearded Arab man who has entered a building while carrying a black assault rifle (Boal 2011). In the hallway of the Khobar Residential Towers, they shoot two Western men, and the shots caused panic among the building's occupants. In another room, the men shoot dead three other residents. They are wearing simple, daily clothing such as regular shirts, polo shirts, and cloth pants. One of them is wearing a *taqiyya*, i.e. a hat or head covering used by Muslim men. In contrast with the costumes of the other people in the building, some of them are wearing suits, *thawbs*, and Arabic turbans. These costumes highlight the character difference between the “heroes” and the “villains”. The shooters then begin firing their guns with brutal gestures at everyone in the room except for a hijab-wearing women. Their behavior shows that their conviction is so strong that they have absolutely no hesitation to point a weapon and fire it at people in the room. Their voices are so high when shouting at the people, inspiring even greater fear.





Data 2 (00:23:06–00:23:38)

In the next data, the shooters targeted foreigners in Khobar Towers in Khobar, Saudi Arabia (Faraj 2004), which is an ideal target because many foreigners are working there. This belongs to the environmental aspect. The target consists of Westerners and foreigners who are non-Muslims. On a website affiliated with Al-Qaeda, it is said that the shooters are brave men from the Jerusalem Squadron, who came to attack Zionists and Christians living in Khobar to steal oil and other natural resources that belong to them (Gurski 2021). This has to do with their belief that non-Muslims are infidels and have become their archenemies. *Jihad* is said to be carried out to ignite the spirit of Muslims in all parts of the world in order to fight against the domination of America and the Jewish nation (Nursalim 2017). According to Dbpedia (2004) the attack killed at least 22 people and injured 25 others.

#### b. Representation Level



Data 3 (00:23:06–00:23:38)

The representation level includes the technical aspects of the camera. The film employs a shooting technique in which the camera is handheld, which produces a more realistic impression because the graphic becomes unstable and chaotic, similar to how people generally observe things in the real world, as if the audience is watching the news themselves (Phillips 2024). In this technique, the camera highlights the television showing the news of the shooting: the camera is positioned at eye level, while the frame size is amped up to the extreme close-up to provide clearer details (Bayangkara & Oktora 2022). The eye-level camera angle is widely used by cameramen and does not really produce a particular impression because it does not highlight anything other than focusing on the scene showing news in *Zero Dark Thirty* (Bonafix 2011). The camera ratio is 16:9 or widescreen, which is widely used in the television and cinema industry (Koesmarini 2022). In terms of music, there is no back song that amplifies the action, but there is a narrator's voice that explains the impact of the shooting in a low volume. This low volume is appropriate because, in the

scene, the characters were watching the news on a television, thus reaffirming the realism of the scene. The resulting voice is also distinct from that of the television reporter who uses a stable tone and formal language. The actors and actresses for “hero” and “villain” characters were cast based on their physical attributes—White people as antagonists, and Arabs as protagonists. This supports the role of actors and actresses because their appearance has been coded by the social code of society. From here, a character serves not only as an individual representation but also as an ideological code (Fiske 2011).

### c. Ideological Level

The act of terrorism shown in this scene is the bombing of the Khobar Towers in Khobar, Saudi Arabia, which causes extraordinary fear among the residents of the building, especially as they brutally fire weapons, pointing them at foreigners. They shoot people in the building seemingly without hesitation because they believe that what they do is the right and legitimate thing, even if that kills other people. Their calmness and confidence when carrying out their mission are influenced by several factors, one of which is the extreme ideological factor, i.e. the belief that what they are doing is an act of *jihad* in defense of their religion. This is in accordance with the definition of terrorism issued by the US State Department, i.e. a premeditated act of violence which contains political elements and is carried out by splinter groups aimed at unarmed targets (Nursalim 2017).

## 3.1.2 Scene 2: Suicide Bombing in London, England

### a. Reality Level



Data 4 (00:34:17–00:35:33)

Movie script :

“EXT. TAVISTOCK SQUARE - LONDON - EARLY MORNING

The city is in full swing on this bright mid-summer morning.

CARS and BUSES roll through the crowded streets.

INT./EXT. DOUBLE DECKER BUS

TITLE OVER: LONDON - JULY 7, 2005

Passengers inside the bus read newspapers, listen to music... another ordinary day.

Then, the bus explodes!

CUT TO:

CU: TV SCREEN

File footage of the aftermath:

REPORTER (O.S.)

This is what remains of the #10 bus, which was traveling through Tavistock Square...” (Boal 2011)



In terms of appearance, the city is described as being sunny—an ideal morning in the middle of summer. Pedestrians, cars, and buses pass by, while inside a bus, passengers are sitting quietly while reading newspapers or listening to music (Boal 2011). This appearance implies that the environment and society are running normally like in ordinary days. The costumes are those usually worn by people who are going to work or school, or to do other activities. This shows that this is indeed the real condition of the community. However, the bomb suddenly explodes, and the scene changes to the extreme, showing the condition of Bus 10 which has been destroyed, an ambulance that is coming in a hurry, the police at the scene, and the curious public. The contrast between the two circumstances is emphasized to show how an originally calm and serene condition can become instantly chaotic and frightening as a result of a suicide bomb that explodes on the bus. The extras display natural, ordinary behaviors of common people such as walking, reading newspapers, listening to music, riding bicycles, crossing a street, and carrying pets. When the bomb explodes, the police seem to be busy with the fallout of the event, the fire department is checking the bus, and the public become curious about what has happened. These actions are normal, reflecting how the government should handle a terrorist event. In terms of environment, the bombing occurs on the deck of Bus 10 which is passing through Tavistock Square, near Euston Station, London. As public transportation, buses are widely used by civilians to travel, making them a strategic place for terrorists to carry out their mission. This is included in the elements of terrorist acts because they target civil society (Asmara 2019). In the real world, it is known that on the same day, bombings also occurred in several other places, namely near Liverpool Street and Edgware Road Station. The London bombing was a suicide bombing carried out by four people. According to L. Rodgers, S. Qurashi, and S. Connor from BBC News, the four perpetrators were Mohammad Sidique Khan, Shehzad Tanweer, Hasib Hussain, and Germain Lindsay (Rodgers, Qurashi, & Connor 2015). The perpetrator intended this bombing as a form of revenge for the atrocities experienced by their “brothers” (Muslims) around the world. They opposed the London Government’s support for the United States and Israel in exterminating Muslims in Palestine, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Their claims were based on the belief that what they did was part of religious commandements, i.e. to protect their Muslim brothers (Moghadam 2008). It is known that the perpetrators used cheap materials to assemble bombs so that they could not be detected by the authorities who specialized in previous foreign attacks.

#### b. Representation Level



Data 5 (00:34:17–00:35:33)

Another level of representation can be seen from data 5, showing the part of the news about the bombing in London, which is almost identical to the Khobar shooting news. However, in this scene, the news is broadcast live, not through video recordings when the television shows the news. This camera technique makes the scene more realistic, as if it were a live documentary using a journalist’s camera so that the environment feels very close and real, making the audience feel as if they were actually there. Techniques

like this improves the visual quality of the film and gives harmony to the narrative conveyed. In addition, the technique of direct news delivery can speed up the story flow because there is no need to explain something with many scenes or to clarify the context relevant to the information (Bordwell, Thompson, & Smith 2019). Unlike the previous one, this data uses 4:3 aspect ratio, which is widely used by tube television (Koesmarini 2022). This difference in ratio is to distinguish between the fictional, "actor" scenes and scenes containing direct news delivery that explain the context of events. In terms of sound, this scene focuses on the bombing incident, so there is no back song at all, except the sound of ambulances and police sirens, as well as the voice of the narrator explaining the impact of the suicide bombing. The volume is slightly higher than that in the previous scene because in this scene, the news is shown live, as if the audience were personally witnessing the events. At the end of the narrator's report, there is a fade-out before the next narration comes in.

#### c. Ideological Level

Based on the scenes above, the bombing in London is carried out in the middle of a public place that is widely accessed by civilians; it fits the definition of terrorism because unarmed people become victims. Palmer Situmorang classifies terrorism into at least six types: (a) bombing, (b) kidnapping and hostage-taking, (c) armed attack and killing, (d) burning and grounding, (e) piracy and robbery, and (f) other types of violence (Nursalim 2017). Bombing is a common method used by terror perpetrators, ignited by the spirit of fanaticism and modern life tools that support their mission. These factors make assembling conventional explosives easy to do, starting from gathering materials to making and using them (Mayo & Kluger 2006). Due to the fact that the suicide bombers used cheap materials in assembling the bomb, it was difficult for the authorities to detect their plan. Meanwhile, the impacts are injuries and deaths, as well as damage to public facilities. Thus, the event is in line with the definition of terrorist acts proposed by Sukawarsini Djelantik, a social science researcher, i.e. a form of violence that is calculated and directed against civil society and occurs in peaceful conditions and other targets by certain agents, with the aim of announcing political, religious, and/or intimidating issues against a government or civil society in order to force them to fulfill their wishes (Nursalim 2017).

### 3.1.3 Scene 3: Bombing at the Marriott Hotel, Islamabad, Pakistan

#### a. Reality Level



Data 6 (00:49:07–00:50:27)

Movie scripts:

SUDDENLY, AN EXPLOSION RIPS THROUGH THE RESTAURANT.

-- SHATTERS THE WINDOWS

-- DESTROYS TABLES AND LIGHTS

-- MAYA, JESSICA, AND OTHERS TOSSED TO THE GROUND, SOME FATALLY.

--SMOKE FILLS THE ROOM

As alarms wail, Maya struggles to her feet, grabs Jessica by the arm, and they stumble to safety.

INT. MARRIOTT - DINING ROOM

Toward the destroyed kitchen, helping each other over obstacles, twisted metal, gaps in the concrete, etc, past injured workers and burning flames.

INT. MARRIOTT HOTEL - KITCHEN - LATER

They continue moving through the debris as the smoke intensifies.

They find each other's hands and grab tightly.

CUT TO:

C.U.: TV SCREEN

The destroyed Marriott.

REPORTER (O.S.)

The blast left a crater 10 meters wide in front of the hotel. The Marriott, one of the most popular destinations for locals and Westerners... (Boal, 2011)

In terms of appearance, this scene shows the condition of the hotel after the explosion which has destroyed windows, tables, and lights. Smoke fills the room. The hotel is burned to the ground. The smoldering flames devour the building, as well as causing severe damage. Maya and Jessica, who are inside the hotel at the time, help each other to get out of the room. Passing through broken metal, cracked concrete, injured workers, and live flames (Boal, 2011). Ambulances are arriving, as well as the journalists who are also present to cover the incident. In addition to the police, the community around the hotel also help to evacuate victims who have been hit by the rubble of the building. This can be seen from the clothing they use, i.e. *salwar kameez*, *kurta*, and *taqiyya*. Meanwhile, there are also people wearing suits and shirts, indicating that they are hotel workers. In terms of gesture, they are quick to help each other in the midst of the chaos. The behavior of two characters working hand in hand to help the evacuation stands out as a form of response to the terrorist attack. In terms of environment aspect, the perpetrators launch their attack at the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad, Pakistan, targeting Westerners and foreigners from other countries. The hotel is a good target because it is popular place among locals and Westerners, similar to the building in Khobar. Guests include Maya and Jessica, who come to the hotel to have a dinner. The explosion occurs at the hotel's entrance and leaves a 10-meter-wide and 3-foot-wide hole where a truck driver intentionally leaves the bomb by after attempting to enter the hotel's security gate. Meanwhile, there carrier was a Pakistani militant named Qari Yasin. The bomb blast kills 50 people, including 2 members of the American military, and injures more than 260 people (Gordon, 2017).

#### b. Representation Level



Data 7 (00:49:07–00:50:27)

In the Marriott Hotel bombing scene, the camera is directed towards the actual bombing site, presented as a news report—the same technique as the one used in the Khobar shooting. This technique makes this film very realistic, as if showing a documentary video using a journalist's camera to make the scene feel close and real. Techniques like this can improve the visual quality of the film, create harmony in the narrative, and enhance the relevance of the events to the film. Like the London suicide bombings, this scene uses 4:3 aspect ratio to emphasize the fact that what is being shown is live television news. The sound aspect is the same as that of the previous data, i.e. the voice of the narrator and an ambulance which implies that at that time, there are many victims who need to be taken to the hospital. Supporting music is not needed to add tension because the sounds of the crowd and ambulances have made the scene even more realistic because such sounds are often heard in the real world.

#### c. Ideological Level

Based on the analysis of the previous two aspects, the event can be considered as an act of terrorism because the bombing destroys the hotel and kills many people. This kind of bombing is carried out so that more victims are killed at the same time, accompanied by an intimidating sense of trauma (Crabtree 2006). Meanwhile, bombings and explosions aimed at innocent civilians are the main instruments of global terror, resulting in death, injury, fear, and chaos (Mayo & Kluger, 2006). Terrorism is a form of coercive intimidation (Primoratz 1990). The bomber deliberately leaves a truck loaded with 590 kilograms of bombs in front of the Marriott Hotel, which is said to be the most prestigious hotel in the capital and located near government buildings, embassies, and high commission buildings. This incident gave rise to a sense of intimidation, that even a high-class hotel such as the Marriott with its formidable protection system can still be destroyed.

### 3.1.4 Scene 4: Suicide Bombing at Chapman Base, Khost, Afghanistan

#### a. Reality Level



Data 9 (00:58:50–01:00:28)

Movie script:

“EXT. CAMP CHAPMAN - CIA COMPOUND

The sedan pulls to a stop. A BLACKWATER GUARD taps on the backseat window. Balawi exits on the passenger side. His free hand is in his pocket.

BLACKWATER GUARD

(to the other guard)

Is he supposed to limp like that?

SECURITY GUARD

Take your hand out of your pocket! Hey!

BALAWI

Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar

BLACKWATER GUARD

(raising his M4)

Get you hand out of your pocket!

BALAWI

Allahu Akbar.

Jessica's smile fades

And Balawi detonates a suicide vest hidden under this jacket and the resulting shrapnel storm pulps the crowd, massacring them all—" (Boal 2011)

In this scene, after making an agreement, Jessica and Humam Khalil al-Balawi agree to meet in a safe area: Chapman Base, Khost, Afghanistan. In terms of appearance, the scene shows the moments when Balawi gets out of the car, while the entire Blackwater Guard is on standby (Boal 2011). Balawi uses a cane to support his body because one of his legs was lame, and one of his hands was hiding behind a vest. Once Balawi says *Allahuakbar*, the Blackwater Guard get more alert and raise their weapons. Balawi's gestures look tense and suspicious, while one of his hands is hidden in a *shalwar kameez* bag. While the gestures of the Blackwater Guard show more alertness and vigilance—they raise their guns to prevent the undesirable—, they also look equally tense. The two parties show very contrasting behaviors, emphasizing their roles as the hero and the villain: the Blackwater Guard carry M4 weapons as a form of defense and self-protection, while Balawi gets off the sedan and says *Allahuakbar* many times as a form of self-confidence. In terms of costume, the "villain" is wearing a *shalwar kameez*, the typical Pakistani clothing worn by the terrorists, a thick cloth wrapped around the upper body, and a *pakol*, a traditional Pakistani hat, with a bushy beard which many people consider as a typical characteristic of terrorists. Meanwhile, the Blackwater Guard are wearing casual clothing but with vests and full combat equipment. This contrasting appearance highlights the roles of each party as the hero and the villain in the film. In the end, the suicide bomb explodes, killing seven CIA officers and one Jordanian officer (Riedel 2019).



Data 10 (00:58:50–01:00:28)

In terms of environment, this scene is set at the Chapman Base, which was chosen as the CIA's negotiation site with Humam Khalil al-Balawi, who at that time pretended to be a double agent from the United States and the GID (Jordan's General Intelligence Department) to help capture Ayman al Zawahiri, or even better yet, Osama bin Laden himself. In fact, Balawi was a triple agent because he also worked for Zawahiri, who ultimately betrayed America and the GID by committing a suicide bombing at Chapman (Riedel 2019).



b. Representation Level



Data 11 (00:58:50 – 01:00:28)

The dialogue aspect of Data 11 is shown when the suicide bomber blows himself up after saying “Allahuakbar!”. This sentence is *takbir*, an Islamic expression to glorify Allah, which a Muslim may also commonly say when facing a problem. It shows again that he really believes that he is doing the right thing—that despite his fear, he still blows himself up. The lives of people he considered enemies are worthless, so he continues his actions. This data uses 16:9 aspect ratio because the scene depicts a fight at the Chapman Base, Khost. In this scene, the camera quickly switches to the CIA member who has raised his weapon while shouting sternly, ordering the perpetrator to take his hand out of his pocket, as well as the suicide bomber’s equally tense expression while saying *takbir*. In addition to the increasing tension, the whip pan camera technique emphasizes dramatic elements and suddenly draws the audience’s attention to certain scenes, i.e. the exploding bomb (Phillips 2024). The camera angle is at eye level with a big close-up frame to draw the audience’s attention to the suicide bomber who wears a beard and typical regional clothes, to the *takbir*, and to his tense expression (Bonafix 2011). In terms of sound, this data is also not accompanied by any music, so it solely relies on the actors’ voices to build the tension.

c. Ideological Level

As mentioned earlier, bombing is a form of terrorism (Nursalim 2017). This type of violence brings down many victims while simultaneously creating a sense of trauma. Merari in Grimland et al. (2006) revealed that, besides terrorism itself as an old phenomenon, there is another emerging phenomenon, i.e. an individual’s desire to kill themselves along with others. Suicide bombing is a violent attack that contains political motives and is carried out by individuals who are totally self-aware and deliberately blow themselves up along with their targets. This death then became an indicator of the mission’s success (Schweitzer 2000). Pape in his article entitled *The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* states that to achieve their main political goals, terrorist organizations currently rely on suicide bombings that are increasing in terms of frequency and location (Pape 2013). Personally, Durkheim says that suicide bombings can happen when a person’s ego gets mixed with external factors; he can no longer control his own behavior when he joins a group which requires him to abandon his personal existence and to integrate it with something that he considers his true essence (Grimland, Apter, & Kerkhof 2006). Thus, when an individual commits a suicide bombing, he believes that he sacrifices something he loves more than himself, even if he has to kill others in the process—which is also part of his mission. Meanwhile, according to Safii Ma’arif, suicide bombings are irrational and there is no reasonable justification for them because such acts are clearly based on chaotic theological concepts (Nursalim 2017). The same is also true for the use of the term *jihad* which is used to legitimize suicide bombings and encourage the recruitment of new members of an organization (Grimland, Apter, & Kerkhof 2006). The terrorists’ interpretation of *jihad* is not in accordance with how it should be interpreted in Islam. *Jihad* should be understood as self-defense and maintenance of self-esteem for Muslims, not as something used to induce terror and violence (Nursalim 2017).

### 3.1.5 Scene 5: Bombing in Times Square, New York City, the United States

#### a. Reality Level



Data 12 (01:18:12 – 01:18:22)

Movie script:

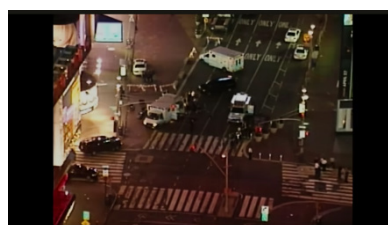
“CU TV SCREEN: News reports of the attempted NYC bombing.

REPORTER (O.S.)

It is in surveillance video and pictures like this of the explosive- laden vehicle just moments before it was parked, that police hope to find the man who wanted so badly last night to leave a body count in Times Square.” (Boal 2011)

Another environmental aspect that reveals the film’s representation of terrorism is the bombing of New York’s Time Square. Although it fails to explode, the incident is quite shocking for the people around that area. The bombers do not target any building but the center of Times Square because they want the impact to be felt by all Americans as a nation. In this case, the perpetrator himself says that his act of assembling a bomb and planning to detonate it in Time Square is not a crime, and that he does not care about the American law. It is the same with American soldiers who attack children in Afghanistan with drones without caring about their lives (Robina 2010). In terms of appearance, the representation of terrorism is evidenced by the whole process of bomb disposal operation. Although the bomb fails to not cause any casualties, it is a real threat. The officers who go to the field at that time have to wear special uniforms to defuse the bomb. They show very careful and calm gestures, and the whole action reflects a real danger in sight.

#### b. Representation Level



Data 13 (01:18:12–01:18:22)

This scene shows that the bombing attack fails because the bomb does not explode. However, the incident still causes a widespread panic. The camera is directed at the Times Square that night, along with the panicked crowd. Like some of the previous data, this technique produces a realistic impression and engage the audience with visual storytelling by displaying news directly in the film. Initially, the scene is shown on a

surveillance camera video from one of the buildings. The directors employed the bird view angle where the camera's position is higher than the recorded object (Bonafix 2011). Meanwhile, the long shot frame size is used to emphasize the object in the background, i.e. a row of cars with several people passing (Bayangkara & Oktora 2022). In this data, the film uses the 4:3 aspect ratio, which represents a live news report for explaining the context of the event without taking a long time. In terms of sound, this scene still depends on the narrator's voice explaining the incident as well as the sound of police car's siren, reflecting the brewing panic and tension in that place.

### c. Ideological Level

Both the reality and representation levels have indicated various elements of terrorism in terms of appearance, environment, or cameras that record events. Although the bomb fails to explode, the impact is still felt: a real security threat, especially after the World Trade Center attack which took place just a few miles away. In particular, the New York City bomber says that he wants to take revenge on the Americans for the atrocities they committed in Afghanistan and Iraq. The perpetrator is aware that what he is doing is wrong, but he chooses not to care. According to him, he does not do any crime (Robina 2010). For him, although his actions may kill others, it is considered as a fair punishment for what the American government is doing. This form of personal terrorism, i.e. terrorist acts committed by individuals, can in fact become a dangerous threat.

## 3.2 Stereotype of Terrorism

Stereotypes are beliefs about personal characters possessed by a particular group of individuals which usually includes the labeling of negative traits attributed to them. This film represents the emergence of stereotypes against terrorism and Islam which is built through messages conveyed by the mass media, including films (Rahimah, Hanief, & Alif 2017). Terrorism in *Zero Dark Thirty* is presented through narrative and visual elements with the aim of creating a certain picture of terrorism, Middle Eastern countries, and conflicts against terrorism.

### 3.2.1 Cinematography

In the representation level, the film directors employed camera techniques that focus on the object and the impact of a terrorism act, thus highlighting the inhumane nature of terrorism and its serious impact on society. The camera has an important role because it can affect the audience's understanding of the scenes being shown, including those strongly associated with terrorism (Bayangkara & Oktora 2022). The tense atmosphere is also shown through sound; although there is no background music, the scenes feature the sounds of ambulance and police sirens, as well as the narrator's voice, emphasizing its connection to the real world. This atmosphere gives rise to the image of terrorists as a real threat in every corner, especially in the Middle East region. On the other hand, scenes of torture carried out by CIA agents to extract information from suspected terrorists are portrayed as a "necessary violence" for dealing with the threat of terrorism. This scene forces a narrative that depicts terrorism as an act that can only be met with violence.

### 3.2.2 Setting

In the reality level, the film's environmental aspect is directly responsible for the formation of terrorism stereotypes. *Zero Dark Thirty* is heavily set in places in the Middle East, especially in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan,

and Afghanistan, especially their slums and hot, dusty, and narrow streets. Visually, it emphasizes the stereotype that the Middle East is rife with conflict zones or terrorist areas, thus creating an impression of insecurity and threat, and emphasizing that the Middle East is a region that is synonymous with terrorist hideouts. This is in accordance with the idea that film and society are related to and forming each other, which serves as a description of the conditions under which the film is made (Mulya et al. 2020). *Zero Dark Thirty* is a mass media product that shows dualism in its representation and depiction of the real conditions in society. As a medium of representation, a film can shape and represent reality or reality with codes, conventions, and ideologies pertaining to two cultures. Meanwhile, in terms of the real depiction of the condition of society, some films transfer the reality in society as it is without replacing this reality (Haquq & Pramonojati 2020).

### 3.2.3 Character

At the ideological level, there is an emphasis on the terrorists as characters that are synonymous with heretical ideology, particularly the use of terms such as *jihad* and martyrdom as a tool of legitimacy for their actions. In this regard, *Zero Dark Thirty* tends to portray terrorist characters without showing a deeper background, motivation, or reason why they commit these acts. They are only shown as cruel and inhumane characters who are capable of killing humans. This leads the audience to quickly view those terrorists as enemies without any additional context. Thus, the terrorists are depicted as homogeneous antagonist characters without anything which can help the audience to make a fairer judgment. Meanwhile, at the reality level, in some scenes, the terrorist characters appear with certain cultural and religious attributes, such as *shalwar kameez*, *pakol*, *taqiyya*, the *takbir*, and other Islamic symbols. The use of these symbols reinforces the stereotype that terrorism is identical with Islam and the Middle Eastern culture, which leads the audience to directly equate a particular religion or culture with extremism solely based on the visual association between religious identity and acts of terrorism. The opposite of the antagonists (i.e. the Americans) are portrayed as heroes who are fully dedicated to fighting terrorism. They are depicted as optimistic, critical, courageous, and civilized people who are ready to become the world's savior against global threats. These contrasting depictions put the "antagonists" at a disadvantage, i.e. reinforcing the stereotype that the West is always the hero and on the right side, while the East, especially a particular group of people, is always a threat and on the wrong side. This hero-villain narrative plays a big role in building a black-and-white perception of terrorism.

### 3.2.4 "The Other"

Otherness is the result of a discursive process in which the dominant group constructs the image of one or several groups outside their own group by stigmatizing existing differences, which serves as an identity eraser intended to cause discrimination. This concept contains a principle that allows for the creation of a hierarchical relationship of "them" vs. "us", giving rise to restrictive and derogatory stereotypes (Staszak 2020). Stuart Hall proposed a more specific definition of "The Other" as a group or an individual that is seen as different, foreign, abnormal, and unequal to a more dominant group or a group that is considered normal according to their own standards (Hall 1997). *Zero Dark Thirty* maintains the stereotype of the terrorist characters as "The Other" by labeling them as the enemy and creating the perception that terrorism is a foreign cultural value that is different from "ours" (i.e. the American values). Furthermore, this is also related to the concept of Orientalism which views the East as a mysterious, dangerous, and uncivilized territory, inferior to the West. This is also related to the characterization of CIA agents, who are depicted from the Western point of view almost throughout the film, while the terrorist characters' point of view is almost absent.

Thus, there is a clear bias that focuses only on one party. This single-perspective approach may lead the audience to quickly view the terrorists as completely negative entities and does not give them any opportunity to understand the issue from the terrorists' perspective.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study reveals how *Zero Dark Thirty* constructs the representation of terrorism using John Fiske's semiotic theory as analytical tool. By examining the film's visual and narrative elements, this research highlights how film techniques can reinforce stereotypes about terrorism and the Middle East. *Zero Dark Thirty* represents terrorism in a way that reflects real-world events and uses cinematic techniques to reinforce dominant narratives about global security which involve violent acts, such as shooting and bombing (including suicide attacks), which have resulted in deaths, material losses, and a sense of trauma in the global community. These elements are derived from the stereotypes of terrorism, Middle Eastern countries, and the emerging conflicts. Our results can contribute to literature and media studies by offering more insights into how popular media can form public opinion about terrorism. This research also emphasizes the importance of applying critical thinking when watching a movie, because, as media products, television series or films can serve as a potent way for conveying information, ideology, idea, or propaganda that serves the dominant interest in society. *Zero Dark Thirty* in particular leans towards serving the American interests by conveying a single perspective on terrorism. Future research on *Zero Dark Thirty* can not only focus on the acts of terrorism *per se* but also examine more deeply how the film as a narrative work reflects or shapes a post-9/11 cultural representation of all cultures involved, especially the Middle Eastern ones. Furthermore, more research could be performed to explore how Hollywood films construct post-9/11 narratives about other issues beyond terrorism, such as the depiction of Muslim identity in Western media. Additionally, integrating Stuart Hall's representation theory or Edward Said's Orientalism could result in a more comprehensive analysis of how the film industry shapes public perceptions of the Middle East. Ultimately, this study underscores the crucial role of media literacy in critically assessing how films shape ideological narratives, particularly in the context of global terrorism.

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