

## **Encountering Other Men at the Movies: Racialised Masculinities on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb)**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines racialised and masculinist discourses on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) around Maghrebi-French films *Days of Glory* (2006) and *Free Men* (2011). Whilst the films centre on the contributions of North African men in WW2, reviewers are shown to be sensitive to the masculine formations of Muslim soldiers, rejecting them as an affront to the sanctity of WW2 histories, and as a diversion from the perceived reality of Muslim masculinity. In doing so, professional and amateur critics reassert hegemonic white masculinity in ways that reflect white masculine angst about the authoritative hold on history and knowledge that the films are trying to challenge. Therefore, whilst racist discourses work to define and produce knowledge of the Muslim man, they simultaneously function to construct white masculinist subjectivities. This article therefore reveals the ways in which online platforms such as IMDb produce space for the homosocial constitution of white masculinities, composed by and performed through both explicit and implicit racist discourse in relation to foreign-language film.

**Keywords:** audience; masculinity; race; film; Maghrebi-French

## Introduction

This article interrogates racialised and gendered film reception. Focusing on reviews of Maghrebi-French<sup>1</sup> films *Days of Glory* (2006) and *Free Men* (2011) on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb), this article examines the ways in which both amateur and professional film critics produce racialised masculinities in messageboards<sup>2</sup> and reviews. Drawing on critical race and masculinities scholarship (Dyer, 1997; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Ahmed, 2007; Kimmel, 2013), this article will investigate the ways in which online forums like IMDb produce space for the constitution of social identities and subjectivities, specifically white masculinities. In doing so, this article builds upon recent work on the importance of online spaces for the production of gendered and racialised identities and relations (Raj, 2011; Cleland, 2013; Daniels, 2013; Ging, 2017; Kanjere, 2019), which has thus far focused on behaviours relating to dating, football, and anti-feminism on sites such as Twitter, Reddit, Grindr, and 4chan. This study of film reception contributes to this emerging interdisciplinary scholarship, through a focus on the production of white masculine subject positions and the role of film as an object through which fragile subjectivities become (re)secured. In doing so, the article follows Ging's (2017: 641) key question of whether online spaces can 'facilitate new and different ways in which to assert male hegemony', given that masculinist and racist discourses predate sites like IMDb. That is not to say that these discourses are homogenous across the platform, or that online forums only facilitate these kinds of discourses, but that there is evidence of them in response to these particular films.

Critics draw on prior knowledge and expectations of national war histories, film genre, and prevalent societal stereotypes of Muslim men to co-constitute both Muslim and white masculinities. Therefore, whilst racialised discourses define and produce knowledge of the 'other', they simultaneously function to construct white subjectivities. I do not mean 'white' in an empirical sense, as demographic information is largely unavailable on IMDb. Rather, in line with many critical race scholars (Dyer, 1997; Moreton-Robinson, 2004; Ahmed, 2007), I refer to white as a subject position, as 'not reducible to white skin' (Ahmed, 2007: 159), and what Bhabha (1998: 21) calls a 'strategy of authority rather than an authentic or essential identity'. This shows how whiteness intersects with masculinity to constitute and reinforce power relations in response to political challenges by the films, which attempt to disrupt the white masculine authority over histories of the war and what it means to be a man.

Processes of racialisation are therefore at work within reviews, and shape how critics position themselves in relation to the films, at the intersection with masculinity and discourses of knowledge and power. Racialisation refers to 'the sociohistorical processes by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed and destroyed' (Omi and Winant, 1994: 55-56), and which 'ascribe physical and cultural differences to individuals and groups'

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<sup>1</sup> Maghrebi-French Cinema refers to films made by directors of Maghrebi origin in France, often referred to as 'beur' cinema.

<sup>2</sup> IMDb shut down its messageboards in February 2017. See Pulver, 2017.

(Barot and Bird, 2001: 601). The language of racialisation further ‘intersects and coalesces’ (Rattansi, 2005) with Islamophobia, emphasising the importance of talking about Muslim experiences as racial, using the tools and language of racialisation (Modood, 2005; Selod and Embrick, 2013). The majority of both professional and amateur critics of these films racialise implicitly, drawing on, reproducing and ultimately benefiting from pre-existing power relations that situate them ‘in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him [the ‘white man’] the relative upper hand’ (Said, 1978: 75).

These readings of the films focus on perceived historical accuracy and authenticity, drawing on expectations based on the idealised, strong, courageous and white ‘soldier heroes’ (Dawson, 1994) of canonical combat films such as *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), and racialised expectations of Muslim men, to deny them access, not just to history, but to white hegemonic versions of masculinity. The Muslim characters of the films are framed as factually disingenuous and sexually deviant, and in subordinating Muslim men critics occupy and constitute white male positions of authority and knowledge. This article will first outline scholarship on racialised and online masculinities, and what the interrogation of them on IMDb and in relation to films means for how we understand them, before unpacking film reviews and messageboards for how they produce ‘deviant Muslim men’ and ‘knowledgeable white men’. Before doing this, it is necessary to briefly outline the films *Days of Glory* (2006) and *Free Men* (2011).

Set during WW2, *Days of Glory* (2006) follows Algerian and Moroccan infantrymen from recruitment in North Africa onto the battlefields of Italy and France, centring on the war effort of North Africans fighting in de Gaulle’s Free French Army. They fight a battle on two fronts, combating not only the Nazi war machine, but colonial racism and discrimination within their own army. The film is permeated by the conventions of the Hollywood combat genre, the whiteness of which the director Rachid Bouchareb explicitly endeavours to challenge, as he stated when promoting the film:

When I saw Stanley Kubrick’s *Paths of Glory*, I never saw African soldiers, but at the time there were 500,000 soldiers from Africa in France. In all the movies about World War II, where are the 250,000 black and Arab soldiers? There were 500,000 Americans in France and 250,000 from Africa. Where are they? (Sinclair, 2007)

This revisionist undertaking is also reflected in Ismaël Ferroukhi’s *Free Men* (2011), which similarly situates North African colonial identities and histories proximate to familiar representations of WW2. Set in occupied Paris, primarily around the city’s Grand Mosque, the film focuses on the Mosque’s efforts towards the rescue of European and Sephardic Jews. It positions itself and its Muslim protagonists alongside western allies by condemning Nazi Germany and tapping into the popular narrative of the French Resistance.

## Racialising Online Masculinities

It is well-established in gender studies that masculinities are both fluid and contested (Connell, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Gorman-Murray and Hopkins, 2014). Connell's (1995) instrumental concept, hegemonic masculinity, contends that practices amongst men produce relations of dominance over women, whilst emphasising the multiplicity of sexual, class and ethnic differences between men (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Therefore, hegemonic masculinities are multiple, shifting and contested, with hegemonic masculinity defending its position of dominance over subordinated men and women. Hegemonic masculinity is as reliant on its subordination of other(ed) men, producing hierarchical relationships within masculinity with the 'global normative' (Connell, 1995) constructed as white, middle class and heterosexual.

Cinema, particularly Hollywood, has also been instrumental in producing and giving meaning to these discourses, lending dramatic shape to the expectations and conventions of 'real masculinity' (Aitken and Lukinbeal, 1997). The soldier is a dominant version of 'real masculinity' (Spicer, 2003; Eberwein, 2007; Donald and MacDonald, 2011), and is epitomised by combat classics such as *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). Presented as 'ideal models' for 'real men', these masculine types are positioned as normative in Hollywood and are often characterised by traits of leadership, heroism, bravery and brotherhood (Connell, 1995; Clarke, 2006). 'Authentic' sequences in combat films naturalise masculinist ideologies in an environment of war (Gates, 2005), using narrative strategies such as the father-son relationship, and acts of violence as part of the coming of age ritual, through which masculinity is able to reproduce itself without the presence of women. Whilst these genres and their archetypes are fluid, adapting in different social and political contexts, they have largely retained their whiteness over time. Therefore, whilst *Days of Glory* (2006) and *Free Men* (2011) reproduce and mimic hegemonic gender norms in their narratives, they reveal the gendered white normativity of Hollywood masculinities (see Hastie, 2020).

These political decisions taken by the films prompt defensive reactions from professional and amateur critics alike, provoking important questions about the construction of white masculinity in relation to the challenge of otherness. Stories of cultural encounters and masculine 'adventure' in distant places have long been an imaginative source for the construction of racial and gender identities (Phillips, 1997). However, the online and often anonymous nature of identity formation makes white masculinist subject positions both challenging to identify and imperative to understand. Whilst some reviewers explicitly identify as white and male, the majority do not and so I make no empirical claims as to the 'whiteness' or gender identity of individual critics. Rather, whiteness and masculinity are considered not as biological categories but as socially constructed (Nakayama and Krizek, 1995; Ahmed, 2007), their power and dominance drawing strength from their invisibility (Dyer, 1997). The discourse of the reviews and messageboard discussions proceed from and intersect with rhetorical strategies of authority that centre white masculinity as the norm, with those accepting, internalising and performing them adopting white masculine positions.

This includes those who are *not* white, who adopt and/or suppress these norms, thus profiting from and contributing to established forms of whiteness. However, Ahmed (2007) points out that whilst non-whites can participate in whiteness, it does not 'extend their shape' in white spaces, and rather always privileges the white body.

Ahmed's (2007) phenomenological approach to how whiteness reproduces itself can help identify how white masculinities operate in online spaces such as IMDb messageboards. Spaces of collective online discussion like IMDb can be seen as a secure location for the negotiation of white masculinity and the production of white male groups in relation to non-white others and idealised forms of the white male self. To borrow Ahmed's (2007) terms, the particular messageboard threads responding to these films become a spaces shaped by 'habitual practices' of whiteness, and that in turn 'orientates' white (male) bodies. Scholars have explored the new ways in which racism operates with the aid of the Internet (Raj, 2011; Daniels, 2013; Cleland, 2013; Kanjere, 2019). For race scholars, the Internet is as an extension of the public sphere which 'devotes itself to content that speaks to the interests and fears of affluent white men, with people of colour and white women as either the objects or the limits of the audience' (Kanjere, 2019: 2165-2166). The Internet plays an important role in the construction of social identity and (imagined) communities (including masculinity and whiteness), as well as in mediating social control and resistance (Hughey, 2008). Whilst acknowledging the liberating possibilities of Grindr for gay men for example, Raj (2011) intimately describes the ways in which the social networking app marks out and orientates non-white bodies within an 'economy of desire', reproducing white norms of sexuality and masculinity through the rejection and objectification of othered bodies. Focusing on whiteness, Kanjere (2019) interrogates the ways in which whiteness deploys defensive strategies in new ways online, emphasising tropes of white vulnerability and innocence against the perceived threat of multiculturalism. These discourses are aided by online platforms, including forums and messageboards (Cleland, 2013), which offer opportunities for racism to migrate online and find support with relative ease and anonymity.

The 'manosphere' is an online network of anti-feminist or men's rights groups that scholars have studied (Kimmel, 2013; Schmitz and Kazyak, 2016; Ging, 2017; Van Valkenburgh, 2018). Some argue that we must urgently examine the online spaces in which patriarchy operates, arguing that 'the discursive tone and communicative politics of men's rights have changed substantially' (Ging, 2017: 2) because of the Internet. The result is a more 'extreme' and 'amorphous' masculinist ideology, with the Internet amplifying what Ging (2017) refers to as an 'aggrieved manhood'. Not unlike Kanjere's (2019) recent work on whiteness then, Ging (2017) shows how discourses of 'innocence' and 'vulnerability', present masculinity as under attack by feminism. Similarly, the Internet provides 'a more legitimate, accessible space' (Schmitz and Kazyak, 2016: 10) for patriarchal and masculinist discourses, and a sense of community through which to reconstruct individual and group identity. These studies of both racism and patriarchy online raise further difficulties in interrogating white masculinities, and what the specific online element tells us about the shifting nature of whiteness and masculinity. This article contributes to the above scholarship in finding that

these particular facets of white masculinity are defensively produced in relation to culturally 'othered' men (Said, 1978) on film, and in relation to each other in homosocial support networks (Sedgwick, 1985) that are facilitated by and expanded through the online space of IMDb. The specificity of the cinematic encounter in this production of subject positions increases our understanding of how publics produce and consume objects to reorder racialised and gendered subjectivities. This has two key aspects: first, the othering and rejection of Muslim men through racist discourses; and second, the constitution and reproduction of white male knowledge as defence mechanism.

## Methodology

IMDb reviews and messageboards allow for the collection of shared and diverse responses, unprompted reactions, and voluntary interactions with film and audiences. The use of anonymity through usernames and pseudonyms amongst amateur critics makes it impossible to make empirical claims about their gender or ethnic identity, but rather reveals the ways in which people occupy, produce and contest different subject positions online through rhetoric (Bhabha, 1998; Ahmed, 2007). Researching IMDb therefore provides valuable insights into the geographies of online racialised and gendered spaces, and the ways in which they become shaped by powerful voices.

The Internet Movie Database (IMDb) originally founded in the UK in 1990 is now based in Seattle after being bought by Amazon in 1998. Users can rate individual films out of 10, and a mean score is displayed next to the film title on the home page. These scores are based on user (or 'amateur' or 'lay') reviews, rather than critical (or 'professional') reviews. Whilst user reviews are given pride of place, IMDb also provides a range of critical reviews, with links to the original source, and messageboard forums in which users engage in conversation and debate about the film, although this feature was shut down by IMDb in February 2017.

I focused on all available messageboard discussions relating to *Days of Glory* (2006) and *Free Men* (2011), whilst also drawing on professional critic reviews for further material, producing a total of 53 messageboard threads on *Days of Glory* (2006), ranging from 1 to 35 contributions. Messageboard threads were considerably less for *Free Men* (2011), with just 5 messageboard threads available. The messageboard threads analysed here were produced between the years 2007 and 2015.

Unlike film studies' dominant approach to audiences, this article does not take the 'spectator' as its primary object – that is the 'theoretical' audience based on inferred meanings and interpretive cues in the text that invite particular readings according to positionality. Rather, it follows in the footsteps of the likes of David Morley (1980), Janet Staiger (2000) and Stuart Hall (1980) by arguing that filmic texts are read differently by a range of different audiences (as opposed to 'the audience' as a generalised and identifiable public). Gillian Rose (2016: 38), drawing on Fiske (1992), defines the process of 'audiencing' as 'the process by which a visual image has its meanings renegotiated, or even rejected, by particular

audiences watching in specific circumstances'. In order to understand this process, I used discourse analysis to address key questions about how audiences produce what Said (1978) famously refers to as 'imaginative geographies'. Discourse analysis is therefore implemented here with a particular focus on the production of postcolonial knowledge and power by audiences, paying attention to how language reflects power relations and the production of subjectivities. Drawing on Waitt (2010: 238), the aim of discourse analysis is not to establish the 'truth' or 'falsity' of audience's statements about the films, but as a way to further understand the contexts and power relations that privilege and validate their particular views and categorisations of the world.

## **Deviant Muslim Men**

'There's obviously a far more complex, tragic, and adult tale to be told than the earnest, PC propaganda offered up in *Days of Glory*' (Hendrix, 2006)

The underlying current of *The New York Sun's* review of *Days of Glory* (2006), of which the above quote is a sample, is one of suspicion: a suspicion rooted in orientalist assumptions that 'Muslims... are incapable of telling the truth...' (Said, 1978: 318). Whilst Grady Hendrix's review is relatively generous about the film *as a film*, stating that the 'battle scenes are actually far more coherent than those in 'Saving Private Ryan', this reviewer desires more than just mimicry from a combat genre film that "focuses on ethnic minorities"' (Hendrix, 2006). The review makes clear that more 'complexity' is needed to tell 'the actual history of France's colonial soldiers... a rape-and-murder spree conducted against the civilian population' (Ibid). It also reveals what some critics expect from a 'foreign' film; that is, a subtler exposé in the art-house style, and ultimately a desire for something different. The central tone and language of the review reflects a condescending colonial discourse that infantilises the colonised man ('more adult tale'), and signals towards a white masculinist reading that rejects the representation of 'controlled' and 'heroic' Muslim soldiers, imagining and producing an image of the hyper-sexual and barbarically violent Arab man in its place (see Said, 1978; Bernstein and Studlar, 1997; Shaheen, 2001).

As many scholars have argued, 'soldier heroes' (Dawson, 1994; Gibson, 1994; Donald and McDonald, 2011) have for centuries been figures from whom men learn to be men. Likewise, war is a space in which soldier masculinities, epitomised by strength, virility and courage, are formed. Audiences in Britain and the US have a wealth of combat films from which to choose stretching from the end of WW2 to the present-day, including *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *1917* (2019), in which white men demonstrate their 'manliness'. It is against this catalogue of white male heroism, and the wealth of racist Hollywood stereotypes about which Shaheen (2001) extensively writes, that *Days of Glory* (2006), and *Free Men* (2011) are read by Grady Hendrix, and others.

One common trope of the combat film is soldiers attempting to court local women while they are at war and is indeed central to Roshdy Zem's character Messaoud in *Days of Glory* (2006). He falls in love with Frenchwoman Irene and is the only character in the film that has such love interests. Jamel Debbouze's character Said in contrast, is infantilised and feminised by his comrades and superiors. As the men liberate Provence, the first time in France for most, Said tells of his bravery to a young Frenchwoman. The scene between Said and the Frenchwoman in *Days of Glory* (2006) invokes the racial and gendered power dynamics between the pair, in a series of reverse high and low angled shots, positioning Said below the white woman, unable to perform a 'successful' virile heterosexual masculinity, and ignorant to her sexual advances. However, Jim Emerson's review for *Roger Ebert's* film blog reads something completely different:

as he proudly recounts his battlefield exploits to a young Frenchwoman, Said's tale of heroism climaxes in a passionate declaration: 'I free a country and it's my country. Even if I've never seen it before. It's my country.' This speech is doubly touching because it's not only an expression of Said's hopes for himself as a Frenchman, but a somewhat awkward and overzealous attempt at seduction. The women of France, he fought for them and they should be his, too. (Emerson, 2007)

Like Grady Hendrix's review in *The New York Sun*, Jim Emerson overlooks the racial and gendered poignancy of this scene, which works to frame a boyish, innocent and naïve Said standing in contrast to the sexually confident white woman. Said is interpreted by Emerson through Orientalist lenses; he is not as a subject within *Days of Glory* (2006), but a reflection of the critic's implicit standpoints on Muslim men as patriarchal ('they should be his too') and sexually driven ('overzealous attempt at seduction').

These discourses of suspicion about historical accuracy, rooted in the racist stereotype of the sexually-deviant Muslim man, are more explicit amongst some amateur critics. In a number of IMDb messageboard discussions the common default position is to question the 'truth' of the film, by asking questions like, 'were the north-african troops feared by civilians?'<sup>3</sup>. These threads centre on *Days of Glory's* (2006) perceived historical and political currency. Contributors provide different sorts of 'evidence' to back up their claims, such as anecdotes, videos, and links to articles or websites, whilst some tell others to 'google it'. Inherent suspicion is reflected in this comment on the film, which states:

there have been many stories about the brutality of North-african soldiers, especially during the Italy campaign. They were known to be ferocious soldiers who never took prisoners but the stories about them raping women they had

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<sup>3</sup> IMDb Days of Glory Messageboard, 'were the north-african troops feared by civilians?', *IMDb*, September 27, 2008, <https://moviechat.org/tt0444182/Indigenes/58c7c306f9fcca09a0dcec6d/were-the-north-african-troops-feared-by-civilians>.



just liberated from the Germans is truly unsettling. This text is from Wikipedia, which I'm certainly aware of not being the most reliable of sources... I will pass no judgement here but I'm curious about if some maybe knows more about this<sup>4</sup>

Relying solely on user-generated website *Wikipedia*, they begin a debate based on misgivings that the heroic narrative of *Days of Glory* (2006) may be false. They get their answers, as several contributors respond to the (loaded) question with a variety of sources to support. A number of responses are anecdotal and family related, as the first response recalls that,

my grandfather and grandmother were forced to work in Germany... They were freed by Moroccan troops. They once told me the Moroccans acted like savages and raped a lot of German women. That's all I know about this subject.<sup>5</sup>

A common source of evidence is the 1960 film starring Sophia Loren entitled *Two Women*. The film tells the story of an Italian mother and her twelve-year-old daughter, who are gang-raped by a group of Moroccan soldiers. For some, this film is the only reference they have for North African soldiers in WW2:

...the only films I can remember North African troops was 'Two Women' and the Moroccan soldiers who raped the two ladies in the film! So, fortunately, these brave men get their due in 'Days of Glory'.<sup>6</sup>

Whilst this amateur critic's only reference point is the Sophia Loren film, they recognise that it might skew what the English-speaking Western filmgoer understands of the history of North African soldiers and acknowledge that *Days of Glory* (2006) provides another story, rather than necessarily a 'true' or 'false' one. The vague and general language however ('very well documented', 'many stories'), and lack of evidence presented by contributors to the discussion, provokes others into countering their arguments, particularly regarding the scale of alleged crimes, with some even hinting towards the ways in which they are racialised:

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<sup>4</sup> IMDb *Days of Glory* Messageboard, 'Re: were the north-african troops feared by civilians?', *IMDb*, September 27, 2008 (See url in footnote 3).

<sup>5</sup> IMDb *Days of Glory* Messageboard, 'Re: were the north-african troops feared by civilians?', *IMDb*, December 2, 2008 (See url in footnote 3).

<sup>6</sup> IMDb *Days of Glory* Messageboard, 'Re: were the north-african troops feared by civilians?', *IMDb*, January 3, 2012 (See url in footnote 3).

... one rape of white woman by a Moroccan would be perceived as much more scandalous than a 1,000 raped by other soldiers. It's the whole 'they' come to take our women fear that instills a lot of rumour.<sup>7</sup>

I'd just like to point out that what the 'indigenes' may have done in Italy (rape and pillaging) is not really all that different from just about any other conquering army that I have heard of.<sup>8</sup>

What I find disturbing is that this war was waged mostly by European troops, yet somehow Moroccan troops are used as scapegoats for the rapes.<sup>9</sup>

Whilst professional critics such as Grady Hendrix (*The New York Sun*) and Jim Emerson (*Roger Ebert*) publish widely distributed reviews with some authority, IMDb messageboards present opportunities for debate and checks. The contributors above directly respond to some of the simplistic, ill-informed and Islamophobic readings of *Days of Glory* (2006), that achieve recognition of its protagonists via well-worn Orientalist stereotypes of the Arab's sexual violence. They point directly to the hypocrisy of those focusing exclusively on this discourse, which implies WW2 for the West was clean, pure, moral and conducted by heroic, controlled men: in short, sanitised, in comparison to the impurity and deviance brought by the 'other' to despoil their history, and their women.

Whilst *Days of Glory's* (2006) protagonists are assumed to be rapists, and therefore positioned outside of the white heroic narratives of 'the good war', *Free Men's* (2011) Muslim characters are discursively constructed as Nazi sympathisers and anti-Semites, and therefore not admissible into the 'justes' narrative of the French Resistance in which the film tries to situate itself. Whilst one contributor to discussions about *Days of Glory* (2006) asks 'were the north Africans feared by civilians?', the only lengthy IMDb messageboard thread about *Free Men* (2011) asks as its title, 'did this really happen?'.<sup>10</sup> The starting point for this review reflects an inherent cynicism about the historical accuracy of the film, and in asking the question, invites others to do the same. That is not to say audiences should automatically accept historical narratives as 'truth', but that in Staiger's (2000) words reviewers are 'perverse' in what they deem worthy for discussion, in this case a cynicism which stems from Islamophobia. One critic's response to the question 'did this really happen?' is a reflection of this:

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<sup>7</sup> IMDb *Days of Glory* Messageboard, 'Re: were the north-african troops feared by civilians?', *IMDb*, November 16, 2008 (See url in footnote 3).

<sup>8</sup> IMDb *Days of Glory* Messageboard, 'Re: were the north-african troops feared by civilians?', *IMDb*, October 1, 2008 (See url in footnote 3).

<sup>9</sup> IMDb *Days of Glory* Messageboard, 'Re: were the north-african troops feared by civilians?', *IMDb*, July 27, 2015 (See url in footnote 3).

<sup>10</sup> IMDb *Free Men* Messageboard, 'Did this really happen?', *IMDb*, March 22, 2012, <https://moviechat.org/tt1699185/Les-hommes-libres/58c821fc2214d80b5cfffac99/Did-this-really-happen>.

considering the fact that the Muslims largely sided with the Nazis (there were 500,000 Muslim volunteers in Waffen SS alone) I find the premise very hard to believe.<sup>11</sup>

They are rebuked by others, however, and other users challenge them for evidence, whilst others uncritically declare that 'this film is based on fact'.<sup>12</sup> They do find agreement in other places, however, as professional film critic Dennis Schwartz takes as his starting point apparent Muslim support for the Nazis, as he says:

it would make for an inspirational human interest story if true, but the historical facts are that the Muslim community on the contrary was known to be hostile to the Jews and aided the Nazis in sending many Jews to the death camps. (Schwartz, 2012)

Like the language used about *Days of Glory's* (2006) violent Muslim protagonists, Dennis Schwartz with confidence tells his readership of the 'historical facts', which he does not provide evidence for, rather relying on a more 'common-sense' point of view. He later updated his review to admit that he was wrong after somebody informed him the film was based on fact, though his default position was that the Muslim creators of the film were lying. Conversely, others celebrate the inclusion of Muslims into white western histories, particularly official memorials and popular culture, in an attempt at championing multiculturalism. One critic, in an IMDb user review, who also makes connections between post-9/11 Islamophobia and Israel, argues that:

among the Righteous Among Nations at Yad Vasham, Israel's official memorial of Ha Shoah or Holocaust, the names of Arabs who saved Jews are absent... In his own way, Ismael Ferroukhi is trying to correct this historical omission.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, professional film critic Erik Lundegaard makes historical and cultural comparisons between the story of the Paris Mosque and Oskar Schindler, made famous by the Steven Spielberg film *Schindler's List* (1994). Not only do the film's Muslims deserve to be considered as justes, but *Free Men* (2011) also implicitly deserves a place amongst the canon of Hollywood war films:

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<sup>11</sup> IMDb *Free Men* Messageboard, 'Re: Did this really happen?', *IMDb*, September 26, 2012 (See url in footnote 10).

<sup>12</sup> IMDb *Free Men* Messageboard, 'Re: Did this really happen?', *IMDb*, September 29, 2012 (See url in footnote 10).

<sup>13</sup> IMDb *Free Men* User Review, 'Les Hommes Libres', *IMDb*, March 25, 2012, [https://www.imdb.com/review/rw2586480/?ref=tt\\_urv](https://www.imdb.com/review/rw2586480/?ref=tt_urv).

the number of Jews Ben Ghabrit's Mosque saved is debated these days, but both sides agree it's somewhere between 500 and 1600. That's Oskar Schindler territory. (Lundergaard, 2012)

So far, I have demonstrated that a number of amateur and professional critics read both *Days of Glory* (2006) and *Free Men* (2011) for their historical (in)accuracies, often from the position of distrust and suspicion that racialises (and genders) their male characters as rapists, murderers, Nazi collaborators and anti-Semites, rejecting the 'heroic' soldier and resistance narratives of the films. Others contest these views in IMDb messageboard debates, rather attempting to celebrate the inclusion of Muslim men into the popular cultural archive of WW2. These discourses constitute imagined deviant Muslim masculinities and they do so in relation to knowledgeable white masculinities. As Said (1978) famously argued, the construction of the 'other' is dependent on the construction of the 'self', or more specifically in this instance, the production of white hegemonic masculinity is dependent on the othered Muslim man (Moreton-Robinson, 2004). What follows develops the analysis so far, in interrogating the specific ways in which critics produce, negotiate and inhabit white masculine subjectivities in relation to the films and their characters, using and extending these particular messageboards on IMDb as homosocial white spaces of support, solidarity and contention.

## **Knowledgeable White Men**

In making explicit claims to, and homosocial approval of, WW2 knowledges, film reception discourses around *Days of Glory* (2006) produce and inhabit forms of white masculinity. Access to knowledge is shaped and regulated by both whiteness and masculinity (Moreton-Robinson, 2004). 'White masculinities' (Dyer, 1997; Carroll, 2011) are defined by their expression in relation to subordinated others, and in response to the perceived threats of multiculturalism and globalisation (Nayak, 2003). In focusing particularly on the constitution of white masculinities in a series of lengthy IMDb messageboard threads, it is apparent that these subjectivities are negotiated as audiences fixate on the banal materiality of war, particularly the perceived historical 'accuracy' of the weapons used, and how this intersects with questions aimed at the actor Jamel Debbouze (who plays Said in *Days of Glory*) to perform the role of the soldier due to his real-life disability. Together, these discourses do not innocently draw attention to the perceived 'inauthenticity' of the film as a failure to 'accurately' represent war as claimed, but they importantly demonstrate the anxious need to maintain dominance over the boundaries of history and the production of knowledge, using and extending the homosocial white spaces of masculinity that are prevalent on these IMDb messageboards.

Scholars have argued that guns themselves are symbolic of masculinity (Gibson, 1994; Connell, 1995; Stroud, 2012). Whilst Stroud's (2012) work considers the reasons for men both

carrying and using firearms in the US, Gibson's (1994) notion of the 'warrior fantasy' examines the ways in which men (re)imagine and (re)construct, or 'desire' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) masculine identities in relation to the military and firearms. Gibson's (1994) central argument is that this cultural relationship to war and guns emerged in America after the military humiliation in the Vietnam War. Hollywood films such as *Rambo* (1982) sought to explore, and ultimately overcome, the threats posed by military defeat. In the case of the IMDb reviews and messageboards here, men demonstrate and seek to prove their superior knowledge of, and affinity to, weapons of war, at the same time as subordinating other(ed) men (Dyer, 1997).

One initial observation about the inaccuracy of guns used in *Days of Glory* (2006), begins a protracted IMDb messageboard thread in which other men lament the lack of attention to historical detail in the film, and congratulate one another on their superior knowledge:

The rifles carried by the French North African troops in this movie are incorrect for the period. Many of the men are carrying the French MAS model 1936, others 8mm German Mausers, a few have M-1 Garands, a few others Lee Enfields, and a couple even have older Lebel-Berthier rifles. A small number even have US Model 1917 Eddystone Enfields which were indeed widely issued to these troops. Let's see, that's a total of 5 different types of ammunition!!<sup>14</sup>

Whilst claiming to be innocent in their desire to simply question the inconsistency of props in the film, this amateur critic's intimate knowledge of WW2 weaponry first of all privileges a concern for an 'accurate' representation, over the broader political message the film attempts to convey. This privileging of the 'real' also deflects anxieties that white men might have over claims by 'others' to 'their' history. Others agree, as the discussion thread develops into a homosocial approval of superior historical knowledge, with one replying with further details, that '...only the 1st Paratroop Regiment of France was issued the M1 Garand, of which they received a tad over 700. The rest of the re-armed French Army was, however, issued many M1 Carbines'.<sup>15</sup> In response, the creator of the thread commends their contribution, and the pair congratulate each other:

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<sup>14</sup> IMDb *Days of Glory* Messageboard, 'Many of the rifles are not authentic', IMDb, August 20, 2007, <https://moviechat.org/tt0444182/Indigenes/58c7c306f9fcca09a0dcec81/Many-of-the-rifles-are-not-authentic>.

<sup>15</sup> IMDb *Days of Glory* Messageboard, 'Re: Many of the rifles are not authentic', IMDb, September 30, 2007 (See url in footnote 14).

My compliments. Your knowledge is impressive... Do you know how many 1932 Levels were produced?<sup>16</sup>

...I'm a history major after all<sup>17</sup>

wow!! The breadth of your knowledge is most impressive and far surpasses mine!<sup>18</sup>

This exemplifies how these particular IMDb messageboard threads work as a male homosocial support networks as participants attempt to consolidate and identify with forms of knowledgeable masculinity. Their lengthy discussions, of which the above is just a fragment, seeks to reinforce the sanctity of WW2, threatened by *Days of Glory's* (2006) perceived carelessness in obtaining accurate props.

Not all discourses which compete for authority over the films do so by boasting of their historical knowledge. Whilst the above critics possess detailed knowledge of weaponry, others directly challenge their mere 'fantasist' *discussion* of guns, as opposed to actually *using* guns:

I bore easily of such things. I am a bit of a gun geek, but I find so many armchair warriors who obsess over the tiniest thing, from grains of bullets (funny how few call them rounds) down to the finish on the inside of a barrel, yet few have ever used a weapon for real and actually get much of their info from watching movies.<sup>19</sup>

This amateur critic's direct complaint about the 'armchair warrior', or what Dawson (1994) might call 'warrior fantasists', implies that they are not 'real men', and therefore confirms that the negotiation of white masculinity takes place *within* the dominant group as a competition for hegemony, and not solely between white and Muslim men. Their dismissal then, is another kind of 'elaborate fantasy', that allows them to 'claim dominance and assert hegemonic masculinity' by claiming, sometimes demonstrating, they are 'able and ready to defend themselves' (Stroud, 2012: 229-230). The creator of the thread, however, reflects similar concerns and chimes with Stroud's (2012) definition of rifle masculinity as they lament the 'blunting' regulation of guns in the UK and the US:

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<sup>16</sup> IMDb *Days of Glory* Messageboard, 'Re: Many of the rifles are not authentic', *IMDb*, October 8, 2007 (See url in footnote 14).

<sup>17</sup> IMDb *Days of Glory* Messageboard, 'Re: Many of the rifles are not authentic', *IMDb*, April 2, 2008 (See url in footnote 14).

<sup>18</sup> IMDb *Days of Glory* Messageboard, 'Re: Many of the rifles are not authentic', *IMDb*, April 11, 2008 (See url in footnote 14).

<sup>19</sup> IMDb *Days of Glory* Messageboard, 'Re: Many of the rifles are not authentic', *IMDb*, July 24, 2013 (See url in footnote 14).

the reason for the lack of machine guns is probably related to cost and the ridiculously strict firearms laws of modern times. I understand that in England the government is starting to harass historical re-enactors about *muzzle* loading weapons and even *blunted swords* and spears! Even in the U.S. the National Parks no longer allow *blank firing* of muzzleloaders by American Revolution Civil War re-enactors (emphasis added).<sup>20</sup>

This comment is laden with sexual and phallic metaphors ('blunted swords and spears' and 'blank firing'), and reflects a fear that not only does *Days of Glory* (2006) threaten the historical purity of WW2, but that the State may make them impotent via a regulation that threatens a version of masculinity enhanced by the power and domination afforded by guns (Meltzer, 2009; Stroud, 2012). Despite the dominance of this 'warrior fantasy' discourse on the thread, it must be noted that others challenge their 'sad' conversation, in particular:

You all remind me of the comic-book store guy in *The Simpsons*. Are you all trainspotters too? No-one cares that the rifles were 'wrong'. Yes, I'd care if I saw an uzi or even an ipod but come on guys. This is the saddest post I've read for ages.<sup>21</sup>

However, such challenges to the 'warriors' emanates from a desire to further compete, as they have gone out of their way to click into a thread specifically about the inaccuracy of weaponry in the film in order to berate its contributors, and in an attempt to marginalise 'comic-book-guy' and 'nerd' (Kendall, 2000) masculinities. One critic defends the accuracy debate, arguing that 'this thread is not pretending to be THE one about the film; it's dealing with some (not minor) details, that count in historical war movie, in this case, weaponry' (emphasis original).<sup>22</sup> The back-and-forth conversations across these threads about weaponry epitomise the homosocial support networks that shore up male authority over knowledge and simultaneously the competition between men and versions of masculinities through different relationships with weapons (Stroud, 2012).

Three messageboard threads are also dedicated to debating the physical disability of Jamel Debbouze in WW2 combat film *Days of Glory* (2006), further underpinning the processes of negotiation through which white masculinities are constituted and contested in relation to films and on IMDb. Whilst previous discussions debate the inaccuracy of the rifles, and further the inauthenticity of the films, debates around Debbouze's (in)ability to perform as a soldier, and by extension a man, further challenges the historicity of *Days of Glory* (2006).

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<sup>20</sup> IMDb *Days of Glory* Messageboard, 'Re: Many of the rifles are not authentic', IMDb, April 11, 2008 (See url in footnote 14).

<sup>21</sup> IMDb *Days of Glory* Messageboard, 'Re: Many of the rifles are not authentic', IMDb, December 30, 2008 (See url in footnote 14).

<sup>22</sup> IMDb *Days of Glory* Messageboard, 'Re: Many of the rifles are not authentic', IMDb, May 21, 2009 (See url in footnote 14).

As some of the above comments demonstrate, the ability not just to ‘fantasise’ about firearms but to actually be capable of handling them is an important attribute of ‘manliness’ (Meltzer, 2009; Stroud, 2012).

In 1989, Jamel Debbouze lost the use of his right arm in an accident, prompting him from then on to place his hand in his pocket when acting to conceal it. In France, his huge fame and ‘stardom’ (Vanderschelden, 2005) somewhat overcomes this, particularly his role in a number of comedy films and as a popular stand-up comedian. Playing a soldier in a film like *Days of Glory* (2006) however, for the critics at least, poses what are perceived to be important questions, as one amateur critic begins a messageboard thread by asking ‘explain why a one-handed man would carry a bolt-action rifle, please’,<sup>23</sup> suggesting that:

this made no sense and was a constant distraction in the movie. Can someone explain why Said would be carrying a bolt-action rifle if there was no way in hell he could possibly fire it?<sup>24</sup>

Concerns about historical inauthenticity are therefore extended from the gun to the body itself, with both interrupting the authenticity of the film’s narrative. Whilst I suspect that if pressed on these comments, contributors would claim that it is common sense, these discourses reflect a common trope that disability and masculinity are in direct conflict (see Shuttleworth, Wedgwood and Wilson, 2012). Jamel Debbouze’s Said, primarily due to his physical disability, is seen as being incapable of being a soldier, and is therefore perceived as dependent and helpless, in relation to the virile and independent, able and ideal forms of masculinity. Another IMDb user, who in previous threads boasted of their more hands-on experience with weapons, exemplifies this performative able-bodied masculinity, reappearing here to reflect on their own real-world experiences:

it can be done one-handed. Not very easy (I also tried it to see) or accurate without a LOT of practice, but still possible. I’d not likely put him in the front line myself, but then I’m not a French Officer in WW2, so can’t comment further (emphasis original).<sup>25</sup>

If he is not seen as a ‘man’, because he cannot fight on the front line, then what does Said’s marginalised masculinity look like? This is partially answered by others in the messageboards, as tropes of dependence and helplessness suggest infantilisation, which is a key theme in

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<sup>23</sup> IMDb *Days of Glory* Messageboard, ‘Explain why a one-handed man would carry a bolt-action rifle, please’, *IMDb*, July 6, 2008, <https://moviechat.org/tt0444182/Indigenes/58c7c307f9fcca09a0dcecb6/Explain-why-a-one-handed-man-would-carry-a-bolt-action-rifle-please>.

<sup>24</sup> IMDb *Days of Glory* Messageboard, ‘Re: Explain why a one-handed man would carry a bolt-action rifle, please’, *IMDb*, July 6, 2008 (See url in footnote 23).

<sup>25</sup> IMDb *Days of Glory* Messageboard, ‘Re: Explain why a one-handed man would carry a bolt-action rifle, please’, *IMDb*, August 26, 2011 (See url in footnote 23).



*Days of Glory* (2006). Therefore, for some, Jamel Debbouze functions well in his role as Said, as a 'kid', a 'little innocent soldier'. Vanderschelden (2005: 63) in her work on Debbouze's stardom in France, also comments that his 'physical features hardly evoke the male French star stereotype. He is small, of slim build, and dark-skinned, and has a physical disability'. In terms of this film then, audiences attempt to rationalise the casting of Debbouze based on the desperate reality of the French army at the time:

...why don't you just imagine that he's a kid from North Africa fighting in the Italian mountains, snowy France and freezing Alsace – and so might have cold hands. Do you often have problems telling the difference between reality and films?<sup>26</sup>

...he is the perfect size and has the perfect face for the little innocent soldier, not-made-for-combat, Sergeant's favourite servant, should-have-listened-to-mother-and-stayed-out-of-this guy.<sup>27</sup>

Some therefore see a place for Debbouze in the film. Vanderschelden (2005: 68), though speaking in the context of French audiences, argues that his 'vulnerable side' characterised by his small stature and physical disability, works to 'reassure' audiences used to violent and threatening non-white men in Maghrebi-French cinema, and so creates 'an acceptable, non-threatening image of Beur masculinity'. For English-speaking Western critics, Jamel Debbouze's Said sits on a continuum of Arab-Muslim masculinities in which some versions of masculinity are rejected as too 'threatening', whilst some are accepted and incorporated into 'desired' forms of Muslim masculinity (Massad, 2007). In objectifying the actor's body in relation to notions of authenticity and accuracy, critiquing his presence in the hallowed white masculine spaces of WW2 history and the battlefield, critics work to construct an authoritative and knowledgeable white masculinity, facilitated through online homosocial networks.

## Conclusion

This article has shown how online spaces of film criticism have the potential to facilitate the formation of new forms of white masculinity. It has been shown that both professional and amateur critics of Maghrebi-French films *Days of Glory* (2006) and *Free Men* (2011) work to organise racialised masculine identities, relationships and homosocial solidarity in relation to the culturally othered Muslim men of the films. Some reject the versions of Muslim

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<sup>26</sup> IMDb *Days of Glory* Messageboard, 'Re: Explain why a one-handed man would carry a bolt-action rifle, please', IMDb, September 7, 2009 (See url in footnote 23).

<sup>27</sup> IMDb *Days of Glory* Messageboard, 'Re: Explain why a one-handed man would carry a bolt-action rifle, please', IMDb, July 9, 2009 (See url in footnote 23).

masculinity presented in the films, replacing them with ones that fit more familiar and Islamophobic geopolitical imaginaries. In doing so, they refashion and reassert white masculinist authority over historical knowledge. This endeavour to reposition the white male at the centre of WW2 histories reveals broader anxieties about gender and race in the cultural encounter. That is to say, in objectifying and racialising the films and their characters, critics reject their adoption of popular Hollywood genre, deny their access to white forms of masculinity (Selod, 2015), and therefore actively (re)produce hegemonic white masculinities and secure their monopoly over knowledge with the assistance of relative anonymity and homosocial support on IMDb.

This article contributes to emerging work on race, gender and the Internet (Raj, 2011; Cleland, 2013; Daniels, 2013; Ging, 2017; Kanjere, 2019; Van Valkenburgh, 2018), drawing on both critical race (Ahmed, 2007) and masculinities scholarship (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). It shows how amateur critics use IMDb to retrieve and reproduce racialised gender norms. Whilst IMDb offers a potentially liberating space for cultural encounters, the negotiation of difference and ability to innocently exchange opinions on films, it may lead some audiences to create an online space that reorders racialised and gendered identities. In line with recent work by Ging (2017) and Kanjere (2019), IMDb amplifies dominant voices, and reflects the societal hegemony of whiteness and masculinity as opposed to challenging it. Whilst IMDb's importance as a space of film criticism is reduced since it closed down its messageboard function, it nevertheless reveals insights into the possibilities and dangers of online film commentary that might also be applied to other forums like Reddit or Twitter. In this case, it has been shown that specific white masculine subject positions are produced through these consumptive practices and in relation to the otherness of the films. Therefore, hegemonic practices of identity and group subjectivity are re-energised through accessible online forums, with audiences taking advantage of the relative anonymity and homosocial environment of IMDb in critiquing these films.

## **Biographical Note**

Dr. Alex Hastie is a lecturer in human geography at Coventry University, with expertise in film/cinema, audiences, postcolonial and popular culture. Alex has researched and written about the relationship between postcolonial cinema, popular culture and film audiences. His PhD, *Postcolonial Popcorn*, examined contemporary Maghrebi-French film for the ways it uses Hollywood genre to tell unfamiliar stories in familiar ways. Alex is now pursuing new research into how people engage with diverse film cultures through online streaming platforms ranging from Netflix to MUBI.

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## Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks to both reviewers for their constructive comments on this paper. Thanks also go to the late Martin Barker who gave me kind and generous feedback on early drafts of this paper, and to Sue Turnbull and Liz Evans for their support in the final stages of publication. Also to my PhD supervisors Richard Phillips and Eric Olund, and colleagues Michelle Newman and Joe Thorogood for their advice and comments. Lastly, thanks to James Robinson and his students at MMU Geography for inviting me to talk about this research.

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## Filmography

- 1917* (Sam Mendes, 2019)  
*Days of Glory* (Rachid Bouchareb, 2006)  
*Free Men* (Ismaël Ferroukhi, 2011)  
*Rambo* (Ted Kotcheff, 1982)  
*Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998)  
*Sands of Iwo Jima* (Allan Dwan, 1949)  
*Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1994)  
*Two Women* (Vittorio De Sica, 1960)