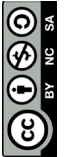# Surveillance, Security, and Neo-noir Film: Spike Lee's 'Inside Man' As a 9/11 Counter-narrative

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After the 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001, a patriotic narrative permeated all aspects of US society. Planned and executed by the George W. Bush administration and reproduced by the media and by other social institutions, the narrative of the War on Terror permeated all aspects of society with little opposition. A few weeks after the attacks, Congress passed the Patriot Act, a bill that redefined security and surveillance in the United States. The new act contributed to the erosion of civil rights. This article analyzes how Spike Lee's Inside Man (2006), a film that critics interpreted as a commercial thriller when it was launched, employs resources from film noir and neo-noir to construct a counter-narrative on security and surveillance. Through a plot that causes confusion, a distinct visual style, a typically noir role of the hero, and hidden references to a 9/11 theme, the film borrows elements from classical film noir and from eighties neo-noir to take a firm stand against the US response to the terrorist attacks. The movie removes the mask of the dominant narrative by showing a structurally corrupt system.

Keywords: surveillance, neo-noir, Spike Lee, film, post-9/11.

After the 9/11 attacks, a patriotic fever swept the United States. Themes of courage, sacrifice, faith, redemption, and patriotism conformed a new cultural narrative, a narrative articulated through the news media, and reproduced in schools, churches, businesses and town meetings throughout the country This narrative, which followed the stages of mourning, constructed a story that shifted "from shock and fear to inspiration and pride" (Kitch, 2003: 221-222).

Seizing the mood of the country, the rhetorical power of the presidency, and an unprecedented historical moment, the administration of George W. Bush

effectively fixed the meaning of 9/11 in terms of a War on Terror to advance its own neoconservative agenda abroad and at home (Krebs and Lobasz, 2007). While the response abroad was still being discussed, the country was transformed in a matter of weeks. Following a binary, Manichean logic, the discourse of the government constructed a narrative of good versus evil, Us versus Them, civilization versus barbarism (Kellner, 2003: 61), and media corporations produced and reproduced frames of the attacks as "acts of war" and "a second Pearl Harbor" (Kellner, 2003: 57-58).

George Bush used the word "freedom" as frequently as he avoided the terms "democracy", "human rights", or "justice" (Kellner, 2003: 58-59). In the name freedom and security, landscapes changed, airports, roads and cities were militarized, federal law enforcement was granted additional powers, mass surveillance was sanctioned, and freedoms were, in fact, curtailed. In October of 2001, the US Congress passed the Patriot Act, a bill that allowed for unprecedented state surveillance, with virtually no public debate. The usual procedures of public hearings, mark up, floor debate, or committee reports were absent in the House of Representatives and in the Senate (Wong, 2007). The speed and procedures with which it was implemented, the secrecy around it, and the fear with which it was received hinted that the constitutional democracy of the United States was under stress (Wong, 2007: 347). Intellectual debate was muted, with a "near-deafening silence of the expected voices of dissent on the great university campuses" (Wong, 2007: 14).

By the time the administration began promoting a narrative of war against Iraq in 2002-2003, alternative interpretations of 9/11 came almost exclusively from the margins. The political opposition by the Democratic Party also remained silent, in part because of the government's success at coercing dissent (Krebs and Lobasz, 2007). As the American Civil Liberties Union (2003) stated, "there is palpable fear even in the halls of Congress of expressing an unpopular view" (i).

Aaron McGruder's syndicated comic strip *The Boondocks* was one of the rare exceptions to the discursive stillness. Just twenty days after the attacks, on 1 October 2001, the protagonist, Huey, a ten-year-old highly politicized African-American boy, reflected on the rapidity with which the national mood changed after the attacks:

> Everything is different now. The whole country has changed, but not me. I'm going to stay cynical... Resist the bandwagon war mentality. Sure my kind may be obsolete, but so what? I'm from the old school, I remember what things were like back in the day... three, four weeks ago (McGruder, 2001).

In the following days, Huey began calling the FBI's terrorism tip line to suggest names of Americans who helped train and finance Osama Bin Laden and the Taliban: Ronald Reagan, the CIA, or George Bush. As a result, the New York *Daily News* banned the strip for several weeks, the *Dallas Morning News* separated it from the other comic strips, and dozens of newspapers issued complaints (Blair, 2001; McGrath, 2004).

In the streets the police barricaded and arrested protesters, the New York Stock Exchange revoked the credentials of Arab TV network Al Jazeera, and celebrities who spoke out against the US foreign policy, from the country band Dixie Chicks to actors Tim Robbins and Susan Sarandon, received professional reprimands (American Civil Liberties Union, 2003).

This article analyzes the disguised strategies of a Hollywood heist film that also challenged the post-9/11dominant narrative. Spike Lee's *Inside Man* was received by critics mostly as a transitional movie from the director's previous politically-engaged work towards a commercial filmmaking style with light drops of racial denunciation. However, the lack of overt political critique does not necessarily imply that the movie lacked any political intention. On the contrary, it was one of the many voices that practiced alternative forms to express dissent, especially considering that the film was produced by Universal, a studio owned at the time by General Electric.

This article proposes that through neo-noir narrative and stylistic techniques, *Inside Man* presented an intelligent critique of the US response to the 9/11 attacks in terms of security and surveillance. In classic film noir fashion, the viewer and the detective discover together a society that far from united through courage, sacrifice, faith, redemption, and patriotism, is structured around corrupt social institutions. At a time in which defying the dominant patriotic narrative arose suspicion, Spike Lee made a film within the system to criticize the system.

POST 9/11 SHIFTS

The pressure on dissent in the years following the attacks reached nearly all aspects of society: unjustified arrests and interrogations of demonstrators, presence of FBI agents on university campuses, libraries forced to inform federal authorities about the books that patrons checked out, citizens removed or arrested from malls for wearing "Peace" T-shirts, students and teachers censored in high schools and universities (American Civil Union Liberties, 2003). While these actions were unconstitutional, the Patriot Act allowed for the eroding of liberties throughout the country.

From a security standpoint, the Patriot Act meant a paradigm shift, as noted by Wong (2007), in at least five aspects that raised the question of whether the US was moving closer to becoming a police state. First, counterterrorism ceased to be handled as crime suppression and was equated to fighting a war. Instead of being treated as suspects with civil liberties, criminals could be treated as enemies without human rights. Second, under the justification that there is no liberty without security, the security and survival of the state became preeminent over the liberties of citizens. Third, a shift from reaction to pre-emption emerged. The administration assumed that it could take pre-emptive actions to reduce/prevent/interdict terrorism. Fourth, to allow for the previous aspect, there is a shift from collecting evidence to collecting intelligence through data mining, community surveillance, and personal monitoring. Finally, the intelligence wall between law enforcement and the intelligence services, between the FBI and the CIA, becomes blurrier as they share resources (6-7).

With this somber outlook for dissenters and civil liberties advocates, surveys consistently showed a vast public approval of the Patriot Act restrictions; emotions and patriotism, rather than information about the content of the legislation, guided this support (Wong, 2007).

Although over the years the film industry reacted, Hollywood followed the acritical bandwagon. One year after the attacks, film historian Wheeler Winston Dixon reflected on how the film and media industry perceived that a historical shift was also taking place in terms of perception, production and reception. Just like after the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941, US audiences seemed eager to watch films with conflict, and, after an initial muteness, Hollywood seemed ready to provide them (Dixon, 2004).

The film industry, however, did not react as it did during World War II — and as many historians expected (Markert, 2011). It is estimated that between 1942 and 1945, between one third and one half of all Hollywood productions portrayed some aspect of the war (2011: 8). In contrast, post-9/11 Hollywood did not begin producing a significant number of war movies until 2004. During the first decade after the 9/11 attacks, about 100 films depicted the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan, a minor proportion of Hollywood's production, especially when compared to the 1940s (2011: 8-9).

Lateral Surveillance

In the 9/11 aftermath, besides intensifying mass surveillance through the Patriot Act, the state called on citizens to cooperate with law enforcement. "If you see something, say something", read a sign in trashcans, subways, and buses throughout Manhattan (Figure 1). The slogan, attributed to publicist Allen Kay, inspired a campaign by New York's Metropolitan Transportation Authority, and has since become a national campaign ran by the Department of Homeland Security (Larsson, 2016), still active two decades after the attacks.
This type of campaigns "urge citizens to become part of the government's terrorism fighting team" (Andrejevic, 2011: 166). From the beginning, these signs and posters served a double purpose: they sought citizen lateral surveillance to prevent possible terrorist attacks, and they also contributed to the narrative of a citizenship working side by side with the government for a common purpose.

Zedner (2005) argues that inviting citizen participation in activities once reserved to the police can be interpreted as a commendable attempt to revalue policing as a public good. In these campaigns, described as "reponsibilization strategies", homeland security officers and police chiefs alike embrace terms such as "community engagement", "active civic participation", and "local capacity building" (Zedner, 2005: 87-93).

As an alternative argument, however, Andrejevic (2011) cautions that the state's rhetoric applies the same de-differentiating logic of terrorism. In sharing the responsibilities of policing, the distinctions between citizens and combatants or between weapons and daily life objects are blurred (166). In the case of citizen de-differentiation, the lines between civilian-target-spy erode (Andrejevic, 2011), as do those between citizen-officer-suspect (Reeves, 2012). In terms of weapons,

as seen in the top of the poster (Figure 1), a backpack can become a weapon of terror, the same way airplanes, cars, trains, buses, knives, or daily mail can (Andrejevic, 2011). Packer (2006) studies the role of transportation and mobility in the most significant attacks on US security.

Figure 1. A poster in a New York City trashcan encourages lateral surveillance

Source: Photo by the author, 2005.

Taking a historical approach, Reeves (2012) shows that this type of surveillance is far from new, but notes that it flourishes especially in a culture of social suspicion. When lateral surveillance spreads throughout the communities, it contributes to the identification of the civilian enforcers with the agencies of the state, and manipulates and places social responsibilities at the service of state objectives (Reeves, 2012: 245). In that respect, polysemic terms such as "community engagement" or "active civic participation" when employed by the promoters of lateral surveillance, promote a hybrid subjectivity of citizen-officer-suspect, rather than altruistic citizens engaged with their community. They also unleash a type of neighbor or co-worker who acts without the legal restraints that prevent law enforcers from unlimited spying (Reeves, 2012).

Film Noir, Film Neo-noir

What Reeves (2012) calls a "climate of categorical suspicion" is one of the main themes of *Inside man*. The shifts in security and surveillance discussed above permeate the film since the beginning. As the next section will discuss, Spike Lee addresses this mood by employing narrative strategies, characters, and aesthetics of film noir and neo-noir for a social and political critique of the post-9/11 United States.

As if it were one of its own prickly characters, film noir refuses neat definitions. Conrad (2006) notes that the widespread disagreement over what film noir also includes a disagreement on which films count as noir. Throughout his seminal text on the topic, Naremore (2008) insists that no clear definition of film noir can possibly include the films that most critics, scholars, and moviegoers would consider film noir. This is partly due to the fact that such a definition would require categories of items with the same properties, and these categories cannot possibly include the diversity of these films (6).

"Film noir is not a genre", wrote Paul Schrader (1972). It has been argued that film noir is "transgeneric", but the very concept of film *genre*, which stems etymologically from biology and birth, is problematic (Naremore, 2008):

> There are many themes, moods, characters, locales, and stylistic features associated with noir, no one of which is shared by all the films that have been placed in the category. Moreover, ... many stylistic qualities usually described as noir can be found in films that don't belong to the category (Naremore, 2008: 282).

It is beyond the scope of this article to attempt to settle a definition of film noir, but in the collective imaginary, film noir is related to Hollywood movies from the 1940s and 1950s[1] that usually embrace stylistic traits such as noir characters and stories, noir plot structures, noir sets, noir decorations, noir costumes, noir accessories, noir performances, noir musical styles, and noir language (Naremore, 2008: 1). Classic film noir can be identified by cinematic techniques:

> The constant opposition of light and shadow, its oblique camera angles, and its disruptive compositional balance of frames and scenes, the way characters are placed in awkward and unconventional positions within a particular shot (Conard, 2006: 1).

And characteristic themes, such as:

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[1]   Confronting the perception that place film noir in the United States in 1940s and 1950s —or from 1941 (*The Maltese Falcon*) to 1958 (*Touch of Evil*), as Schrader (1972) did—, several authors have argued that film noir has blurrier origins and transcends borders, (e.g., Naremore, 2008; Fay and Nieland, 2010). Ultimately, film noir should be treated as a "discursive construct", Naremore (2008) and Conard (2006) argue.

> The inversion of traditional values and the corresponding moral …; the feeling of aliena-
> tion, paranoia, and cynicism; the presence of crime and violence; and the disorientation
> of the viewer (Conard, 2006: 1-2).

Although film noir is not necessarily political, filmmakers have often used it for critical ends, such as the struggle against censorship and political repression (Naremore, 2008). In that respect, the work of Robert Arnett on neo-noir is particularly useful to the focus of this article. Arnett (2007, 2020) acknowledges that, just like noir, neo-noir has become a fuzzy category in which almost anything involving "any combination of a detective, a crime, a handgun, a hat, and some moody lighting" is included (1), and laments that one of the main purposes of film noir —"to create a specific sense of malaise"— is often lost in the discussion about neo-noir (Arnett, 2007: 9). This feeling of angst often mirrors society's bleak and fearful mood even at times of victory, such as in the 1940s (Palmer, 2006). Several critics claim that noir films provide a narrative to the "deep doubts about national purpose and direction" as a dark mirror of society (Palmer, 2006: 188-189), but perhaps it is most useful to treat each film individually, by seeking the connections each movie establishes with historical trends and events (Palmer, 2006: 190).

Arnett (2020) traces the connection between neo-noir and specific time periods, as groups of films that comment on and reflect the darker parts of a discourse in its social and cultural context. Telling illustrations are the Regan-era and what he calls *Eighties Noir* (Arnet, 2007) or the post-9/11 *Digital Noir*, which "concentrates on the dark angst within our highly technologized, deeply networked, digital work" (Arnett, 2007: 110).

Thus, during the 1980s, Hollywood reinforced Ronald Reagan's discourse of national pride and strength with the purpose of leaving behind the Vietnam defeat and reaffirming traditional institutions such as government, the military, family, or religion (Arnett, 2007). In the narrative structure of the 1980s, the status quo is disrupted and put back together through methods aligned with Reagan's values of a renewed American dream. In mainstream films, characters wear a mask that hides reality, like Reagan's narrative hides corruption (e.g., the Iran-Contra scandal), but this mask is naturalized and never acknowledged; acknowledging it would mean admitting that dream-America is just a dream, and therefore, it would challenge the status quo (Arnett, 2007: 125-126).

On the contrary, neo-noir film in the 1980s acknowledges the mask motive. The characters wear some sort of mask, often physical as well as metaphorical, but descend to a world where the hero generally "sees and discerns the real". In 80s noir, government institutions become metaphors of the failure to deliver the American dream. At the end of the narrative structure, the hero has discovered, along with the audience, that the institutions of Reagan's America are "a diversionary dream mistaken for reality" as their corruption surfaces to light (Arnett, 2007: 125).

Finally, just as noir has a characteristic visual style, so does 80s noir, from which *Inside Man* borrows a set of elements, including an expressionistic use of architecture, a restrained color palette, sometimes exaggerated, and dramatic shadows and silhouettes.

'INSIDE MAN'

Upon the release of *Inside Man*, film reviews almost unanimously asserted that Spike Lee, a filmmaker known for his political engagement in terms of race and class, had veered away from politics to focus on crime and action. Some critics welcomed the transformation while others lamented it, but few read the new film as little more than an electrifying commercial thriller, albeit with occasional traces of Lee's didactic signature (Harrison-Kahan, 2010; Carroll, 2011; Sweedler, 2019).

Perhaps that is the reason why the film has attracted little attention among researchers. Although Spike Lee's work has inspired hundreds of articles and books, an extensive search of the literature uncovered only four academic studies devoted to *Inside Man* (Gerstner, 2008; Harrison-Kahan, 2010; Carroll, 2011; Sweedler, 2019). As Milo Sweedler (2019) notes, interpreting *Inside Man* as an incisive critique of the system means advocating a minority position.

All four works offer a unique reading of the film, while also interacting and complementing one another. Gerstner's (2008) interpretation, like many a film critics, departs from the commercial restraints imposed by the funding of the film, a 45 million dollar-budget picture by Universal Studios (Box Office Mojo) with a cast of superstars: Denzel Washington, Clive Owen, and Jodie Foster.

For Gerstner (2008), the commercial imperatives entail a de-authorization of Spike Lee in his film, a "divorce" between director and film, but interestingly, these same imperatives constitute one of the tensions that make the film intriguing, the tension between New York and Hollywood, between capitalism and filmmaking, which is the tension that Spike Lee's must face, as an African American political filmmaker in a predominantly white industry. The study recognizes the portrayal of the state, including the Patriot Act, in the film, but reads its consequences in a localized manner, centered around New York and the homogenization of the city's culture.

Lori Harrison-Kahan (2010) takes Gerstner relay and shows *Inside Man* both as a social critique of post-9/11 United States and as a film that mirrors Spike Lee's complicated relationship with the studio system and with capitalism. Her analysis also links the racial and cultural tensions of the film to globalized problems, such as the transnational flow of workforce, the corruption of capitalism, or torture in Abu Ghraib.

Douglas Cameron (1997) showed how in Robert Rodriguez's *El Mariachi*, the main character is actually the film director, the narrator of his own story, in a need for cultural minorities to adapt to new circumstances. With a comparable argument, Harrison-Kahan (2010) traces a direct parallelism between Spike Lee and Dalton Russell, the leader of the robbers. They both narrate the story, they both control the characters, and they both embrace entertainment and moneymaking, though they both take a firm stand on global politics and on racial and economic injustice.

Carroll (2011) bases part of his arguments on what we do not see, rather than on what we see to argue that *Inside Man* uses the heist genre as a resource to work through the anxieties of society. By recasting an uncanny, rather than traumatic, 9/11, his analysis gravitates around the actual attacks: the film places "the horrors

of September 11 in another context", Carroll claims (2011: 851). Terrorists live among us, as do the authors of the heist: "Like the suicide bomber trained in US flight schools and living in suburban Florida, *Inside Man*'s representation of criminals hidden in plain sight reflects post-September 11 anxieties of proximity" (Carroll, 2011: 847).

Equating the leader of the robbers to "the members of the terrorist sleeper cell" (2011: 849), though, implies placing the fear and destruction caused by the robbers at the same level as the fear and destruction during the attacks, a hyperbolic extreme, even when comparing the two metaphorically. In the film, the ones who use violence in a de-differentiating way, in a "terrorist logic", as Andrejevic (2011) said, are the police officers, not the robbers. By interpreting the heist as the attacks, Carroll effaces the ambiguously noble goals of Dalton Russell, the robbers' leader. Russell can hardly be identified as a terrorist because, unlike Al Qaeda, his intentions of serving justice, no matter how hazy, appeal to the audience.

The Plot

Inside Man narrates a robbery at the main branch of the Manhattan Trust Bank, a fictional institution located at Wall Street and Broadway, where capitalism intersects with show business. A group of fake painters with white masks and sunglasses disables the security cameras, draw their machine guns, lock the front door of the bank and make all the bank employees and customers strip and dress up in black jumpsuits with white masks. Led by Dalton Russell (Clive Owen), the band members blindfold and separate the hostages, switch them from room to room, and mingle with them, so neither the hostages nor the film viewers can be certain of who is who. Outside, dozens of NYPD officers and snipers surround the building. Since his first appearance, the audience learns that the police is wary of the hostage negotiator, Keith Frazier (Denzel Washington). Not only did Frazier's last job failed, he is also under investigation for 140,000 missing dollars from a drug operation.

Upon being informed about the heist, the founder and CEO of the bank, Arthur Case (Christopher Plummer), hires Madeleine White (Jodie Foster), a mysterious, sophisticated fixer, to make sure that the contents of his safe deposit box at the bank remain secret. The secret, the public later finds out, is that Case built his bank with blood money he obtained by collaborating with the Nazis during the Holocaust. Ms. White extorts the mayor of New York to get access to the bank.

In the bank, the robbers release two hostages. The first one is an elder man with a heart condition who seems to suffer from a shortage of breath. When he is released, the police point their guns at him, handcuff him, and take him away. The second hostage who is released is a Sikh bank employee who carries a message in what looks like a desk drawer tied to his neck, with the demands from the robbers written on it: an airplane with pilots and two buses to get to the JFK airport. Shortly after, the robbers demand food. Frazier sends in several boxes of pizza with microphones in it, unsuspicious that Dalton Russell had previously bugged the desk drawer, and knew all of the police's plans in advance.

One of the climactic moments of the film arrives when the robbers, after phone and face-to-face encounters with both Ms. White and Detective Frazier, find out that the special units are about to storm the bank. They then open the door with a big explosion, and set all the hostages free. As hostages and robbers, looking alike, hesitantly walk out of the bank, blindfolded, their hands up, they shout: "Don't shoot, don't shoot!" The police start shooting rubber bullets anyway, push the hostages to the ground, yell at them, handcuff them, and take them into custody on two police buses. The bank is intact, the money is in the open vault, and the robbers are, again, mingled with the hostages, with no way of being identifiable. Frazier is told to bury the case, but he starts uncovering the truth, that the robbers pursued, in reality, Arthur Cases' secret, guarded in a safe deposit box.

Inside Neo-noir

Presented and received as a commercial heist movie, *Inside Man* deals with post-9/11 issues in a critical way, as the authors who have analyzed it identified. The direct references to the attacks and its aftermath are included in the dialogue and in the background. One of the talks between Detective Frazier and Ms. White takes place in front of a mural with the US flag, where the stripes are formed by letters that read we will never forget and the Statue of Liberty and a hazy silhouette of the World Trade Center replace the stars (Figure 2). Although the reference is explicit it is common for viewers, who concentrate on the dialogues of the plot, to miss this visual reference.[2]

Figure 2. A mural displays the 9/11 theme, as Ms. White and Detective Frazier talk
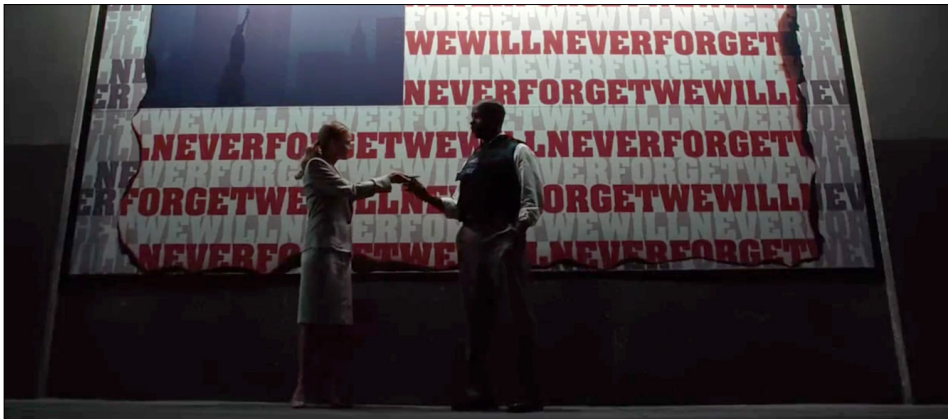
Source: Universal 2006.

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2   After a decade of projecting the film for dozens of both undergraduate and graduate students in my communication courses, only a handful of them detected the mural in the first viewing.

During Ms. White first appearance, before Arthur Case requests her services, another inconspicuous reference to 9/11 appears. As she is entertaining an elegantly-dressed client, they hold the following conversation:

> CLIENT: Ms. White, I want you to rest assured: my only intention is to spend time in your wonderful city and to enjoy all that it has to offer.
> MS. WHITE: And no business with your uncle?
> CLIENT: In truth I have very little to do with him these days.
> MS. WHITE: I'm told you haven't seen him in nine years. Is that right?
> CLIENT: You're extremely well informed.

At the end of the movie, the audience learns that the client is Osama bin Laden's nephew, who is in New York City to buy a co-op in Park Avenue. If Hollywood associates the words bin Laden with the enemies of the United States (see, e.g., Markert, 2011), Spike Lee associates them with the business elites of New York City, and socially respected Arthur Case ends up listed, admittedly against his will, as a reference for bin Laden's nephew.

A scene where three hostages chat shows a third direct reference to the 9/11 theme (see Figure 3):

> WOMAN: Do you think they are terrorists?
> MAN 1: They are robbers, not terrorists.
> MAN 2: How do you know? They could be Al Qaeda.
> MAN 1: Trust me, I've studied these things.
> MAN 2: What are you? Mossad?
> MAN 1: I was a lawyer. Now I teach courses at Columbia Law on genocide, slave labor, war reparation claims.
> WOMAN: *Mira*! Can I sue anybody when this is over?
> MAN 1: Oh sure, go nuts.

Figure 3. Several hostages discuss about the robbers

Source: Universal 2006.

Besides helping frame the theme of 9/11, the previous conversation reveals several telling facts about the film. First, the conversation places the film, and the attacks, into a larger context in which Israel's secret services play a role, thus internationalizing the theme. Second, the scene shows that the fear should not be compared to the terror of 9/11. The villains in each case operate at a different scale, as shown by the tone of the conversation, lively and without a hint of the characters' being scared. To confirm this, an authority whose expertise is human rights explicitly says that robbers are different from terrorists or Latino women. Fourth, the conversation also shows how the victims of the film include different backgrounds, cultures, and educational levels, including Columbia professors. Finally, the scene foreshadows impunity. When the woman asks if she will be able to sue when it is all over, she assumes that they will get out alive (and reinforces the idea that the robbers are not dangerous), and she learns by the lawyer's sarcastic response that nobody will be held responsible.

Having established the references that frame Inside Man in its historical context, I will explore the resources that Spike Lee employs in this neo-noir, particularly in terms of the visual style, the role of the hero in the narrative, and, as a way to conclude, the role that technology and surveillance play in the film's counter-narrative of post-9/11 politics.

The Visual Style

The images that accompany the opening credits depict the might of corporate wealth with an expressionist use of architecture. The inequity between the wealthy and the rest (Figures 4 and 5), the material portrayal of corporate bellicosity (Figure 6), the equivalence of the patriotic symbols with capitalism and Wall Street (Figures 4 and 7) all appear through architecture. No actors are required to tell the story of power in the United States. The intersection between entertainment and money, theater and economy, make-believe and reality, Spike Lee and the Hollywood studio system (a relationship finely described by Harrison-Kahan, 2010), also justifies its own shot, accompanied by the US flag on one side, and the director's name on the other (Figure 8).

The color palette is subdued, as Arnett (2007) points out for eighties noir. If in the 1980s Florida, the pastel colors abound, the colors of Inside Man are also restrained, with the bluish gray tone of technology, and a dark illumination overall with exaggerated contrasts (Figures 2 and 3), dramatic shadows and barely marked silhouettes, especially in the scenes inside the bank. This unnatural lighting pervades throughout the film sequences, and contributes to a feeling of confinement and malaise.

In the last sequence of the film, the Detective comes home after his trip to the unmasked reality to find his drunken soon-to-be brother in law (the family institution let down by the economy). As Figure 9 shows, he has become a classic film noir hero, appearing only through his shadow with a 1940s style hat, a changed man. In the previous scene —"looking for closure" in Ms. White's words— he told the mayor that he knew the truth and thanked him for lunch. Taking into consideration that he did not eat anything, what Detective Frazier was telling the mayor was that he had gained some leverage over the powerful,

but that he gladly accepted his promotion to remain within the system. Finally, the hero is inside. His morals may be ambiguous, but his purpose as neo-noir hero has been served: both him and the audience know that the system is corrupt.

Figure 4. A giant US flag covers the New York Stock Exchange Building

Source: Universal 2006.

Figure 5. One of the robbers exits his home in New York City

Source: Universal 2006.

**Figure 6. The scowls of the Giants of Finance, at 20 Exchange Place,
the site of the bank**

Source: Universal 2006.

Figure 7. Opening shot representing an eagle

Source: Universal 2006.

Figure 8. Broadway and Wall Street signs in the opening credits

Source: Universal 2006.

Figure 9. Detective Frazier comes home

Source: Universal 2006.

The Hero

In the noir fashion, the hero is far from a winner. Detective Frazier has been accused of embezzling money, his record shows at least one disastrous handling of a hostage crisis, he sells his silence for a promotion, and he cannot get married because he cannot afford the wedding, the furniture, the kids, nor the diamond ring. His moral ambiguity is hidden by Denzel Washington's charismatic performance (Sweedler, 2019), but like an 80s noir character, he descends into, or perhaps climbs to, the world of capitalist corruption.

When the police chief assigns the case to Frazier because the main negotiator is on vacation, it seems like a second chance: "Christmas came early for you this year", says the chief. In the forty seconds between the announcement and

the time Frazier and his sidekick, Bill Mitchell (Chiwetel Ejiofor), exit the police station, at least seven US flags appear in the shots. Unknowingly, the hero is leaving America's dominant narrative, a narrative sheltered by a flag that functions like a mask (as in Figure 4, where the flag hides the inside of New York Stock Exchange) to discover a different reality, and they are taking the audience with them.

The mask of the post-9/11 narrative of unity, sacrifice, patriotism, and strength begins falling when the first hostages are released. The NYPD, "New York's finest", whose function is the protection of citizens, fear them and treat them as criminals instead (even an elder with a heart condition). They obscenely identify a bank employee as an Arab, and, without an explanation, refuse to give him back his turban. "I'm a Sikh, not an Arab, by the way, like your cops called me outside", he protests. "I don't think you heard that", replies Captain Darius (Willem Dafoe), "There's a lot going on, you probably got disoriented. I didn't hear that". The police captain tries to keep the mask of respect for civil rights on, but the bank employee removes it back: "I heard what I heard", which is what the audience heard. The police exhibition of racist slurs and of sexist attitudes (Frazier and Mitchell stare at a suspect's cleavage during interrogation) contests the narrative of police as 9/11 heroes, and fails to deliver the promised dream of unity in front of an outside enemy.

Frazier, who knows the reality of street cops, discovers the corruption of politics first, as Ms. White and the Mayor try to co-opt him, and of capitalism later, when he learns the truth about Arthur Case. Nothing it what it seems. The system looks refined, but it is cruel: "My bite is much worse than my bark", Madeleine White tells him. In the masked world of the self-portrait of the elites, Arthur Case is an esteemed member of society, a self-made man, and an influential philanthropist who displays photos on his desk of himself next to George H. and Barbara Bush and with Margaret Thatcher. He insistently holds on to his mask, even when Frazier and the audience already know the truth: "You can ask anyone who knows me. They'll vouch for me and for the things I've done", he says at one point. Behind the mask is a greedy businessman who betrayed his French Jewish friends by working with the Nazis during the Holocaust, a member of an elite who, in the name of profit, can vouch for Bin Laden's nephew.

Although the hero loathes being played, he makes a point of telling the powerful (White, Case, the Mayor) that he has discovered the full story, and that he, too, can use extortion and blackmail (he recorded the Mayor and Ms. White as they threatened him). At the same time, however, he seems quite content with the payoff he receives to remain inside the system. Has he become the Inside Man? Whatever the answer, Frazier happily accepts a promotion and a promise of media exposure. "How'd you like to be in the front page of *The New York Times*?" offers Ms. White, thus unveiling the pliability of the mainstream media, too. His reluctant acceptance to play the game, though, shows more moral ambiguity than an embrace of the system. The hero has taken the mask off the status quo, and has proved its corruption to the audience.

TECHNOLOGY, SECURITY, AND SURVEILLANCE

The social and political critique of *Inside Man* does not emanate from one single theme. The arguments in the published literature in terms of race, class struggle, the crisis of capitalism, global affairs, or post-9/11 confusion are all present in the film. The significance of one over the other is open to interpretation, and most likely depends on individual academic interests.

For the purpose of this paper, we will conclude by addressing the theme of post-9/11 surveillance and security. The Patriot Act and new technologies rendered spying on citizens' undetectable, and lateral surveillance erased the lines between victims and perpetrators, between targets and spies, and between citizens, officers, and suspects. The bank robbers exploit this de-differentiation by successfully hiding among the hostages. The only child in the film says to the police: "With the mask, they all look the same".

As airport security controls show, especially after 9/11, authorities treat everybody as guilty until no suspicious materials are found in the luggage. The dominant narrative justifies the security shift as unimportant inconveniences to guarantee personal safety: "If you haven't done anything, you have nothing to fear". In the film subverts this narrative: "What happened to my civil rights?" says the Sikh employee. When the rest of the hostages rush out of the building, Spike Lee strips naked the security narrative, exposing authoritarianism and suspension of rights. With shocking cruelty, the hostages get shot at with rubber bullets, in spite of holding their hands up, being blindfolded, and yelling: "Don't shoot!".

Why do the police, the protectors of citizens, shoot rubber bullets at innocent hostages? Under the post-9/11 shift in security, every citizen poses a threat. As Packer (2006: 381) states:

> Citizen's become bombs, not simply by choice or through cell propaganda and training, but by Homeland Security itself. It treats all as potential bombs, thereby governing us as if each and all may become bombs. Effectively, we are all therefore becoming bombs whether we would ever choose to be or not.

The shocking effect of seeing the police attacking victims of a holdup is intensified by the fact that they are shot with rubber bullets, a sight that is more often associated with repression of protest than with the fight against terrorists. The hostages are then tied and transported away in buses. The buses that robbers demanded as their way to freedom are resignified by the state and converted into prison transport vehicles. Just like terrorists weaponize means of transportation, the state transforms them into tools of repression.

Inside Man shows the consequences that granting extended powers to law enforcement has for common people.

> Under the regime of Homeland Security, it is not the safety of citizens that is of primary concern, but rather the stability of Empire's social order most generally, and more specifically the security of the state form (Packer, 2006: 381).

The film also subverts the narrative about surveillance. First, it shows that technology permits bidirectional surveillance. Even if asymmetrical (the state can rely on costly, sophisticated resources; citizens cannot), ingenuity yields to a certain degree of citizen empowerment. The NYPD sends a predictable hidden microphone inside a pizza box, but the robbers had previously sent a bugged drawer to the police operating station. The police are aware that surveillance can turn against them: "You never know who's listening", says an officer to Frazier. Second, lateral surveillance, which is both a security measure and part of a narrative of citizen collaboration with the authorities, produces no effect on the film's civilians.

The victims of the film, the common people who line up at a bank, do not show any sympathy for the bank robbers. After all, the criminals confiscate their cell phones, make them strip, tie them up, threaten to kill them, yell at them, and retain them overnight at the bank. However, they do not express any will to cooperate with the police either.

Lee does not depict a citizenship united behind law enforcement. The patriotic love story between government and society revealed by the post-9/11 surveys about the Patriot Act is absent from the film. The only civilians who cooperate with the police, a construction worker and his former Albanian wife, do so without any enthusiasm, and in the case of the Albanian woman, for self-benefit, to get parking tickets condoned. Their cooperation turns out to be irrelevant to the plot, and their meager citizen cooperation, useless. Spike Lee blurs the lines between guilty and innocent, but not between police and citizens. *Inside Man* shatters the image of unity around and approval of the authorities, and overall contributes to unfix the official meaning of 9/11, especially because its unifying factor, the external enemy, is denied in the film by the Columbia professor: "They are robbers, not terrorists".

One last idea deserves some thought, and may be instrumental for future research. In a film about post-9/11 climate of oppression and surveillance, a Nazi connection may seem anachronical and out of place. Creating this confusion is part of the point. The neo-noir mood is motivated by the 9/11 aftermath, but the corruption of the status quo is not. The US response to 9/11 does not surge in a vacuum. Behind the official narrative of the attacks, history plays a role: the photographs of Margaret Thatcher, Barbara and George H. Bush, the Cold War[3] and World War II, with its aged envelopes stamped with swastikas, show that the corruption of institutions predates the post-9/11 administration. Spike Lee's film shows that corruption is structural, not circumstantial: it was not born with the Patriot Act; the Patriot Act is one of its children.

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3   The dialogues of the film acknowledge history through mentions to the Munich Olympics of 1972 and Albania's dictator Enver Hoxha.

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