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Ambivalent allies, positive Muslim characters in the representation of the War on Terror

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The aim of this paper is to study through the study of films how the cultural industry tried to create positive characters in the representation of the War on Terror. If Orientalism in film has been widely denounced and studied (King 2010, Khatib 2006, Shaheen 2012, Konzett 2004), the film industry has also shown some interest in the creation of Muslim characters that would be positively received by the public.

The legacy of Edward Said's work on Orientalism can therefore be perceived in the film industry, when it tries to avoid stereotypes, and aims at portraying Muslim characters that would take part in the War on Terror. As Hollywood tends to be liberal-oriented, and in a situation where «winning hearts and minds» was seen as perhaps the most crucial element of the war against jihadism, movies and TV series tried to include the legacy of Edward Said in their war narrative, a movement that can also be seen in European film industries, which display the same concern against Islamophobia, as can be seen in Made In France (Boukhrief 2015), or Timbuktu (Sissako 2014) in France.

Productions such as Sleeper Cell (Reiff and Voris 2005-2006), Homeland (Raff since 2011), Traitor (Martin 2008), Body of lies (Scott 2008), though often criticized for their orientalism, went to great length to create positive Muslim characters. Beyond these examples, this effort also included films that aimed at showing in a positive light historical Muslim characters (Kingdom of heaven Scott 2005), or who tried to promote coexistence and mutual understanding beyond the War on Terror (The Visitor McCarthy 2007). Nevertheless, the status of these characters remains ambiguous, and their are rarely presented as unequivocally positive, as some traces of the traditional representation of Muslims remain in the context of uncertainty of the War on Terror.

As this occurs in a context where Hollywood has strong links to the military sphere (Valantin 2010, Robb 2004), our aim is to assess whether these movies can be considered part of a propaganda effort (Kepel and Ghazaleh 2004), and a reaction to criticisms against the foreign and cultural policies of the United States (Yin 2010). Beyond this aspect, we want to better understand how these characters are created, and how deep the post-orientalist thought has penetrated the film industry. As these films aim to fight stereotypes, they may also be creating new kinds of
stereotypes, designed along the lines of a new kind of Orientalism. In particular, as many of these positive characters are women, these films may be vehicles that carry an Orientalist feminism (Bahramitash 2005). Another thing is, as Muslim characters are represented as belonging to minorities, and portrayed by actors belonging to black and Latin minorities we will articulate this aspect of our research to the question minorities representation (Elayan 2005, Erigha 2015), pondering whether Muslim positive characters can be considered as a case of renewed blackface.