

The Clash of Articulations: Aesthetic Shock, Multivalent Narratives and Islam in the Post-9/11 Era

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates a multilingual, multi-genre data set of 13 post-9/11 popular culture videos, produced by performative artists from across global society, which use digital media aesthetics to defy hegemonic narratives relating to Islam and the War on Terror. The languages represented across the 13 texts are English, French, Spanish and Arabic; and the popular culture genres are hip-hop, comedy, punk and parkour. The texts are grouped thematically for analytical purposes into the following categories: 9/11, War on Terror, Clash of Civilisations, and Palestine.

Using the sociological manifestation of narrative theory (Baker 2006, Somers 1994) as the conceptual framework, I firstly conduct a narrative analysis of the texts focusing on themes of temporality; character/identity; and multivalence, i.e. the co-existence of seemingly contradictory narratives within a single text (Stroud 2002). I argue that a combination of aesthetics and multivalence is deployed in all the videos, despite their creative and linguistic diversity, which functions to arrest viewers out of uncritical immersion in their normative (hegemonic) narrative environment, and open a space in the affective present for new meanings and values to enter. This technique or affective practice, which I term ‘aesthetic shock’, addresses a widespread critique of socio-narrative theory; namely, the failure to account for how social agents might subscribe to new narratives that contradict their existing worldview.

Secondly, the socio-narrative framework is supplemented with recent scholarship on affect (Berlant 2011, Butler 2004) and Deleuzian philosophy (1987). This permits a deeper understanding of the texts as indicative of an epistemological groundswell that is symptomatic of our unfolding moment in history, whereby contradiction and aesthetics emerge as key narrative tools for resistance to the post-9/11 hegemonic order. The two models are connected from a translation studies vantage point by the notion of ‘renarration’ (Baker 2008), offering a unique angle on the flows, patterns of exchange, and evolving identity constructs in the digital media context.

Following detailed exploration of the texts and their production contexts, consistent features are drawn out in an attempt to identify emerging patterns between them. These findings include the affective practice of what I term ‘conscious individualism’, the creation of intimate publics (Berlant 2011), and a united, pluralised front against the neoliberal economic agenda for which prominent public narratives such as Samuel Huntington’s reductive ‘Clash of Civilisations’ thesis (1996) act as a smokescreen.

Ultimately, it is argued that the texts should be seen as deterritorialising sites of aesthetic activism; a means for the non-elites masses across global society to creatively capitalise on the affordances of the digital era, to assert themselves against oppressive cultural narratives and affirm new modes of thinking and being the world. Expressions of political resistance such as the 13 texts analysed in this study are becoming more visible and more vital across different *linguacultures* as the rationalist nation-state paradigm loses currency, evoking the possibility of futures other than that of capitalist progress. I contend that we must pay close attention to such narratives –both their message and their medium – if

we are to achieve a more constructive and nuanced appreciation of the chaotic and contradictory world in which we live.

KEYWORDS: aesthetics, affect, digital media, globalisation, narrative hegemony, post-9/11, renarration

Completion of Thesis

Place: University of Manchester

Year: 2017

Supervisors: Professor Mona Baker, Professor Luis Pérez-González