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Trauma films celebrate private power

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The next time you watch a 21st century Hollywood film about traumatic global events such as the genocide in Rwanda or the U.S. invasion of Iraq, think about how they're shaping your ethics, says Neil Narine.

A Simon Fraser University doctoral student in the School of Communication, Narine has just defended a thesis in which he concludes today's American trauma flicks encourage ethical selfishness rather than global sensitivity.

Drawing on communication theory, Narine worries that modern trauma filmmakers' casting of prominent actors known as humanitarian celebrities, such as George Clooney in *Syriana*, promotes private solutions to public problems on screen and off.

Narine studies communication failures on a societal level and has published several research articles on trauma and representation. For example, he has written about filmmakers' portrayal of the Holocaust as a traumatic event in movies like *Sophie's Choice*.

Narine defines trauma films as dramatizations of violent political and social events that are so horrific they defy human comprehension and any efforts to portray them in their totality.

In his doctoral thesis, *The Cinematic Network Society: Ethical Confrontations with New Proximities to Human Suffering in the Information Age*, Narine argues that contemporary trauma films reflect our increasing self-interest in a fearful, networked society.

Narine bases his argument on an analysis of 12 trauma films made primarily after 9-11, such as *Syriana*, *Babel* and *Hotel Rwanda*, which he demonstrates are strikingly similar in their plot development.

'They are concerned with complex global traumas in our age of globalization, including intensifying conflicts over dwindling resources, transnational weapons cartels and terrorist threats,' says Narine.

'They have multi-layered, interconnected plots in which naive protagonists are initially ignorant of their interconnectedness but eventually are tragically altered upon recognizing it, and take action based on self interest rather than global welfare.'

The celebrities in these films, such as Clooney, Angelina Jolie (*Beyond Borders*) and Brad Pitt (*Babel*), endorse private fundraising foundations and green products, suggesting that we should all practise our citizenship in the marketplace as private consumers.

'I think we should be concerned that modern American trauma films may indeed be discouraging the development of a global citizenry that uses its interconnectedness to solve global problems collectively. Instead, they are further entrenching North Americans' tendency to isolate themselves from the wider world.'

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