

Sightings 9/11/08

Examining Hateful Words and Images: The Case of *Towelhead*

--Melissa Conroy

This past August, Warner Bros. studio faced a dilemma over a new film. The film is currently titled *Towelhead*, an offensive, derogatory term referring to Arabs and Muslims. The Los Angeles office of the Council on American-Islamic relations (CAIR-LA) has asked the studio to change the title to *Nothing is Private*, a title that was used when the film debuted at the Toronto International Film Festival. In a letter to Warner Bros., Hussan Ayloush, Executive Director of CAIR-LA writes: "The title ... is of great concern to us, since the word is commonly used in a derogatory manner against people of the Muslim faith or Arab origin.... We have no desire to inhibit the creative process or your right to produce any film you wish. However, I ask you to take the above concerns into consideration and examine the social implications of releasing the film under its current title, 'Towelhead.'"

The film is the story of a young Lebanese-American girl growing up in the 1990s. It is directed by Alan Ball, creator of *Six Feet Under*, and based on the novel *Towelhead* by Alicia Erian, an Arab-American woman. Erian says she chose the offensive term purposefully, in order to bring to light the racism faced by Arab-Muslims in America. Ball decided to keep the original title of the novel because it "dramatizes the pain inflicted by such language, something many people of non-minority descent never have to face...." It appears evident that while the word "towelhead" is racist, the film and novel are not.

Last year, George Washington University faced a similar situation, when in October hundreds of posters proclaiming "Hate Muslims? So do we!!!" were plastered over campus. The poster features a man in robe and kaffiyeh with lines pointing out the distinctive features of this "typical Muslim." Lasers for eyes, venom from the mouth, even a peg-leg (for smuggling children and heroin) are listed. The posters were clearly satirical, created to draw attention to "Islamofacism Awareness Week," an actual event hosted by a conservative student group, the GWU Young America's Foundation. The hyperbolic posters were a reaction to the linkage of Islam and terrorism. Authors of the posters, dismayed that their message was misunderstood, wrote a letter to *The Hatchet*, an independent student newspaper, stating that their action was "part of a rich American tradition of raising awareness, in this case, about Islamophobia."

How is it that we have come to a place in this "rich American tradition" of freely exchanged ideas that we cannot even dissect, let alone tolerate, words and images that bother us? Commenting on the apparent conflict between the freedom of religion and the freedom of speech, Stanley Fish wryly remarked that "what religious beliefs are owed – and this is a word that appears again and again in the recent debate – is 'respect,' nothing less, nothing more." This superficial respect prevents us from engaging in discussions we need to have about racist language and images that exist despite our attempts to erase them. Jack Shaheen's encyclopedia of images of Arabs, *Reel Bad Arabs*, looks at hundreds of films that portray the all too familiar Hollywood villain. In one of the appendices, he lists around two hundred words that have been directed at this "film Arab," many much worse than "towelhead." Yet these words and accompanying images will continue to have power as long as we refuse to discuss them. We need stories that tell us how these words and images affect people's lives. If we are to interrogate the way we depict Muslims and Arabs, we must examine, rather than avoid, the hurtful words and images used to describe them.

References:

See "Muslim Group Asks Studio to Change 'Towelhead' Film Title" at <http://www.marketwatch.com/news/story/muslim-group-asks-studio-change/story.aspx?guid={A6603A6D-FAF5-4A75-88BA-0F41F729DFEC}&dist=hppr>.

See Gregg Kilday's article "'Towelhead' title draws objections" at <http://www.reuters.com/article/entertainmentNews/idUSN2629340720080826?feedType=RSS&feedName=entertainmentNews>.

See Eric Roper's "Seven GW students admit to hanging controversial posters" at <http://media.www.gwhatchet.com/media/storage/paper332/news/2007/10/08/News/Seven.Gw.Students.Admit.To.Hanging.Controversial.Posters-3022092.shtml>.

For the trailer of *Towelhead* go to <http://wip.warnerbros.com/towelhead/>

Melissa Conroy is Assistant Professor of Religion in the Department of Religion and Philosophy at Muskingum College, New Concord, Ohio.