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Article:	Subliminal Messages of War: Portrayal in “Justice League Flashpoint Paradox”
Author(s):	Hira Shakil Faculty, Department of Media Sciences, SZABIST University, Islamabad – Pakistan
	Amna Zulqarnain Faculty, Department of Media Sciences, SZABIST University, Islamabad – Pakistan
	Dr. Wajid Zulqarnain Associate Professor, Head of Department, Department of Media Sciences, SZABIST University, Islamabad – Pakistan
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Author(s) Note:	Hira Shakil is serving in Faculty at Department of Media Sciences, SZABIST University, Islamabad – Pakistan Email: hirasalman.jan86@gmail.com
	Amna Zulqarnain is serving in Faculty at Department of Media Sciences, SZABIST University, Islamabad – Pakistan Email: amna_zareef@hotmail.com
	Dr. Wajid Zulqarnain is serving as an Associate Professor at Head of Department, Department of Media Sciences, SZABIST University, Islamabad – Pakistan Email: wajidgeo@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This research examines superhero cartoon movies as a medium for narrating the perceived superiority of the West over the East, with the West depicted as the savior and the East as a threat to global peace. Using "Justice League: Flashpoint Paradox" (2013) as a case study, the study investigates the incorporation of subliminal messages related to the real-time Iraq war through hidden images and narrative elements. The research is structured using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory employing Edward Said's theory of Culture and Imperialism, the study analyzes visual representations in the cartoon movie to illustrate their reflection of the Iraq war and highlighting how superhero narratives reflect contemporary geopolitical tensions and reinforce Western hegemony, particularly in the context of the post-9/11 era. Furthermore, the study examines the impact of these subliminal messages on the overall narrative and characterization, revealing the perpetuation of stereotypical images of both the West and the East.

Keywords: Semiotic analysis, superhero toons, war on terror, subliminal messages.

1. Introduction:

This research explores the subliminal messages present in the superhero cartoon movie *Justice League, Flashpoint Paradox (2013)*. The prime focus of this research is to study the subliminal messages present in the superhero toons. The research is conducted to understand the hidden message portrayed through these superhero movies. Moreover, the basic objective to carry out this research is to understand how the superhero narrative represent the ongoing war on terror in the parallel time as argued by Toh, J., 2010. Moreover, as Williams, K.D. (2011) in his research, by comparing *Superfriends* and *Justice League* in terms of Foreign Relations concluded that these superhero toons reflect the era in which they are aired, so the current research in reference to his research examines the selected sample according to the parallel time scenario. The research will add on to his research by analysing the 2013 animated movie of the *Justice League* in reference to the War on Terror of the parallel time. The War on Terror (WOT), otherwise called the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), is an analogy of war alluding to the universal military battle that was propelled by the U.S. government after the September 11 assaults in the U.S. in 2001. As, the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, were defined in the news media and popular culture as an assault on American culture, if not civilization itself. These definitions were aligned with a broad context and a preexisting discourse of fear, which is discussed below, along with symbolic images of "Arabs" as the "Other," or marginalized outsiders who are threats to personal and national security (Reframing 9/11, 2010). As Bush claim them to be "Axis of evil" (Jardak, R. B., 2021).

1.1. Hypothesis

H₁: Subliminal messages in superhero toons represents the real time geopolitical senario and portrays America's superiority.

1.2. Research questions:

Following are the research questions:

1. What subliminal messages and symbols are present in Justice League?
2. What do these messages represent within the superhero narrative?
3. What is the significance of these messages in relation to the narrative of the movie?
4. How do these messages relate to the ongoing war on terror in the parrel real time?

1.3. Literature Review:

Hollywood is the leading motion picture industry in the world which is capable of communicating mass audiences around the world. Emin Batur concluded Hollywood to be an advanced new Weapon of the United States of America (Dizdar, E. B., 2012). The US government always supported the big bees of the Hollywood by facilitating them through tax breaks and in return they support American stereotypes like unanimity, patriotism, America's greatness, through its productions and also by selling the "American Dream" either directly or subliminally (Dizdar, E. B., 2012). Subliminal is anything that is underneath the level of observable observation. Nadeem, S., & Ansari, N. uncovered how films subtly convey political views and concepts through subliminal messages, often manipulating audiences without their awareness, leading them to adopt misguided perceptions (Nadeem, S., & Ansari, N., 2021). In Disney animated movies, sexual orientation keep on being portrayed and non-prevailing or minority groups are depicted negatively by any means. Men are portrayed as physically strong, aggressive, non-expressive, heroes, saviors and as gallant friends in need, especially of females. Women are depicted as beautiful, thin, attractive physic, reliant on men, and occupied with

domestic responsibilities (M. A Towbin, Shelley A. Haddock, Toni Schindler Zimmerman, Lori K. Lund & Litsa Renee Tanner, 2004). Critics claimed that these subliminal messages like gender stereotyping and gender roles, racism, inducing violent behaviors, graphical symbols of the letters of SEX, use of satanic symbols etc are being used on and off in most of the cartoon series and can be seen almost in every famous Disney movie (Daniee 23, 2014). In Johnny Bravo there was a poster on the background wall portraying a plane crashed in a building with a title coming soon indicating the 9/11 incident (GameNTech, 2014). Sesame Street had many messages one regarding Donald Trump as America's presidential candidate which were proved later (MindChop, 2016). Wilson et al. (2002) assessed information from NTV Study and observed that 97% of superhero programs, represented brutality. Similarly Males are structured more masculine and females with feminine traits to represent gender roles (Baker, K., & Raney, A. A., 2007).

In 2011, Kevin D. Williams conducted a comparative study of superhero narratives, focusing on the pre-9/11 series *Superfriends* and the post-9/11 *Justice League*. He concluded that these series reflected the eras in which they aired, influenced by events such as the Cold War and 9/11. Post-9/11 episodes depicted heroes with fierier costumes, more masculine appearances, and a willingness to be hurt, reflecting a shift towards a more human portrayal of superheroes. Williams argued that this reflected America's post-9/11 military strategy, resembling the approach of George W. Bush. He suggested that these portrayals of military action also reflected broader societal attitudes and the role of America as a global superpower. Williams emphasized that superhero stories consistently symbolize American patriotism and power dynamics. (William, K. D., 2011). Kort-Butler (2012) argued that superhero media reflects societal beliefs about criminality. While these portrayals present a strong, powerful image for viewers, they also convey messages for young audiences. Money is a persistent theme among villains, with greed and revenge driving much of their criminal activity. Insatiability and reprisal are the inside for the vast majority of the criminal action (Butler, K., 2012). Antoni Moore and William Cartwright (2015) examined caricatures from World War I, particularly those depicting the Gallipoli campaign of 1915-1916. Their initial research suggests that "the cartoonists considered the actual geography of the targeted region when developing their drawings, as well as use navigational artefacts to give the impression of the Place that was illustrated" (Moore, A., & Cartwright, W., 2015). Analyzing "Batman Begins," Toh argued that Batman's gadgets like the Batmobile and Bat-suit, both military-inspired, are used to combat threats like the microwave emitter, a product of Wayne Enterprises stolen by antagonist "Ras Al Ghul" for Gotham's destruction. Toh sees this as a fictional parallel to the US's attempt to promote democracy in the Middle East, particularly under the administration of George W. Bush. Key elements include the removal of Middle Eastern dictators like the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, who were perceived to possess weapons of mass destruction. Toh further suggested that Bruce's development as Batman mirrors the real-world case of the CIA training Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan during the US campaign against the Soviets. In analyzing the film, Toh noted that Al Ghul and his League of Shadows resemble Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, which attacked New York City (often likened to Gotham City) on September 11, 2001 (Toh, J., 2010). In his analysis, J. Dittmer explored that Captain America comic series focuses on its use of iconography and symbolism. These symbols contribute to a sense of territorial belonging and help shape a prevailing American geopolitical narrative

within the comic's storyline. In addition to this the dialogues of the terrorists like "whore with a painted mouth" (Rieber and Cassaday 2002b, 8), "Death is peace for me" (Rieber and Cassaday 2002b, 13) represents the extremist Islamic ideology of the "other" (Dittmer, J., 2005). In light of the strong association between contemporary events and superhero narratives, these writings can coherently be said to portray the social tensions of their day, including 9/11 (Brown D., 2009).

1.4. Theoretical Framework:

The research will be conducted keeping in view two theories of social sciences Edward Said's theory of culture and imperialism which defines the portrayal of dominance of West over the non-western nations and Ronald Barthes theory of semiotics to study symbols.

1.4.1. Edward Said's theory of Cultural Imperialism:

Edward Said asserts that the West sees itself as the locus of significance, while perceiving other cultures as lacking vitality. Said's work explores the debate over Western hegemony, portraying non-Western cultures as recipients of the dominant discourse imposed by the West on the East, portrayed as the "Other" (Said, E. W., 2012).

1.4.2. Ronald Barthe's theory of semiology:

The study of signs is called semiology. Semiotics additionally called semiology was first characterized by the Swiss etymologist Ferdinand de Saussure as 'the investigation of signs (Chapman, S. (Ed.), 2009).

Ronald Barthes suggest the sign as a combination of signifier and signified (Bouzida, F., 2012). Barthes used two terms to describe the signification process denotation and connotation.

Denotation level:

Denotation level of signification is the first order signifying system, where the meaning of the image is referred to its literal or descriptive meaning. It consists of both signified and the signifier (Barthes, R., 1977).

Connotative level :

According to Barthes, at the connotative level the image is identified with the aesthetic and ideological variables that are opened to readings and elucidations keeping in mind the end goal to explain how importance is made through complex semiotic collaboration. There is no correct way of interpreting their meaning; on the contrary, they are open to all kinds of readings (Barthes, R., 1977).

2. Methodology:

The range of media research is exceptionally endless , this field of research is a legacy of various logical orders, media inquire about includes "the use of efficient strategies to take care of an issue or to comprehend it better than previously" (Turow, J., 2009), in light of the fact that media can't be concentrated out of the socio-cultural setting, the analyst can utilize quantitative or qualitative ways to deal with study the media phenomenon. This study aims to analyze the narrative of the Justice League Flashpoint paradox and its content keenly to identify any subliminal messages, in the form of symbols or images or icons and derive its relation to the war on terror of the parallel time. The proposed method to lead the research is content analysis and in content analysis, semiotic analysis will be favored. To carry on the theoretical models proposed by Ronald Barthe for semiotic will be applied. However the basic ideology

of the movie is analyzed by applying Edward Said's theory of Cultural imperialism which defines the portrayal of dominance of West over the non-western nations.

2.1. Semiotic Analysis:

The semiotic approach to analyze visual communication stresses the idea that images are a collection of signs that are linked together in some way by the viewer. Barthes approach to semiotic analysis is applied to investigate the selected sample. The analysis will be done in two levels of signification: the Micro level of signification and the Macro level of signification. In the micro level signification, the identification of the sign and its surface and implied meanings will be given in the form of a table. While on the macro level of signification the literal and implied meanings of the whole message under denotation and connotation levels will be discussed in detail. As been done by Jabbar, A.& Riyadh, L. (2009) in their analysis of political cartoons.

2.2. Sample:


The selected sample is selected on convenient sampling. As most of the work been done is on Batman and Superman while less research been found on the Flash.




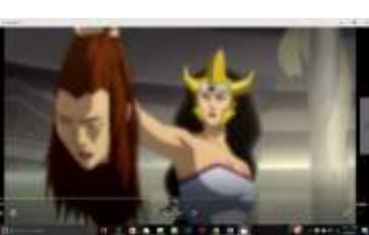

Justice League: Flashpoint Paradox (2013):



There are many characters in the film but some of the most important characters are: The Flash, Thomas Wayne, Diana (Queen of Amazon, Themyscira), Aquaman (King of Atlantis), Captain Atom, Lois Lane, Lex Luthor and the Reverse Flash (Eobard Thawne/ Professor Zoom). The movie centers on The Flash, a superhero known for his super speed and ability to travel through time. Barry Allen, The Flash's alter ego, was raised by his mother but became an orphan after her murder. Despite growing up, Barry remains haunted by his mother's death and often imagines scenarios where he could have saved her if he were faster. When provoked by Thawne, he attempts to alter the past by running back in time to prevent her murder. However, his actions inadvertently cause a ripple effect, leading to drastic changes in the timeline where the world is on the brink of World War III, and The Flash and Justice League cease to exist.

3. Findings:

Table 1: Identification of signs and their meanings.

	Image from the movie	Identification of sign	The Denotation Meanings	The Connotation Meanings
1.	 <p><i>Minutes: 0:12:15</i></p>	Photograph in the news flashed on the computer screen.	The news on the computer screen signifies the start of WW-III and the end of times.	The image reminds the viewer of the 9/11 scenario.

2.	 <p><i>Minutes: 0:12:25</i></p>	Poster in the background with the title Wallcoo and November.	A confused Barry sitting in the Police Headquarter trying to figure out what has happened.	Wallcoo.net is the website for Hollywood movie and games wallpapers. Significance of November.
3.	 <p><i>Minutes: 0:29:47</i></p>	Position of needles in the watch.	Technological advancement. Luthor transferring data of Aquaman's WMD to the CIA.	The needles are positioned around 9 and 11, reminding the 9/11 event.
4.	 <p><i>Minutes: 0:30:13</i></p>	The scratch marks on Flash's face.	A desperate, wounded flash waiting for the thunder light to strike at the right point.	The scratch symbolize S, 11 or 9, 11.
5.	 <p><i>Minutes: 0:34:25</i></p>	Beheading.	A victorious wonder woman assassinated Aquaman's wife and wore her crown proudly.	Act of barbarism. Representing vicious East.
6.	 <p><i>Minutes: 0:34:47</i></p>	Form of blood on the hand of Thomas Wayne.	Thomas Wayne is beating her son's murderer badly.	The form of blood resembles the map of Iraq.

7.	 <p><i>Minutes: 0:14:45</i></p>	The Flash.	The Flash broke the ripple created by the flash and restore the timeline.	The superpower reversed its own decision.
8.	 <p><i>Minutes: 1:17:38</i></p>	The bright shining buildings with Flash in the foreground.	the city of lights is now in peace.	The superpower brings the world in peace.

4. Discussion:

4.1. Never Forget 9/11 and the Ultimate Saviors:



Minutes 0:12:15

Here, in this scene, Barry Allen wakes up at the police headquarters with this news flashed on his computer and realizes that he's in a changed timeline. The term "Armageddon" flashes on the screen, accompanied by an image of a burning building. Additionally, the term is used more broadly to denote any apocalyptic scenario. In reference to the traditional Christian point of view, the term Armageddon is denoted as the great day of God (Hendriksen, W., 1954).

The burning building image signifies the destruction of advanced regions, implying that even highly developed nations are vulnerable in Armageddon. The news on the computer screen suggests a global catastrophe.

At the connotation level, the image along with the sentence "The world faces Armageddon" signifies that the war have already been started. The rise of smoke from a prominent building resembles the event of September 11. This might have been done intentionally to recall the incident of September 11, 2001, which might be a part of Never Forget 9/11 campaign.



Attack on World Trade Centre, 9/11.

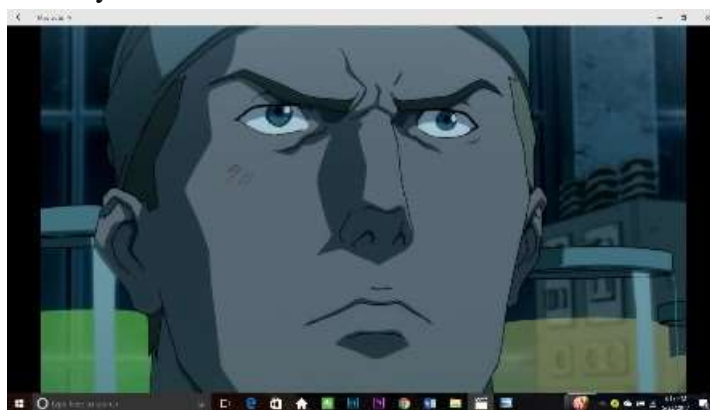


Minutes: 0:29:47

Here, we see a watch on the wrist of Lex Luthor, flashing 'open connection' with a progress bar underneath showing transferring of data of the location of Aquaman's WMD (weapon of mass destruction) to the CIA.

The image symbolizes the technological advancement of

American forces, showcasing their ability to reach powerful enemies and detect anyone dealing with weapons of mass destruction. It suggests America's responsibility to monitor global atomic technology progress and maintain world peace by preventing WMD use. Additionally, the positioning of the hour and minute hands on Luthor's watch near the numbers 9 and 11 alludes to the September 11 incident, an iconic representation of America. This may serve as a subliminal message, linking Armageddon to post-9/11 scenarios and implying that the terrorist attack was a catalyst for World War III.



Minutes 0:30:13

In this scene, Thomas Wayne assists Barry Allen in attempting to restore Barry's superspeed powers by replicating the lightning and chemical incident that originally granted him his abilities. Unfortunately, the first attempt results in severe burns for Barry, prompting Thomas to save him from near death. They make a second attempt to restore Barry's powers, which proves successful this time.

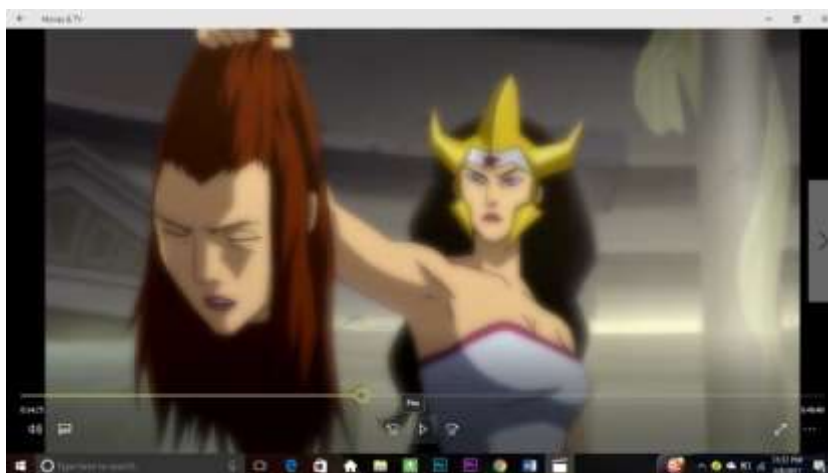
The image centers on Barry's intense expression, illustrating his keen desire to reclaim his Flash abilities and prevent World War III. This reflects his dedication to becoming a superhero again, emphasizing the belief that only his super speed powers can avert mass destruction.

Secondly the other most notable thing in the image were the scratches on Barry's face. They are designed as S / 11 or 9 / 11 i.e. September 11. As Daniee claimed that subliminal messages in the form of graphical symbols of the letters are used in cartoons (Daniee 23, 2014). This might signify that the Americans won't let anyone forget the 9/11 incident as September 11 incident has become an iconic symbol for America.

4.2.Representation of the Other:

The story of this animated movie "Justice League, Flashpoint Paradox" is a work of fiction. However it consistently refers to the real life geopolitical events reinforcing the stereotypes of the eastern and western cultures.

In this Scene, everthing is different in this timeline therefore Diana (the Wonder Woman) is the Queen of Amazon, Aquaman is the king of Atlantis, the underwater city and not in JL. In the constructed timeline *Diana and Aquaman* get allied which was driven into an affair. When Mira, Aquaman's wife, gets to know about it she tried to assassinate her but Diana in self defence slaughtered her head and wore her crown as a warning for others. This raged the Atlanteans

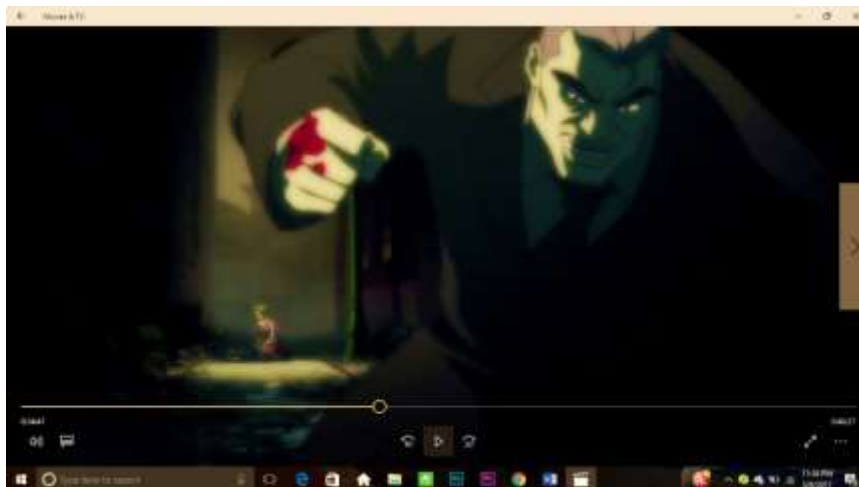


and war started between Diana and Aquaman which embroiled the whole world in its folds. This might be signifying the Shia Sunni Assaults in Iraq (2011-2013) that started after the withdrawal of forces from Iraq. Both parties might be representing the two sects within the East, that are equally powerful, barbaric, extremist and belonged to an undeveloped nation, as Toh noted that Al Ghul and his League of Shadows resemble Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, which attacked New York City on September 11, 2001 (Toh, J., 2010).

Also some dialogues represent the nature of the Other. One is Slade Wilson (Head of American missionaries) on seeing the battlefield said, "It's a lot of Death even for me". This might be a representation of American human loving nature. Although America has seen too much death during its WOT but the destruction and bloodshed this war is giving the world is at its peek. It might also represent the barbaric nature of the Eastern opponents. As Dittmer, J., (2005) finds a few dialogues showing the extreme nature of the "other". Second is when Lex Luthor (IT genius) while transferring the data to the CIA said, "Atleast I know I was right". This dialogue might be signifying American belief in being the world's savior, depicting real-life political and war events in a mythical manner. Despite being fiction, the movie subtly promotes themes of American cultural superiority, portraying the East as a threat to global stability due to its possession of weapons of mass destruction. The movie serves as a mythic representation of America as a peace-loving nation and the East as uncivilized and dangerous,

echoing Edward Said's theory of culture and imperialism, which argues that the West portrays itself as superior and the non-West as in need of salvation.

4.3. Representation of war on Iraq in parallel timeline:



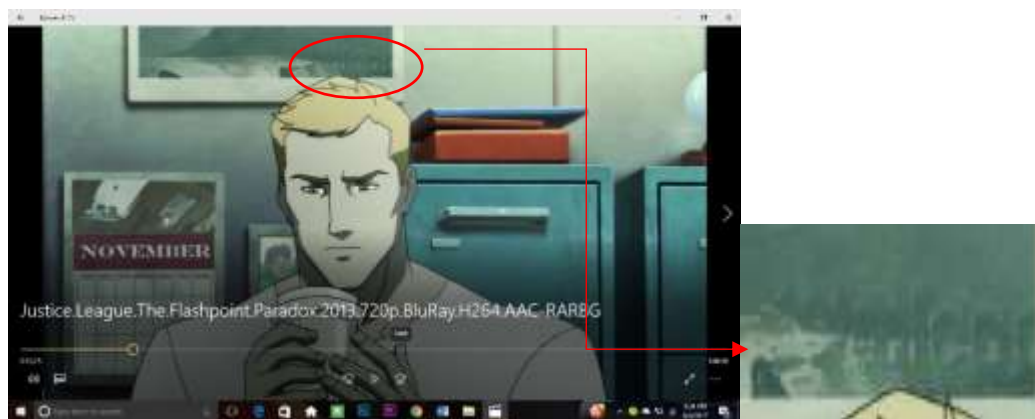
Minutes 0:34:47

Here, Thomas Wayne, the father of Bruce Wayne, is severely beating the murderer that the nuckles of his got stained with blood.

The over built Thomas Wayne signifies the weapon of war in himself as William K.D. (2011) concluded the superheroes to be more masculine and brutal after the 9/11 scenario. Thomas Wayne might be representing the veterans fighting for America in Iraq. The murderer's blood can be seen on Wayne's strong fist. The research finds the form of the blood mark is the mirror image of the map of Iraq. As Dittmer, J., (2005) argued that symbols represent territorial representations. Also Moore and Cartwright concluded that drawings have the ability to convey the impression of the depicted place. (Moore, A., & Cartwright, W., 2015). This might have been done knowingly, representing America's war on Iraq in the name of WOT (War on terror). Thomas Wayne who is the most influential citizen of Gotham (Gotham represents New York, Justine Toh, 2010) is beating badly the murderer or the terrorist who might be signified as Iraq, in relation to the blood mark. This can be a representation of America's invasion of Iraq and the military veterans fighting for the US in Iraq. The symbol and the scene might be indicating that if Iraq was not punished then the streets of New York might give the same deserted look as of the streets of Gotham city. This symbol is the main lead for the research to go in the direction of finding representations for the WOT on Iraq.



Figure 7: Map of Iraq



Minutes: 0:12:25

In this scene Barry is confused and trying to understand what has happened. This particular scene is of the Police Headquarters where Barry wakes up in the fractured reality, with ongoing World War III. In the background one can see office drawers, files, calendar showing "November" and a poster on the wall.

At the connotation level, "Wallcoo" written at the bottom right corner of the poster signifies Wallcoo.net, a website providing free high-resolution wallpapers of Hollywood movies, animated movies and even of games.

Moreover, November has a specific significance in the timeline of Iraq War. On 5th November, 2006, the trial of Iraq's former dictator ends with a sentence of death by hanging, igniting Shia-Sunni conflict. On November 8, 2006, President Bush accepts the resignation of Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, who had become a lightning rod for criticism of the conduct of the war. November 4, 2008, Obama wins the White house campaigning on a vow to withdraw combat troops in Iraq within sixteen months of taking office. November 2010, New government formed (Hamasaheed, S. & Nada, G., 2020).



Minutes: 0:14:01- 0:14:45

In this scene the Flash of the war time is running after the Flash of the real time to stop him from reaching the past where he can save his mom, with a specific end goal to stop the war. At last after extensive running the Flash of the new timeline stops the Flash of the real timeline from saving his mom from the murderer. Due to running at superspeed the wounded Flash of the constructed reality is bleeding badly but still doesnot stop as he is desperate to bring the world back in peace.

This reflects the keen intention of the superhero to save the world from the war and bring back peace, even at the cost of his life.

This might be signifying the real time scenario when in the later years the US government decided to bring back their army from Iraq which will stop further killings of their soldiers and can save the world to indulge into World War III. The scene might be symbolising

this parallel situation of the US strate, signification of the two Presidents of America, i.e Borak Obama reversing the strategy of the Ex-President George W. Bush. The hero bleeding badly connotes the sufferings the veterans went through during the American tugged War on Iraq, but still they were desperate to serve for World Peace.



Minutes: 1:17:38

In this last scene, we can see the satisfied Flash running around the beautifully lit New York city in peace.

At the denotation level the image signifies that the superhero had saved the world from being indulged into World War III and patrolling around the city even at night. The lit city represents peace, prosperity and development of the New York City.

At the connotation level, the image signifies that only the American superpower can prevent the world from indulging into World War III. The patrolling superhero connotes that the world peace can be maintained just because America is keeping an eye on the world and striving hard for serving the people.

5. Conclusion

The research concludes that subliminal messages do exist in the *Justice League Flashpoint paradox*. The research agreed to William K. D. (2011) who argued that the superhero narrative always travel along the real time political scenario of America. The superhero genre is a clear depiction of America as a guardian of the world. It has been cocluded from the symbiotic analysis of the cartoon movie that America will never forget the 9/11 incident and nor do they allow the rest of the world to forget it. Moreover these images might also signify the fact that the World War III has been started since America was attacked and the world has to face the consequences of harming the superior power.

The story visibly narrates the superiority of the West over the East. The West or America is portrayed to be the savior of humanity and the East is portrayed as uncultured, barbaric and yet equipped with technology. The narrative of the story portrays geopolitical scenario of the war of terror on Iraq. As Iraq was invaded due to the doubt of having the WMD. The story narrates the American way of treating the East. It is the duty of America to resolve any conflict amongst nations around the world. The East is symbolised as a danger to world peace so that the weapon of mass destruction should not be in their hands which is a clear motif of America in real time.

The subliminal images along with the narrative of the story depicts America's greatness and represents East as a threat to World's peace. The narrative maintain America's superiority

and imperialism over the world by portraying American Moral and cultural highground. They portray themselves as the saviours and protectors of this world. American cultural products justify their political and imperialistic motives by the said narratives of superiority. These narratives of superiority construct the myth that the world needs saving and no one can do it other than the America.

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