Obsession: Radical Islam’s War Against the West

Obsession purports to expose elements within mainstream Muslim society intent on propagandizing “militant Islam” or “islamofascism.” How does Obsession make its case? What sorts of organized persuasion does the film expose? Do you find the use of Arab and Palestinian television persuasive? Do you find the use of experts compelling? How about the historical parallels?

“It’s important to remember most Muslims are peaceful and do not support terror,” Obsession establishes in its opening minute. “This is not a film about them.” Despite beginning on this responsible note, however, Obsession quickly abandons what the educated viewer soon realizes is a hollow disclaimer. Manipulating Arab and Palestinian television, the film depicts the entirety of Muslim society as holding a “radical worldview” that “poses a threat to us all” in order to blur the line between Muslim radicalists and ordinary Muslims, and ultimately scare viewers instead of presenting a fair and balanced perspective on the tension between the Arab world and the United States.

The use of Arab and Palestinian television is not inherently problematic. Indeed, the impact of media on societal beliefs is an issue of vast importance, and direct footage thus imperative in portraying this topic. However, it is the manner in which Obsession integrates these television clips into the film that raises concern. Rather than using the subtitled video to give Western viewers a comprehensive lens through which to consider formulation of public opinion in Arab culture, the film only replays select messages. “Death to America” is the sole perspective Obsession purports. This is not to say this attitude is not seen in abundance on Arab television screens, but the lack of variety in messages seen in the film casts doubt over the credibility of its sources.
The clips lack more than variety, however. Depth, too, is missing from the video footage. Even if all of Arab television portrays the US in a negative light, surely the anti-American voices would, in some cases, offer more sophisticated explanations than “Americans are beasts” for their hatred. The film explains that many (implying all) Arabs feel the West is responsible for all ills in their society—unemployment, poverty, hunger, ignorance; the list continues indefinitely. If prompted to grasp the complex reasons why this is believed, the viewer could vaguely cite globalization at US hands, but overall, the multifaceted issue is not given the attention it deserves, and that is an intentional omission by filmmakers seeking to paint the portrait of Arab/American aggression in deliberately superficial black and whites. Americans cannot empathize with a caricature.

The film’s producers additionally eschew depth in favor of more startling, provocative clips in more than opinions expressed, however. The imagery of video clips are chosen with a specific purpose in mind beyond representing the entire story at hand: overwhelming American viewers’ senses. Crowd scenes glaring with color feature masses of angry people roaring in a harsh tangle of language hostile to the targeted US viewer; the overall effect is distressing. The crowd scenes also serve another purpose central to the filmmakers’ message: presenting the Arab Muslim as one-dimensional. The more images of vast, frenzied crowds the documentary portrays, the farther the film’s opening distinction between radicalism and mainstream falls from the viewer’s mind. Rather than exploring the actual root of Muslim rage, Obsession deliberately plays up stock fear-inciting images—raging Arab crowds, children spouting hatred, and Nazi rallies—at the expense of an evenhanded, or even consistent viewpoint. For example, in portraying Mein Kampf and jihad as parallel representations of struggle in threatening
movements, the film contradicts itself, attempting to claim radical Islam as an unprecedented “post-modern type of ... transnational warfare” while simultaneously painting it as indistinguishable from the Third Reich. Clearly, Obsession is not interested in presenting a balanced, exploratory documentary uncovering the complexity behind radical Islam’s resentment towards the West, but rather resorting to manipulative tactics aiming to alarm Americans into action.