HOLLYWOOD RELOADED: 
THE FILM AS IMPERIAL COMMODITY

SCOTT FORSYTH

The features of the typical Hollywood film are now part of popular cultural discourse. ‘High concept’ films or blockbusters are defined by budgets of $100 million and up, with half as much again spent on massive promotion campaigns, plus investment in the most advanced technologies for elaborate stunts, explosions and computer-generated ‘special effects’. Hollywood corporations are part of huge media/communication conglomerates linked with the electronics, real estate and even aircraft and armaments industries. Films are the strategic, leading edge – the ‘tentpole’ in the latest show-biz jargon – of an expanding circuit of consumable commodities including videos, television, internet, comics, novels, games, toys, clothes, fast food, theme parks and rides; entertainment industries are now the leading American export. For films, the circuit increasingly depends on remakes, prequels, sequels, series and franchises, all pre-sold, in an interconnected repetitive process that diversifies revenues and avoids risk – and in which most individual films actually lose money! Equally important, Hollywood defines, with its capital and technological innovation, what a film product now is; competitors are forced to compete on this level. And its industrial and cultural dominance is reinforced by control of financing, distribution, theatrical exhibition and production on an international scale.

Hollywood developed and even pioneered strategies of international competition from the 1920s onwards, but over the past twenty years a programme of focused reorganization has enabled it to recreate the oligopoly of the classic studio system on an international scale, consistently aided by the American state. Over the 1990s, assisted in myriad ways by state subsidies, lobbying and trade negotiations, Hollywood not only increased its market share in most of the world, but also dramatically increased its control of theatres and production capacity in most countries. Even with protection other countries’ film industries have become not so much rivals as branch
plants for Hollywood productions, suppliers of cheaper skilled labour, sources of capital, inspiration for innovative styles, exporters of new talent and stars. More than an evolution of earlier forms of cultural imperialism is involved here: what has happened is the material incorporation of other national film industries into what Miller calls an American-dominated international division of cultural labour.¹

So the Hollywood film is a key commodity of American imperialism today, and its favoured genre is the ‘action film’. Of course, films of action and spectacle have always been central in film history, but never so dominant as in the last twenty years of Hollywood’s revitalization. The blockbuster can of course be ‘polygeneric’, mixing horror, fantasy, sci-fi, spy and police thrillers, war films, melodramas into the action film, making it a sort of metacategory for the dominant form of film today, with simple narratives and concise themes – quests, chases, revenge, war – and simple characterization, with plenty of occasions for stunts, fights, battles, and effects of all kinds, and clear resolutions. Globalized Hollywood can also organize itself around plots that skip from one cheap exotic location to another, from one diminished or dismantled national industry to another.² Naturally, this is also a terrain of fierce critical debate. Rarely have film critics so forcefully announced the death of the cinema, or so routinely denounced films as trivial products of an industrialized system Adorno could hardly have imagined. Some critics defend action films with populist connoisseurship and textual tracking of its vast repertoire, and some film scholars analyze action films as the latest in a lineage of films that have always indulged the pleasures of spectacle, thrills and ‘attractions’; for them, America is once again simply entertaining the world with what the people want.³ But what this essay seeks to emphasize is the way the action film by its very nature reflects the might of American capital, corporate organization and technology, all aimed at ensuring that this is indeed what the people want; and what its narratives and ideologies then embody and personify so forcefully – the celebration of American individualism and heroes, and of America itself, the resolution of good over evil, the repetitive crushing of the country’s foes.

War films of all kinds have been especially prominent in recent Hollywood output, and the cinematic aesthetics of war permeate countless films in the action genre. The American military has an intimate relationship with these productions, showcasing military hardware, sanitizing scripts, and utilizing films, television and video games for recruitment and propaganda, and even military training. Some scholars even argue that Hollywood and the military industrial complex are converging. While the war on Iraq was still ‘officially’ on, ‘gamers’ – video and computer game fans – could join in with SOCOM II: Navy Seals. The Reaganite action hero, with some interesting
variations, and even more, comic-book superheroes, remain central in countless action films; and the action film itself, despite the too-easy derision of most critics, has assumed a central role in the political economy of multinational corporate filmmaking. And the ultimate Reaganite ‘hardbody’ is now in the Governor’s mansion in California.4

It has become commonplace to observe that the American mass media’s role in the war on terror and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq was both crucial and servile – a war staged for and through the key media giants. Overall, we can say that this representation of these wars – and it goes way beyond simply re-presenting them – constitutes a cultural event, a Debordian spectacle.5 Hollywood contributes to, prepares this event and spectacle, and makes watching it comprehensible and enjoyable.

We can easily cite examples of how Hollywood helped us as spectators. When President Bush said he wanted Bin Laden ‘dead or alive’, everyone understood the evocation of the Western. We also knew the enemy, from the racist representations of Arabs in dozens of films over the years.6 When Bush climbed out of a fighter plane on an aircraft carrier and strode manfully on the deck, we all remembered Tom Cruise in Top Gun (1986). When Bush taunted the crushed Iraqis, telling them to ‘bring it on’, we recognized the laconic idiom and grim humour of an American action hero.

If the first Gulf War could be understood as a videogame, the wars on Iraq and Afghanistan unfolded as sports shows, with CNN and FOX correspondents as jock cheerleaders in games that had predictable but still suspenseful endings. Indeed, the networks utilized all the aesthetics of mainstream television to deliver the wars as exciting, branded programming – logos, musical themes, star ‘journalists’ – and the media war called on the conventions of multiple genres – the war film, soaps, game shows, sports, radio talk shows. This is useful but perhaps inadequate. What actually governed the production and consumption of these wars was the prototype of the Hollywood film today; the organizing spine of the event was the polygeneric, capital- and technology-intensive action blockbuster – its dramas and narrative expectations, images, military spectacles, its weaponry fetishism, its fixation on media technology itself, and its triumph of American Good over all Evil.

At the level of performance and characterization, to appreciate President Bush on that aircraft carrier, we must really imagine the Imperial Presidency, not only its dignified and obvious association with state power and grandeur, but also its Hollywood representation – the President himself as the hero of the spectacle. We have been prepared for this by years of films of the American President – comedies, thrillers, murder mysteries – not to mention the Reaganite films which, several critics have argued, ultimately offered
Reagan himself as the hero of public fantasy. Bush’s posturing as President evoked Harrison Ford in *Air Force One* (1997), literally killing the crazed ex-Soviet terrorists himself, or the flyboy President of *Independence Day* (1996) destroying alien invaders to make the world safe for America’s national holiday.  

And of course it is the terror of September 11 that begins this new imperial action movie and overarches, sometimes explicitly, more often emotionally, all the wars that TV and Hollywood are now fighting. It is commonplace that we watched 9/11 as if caught in a movie. As Mike Davis and Slavoj Zizek brilliantly reminded us, it recalled images that Western culture had conjured up in countless films, books and comics. Movie-goers have been traumatized enjoyably for years by the destruction of the mighty towers of Western capital, the war coming home from the always vanquished subaltern world, the triumphs of Progress and Empire answered by invasion, barbarism, apocalypse: America destroyed, or almost, again and again, by marauding Arab terrorists, Communists, bloodthirsty drug lords, rogue KGB officers with nuclear bombs, invading aliens.

On 9/11 neither Bruce Willis nor Arnold Schwarzenegger came to the rescue, and the narrative of revenge begun by that atrocious ‘opportunity’ (as the ‘neocons’ saw it) is still unfolding in the real world. American television has continued in an entertaining and craven fashion to cheerlead war with several didactically propagandistic ‘movies of the week’ – including *Saving Jessica Lynch* (2003), released even after the real private Lynch had disavowed the story of her heroic rescue by US special forces. However, feature films operate on a much longer production schedule, so their ideological articulation with hegemonic politics has to be more complex and sophisticated. Indeed, Hollywood spokesmen reacted immediately to 9/11 with guilt – for all the disasters they had imagined, for all the atrocities and violence they had aestheticized, as if they themselves had conjured up the disaster. Movie premieres were cancelled or delayed, scripts were revised and Hollywood reported for duty. The Pentagon asked screenwriters to brainstorm terrorist scenarios in order to help preventive investigations, while producers met with Karl Rove, Bush’s top adviser, to discuss the patriotic themes needed for the new day. We may be just beginning to view the fruits of the most explicit ideological enlistment since Hollywood’s massive role in World War II. It is not surprising that Hollywood films resonate with the world-view of the American Right. What is more interesting is to see what part supposedly ‘liberal’ Hollywood plays in the new imperial patriotic campaign.
GOOD WARS AND HUMAN RIGHTS WARRIORS

The American leadership is anxious to drape their current wars in the mantle of the Good War. World War II is endlessly evoked in rhetoric and imagery to insist on an unequivocal equation between the USA and universal rights. This draws on a political – and cinematic – interpretation of World War II that has been important to the vindication and portrayal of US imperialism for decades. The war film of the 1940s has provided a range of conventions and narratives that remain lastingly influential; in particular, the male combat group, isolated and endangered, representative of America, connected by bravery and camaraderie. Epics from the 1950s to the 1970s – From Here to Eternity (1953), The Longest Day (1962), Patton (1970) – replayed those uplifting myths on a grand scale to mythologize America’s singular role in the victory, and Saving Private Ryan (1998) represents its most successful updating. The film’s opening – the horrific spectacle of the Normandy landing – shocked audiences, as key war films always do, with a new realism and explicitness. That violence, with all the resources of horror film special effects and digitally enhanced mayhem, secured our attachment to an egregiously sentimental tale of a combat unit’s rescue of the surviving Ryan brother. It allowed a renewed celebration of the male combat group – the conventional multi-ethnic allegory for America itself – that had been undermined by the darker variations of the Vietnam film cycle of the 1970s and 1980s – Apocalypse Now (1979), Platoon (1986), Full Metal Jacket (1987). In Saving Private Ryan Spielberg’s American ‘brothers’ fight for each other, not for any ideological or political aim, and the film concludes in the most spiritual, literally flag-waving celebration of America.10

While there have not been a large number of recent World War II films, Saving Private Ryan recuperated the war film in a way that could be readily evoked. It spawned a successful television miniseries, Band Of Brothers (2001), and a number of war films set in World War II. The most expensive and widely marketed of these was Pearl Harbor (2001). While this film premiered before 9/11, it aestheticized The Project for a New American Century’s call for ‘another Pearl Harbor’ to impart energy to America’s mission in the world. The Pentagon worked closely on the film with Disney Studios; the premiere was held on an aircraft carrier and recruiting booths were set up in theatres.11 Notably, Pearl Harbor also offers a heart-warming sub-plot of a heroic black cook saving his hostile white fellow-sailors. The crimes of racism are raised to view – and then corrected by American democracy. It is worth recalling that this liberalism is integral to the classic Hollywood war films; however much they fit within contemporary and reactionary American nationalism, they were often the work of the Hollywood left, perceived as part of a national front against fascism. In Popular Front left nationalist logic,
World War II films often celebrate the ‘citizen soldier’ as a mythos for the collective heroism of the nation, whereas more recent films celebrate the professional warrior as an institutional embodiment of the state. However, Hollywood films in general are likely to combine liberal and conservative themes and tropes, more likely to square ideological circles than follow a didactic line.

The conventions of the good war migrate easily to other wars. *We Were Soldiers* (2002) goes back to a key battle early in the Vietnam war to reverently celebrate the heroism of the American soldier, lovingly and spiritually nurtured by Mel Gibson’s Colonel Moore – patriarch to his family and his soldiers. The film introduces itself as a ‘testament’ and carefully depoliticizes ‘a war we did not understand’. It consciously ‘forgets’ more than ten years of Vietnam war films that had consistently questioned and de-romanticized, even if largely in apolitical terms, the American defeat; America’s Colonel Moore simply fights wars because there are bad people in the world. The heroes in this film too ‘fought for each other’, once again reducing war to military professionalism and male bonding. More interestingly, the film is one of the few American films to humanize the Vietnamese enemy, pictured throughout as worthy and soldierly foes.

*Black Hawk Down* (2002) reduces the context even more dramatically. The disastrous American intervention in Somalia is told as the story of one helicopter crew on a wild rescue mission in Mogadishu. The film’s superbly kinetic music video-style battle scenes valorize the stoic professionalism of its soldiers and focus the spectator on the most viscerally limited enjoyment. On the one hand, the film’s refusal to provide any context or explanation for the battle we are excitingly thrust into is necessary for its reduction of the theme to a single combat group’s battle to save each other, ‘to leaving no man behind’ as the highest good. On the other hand the stark imagery of this ugly, impoverished Third World outpost and its hundreds of faceless slaughtered Africans – background and fodder for the high-tech heroics of the First World – speaks more than allegorically about global imperialism now. Tom Doherty argues convincingly that both *We Are Soldiers* and *Black Hawk Down* are tales of moral rearmament and soldierly courage, despite debacle and defeat, that resonate with precision in the post-9/11 ideological discourse.

Several recent war films reflect the recent opportunistic dusting-off of the ancient doctrine of the just war in service of imperialist aggression – in its new form as a doctrine of the right to wage ‘pre-emptive’ war, as in Afghanistan and Iraq. In these films imperial soldiers are caught in wars whose grand motives are seen to be bogus or fraudulent, or beyond comprehension, but in situations that can be reduced to a moral dilemma – the saving of ‘innocents’. In *Tears of the Sun* (2002) an intervention in an imag-
inary African civil war forces tough American professionals, led by the iconically grim and stoical Bruce Willis, into a *crise de conscience*. In a ponderously didactic morality lesson they rescue a group of innocent civilians from tribal massacre. Diplomatic niceties have rendered the Americans temporarily vulnerable but their massive superiority is reasserted in a climactic spectacular of F-18s. While the film is reverential in its human rights rhetoric, its Reaganite and Clintonite political message is that the Western decision to do ‘good’ must trump international law, the political context and — that old cliché — bureaucratic timidity. The happy Africans gratefully bless the Americans: ‘God will never forget you, Lieutenant!’ In *Behind Enemy Lines* (2001) an American pilot crashes behind Serbian lines in a fictionalized Balkan war and is hunted by Serbian paramilitaries who are busy conducting an ethnic massacre. The film casts NATO and France as those favourite Reaganite villains, bureaucrats and appeasers, whose delay in organizing a military rescue lends the film what little suspense it can muster. Finally, a feisty American officer defies his NATO superiors and America saves both its hero and the cause of human rights.

The most interesting of the human rights warriors are in *Three Kings* (1999). It is one of the few films to be set in the first Gulf War and it offers a cynical, derisive picture of official American motives and actions; the role of the media is particularly mocked. The band of rogues who set out to steal Hussein’s gold bullion eventually give up the fortune in order to rescue an endangered group of innocent civilians caught between the American invaders and Hussein’s brutal power. The film was marketed, and received, as unconventional, even ‘oppositional’ but it is still a fantasy of human rights imperialism. The fault in the Gulf War, it says, was failing to go all the way to liberate Baghdad, allowing our hands to be tied by venal politicians. It is a prescription for the next war on Iraq. There are good and bad colonial subjects and the West must intervene for the good; the film is about what one critic astutely labelled the ‘neo-colonial mission’.15

A number of films do work against the upbeat glorification of America’s military destinies and ‘manly warriors’. *Buffalo Soldiers* (2002) recalls anti-war comedies like *MASH* (1970) and *Catch-22* (1970). Set on a base in peacetime West Germany, these American heroes are specialists in graft and drug and arms dealing. Nothing is sacred and the heroes’ careless machinations end in mayhem and dozens of deaths. But the satire is finally just toothless cynicism, mockingly suggesting that what these deranged crooks need is a good war! An earlier film, *The Siege* (1998), even casts doubt on the war on terror as a noble war. This liberal attack on militarism also revels in chillingly premonitory images of deranged Arabs bombing New York and the martial law imprisonment of thousands of Arab Americans. The terror is gradually
exposed as blowback for CIA machinations in the Middle East: ‘we’re the CIA, something always goes wrong’. On the one hand this echoes the popular suspicion of the CIA that had been popularized in the anti-war movement and featured in paranoid spy thrillers throughout the 1970s. On the other hand American liberalism is so pallid that the film needs the FBI to rescue democracy in another implausible but cheerful rehabilitation of the American state. These films disturb the exciting story told in most recent war films, but they clearly are not part of a significant cycle of anti-war films. They have little connection to that powerful lineage in film history. For all the liberal angst and dissent, it is still the pro-war action spectacle that is emblematic of Hollywood today.

RAINBOW RAMBOS AND SUPERVILLAINS

In 1990, Chief of Staff Colin Powell could joke that he ‘…was running out of villains’, but throughout the 1990s Hollywood provided him with a dizzying variety of them – crazed Arabs, evil Latin drug lords, brutal Russian Mafiosi, rogue KGB-ers, supervillains intent on world domination, monsters from space – in a cinematic lineage that reaches back to the silents, Fantomas, Dr. Mabuse and Dr. Moriarity. In recent years, old Nazis are still a reliable menace but Cubans and North Koreans are appearing with opportunistic regularity too. In the popular comic book films, villainy is often some pure, supernatural Evil, fitting enemies for a spiritually-defined America battling evildoers all over the world. And at the center of the action film is the hero, usually a lone wolf rebel, always up to the challenge of these villains, and also revised and updated in recent years.

Rambo played a key part in defining America’s modern action hero: he cinematically refought the Vietnam disaster as a good war, joined the Mujahadeen to slaughter the Soviets in Afghanistan, and entered American political discourse. The Rambo films were brutally simplistic but always more complex politically. Rambo was a dark Other, the enemy of the American state as much as of America’s enemies: the infamously hard killer that America needs but cannot tolerate, coded as Native, Hippie, or victim-ized working class. Few contemporary films address that complexity but many, not surprisingly, attempt to recreate the Rambo phenomenon. Vinn Diesel in XXX (2003) is the most manufactured new Rambo. His character, X, is presented as a rebel the CIA needs – an unlikely combination of extreme sports, heavy metal, tattoos and muscles – but he has been constructed with synergetic marketing in mind. This new Rambo confronts supervillains who are a particularly jumbled meshing of contemporary anxieties – Russian army deserters, drug lords, ravers, anarchists – all pursuing a dastardly plot with biological weapons that will unleash a destructive
utopia/dystopia of ‘absolute, beautiful freedom’. Of course, X stands up for the ‘old stars and stripes’ and saves the world.

Arnold Schwarzenegger in Collateral Damage (2002) is a more plodding update but the film is also more explicit in its Reaganite didacticism and its opportunistic articulation with the immediate military and geo-political agenda of the US state. The film’s release was delayed by post 9/11 sensitivities but a year later the movies were back to the grim fun of the catastrophic destruction of American cities and Arnold, as a humble fireman, becomes a citizen vigilante out to avenge the death of his wife and child, travelling to Columbia to battle a fictional version of the revolutionary FARC. This action hero as family man becomes agent of the CIA’s covert intervention in the third world that has been held back by liberal wimps in Washington. The film does make a slight effort to consider the costs of US interventions in Latin America, and even raises the issue of American atrocities there; but Latin American revolutionaries are finally equated with madness and terrorism. With neocolonial finality, the hero exacts a satisfyingly brutal vengeance on the rebellious Third World.17

Perhaps the most notable thing about these heroes and dozens like them is their colour and diversity. They are not just white hulks, but include a host of African American stars – Denzel Washington, Wesley Snipes, Samuel L. Jackson, and a long list of rap singers – women warriors (Lara Croft: Tomb Raider, 2001 and Lara Croft: Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life, 2003, Charlie’s Angels, 2000 and Charlie’s Angels: Full Throttle, 2003, Kill Bill Volume 1, 2003 and Volume 2, 2004), kids at CIA summer camp (Agent Cody Banks, 2003, and Agent Cody Banks: Destination London, 2004), and Latino kids (the Spy Kids series). Even James Bond’s superhero skin is saved by an equally suave, invincible female African American spy (Die Another Day, 2003). Perhaps most striking, major Asian stars are featured in a growing cycle of international hit thrillers – Chow Yun Fat, Jackie Chan, Jet Li – not to mention any number of mutants and superheroes from Batman and Spiderman to the X-Men. Even complete idiots can save the world in the many successful and toothless parodies of the already smirkingly self-parodic spy films – the popular Austin Powers series, Johnny English (2003), I Spy (2003). This diversification of the hero can be seen as a politically neutralized kind of identity politics: the remnant of the civil rights campaigns is feebly echoed in the X-Men’s pursuit of justice for mutants, and the women’s movement becomes the frothy girlpower of the Angels. Significant social and demographic changes are certainly reflected in, and may even mildly subvert, these popular film genre conventions. But the diversification of heroes also reflects the enhanced role of marketing in contemporary Hollywood, with demographically overlapping targets and multiple identification positions and
modes of consumption. Finally, the shift reflects global Hollywood’s pursuit of international markets and the incorporation of the stars and styles of other national cinemas, from Hong Kong to Japan to Mexico. Hollywood has been keeping up with postmodern cultural studies.

In fact, this ‘rainbow’ casting allows all these heroes to play the same roles in these action films’ predictable challenges. The ideology of individualism trumps liberal and conservative ideologies and allows all the new Rambos to battle, in their routinized rebelliousness, for America, literally or symbolically, for Good against Evil, just as before. Liberalism is incorporated effortlessly by action films’ formal and ideological inventiveness.

While these heroes usually stand for America, their motives are often simplified to mere revenge, the most efficient convergence of character and narrative. Revenge is very cinematic. Yet even in such simplified narratives there is often some disturbance of the simple celebration of America the Good. Bad as so many of them are, action films’ continued success is partly due to the fact that some of them contain a minimal degree of ambiguity, contradiction, or even critique. In these films imperialism is not all fun; the dark side of America is involved as well. Ideologies in film are never monolithic, always capable of contradiction and ambiguity, even dissonance and critique. Denzel Washington’s Creasy in *Man on Fire* (2004), for example, is tormented, suicidal and alcoholic as well as a globetrotting CIA assassin; he fears God will never forgive him for his crimes. Bizarrely enough, however, the film then gleefully follows the story of the brutal revenge of torture and slaughter he exacts – presumably the sort of mayhem he is tormented by – against Mexican gangsters and crooked cops. To take another example, *The Sum of All Fears*, another plodding idealization of heroic CIA agents in the influential Tom Clancy series, nonetheless returns us to the enduring entertainment value of the destruction of American cities with the film’s set-piece nuclear destruction of Baltimore. By the time the film was released in 2002, Hollywood’s sensitivity had evidently returned to pre-9/11 levels.

Another element of dissonance in the imperial action film comes from the spy thriller which despite its imperial roots has always contained a critical, even leftist side, from anti-Nazi Popular Front thrillers to ambiguous, paranoid films about the Cold War. The spy is the favourite adventurer of contemporary empire. James Bond and the Angels hopscotch around the world happily blowing things up in exotic locations. Current and former CIA hitmen travel to foreign backdrops to kill countless foreigners in *Man on Fire, Bad Company* (2002), *Mission Impossible 1* and 2 (1996, 2000), *The Bourne Identity* (2003) and many more. The spy is inherently capable of deceit and betrayal and in *Mission Impossible* or *The Bourne Identity*, paranoia is more than reasonable and the enemy most to be feared is the one within. In *Spartan* (2004), venality and
corruption go right up to the White House; as the President’s daughter puts it, ‘I was raised by wolves’. Even a film designed to rehabilitate the institutional reputation of the CIA, *The Recruit* (2003), ends with betrayal within by the very father figure who embodies the agency’s ‘ideals’. Some films have even gone beyond paranoia to critique. *The Quiet American* (2002) is a thoughtful version of the Graham Greene classic mockery of American good intentions. Johnny Depp’s cheerfully psychotic CIA agent in *Once Upon a Time in Mexico* (2003) is more than darkly comic in its portrayal of the murder and catastrophe America can bring. The film memorably concludes with the imagery of popular insurrection against a CIA-engineered coup! *The Beach* (2000) is a bitter, if superficial, critique of the despoliation of the third world by Western tourism.

Several cop thrillers also show city police, those other personifications of the state’s monopoly of violence, in a problematic light. In *Training Day* (2002), the corrupt character of a charismatic cop indicts the war of occupation the police are conducting against America’s inner-city ‘third world’. *Dark Blue* (2003) is a similar exposé of police corruption, by implication at the level of the police as a repressive institution. Both films conclude with liberal salvation, but the reversal of conventional cop hagiography is still notable.

Then we have *The Matrix* series of films. Their popularity opens up the cultural possibility of what the science fiction critic Peter Fitting calls ‘critical dystopian’ films. The original, *The Matrix* (1999), in particular, proposed a monstrous version of technophobic paranoia, a world of media technology gone mad, and humanity reduced to bodily slavery. It imaginatively indicted modern capitalism as ‘the desert of the real’. Notably, the second and third films in the series, *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) and *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003) dissipate this intriguing concept in New Age messianism.18

**THE AESTHETICIZATION OF COERCION:**

**CONCLUSIONS**

The critical element in the action film remains a minor theme in Hollywood. The action film – especially the war versions I have largely focused on – is always blatantly political, always about international power, and mostly uncritical. I have argued that such films offer a national allegory of America – beleaguered in a dangerous world of multiple threats and enemies. On the other hand, as Fredric Jameson suggests, many convoluted spy thrillers and their mad super-villains with their nefarious plans for world destruction offer a picture of global capitalism, and all its unseen violence, manipulation and havoc, as a subtext, in a culture where it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to picture capitalism itself.19 Certainly,
action films are constantly imagining the end of the world as a cinematic spectacle, and very rarely name capitalism or imperialism. More narrowly, what we have in so many films is a representation of the power of the imperialist American state, ‘the power of armed oppression’ in Engels’ phrase, with its military functions and institutions heroically personified and familiarized by professional warriors, citizen soldiers and vigilantes, who are also quite often rogue heroes for an increasingly militarily defined ‘rogue state’.

But Hollywood’s version of imperialist militarism is populist fun, enlisting us all in an imperial project that requires popular consent. The action film displays, over and over, the immense technological and military capacity of America’s media and state, over and over, an aestheticized representation of coercion that plays an important role in securing consent. For Hollywood’s USA is a benevolent friend to the world as well as a bringer of revenge. The conclusion of Independence Day says it clearly. The American president, and a squad of heroes, have destroyed the invaders’ command ship and developed a superior technological response to the aliens’ apparently invincible technological prowess. They share it with the rest of the world as we skip to locations all over the globe and a series of quickly sketched national stereotypes follow American orders in defeating the invaders. The images illustrate Hollywood’s, and American-led globalization’s, ability to dominate, incorporate and orchestrate the world’s consumption of America; it is the symbolic performance of imperialism.

As viewers we can enjoy imperialism as a spectacle – we can track and enjoy the generic confluences and convergences, the sideshows and tangents. And this brings us back to the imperial role of culture today: Hollywood is emblematic of America’s cultural and ideological domination; and the Hollywood action movie is the key output of the vast media conglomerates that have been crucial to American globalization and its ability to remake the world in its own mad image.

Despite this apparent triumph, however, the new globalized Hollywood has financial, aesthetic and ideological fault lines. On finance, Hollywood’s venerable lobbyist Jack Valenti has issued dire warnings about the escalating production costs of the blockbusters that ensure Hollywood’s domination. Massive interconnected webs of synergy can be houses of cards and one bloated imperial commodity flop can bring down a corporation. The huge media conglomerates that buttress Hollywood’s global domination have also been rocked by tumultuous and volatile mergers, takeovers and collapses, as the hi-tech and stock market bubbles burst in the early years of this century. Faced with this, Hollywood has increasingly relied on foreign investment to offset its own aversion to risk. But since the blockbuster strategy is actually risk-filled, it is uncertain if its access to foreign capital will remain secure.
Imperial Hollywood may be in danger of imperial overreach.

Aesthetically, these films – built on audience research and technological gimmickry and sold by total control of marketing and exhibition – have been condemned by critics and cinephiles as the trivializing death of the cinema. This may be exaggerated but this phase of Hollywood filmmaking has opened up an aesthetic vacuum that art cinema, nationally-rooted films and even politically militant features and documentaries may be able to fill. Indeed, Hollywood’s domination has not been total or entirely homogenizing: Hollywood’s need to internationalize itself should allow a contested terrain of alternatives to develop. There are also indications that the action film may move beyond the trivial. Film studies have focused on the development of ‘action auteurs’, the stylistic innovations and spiritual meditations of John Woo, the mixing of feminism into male-fixated genres by Kathryn Bigelow, the wild homages to Asian cinema by Quentin Tarantino. These artists may bring an unexpected weight, albeit likely depoliticized, to films designed for so-called passive consumption, and may indicate some resilience in the always necessary relative autonomy of cultural producers within the mighty culture monoliths.

Then there is the vulnerability of ideology to political realities. Some have speculated that blatant American triumphalism will become a hard ideological sell as America’s imperial adventure in Iraq continues to founder and massive anti-American and anti-imperialist politics continue to develop. Hollywood’s international domination has also brought an unprecedented dependence on foreign audiences, and finding ways to appeal to foreign viewers has become important for corporate strategies. Explicitly didactic Reaganite-Bushite films are unlikely to be common. Hollywood will most likely shape imperial ideology allegorically; action heroes will increasingly do battle in fantastic worlds of Good and Evil, or be set in long-ago days of imperial glory.

Hollywood has indeed ‘Reloaded’ in the last decade, in corporate structure, in control of production and markets, in defining film by out and out commodification. These imperial commodities dominate global culture and celebrate America’s triumphs, formally and ideologically, and the fact that many such films feature humanitarian concerns, guilty angst or multicultural heroes only serves to get liberal viewers to buy into their main message. But recall that The Matrix proposes the future of capitalist modernity as a nightmare of the military-industrial-media complex gone mad; one critic argues that, implicitly, the Matrix is Hollywood. Cracks along the fault lines of capital, global production and aesthetic and ideological contradictions may make Hollywood’s imperial commodity subject to the kind of disaster and collapse it so pleasurabley imagines and expensively constructs on screen.
NOTES


2 Miller et al., in *Global Hollywood* provides several powerful illustrations; Prague has become Hollywood’s second European production location after the dismantling of the large state studio and the unemployment of a highly skilled film work force, pp. 71-72; *The Beach*, a film condemning Western tourism, was produced with the coercive co-operation of the Thai government in violating its own environmental regulations in order to produce a more picture-perfect paradise, p. 197.


For an excellent discussion, see Tom Doherty, ‘The New War Movies as Moral Rearmament: Black Hawk Down and We Were Soldiers’, Cineaste, XXVII(3), 2002.


See the excellent close analysis in Lila Kataeff, ‘Three Kings: Neocolonial Arab Representation’, Jump Cut, 46, (Summer) 2003, www.ejumpcut.org. She observes ‘… the film personalizes an intervention in the affairs of a colonized nation by using the logic of the colonizer to attempt to solve the problems of the colonized.’

Kellner and Ryan’s Camera Politica offers a compelling account of Rambo as a working-class victim articulated with right-wing populism.

Schwarzenegger’s star persona, and perhaps political potential, has been carefully constructed from film to film, see the case study in Jose Arroyo, ed., Action/Spectacle Cinema, pp. 27-58.

For an interesting discussion which concludes that the Matrix is our watching Hollywood, see Osha Neumann, ‘Selling The Matrix’, Radical Society, 29(1), 2002, pp. 73-83.


Michael Moore hopes to bring down the Bush government with his new film *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004). Hollywood has partially managed this competition by creating its own divisions for independent and art films.
