

Ilias Ben Mna

Echoes of Reaganism in
Hollywood Blockbuster
Movies from the
1980s to the 2010s



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This book examines the reverberations of key components of Ronald Reagan's ideology in selected Hollywood blockbuster movies. The aim of this analysis is to provide a clearer understanding of the intertwining of cinematic spectacles with neoliberalism and neoconservatism. The analysis comprises a dissection of Reagan's presidential rhetoric and the examination of four seminal Hollywood blockbuster movies. The time range for analysis stretches from the 1980s until the 2010s. Among the key foci are filmic content as well as production and distribution contexts. It is concluded that Reagan's political metaphors and the corporatization of film studios in the 1970s and 1980s continue to shape much of Hollywood blockbuster filmmaking.

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from the 1980s to the 2010s

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*Dedicated to my parents—and my two older brothers, who raised me on
a healthy diet of 1980s action movies*

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Introduction

Yes, the 1980s are our very own Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon game: Everything defining today's politics seems connected to that decade. And even though many of these political narratives were around before the Reagan era [...] they were vastly amplified by the new technologies, corporate reorganizations and federal policy changes of the time.

— David Sirota, “From Charlie Sheen to Reagan Nostalgia, The ’80s Just Won’t Go Away,”
The Washington Post, March 11, 2011

Blockbusters and Reaganism

Blockbuster movies wield considerable mass cultural influence on a global scale and represent one of the most profitable sources of revenue for Hollywood studios.¹ Despite the massive commercial success and far-reaching socio-cultural repercussions of this style of filmmaking, its ideological genealogy and historical development over the decades have received only limited scholarly attention.

Thus, this book will discuss specific “echoes” of Ronald Reagan’s rhetoric and ideology in Hollywood blockbuster movies since the 1980s. These echoes are understood as conceptual, narrative, and stylistic parallels between cinematic story lines and key tenets of Reaganism. In the context of the emergence of the contemporary blockbuster formula in the late 1970s, the Reagan presidency and its associated brand of cinema in the 1980s provide a unique semiotic anchoring point for an investigation of the cultural metatexts that have shaped two seemingly different cultural practices: postmodern presidential rhetoric and postmodern Hollywood filmmaking. Notably, both practices are informed by the reproduction of cultural knowledge through myths and the affirmation of mainstream self-certainties (Rogin, *Independence Day* 43), since both practices aim for an easily marketable mass appeal. Therefore, I approach both practices as textual formats, which are strongly intertwined with the underlying discourses that shape the creation, production, distribution, and dissemination of images. These practices have gained considerable

1 I define the term “Hollywood” as the “Big Six” film studios: Warner Bros. Pictures, 20th Century Fox, Paramount Pictures, Universal Pictures Sony Pictures Entertainment, and Walt Disney Studios.

currency as conveyors—and mediators—of societal discussions on race, gender, class, space, and body politics, as well as national and individual identity politics. Analyzing the interrelationship between the two can yield valuable insights into the workings and manifestations of a “national sub-conscious” since the 1980s (Britton 102–103; Wood 156–160; Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, The Movie*). The dramatization of struggles inherent in capitalist, gendered, and racist power structures arguably exerts its most far-reaching influence in the cultural productions of two institutions, which can easily leverage national and global attention: multinational Hollywood media conglomerates and the White House.

I will, therefore, begin by dissecting Reagan’s presidential rhetoric and then I will closely examine four blockbuster movies from the period between 1982 and 2012: *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), *Independence Day* (1996), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Avengers* (2012). In separate close readings, these films will be explored in terms of their resonance with or resistance to two key trajectories: Reaganite neoliberalism and Reaganite neoconservatism.² These two foci are further undergirded by a reactionary form of backlash politics in opposition to socially progressive movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Soles 2). Therefore, a set of political metaphors used by Reagan in his rhetoric will facilitate access to these two trajectories, while also serving as a “Reaganite lens” through which each film can be read.³ These ideological tenets will be followed over a period that extends beyond the Reagan presidency (1981–1989). This adds a diachronic⁴ dimension to the overall analysis.

The simultaneity of the rise of the blockbuster and the ascent of Reaganism (Jordan 29–50) puts Reagan’s brand of conservatism in a privileged position for a thorough historical analysis. Therefore, the perspective detailed in this book is unique, as it examines Reaganite echoes in Hollywood cinema beyond the 1980s and into the 2010s. Unlike previous, synchronic analyses of Reaganite cinema, which largely focused on the 1980s (Davies and Wells; Prince, *American Cinema of the 1980s*; Rossi; Hackett), I dive headfirst into the question of how far the cinematic Reagan era extends beyond the 1980s. Thus,

2 The terms “neoliberalism” and “neoconservatism” will be defined and contextualized in Chapter 1.

3 The term “Reaganite lens” is understood throughout this book to mean a filter that highlights the ideological tenets and contradictions central to Reaganism.

4 In this study, the term “diachronic” denotes the consistent tracing of one type of ideological discourse across multiple historical phases. “Synchronic” refers to the analysis of an ideological discourse within the period in which it originated.

this study contributes to a more precise delineation of the historical reach of the cinematic Reagan era and can, thereby, illuminate the pop cultural and ideological legacies of the 1980s in mass media.

The Long Shadow of the 1980s

The discussions in this book revolve around dramatized socio-cultural struggles and their cinematic resolution, from the early 1980s all the way to contemporary Hollywood. My argument is central to the following three claims:

- Hollywood blockbuster movies continue to recycle ideological tropes and metaphors that were prominent in both Reagan's rhetoric and Reagan-era cinema.
- Hollywood blockbuster movies incorporate both socially progressive and conservative visions in their negotiations of societal conflicts, which are presented as a "populist backlash" against forces that threaten white, middle-class masculinity.
- Hollywood blockbuster movies reflect their increasingly global and diverse viewership through the incorporation of a "multicultural neoliberalism," which cements the blockbuster's status as a "commodity spectacle." This points toward a reformulation of cultural struggles within a continued late capitalist and neoconservative framework.

Central to these claims is the observation that several technological and financial metastructures—which have governed the political economy of Hollywood since the late 1970s—are still intact or have gradually strengthened over the last four decades. These economic co-ordinates structure the output of major film studios in the United States against the backdrop of three continuing cultural, social, and political paradigms, which affect both supply and demand in the film business: neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and the so-called "culture wars" (Hunter). As Reaganism provided an early, right-wing articulation of all three of these discourses, there is reason to assume that subsequent reiterations of conservative discourses in Hollywood film still relate to this continuously dominant form of US conservatism.

The overarching theoretical framework for this analysis is based on Douglas Kellner's concepts of "technocapitalism" and the "media spectacle" (*Film, Politics, and Ideology; Media Culture; Media Spectacle*) as a basic epistemology for the reverberance of new mass media technologies in the cultural, political, and social realities of post-industrial societies. In this context, I will also

trace the continued repercussions of the corporatization of Hollywood studios, which started in the late 1970s (Jordan 40–41).

This becomes especially relevant given the fact that high-concept⁵ blockbusters, despite having been conceived 40 years ago, are nowadays more financially successful than ever. According to the box-office revenue-tracking website Box Office Mojo, 19 of the 20 highest-grossing films worldwide were produced in the period between 2009 and 2018.⁶ From a film historical perspective, the impact, resonance, and—most prominently—profitability of the blockbuster concept are increasing significantly (Prince, *A New Pot of Gold*). Therefore, I endeavor to offer a more holistic analysis characterized by a focus on the correspondences between a larger ideological consensus and the demand-driven, profit-oriented dynamics of Hollywood filmmaking (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*). This approach allows for a clearer delineation of the radical shifts that US society has experienced since the neoliberal departure from New Deal welfare capitalism and the intervention of progressive social movements in the 1960s and 1970s (Cannon; Troy, *The Reagan Revolution* 45–48). The Reagan presidency, therefore, emerges as a pivotal watershed moment for the ascendancy of a social/economic conservatism after the 1970s. This watershed moment is marked by the beginning of the culture wars, the end of the Cold War, and the institutionalization of a neoliberal consensus that has taken form not only as a political and economic, but also as a cultural regime.

In this context, the political rhetoric of subsequent presidents, from Reagan to Trump, is relevant as it sheds light on discernible commonalities, continuations, adaptations, and differences. Given the ongoing discussions about the legacy of 1980s neoliberalism during the 2008 financial crash, the emergence of the Tea Party movement in the United States, the echoes of Reagan's counterterrorism rhetoric in George W. Bush's "War on Terror," and the emphasis on an optimistic "American exceptionalism" in Barack Obama's and Bill Clinton's speeches (Freie 21), there are grounds for examining an overarching mode of political communication that has endured since the Reagan era (Sirota, *Back to Our Future*; Bunch).

5 The term "high concept" is used by film scholars to denote an artistic work that is built on a succinct premise or story line; for example, a "what-if" scenario or a "set of themes that could be easily summarized in a fifteen-second advertising spot or print campaign" (Jordan 63).

6 "All Time Box Office—Worldwide Grosses." [boxofficemojo.com](https://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/). Accessed January 1, 2019: <<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/>>.

How to Trace Ideology in Blockbusters?

As previously noted, Douglas Kellner's concepts of "technocapitalism" and the "media spectacle" (*Media Culture; Media Spectacle*) provide the primary starting point for my analysis. Susan Jeffords' notion of the "Hollywood hard body" (*Hard Bodies*), George Lakoff's dissection of the "strict father" model as a political framing device (*Elephant; Thinking Points*), and Roland Barthes' observations on the structure and usage of mythologies in late capitalist storytelling (*Mythologies*) will be utilized to build on this foundation. These different but interconnected prisms allow for a multi-perspectival analysis whereby blockbusters can be dissected as media spectacles within and beyond the filmic text.

Kellner's concept of the media spectacle provides an avenue for interrogating the political economy of Hollywood and its effects on filmic content. This facilitates the mapping-out of social and cultural transformations from different critical perspectives (Kellner, *Media Culture* 26), thereby allowing for the analysis of blockbusters as cultural phenomena rather than mere stand-alone texts. Top-grossing media spectacles are suited to such an inquiry as their commercial success and diffusion through merchandise and branding represent a broad collective experience of post-industrial consumerism (Kellner, *Media Culture* 37).⁷ This, in turn, has far-reaching implications for the continuation of neoliberal and neoconservative projects that started to take shape in the Reagan era.

Susan Jeffords' concept of the "hard body" offers a viable means of illuminating filmic narratives in terms of the portrayal of gender, as well as a reasserted national identity. In view of the post-Vietnam, post-stagflation, and post-Watergate climate during which the modern blockbuster formula was conceived, it is vital to interrogate how representations of the body reflect cultural fantasies of a conservative "pushback" against perceived threatening forces—either in the form of a racialized Other, shifts in gender relations, or technological progress. Jeffords argues that the re-centering of a muscle-laden and indestructible white masculinity is an expression of escalating fears of

7 In his book *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern*, Kellner posits that "focusing on texts and audiences to the exclusion of analysis of the social relations and institutions in which texts are produced and consumed truncates cultural studies, as does analysis of reception that fails to indicate how audiences are produced through their social relations and how to some extent culture itself helps produce audiences and their reception of text" (37).

imperial decline and the onset of globalization (*Hard Bodies* 3, 193). Thus, it is worth examining the depiction of bodies across decades and genres in order to explore the shifting contours of such pushback fantasies.

The conservative restoration of hierarchies is also central to Lakoff's "strict father" model. Lakoff's notion, which derives from his research in cognitive linguistics, allows depictions of the family and the use of tendentious metaphors and terminology to be pried apart. The narrative shape of what Lakoff describes as a "political frame" activates thought processes that link ideological mappings of society and its constituent binaries, for example, "the restoration of the family." The focus on simplified and heroic story lines in blockbuster movies presents fertile ground for exploring the construction of hierarchies and notions of the "nation as a family." The family metaphor continues to be a common feature of discourses that arise in the context of the culture wars (Hunter), especially since Reagan and the self-declared "Moral Majority" injected a reactionary and allegedly "values-oriented" family discourse into the conservative cultural lexicon. For these reasons, Lakoff's approach can generate detailed insights into the historic reconstruction and reformulation of "family" in the mainstream cinematic imagination.

Given the nature of films as audiovisual texts, both speech and visual language are critical to the construction of meanings. Therefore, Barthes' explorations of myths and mythologies facilitate the deconstruction of the interplay between image and speech in movies. Furthermore, Barthes offers methodological strategies to expose semiotic layers in connection with their ideological functioning. This allows for a thorough disassembling of national foundation myths, for example, or the essentialization of the Other in blockbuster movies. And since the Reagan era was infused with images of both capitalist and racist mythologies, Barthes' approach serves as a solid means of investigating potential commonalities between Reaganism and Hollywood tales.

These different approaches provide a comprehensive basis for investigating both the content and context of blockbuster movies. The intersections between cultural, political, and economic paradigm shifts, which are mirrored in major Hollywood productions, require a broad analysis that draws from multiple levels of inquiry. Thus, the "resonant images" of dramatized conflicts portrayed in film need to be examined in order to shed light on why these visual narratives are so popular and to determine the degree to which they reproduce or challenge domination in a societal context (*Media Culture* 107). In accordance with Kellner's understanding of media culture as "contested terrain" (*Media Culture* 101–102), movies are viewed in this book as multiple textual layers with often competing, resonant images. In this sense, the proposed analysis is

fundamentally geared toward uncovering implicit and explicit power dynamics that reflect prevalent societal conflicts.

Considering the nature of movies as “contested terrain” (Kellner & Ryan), this thesis does not seek to explore any direct and/or mono-causal relationships between Reaganism and Hollywood productions. As a multi-faceted phenomenon, cinematic spectacles are involved in a variety of contextual relationships that even a multi-perspectival approach cannot fully cover. In addition, the approaches selected for consideration in this book do not allow for a thorough disassembly of technical and cinematographic aspects. However, the analysis will offer dissections of filmic dialogues, cinematography, *mise-en-scène*, and the narration of selected scenes in order to decode the cinematic communication of implicit meanings.

These theoretical concepts are also unsuitable for the delimitation of blockbusters as a genre. While I will outline a working definition of the term “blockbuster movie,” a more targeted and comprehensive genre theory would be required to fully define this mode of filmmaking as a coherent entity. Yet, the analysis is conducive to discerning commonalities over the period in question and across subject genres and can thereby contribute to further scholarship on questions related to blockbusters as genre.

It should also be noted that these theoretical frameworks do not provide the tools for an exhaustive ideological analysis of either Reaganite rhetoric or all of the potential political symbolism of a given movie. Rather, the discussions in the ensuing chapters aim to illuminate critical watershed moments that affected both the history of Hollywood and US society at large. Thus, the development and trajectories of specific ideological inflections resulting from the corporatization of Hollywood in the 1970s can be delineated. This contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of media culture as a phenomenon that resides at the intersections of technology, capital, and dominant cultural discourses (*Media Culture* 102–103).⁸

Focal Points for Analysis

This book includes a theoretical discussion and the textual analyses of two phenomena: Reaganite rhetoric and its echoes in blockbuster movies.

8 As Kellner points out in his outline for contextual cultural studies, “films and other forms of media culture should be analyzed as ideological texts contextually and relationally” (*Media Culture* 102–103).

In Chapter 1, I will discuss the purpose, contours, and parameters of the selected theoretical approaches. Douglas Kellner's concepts of technocapitalism and media spectacle will serve as the starting point of my analysis, which will be further supported by Susan Jeffords' concept of the "hard body," George Lakoff's "strict father" model, and Roland Barthes' discussion of mythologies. I will also provide basic delineations of key terms, such as "neoliberalism" and "neoconservatism," as well as outlining a working definition of the term "blockbuster movie."

In Chapter 2, I will dissect Reagan's presidential and campaign rhetoric. This will include a textual analysis of the semiotic and ideological underpinnings of Reagan's public addresses. Thus, a set of parameters will be worked out, allowing for the proper positioning of these discourses in their cultural and political context. This analysis will incorporate Barthes' concepts of myth (*Mythologies* 106–164) and Lakoff's criteria for political framing and metaphors (*Thinking Points* 35–66; *Elephant* 3–34), as well as certain specifics of US-American political ideologies as outlined by Daniel P. Franklin (104–117). Kellner's observations on the facets of late capitalist media spectacles will provide additional context.

The ideology of Reaganism, which forms the basis for Reagan's rhetoric, is understood to be at the confluence of neoliberalism and neoconservatism and characterized by a reactionary stance in relation to cultural issues (i.e. the culture wars). In order to specify these ideological themes and translate them into narratives that can be juxtaposed with cinematic story lines, a set of key themes will be examined:

- The invocation of a mythical "limited/small government" during Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign and subsequent first term in office.
- The conception of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) or "Star Wars" program as a Cold War strategy for technological superiority in outer space.
- The framing of "terrorism" as "war" and the related discourse on individual heroism as a metaphor for national unity.
- The conception of rugged, self-styled entrepreneurialism as a discursive pushback strategy against economic anxieties and external competition.

These foci were selected on the basis of two main trajectories that are of vital importance for a diachronic analysis: the ascendancy of neoliberalism and neoconservatism as political and cultural regimes in the four decades after Reagan's election in 1980 (Godwin 56–84; Vaisse; Heilbrunn 105–128). Observations regarding the imperialist undertones of the SDI program and "terror as war" are bracketed by investigations of "rugged individualism" and masculine,

neoliberal capitalism. The specific order of these sections is reflective of the chronological arrangement of the movies.

Chapters 3 to 6 contain analyses of four seminal blockbuster movies from the time period between 1982 and 2012: *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), *Independence Day* (1996), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Avengers* (2012). These movies fulfill the basic criteria necessary to be considered a Hollywood blockbuster movie, in the sense that these are high-concept films that were produced by major Hollywood studios and have grossed more than \$100 million domestically in their original run (Shone). They exceed these criteria in notable ways, as they constitute the most financially successful films of their respective decades and have entire merchandise universes attached to them. These filmic texts were also chosen on the basis of their historical positioning, as each one can be read as a reflection of a respective presidency since the 1980s. *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* will be analyzed as a reflection of middle-class anxieties regarding “big government” in the Reagan–Bush era; the examination of *Independence Day* will focus on Reaganite foreign policy echoes in the Clinton era; and *The Dark Knight* will be considered as a terrain for investigating the “War on Terror” metaphors of both Reagan and George W. Bush (Jackson 3). *The Avengers* was released during Obama’s first term, which was heavily impacted by the financial crash of 2008—an event that led many observers to claim that Reaganite neoliberalism had reached its end (White 185–212; Bunch 225–229).

Each movie will be analyzed in a separate chapter in a parallel pattern. The groundwork for discussing each movie as a blockbuster will be laid in a film historical overview centering on the political economy of Hollywood prior to and at the time of the release of the movie in question. This more descriptive perspective sheds light on questions of ownership and how these informed filmmaking decisions (especially in terms of narrative, style, and marketing). This will add a structuralist dimension to the overall analysis, thereby highlighting the interrelationship between the neoliberal turn of the late 1970s and the innovative and restorative qualities of blockbuster filmmaking in the following years.

The core analysis in each chapter will focus on a reading of the film itself. Key scenes, dialogues, and narrative threads will be analyzed from a stylistic and textual angle—leading to discussions on the implicit meanings and possible interpretations from a socio-cultural and historical perspective (Franklin; Gocsik et al. 39–46). Reagan’s rhetoric on the four themes outlined above and the related co-ordinates of his ideology will serve as a primary frame of reference for this ideological analysis. It is the goal of this analysis to determine the extent to which specific components of Reagan’s rhetoric overlap or clash with certain textual layers of the filmic narrative. Building on these foci, the textual

reading will draw together possible resonances and dissonances between Reagan's rhetoric and the movie. Hence, the analysis of each movie will be tied to a hypothesis of how the filmic text furnished certain imaginations of power struggles for which Reagan had provided his own answers.

In Chapter 3, *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* will be investigated through one of the principal antagonisms of the film: the conflict between government bureaucracy and white, suburban child protagonists. Through the formal and narrative positioning of Elliott and E.T. as victorious protagonists, it can be reasonably argued that the film's attitude toward this conflict is highly conducive to an interpretation that celebrates a racialized and gendered form of individualism in the face of an intruding, yet ultimately ineffective, bureaucracy. Against this backdrop, a possible interrelationship between Reagan's endorsement of a mythical "small government" in 1980 and the tremendous success of a blockbuster movie that pits suburban boys against federal agents in 1982 becomes tangible. I will, therefore, trace echoes of Reagan's campaign rhetoric in the movie and dissect the role of neoliberal policies in the production and distribution of the film.

The analysis of *Independence Day* in Chapter 4 will focus on echoes of Reaganite Cold War rhetoric and the translation of this rhetoric into a 1990s context through the inclusion of Clintonite discourses on "diversity" and "multilateralism." Through this lens, the continuation of Reaganism and its conceptions of "American exceptionalism" (Baker 10–14) throughout the Clinton years can be made visible. This chapter will, therefore, revolve around the reconstruction of the Reaganite Cold War imagination in *Independence Day* along the following parameters: the Reaganite approach to building and maintaining "space superiority," the role of "Messianic Americanism"⁹ (Dearborn 197–203), and the integration of Clintonite "multiculturalism" as a legitimizing vehicle for perpetual global hegemony (Rogin, *Independence Day*). All of these examples will serve to illustrate the continuation of conservative frameworks in both politics and pop culture during the 1990s and thereby shed light on the broader socioeconomic transformations that occurred in the preceding decade.

In this context, Chapter 5 explores how *The Dark Knight* reflects collective post-9/11 anxieties, the state of civil liberties, and the proper response to violent,

9 In his analysis of "American exceptionalism" in presidential rhetoric since 1897, John Dearborn identifies "Messianic Americanism" as a recurrent theme, marked by clear moral binaries and a religiously coded triumphalism. George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan are among the chief promulgators of this notion (28).

ideological challenges through non-state actors. The political and social climate after 9/11 provided numerous echo chambers for George W. Bush's neoconservative rhetoric. Cultural depictions of law enforcement, counter-terrorism, military interventions, and national security were inevitably influenced by Bush's framing of the newly found role of the US government as a so-called "defender of the civilized world." Therefore, it is vital for this analysis to determine the extent to which this overlaps with Reagan's public imagination of the fight against terrorism and identify possible echoes of such approaches in the movie. This will be supported by scholarly observations on how the firm, paternalistic and Manichean language that Reagan employed in the 1980s experienced an explicit and visceral comeback during the Bush administration (Jackson 3; Winkler 303–333). Reagan's framing of terrorism as "war," in particular, is prominently continued in political and cultural discourses. This framing is also echoed in *The Dark Knight*, which presents an ambivalent depiction of the struggle against terrorism and the usage of torture.

The 2012 Marvel superhero film *The Avengers*, discussed in Chapter 6, presents a cross-section of various ideological discourses that became pre-eminent in the wake of the continued "War on Terror," as well as the global financial crisis that hit the US economy particularly hard in the late 2000s. Among other topics, the filmic narrative deals with notions of the feasibility and effectiveness of US-American global leadership after the neoconservative turn during the Bush years. Moreover, it touches upon themes of post-industrial economic anxieties. This is crucial in the context of widespread doubts about Reaganite neoliberalism. For movie-going "millennial" generations, in particular, the paradigm of so-called "Reaganomics" seemed to have contributed to an economic crisis that had shattered myths of individual entrepreneurialism as beneficial to society. These doubts and insecurities were addressed by Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. In tandem with the Obama presidency, *The Avengers* can therefore be read as a progressive renegotiation of certain elements of Reaganite neoliberalism, especially the notion of entrepreneurialism as a vital element in maintaining the national body.

It should be noted that this analysis does not seek to argue that Reaganite rhetoric is in any direct causal relationship with the respective movies and/or their narrative content. Akin to Susan Jeffords' discussion of the Reaganite "hard body" in 1980s cinema, this inquiry is

about the correspondences between the public and popular images of "Ronald Reagan" and the action-adventure Hollywood films that portrayed many of the same

narratives of heroism, success, achievement, toughness, strength, and “good old Americanness” that made the Reagan Revolution¹⁰ possible. (*Hard Bodies* 15)

This examination aims to explain how the rise of conservative neoliberalism—and its mainstream popularization through Reagan—helped to create a popular cultural atmosphere in which such movies would thrive.

Furthermore, the textual analysis does not attempt to suggest an ideological congruence between Reaganism and the entirety of all of these movies’ possible meanings. The analysis is dedicated to juxtaposing a primary theme of Reagan’s politic rhetoric at a given time (mainly from his presidential speeches given between 1981 to 1989) with the implicit meanings of selected scenes and narrative threads that arise from the central conflict presented within the movie in question. The prospective argument rests on the premise that—based on the examined aspects of the film—the narrative reinforces Reagan’s rhetoric rather than contradicts it, that is, more compelling evidence speaks for his rhetoric than against it. Therefore, possible dissonances with Reaganite themes will be part of this analysis, as they can offer valuable insights into the extent to which the cinematic Reagan era is disrupted by popular counter-narratives. This can help to delineate the complicated and multi-directional exchange between Hollywood film and political shifts since the late 1970s.

The resulting findings and observations will be summarized and discussed in “Conclusions and Outlook.” This final section will locate important conclusions within contemporary scholarship, as well as offer suggestions for further inquiries. Special attention will be paid to recent manifestations of a cinema- and TV-inflected spectacle logic in politics, most notably the “Trump phenomenon,” which marks the second time that a former mass media celebrity has gained access to the White House. This development demonstrates the ongoing relevance of media spectacles in the narration and structuring of societal conflicts, which underlines the importance of the analysis in this book.

10 The term “Reagan Revolution” is a highly contentious one as there is significant disagreement over whether it succeeded on its own terms (Troy, *The Reagan Revolution* 53–70) and whether its goals can even be described as “revolutionary,” rather than reactionary.

Why Does Reaganism in Blockbusters Matter?

The exploration of the relationship between Reaganite imagery and blockbuster success is of the utmost importance in the contextualization of a variety of ongoing cultural and political transformations in the United States.

Through the diachronic analysis of Reaganism in Hollywood entertainment, critical new insights can be gained regarding the legacies of the cultural and economic rightward shift that occurred in the late 1970s (Lemann 401–411), including observations that can help to determine the film historical extent of what Andrew Britton dubs “Reaganite entertainment” (97–111). Like numerous other scholars, Britton places the beginning of this period outside the actual Reagan presidency, pointing out that “the characteristic features of this movement—both formal and thematic—are already substantially developed in films which were made before the election of the current president: not only *Rocky* (1976) and *Star Wars* (1977), but also the disaster cycle” (97). As the start of this trend toward reactionary and capitalist reassurance in Hollywood cinema began before Reagan’s election (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*: 15), it is worthwhile investigating the extent to which this legacy continued after Reagan left office in 1989. Which possible film historical watersheds could signal a dissipation, continuation, or possible intensification of the themes and formats of the cinematic Reagan era? Blockbusters offer a unique perspective on this film historical question as they mirror broad and critical developments in mass media entertainment.

This angle also serves to provide new material for a discussion of Chris Jordan’s projection that “the trends in Hollywood production, distribution, and exhibition, which coalesced under the Reagan administration’s philosophy of success, will continue to grow for the foreseeable future” (160). Through an investigation of these trends in major filmic spectacles into the twenty-first century, these assumptions can be fleshed out and defined with clearer thematic and formal contours. This has repercussions not only for cinema in the United States, but also for filmmaking around the globe, as the blockbuster formula is now being adopted by producers on all continents (Scott, “Hollywood and the World” 33–61).

This perspective can also be linked to historian Sean Wilentz’s claim that the period between 1974 and 2008 presented an “extended Reagan era” in that it was primarily shaped by the cultural dominance of right-wing and neoliberal discourses (1–11). Journalist David Sirota offers a similar view in his book *Back to Our Future*, in which he posits that conservative action entertainment and

1980s mass media culture are returning to the screen in an intensified manner (xx). Therefore, my analysis forms part of a larger discussion about the history of pop cultural spectacles and the frequent recourse to the cultural and political struggles of the 1980s.

Furthermore, this book offers an in-depth and historical analysis of what Kellner terms “media cultural studies.” He describes this as “the project of analyzing the complex relations between texts, audiences, media industries, politics, and the socio-historical context in specific conjunctures” (*Media Culture* 37). Conducting such investigations into some of the pre-eminent filmic texts of the last few decades presents an excellent opportunity to enter into discussions on the role of the spectacle in mediating cultural and political meanings in a post-industrial setting. This is critical for the cultivation of new forms of resistance and audience empowerment (340) at a time when pop culture and political spectacles are increasing at an exponential rate (Street 435–452).

This is also observable in the rise of “celebrity politics” in the United States, for which the Reagan presidency arguably provided a lasting blueprint.¹¹ In his discussion of “The Democratic Worth of Celebrity Politics in an Era of Late Modernity,” Mark Wheeler speaks of the “‘hyper-reality’ of the US entertainment–politics nexus” (415), which politicians such as Reagan or Obama have filled using “telegenic imagery.” Dissecting entertainment-oriented media spectacles on multiple textual levels offers a means of uncovering the mechanisms of post-industrial power structures in a digitalized age. As mass media spectacles continue to be shaped by neoliberal logic and vast technological shifts, the tracing of ideological trajectories in such spectacles facilitates the diagnosis of the persistence of specific pop cultural images and plotlines that are now experiencing a general resurgence.

So far, little scholarship has been conducted on what Sam Saunders described as “the Age of the Remake” in an article for *The Huffington Post* in 2012. The notable trend toward franchise reboots—with a focus on blockbusters from the 1980s¹²—begs the question of how cinematic imagination continues to borrow

11 In his piece for *The Guardian*, entitled “You’re hired! How TV carried Reagan and Trump to the White House,” journalist Jonathan Freedland argues that “A facility on TV had been important since John F. Kennedy, but Reagan made it an essential requirement of the job” (*The Guardian* (September 27, 2017). Accessed November 18, 2018: <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/sep/29/youre-hired-how-tv-carried-reagan-and-trump-to-the-white-house>>).

12 A few key examples are the *Ghostbusters* remake in 2016, the reboot of the *Star Wars* franchise with *The Force Awakens* in 2015, a *Top Gun* sequel slated to be released in 2020, and the continuation of the *Terminator* series in film and television.

from the societal dramas of the Reagan era in order to produce crowd-pleasers of global magnitude. This diachronic angle allows for a better delineation of the historical contours of power and resistance, which remain relevant to this very day. Through an examination of production and distribution, this analysis can shed further light on how recycled tropes of white, masculine heroism are negotiated in changing technological and transnational settings.

In her final thoughts on the future of the Hollywood “hard body”, Susan Jeffords articulates a similar line of thought. She expects the “hard body” to show resiliency and become “more intimately woven into the fabric of American culture” (*Hard Bodies* 192–193). She goes on to state that these national models of masculinity

are dangerous models, not only because they depend on the kind of nationalism and militarism that brought the country to military actions in Panama, Grenada, and the Persian Gulf but also because they seem now to represent the desperation of an aging superpower that is reluctant, under a conservative framework, to relinquish its international status and influence and may, like William Munny, be willing to punish harshly those who insist to do so. (193)

With this projected development in mind, the ruptures caused by 9/11, the disastrous Iraq War, and the financial meltdown of 2008 have resulted in more egregious, more punitive and more complex presentations of the “hard body.” For this reason, the analysis of movies that reflect the imagined social mood at specific historical moments in the post-Reagan era assists in determining the extent to which blockbusters still rush to generate cultural fantasies that tackle mounting challenges to white, male US-led capitalism in a globalizing world. For instance, *Independence Day* was released at a time of relative economic growth and post–Cold War triumphalism; *The Dark Knight* was produced in response to the illegal excesses of the Bush administration’s so-called “War on Terror”; and *The Avengers* is informed by economic and imperial anxieties brought about by the financial crisis of 2008 and the re-emergence of Russia and China as challengers to US-American hegemony (Dodds 476–494).¹³

13 In his article “‘Have You Seen Any Good Films Lately?’ Geopolitics, International Relations and Film,” Klaus Dodds notes that “At times of crisis, Hollywood has often been more than willing and able to produce and market films designed to ‘raise’ national morale and spirit” (476). Hollywood shares this mythical distinction with Ronald Reagan, who is frequently said to have “lifted the spirits of the nation” by both liberal and conservative commentators (Schroeder; Rollins), though such claims often neglect the question of whether he “improved the nation” (Bunch 229).

The filmic dramatization of social conflicts is also relevant to a more comprehensive understanding of the culture wars (Hunter 274–278) and increasing political polarization in the United States (Wood B. 45–65). The “battles” in this struggle are frequently fought using memorable rhetoric, compelling images, and narratives about the role of the United States and its people in world history (Dearborn 197–203). Hence, the exploration of the role of metaphors in “Reaganite cinema” constitutes an indispensable part of the elucidation of the cultural shifts and polarization that the United States has been experiencing since the late 1970s.

Moreover, this analysis will yield further details on the survival of mythical images from the 1980s. These are of relevance to contemporary scholarship regarding more recent and deliberate myth-making efforts surrounding Reagan’s divisive political and cultural legacy (Bunch 209–229; Espinoza). Notable among these efforts to bring back Reaganite ideology is the “Reagan Purity Rest” introduced by the Republican National Committee (Beinart) and the efforts of the Ronald Reagan Legacy Project, launched by conservative writer Grover Norquist in 1997, an organization that has dedicated itself to renaming public sites throughout the country after the fortieth president (Bunch 151–154). This relatively new phenomenon has so far only received scant attention in academic discussions on the cultural legacy of the first actor-president.¹⁴ But in light of the tremendous popularity of blockbuster movies and their perpetual recuperation of tropes from the 1980s, it is crucial to detail the workings of reimagined presidential mythologies through the prism of the media spectacle (Werner 1–18).

Ultimately, this analysis is designed to shed light on how the ideological underpinnings of cinematic conflicts interconnect with a form of rhetoric that aided in effecting a reactionary shift in social and economic policies in the United States at a crucial point in history. Therefore, this analysis will illuminate the production, distribution, and inherent mythologies of two ongoing cinematic blockbusters: Hollywood spectacle movies and the Reagan era.

14 In his article on “Evocative Mythology: Constructing Reagan the Cold Warrior in Public Memory, 1980–2012,” Jack Werner explains that “it is the meeting point of Reagan the man and the story of American Exceptionalism as told by Reagan himself that empowers evocative mythology” (12). Contemporary Reagan mythologies are arguably shaped by cinematic narratives that Reagan utilized in the construction of his persona.

Chapter 1 Tracing Echoes in Film

Ronald Reagan!?! The actor? Then who's Vice President?

Jerry Lewis?

— *Doctor Emmett Brown in Back to the Future (1985)*

Chapter Overview

The basic underlying claims of my book will be supported by the following concepts:

- The “media spectacle,” as defined by Douglas Kellner in his books *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity, and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern* (1995) and *Media Spectacle* (2003).
- The Hollywood “hard body,” as postulated by Susan Jeffords in her book *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (1994).
- The concept of the “strict father” as a political framing device, based on George Lakoff’s books *Don’t Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (2004) and *Thinking Points: Communicating Our American Values and Vision* (2006).
- A brief summary of the role of mythical signifiers in political narratives, as outlined by Roland Barthes in his book *Mythologies* (1972).

In addition, I will define my terminology (e.g. the term “blockbuster”) and circumscribe the potential advantages and limitations of the chosen approach.

The Case for the Continued Reaganization of Hollywood Blockbusters

As outlined in the introduction, the analysis in this book revolves around echoes of Reaganite rhetoric and metaphors in Hollywood blockbuster movies between 1982 and 2012. The ensuing examination of blockbuster movies as cultural and political texts will serve to test the following central assumptions:

- Hollywood Blockbuster movies continue to recycle pop cultural tropes that arrived in the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate, post-Iranian hostage crisis and post-stagflation climate of the early Reagan era, for example, the Hollywood

“hard body,” the biracial buddy cop duo fighting against a foreign invasion (Jordan 77), the usage of outer space as a narrative terrain for high-tech militarism, the “Reaganite female” (Kellner, *Media Culture*, 78), the “restoration of the father” as a response to 1960s social progressivism (Wood 152–155), the framing of terrorism as “war,” and the fashioning of domestic bureaucracy as well-meaning, but ultimately inept and/or harmful (much like Reagan portrayed the administration of Jimmy Carter).

- Hollywood blockbuster movies resolve the depicted social conflicts through a synthesized form of pushback politics. These pushback politics are characterized by both socially progressive and conservative imagery that is interwoven into triumphalist high-tech spectacles that generally affirm a form of late capitalism and US imperialism that gained ascendancy in the 1970s and 1980s.
- Hollywood blockbuster spectacles have evolved to incorporate social critique by espousing visions of “multicultural neoliberalism.” These films generally lack a coherent critique of late capitalism, but they do employ representational strategies that maximize appeal beyond the traditional white, middle-class Hollywood clientele. In doing so, they leave intact central provisions of neoliberalism as a cultural regime. Furthermore, this brand of “social progressivism” lacks a coherent stance against neoconservatism, leading to ambivalent cultural negotiations of “The War on Terror.”

These three positions are best understood as principal lines of investigation rather than stand-alone hypotheses since the diachronic angle for the analysis is geared toward the gradual uncovering of ideological and socio-cultural trajectories over a string of filmic analyses. As mentioned in the introduction, each specific blockbuster will be analyzed through the central prism of one specific core theme of Reaganism. Consequently, many observations and conclusions will be aggregated as the analysis progresses. Discussions of later films will draw on the insights of previous inquiries in this book, thereby painting an increasingly holistic picture of the ideological undercurrents of blockbusters. The aggregate nature of these arguments also applies to the themes of Reaganite rhetoric that will structure the film analysis:

- the “small-government” metaphor
- Cold War in outer space
- (counter-)terrorism as war
- hard-bodied entrepreneurialism.

As noted in the introduction, these foci have been selected because they mirror two essential constants of 1980s conservatism: neoliberalism (e.g. “small government,” hard-bodied entrepreneurialism) and neoconservatism (Cold War and counter-terrorism rhetoric). It should be acknowledged that these themes do not provide an exhaustive overview of Reaganism when considered individually, but taken together they can yield valuable insights into ideological correspondences between “popular images of ‘Ronald Reagan’ and the action-adventure Hollywood films that portrayed many of the same narratives of heroism, success, achievement, toughness, strength, and ‘good old Americanness’ that made the Reagan revolution possible” (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 15).

The principal claims aim to engage with these correspondences and thereby set the stage for what Douglas Kellner has dubbed “diagnostic critique”: “A diagnostic critique also analyzes how media culture provides the resources for producing identities and advances either reactionary or progressive politics, often providing ambiguous texts and effects that can be appropriated in various ways” (*Media Culture* 6). Given the status of feature films as contested terrains for competing social visions, it is much less important to ask whether a movie pushes a certain point of view than it is to interrogate which specific societal struggles and dramas are chosen and how they are resolved (Kellner, *Media Spectacle* 2). In this context, the role of mass media in “agenda setting” for collective discourses should not be understated. Christensen and Haas point out that “movies contribute to general social and political learning, including affective patterns. Movies are part of a larger political socialization process” (12–15). This aspect of cinematic socialization has arguably acquired a new dimension as a result of the ascent of new multi-media technologies and enhanced modes of cross-channel distribution. When combined with a shifting language in cultural and identity struggles in a post-1960s climate, these technological shifts generate new forms of cultural mediation that make use of film’s power to reduce complexity in order to generate an accessible mass product.

This applies not only to film, but also to political communication. As Robert E. Denton, Jr. notes: “[T]he media reduce abstract or ideological principles to human personal components. Political issues and actions are linked to individuals. Rather than choose among policies or ideologies, we select among actors” (Denton in Prince, *Visions of Empire* xiv). The performance of simplicity in a time of (perceived) increasing complexity has significant repercussions for the narration of social conflicts and the diffusion of such narratives. The fact that Denton highlights the term “actor” emphasizes the centrality of cinematic imagination in channeling notions of hegemony or resistance. This book aims to elucidate the underlying technological and cultural shifts that have put

“actors” into the spotlight as prime mediators of national identity—both on the big screen and in the White House.

Subsequently, engaging in the power struggles that arise from these multitudinous shifts requires a thorough understanding of the genealogy and manifestations of contemporary media spectacles. Therefore, a multi-perspectival approach is suitable to highlight interrelationships between different sets of struggles not only through an intersectional lens, but also by including the political economy of cultural productions in conjunction with larger technological transformations. For this reason, Kellner’s concept of the “media spectacle” will be presented in the following section.

The Media Spectacle According to Douglas Kellner

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word “spectacle” as “a visually striking performance or display” or alternatively as “an event or scene regarded in terms of its visual impact.”¹⁵ These definitions point to the crucial aspect of visual experience—as well as the “pleasure of viewing” the spectacle. The performance aspect indicates that certain types of spectacles take the form of staged events (unlike natural spectacles, for example). It is critical to recognize the conscious and deliberate nature of these staged performances in order to comprehend the relationships between media spectacles and society.¹⁶ Therefore, this section will outline the nature of Kellner’s concept of the “media spectacle” and its social and economic functioning against the backdrop of post-industrial technological changes.

Kellner builds his concept of the “media spectacle” on Guy Debord’s notion of the “society of the spectacle” (Kellner, *Media Spectacle* 2–11). Debord contextualized the term “spectacle” in his observations on French post-war capitalism, in which he described a form of societal organization whereby commodities and consumption are at the heart of mass cultural productions (Kellner, *Media Spectacle* 2). Kellner further explicates this notion:

15 “Spectacle,” *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*, oxforddictionaries.com. Accessed December 21, 2018: <<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/spectacle>>.

16 Thompson et al. argue that current academic “theories of spectacle highlight how the productive forces of marketing, often associated with media and Internet proliferation, create symbolic forms of practice that are emblematic of everyday situations” (16). The spectacle as a pre-mediated cultural practice has therefore been at the center of recent scholarly discourse.

I argue that media spectacles are those phenomena of media culture that embody contemporary society's basic values, serve to initiate individuals into its way of life, and dramatize its controversies and struggles, as well as its modes of conflict resolution. [...] while Debord presents a rather generalized and abstract notion of spectacle, I engage specific examples of media spectacle and how they are produced, constructed, circulated, and function in the present era. (2)

Kellner's concept therefore aims to read media spectacles as comprehensive texts independent of the content of the actual audiovisual narrative. Media spectacles need to be understood within their respective economic, cultural, and political contexts in order to fully comprehend the undercurrents of their staged performances. This is especially vital for cultural productions that are primarily conceived as commodities, such as blockbuster movies. Furthermore, media spectacles are embedded within a market logic of maximizing attention and emotional resonance with a target audience from early screenwriting to the distribution of mass merchandise during and after the film's release. The entire life cycle can be read as a bona-fide cultural text that reflects the predominant biases and aspirations of both the producers and consumers. In his discussion of Hollywood's effects on the political culture in the United States, Daniel P. Franklin summarizes the market orientation of contemporary media spectacles: "[I]f films are truly made to meet the demands of the consumer, then the logic of the influence of film is simple. Filmmakers are businessmen and businesswomen. They want to make money. They make money by giving the public what it wants. Films then come to largely reflect the sensibilities of their audience" (20). Thus, it can be concluded that accomplished media spectacles not only expose widespread cultural epistemologies of basic values, controversies, and struggles, as Kellner aptly notes, but also provide insights into how the dissemination of images is anticipated and ultimately effectuated through established channels. Thus, the analyses in the following chapters of major Hollywood productions over the last 40 years will interrogate filmic texts, their production and distribution contexts, and their larger repercussions as pop cultural watersheds.

It can be observed that the corporatized structure of major Hollywood studios generally follows this logic, at least when it comes to their flagship, most capital-intensive products: blockbuster movies. In order to generate a maximum return on investment, a product needs to sell across demographics, across borders, and across different walks of life. In light of this, Kellner adds to Debord's theory that "spectacle culture has expanded in every area of life. In the culture of the spectacle, commercial enterprises have to be entertaining to

prosper” (*Media Spectacle* 3). Contemporary mass media spectacles therefore rely on the circulation of branded merchandise for their perpetuation in ancillary markets.¹⁷ What Kellner’s dubs the “commodification of previously non-colonized sectors of social life and the extension of bureaucratic control to the realms of leisure, desire, and everyday life” accentuates the interplay between larger technological transformations that haven taken place since the publication of Debord’s original theory in 1967.

In his book *Movies and the Reagan Presidency: Success and Ethics*, film scholar Chris Jordan designates the advent of multiplexes, cable television, and home video as momentous changes in the media landscape of the 1970s (40–48); this set the stage for so-called “high-concept movies,” including blockbusters.¹⁸ Thus, it can reasonably deduced that media spectacles also serve to negotiate technological shifts by transforming them into accessible items for consumption. The reduction of complexity in an increasingly heteronomous environment is achieved through bombastic, audiovisual catharsis, which underlines the instructive character of spectacles as heralds of technocapitalism (Kellner, *Media Spectacle* 11–15). Kellner connects contemporary spectacle culture with technocapitalism:

[C]urrently, we are entering a new form of technocapitalism marked by a synthesis of capital and technology and the information and entertainment industries, all of which is producing an “infotainment society” and spectacle culture. In terms of political economy, the emerging postindustrial form of technocapitalism is characterized by a decline of the state and enlarged power for the market, accompanied by the growing strength of transnational corporations and governmental bodies and the decreased strength of the nation-state and its institutions.

The ascent of the current form of media spectacle is inseparably linked with globalization and the rise of neoliberal capitalism. This creates an interconnection between the transformations that took place in Western societies in the 1970s and 1980s, marking the Reagan era as a political watershed moment for the development of media spectacles in a US-American context. The current form of spectacle culture is designed and institutionalized in a climate

17 Kellner notes that in order “to succeed in the ultracompetitive global marketplace, corporations need to circulate their image and brand name, so business and advertising combine in the promotion of corporations as media spectacles” (*Media Spectacle* 4).

18 Chris Jordan remarks that the term “high-concept” refers to “a mode of movie production that favors projects that can be summarized in a thirty-second television spot and sold in a single sentence” (7).

marked by increasing tension between corporate commercial interests and the institutionalized powers of the industrial nation state. The overall trend toward a post-industrial societal fabric manifests itself in cultural productions that dramatize such tensions and reflect popular desires for either the valorization or demonization of certain characteristics of the pre-neoliberal era. As a result, the usage of modern technology in spectacle narratives (both in terms of style and content) needs to be understood within the context of such cultural transformations.

The Reagan era presents an excellent starting point for tracing these developments over time, as it was situated within the context of a reactionary realignment whereby post-industrial high-tech capitalism was married to social visions derived from racist and heterosexist conservatism. This bifurcation was advertised by the Reagan persona, which presented a novel form of political spectacle, one that explicitly brought the tropes of the Hollywood cinematic form into the arena of national political discourse in the United States. Kellner notes that

his presidency was scripted to act out and play his presidential role. Reagan rehearsed his lines every day and generally gave a good performance. Every move was scripted and his media handlers had cameras on hand to provide the image, photo opportunity, and political line of the day that they wanted to convey to the media. Reagan was also a celebrity, a superstar of media culture, [...] and perhaps the first intersection of celebrity and politics in an era in which celebrities were increasingly not just role models but political forces who ran for office or were active politically. (*Media Spectacle* 166)

While Reagan's impact and legacy are hotly debated, Kellner rightly identifies the adeptness of his "performance" of the presidency for a modern TV format. Central to this media spectacle are the formulation of bite-sized (high-concept) plotlines, prudent choreography, and telegenic appearances. The "Reagan persona" should therefore be read not only as a product of Hollywood, but also as an active contributor to the introduction of late capitalist forms of cinematic storytelling into wider societal arenas (Thompson et al. 11).¹⁹ In line with McLuhan's seminal slogan that the "medium is the message" (*Medium is the Message* 8; *Understanding Media* 309), the delivery of political ideology in a

19 In "Puppets of Necessity? Celebritisation in Structured Reality Television," Thompson et al. state that "field actors are not intermediaries [...], but are themselves active agents in the process, actively shaping, and being shaped by the meanings produced" (11).

mass spectacle exemplifies the role of popular culture in conveying and shaping social meanings.

Kellner's conceptualization of the media spectacle has numerous advantages for the analysis contained in this book. The dramatization of eminent societal conflicts in cinematic form takes place in an increasingly complex social environment. This calls for an investigation of how blockbuster movies manage to transcend societal fragmentation and polarization and draw a maximum number of spectators. An adequate set of answers to this question can be provided by looking at the filmic text and its cultural, political, and economic contexts. Kellner's concept of the media spectacle highlights the interrelationship between staged performances and their production and distribution in fertile ways.

Since the four film analyses are united by a diachronic perspective, it is also necessary to investigate how the corporatization of Hollywood film production has shaped stylistic and thematic elements of blockbuster filmmaking over the last 40 years. Kellner's concept of technocapitalism facilitates this investigation, as it illuminates the workings of globalization and neoliberal capitalism in cultural mass productions. The associated conflicts surrounding the roles of technology, the state, and cultural discourses inherited from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s inevitably lead to updated translations of societal tensions.

Moreover, Kellner's approach traces the manifestation of spectacles through the entire process of production, construction, and circulation (*Media Spectacle* 2). This is vital for contextualizing the primary subject of this analysis, which seeks to understand blockbuster movies as a cultural and political phenomenon. Unlike other kinds of films, blockbusters are principally defined by their production design and awarded "blockbuster status" when they deliver the desired commercial mass effects (Hall 147–166).²⁰ Merely looking at the filmic text will not do justice to the larger implications of blockbusters as a societal spectacle. Thus, Kellner's approach offers a valuable means of studying the interplay between production, distribution, and the form and content of the movie itself.

As Kellner notes, the Reagan presidency is unprecedented in the pop culture history of the United States. A movie celebrity performed within the nation's

20 Sheldon Hall and Steve Neale define blockbusters in their book *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters: A Hollywood History* as "unusually expensive productions designed to earn unusually large amounts of money"—that is to say, films which are not just exceptionally successful box-office hits but those which are specifically intended to be so, and are budgeted, made and marketed accordingly" ("Pass the Ammunition" 148).

highest office by explicitly referring to tropes borrowed from Hollywood imagination. One of these tropes, decisively shaped by blockbusters and Reagan in the 1980s, is the “hard body.”

The Hollywood “Hard Body” According to Susan Jeffords

In order to outline the role of the “body” in this study, it is necessary to briefly define the cultural and political dimensions of the term. Nadia Brown and Sarah Allen Gershon describe bodies as “sites in which social constructions of differences are mapped onto human beings. Subjecting the body to systemic regimes—such as government regulation—is a method of ensuring that bodies will behave in socially accepted manners” (1). The cultural representation of bodies is therefore inextricably linked to constructed social hierarchies and the exercise of power. Thus, bodies present a unique focal point for the investigation of ideological conflicts in popular culture, as they serve as accessible signifiers for prevalent conflicts.²¹

Susan Jeffords applies this understanding of the body as a contested terrain to both human beings and fantasies of national identity at large. In her assessment of how Reagan performed as both “a president and a man,” she states that

to the extent that the president stands for the nation, and to the extent that a particular president constructs that standing in distinctly masculine terms, then national identity must itself be figured in relation to popular masculine models and narratives of masculine generation and power. (*Hard Bodies* 12)

Jeffords considers the ramifications of bodies for dominant understandings of masculinity, femininity, the family, and national identities. The last of these relates directly to technological capabilities, notions of economic strength, and the narrative situating of the nation in global contexts. This indicates that large-scale economic, technological, and political realignments will manifest themselves in a cultural body politics that reflects updated notions of social conflict.

21 Brown and Gershon go on to state that “[p]ower is not manifested in a static form. [...] Analyzing the body as a site where power is contested and negotiated provides scholars with the ability to examine the fluidity of privilege and marginalization” (1). Through the diachronic approach, the analysis of bodies in filmic texts can generate insights into the developments of these very fluidities in relation to race, gender, and class, for example.

Susan Jeffords argues that the Reagan presidency constituted a watershed, in which a significant change in popular depictions of the body can be observed:

In the broadest of terms, whereas the Reagan years offered the image of a “hard body” to contrast directly to the “soft bodies” of the Carter years, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw a reevaluation of that hard body, not for a return to the Carter soft body, but for a rearticulation of masculine strength and power through internal, personal and family-oriented values. (*Hard Bodies* 13)

Pop cultural manifestations of the body also mirror larger narratives of political difference. This applies especially to media spectacles, which try to tap into a national subconscious. Tracing the specificities of fictional bodies in blockbuster movies can therefore uncover the implicit workings of larger socio-cultural metatexts in relation to political economy and global transformations. Jeffords’ understanding of the “hard body” as a national body is significant for the analysis of characters that come from a marginalized position. As I intend to examine expressions of “multicultural neoliberalism,” the integration of emancipatory discourses through bodies acquires a new dimension in the context of the national body. For example: How should we read the social meanings of feminine bodies that are incorporated into larger masculine structures of militaristic defense?²²

Building on the conceptualization of the masculine body as expressive of national identity at a time of tectonic social shifts, Jeffords sets out to provide a definition of the “hard body” that underlines how it has been shaped by long-standing power binaries:

In the dialectic of reasoning that constituted the Reagan movement, bodies were deployed in two fundamental categories: the errant body containing sexually transmitted disease, immorality, illegal chemicals, “laziness”, and endangered fetuses, which we can call the “soft body”; and the normative body that enveloped strength, labor, determination, loyalty, and courage—the “hard body”—the body that was to come to stand as the emblem of the Reagan philosophies, politics, and economics. In

22 In this context, Kellner has outlined the notion of the “Reaganite female.” In his brief analysis of the character Charlotte “Charlie” Blackwood in the quintessential Reagan-era action movie *Top Gun* (1986), he states “Charlie (Kelly McGillis), is the perfect Reaganite female: competitive, out for promotion, and proper in her behavior. She incarnates a conservative appropriation of feminism in which women compete as equals with men while retaining their ‘femininity.’ ‘Charlie’ has a man’s name, but thoroughly feminine looks, sensibility, and behavior. She also represents the new woman in the military, and during a period in which the volunteer army depended on women recruits, her image of a successful and attractive military woman provides free recruitment advertisements for the volunteer army” (*Media Culture* 78).

this system of thought marked by race and gender, the soft body invariably belonged to a female and/or a person of color, whereas the hard body was, like Reagan’s own, male and white. (*Hard Bodies* 24–25)

The “hard body” is therefore geared toward binary epistemologies of conflict and a clear-cut construction of social difference. This trope is located right at the center of the corporate-sponsored media spectacle, which generally seeks to reduce complexity and resolve conflict in an easily narratable form. Thus, “hard bodies” arrived at a time wherein increased demands for collective pleasure (27) coincided with the development of enhanced technologies capable of producing and distributing spectacles on an unprecedented scale.

In its essence, the “hard body” is evocative of popular desires for the restoration of an imaginary patriarchal, invincible, and dominant masculinity. In a political climate that was marked by the recent failure of US-American imperialism in Southeast Asia and the added humiliation of the Iranian hostage crisis from 1979 to 1981, the national body seemed to be “post-imperial” (3), vulnerable, and weakened from the perspective of white, normative masculinity. Reagan entered the national scene in the aftermath of these perceived degradations and performed as a viewable “hard body” himself. His status as a “hard body” was partly inherited from his acting roles in the 1940s and 1950s, which often saw him donning the attire of the “lone Western hero.” However, John Hinckley’s failed assassination attempt in 1981 offered spectators in the United States (and around the world) an instructive spectacle of the “hard body” in the 1980s. Reagan not only managed to survive, making him the first President of the United States to survive a shooting, but “stayed in character throughout” (30), making quippy remarks and entertaining the hospital staff. To many conservatives, this image of an impenetrable national body signaled a restoration of a masculinity that had previously been challenged by progressive interventions in the form of second-wave feminism, the Civil Rights Movement, and countercultural lifestyles.²³ Particularly after the Vietnam War, when filmic negotiations of this conflict were in high demand, Reagan catered to demands for a “strengthened and prepared body,” one which would soon find its way into the *Rambo* franchise of the 1980s.

Unlike previous “hard bodies” of the 1970s, the Reagan-era “hard body” is characterized by ultimate triumphalism—despite initial marginalization by

23 Robin Wood explains that the “restoration of the father” in Reagan-era cinema corresponds with “the restoration of women, after a decade of feminism and “liberation” (152).

bureaucratic authorities or a “soft-bodied” public.²⁴ Jeffords points to *Dirty Harry* (1971) as a precedent. In this film, the main character exhibits core elements of the Reagan-era “hard body”—a disdain for bureaucratic authority and procedure, rampant racism and sexism, a trigger-happy demeanor—and has a soft-bodied antagonist. However, Clint Eastwood’s character is denied a full societal rehabilitation at the end. Instead of being lauded by an approving public, Harry Callahan merely walks away from the scene of the final showdown (19). The Reaganite “hard body,” on the other hand, is generally awarded a sense of social triumph. Jeffords notes that, in lieu of nihilist visions of a doomed society that characterized previous depictions of “hard bodies,” the new type of “hard bodies” can successfully resuscitate institutions that have seemingly “fallen prey” to misguided individuals, who very often exhibit a soft-bodied and implicitly liberal bent (19).

Despite its apparent coherence, the “hard body” is not without contradictions. Jeffords observes that the hyper-masculine Hollywood protagonists of the 1980s must repeatedly navigate the inconsistencies and ethical dilemmas of technological progress. She notes that Reagan’s position on modern technologies was incongruous, as his philosophy espoused capitalist individualism as a driving force for a mythical form of patriarchal, social cohesion (40). Jeffords’ viewpoint is further supported by the fact that much of Reagan’s imagery relied on an aesthetic borrowed from the 1950s, leading to an array of optic discrepancies between modern technology and regressive fantasies. Movies like *Rambo III* (1987) resolve this dilemma by bifurcating notions of technological strength into the performance of a mindless, robotic, and totalitarian bureaucracy and a skilled, flexible body that uses state-of-the-art technology in highly efficient and individualized ways (41). The latter aligns perfectly with a capitalist logic of individual optimization and so-called “flexibility.” This point will be vital in assessing the performance of “hard bodies” in blockbusters within the context of a neoliberal cultural regime.

In addition, the fusion of the “hard body” with modern technology leads to collisions of conflicting desires; for example, in terms of anxieties surrounding the displacement of humans through automation²⁵ (a “post-human world”)

24 This is observable in the *Rambo* franchise when John Rambo is tormented by the local police in the first installment. However, by the second movie, the protagonist is reinstated into military ranks and takes out an entire Soviet-Vietnamese battalion through spectacular violence. Further examples are 1980s blockbuster movies like *Ghostbusters* (1984), *Die Hard* (1988), and *Lethal Weapon* (1986).

25 Ryan and Kellner point out that “[a]s conservative economic values became ascendant, increasingly technical criteria of efficiency came to be dominant. In addition,

and the ownership of weapons of mass destruction (Wood 149–150). These dissonances were negotiated in Reagan-era movies with results ranging from the externalization of these anxieties onto the Other—for example, in *Robocop* (1987) or *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981)—to a more Luddite mode of conflict resolution—for example, in *The Terminator* (1984) or *Rambo II* (1985). Yet, the “hard body’s” relationship to technology remains an enduring question in Hollywood filmmaking. As recent technological developments have been accelerated by the Internet and digitalization, it has become necessary to dive into contemporary depictions of the “hard body” in Hollywood blockbuster movies.

Jeffords’ concept offers a wide scope for investigations into the ideological undercurrent of blockbuster movies. The “hard body” serves as prism for narratives of national reassertion and/or cultural pushback against domestic challenges to white, male hegemony. The proximity of this hyper-masculine image to cultural fantasies of national identity allows cinematic performances of bodies to be viewed through a wider prism in which prevalent constructions of difference are made tangible. This makes it possible to compare the allocation of physical traits along racial, gendered, and class lines. As the overall analysis in this book also revolves around the incorporation of emancipatory discourses into Hollywood spectacles, it is of interest to find out whether “hard bodies” remain the domain of white masculinity over time or whether the trope evolves into more polysemous manifestations.

Given the exponential changes brought about by digitalization and the Internet, the role of the “hard body” in relation to technology is of critical importance when examining blockbusters as expressions of technocapitalism (Kellner, *Media Spectacle* 11–15). Since blockbusters aim to maximize revenues across borders and markets, different degrees of global technological penetration need to be reconciled within the form of the body. A closer inspection of the representation of bodies opens new avenues for decoding the mass appeal of blockbusters, while also providing tools for dissecting the performance of neoliberal consumerism in a time of more individualized technologies (made to “fit the body”).

As noted by Brown and Gershon, the body resides in a specific societal context that assigns specific social meanings to the physical manifestation of

conservative economic development emphasizes the displacement of excessively costly human labour by machines. [...] One antinomy of conservatism is that it requires technology for its economic programme, yet it fears technological modernity on a social and cultural plane” (65; Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 150).

human beings (1). Bodies can therefore also be read as metaphors for more abstract political positions. Cognitive linguist George Lakoff locates the usage of such metaphors in his concept of “political framing.” According to him, one of the pre-eminent frames in political discourses in the United States is the “strict father.”

George Lakoff’s “Strict Father Model” as a Political Framing Device

As carriers of sight and sound, films are ripe with metaphors. The brevity and coherence of visual narratives relies on the effective use of digestible symbols, which help viewers to orientate themselves within a movie (Cavell, *The World Viewed* 16–41). Since movies create meanings through being viewed, metaphorical concepts are central to the transmission of filmic language. This has far-reaching implications for the relationship between film and ideology. Carlo Comanducci explains that

ideology and metaphor function as internalized systems of relations, or paradigms. Conventional metaphor and ideology are internalized in three senses: they are used unconsciously, they are early apprehended, and they are used as fundamental structures for the organization of experiences. (22)

Both terms are inscribed into cognitive processes that produce meaning and knowledge—on the collective and individual levels. Thus, the analysis of cinematic language in any given movie requires a disassembly of conceptual structures. This allows for implicit meanings to be examined in terms of both their symbolic and ideological content. In fact, both forms of content are inseparable. As cultural scholar and philosopher Slavoj Žižek remarks in *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*: “If you take away from our reality the symbolic fictions that regulate it, you will lose reality itself.”

In his book *Don’t Think of an Elephant!* (2004), George Lakoff argues that in modern political communication, meaning is frequently produced through metaphors. These metaphors reflect conceptual understandings of the world and can therefore activate and channel cognitive processes toward pre-conceived forms of meaning and interpretation. Lakoff describes this as “framing.” He states that “frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. [...] they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions” (xv). He goes on to state that frames are often linked to metaphors in political communication in order to

provide a succinct and tangible narrative. He references George W. Bush’s use of the phrase “tax relief” as an example: “When the word *tax* is added to *relief*, the result is a metaphor: Taxation is an affliction. And the person who takes it away is a hero, and anyone who tries to stop him is a bad guy. This is a frame. It is made up of ideas, like affliction and hero” (4). In line with his understanding of metaphors as conceptual, rather than a merely linguistic, constructions (Lakoff and Turner, *Cool Reason* 50), Kellner extrapolates a link between semiotic expressions and more abstract conceptualized narratives. Comanducci puts this succinctly: “Generally speaking, using metaphor is talking (representing, feeling or thinking) of something in terms of something else” (3). Metaphors activate mental frames, which, in turn, mirror the interpretation of a “world viewed” (Cavell, *The World Viewed—Enlarged Edition*). These processes occur inevitably and subconsciously (Lakoff, *Thinking Points* 36), making them an implicit vehicle for the effective transmission of both ideology and fictional narratives.

In his book *Thinking Points: Communicating our American Values and Vision* (2006), Lakoff expands his framing concept using insights from cognitive science. Frames can be subdivided into surface frames, which come in the form of phrases such as “War on Terror,” and deep frames, which are much more deeply ingrained in the political worldview of a person. The repeated use of surface frames can strengthen neural connections in the brain that reinforce the activation of deep frames to the point that they become part of one’s own “common sense” (29, 36–37; Andor 179–180). Since these deep frames can block the activation of “opposition frames,” that is, competing interpretations of the world, the reframing of political debates is critical for any form of social change.

Lakoff’s notions have reverberated throughout communication and political sciences, with commentators pointing out that his focus on “neural circuitry” (Williams) carries reductionist overtones. Moreover, the centrality of changing language in order to effect societal transformation has been contested. For example, Joanna Williams maintains that this “overstates the significance of language and underplays the importance of the material conditions of people’s lives.”²⁶ Lakoff’s concepts of framing and political metaphors do indeed reside within the realm of the semantic, which makes their implications for political activism a matter of debate.

26 Joanna Williams, “The Trouble with George Lakoff,” *consciencemag.com* (December 20, 2016). Accessed November 8, 2018: <<https://consciencemag.org/2016/12/20/the-trouble-with-george-lakoff/>>.

However, these notions play an important role in the film analyses. More than Kellner's media spectacle or Jeffords' "hard body," the framing approach can help to elucidate the conceptualized backgrounds of specific key terms and phrases that have found their way into the mainstream political lexicon of the United States. Therefore, Lakoff's insights will play a vital role in the deconstruction of Reaganite rhetoric in Chapter 2, in particular in relation to the repercussions of mythical metaphors like "small government," "Star Wars program," "trickle-down economics," and the "War on Terror." Translations of these terms do appear in Hollywood movies, which makes these cinematic productions complicit in the cultural prevalence of such political semantics. And since the repetition of frames is critical to the sedimentation of ideology, blockbusters—which are explicitly designed for repeat viewings across media—carry an increased responsibility in the shaping of political discourse. Given the role of the culture wars in the 1980s conservative realignment, one specific metaphor will be highlighted throughout this book, as it provides a central frame for the nation and the family: the "strict father" model (*Thinking Points* 57–59).

George Lakoff locates the "strict father" within the broader, widespread metaphor of the "nation as family" (*Elephant* 5–8; *Thinking Points* 49–66).²⁷ In this metaphor, the collective that is understood to form the nation state resembles the social unit of a biological family. This imagery permeates all forms of socialization. Furthermore, it structures public political discourse to a great extent, as it constitutes an accessible metaphor suitable for activating deeply embedded thought patterns. Lakoff writes:

[I]t's no accident that our political beliefs are structured by our idealizations of the family. Our earliest experience with being governed is in our families. Our parents "govern" us: They protect us, tell us what we can and cannot do, make sure we have enough money and supplies, educate us, and have us do our part in running the house. (*Thinking Points* 49)

Building on this observation, Lakoff discerns two competing philosophies in mainstream political discourse in the United States: a progressive one and a conservative one. Both tendencies can be narrated and conceptualized through the metaphor of the family. The progressive vision is associated with

27 In *Don't Think of an Elephant*, Lakoff argues that expressions of these family metaphors are manifold and imply a homogenous understanding of the nation: "We have Founding Fathers. The Daughters of the American Revolution. We "send our sons" to war. This is a natural metaphor because we usually understand large social groups, like nations, in terms of small ones, like families or communities" (5).

the “nurturant parent model” while the conservative one is associated with the “strict father model” (50). These two visions stand in contrast to each other and cannot be applied at the same time in the same situation. Activating one metaphor implies the negation of the other.²⁸ Lakoff dubs this dichotomy the “Moral Politics Model” and it is characterized by an emphasis on ideological purity and an emotionally resonant “value” discourse (51).

The progressive nurturant parent model is defined by ideals of gender equality, a more open-ended definition of the term “family,” and a focus on care-giving and empathy for children. Correspondingly, children are reared to develop empathy and responsibility for themselves and others (52–53). Lakoff explains that “nurturant parents are authoritative without being authoritarian. They set fair and reasonable limits and rules, and take the trouble to discuss them with their children. Obedience derives from love for parents, not fear from punishment” (52). Based on these fundamentals, Lakoff extrapolates a set of progressive values, which include protection, fulfillment in life, opportunity, fairness, equality, prosperity, and community.

The “strict father” model is the opposite. It is based on a patriarchal and heterosexist worldview with clearly defined gender roles and social hierarchies. It repeatedly invokes the threat represented by an Other that naturally resides outside the family and is inclined to harm it:

A family has two parents, a father and a mother. We live in a dangerous world, where there is constant competition with inevitable winners and losers. The family requires a strong father to protect it from the many evils in the world and to support it by winning those competitions. (57)

The permanent assumption of racialized threats builds a foundation for internal hierarchies that need to be policed and maintained by the father. A weak father would fail at protecting the nation from such imagined intrusion. Therefore, it is imperative, for the purposes of this analysis, to interrogate blockbusters’ depictions of foreign invasions, which are fought off through the realignment of domestic hierarchies and spectacular feats by a perceived paternal authority.

What further emerges in this definition is the clear reliance on a traditional gender binary and a naturalization of capitalism-induced conflict (“competition”). In the post–second wave feminist setting of the blockbuster era, this

28 However, Lakoff explains that many people are in fact “bi-conceptuals” and effectively apply different positions in different situations. He adds that “in real families, it is commonplace to have, say, a strict father and a nurturant mother” (*Thinking Points* 58).

understanding of the family has a restorative connotation. Lakoff underlines that this model affirms that “the mother supports and upholds the authority of the father but is not strong enough to protect the family or to impose moral order by herself” (57). It can be deduced that this emphasis assumes that challenges to patriarchal authority are conceivable (or have already been launched) but need to be curbed within the confines of gendered capitalism. This point is critical for the investigation of female characters in movies and their constructed role in upholding the family.

The “strict father” model is ultimately geared toward the maintenance of a gendered, racialized capitalist social order. The performance of “discipline” is vital in the preparation of children for capitalist competition. This discipline needs to be conveyed primarily by the father and then simultaneously internalized and publicly manifested: “Children who are disciplined enough to be moral can also use that discipline as adults to seek their self-interest in the market and become prosperous” (58). This focus on discipline can be translated into fitness for the labor and marriage markets and for capitalist competition overall. In the analysis of blockbusters, portrayals of capitalist entrepreneurship can serve as valuable texts for the implicit valorization of the “strict father” model.

The value-laden discourses of these two models has implications for the world of film and the world of politics. In the introduction to *Thinking Points* (2006), Lakoff uses none other than Ronald Reagan as a primary example of the institution of a “style-over-substance” discourse that has served conservatives well since the 1980s:

Reagan talked about *values* rather than issues. Communicating values mattered more than specific policy positions. [...] Recall Reagan’s mythical Cadillac-driving “welfare queen”. For Reagan, she represented more than just a case of welfare abuse. She came to symbolize all that was wrong with the government’s approach to dealing with poverty, especially a wide array of government “handouts”-programs he thought rewarded laziness, removed the incentive to be disciplined, and promoted immorality. Whatever we may think of Reagan, this has been a winning formula for conservatives for the past quarter century. (7–8)

This racist and sexist metaphor, employed Reagan in the late 1970s, soon assumed a life of its own and offered a new means of castigating marginalized communities, in particular African-American women, as unfit to be counted as members of the “national family”. Their alleged unfitness was located within the perceived failure of the welfare state, which now needed to be rolled back through a series of pro-corporate and neoliberal reforms. Therefore, the usage of metaphors in effectuating societal power structures cannot be understated.

Overall, Lakoff's concept of the "strict father" sits atop multiple cultural intersections that are relevant to my analysis. This model is useful for exploring power dynamics within larger societal conflicts. As blockbusters dramatize these conflicts, the "strict father" model provides a means of viewing these struggles through the prism of the nation as a family (or vice versa). Spectacular events, such as home invasions, alien invasions, or acts of terrorism, can be read as commentaries on the state of the family/nation at a given moment. The general focus on individual heroes, or tightly knit groups of protagonists, offers a viable terrain for deconstructing heroism in terms of gender, race, class, and space. For example, since the "strict father" is associated with the implementation of discipline, the capitalist fitness of protagonists becomes central to the unearthing of implicit meanings, such as neoliberal self-optimization and the gendered/racialized nature of leadership. As collective cultural fantasies with mass appeal, blockbusters need to be investigated for implicit postulations of the normative family in order to illustrate how popular understandings of "the family" are manifested.

Thus, the mythical imagery surrounding the nation can be better dissected and its historical evolution can be traced. After all, concepts of the nation and identity at large are heavily infused with mythologies.

Roland Barthes' Concept of Mythologies as a Tool for Deconstructing Capitalist Imagery

Roland Barthes' work on the role of myths in the maintenance of bourgeois society has been the subject of scholarly debates for decades. In his influential book *Mythologies* (originally published in 1957), Barthes proposes that cultural artifacts in the modern world can be read as a form of speech, in which signification often presents itself to the consumer/spectator in a naturalized and eternal form. This has far-reaching implications for the construction of realities in a capitalist system, as myths structure relationships between the individual and the object in profound ways. Every form of cultural production has "moral and political significance," since it affects not only attitudes toward the object, but also attitudes toward other subjects (Welch 20).

On this basis, Barthes develops a notion of myth by building on Ferdinand de Saussure's semiology, an area within the wider field of semiotics. Barthes extracts three elements of myth: the "signifier," the "signified," and the "sign/signification." He uses the example of roses as a signifier and passion as the

signified. Only when considered in relation to each other do these two elements synthesize into a sign:

[O]n the plane of analysis, we do have three terms; for these roses weighted with passion perfectly and correctly allow themselves to be decomposed into roses and passion: the former and the latter existed before uniting and forming this third object, which is the sign. (*Mythologies* 111–112)

According to Barthes, the form of myth is anchored in this tripartite system. The myth draws on semiological associations that have existed previously, which makes it a “second-order semiological system” (113). Myths therefore need to be deciphered in the context of larger systems of meanings, especially since a “signified can have several signifiers” (118). This requires a process of acculturation, which emphasizes cultural productions as both mediators and carriers of myths (Welch 24). For the purposes of my analysis, it is important to note that cultural artifacts, such as blockbuster movies, neither “invent” mythologies nor merely replicate them— as they are second-order semiological systems. Instead, the forms of signification presented by such films give an account of how politicized speech in consumer products builds on pre-established relationships of meaning. This applies to imagery within a blockbuster text, as well as the merchandise and advertisement associated with it. Myths carry a history with them and are, themselves, a way of talking about history. Since I intend to delineate an ideological trajectory within blockbuster filmmaking, the analysis of myths in this book offers a valuable means of uncovering cinematic negotiations of national foundation myths, visions of heroism, and the distortion of political discourse in service of a specific agenda.²⁹ As mass cultural artifacts, blockbusters do insert themselves into mythologies.

In relation to the reading and deciphering of myths, Barthes first points to the three elements of signification. He distinguishes between empty signifiers, full signifiers, and mythical signifiers. These different levels depend on how the spectator wishes to absorb the myth—“by focusing on one [part of the signification], or the other, or both at the same time” (127).

- In the case of the empty signifier, the signifier is taken literally, “without ambiguity.” For example, a boy of color who salutes the French flag is an “example of French imperialism.”

29 Barthes emphasizes that “however paradoxical it may seem, myth hides nothing; its function is to distort, not to make disappear” (120).

- In the case of the full signifier, the meaning and the form of the myth are separated from each other. Instead of interpreting the saluting of the French flag as an example of imperialism, it is interpreted as an “alibi of French imperialism” (127). By focusing on what is signified, the obfuscation at work in this image becomes evident. At its core, this approach demystifies and deconstructs.
- The mythical signifier represents the amalgamation of both forms into an “inextricable whole made of meaning and form” (127). The reader focuses on the aggregate interplay between signifier and signified, with the result that the boy of color saluting the French flag “is no longer an example or a symbol, still less an alibi: he is the very presence of French imperialism.” In this case, the signification becomes “dynamic” as it interweaves different forms into a new symbolism.

Barthes associates the dynamism of the third reading with “the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature” (128–129). The amalgamation of two forms is perceived as occurring naturally; thus, deliberate motivations and intentions behind the myth-making are discarded.³⁰ This effect of naturalization is critical when dissecting filmic narratives, especially those in the form of genres or specific formats such as blockbusters.³¹

According to Barthes, mythologies now largely function to “naturalize and eternalize the historically contingent forms of French bourgeois culture” (Durham and Kellner xxii), which corresponds with Guy Debord’s notion of the “society of the spectacle.” Mass-produced cultural artifacts promote consumption and will reflect this consumption logic in one way or another. This has implications for the emergence of neoliberalism as a naturalized, post-industrial cultural regime (Macris 21).³² Subsequently, it is important to shed light on blockbusters and to interrogate what exactly they naturalize, how this

30 Barthes adds that “myth is experienced as innocent speech: not because its intentions are hidden—if they were hidden, they could not be efficacious—but because they are naturalized” (130).

31 In his discussion of genre theory, Daniel Chandler makes reference to Jane Feuer when he writes that “the genre ‘positions’ the audience in order to naturalize the ideologies which are embedded in the text” (4).

32 Vicki Macris notes that “as with all (dominant) ideologies, neoliberalism has become naturalized, legitimized, universalized and firmly embedded in everyday discourse, operating as a mechanism for upholding and reproducing the asymmetrical power relations in society” (21).

naturalization is effected, and how this relates to larger ideological and cultural shifts in society.

For example, Barthes describes “identification” as one of the principal elements for myth on the political right. He links this identification with the construction of difference between the “petit-bourgeois man” and the Other (152). The naturalization of this imagining of the Other can be closely inspected its, especially since interaction with the so-called exotic is a recurrent theme in blockbuster movies. In order to better circumscribe ideological subtexts in these films, it is important to examine representations of the Other in light of essentializing strategies. In his essay “Subculture: The Unnatural Break,” Dick Hebdige summarizes Roland Barthes’ observations on this matter:

[T]he Other can be trivialized, naturalized, domesticated. Here, the difference is simply denied (“Otherness is reduced to sameness”). Alternatively, the Other can be transformed into meaningless exotica, a “pure object, a spectacle, a clown.” (Hebdige in Durham and Kellner 157)

A variety of textual analyses can be launched from these two, seemingly bifurcated, trajectories. For instance, the “domesticated Other” is of interest in the dissection of the character of E.T. in *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial*. The notion of the Other as “a spectacle, a clown” strongly mirrors the character of the Joker in *The Dark Knight*. Ultimately, Barthes’ concept of mythologies remains an outstanding means of dissecting the ideological connotations of myths. Reagan was known as a “story-telling” president and “mythologist;”³³ consequently, there is ample material for the dissection of his rhetoric in Chapter 2. First, however, I will postulate a definition of the term “blockbuster” for the purposes of this book.

Defining Hollywood Blockbusters as a Formula

In order to devise a working definition of the term “blockbuster,” I will briefly outline the etymology of the word and its contemporary usage in media and

33 Just like the hypothetical mythologist in Barthes’ writing (158), Reagan faced near-expulsion after the Iran–Contra affair, which Kellner has dubbed a “great political spectacle which could have made great movies, but was perhaps too complex and has never been presented in popular narrative form” (*Media Spectacle* 167). Given that Reagan acted out a filmic role as president for eight years, it can be speculated that neither the press nor the majority of the public had much interest in disrupting this cinematic spectacle with an “unhappy ending” after the presidencies of Nixon, Ford, and Carter (Bunch 99).

entertainment discourses. This will include a focus on the evolution of the “high-concept movie” in the 1970s and questions of budgeting, box-office success, and associated cross-channel distribution and merchandise. On the basis of these parameters, a definition of blockbusters as a specific mode of filmmaking will be proposed.

The usage of the term “blockbuster” originates far back in the history of US-American media. In his paper “Pass the Ammunition: A Short Etymology of ‘Blockbuster,’” Sheldon Hall traces the modern usage of the term to the mid-twentieth century:

[I]t has been possible to construct a reasonably accurate history of “blockbuster” before the mid-1950s, by which time it had become recognised and accepted by both the trade press and the film industry at large as betokening the kinds of film identified above: one which would “gross \$2,000,000 or more in domestic (U.S. and Canada) rentals” as well as “a relatively expensive picture that can head the program in all situations.” (148–149)

However, Hall goes on to point out that during World War II the aerial carpet bombings of entire block buildings were referred to as “blockbusters” in the press in the United States. This military connotation was soon expanded, with the term being used to describe war propaganda films that celebrated spectacles of destruction, like the RKO film *Bombardier* (1943), which was described in advertising taglines as “The block-buster of all action-thrill-service shows” (151–153). Hall indicates that the term fell out of use after the war, which undermines popular etymological attributions of the term to the common practice of “block booking,” which was implemented by the eight major Hollywood studios in the 1930s and 1940s (149–150).

Eventually, the term “blockbuster” came to be used most pervasively and enduringly in a Hollywood context in relation to a new mode of filmmaking pioneered by Steven Spielberg and George Lucas. In the wake of the immense financial success of *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977), many media observers contended that a new era of spectacle filmmaking had dawned in Hollywood. In his book *Blockbuster: How Hollywood Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Summer*, film scholar Tom Shone reiterates the historical assessment of David Brown, who worked as co-producer on the movie *Jaws*:

Movies used to be a solitary experience. You sat in the dark, alone, no matter how many people surrounded you. But with *Jaws* people started to talk back to the screen and applaud shadows. [...] It marked a crucial advance on the decade’s previous blockbusters. Say what you like about *Love Story* but it was not really an audience

participation film [...]; nor was *The Godfather*, which was essentially a study in collective isolation; you watched it alone, no matter how full the cinema was [...]. But *Jaws* united its audience in common cause [...] and you came out delivering high-fives to the three hundred or so new best friends you'd just narrowly avoided death with. And then you came back the next day to narrowly avoid it again. For here was the second major defining mark of the summer blockbuster: you watched it again. (36–37)

This telling observation reveals a set of properties that defined the high-concept style that started to take hold in Hollywood cinema in the 1970s. Critical features include, for example, the emphasis on collective and cross-segment consumption, as well as on repeated viewings, which resulted from new distribution technologies that allowed films to remain in circulation on multiple platforms (Jordan 59). This tendency is also reflected in the more episodic and TV-inflected nature of blockbuster filmmaking, which makes frequent use of sequelization and franchising (e.g. the *Rocky*, the *Rambo*, and *Die Hard* franchises).

Chris Jordan develops these thoughts further by situating the high-concept style in the context of the emerging Reagan era. He postulates that high-concept filmmaking synthesizes European art cinema conventions into “Hollywood’s genre and star-based system of entertainment” (63), thus injecting more stylistic expressivity in terms of “character, mise-en-scène and editing.” This trend across the now corporatized Hollywood studios was accelerated by a drive toward a

narrow range of themes with broad popular appeal and the reiteration of them across multiple genres. [...] The marketplace-driven, style-conscious design of high concept resulted in an inherent ideological conservatism that made it an effective vehicle for dramatizing Reagan’s construction of American identity in terms of moral absolutes of good versus evil. (63)

Jordan’s overview of the evolution of high-concept filmmaking evinces further characteristics of blockbusters: a conscious emphasis on stylistic “glossiness,” a firm grounding in star power and genre conventions, and, above all, a focus on formulaic narratives based on moral binaries.

Stephen Prince adds further elements in his discussion of ancillary markets in the 1980s. He describes how Warner Communications Inc. proudly proclaimed that its products “know no geographical boundaries” (*A New Pot of Gold* 139). This global orientation, in connection with growing demands for mass media entertainment outside the United States, has put new modes of filmmaking with more cross-cultural appeal on the map. This coincided with the vertical

and horizontal integration of business units into corporate structures across the globe. As a result, corporatized film studios were able to cater to markets outside of regular theaters:

Herein lay the connection between film production by the majors, the ancillary markets, and the consolidation of multinational corporate influence. Despite a film's initial theatrical release, production occurred to service the ancillaries, and blockbuster films stimulated a huge array of marketing and merchandising throughout the world's restaurants, toy stores, and other retail outlets. (*A New Pot of Gold* 139–140)

In accordance with Kellner's characterization of the technospectacle, blockbusters "colonize" all forms of modern life—offering immersive consumption experiences that reverberate long after the initial theatrical run. This is primarily achieved through merchandise, which includes the music and soundtrack as additional profit venues (Prince, *A New Pot of Gold* 210).³⁴ The inclusion of a global and multi-faceted merchandise empire is therefore another crucial characteristic of Hollywood blockbusters. The projected profitability of such large ventures is calibrated through extensive pre-production market research and pre-release test screenings, surveys, and aggressive cross-media promotional campaigns (Herrington 7–15). Blockbuster effects rarely result from completely unanticipated "sleeper hits."³⁵

A further thematic aspect is the reflection of white, male individualism, and associated tales of heroism in most blockbuster movies. Chris Jordan explains that—in the context of the late 1970s—this reflected "a rightward drift in popular taste" (62), stemming from desires for accessible "comic book fantasies like *Superman* (1978)" or for the cinematic renegotiation of the Vietnam War, as in *The Deer Hunter* (1978). In a similar fashion, Robin Wood specifies six elements

34 With regard to the integration of an MTV-inflected style of audiovisual music promotion into the world of film, Prince notes that "Portions of FLASHDANCE and TOP GUN are essentially rock videos, extended montage sequences cut to music, which facilitated synergies with recorded music merchandising. FLASHDANCE and subsequent Simpson–Bruckheimer films were carefully marketed in tandem with the release of singles and albums featuring music from the sound track" (*A New Pot of Gold* 210).

35 One example of an exception to this is *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), which was independently produced by amateur film-school graduates Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez and returned roughly \$250 million globally on a \$60,000 production budget ("The Blair Witch Project." Box-office information at boxofficemojo.com. Accessed January 1, 2019: <<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=blairwitchproject.htm>>).

that constitute what he dubs the “Lucas–Spielberg Syndrome”: Childishness, Special Effects, Imagination/Originality, Nuclear Anxiety, Fear of Fascism, and the Restoration of the Father (147–155).

For the purposes of this theoretical framework, it can be extrapolated that Hollywood blockbusters

- are built on formulaic tales,
- serve a narrative that generally reflects a “bad-versus-good” binary,
- are conceived as commodities and distributed for collective consumption,
- are designed for repeat viewings,
- offer an immersive viewing experience marked by escapism,
- exhibit a glossy and conscious stylistic expression,
- make prominent use of special effects,
- are tied to a merchandise universe (which is also mirrored in product placement),
- are designed to appeal to multiple audience segments across cultural/national boundaries,
- are accompanied by excessive market research and advertising campaigns,
- are frequently sequelized and turned into franchises,
- integrate the cross-promotion of the music and soundtrack into the filmic narrative,
- are thematically centered on patriarchic and capitalist visions of a mythical white, male individualism.

There is, however, one decisive aspect on which film scholarship has yet to produce a general consensus: What minimum budget and what level of financial box-office success are considered necessary for a film to be classified as a bona-fide blockbuster?³⁶ Film theorist Robert Stam uses a budget-based definition whereby the term “blockbuster” becomes applicable to productions that exceed a certain threshold in terms of monetary investment (*Literature Through Film* 56; *Film Theory* 14). This, however, begs the question of whether “blockbuster intent” equals “blockbuster effect” for a given production. In light of the numerous aspects discussed in this section, it stands to reason that the constituent elements of the blockbuster fully materialize in the reaction of the public and the desired full-scale implementation of a cross-media spectacle. This tilts the scale in favor of an output-oriented definition of the “blockbuster

36 Walt Hickey, “The 11 Defining Features Of The Summer Blockbuster,” *FiveThirtyEight* (May 2, 2014). Accessed November 9, 2018: <<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-11-defining-features-of-the-summer-blockbuster/>>.

effect.” For the purposes of my analysis, I settle on a threshold of \$100 million (adjusted for inflation) in total domestic gross at the box office during the original theatrical run of a given movie. This number has been chosen for reasons of efficacy and in order to create clarity for the selection of my sample. Different thresholds are, of course, entirely feasible for further analyses. The chapters containing the film analyses will provide additional information on why each movie was chosen.

Key Ideological and Methodological Terms

This section will provide brief working definitions of four terms that are of critical importance for my analysis: neoliberalism, neoconservatism, messianic Americanism, and metatexts/subtexts. These concepts will be sketched out in a more encyclopedic fashion in order to serve as guidelines for the analysis. Broad concepts such as neoliberalism and neoconservatism cannot be exhaustively characterized in all their facets in the scope of this study; instead, the definitions provided will focus on central tenets and features that are relevant for the subsequent analysis.

Neoliberalism

In his article on “Neoliberalism as Concept,” Rajesh Venugopal postulates that the term “neoliberalism” has been subject to “terminological inconsistency, weak definitions and conceptual drift” (6). In his 2018 online article for *Dissent Magazine*, Daniel Rodgers proposes to pry this term apart by identifying

four distinctly different phenomena. “Neoliberalism” stands, first, for the late capitalist economy of our times; second, for a strand of ideas; third, for a globally circulating bundle of policy measures; and fourth, for the hegemonic force of the culture that surrounds and entraps us. (Rodgers)

For the purposes of this study, the first and fourth phenomena are the most relevant.³⁷ In Michael Thompson’s summary of David Harvey’s delineation of

37 With regard to neoliberalism as an economic project, Rodgers notes that “neoliberalism (1) inscribes on politics and culture the needs of a global capitalism that sustains itself on the free flow of capital, goods, disembedded labor, and market-friendly state policies. It does not rely on the state in the same way that the ‘embedded’ corporate capitalism of the mid-twentieth century did, but it is not a creature of the minimal state either. It depends, rather, on complex structures of institutional supports, business-friendly regulations, and free-range investment opportunities arrayed in different ways across the globe” (Rodgers).

neoliberalism, he articulates a concise set of principles that capture the term's economic, political, and cultural implications:

Neoliberalism is the intensification of the influence and dominance of capital; it is the elevation of capitalism, as a mode of production, into an ethic, a set of political imperatives, and a cultural logic. It is also a project: a project to strengthen, restore, or, in some cases, constitute anew the power of economic elites. [...] Neoliberalism is therefore not a new turn in the history of capitalism. It is more simply, and more perniciously, its intensification, and its resurgence after decades of opposition from the Keynesian welfare state and from experiments with social democratic and welfare state politics. (23)

Thompson goes on to summarize Harvey's analysis of the Thatcher era in the UK and the Reagan era in the United States: "Thatcher in Britain and Reagan in the United States were both pivotal figures, not so much because of their economic policies, but, more importantly, because of their success in the 'construction of consent.' The political culture of both countries began to accept neoliberal policies" (24–25). Thus, it can be stated that neoliberal projects were accompanied by shifts in cultural and political discourses, which, in tandem, paved the way for neoliberalism as a cultural regime. This overarching influence on collective meanings and symbols is often described as the most engulfing feature of neoliberalism. In her book *Undoing the Demos* (2015), Wendy Brown points to the rise of a "governing rationality," marked by trends toward the "economization" and "monetization" of virtually all aspects of life (31–32). At the center of this rationality is a conception of the human being as "homo oeconomicus." According to Brown, this heavily gendered term (99–107)³⁸ stipulates that humans are not only rational actors, but a form of "capital" in themselves. This rationality dictates that this capital needs to be cultivated as such, leading to a figure of "the human as an ensemble of entrepreneurial and investment capital [...] evident on every college and job application" (36). As a result, all human arrangements become subject to a logic of market efficiency; that is, the state becomes a firm, the university a factory, and the self "an object with a price tag" (Rodgers).

38 Wendy Brown deconstructs the gendered aspect of "homo oeconomicus," stating that "when homo oeconomicus becomes normative across all spheres [...], there are two possibilities for those positioned as women [...]. Either women align their conduct with this truth, becoming homo oeconomicus, in which case the world becomes uninhabitable, or women's activities and bearings as femina domestica remain the unavowed glue for a world whose governing principle cannot hold it together" (104–105).

These definitions illustrate the tremendous, pervasive impact of neoliberal developments on cultural and political discourses around the globe. The pivotal role of the Reagan era in facilitating this development in the United States will be further explored in Chapter 2 in order to highlight more precise aspects of Reaganite neoliberalism.

Neoconservatism

In a US-American context, the term “neoconservative” was first coined by socialist activist and political theorist Michael Harrington in 1973 in order to describe the pro-Nixon positions of (formerly) liberal politicians such as Daniel Bell, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Irving Kristol (Harrington 165–272).

Justin Vaïsse affirms that many ideological progenitors of what is now considered “neoconservative thought” originally came from leftist or liberal political backgrounds. However, after the resounding defeat of anti-war candidate George McGovern in 1972, many liberal supporters of anti-communist and hawkish foreign policies felt that they didn’t have a home in the Democratic Party anymore. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, they largely joined the Reagan coalition of conservatives, which appealed to advocates of military rearmament and global unilateralism (Ehrman 9). The Reagan administration included one of the most ardent proponents of US-American military hegemony: Jeane Kirkpatrick, who served as US ambassador to the United Nations. In her essay “Dictatorships and Double Standards” (1979), she argues for a US-led global “promotion of democracy” through the exertion of power. Simultaneously, she contended that the implementation of so-called “free markets” took precedence over democratic reforms promoting freedom and egalitarianism, stating that perceived “authoritarian regimes” were still preferable to communist systems—as long as they were friendly to capitalist influence. This primacy of the market reflects the governing rationality of neoliberalism in its starkest terms.

The emphasis on economic imperialism and military might seemed to fade after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This, however, spawned a new generation of neoconservatives spearheaded by figures such as Bill Kristol and Norman Podhoretz (Vaïsse 3), who argued that the post-Cold War era presented a unique opportunity for the pursuit of unabashedly militarist and imperialist projects around the globe. This school of thought had a profound influence on the administration of George W. Bush (2001–2009), which is often considered

to be the premier example of contemporary neoconservatism in public and scholarly discourses.

When it comes to the specific tenets of modern-day neoconservatism, Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke detail the following characteristics in their book *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order* (2004):

1. A belief deriving from religious conviction that the human condition is defined as a choice between good and evil and that the true measure of political character is to be found in the willingness by the former (themselves) to confront the latter.
2. An assertion that the fundamental determinant of the relationship between states rests on military power and the willingness to use it.
3. A primary focus on the Middle East and global Islam as the principal theater for American overseas interests. (11)

This set of beliefs is then implemented through the following strategies:

1. Analyze international issues in black-and-white, absolute moral categories. They are fortified by a conviction that they alone hold the moral high ground and argue that disagreement is tantamount to defeatism.
2. Focus on the “unipolar” power of the United States, seeing the use of military force as the first, not the last, option of foreign policy. They repudiate the “lessons of Vietnam,” which they interpret as undermining American will toward the use of force, and embrace the “lessons of Munich,” interpreted as establishing the virtues of preemptive military action.
3. Disdain conventional diplomatic agencies such as the State Department and conventional country-specific, realist, and pragmatic, analysis. They are hostile toward nonmilitary multilateral institutions and instinctively antagonistic toward international treaties and agreements. “Global unilateralism” is their watchword. They are fortified by international criticism, believing that it confirms American virtue.
4. Look to the Reagan administration as the exemplar of all these virtues and seek to establish their version of Reagan’s legacy as the Republican and national orthodoxy. (11)

These themes reveal a belief in the triumphalist power of the US military in the face of (constructed) atavistic adversaries. Neoconservatives propose a mythical view of the world—much like the good-versus-evil binary in blockbuster entertainment—which neatly fits into simplified and spectacle-laden tales of heroism. This similarity with contemporary cinematic formulas calls for an

investigation of neoconservative echoes in Hollywood blockbusters. Moreover, the recourse to a mythical image of the Reagan administration has significant repercussions for the reconstruction of mythologies in both pop culture and politics. The analysis of Reagan's Cold War and counter-terrorism rhetoric will determine how the fortieth president assisted in the creation of narrative patterns that have reverberated in Hollywood entertainment of the post-Cold War era.

Messianic Americanism

In his analysis of "American exceptionalism" in presidential rhetoric since 1897, John Dearborn classifies four trends: messianic Americanism, messianic internationalism, realist exemplarism, and pragmatist moralism (1). He uses the speeches of individual presidents as case studies and determines that Reagan's language largely falls into the "messianic Americanism" category (197–203). Dearborn illustrates this rhetorical and ideological position in the following terms:

[M]essianic Americanism, fully embraces the idea of American exceptionalism. A president demonstrating this type emphasizes a belief that the U.S. is unquestionably unique with a destiny of leading the world toward freedom and democracy. Stark moral contrasts are used; the U.S. is the unquestionably "good" power fighting against an evil opposing force. Because the U.S. is always "good," any actions taken, however negatively perceived, are considered justified. Religious beliefs and rhetoric about the U.S. fulfilling a mission from God are often employed. Furthermore, the success of the U.S. in meeting all foes and challenges is considered inevitable, and there is generally a willingness to make sacrifices to achieve goals. Importantly, this type of exceptionalism focuses on the U.S. using its own power and ideals to achieve its destiny of spreading freedom. It does not as significantly pay attention to international opinion nor embrace international law and institutions; rather, these institutions are often viewed with suspicion. (25–26)

Remarkably similar to neoconservative ideology, this form of Americanism relies on narrative patterns that reproduce a good-versus-evil binary. The triumphalist and reassuring undertones of messianic Americanism mirror the high-concept template for Hollywood blockbuster filmmaking in critical ways, making this form of "American exceptionalism" a useful frame of reference for the closer examination of the interrelationship between presidential rhetoric and cinematic spectacles. Messianic Americanism will therefore be prominently applied in the analysis of one movie in this sample that is heavy on presidential speeches: *Independence Day*.

Metatexts/Subtexts

In his book *The Films of the Eighties: A Social History* (1995), William J. Palmer draws on New Historicism in his assessment of films as holographic conveyors of history. The multiple textualities of film give this medium a privileged position in capturing “the simultaneity of the events of history, the multiplicity of history’s meanings” (10). As a cultural text, film processes history through the incorporation of both a (historical) event and an idea. Thus, films transmit “potent sociohistorical messages”, which tend to “shape shift on different textual levels” (9) These levels are primary texts (consisting of the plot), subtexts (addressing themes), and metatexts (self-reflexive discourses). Palmer explains that

The surface texts of most films are constructed out of a limited number of conventional mass modes of discourse (plots), whereas the subtexts of films consist of a variety of sociohistorical discourse contexts (themes), such as political consciousness, revisionist history, moral messaging and existential themes. (10)

This approach to filmic textuality is notable in that its interpretation of the relationship between film and history emphasizes the “multiplicity of the facts and events” (11). A film is not merely read as a linear text but broken into layers of inter-related modes of meaning that “diffuse and interpret history” and/or “use and abuse it.” The investigation of these multiple layers allows for a “self-reflexive analysis of different texts as a means of delineating a metatext and/or metahistory. This metahistory places both the ‘facts’ and the various ‘texts of the facts’ within larger historical system of interpretation” (11).

In this book, however, the term “metatext” will be used in a slightly different manner to connote structural transformations, which can be read as cultural texts in their own right. Thus, the holographic nature of films as translators of social change can be more clearly examined. The readable surface texts include Hollywood blockbusters since the mid-1970s, but also the Reagan presidency itself (via Reagan’s rhetoric and public image) and the associated “cinematic Reagan era” (Kellner and Ryan). Among the various relevant subtexts are the restoration of the father, Cold War nuclear anxieties (Wood 147–155), post-Cold War fears of the Other (e.g. in the form of terrorism; Palmer 114–164), and middle-class economic anxieties in a post-industrialist environment (Kellner, *Media Culture* 15–20; see Figure 1).

In this context, Palmer deems the Reagan era unique in US-American film history:

This relationship between history and film is also unique in the eighties because of the sociopolitical stability, its overpowering Reaganness comparable to the Ikeness of the

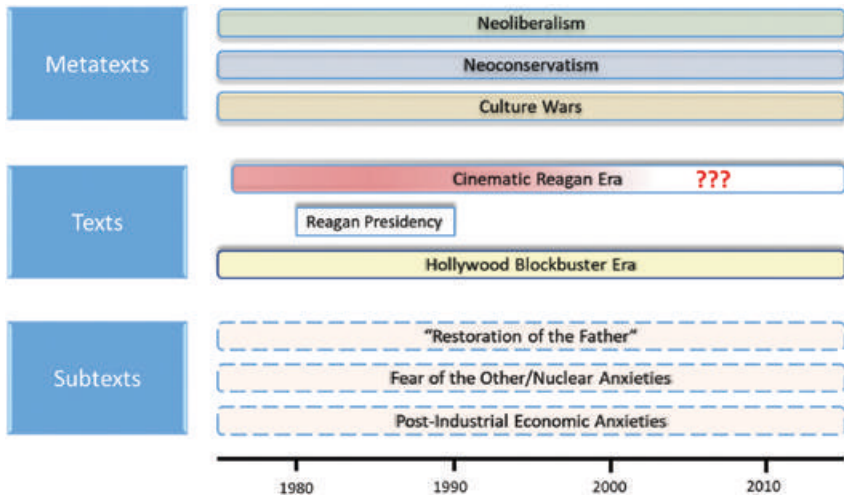


Figure 1: The positioning of metatexts, texts, and subtexts in the scope of this analysis. Of importance is the question of how far the “Cinematic Reagan era” extends given the continuation of its constituent meta- and subtexts.

fifties. [...] The victory of the Reagan agenda changed everything in America and by as early as 1982 had also changed the very nature of Hollywood films. (11–12)

This approach, just like the other approaches described in this chapter, comes with its own set of potentials and limitations.

Potentials and Limitations

The theoretical frameworks outlined in this chapter present a vast range of opportunities for investigating echoes of Reaganism in Hollywood blockbuster movies. Blockbusters can be approached from a multi-perspectival angle incorporating the media spectacle (Kellner), the “hard body” (Jeffords), the “strict father” (Lakoff), and Barthesian mythologies. This includes a more comprehensive reading of filmic texts as extensions of the production and distribution process, which contributes to a more elaborate understanding of blockbusters as mass media spectacles and not merely isolated texts. The economic background of a corporatized Hollywood continues to shape cultural productions, which in turn imbue all areas of modern life with popular images. Jeffords’ concept of the “hard body” and Lakoff’s “strict father” model provide excellent starting points for examining representations of the body and the family in a

cinematic context and Barthes' conceptualizations help to illuminate the cultural implications of Reagan's political speech, on the one hand, and the usage of national myths and naturalization in film, on the other.

It is important to reveal the subtexts of these images for recurrent ideological patterns in order to magnify which conflicts are resolved and how. Thus, a Reaganite lens is highly suitable for ascertaining historical trends and reformulations across time. By capturing dominant ideological tendencies, questions of resistance can be targeted in a more detailed manner, thus minimizing the risk of what Douglas Kellner calls the "fetishization of resistance and pleasure" (*Media Culture* 37–39). Instead of reading Hollywood productions as simple crowd-pleasers catering to the popular demands of a mostly liberal movie-going public, this analysis dissects specific struggles and representations. Thus, pleasure and resistance can be delineated much more clearly, as it will become more manifest how specific spectacle elements reproduce dominant discourses and to what extent they offer a platform for counter-hegemonial language.

My diachronic approach to the impact of the New Right in cinema constitutes a further critical distinction. As noted in the introduction, contemporary scholarship on Reaganite cinema has largely focused on the 1980s/early 1990s (Prince, *Visions of Empire*; Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*; Palmer; Jordan; Belton 389–393; Rossi; Hackett).³⁹ This analysis seeks to provide a more comprehensive basis for investigation by approaching Hollywood blockbusters and Reaganism as ongoing projects within a neoliberal cultural regime. The analysis goes beyond the 1980s and ventures into the 2010s in an effort to determine the extent to which the same set of cultural struggles and formal conventions provide a profitable platform for producing consensus through consumption. Numerous scholars have already posited that the 1980s impacted Hollywood in decisive ways. It stands to reason that these developments did not come to a sudden halt in 1989; after all, several observers point out that the cinematic Reagan era had already started before Reagan took office, with conservative tales of masculine heroism like *Rocky* (1976) or *Star Wars* (1977).⁴⁰ It is for this

39 Notable exceptions include Robin Wood's *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan ... and Beyond* (2003) and Ben Dickenson's *Hollywood's New Radicalism: War, Globalisation and the Movies from Reagan to George W. Bush* (2006), which both follow repercussions of and reactions to Reaganism into their respective contemporary eras. However, neither conducts a thorough diachronic analysis of a set of given themes over time.

40 For instance, Peter Kramer explains in his article "Ronald Reagan and *Star Wars*" (1999) that George Lucas' space epic anticipated the SDI program.

reason that the analysis anchors classic Reaganite cinema through the inclusion of *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* from the 1980s and proceeds to trace Reaganite echoes in succeeding decades. Thus, multiple trajectories can be traced in order to provide better answers to questions such as: When did the Reaganization of Hollywood come to halt—if indeed it has? Which specific cultural and political struggles inherited from the post-1960s era retain currency in blockbuster filmmaking? And why do blockbusters continue to be successful?

Throughout his analysis of ideological subtexts in cinematic spectacles, Douglas Kellner generally adheres to a synchronic approach, that is, reading films in the political contexts of their respective times. By applying a diachronic framework to historical film analysis, the workings of larger cultural, political, and economic metatexts can be made visible, offering insights into readaptations, reformulations, and renegotiations. Discussions concerning an escalating cinematic redress for the past are certain to increase, given the current pop cultural trends toward remakes and relaunches (Verevis 266).⁴¹

This investigation is further distinguished by its situating of blockbusters vis-à-vis presidential rhetoric. While numerous filmic narratives have been juxtaposed with the verbalized ideology of presidents of the United States, this book offers a survey of some of the most commercially successful movies of all time in relation to the rhetoric of one president, unlimited by genre or decade. This provides avenues for sketching out the ideological contours of top-grossing movies as a filmic format (Sanders 387–457). Academic discussions regarding the genre aspect of blockbusters are still rare or not fully developed in terms of ideological commonalities. The juxtaposition of blockbusters with Reaganite rhetoric offers a means of staking out political subtexts in a clearer fashion and within a comprehensive historical context. Moreover, the reverberations of presidential rhetoric in popular culture are of continued relevance, as presidents have occupied a privileged role in the in the promulgation and diffusion of metaphors in the history of the United States (Heidt 233–255; Roof 286–301). This is amplified by the fact that corporatized Hollywood has

41 Constantine Verevis writes that “[i]f one accepts Thomas Elsaesser’s suggestion that global Hollywood has entered a digital or franchise era of post-production then a blockbuster—like Spielberg’s *War of the Worlds*—can be understood as a ‘signature product’, an instance in which a pre-existing film or property no longer provides a (closed) narrative model but rather functions as a blueprint for ‘remediation’” (226). The changing media landscape of the 1970s/1980s therefore provided a set of blueprints that continue to exert an influence today.

adequate motivation to cash in on political celebrity status, as in the case of the first actor-president (Franklin 56).

My overall approach and sample have limitations as well. As stated in the introduction, it is beyond the scope and intent of this analysis to suggest causal relationships between filmic narrative and political rhetoric (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 15; Franklin 75–89), nor can I ascertain the degree to which the production process of blockbusters is intentionally infused with ideological themes or agendas. The selected theoretical frameworks do not explicitly provide for quantifiable results across analyses, that is, I will not present numeric data illustrating developments concerning themes or stylistic elements. Instead, I will discuss and situate several findings in a set of interconnected analyses.

It should also be emphasized that I will explore how blockbusters can be characterized as a specific style of filmmaking, distribution, and reception. However, my selected approach and focus make it impractical to provide a comprehensive genre theory for blockbusters. This would require a more thorough discussion of existing genre theories and cinematic conventions. Kellner's postulations regarding "multi-perspectival cultural studies" do invoke "ideology critique and genre criticism with semiotic analysis" in order to "discern how the generic forms of media culture, or their semiotic codes, are permeated with ideology" (*Media Culture* 98), but they do not offer a distinct model for delimiting cinematic genre beyond thematic content.

For reasons of limited access, the analysis cannot provide first-hand insights into the production process, nor can its methodology facilitate an exploration of phenomenological aspects of film as a collective experience, for example, a detailed analysis of viewer responses, audience surveys, etc. (Hanich; Maxfield). However, the sections on the production and legacy of each blockbuster will rely on secondary literature and newspaper articles to draw together important observations relevant to the overall analysis. In addition, each analysis will provide reliable numbers on box-office gross.

The size of the sample selected for the analysis constitutes a critical limitation. It needs to be acknowledged that this study cannot offer an exhaustive survey of blockbusters in general through the consideration of four films. Rather, I seek to highlight film historical landmarks that were critical for the developments of blockbusters in their current form—with the exceptions of *Jaws* and the *Star Wars* saga, which have been widely dissected. As stated in the introduction, the sample reflects pivotal turning points in the post-1970s development of US-American popular culture and society at large. This makes it possible to ask questions regarding the emergence, continuation, and discontinuation of prevalent political discourses, for example, why and how does

Reaganite Cold War rhetoric reverberate in *Independence Day*, a movie that was released at the height of the Clinton era? How do movies like *The Dark Knight* and *The Avengers* process the global financial crisis and the election of Barack Obama—two events that were often seen as pivots away from the neoliberal and neoconservative consensus? Ultimately, this study may not be able to provide a full-scale historical lineage of blockbusters, but it can shed light on critical turning points and their negotiations on the big screen. Thus, it contributes to larger discussions on the role of politics in film and the role of film in politics.

The utilization of explicit forms of oppressive language in the discussions in this book risks what Rebecca Barrett-Fox terms “the normalization of hatred” (22). Moreover, the focus on the legacy of the Reagan era can be seen to contribute to current “Reagan mythologies.” Barrett-Fox proposes to “deliberately cultivate awareness” (22) of the negative effects of such language, which is why I will consciously demystify oppressive discourses and expose their contradictions. Chapter 2, in particular, will work toward deconstructing metaphors that serve as euphemisms for militarist projects and the upward distribution of wealth. Nevertheless, the terminology in the subsequent analyses needs to reproduce the original formulation of certain rhetorical figures (e.g. “small government”), as they embody a specific narrative form that is vital for the film analyses. In the following chapter, I will discuss these specific constructions through an examination of the metaphors and ideological undercurrents of Ronald Reagan’s presidential speeches.

Chapter 2 Key Myths and Metaphors in Reagan's Rhetoric

Politics is just like show business. You begin with a hell of an opening, you coast for a while, and you end with a hell of a closing.

— Ronald Reagan speaking to his advisor Stuart Spencer in 1966
(*The New Yorker*, September 24, 2012)

Chapter Overview

In order to effectively analyze the intersection of Reaganite rhetoric and popular filmic narratives, it is important to identify the constituent elements and outlook of Reaganite discourses. I will, therefore, conduct a textual analysis on the semiotic and ideological underpinnings of Reagan's speeches and public addresses. Thereby, these discourses can be situated within their cultural and socio-political contexts. This is necessary in order to identify themes, myths, and metaphors that corresponded with societal shifts away from the countercultures of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the New Deal-inflected welfare capitalism of the mid-twentieth century. The public pronouncements of Reagan and his administration serve as pivotal, oratorical documents in the tracing of the cultural realignments that informed subsequent neoliberal and neoconservative currents in the United States. Analyzing these texts is, therefore, critical to a diachronic investigation of the interrelationship between mass media and politics in a neoliberal, post-Fordist setting.

The following analysis and discussion of Reagan's speeches will incorporate Roland Barthes' concepts of myth (106–164), George Lakoff's criteria for political framing (*Thinking Points* 35–66; *Elephant* 3–34), as well as aspects of US-American political ideologies, as outlined by Daniel P. Franklin (104–117). Douglas Kellner's observations on the facets of postmodern media culture will serve as additional background for the discussion. The following main themes of Reagan's rhetoric will be inspected in four separate sections:

- Reagan's rhetoric on "limited/small government" during his 1980 presidential campaign and his first term in office.

- Reagan's conception of the SDI/"Star Wars" program as a Cold War strategy for technological superiority in outer space.
- Reagan's framing of "terrorism" as "war" and the related discourse of individual heroism as a metaphor for national unity.
- Reagan's conception of rugged, self-styled entrepreneurialism as a discursive pushback strategy against economic and political anxieties.

These foci were selected on the basis of two main trajectories that are central to a diachronic analysis: the ascendancy of neoliberalism and neoconservatism as political and cultural regimes in the three decades after Reagan's election in 1980 (Godwin; Heilbrunn, 105–128).⁴² Observations on the jingoistic undertones of the SDI program and "terror as war" are bracketed by investigations of mythical rugged individualism and patriarchal, neoliberal capitalism. This order is also reflective of the chronological arrangement of the movies that will be explored in Chapters 3–6. From a historical perspective, it makes sense to determine the early language used by Reagan as he entered the presidential stage. Thus, the next section will deal with one of the principal tropes of his 1980 campaign: the call for a so-called "small/limited government."

The "Small-Government" Metaphor

In his 1980 campaign, Reagan's verbalized positions on the role and current condition of the federal government⁴³ demonstrate the recurrent theme of an existing governmental entity that appears to be disconnected from the

42 Jacob Heilbrunn argues that "with the presidency of Ronald Reagan and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, neoconservatives believed that their hawkish approach had been vindicated" (109) and that Reagan's arms buildup, the Strategic Defense Initiative, and depiction of the Soviet Union as an "evil empire [...] seemed to signal that the United States was back on the offensive" (122–123). These impressions led notable neoconservatives William Kristol and Robert Kagan to write an article for *Foreign Affairs* in 1996, entitled "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy" (124). This article was invoked the Reagan myth to call for an aggressive and neo-imperialist foreign policy in a post-Cold War environment.

43 It should be acknowledged that Reagan himself rarely used the exact terms "small government" or "limited government" in public addresses. These terms have, however, come to represent his ideology in numerous public and scholarly discourses, leading to their widespread use as denotations of Reagan's articulated positions on the federal government and its social programs (bar its military programs and the fact that the size of the federal government grew under the Reagan era in terms of employees and budgets; Bunch 61).

population it is supposed to serve/represent. He makes the scolding of a supposedly detached and irresponsible federal government a prominent theme in his announcement of his presidential bid in November of 1979:

The crisis we face is not the result of any failure of the American spirit; it is a failure of our leaders to establish rational goals and give our people something to order their lives by. [...] The people have not created this disaster in our economy; the federal government has. It has overspent, overestimated, and over-regulated [...] At the same time, the federal government has cynically told us that high taxes on business will in some way “solve” the problem and allow the average taxpayer to pay less.⁴⁴

The discursive logic of this rhetoric presents a dynamic between two separate entities—the government and the people—with contrasting visions for the future. Both entities have supposedly come into conflict due to a perceived government expansion, sidelining any aspects of democratic legitimization or consensus-oriented politics in all three branches of government. Moreover, Reagan plainly uses the federal government as a scapegoat for economic crises, thereby employing federal government as a signifier for the unresolved challenges facing US-American society. Thus, he confers a negative mythical quality on the federal government (more specifically, the Carter administration).

As noted in Chapter 1, Roland Barthes distinguishes between empty signifiers, full signifiers, and mythical signifiers as sub-types for reading a myth (127). In the case of the “empty signifier,” the signification follows a clearly literal and static path whereby “the concept fill[s] the form of the myth without ambiguity.” This allows for a reading according to which the federal government represents the perceived “malaise” invoked by Reagan. It stands for and is exemplary of “failure.” However, according to Reagan, this failure cannot be traced to the mythical qualities assigned to the white, middle-class mainstream. This reinforces Reagan’s strict semiotic separation of “government” and “people.” The government, therefore, is distinct from the people and does not communicate with the people in a meaningful or mutual way. Through a reading of the myth as a full signifier (i.e. reading it as an imposture or decoding the myth), the gaps and distortive qualities become apparent. Reagan does not specify any other factors that may have contributed to the economic crisis of the late 1970s, nor does he acknowledge the multi-directional dynamics between an elected government and its people. The term “government” seems to refer only to the

44 Ronald Reagan, “Ronald Reagan’s Announcement for Presidential Candidacy” (November 13, 1979).

Carter administration's handling of economic issues and does not encompass the preceding Republican presidents and their roles in the crises of the 1970s.

The mythical signifier is understood through the "constituting mechanism of myth" (127), thereby exposing an entire narrative of decline, a supposed crowding-out of previously ascendant mythical qualities and strengths possessed by the white middle class, which is now under siege by an irresponsible and expanding force. This story line lends itself to interpretations of white, male hegemony within a capitalist framework ("American spirit") as the beleaguered part of society.⁴⁵ The characterization of the government as "cynical" due to its "high taxes on business" underlines the government's intent to stifle this naturalized element of society. Barthes remarks that "the very principle of myth" is that "it transforms history into nature." In the presented dichotomy between "people" and "government," Reagan absolves his target audience and endows them with immutable qualities of greatness. Thus, it is implied that a restoration of these qualities of greatness would be congruent with a pushback against the bureaucratic forces that threaten them. This is forcefully exemplified in a later passage of the same speech:

We must put an end to the arrogance of a federal establishment which accepts no blame for our condition, cannot be relied upon to give us a fair estimate of our situation and utterly refuses to live within its means. I will not accept the supposed "wisdom" which has it that the federal bureaucracy has become so powerful that it can no longer be changed or controlled by any administration.⁴⁴

The repeated narrative of an expansive and intrusive government adds a note of urgency to the subtext of this message. This transparent attempt to evoke certain emotional responses can be dissembled into its constituent surface and deep frames (Lakoff, *Thinking Points* 28–29). According to Lakoff, surface frames build on lexical terms and phrases that can cognitively activate deep frames. These deep frames reflect a person's deeper moral and political worldview. While Reagan maintains that the "federal bureaucracy" can still be "controlled" (the "surface frame"), the use of the term "control" evokes deep frames of a volatile and jeopardous development. These deep frames are underlined by Reagan's assertions that there is consensus that the situation has already spun out of control and that he is the only one standing up to this form of supposed

45 Stephen Prince remarks that "[t]he dominant symbolic motifs of the Reagan period, then, portrayed a society under threat. America and the family were besieged by resurgent forces of chaos and disorder: communism, terrorism, gay and women's rights, school bussing, abortion, and so on" (*Visions of Empire* 32).

defeatism. In light of the previous observations on the mythical signifier as a vehicle for narrating a naturalized dynamic (Barthes 127, 130), the urgency created by the subtext of “controlling” the federal bureaucracy becomes even more apparent. Reagan’s invocation of an “out-of-control” government creates a myth that provides motivation. This motivation is supplemented by an appeal to faux commonsensical beliefs regarding the containment of threats. While the motivation itself is not “natural” (Barthes 125),⁴⁶ the myth transposes it into a narrative that makes it appear naturalized. One of the effects of this framing and myth-making is the construction of the tale of a federal government that is on the verge of becoming “un-American,” overly intrusive, wasteful, and unresponsive.

The term “arrogance” is used in tandem with a faceless abstract noun (“federal establishment”), which allows Reagan to attack the Carter administration, its Keynesianism, and its liberal welfare policies without resorting to naming names and thereby activating competing deep frames in people who don’t hold a negative view of Carter as a person. This rhetorical strategy was aimed at independents and Democratic voters who had voted for Carter in 1976.⁴⁷ Thus, it is critical to note that Reaganite anti-government rhetoric of the 1980 campaign often resorted to abstract and vague descriptions of “bureaucracy” and “establishment” as antagonistic forces.

Reagan’s rhetorical remedy for this menacing constellation takes the form of an invocation of foundational myths as a guiding principle. Through the usage of vague descriptors and an appeal to “values,” he presents his views as the logical result of colonialist histories derived from foundational myths of the United States:

My view of government places trust not in one person or one party, but in those values that transcend persons and parties. The trust is where it belongs—in the people. The responsibility to live up to that trust is where it belongs, in their elected leaders. That kind of relationship, between the people and their elected leaders, is a special kind of compact. Three hundred and sixty years ago, in 1620, a group of families dared

46 Barthes writes that “motivation is unavoidable. It is none the less very fragmentary. To start with, it is not ‘natural’: it is history which supplies its analogies to the form” (125).

47 According to a *Time* poll published on September 15, 1980, 59 percent of Carter supporters felt positive about him as a person, whereas only 48 percent of Reagan supporters felt similarly about their candidate (“The Mood of the Voter,” *Time* magazine (September 15, 1980). Accessed December 8, 2018: <<http://edition.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1996/analysis/back.time/9609/15/index.shtml>>).

to cross a mighty ocean to build a future for themselves in a new world. When they arrived at Plymouth, Massachusetts, they formed what they called a "compact"; an agreement among themselves to build a community and abide by its laws. [...] Isn't it once again time to renew our compact of freedom [...]? (Golway, 45–46)

Along the lines of Barthes' "mythical signifier," Reagan narrates an imaginary historical trajectory based on the premises of "American exceptionalism" and "the experience of flight" (Franklin 22–23). The utilization of the *Mayflower* myth effectively excludes Native Americans from this national narrative and casts the European settler population of the United States as the "dispossessed," who—through entrepreneurial spirit—set out to create a new society. The repeated use of the word "compact," which is associated with this popular myth, implies a language of consent, mutuality, and accountability.⁴⁸ Barthes has noted that "this distortion is possible only because the form of the myth is already constituted by a linguistic meaning" (121). Therefore, Reagan resolves the previously stated tension between government and people by arguing for a return to the original trajectory, implying that an unjust intervention (or usurpation) has taken place. The potent imagery "of families [who] dared to cross a mighty ocean to build a future for themselves in a new world" underlines the mythical centrality of masculine individualism, family, and entrepreneurial initiative in the securing of the compact.

Another prominent theme in Reagan's 1980 campaign rhetoric was the dystopian characterization of the supposed effects of "big government," which was painted as having disastrous results for both the middle class and the impoverished strata of society. Reagan regularly ended such tales by proclaiming that this was not an inevitable fate. While this theme was already present in the two speeches that were previously analyzed in this chapter, the Reagan campaign managed to expand on the theme through the inclusion of personal "tales of compassion" in the televised debate between Carter and Reagan on October 28, 1980. Kurt Ritter and David Henry highlight one of the key moments in the debate, in which Reagan constructs a dystopian narrative that casts him as a compassionate protagonist up against allegedly excessive and misguided government intervention:

Noting Carter's emphasis on federal assistance and expansive government, Reagan recalled a visit he had made recently to the South Bronx, to the same spot the President had visited in 1977. Where Carter had "promised to bring a vast program to

48 Notions of consent and mutuality are demonstrably limited in the case of the Pilgrims at Cape Cod, as they excluded women, Native Americans, and non-Congregationalists from the exercise of political power.

rebuild” the area, Reagan instead found what “looks like a bombed-out city—great, gaunt skeletons of buildings, windows smashed out; painted on one of them ‘Unkept promises,’ on another, ‘Despair.’ And this was the spot at which President Carter had promised that he was going to bring in a vast program to rebuild this area. There are whole blocks of land that are left bare, just bulldozed down flat, and nothing has been done. And they are now charging to take tourists through there to see this terrible desolation.” [...] “I talked to a man just briefly there who asked me one simple question: ‘Do I have reason to hope that I can someday take care of my family again? Nothing has been done.’” Lest the viewer miss the point, Reagan made clear that the culprit was his opponent, whose misguided dependence on government programs was doomed to failure. (Ritter & Henry in Friedenberg 78–79)

In this narrative of urban and social decline, several myths that repeatedly structure Reagan’s rhetoric on “limited government” come to the forefront: firstly, the anonymity and facelessness of “big government” and its representatives. In line with Barthes’ definition of the myth as an empty signifier, the presence of desolation and despair is not evidence of the absence of “big government,” but is, rather, a clear indictment of its overbearing presence and intrusion. Secondly, the destructive and bleak atmosphere supposedly created by “big government” is described as uncharacteristic of the contemporary United States (“looks like a bombed-out city”). Thirdly, the alleged lack of accountability and dialogue between the government and its constituents (“unkept promises”) is highlighted. And fourthly, it is suggested that this calamitous situation represents a recent departure from a naturalized trajectory of history.

Instead of discussing long-standing discriminatory structures and practices, Reagan opines that the misery faced by the inhabitants of the South Bronx is the result of a recent misguided intervention. This is observable in the subtle, but critical inclusion of the word “again” in the question, “Do I have reason to hope that I can someday take care of my family again?” The mythical signification here makes reference to a preferable past that has only recently been lost, thereby narrowing culpability down to the Carter administration and its associated social programs. Barthes writes that the “signified” in a myth “is in no way abstract: it is filled with a situation. Through the concept, it is a whole new history which is implanted in the myth” (117). And it is in this situation that Reagan inscribes himself as a source for emotional rapport and a signifier of a mythical past and aesthetic.

A final and crucial element in Reagan’s rhetoric on “small government” is the legitimization of Reaganite neoliberalism through its infusion with references to mythical heroism. The tales of wide-eyed imagination embraced by Reagan endow this anti-government rhetoric with an inflection of almost

childlike sanguinity. This offers an escapist vision of a depoliticized nature while brushing over the socio-economic ramifications of the neoliberal turn. In a frequently quoted passage from his inaugural address, Reagan paints a picture of individual potential that has been stifled by excessive bureaucracy:

It is no coincidence that our present troubles parallel and are proportionate to the intervention and intrusion in our lives that result from unnecessary and excessive growth of government. It is time for us to realize that we're too great a nation to limit ourselves to small dreams.⁴⁹

In this tall tale, he reinforces the idea of a national trajectory that has been usurped and needs to return to its naturalized state. However, unlike in the juxtaposition analyzed in the previous speeches, the dichotomy that is narrated here is not “the government” versus “the people,” but “the government” versus “dreams.” This implies that “small dreams” are a result of “big government.” This is embedded in an ahistorical narrative that suggests a negative relationship between unspecified national predicaments and the presence of welfare liberalism and social programs. On a linguistic level, the use of the word “dream” can activate deep frames that are evocative, for instance, of notions of the “American Dream” and the related immigrant experiences (Franklin 22–23, 39–41) or concepts of brotherhood or indivisibility along the lines of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech (Blanton 90). However, in the context of the advent of neoliberalism as a cultural regime, all these dreams—whether they are socially progressive or conservative in origin—rest on the pushback against “big government.” Reagan thus articulates a neo-capitalist framework by appealing to the seemingly innocuous: “dreams” (Barthes 142–145). This is further amplified in this passage from the same address:

We have every right to dream heroic dreams. Those who say that we're in a time when there are not heroes, they just don't know where to look. [...] Your dreams, your hopes, your goals are going to be the dreams, the hopes, and the goals of this administration, so help me God.

The accord that he invokes between people and government brings the previous rhetoric on a democratically legitimized compact full circle. The now mystified and spiritualized discourse of rugged individualism is expressive of a new sense of supposed national harmony—class, gender, and racial concerns are relegated to the background in favor of an escapist language of “individual achievement.” This language is both escapist and triumphalist, as it echoes the “People beat

49 Ronald Reagan, “First Inaugural Address” (January 20, 1981).

the politicians” frame that conservative populism has invoked in subsequent elections.⁵⁰ But more importantly, it reassures Reagan’s target audience of rural and small-town white, middle-class voters that they are “essentially good” and that their aspirations find a proper metaphorical expression in Reagan’s rhetoric. Lakoff sums up the implications of this mystified “free-market” creed in his exploration of the “strict father” model:

The good people are the disciplined people. Once grown, the self-reliant, disciplined children are on their own, and the father is not to meddle in their lives. Those children who remain dependent [...] should be forced to undergo further discipline or should be cut free with no support to face the discipline of the outside world. (*Elephant* 41)

In this framework, the market is itself a “strict father” as it rewards the “disciplined people” and punishes those who are supposedly “lacking discipline.” Believing in the market means believing in the “appropriate father.”

In summary, it can be stated that Reagan employed a variety of ahistorical and emotionally resonant mythical story lines in his propagation of the notion of a “limited government.” In Reagan’s announcement of his candidacy for the presidency, several themes that structured the ensuing language on the campaign trail came to the forefront. The repeated juxtaposition of “the people” and “the government” was shown to be imbued with references to mythical qualities that the white, middle-class mainstream of the United States was supposed to possess. These qualities were allegedly being stifled by an expanding and increasingly intrusive government. Reagan underlined the seriousness of his message through a subtext of urgency.

Another prominent theme in this anti-government rhetoric was the invocation of national founding myths that appealed to white voters and social and libertarian conservatives. In his presidential debate against Jimmy Carter, Reagan portrayed the federal government as faceless, anonymous, and vigorously destructive in its irresponsibility. The notion of a bureaucracy that is “out of touch” with the middle class was semiotically linked to a narrative of the country having been usurped by “un-American” forces—linking the idea of an unaccountable government to subconscious images of totalitarianism. Reagan’s proposed remedy for the calamitous situation he depicts takes the form of a renewal of a “mythical compact,” which he describes in a depoliticized manner. This renewal is structured by a general pushback against federal and social programs (which evidences the re-installment of racial and masculine

50 One example is the election of Arnold Schwarzenegger as Governor of California in 2003 (Lakoff, *Elephant* 36).

hegemony along the lines of neo-capitalist individualism) and the invocation of myths of heroism and dreams, which he expresses in an empathic and nostalgic manner.

All these semiotic constellations inscribed themselves into a larger set of narratives that positioned the Reagan campaign as a spearhead for the neo-liberal and neoconservative realignment of the 1980s. It is safe to say that the Reagan campaign found a new and more effective way of channeling the previous Goldwater conservatism into a rhetorical formula that resonated with the US electorate on a larger scale. This aided in the formation of a new conservative coalition. This type of discourse, therefore, corresponds directly with a larger societal subconscious, which makes the analysis of a contemporaneous mass media text such as *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* so important.

The “Star Wars” Program as a Pop Culture Invocation for Cold War Rearmament

A central and recurrent claim of the Reagan administration was the return of the United States to a position of international dominance. Reagan contended that this position had been lost in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the Iranian hostage crisis, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. By invoking the mythical “missile gap,”⁵¹ which was frequently used by foreign-policy hawks throughout the Cold War era, Reagan returned the attention of the US-American public to the sky. According to his vision, the militarization of space would provide state-of-the-art protection from any alleged Soviet aggression. One of the most prominent projects associated with this strategy was the SDI program, a proposed missile-defense system announced by Reagan on March 23, 1983. The associated imagery provided tales of national assertion through the ability to prevent strikes or intrusions before they even occurred—leading the national press and media to refer to it as the “Star Wars” program.⁵²

51 It is important to note that Reagan-era discourse on the missile gap was permeated by repeated exaggerations of Soviet progress on high-end military weapons (Hoffman 294).

52 Similar to the term “small government,” Reagan himself rarely used the term “Star Wars” to refer to the SDI program in public speeches or interviews. Nevertheless, the filmic associations evoked by the program were numerous and arguably stem from Reagan’s own involvement in Hollywood film. Michael Rogin argues that the Strategic Defense Initiative was possibly derived from the “inertia projector” in the 1940 science-fiction movie *Murder in the Air*, in which Reagan himself starred (*Ronald Reagan, The Movie* 1–43). One of the first national figures to verbally connect

His public address announcing the Strategic Defense Initiative is characterized by a sense of urgency in the face of an alleged secret military buildup of the USSR:

[S]ince 1969 the Soviet Union has built five new classes of ICBM's, and upgraded these eight times. As a result, their missiles are much more powerful and accurate than they were several years ago, and they continue to develop more, while ours are increasingly obsolete. [...] But the Soviets are still adding an average of 3 new warheads a week, and now have 1,300. These warheads can reach their targets in a matter of a few minutes. We still have none. So far, it seems that the Soviet definition of parity is a box score of 1,300 to nothing, in their favor.⁵³

The postulation of a large military discrepancy between the United States and the USSR echoes Barthes' discussion of motivation as a central feature of the myth. Barthes writes that

the mythical signification, on the other hand, is never arbitrary; it is always in part motivated, and unavoidably contains some analogy [...]. Motivation is necessary to the very duplicity of myth: myth plays on the analogy between meaning and form, there is no myth without motivated form. (124)

Given Reagan's stated goals to replace the previous Cold War policy paradigm of “Mutually Assured Destruction” (MAD),⁵⁴ the missile gap becomes an ideological prism, suggesting not only the necessity of keeping up with the Soviets, but also a radical departure from previous long-held paradigms of national defense. The presentation of a large gap constitutes the “motivated form.” This connects with the myth of a complacent and unassertive foreign policy in significant ways. Reagan effectively argues that merely attempting to close the gap would be insufficient for national security, as doing so would mean remaining within the confines of MAD. The stark contrast evoked by the mythical image plays into the underlying motivation of legitimizing a radical departure from previous defense policies and justifying higher-rank militaristic projects. Reagan asserts his desire to increase the defense budget in this passage from the same speech:

this program to the *Star Wars* franchise was Democratic senator Ted Kennedy (“‘Star Wars’: How the Term Arose,” *The New York Times* (September 25, 1985). Accessed December 8, 2018: <<https://www.nytimes.com/1985/09/25/world/star-wars-how-the-term-arose.html>>).

53 Ronald Reagan, “Announcement of Strategic Defense Initiative” (March 23, 1983).

54 Reagan and his aides regarded MAD as flawed and unsustainable (Troy, *The Reagan Revolution* 87, 96).

The calls for cutting back the defense budget come in nice, simple arithmetic. They're the same kind of talk that led the democracies to neglect their defenses in the 1930's and invited the tragedy of World War II. We must not let that grim chapter of history repeat itself through apathy.

Several mythical signifiers serve as thematic interlocutors for Reagan's broader ideology here: the invocation of an imaginary past of national strength and dominance, located in the 1950s, and the construction of a totalitarian threat, which operates on hyper-masculine principles. In this story line, the threat can only be forestalled through the reassertion of one's own masculinity. Using the notion of the full signifier, it is possible to decode Reagan's reference to the supposed inaction of Western democracies when faced with the rise of fascism as a distorting narrative. Invoking this historical myth reconfigures contemporary debates into the realm of the absolute and leaves only a few remaining options, as the presence of nuclear warheads creates a rigorous sense of urgency.

Toward the end of the speech, Reagan uses accessible language and imagery to paint his alternative vision for national defense:

What if free people could live secure in the knowledge that their security did not rest upon the threat of instant U.S. retaliation to deter a Soviet attack, that we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies?

The illusion of absolute safety through pre-emptive action has significant ideological repercussions that continue to reverberate in neoconservative discourses in the United States to this very day. Within the context of a military arms race, the militarization of space offered new profit venues for a military-industrial complex that was experiencing saturated markets in conventional warfare, as well as the loss of key allies, such as Iran and South Vietnam. The shift from a Fordist economic setting toward a neoliberal setting resulted in a renewed focus on investment-heavy markets that necessitated a new degree of public-private partnership. This inscribed the SDI and its imagery into a neoliberal political and cultural regime. The political resonance is exemplified by fantasies of national reassertion, which celebrate the nation's technological capabilities on post-Fordist terms (e.g. advanced and efficient technology are juxtaposed with massive and bloated machineries).

The supposed versatility, agility, and capitalist drive behind such ventures are presented as critical to the survival of the nation. For instance, James Oberg of the US Air Force Academy states, in his theory on "Space Power," that "a strong economy makes it easier to fund a strong space program, both government and commercial programs. But a weak economy should not be allowed

to lead or to terminate space activities” (45). The proper character of the president is evidenced by his support of such military innovation even in times of economic hardship, as the presence of otherized foes remains a constant in this framework (in line with Lakoff’s reasoning on the basics of conservative morality). Oberg also refers to the role of market capitalism in maintaining “Space Power”:

[P]rivate industry must vigorously pursue space technology and applications for “business and profit” and fund their own in-house basic and applied research to maintain a competitive edge in the designing, manufacturing, deploying, and operating of space systems. (44–45)

The emphasis on the economy in a framework of corporate capitalism intersects with the key visions of Reaganite neoliberalism and neoconservatism, as it is implied that a strong defense rests upon profiteering in the private sector.⁵⁵ This is amplified when the United States is facing a totalitarian Other, which relies on a collectivist system and thus appears to be less responsive to market forces. These notions of “war preparedness in peace time” and “military strength through innovative competition” reappear in cinematic form in *Independence Day*.

Of vital importance to Reagan’s legitimization of the weaponization of space were his articulations of religious triumphalism in the face of Soviet-style communism. Frances Fitzgerald outlines in her book *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War* that Reagan’s “patriotic pieties” (24) were shaped by nineteenth-century Protestant beliefs that the United States was “a covenanted New Israel” that received divine instruction to become “invulnerable” (İşçi 106). Fitzgerald addresses the skepticism among leading scientists and politicians, as well as a section of the general public, regarding the degree to which the title “‘Star Wars’ [...] was a reflection not merely on the improbability of making nuclear missiles impotent and obsolete” (Fitzgerald 22, İşçi 106). In fact, the title “Star Wars program” acquired several intertextual connections as Reagan’s SDI announcement came only two weeks after his widely noted address to the National Association of Evangelicals in

55 Barry Smart refers to David Noble when explaining that a digitalized, information-based military apparatus is strongly tied to notions of social control: “The formative technological roots of an increasingly digitalized informational machine-centric capitalism can be traced back to the Second World War and military sponsorship of research in the fields of communication and control of information, specifically in electronics, servomechanisms, and computers” (20).

Orlando, Florida. In this speech, he described the Soviet Union as an "Evil Empire," thereby echoing the *Star Wars* franchise (Kramer 41–47). The links between religious triumphalism and Reagan's Cold War rhetoric are therefore evident and critical to understanding the structure and mythical imagery of this rhetoric. It is important to note that Reagan did not *introduce* religiously coded Cold War rhetoric into political discourses in the United States. However, his spin on "American exceptionalism" allowed him to leverage a surge of conservative patriotism that emerged in reaction to perceived slights to the collective psyche of the white mainstream. This climate allowed for a vision that departed from that of his predecessors in its spatial setting and greater belligerence.⁵⁶

In his "Evil Empire" speech, Reagan saves his thoughts on relations between the United States and the Soviet Union for the end. Up until then, he primarily focuses on domestic culture war issues, for example, abortion rights, prayers in school, and the supposed "pitfalls of secularism." He establishes a series of moral binaries, in which the perceived "moral side" can only prevail through dominant assertiveness (Baker 22). Thus, Reagan invokes a consistent theme of "good" versus "evil," mythically casting his own side as the beleaguered side. He reactivates the linguistic frames of the "strict father" model by performing the role of an alert patriarch, who discerns right from wrong. He also warns his base of impending doom using language that echoes traditions of the Puritan jeremiad. By the time Reagan addresses the Cold War, he has firmly established himself as an unwavering "Christian soldier."⁵⁷

The underlying dichotomy is continued when Reagan warns against accepting any proposals of a nuclear freeze: "The truth is that a freeze now would be a very dangerous fraud, for that is merely the illusion of peace. The reality is that we must find peace through strength. [...] A freeze would reward the Soviet Union for its enormous and unparalleled military buildup."⁵⁸ Reading this passage from the perspective of Lakoff's "strict father" concept, the United

56 Scott Spitzer argues that "Reagan entered office as a reconstructive rather than a preemptive President, providing him with an opportunity to build a new Republican Party, engage in institutional construction, create new conservative networks of elites, and extend his leadership throughout the nation under a warrant for remaking national politics" (5–6).

57 This address was followed by a rendition of the English hymn "Onward, Christian Soldiers" from the nineteenth century (Baker 24).

58 Ronald Reagan, "Address to a Meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida" (March 8, 1983).

States is cast as a family that is in dire need of such a father, especially since the enemy is asserting aggressive masculinity.

This scenario, in which the United States needs to be heroically rescued, squarely places Reagan’s narrative in mythical and metaphorical territory. The exercise of strength on an international scale is presented in a depoliticized manner—as if the metaphor of the freeze was the dominant discursive distortion of the time and Reagan was merely attempting to restore a naturalized balance between the two superpowers. This parallels Barthes’ thoughts on “depoliticization [... supervening] against a background that is already naturalized” (143). The populist strain of Reaganite conservatism thereby comes to the forefront, with Reagan establishing himself as a critical voice speaking out against perceived “establishment wisdom” and the associated diplomatic efforts, which ought to be resisted on moral and religious grounds. The subtext of this language aligns closely with models of the state as a rational actor that engages in business-style transactions with other nations. This transactional logic is manifested in Reagan’s repeated references to the missile gap as a strategic imbalance, the implication being that previous administrations were not sufficiently rational and competitive in their foreign policies—that is, they lacked “common sense.” Also notable is the use of the term “freeze,” which commonly connotes being static and/or lacking dynamism. This terminology allows Reagan to activate deep frames of resistance against the perceived inertia of “politics as usual.” He ends his “Evil Empire” speech on a triumphant note:

I believe we shall rise to the challenge. I believe that communism is another sad, bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages even now are being written. I believe this because the source of our strength in the quest for human freedom is not material, but spiritual. And because it knows no limitation, it must terrify and ultimately triumph over those who would enslave their fellow man.⁵⁸

This language characterizes the competition with the Soviet Union as a divinely pre-ordained struggle with a predestined outcome. The Soviet Union/United States moral binary is underlined by discourses of the “irrational Other” versus a “rational Western world,” which recognizes the pitfalls of communism. This knowledge is informed and structured by a knowledge of God, which gives the neo-expansionist foreign-policy impulses of the Reagan administration a sheen of virtuousness. This can be juxtaposed with the mere pragmatism of the “Realpolitik” of the Nixon administration or the more calculated, long-term foreign-policy project of Jimmy

Carter.^{59,60} By echoing ages-old Protestant beliefs that the United States was “a covenanted New Israel” (İşçi 106), Reagan asserts a new metaphorical sense of the national body. This “hard body” is not only capable of recuperating after previous slights but can also reassert masculine dominance in uncompromising ways (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 25). As the preceding observations on domestic cultural issues have suggested, the global exercise of the national “hard body” is also predicated on the containment of domestic “soft bodies”—as represented by feminism, challenges to heteronormativity, and liberal intellectualism, as well as societal advances made by racialized minorities (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 38).

It is, however, observable that the language and the actual policies of the Reagan administration took a more conciliatory and co-operative stance in the second half of the decade. Frequently, his rhetoric on global politics would revolve around accessible myths of diversity in the United States as a model for global co-operation. In his address to the United Nations General Assembly on October 24, 1985, Reagan expressed his view of a pluralist form of “American exceptionalism”: “America is committed to the world because so much of the world is inside America [...]. The blood of each nation courses through the American vein and feeds the spirit that compels us to involve ourselves in the fate of this good Earth” (Baker 39).

In this short passage, a multitude of myths paint a picture of the United States as a unified global village that is held together by a spiritual component. Aside from the manifest distortions in terms of racial, economic, and gendered power disparities in US-American society, this framework is highly inculcated by myths of “American exceptionalism” and the inherent goodness of the country. Since the United States unites “so much of the world,” it logically follows that the country will be characterized by the essentialized qualities of “this good Earth.” Consequently, remaining involved on the global stage is not only a political but also a moral mandate, since the country combines and represents the positive traits of the entire planet (“feeds the spirit that compels us to involve ourselves”). Within the context of Reagan’s “messianic Americanism” (Dearborn 197–203), this mythical progressivism re-enshrines the idea of a “melting pot” of nations as divinely chosen to usher in an ultimate age of peace, freedom, and prosperity for the entire world. Global leadership by

59 Kyle Longley argues that “Carter’s approach rejected the short-term appeal of cooperating with dictators who trampled on the rights of people with a zeal equal to that of the communists” (95).

60 John A. Dearborn characterizes Reagan’s language as “Messianic Americanism,” Nixon’s as “Realist Exemplarism,” and Carter’s as “Moral Pragmatism” (28).

the United States is presented as inherently moral, as it is uniquely established by divine foresight. This notion would echo throughout the succeeding decades in discourses regarding a supposed “End of History” (Fukuyama, *The End of History*) on both neoliberal and neoconservative terms. It is therefore important to note that, despite its emphasis on international co-operation, Reagan’s language nonetheless extolled mythical virtues of “American exceptionalism” that laid the groundwork for capitalist and expansionist projects in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

At one point, Reagan’s space defense rhetoric even explicitly invoked the notion of an extra-terrestrial Other as an integrative force for overcoming global differences. In a speech given in 1988, the president mused about the following:

I’ve often wondered, what if all of us in the world discovered that we were threatened by an outer—a power from outer space, from another planet. Wouldn’t we all of a sudden find that we didn’t have any differences between us at all, we were all human beings, citizens of the world, and wouldn’t we come together to fight that particular threat?⁶¹

Reagan does not specify why these aliens would be hostile or how the threat would manifest itself. Yet, the mere presence of an Other serves as the genesis for a tale of global integration and universalist identity building. The construction of a binary on global terms transposes Reagan’s previous anti-Soviet language onto the canvas of outer space. Thus, this anecdote exposes an undercurrent of continuity between the fight against communism and an imagined future confrontation with aliens. The SDI program is thereby afforded discursive legitimacy, as it represents a technological bridge between the late stage of the Cold War and hypothetical expansion into uncharted new spaces.

The program acquires another dimension as a futuristic means of defense: According to Reagan, it can bring about a universal sense of purpose and identity for all humans. Like the alien invasion, the focus on outer space frames the fight against communism in cosmic terms. It becomes an all-encompassing endeavor with religious connotations. The mythical nature ascribed to the Cold War is accented by a language of “incomplete images” (Barthes 125). As previously noted, this imagery, with its vague descriptors, lends itself to caricature and pastiche, as well as mimetic reproduction. The SDI program assumes the role of a psychological signifier for global co-operation and the defeat of communism rather than a strategic military measure to

61 Terence Hunt, “Reagan—Space Invaders,” *Associated Press Dispatch* (May 9, 1988). In Michael Rogin, *Independence Day* (8).

counteract the suggested missile gap. Through recycled tales of symbolic othering, this anecdote proposes the eradication of racial, cultural, and economic difference on Earth. The result is a form of depoliticized speech (Barthes 142–145) that is conducive not only to the maintenance of the status quo, but also to the introduction of vast corporate-sponsored military projects.

In summary, it can be stated that Reagan's invocation of the mythical missile gap laid the groundwork for naturalized and apparently commonsensical discourses on rearming the United States. The shift from a Fordist mode of production to a post-Fordist one facilitated and incentivized the pursuit of military projects outside of conventional warfare (i.e. in the realm of space). This phenomenon was accompanied by Reagan's escapist appeals to national impenetrability, seemingly derived from the Hollywood imagination. Reagan's language is, therefore, infused with imaginations of triumph and mass media-ready spectacle. The mixture of these elements is also present in *Independence Day*.

Counter-Terrorism as “War” against the Other

Throughout the 1980s, the Reagan administration was confronted with terrorist groups on multiple occasions and in changing constellations. Early on, Reagan publicly articulated a set of guidelines and ideological corridors that outlined his vision for dealing with terrorism. Chief among these were his public promises never to negotiate with terrorists under any circumstances, never to make concessions to terrorist groups, to proactively pursue and “punish” regimes that were deemed supportive of terrorism, and never to retreat in response to terrorist attacks. Yet, the Reagan administration failed to live up to these guidelines in significant ways, leading many historians and commentators to relegate the fortieth president's anti-terrorism rhetoric to the realm of “Reagan mythology” (Bunch 76–77, 107). Nevertheless, the firm, paternalistic, and Manichean language that Reagan employed experienced an explicit and visceral comeback during the administration of George W. Bush (Winkler, “Preemptive War Rhetoric” 303–333).⁶² Thus, it is important to determine the exact contours and novelties of Reagan's anti-terrorism rhetoric in

62 Carol Winkler notes that presidential war rhetoric has often been analyzed as a “genre of public discourse” and that the “public communication strategies of the Bush administration on Iraq and the Reagan administration on the bombing of Libya [...] demonstrate that despite changes in the situational exigencies, the nation's leadership uses a heavy reliance on strategic misrepresentation to maintain compliance with the genre's expectations” (“Preemptive War Rhetoric” 303).

order to discuss how it has laid some of the groundwork for ideological and cinematic discourses on war and terrorism in the early twenty-first century.

First and foremost, the language Reagan used when speaking about terrorism in the 1980s was informed by the same Manichean underpinnings that largely structured the language he used when speaking about the Cold War. In his speeches, Reagan presented terrorism as a tangible entity that operates outside the realm of a “civilized world.” This distinction between “civilized” and “uncivilized” is predicated on the terrorist’s use of intentional violence against civilian targets. Reagan detailed this view in his statement regarding the 1985 Zona Rosa attacks in El Salvador, in which 15 people were killed (among them two US-American businessmen):

This atrocity, like the bombing earlier yesterday in Frankfurt, Germany, is further evidence that the war which terrorists are waging is not only directed against the United States, it is a war against all of civilized society. This is a war in which innocent civilians are targets. This is a war in which innocent civilians are intentional victims, and our servicemen have become specific targets. This cannot continue.⁶³

Terrorism is constructed as a form of physical and political violence that is perpetrated by non-state actors; yet, it constitutes a declaration of war against all “civilized” nation states and their respective populations. Possible social or political grievances are eclipsed by the perpetrators’ willingness to resort to physical violence against non-combatants. This renders the perpetrators’ ideological concerns either mute or not worthy of discussion. In this conception of “civilization versus terrorism,” the possibility of a neutral and/or nuanced stance is diminished. The framing of this struggle as a “war” implies a necessary mobilization, regardless of one’s own political stance or connection with the events.

As opposed to “police” or “intelligence action,” the “war” frame offers a more immersive experience marked by a departure from the “normal state of affairs” in that all other concerns—aside from the war—become secondary (Lakoff, *Thinking Points* 29).⁶⁴ The war that terrorism supposedly brings into the lived experience of a whole population is described as an unprecedented axiomatic threat, one that is inescapable for both the individual and the collective as it

63 Ronald Reagan, “Statement Announcing Actions Against Terrorism” (June 20, 1985).

64 Lakoff explains that the “conceptual frame associated with ‘war’ has semantic roles: armies, a fight, a moral crusade, a commander in chief, a capture of territory, the surrender of an enemy, and patriots supporting the troops. ‘War’ implies the necessity of military action. When we’re in a war, all other concerns are secondary” (29).

appears to endanger a vaguely defined “way of life.” In this sense, terrorism is not about competing policy models or geopolitical resource struggles; rather, it insinuates a totalizing emotion, which challenges “life” at its most basic level (Jackson 4–5). The emotional dimension of “terror as a state of mind” can perpetuate the war frame at will, without defining any specific victory (Lakoff, *Thinking Points* 29–30).

Moreover, Reagan's emphasis on “servicemen” suggests that this is a struggle that is primarily fought by male members of the US armed forces, thus implying that it can only be won by males. This effectively genders the government narrative of anti-terrorist efforts and exposes its additional social function perpetuating gendered power structures at home and the defusing of progressive movement politics (Jackson 18–19). In this framework, the people fighting terrorism are considered to be masculine, which implicitly ties this discourse to the concept of the “hard body” in the context of 1980s cinema. As the forces representing “good” are connoted as male, the opposing terrorists logically need to exhibit some form of “internal bodily failure” (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 52) or insufficient masculinity. The rhetorical emphasis on the masculinity of the US forces creates a binary, in which terrorists are poised to lose as they do not possess such “hard bodies.” Moreover, it eclipses female voices, as women are prevented from positioning themselves in this male exercise of war.

Through its employment of the terminology of “war,” Reaganite counter-terrorism rhetoric represents a departure from the discourses of previous administrations. Richard Jackson elaborates on this point by highlighting the repeated use of this term in the 1980s:

For example, the Reagan administration discursively re-constructed instances of anti-American terrorism as “acts of war”, rather than as crime, insurgency, or simply kidnappings, bombings, hijackings, and the like. Speaking about the kidnapping of American citizens in Lebanon for example, Reagan declared that, “Their acts of terror constitute a declaration of war on civilized society”; earlier he had stated that America “would not tolerate what amounts to acts of war against the American people.” In another speech, Reagan suggested that so-called “terrorist states”—nations that sponsor terrorism—are “now engaged in acts of war against the Government and people of the United States”. (3)

The positioning of terrorism within cultural and linguistic markers of “war” is expressive of a rhetorical alignment that emphasizes military responses and overall mobilization in response to threats that are designated as outside the threshold of “civilization” and devoid of legitimate political context. However, it is important to note that the “war” frame was activated by Reagan specifically in relation to terrorist incidents that could be associated with leftist or

anti-imperialist causes. These movements were frequently “depicted as the Soviet Union’s proxy forces in the global struggle against the West” (Rosenau 28). This conjunction of terrorism and war gave way to rhetorical performances of bellicosity against any group that was deemed to present an ideological challenge to the government. This was cemented by a strong discursive element of racial othering, which places terrorism in the realm of state sponsorship by nation states, which are considered illegitimate (“terrorist states”) and therefore outside of any legal international framework. This can be contrasted with the responses to domestic terrorism. According to counter-terrorism scholar William Rosenau:

[T]he U.S. government never waged a “war” against domestic terrorism in the years between 1970 and 1985. Rather than framing terrorism as an existential or civilizational challenge, policymakers stressed the criminal aspects of terrorist activities and their threat to public safety and security. (29)

The Reaganite framing of terrorism as war thereby implies that terrorism is exclusively committed by racialized and ideological Others. The term “war” overrides the dialectic relationships between domestic and international terrorism as it focuses on the latter with explicit semantic might (Barthes 142). In Reagan’s language, leftist and anti-colonialist violence is, therefore, invested with a fabricated potency that other forms of terrorism supposedly lack. Consequently, far-reaching measures against this form of violence are presented as warranted and necessary. Thus, Reagan inserts himself into existing debates on terrorism as a facilitator of extensive military and covert warfare projects, which are explicitly tied to counter-terrorism. In this sense, the “War against Terror” becomes an example of myth as “depoliticized speech”. Barthes states:

[M]yth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. If I state the fact of French imperialism without explaining it, I am very near to finding that it is natural and goes without saying; I am reassured. (143)

As for making things “innocent,” it can be noted that waging war against terrorism is put forward as a noble and commonsensical endeavor. The phenomena of racialized and leftist terrorism can, thereby, be stripped of context and historical analysis, as the term “war” refers to the existence of “armies, a fight, a moral crusade...” (Lakoff, *Thinking Points* 29). Departing from the logic of winning “hearts and minds” that was nominally invoked during the Vietnam War, Reagan’s perspective returns to a logic of conventional warfare in which brief, but intense mass mobilization can yield direct results. In his 1986 address

on terrorism, Reagan presents addressing the grievances of the opposing side as an “unnatural myth”:

For too long, the world was paralyzed by the argument that terrorism could not be stopped until the grievances of terrorists were addressed. The complicated and heart-rending issues that perplex mankind are no excuse for violent, inhumane attacks, nor do they excuse not taking aggressive action against those who deliberately slaughter innocent people.⁶⁵

The utilization of the word “paralyzed” evokes able-bodied notions of inaction and inertia, associations that can be easily resolved by the terminology of war. In line with Lakoff’s “strict father” model, President Reagan assumes the role of an initiator of necessary change in order to defend the “nation as a family” (which is understood to be composed of “innocent people”). In this respect, two developments are vital for the proposed “war against terrorism”: discounting any possible grievances violent groups may have and conferring executive powers to deal with such groups. The former accords with the recurrent theme of restorative, mythical conservatism. The implication is that previous administrations and public discourses were not sufficiently invested in the paradigms of patriarchal, hard-body assertiveness. Instead, they engaged in a complex search for the root causes of terrorist acts. This echoes Reagan’s characterization of the Carter presidency.⁶⁶ Furthermore, it offers an “argumentative option for diffusing public frustration” (Winkler, *Presidents Held Hostage* 21) by tapping into existing sentiments regarding real-life acts of terrorism in the 1980s. Accordingly, this rhetoric assumes the role of a counter-myth, juxtaposing the “strict father” model with an alleged discursive regime of indecisive and ineffective liberal discourses. This insurgent quality of the “War against Terror” frame is vital to understanding the outsider status of characters like the Batman and the Joker in *The Dark Knight*.

65 Ronald Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on Terrorism” (May 31, 1986).

66 David C. Wills states that “[t]he Reagan team believed Carter had failed to deal effectively with Soviet adventurism, and had been especially weak trying to resolve the Iran hostage crisis. According to Robert Gates, then the CIA’s Deputy Director for Intelligence, ‘weakness’ was the watchword applied to every aspect of foreign and defense policy, and intelligence, during the preceding four years. Consequently, the Reagan administration was very sensitive about any comparisons to the previous administration, and sought to differentiate itself by appearing to act with strength and dispatch in foreign affairs, with a special emphasis on responding effectively to terrorism” (3).

Mythical images of war are also present in Reagan’s postulations of primarily white and male heroism in the face of terrorism. In his 1983 radio address regarding the Beirut barracks bombings, Reagan paints a picture of an undeterred leader who will ensure the continued involvement of the United States in the Lebanese Civil War as part of a popular mandate:

They mistakenly believe that if they’re cruel enough and violent enough, they will weaken American resolve and deter us from our effort to help build a lasting and secure peace in the Middle East. Well, if they think that, they don’t know too much about America. As a free people, we’ve never allowed intimidation to stop us from doing what we know to be right. [...] We will not forget the image of young marines gently draping our nation’s flag over the broken body of one of their fallen comrades. We will not forget their courage and compassion, and we will not forget their willingness to sacrifice even their lives for the service of their country and the cause of peace.⁶⁷

The selection of these particular images reveals a desire to convey steadfastness, continuity, and the notion that the war is being fought by and on behalf of “regular citizens” (e.g. young marines), who have a personal stake and moral conviction in their mission (“cause of peace”). According to this rhetoric, their participation in this war did not have a mercenary or complex geo-strategic character. They died because of their “goodness,” which reinforces the “civilized versus uncivilized” binary. Social cohesion and unity within the established mythologies is presented as the appropriate response to terrorist violence. In this context, arguing against continued involvement in the Lebanese Civil War would mean rejecting national mythologies, as well as dishonoring the heroic images narrated by Reagan (i.e. reading the myth as “full signifier”). In this case, the heroes serve to extend the war and not to end it. Joseph H. Campos II remarks on the connection between “heroic imagery” in Reagan’s counter-terrorism language and the strengthening of the “national security state” and social control:

In the face of tragedy (violence produced by terrorism), the American democratic historical imagination provided, (and still provides) a spacio-temporal site for the production of heroes. This creation of heroism allows the discourse of national security to gain hold in the consciousness of the citizenry enabling continued manipulation and appropriation of terrorism. President Reagan cemented this celebration of heroism by again stressing the barbaric and vicious nature of terrorists, when he commented at a ceremony honoring the victims on 23 April 1983. (50)

67 Ronald Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on the Death of Federal Diplomatic and Military Personnel in Beirut, Lebanon” (April 23, 1983).

One reason why Reagan was in a unique position to tout this kind of heroic imagery and present it as an expression of undaunted triumphalism was his constant flaunting of the “hard body,” in particular his survival of an assassination attempt in 1981 (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 100) and the resulting mythology of Reagan being indestructible and supposedly destined for a higher purpose. Therefore, the implication that Reagan's body should be read as emblematic of the state of the nation reconnects the Beirut incident with right-wing notions of triumphalism and the “comeback of the hard body”—a resurrected sense of social cohesion centered on the traditional nuclear family. Drawing on the Hollywood mythology of movies like *Rocky* and *Rambo*, the stylized white, male “underdog” regained currency in 1980s political discourse. As in the movie *Independence Day*, it is through the application of the “underdog” status—and often a role reversal in the face of political realities—that this form of revisionist heroism becomes imbued with a sense of revolution against a mythical constellation of liberal power structures. Effectively, these cultural and political fantasies, by and large, served to uphold a status quo—within the United States and abroad.

Another vehicle for the creation of social cohesion in the face of terrorism was the externalization of violent threats along racial lines. The discursive integration of racist knowledge was in tune with the right-wing and evangelical segments of the population that Reagan spoke to. Moreover, it helped to create an atmosphere that legitimized physical and discursive violence against minority groups as a supposedly “counter-terrorist” measure (Spann 102–104).⁶⁸ Therefore, it is unsurprising that the Reagan administration strongly relied on the othering of terrorism to produce and sustain mass support for its policies. Secretary of State George P. Shultz defined terrorist activities as distinctly “un-Western” and embedded in a mindset that resides outside of conservative concepts of “Judeo-Christian civilization”:

But perhaps even more horrible is the damage that terrorism threatens to wreak on our modern civilization [...]. We have pulled ourselves out of a state of barbarism and removed the affronts to human freedom and dignity that are inherent to that

68 Girardeau A. Spann notes in his paper “Terror and Race” that “The concept of racial discrimination conveys the invidiousness inherent in the sacrifice of minority liberty for perceived majority security that might otherwise be mistaken for a mere convenient and justifiable differentiation based on citizenship. Most of the non-citizens who have had their fundamental liberties infringed by the war on terror are Arabs or Muslims [...] reflex submission to the lure of stereotypes is the hallmark of racial discrimination, and it seems to be a pervasive feature of the war on terror” (103–104).

condition [...]. Terrorism is a step backward; it is a step toward anarchy and decay. In the broadest sense, terrorism represents a return to barbarism in the modern age. (Shultz in Gunneflo 119)

In this speech, delivered at the Park Avenue Synagogue in New York City in October of 1984, Shultz reassures the Jewish-American community in attendance that a re-elected Reagan administration would continue to side unambiguously with Israel in its conflict with the occupied Palestinians. Terrorism is, therefore, presented as the product of only one side in a “civilizational struggle.” The “barbarism” commonly associated with terrorism is constructed as the exclusive product of a culture that is spatially and ideologically anathema to concepts of “white modernity.” Shultz’s use of “we” and “modern civilization” reproduces notions of Western superiority in this context and frames both sides as homogeneously committed to one set of goals with virtually no in-group variety or distinction. These mythical signifiers lend themselves to an imagination of terrorism as the exclusive domain of the Other (in this case Palestinians and Arabs/Muslims). This echoes Edward Said’s observation on the contrasting of the “Western man” with the irrational “Oriental Other” as a legitimizing measure for imperialist projects, as well as for cementing social hierarchies at home (Said 301–302). The mythical qualities of this construction are undergirded by what Roland Barthes has dubbed the principal figure of “identification” (152–153).

Within this figure, the Other is semiotically acclimatized into a logic of spectacle and mirroring, which assumes the dimension of a “scandal,” threatening the very essence of the *petit bourgeois*. This can be identified in Shultz’s language, which constructs a supposed “simultaneity of the non-simultaneous” (Bloch), pitting two different timelines against each other, with one of them being deemed illegitimate. This juxtaposition creates a symbolic tension geared toward “exoticizing” political violence, thereby predicating any discourses regarding such violence on the existence of the Other (i.e. terrorism is what the Other does). As Barthes remarks, “there is here a figure for emergencies: exoticism. The Other becomes a pure object, a spectacle, a clown. Relegated to the confines of humanity, he no longer threatens the security of the home” (Barthes 153). Thus, the spectacle aspect of terrorism is amplified through the utilization of racist and colonialist tropes, conducive to highlighting difference and projection.⁶⁹ In the context of technocapitalism (Kellner, *Media Spectacle* 15–17),

69 Richard Jackson highlights the Freudian quality of this kind of projection: “In Freudian terms, we might say that the barbarians are representative of the id force: libidinous, irrational, violent, and dangerous” (9). This understanding of

the reduction of complexity and the drive toward the spectacle are aided by new forms of dialectical narratives that reshape the dramas of everyday life (2).⁷⁰

In Barthes' discussion of the Other, the figure of the "clown" is also of importance. In Shultz's statement, it is telling that he speaks of "anarchy and decay," which are contrasted with terms like "freedom" and "dignity." Terrorism, in this sense, is devoid of rationality in all its forms, rendering it a semiotic space of aimlessness, inconsequentiality, and nihilistic self-abasement. The juxtaposition with "dignity" opens up a variety of interpretations, including the "surreal" nature of the spectacle, which exists primarily for amusement and to be looked at and lacks any rational agency or strategy. These parameters provide ample material for discussing the Joker as an "otherized" terrorist/entertainer in *The Dark Knight*.

In Reagan's construction of terrorism as a "racialized threat," the association between terrorism and communism and Middle Eastern regimes emerges frequently (Jackson 10). As previously stated, Reagan justified US involvement in Central America by explicitly tying communism to what he considered to be state-sponsored terrorism linked to various Arab nationalisms and/or Shiite Islamism in Iran:

Let's not kid ourselves; the Sandinistas are avowed, dedicated Communists. And Communists since the days of Lenin have advocated terrorism as a legitimate means to attain political ends. [...] If the Sandinistas are allowed to consolidate their hold on Nicaragua, we'll have a permanent staging ground for terrorism. A home away from home for Qadhafi, Arafat, and the Ayatollah—just 3 hours by air from the U.S. border.⁷¹

The assortment of competing regimes and ideologies reveals an attempt at obfuscation, through semiotically subsuming different agendas under a supposed

terrorism negotiates the innermost conflicts and unspeakable desires of the supposed civilized society.

70 With regard to the 9/11-attacks, Kellner opines that "[t]hese catastrophic events and their attendant instability and capriciousness assure a profitable futures market for investments in chaos and complexity theory, as well as arms and security industries. [...] There may also be a return to dialectical theory, as the interconnections between globalization, technological revolution, media spectacle, Terror War, and the domains of cyberspace and the Internet become central to every sphere of existence from the dramas and banalities of everyday life to the survival of the human species and life on earth" (*Media Spectacle 2*).

71 Ronald Reagan, "Remarks to Jewish Leaders During a White House Briefing on United States Assistance for the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance" (March 5, 1986).

ideological umbrella of non-white “anti-Westernism”—chiefly sponsored by communism. The vast schisms and the different ideological, spatial, and historical contexts that structure the aforementioned ideologies (Sandinista ideology, Khomeinism, Gaddhafism, Palestinian nationalism) are relegated to the background. In their place is a decontextualized, homogenic phenomenon whose only roots are attitudinal (“Communists since the days of Lenin have advocated terrorism as a legitimate means to attain political ends”).⁷² This can be further extrapolated to a denunciation of any opposition to capitalism as intricately linked to terrorism, which is of interest when examining the character of the Joker.

Subsequently, the “war” frame exacerbates the drive toward a military response and the securitization of public and private life at home, as it presents itself as commonsensical, thereby eclipsing competing frameworks of meaning. Lakoff remarks that the terminology of war “negates due process, because in war you assume that the enemy is guilty—you shoot to kill” (*Thinking Points* 30). Thus, fearing the Other and assuming the guilt of the Other appear to be not only rational, but also a duty in war. Accordingly, the alleged irrationality of terrorism can only be confronted through war and securitization as expressed by a “strict father.” These terms are laced with theological overtones in both Reagan’s (and later Bush’s) counter-terrorism rhetoric.

The analysis of Reaganite counter-terrorism rhetoric in this chapter uncovered the framing of “terrorism” within the context of neoconservative projects globally and domestically. Central to Reagan’s narrative construction of terrorism were certain aspects of the spectacle, which cast the terrorist challenges of the 1980s as unprecedented and a grave civilizational threat. This, in turn, set the stage for framing both terrorism and counter-terrorism as war, justifying equally far-reaching measures, as well as abuses of executive powers domestically and abroad.

The triumphalist undertone of post-Cold War neoliberalism, however, faltered during the final year of the Bush administration (around the time *The Dark Knight* was produced). This led to renewed doubts about the nature of “War on Terror” and the consequences of conservative neoliberalism. Therefore, echoes

72 Richard Jackson explains in this context that “[i]n this agent/act ratio, the character of the terrorists precedes their actions: the terrorists did what they did because it is in their nature to do so—they murdered because that is what evil, demonic terrorists do. It is a powerful discourse, and an act of demagoguery, which functions to de-contextualize and de-historicize the actions of terrorists, emptying them of any political content, while simultaneously de-humanizing them” (10).

of Reagan's rhetoric on entrepreneurialism in conjunction with defense will be explored in the next section.

The White Male Entrepreneur as Mythical Hero for the Nation

According to journalist John Berlau, Reagan used the term "entrepreneur" 186 times in presidential proclamations, radio addresses, and major speeches.⁷³ This comparatively high number is a testament to the centrality of white, male entrepreneurship within Reagan's presidential rhetoric. Given the focus on "small-government" neoliberalism, especially in his 1980 presidential campaign, the appeal to so-called "rugged individualism" in the marketplace was a fundamental feature of Reagan's economic vision. The preceding crises of stagflation and the lack of consumer confidence necessitated a reformulation of entrepreneurship within the emerging neoliberal environment, as New Deal capitalism was popularly associated with Fordist modes of production and consumption (Troy, *The Reagan Revolution* 31–52). This prompted the Reagan campaign to tout entrepreneurial virtues in growth industries, such as the information and service sectors, as well as instill post-industrial elements into imaginations of the restored white, male entrepreneur. Among these elements was a reimagined relationship between entrepreneurialism and national defense, wherein the businessman is constructed as an innovative disrupter within an antiquated defense apparatus. Moreover, Reagan's discourse on entrepreneurialism is pervaded by recycled foundational myths. These range from pop culture-inflected imaginations of the "Old West" (Smith) to the extolment of the masculine virtues of the entrepreneur as a naturalized expression of the dominance of the United States in a globalizing environment.

At the heart of Reagan's conception of entrepreneurial capitalism was the image of a white, male, able-bodied entrepreneur as the engine of the nuclear family, which is extended to the local community and the entire nation. While "big government" was characterized as intrusive and inept, entrepreneurs are described in heroic terms in the 1981 inaugural address:

73 John Berlau, "Yes, Reagan Loved Entrepreneurs—and Today's Conservatives Should, Too," *The National Review* (July 1, 2015). Accessed December 8, 2018: <<https://www.nationalreview.com/2015/07/ronald-reagan-entrepreneurs-supply-side-economics/>>.

You meet heroes across a counter, and they're on both sides of that counter. There are entrepreneurs with faith in themselves and faith in an idea who create new jobs, new wealth and opportunity. They're individuals and families whose taxes support the government and whose voluntary gifts support church, charity, culture, art, and education. [...] Their values sustain our national life.⁷⁴

Two central myths emerge in this statement that cast white, middle-class entrepreneurialism in the role of a provider for the family (and, by extension, the nation): 1) entrepreneurs create for the nation and 2) entrepreneurs give to the nation. In both cases, entrepreneurs act out of proper attitude and investment in spiritualized principles of success ("faith in themselves and faith in an idea"). Reading this as an empty signifier, the accessible and yet metaphorical language employed by Reagan has an instructive quality. Within the context of the "small-government" theme of the 1981 inaugural address, this instructive quality links up with the mythical restoration of a supposedly forgotten middle-class, commercial instinct. Reagan seeks to "remind" his audience that entrepreneurs operate on an efficient, self-confident basis and, thus, do a better job of performing many of the tasks that the previous administration has allegedly usurped ("whose voluntary gifts support church, charity, culture, art, and education"). Entrepreneurs emerge as the drivers of national strength and health ("whose taxes support the government").

The cautionary stance adopted reveals an acknowledgment of challenging narratives and competing viewpoints, thus demonstrating one of the Barthesian features of Reaganite mythology: "not to deny things, but to talk about things, to give them an air of innocence and to purify them" (143). Reagan enters into long-standing public debates about the role of the government and the role of the individual by taking a purist, market fundamentalist stance—shedding previous dialectics and contradictions. The axiomatic endorsement of individualist capitalism serves as a discursive reaction to existing counter-narratives. This points to an ongoing and noteworthy unease regarding the looming upward redistribution of wealth in the early 1980s.⁷⁵ The presentation of the

74 Ronald Reagan, "First Inaugural Address" (January 20, 1981).

75 Douglas Kellner puts forward the view that "this offensive of the right never really triumphed in the realm of culture, and culture itself has been a fiercely contested terrain for the past decades" (*Media Culture* 19). It should be noted that numerous pop cultural spaces have resisted the conservative onslaught of the 1980s or emerged in clear opposition to it (e.g. alternative music scenes like the grunge movement or independent film in the 1980s). Yet, Kellner is right to point out that the cementation of neoliberal individualism as a cultural regime has structured and informed the logic of mass media production across the entire globe (Kidd 67).

businessman as a supporter of communities serves as a rhetorical trope to calm such fears. Through Reagan's own acoustic and visual public performance, which has often been described as easy-going and reassuring for white and elderly voters in particular (Blevins 156), the reintroduction of corporate entrepreneurship as a focal point for national strength becomes intertwined with the performance of a pop culture-inflected form of succinct sound-bite politics. Gil Troy notes how the well-choreographed daily spectacles of cable networks like MTV and CNN facilitated the elevation of self-styled businessmen in the 1980s:

The entrepreneurs of the moment such as Lee Iacocca, Donald Trump, and Ted Turner would join President Reagan in elevating the pursuit of wealth, the compulsion to consume, and the desperation to succeed from selfish acts of individualism into altruistic acts of patriotism. The brazen ethos, along with the slick sensibility and colorful graphics of an increasingly wired world, would be part of the Big Chillers' "yuppie package." (*Morning in America* 117)

Building on the mythical qualities of this well-choreographed white, male entrepreneurship, Reagan's rhetoric intertwined the role of capitalist individualism with the defense apparatus. Although the administration consistently called for higher defense funding in its first term in office, the role of private-public partnerships in the rearmament of the United States was often touted within the neoliberal vocabulary of "innovation" and "efficiency." One such example is the appointment of David Packard, co-founder of Hewlett-Packard, as the chairman of a newly created bipartisan commission to redesign defense management in 1985. Reagan explained his appointment decision in his "Radio Address to the Nation on the Defense Budget" in 1986:

I chose Dave Packard, an entrepreneur and self-made man who started Hewlett-Packard in a garage in the 1930's and built it into one of our country's leading high-tech computer and electronics companies. Dave is world famous for his management skill, and his company is renowned for its efficiency and modern management techniques. The initial recommendations came in this week. They are a tremendous example of American know-how applied to an extremely complex and difficult problem. Their application, I'm convinced, would make every defense dollar more effective and make America stronger.⁷⁶

The laudation of the white male entrepreneur and his insertion into the defense apparatus exhibit certain themes that recur in Reagan's rhetoric: The entrepreneur is styled as a self-made businessman, whose business venture had humble beginnings (the spatial setting of the garage suggests a small-town or

76 Ronald Reagan, "Radio Address to the Nation on the Defense Budget" (March 1, 1986).

suburban setting). The common “rags-to-riches” myth fulfills several ideological functions, among them the legitimization of wealth and power disparities,⁷⁷ an underlying triumphalism by way of a linear narrative of material success and a reassuring reinforcement of the myth of meritocracy. Within the context of conservative backlash politics, the naturalized and seemingly depoliticized veneer of this story reveals the intersection of restorative imagery and a post-industrial neoliberal project. The mythical images of the past are evoked to pave the way for large-scale ventures aimed at privatization and monetization.

Another important theme in this passage is the presentation of the entrepreneur as a member of a public-private partnership. Using the terminological toolshed of “free-market” mythology (Lakoff, *Thinking Points* 72–77), Reagan associates the introduction of a stylized entrepreneur into a public structure with increased “efficiency” and “modern management.” It is important to note that, in this narrative, the entrepreneur remains a distinct entity and is primarily identified as a businessman. David Packard does not become a part of the public structure, but is, instead, called upon to contribute his perspective to it. Consequently, the suggested positive outcomes are discursively linked to a private intervention, giving the private element in public-private partnerships the narrative edge.

Yet another important theme is the rhetorical invocation of the media spectacle through references to futuristic technologies. The connection between stylized businessmen and military enterprise is frequently founded upon the celebration of state-of-the-art technologies that undergird the traditionally masculine quality of these partnerships. Akin to Reagan’s rhetoric on the SDI program, the defense spectacle rests upon accessible discourses of modern technology that have made their way into popular culture. Hewlett-Packard had already made a name for itself as one of the early introducers of inkjet and laser printers for home use in the 1980s. By tying military rearmament to the popular technological mass spectacles of the day, Reagan produces a language of purported synergies between capital and technology. At the same time, he declines to mention the dangers of automation, privatization, and a profit-oriented military-industrial complex, which became further entrenched under his tenure.⁷⁸ The mythical qualities of

77 Daniel P. Franklin notes that “[i]f, according to the rags-to-riches myth, all wealth is earned and thus deserved, then poverty is earned and deserved as well. This myth too is highlighted in American popular culture. Throughout American history, not just in the history of American motion pictures, the poor and oppressed are often depicted as deserving their fate” (27).

78 Ronald W. Cox states that “[i]n the development of the Reagan Doctrine, military contractors and oil corporations were well-represented through their influence in

the stylized, self-made, white, and male entrepreneur and the effects of his intervention in a government military apparatus feature heavily in *The Avengers*.

The intersection of white, male entrepreneurialism and national defense was also informed by a language of heroism in Reagan's rhetoric. In his remarks at the presentation ceremony for the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1983, Reagan summarized why engineer and businessman Simon Ramo was receiving the highest civilian award in the country:

As an engineer, businessman, physicist and defense and aero-space pioneer, Simon Ramo's career has been on the forefront of American technology, development and growth. The son of a storekeeper in Salt Lake City, Dr. Ramo built his business from a one-room office to a nationwide network of production plants. A shining symbol of American ingenuity and innovativeness, Dr. Ramo was also a distinguished author, philanthropist and civic leader. His life's work has strengthened America's freedom and protected our peace.⁷⁹

As previously observed, competitiveness in a capitalist setting is portrayed as having positive consequences for collective society, including enhanced safety and international standing. The representation of entrepreneurship and its contribution to the defense of the nation follows the same mythical patterns as the Packard Commission: Ramo is constructed as a self-made man from humble beginnings in a conservative, predominantly white, and relatively rural part of the country. The businessman's contributions to national defense fall under the category of post-industrial technocapitalism with a strong focus on outer space. This outer-space setting is one of the premier mythical sites of Reaganite defense policies and Hollywood filmmaking. The term "aero-space pioneer" is arguably conversant with foundation myths that cast colonial settlers as enterprising and daring—concealing genocidal acts against Native Americans and the ethical imprudence of the militarization of space (Lippman 177). The instructive nature of this ceremonial speech (the empty signifier in the Barthesian sense) presents the listener with an example of heroism through "free-market" success in space-oriented, high-tech defense industries. In the context of Ramo being awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, it can be inferred that such endeavors are worthy of emulation. This narrative lends itself

the conservative think-tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, which drafted an influential 1988 report advising the Reagan Administration to move toward war preparation for potential hostilities with 'maverick regimes' that constituted a new threat to US national security interests" (6).

79 Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Presentation Ceremony for the Presidential Medal of Freedom" (February 23, 1983).

to a science fiction–inflected conception of heroism in which escapist fantasies are seen as drivers of both individual and national success.

Within this framework, Reagan himself becomes an appropriate source of inspiration due to his self-conferred “foresight” in establishing the SDI program to compete against the Soviet Union.⁸⁰ Ramo’s modest upbringing is infused with an almost pre-modern, early twentieth-century aesthetic (“son of a store-keeper”) and then discursively connected to imaginations of “innovation” and “ingenuity” in a neoliberal, post-industrial environment. It is, therefore, important to note that the mythical, white, and rural conception of the “heartland” remains a staple in Reagan’s sermonizing regarding entrepreneurship. These characteristics are combined into a philanthropic personality, which echoes the notion that “entrepreneurs give to the nation.” This frequently employed trope tying the accumulation of wealth to national security and humanitarianism opens the ideological gates for a discursive synthesis of countercultural social concern and Cold War hawkishness. The benevolent philanthropist is simultaneously a hard-bodied, high-tech protector of the nation.

Lastly, the image of the “civic leader” re-establishes entrepreneurship as a central feature of social hierarchies and national identity. Within the context of spectacle-oriented technocapitalism (Kellner, *Media Spectacle* 11–15), the brand attains a discursive role in transmitting and dispersing images of entrepreneurial success. Effective branding in a diversified attention economy becomes a necessary mediator for the allocation of power.⁸¹ As Reagan suggests that Ramo was an entrepreneur first and a “civic leader” second (“Ramo was also...”), the convincing performance of entrepreneurialism is privileged in this construction of mythical heroism. The branded performance of success, the affiliation with space-oriented, high-tech adventurism, and the intervention of

80 Susan Jeffords concludes that Reagan’s space-age technological affiliation put him into proximity with well-known blockbuster figures of the 1980s, most notably Doc Brown of the *Back to the Future* franchise: “For who is Doc Brown other than Ronald Reagan himself? He has allied himself with technology in the name of progress [...] turned to science fiction tales for his inspirations (Doc’s childhood reading led him to want to build a time machine, Reagan’s viewing of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* led him to envision his own ‘Star Wars’ program)” (*Hard Bodies* 78).

81 Douglas Kellner maintains that “to succeed in the ultracompetitive global marketplace, corporations need to circulate their image and brand name, so business and advertising combine in the promotion of corporations as media spectacles” (*Media Spectacle* 3).

the entrepreneur in the defense apparatus are of critical relevance to the discussion of *The Avengers* in Chapter 6.

In the context of the conservative realignment in the 1980s, the inscription of entrepreneurialism in myths of national strength and defense is also in service of a re-narration of the nation's imagined past and future. The figure of the entrepreneur is a reliable constant in Reagan's vision of US history. For example, he frequently linked metaphors of national foundation and the nuclear family with global high-tech triumphalism in a neoliberal setting. In his radio address to the nation regarding small business in 1983, he draws a direct line from the rebellion of the Thirteen Colonies to the Moon landing and beyond:

Entrepreneurs have always been leaders in America. They led the rebellion against excessive taxation and regulation. They and their offspring pushed back the frontier, transforming the wilderness into a land of plenty. Their knowledge and contributions have sustained us in wartime, brought us out of recessions, carried our astronauts to the Moon, and led American industry to new frontiers of high technology.⁸²

This passage is exemplary of the patriarchal, racist, and settler colonialist underpinnings of Reaganite entrepreneurialism as it privileges codes of toxic masculinity.⁸³ The racial dimension of the mythical entrepreneur is made explicit by the reference to colonialist expansion in the so-called "American West." This expansion is construed as a venture of "pushing back"—reinforcing the discursive positioning of Reaganite neoliberalism as a literal "pushback." In this story line, the entrepreneur not only pushes back against external Others, but also against internal doubts and crises of confidence ("brought us out of recessions"), as well as big government ("excessive taxation and regulation").

The underlying mythical signification can be interpreted as a "mythical insurgency," which connotes Reagan's rhetoric on the entrepreneur as intricately intertwined with opposing myths of welfare/New Deal liberalism, as well as feminist and anti-racist discourses. Moreover, the physical imagery ("carried our astronauts") lends itself to an ableist construction of the entrepreneur, which is augmented by the hard-bodied symbolism of the white, male capitalist. The re-appropriation of the "frontier myth" in service of neo-capitalist ventures highlights the linguistic flexibility of the term "entrepreneur". Within this term, different historical manifestations of capitalism are naturalized along one timeline.

82 Ronald Reagan, "Radio Address to the Nation" (May 14, 1983).

83 For example, through references to war and rebellion, which become intelligible and legitimate through codes of hegemonic masculinity (Hutchings 400).

In this context of naturalized speech, Roland Barthes contemplates how myths “rob articulated language” and thereby empty the semiological language-object: “In fact, nothing can be safe from myth, myth can develop its second-order schema from any meaning and, as we saw, start from the very lack of meaning” (132). Language thereby becomes a repository for semi-otic arrangements through which the concept of the signified is “filled with a situation” (117). Thus, invocations of myths can utilize the same signifiers to describe and distort different realities. The implied connection between the capitalisms of the past and the space-age capitalism of Reagan’s neoliberal fantasies offers a variety of restorative qualities that square with the narrative foci of the Hollywood blockbuster era.

This is important for analyzing the glamorization of wealth and its discursive positioning within national myths in popular culture in the United States, as it can reveal the workings of an institutionalized imagery of success. This imagery empties discourses of class anxieties and social concerns that cannot be addressed by the market. Instead, selected national achievements are inscribed onto the gendered and racialized bodies of entrepreneurs, while notions of female domesticity and racialized subservience are re-inscribed into the concept of the nation. The notion of entrepreneurs “carrying astronauts” is of relevance here, as it implies male mobility and agility—as opposed to a lack of mobility outside of the entrepreneurial realm. In this context, Chris Jordan argues that the emphasis on male mobility in the MTV-inflected “music-video-movie” of the 1980s mirrored a “class-ordered dichotomy with a gender dichotomy that juxtaposes the freedom-loving, uninhibited male with a socially restrained, domesticating female counterpart” (106). With regard to *The Avengers*, it is important to explore the specific gendered expressions of Tony Stark’s high tech-powered “hard body” in conjunction with his entertaining and quippy demeanor.

In reference to Reaganite cinema, Susan Jeffords delineates the internal workings of the hard-body concept by outlining its focus on dichotomies:

In keeping with the logic of the Reagan hierarchy, any differences between relative successes within the Reagan system must be attributed, not to pre-existing racism, disproportionate allocations of social resources, or economic and class inequalities, but to personal inadequacies considered as internal *bodily* failures. In such a system, some men have earned their survival and others have not. And whereas weak men may not be actual enemies, they are nonetheless not entitled to the profits due to those whose strength insures the survival of the nation as a whole. (*Hard Bodies* 52)

The concept of the “hard body” can also be inverted to express that success and strength result from internal bodily fortitude. In terms of mythical signification, the celebrated and stylized entrepreneur is not only emblematic of success; it is also instantly embedded into the symbolisms of hegemonic physical capability. Whether this capability results from literal physical strength and a muscular physique or the skilled use of cognitive faculties is of little consequence in the Reaganite imaginary. For instance, despite being mostly associated with his “exaggerated musculature” (Jordan 108), John Rambo notably declares in *First Blood—Part II* (1985) that “I’ve always believed the mind was the best weapon.” The notion of the hard body is, therefore, tied not solely to physical strength, but rather to the pursuit of “mental as well as physical superiority” (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 40).

Again, Reagan’s own fascination with high-tech gimmickry provides ample material for accessible story lines that frame modern technology as a herald of an age of unlimited growth, unbound by natural restraints. In his 1988 address to Moscow State University, he expands on his vision:

Think of that little computer chip. Its value isn’t in the sand from which it is made but in the microscopic architecture designed into it by ingenious human minds. [...] In the new economy, human invention increasingly makes physical resources obsolete. We’re breaking through the material conditions of existence to a world where man creates his own destiny. [...] But progress is not foreordained. The key is freedom—freedom of thought, freedom of information, freedom of communication.⁸⁴

Imagined entrepreneurial genius is styled as the driver for ideological competitiveness and subsequent triumphalism, which is painted in futuristic terms. The national “hard body,” which can also manifest itself in skillfully arranged technology, is tied to myths of assertiveness in “free markets,” an assertiveness that derives from bodily fortitude. As frequently noted, these bodies are constructed as white, Christian, and male and characterized by a middle-class, small-town mindset (Jordan 110). However, this triumphalism is not inevitable (“progress is not foreordained”), which underscores the pushback quality of Reagan’s celebration of entrepreneurialism. Hence, the entrenchment of a neoliberal cultural regime forms the basis for the cultivation of this new post-industrial “hard body.” This requires the construction and simultaneous disavowal of a preceding metalanguage of “insufficient masculinity” in the form

84 Ronald Reagan, “Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session with the Students and Faculty at Moscow State University” (May 31, 1988).

of the liberal welfare capitalism of the 1960s and 1970s. This is a metalanguage “which is trained to celebrate things, and no longer to act them” (Barthes 143).

Since entrepreneurs are inherently inscribed in mythologies of disciplined virtue and “proper character,” the government aims to step back and let them shape the body of the nation in their own way. Any further meddling by the state would disturb the naturalized unfolding of masculine strength in the economy and within the nation. This fully aligns with Lakoff’s delineation of the limits of the “strict father,” who separates “disciplined” children from “undisciplined” children (*Elephant* 41). It therefore stands to reason that the discursive treatment of entrepreneurialism and “free-market” mythologies in the dramatization of conflicts between masculine “hard bodies” and feminine weak bodies in the Hollywood blockbuster imagination also needs to be investigated. Particularly within a political climate marked by doubts concerning the effects of neoliberalism (Negra and Tasker 345–350), the negotiation of entrepreneurship on the big screen can yield valuable insights into the internal workings of major Hollywood filmmaking as it seeks to address such doubts.

In Reagan’s own narration, anxieties and doubts arising from the excesses of capitalism are incorporated and reframed in a rhetorical constellation in which the businessman is fashioned as capable of rescuing the nation, the local community, and the family from the “false prophets of collectivism” (Bailey 20). The overlap between concepts of the conservative “strict father” and Reagan’s narration of entrepreneurs as naturalized leaders of the nation has highlighted the accessibility of such myths for tales of branded individual success. This leads to questions of corporate self-narration in times of economic crisis within a branded, corporatized Hollywood landscape. These questions will be addressed in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3 *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* as a Reaganite “Small-Government Fable”

Introduction and Chapter Overview

The release of the film *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* in June 1982 signaled a new phase in the history of Hollywood blockbuster filmmaking. After the tremendous financial successes of previous blockbusters, such as *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars—Episode IV: A New Hope* (1977), *E.T.*⁸⁵ achieved even higher levels of success and accelerated the high-concept formula into full swing. The film became the top-grossing movie of the 1980s, totaling more than \$792 million in worldwide ticket sales alone.⁸⁶ This science-fiction tale not only incorporated many narrative and stylistic elements of the early blockbuster craft; it also excelled as a vehicle for merchandise (from candy to video games) and as a branding tool for Steven Spielberg’s own newly formed production company, Amblin Entertainment. The handful of filmmakers who had proven themselves skilled in the new blockbuster craft (e.g. Spielberg with *Jaws* (1975), George Lucas with *Star Wars* (1977), John G. Avildsen with *Rocky* (1976), Richard Donner with *Superman* (1978); Prince, *A New Pot of Gold* 186–287) could now aim for record-breaking budgets, while producers saw the immense revenues generated through merchandise and aggressive marketing campaigns as vindication for the corporate integration of ancillary markets into the Hollywood landscape.

It is this far-reaching legacy and entrenchment within the popular culture of the United States that make *E.T.* an interesting starting point for an analysis of the interrelationship between Reaganite rhetoric and Hollywood blockbusters. The immense popularity of *E.T.* raises questions of how the content and context of the film helped to propel it to these record-breaking financial successes. On the surface, the movie relates the story of a 9-year-old boy named Elliott, from a white, suburban, middle-class, single-parent family, who befriends an alien stranded on Earth. Federal agents, who are aware of an alien presence in the suburb, seek to seize and use the alien for scientific purposes. The

85 The film title *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* will occasionally be shortened to *E.T.*

86 “E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial,” box-office information at boxofficemojo.com. Accessed December 16, 2018: <<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=et.htm>>.

central conflict arises from both Elliott’s and E.T.’s opposition to these plans, as E.T. wishes to be reunited with his⁸⁷ fellow aliens and return to his home planet. After E.T. is captured by the government, Elliott, his siblings, and his friends mount a largely improvised rescue mission and succeed in liberating E.T. just in time to deliver him to his mother ship before it departs Earth.

Through this antagonism between government bureaucracy and suburban child protagonists, the movie implicitly touches upon competing social visions of the role of government versus the role of the white, male, and middle-class individual. Through the formal and narrative positioning of Elliott, E.T., and their friends as victorious protagonists, it can reasonably be argued that the film’s attitude toward this conflict is highly conducive to an interpretation that celebrates a racialized and gendered form of individualism in the face of an intruding, yet ultimately ineffective bureaucracy.

Released the year after Reagan’s inauguration as the fortieth President of the United States, the film is located at a critical moment in recent history, shaped by the beginning of a process of cultural and political realignment. In Reagan’s 1980 campaign rhetoric,⁸⁸ one of the most frequently repeated themes was the assertion that “government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem.”⁸⁹ Reagan initially rode on a wave of dissatisfaction with the Carter administration—which he had characterized as imposing “on the individual freedoms of the people.”⁹⁰ In this context, the “small-government” metaphor became a staple for the newly formed conservative coalition and a fixture in the neoliberal consensus that characterized both major political parties after the 1980s (Mann 27–29).

Against this political backdrop, a possible interrelationship between Reagan’s endorsement of a so-called “small government” in 1980 and the tremendous success of a blockbuster movie that pits suburban boys against federal agents becomes tangible. Thus, the aim of this chapter is to analyze the extent and contours of these similarities. The analysis will trace the echoes of Reagan’s campaign rhetoric in the movie, as well as dissect the role of neoliberal policies

87 Even though gender and sex of E.T. remain ambiguous throughout the movie, certain narrative signifiers construct the character as male.

88 This rhetoric was among the factors that contributed to Reagan’s landslide victory against Jimmy Carter in the presidential election (Shogan: 2–3; B. Dan Wood 39).

89 Ronald Reagan, “Ronald Reagan’s Announcement for Presidential Candidacy” (November 13, 1979).

90 Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter, “The Carter–Reagan Presidential Debate” (October 28, 1980).

in the production and distribution of the film. Drawing on Douglas Kellner's multi-perspectival approach, this inquiry will be based on three components: 1) a discussion of the production and the political economy, 2) a textual analysis, and 3) a study of the legacy and repercussions of the film (Kellner, *Media Culture*: 10–16).

Reagan's rhetoric on "small government" in the early 1980s and the related co-ordinates of his ideology at the time will serve as a primary frame of reference for this ideological analysis. The reading of the film will therefore mainly focus on episodes that either address the government's role or depict its immediate actions. Nevertheless, certain aspects that facilitate the understanding of the political subtexts in the film—for example, the depiction of the family, the spatial setting, the construction of E.T. as an Other—will be interwoven into this reading. Two specific foci will form the foundation for the analysis:

- The dystopian undertones of the portrayal of government agents and institutions.
- The restoration of the father through white, male, middle-class individualism.

Based on these focal points, the textual reading will draw together possible resonances and dissonances between Reagan's rhetoric and the movie. While the restoration of the father has already been analyzed in *E.T.* in psychoanalytical and cultural terms (Wood 155–160), the subsequent analysis is differentiated by its application of George Lakoff's concept of the "strict vs nurturant father" (*Elephant* 39–40) to stake out the usage of political framing devices. This makes it possible to strip back the seemingly apolitical veneer of this movie and determine how basic political frames are transformed into simple metaphors. These metaphors can, in turn, provide a basis for formulaic, high-concept story lines. In addition, the frequently observed moralist overtones and infantilization of the audience (Britton 102–103; Wood, 156–160) make this movie a candidate for classification as a fable.⁹¹ At of the basic level, it can be observed that this is a narrative about a talking, intelligent, non-human creature with

91 In *Approaches to Literature: Genres* (1987), D.W.S. Ryan and T. Rossiter define the term "fable" as "[a] very short story in which birds, insects, and animals talk and act like humans. Its purpose is to communicate a moral, to teach good behavior, and to show the hurtful side of vice [bad behavior]." Rosario Piqueras Fraile adds that these tales not only serve entertainment purposes, but often also have hidden objectives, for example, attacking "corrupt politicians" or satirizing governmental power (33). In this sense, the fable provides an ancient format for the production of knowledge about political power and appeals to audiences of all ages.

anthropomorphic qualities, who teaches a family—and in particular children—about an implicit value system.

The inscription of patterns of legendary storytelling and mythical imagery into the movie exposes a subtext that is comparable to the use of national myths in political rhetoric (McConnell). This analysis will lay out the ideological parameters for the themes of mythical restoration in Reagan’s campaign rhetoric on the role of government in their historical context of the early 1980s. A selection of myths—which are present in both Reaganite rhetoric and the movie—will therefore be scrutinized in terms of their relation to power and their self-ascribed “depoliticized” nature (Barthes 142–145). As power relations between the government and the white, middle-class citizenry are central to this analysis, it is essential to understand the precise role of myths in outlining the normative parameters of this relationship.

In the film analysis, the central argument aims to demonstrate how both Reagan’s rhetoric and the portrayal of government representatives in the film addressed widespread anxieties among the white, middle-class mainstream in the United States. The implicit resolution comes through the pronouncement of a reactionary and neoliberal vision mediated through national myths and escapism. It is important to note that I am not arguing that Reaganism stands in a direct causal relationship with the movie and/or its narrative. Like Susan Jeffords’ discussion of the “Reaganite hard body” in US cinema of the 1980s, this inquiry is

about the correspondences between the public and popular images of “Ronald Reagan” and the action-adventure Hollywood films that portrayed many of the same narratives of heroism, success, achievement, toughness, strength, and “good old Americanness” that made the Reagan Revolution possible. (15)

As described in Chapter 1, it is beyond the capabilities of this analysis to support or make claims of mono-causality between Reagan’s rhetoric or popular image and the conception, production, and distribution of *E.T.* This examination seeks to explain how the rise of conservative neoliberalism—and its delivery through Reagan and his rhetoric—gave rise to some of the discourses in popular culture in the United States that created an atmosphere in which such a movie could materialize as a profitable echo chamber.

Furthermore, the film analysis is not intended to suggest an ideological congruence between Reaganism and the entirety of the movie’s possible ideological interpretations. The examination is dedicated to juxtaposing a primary theme of Reagan’s political rhetoric at a given time (the early 1980s) with the implicit meanings of selected scenes and narrative threads that arise from the central

conflict in the movie. The prospective argument rests on the premise that the narrative further reinforces Reagan's rhetoric, rather than contradicts it. In other words, there is more evidence in the movie that it speaks for, rather than against, Reagan's rhetoric. Therefore, this analysis will also explore possible dissonances with Reaganite themes, as these can provide valuable insights into how the film's success could also have rested on an underlying drive to resist the conservative realignment in the early 1980s.

This is crucial for contemporary discussions on the cultural resonance of this film, as scholars seem to be divided regarding its ideological impetus. For instance, Susan Jeffords argues that *E.T.* is among the many Hollywood films of the 1980s "that attempted to counter some of the prevailing social and political messages of the Reagan presidency" (*Hard Bodies* 22). This, however, begs the question: Which specific messages were targeted and to what extent does this attempt succeed? William J. Palmer posits that "*E.T.* is a fable for international cooperation, a warning that people cannot continue to react violently toward those who are different from them" (232). Palmer's observation appears to be well founded; yet, it requires a thorough discussion of who represents the Other in this movie and how "otherness" is mediated (e.g. in a non-threatening or challenging way). Chris Jordan, on the other hand, sees *E.T.* as embedded in the yuppie movies' "construction of suburbia as a self-sufficient community of individual families that is restored to stability through the elimination of the threat posed by external forces like the state, bureaucracy, science, rationalism, and capitalist greed" (72). Jordan's perspective offers valid starting points for a comprehensive investigation of class, gender, race, and space in this film.

Ultimately, this analysis aims to determine how the ideological undercurrents of the movie's central conflicts interconnect with the presidential rhetoric that facilitated a reactionary shift in social and economic policies in the United States at a crucial point in history. Analyzing *E.T.* through a Reaganite lens can illustrate how specific ideological discourses gained such momentum that their on-screen manifestation resulted in a blockbuster effect. The transformation of preceding, counterculture discourses of social transformation into a right-wing cultural regime can be better understood by examining a movie that appealed to millions of baby boomers and their young children in the early 1980s. This is a movie that helped ease the transition into a pop cultural climate that returned focus to the "traditional nuclear family" and extolled the virtues of white male entrepreneurialism and individualism.

E.T. achieved long-standing success through merchandising, as well as cinematic and TV reruns. This gives rise to further questions of how its functioning as a mass media spectacle might have translated into a recognizable cultural

script for subsequent imaginations of the role of government and the role of the white, middle-class, suburban individual—both in film and politics. Therefore, this chapter offers insights into how and why a conservative and neoliberal cultural regime has cemented itself in US-American society since the early 1980s (Ventura 23–44; McGuigan 236–237). In the following section, however, the economic and studio political settings that informed the production of *E.T.*—*The Extra-Terrestrial* will be outlined.

Hollywood Studios at Heaven’s Gate: The Production Background of *E.T.*

The early 1980s were marked by significant restructuring within the entertainment business, which also had a direct impact on Hollywood film studios. The deregulatory trends that began in the 1970s—championed by Ronald Reagan as Governor of California, among others (Jordan 32)—led to new forms of conglomerate ownership. This type of proprietary control became part of the very fabric of filmmaking and film distribution. Despite these tremendous shifts, Stephen Prince argues:

[O]utwardly, though, to its theatergoing public, the industry gave few signs that anything was changing. Certainly, the films that Hollywood made in the initial years of the decade held few clues to the industry’s mutation. Surveying the big moneymakers, a casual observer might conclude that Hollywood was engaged in business as usual. (*A New Pot of Gold* 3)

It can be argued that the early blockbuster emphasis on heroic story lines, the reliance on seasoned, profitable directors (like Steven Spielberg and George Lucas), and the leveraging of star power were well established in the tradition of Hollywood filmmaking. Yet, the conglomerate structure of studio ownership created new opportunities for production and distribution that had been out of reach in previous decades. Media corporations adopted a mode of business integration and expansion to ancillary markets that gave them a much larger stake at every step of the creative and distributive process (Prince, *A New Pot of Gold* 18–25). This resulted in an overall decline in the bargaining power of the individual director as the leading creative force behind film production. Film historians often point to Michael Cimino’s epic Western film *Heaven’s Gate* (1980) as a defining moment signaling the end of “auteur filmmaking” in Hollywood (Prince, *A New Pot of Gold* 33–39). Despite a lavish budget of roughly \$45 million, Cimino’s feature underperformed severely at the box office—generating a mere \$3.5 million in lifetime gross. The ambitious project

also failed to resonate with film critics, indicating to many film studios that a different tone and narrative outlook were needed. *Heaven's Gate's* poor performance is often blamed for the demise of its parent film studio, United Artists. Prince describes the following ramifications:

The *Heaven's Gate* debacle pointed to absolute need for the majors, in an inflationary climate, to institute tight production controls, especially over ambitious directors who did not have proven box-office track records and who were not working in solidly profitable genres, such as science fiction. Filmmakers like Steven Spielberg, John Landis, or Sydney Pollack would be entrusted with major production budgets because of their flair for handling popular material, but such highly regarded auteurs of the 1970s as Martin Scorsese, Robert Altman and Arthur Penn would experience a difficult period marked by chronic funding problems. (*A New Pot of Gold* 37–38)

The drive toward risk reduction on the part of production studios also affected script-approval processes. The “Lucas–Spielberg syndrome”—as Robin Wood calls it (144)—was thereby fueled by a more risk-averse focus on proven formulas and directors. The first *Star Wars* film by George Lucas and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* by Steven Spielberg—both fantasy/adventure films—proved extraordinarily successful at the box office in 1981 and sequels were already in the making in the early 1980s. Spielberg continued to build on this reputation by embarking on another fantasy/sci-fi project. Originally, he envisioned a rather dark feature about aliens terrorizing a suburban family (tentatively titled *Night Skies*). These plans later morphed into the more fairy tale-like narrative of *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial*. Spielberg explained in an interview that during the shooting of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*,

I might have taken leave of my senses. Throughout [the production of] *Raiders*, I was in between killing Nazis and blowing up flying wings and having Harrison Ford in all this high serialized adventure, I was sitting there in the middle of Tunisia, scratching my head and saying, “I’ve got to get back to the tranquility, or at least the spirituality, of *Close Encounters*.” (Sinyard 78)

The basic outline for *Night Skies* was, however, successfully recycled in the film *Poltergeist* in 1982—demonstrating that fantasy films dealing with the supernatural were in high demand. Nevertheless, Spielberg’s move toward a more simplistic, family-friendly narrative for his upcoming project was not well received by major production studios in Hollywood initially. The first studio he approached, Columbia Pictures, rejected the script that he and his screenwriter Melissa Mathison had put together for *E.T. and Me* (the project title)—calling it a “wimpy Walt Disney movie” (Caulfield). This decision was made in 1981—a time when the Walt Disney Company was having serious financial and

creative difficulties. Hence, comparisons to Disney were unflattering in the film business. Spielberg then approached MCA. Its subsidiary, Universal Studios, recognized the growing demand for fairy tale-like stories and the project went into production in September of 1981.

Universal Studios and its parent company, MCA, found themselves in a situation similar to that of other major Hollywood production studios in the early 1980s. The corporate structure consisted of five business segments, of which filmed entertainment was one. However, the parent company also sought to expand its influence in pay TV and cable and—through a joint venture with Philips and IBM—was exploring the creation of a videodisc system (Prince, *A New Pot of Gold* 12). Simultaneously, the company released around 80 titles on the videocassette market each year. This diverse strategy was complemented by a general push within the industry to purchase real estate in key suburban areas throughout the United States for the construction of multiplexes. Thus, Universal was in a strong position to offer *E.T.* a wide release in June of 1982 and cross-media distribution after its original theatrical run. According to Chris Jordan, “*E.T.* grossed a staggering \$12 million in a single weekend upon its nationwide release in June 1982. Box-office figures for the week of June 9, 1982, alone were \$96.9 million, nearly double the figure of the previous year’s opening summer week” (41).

Furthermore, MCA developed a synergy-oriented marketing campaign with Pepsi to leverage both companies’ strong presence in multiplexes across the country (Jordan 46). Thus, the main cogwheels in production, distribution, and promotion were in place for a blockbuster success. However, the resounding and unexpectedly strong performance of *E.T.* at the box office was also situated in the context of a thematic shift in Hollywood production that very clearly mirrored the demographic, cultural, and political changes that were taking place in mainstream society. As previously outlined, science-fiction and fantasy films were among the most successful genres during the 1980s in the US film market, a trend arising from a confluence of a variety of political and structural factors. By the late 1970s, movie-going audiences were not only shrinking (in part due to the competition from pay TV and cable), but also becoming younger. Terry Christensen and Peter J. Haas posit that this generational shift stimulated demand for more stylized and light entertainment as opposed to “serious or analytical political film” (145). The move toward sci-fi and fantasy films provides a certain measure of evidence for this claim.

The political climate of the United States by the late 1970s has often been described as “gloomy” and exhausted after years of perceived domestic- and foreign-policy failures (Jordan 62; Bunch 42; Troy, *The Reagan Revolution*

45–48). Hollywood studios moved toward offering more escapist fare that seemed to provide a departure from the dreary political and social conundrums of the day. However, this form of “escapism” presented a revealing and partially pro-Reaganite political commentary at that point in film history. After all, it was this focus on optimism and almost child-like simplification that allowed Reagan to mobilize disaffected and independent, white, working-class voters in 1980. Christensen and Haas outline how the move toward seemingly unpolitical films represented a political move in itself:

Spielberg went on to make *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977); *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), and *E.T.* (1982), all of which only contained minimal explicit political comment. Lucas started with *American Graffiti* (1973), and then went on to make *Star Wars* (1977), and its equally successful sequels. The lack of political content in all these films was seen by some critics as a sort of conservatism, as was their reliance on individual heroes. (145)

The emphasis on reassuring and comforting messages in filmed entertainment coincided with the rise of Reaganite restorative rhetoric—creating an intertextual relationship whereby each reinforced the another. The retreat of large portions of the white middle class into the “designated safe space” of suburbia was accompanied by new forms of consumption in the form of individualized entertainment that fostered an atomized social climate (e.g. the Walkman, introduced by Sony in 1982).

Executives at Universal Studios calculated the potential for merchandising early in the production process of *E.T.* The producer of the film, Kathleen Kennedy, decided to hire Italian special-effects artist Carlo Rambaldi to design the look and animatronics of the alien.⁹² Rambaldi, who had previously worked on the alien designs for *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, paid great attention to ensuring that E.T. had an endearing, pet-like quality that would appeal to children in particular. This bid to create a charming and innocent-looking creature paved the way for merchandising strategies aimed at families and children, who were expected to make up the bulk of the target audience. Nevertheless, potential merchandise partners were not always impressed with the design. Mars Incorporated opined that E.T.’s appearance would frighten or disgust children. This led to the company’s decision not to use the film as a vehicle to market its brand of M&M’s chocolates. The Hershey Company was much more open to the alien’s design and agreed to have their product “Reese’s Pieces”

92 *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial: The 20th Anniversary Celebration* (DVD). Universal Pictures, directed by Laurent Bouzereau, 2002.

featured in the movie. This decision paid off as sales of this brand of candy increased by roughly 300 percent after the release of the film (van Biema).

It was against this background that *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* was conceived, produced, and distributed. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the overwhelming success of this film represented the confluence of a variety of developments, which were successfully tapped into by Hollywood filmmakers and the “Reagan Revolution” (Troy, *Morning in America* 53–70). The economic setup of Hollywood and its distributions arms was ripe for a massive blockbuster success. This was fueled by additional revenue from merchandise and entertainment-hungry middle-class families, who sought refuge in tales that offered a very narrow version of reconciliation (Palmer 308). The carefully crafted stylistic elements of the movie constituted not so much an auteurist vision of artistic expression, but a business proposal to draw large numbers of suburban families into theaters and multiplexes and provide them with an immersive spectacle of infantilism and escapism.

A key part of these mythologies is the visual and narrative reimagination of the relationship between the state and the subject (W. Brown 17–46). This also undergirds discourses on class, race, gender, and space. All these elements will be scrutinized in the following analysis.

Film Analysis

The Dystopian Nature of Government and Bureaucracy in *E.T.*

*The nine most terrifying words in the English language are:
“I’m from the government and I’m here to help.”*

— Ronald Reagan

The government is one of the first and most momentous actors in *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial*. The narrative is set in motion in the opening scenes by the intrusion of government agents, who disrupt a group of aliens collecting plants in a southern Californian forest at night—presumably for botanical research. One character, later identified as E.T., strays from the group and wanders around in the forest. The camera adopts his perspective as he reverently stares at the towering Redwood trees that surround him. The low-angle shots used to convey E.T.’s observation of Earth’s flora contribute to a “child-like” point of view, characterized by an aura of exploration and wonder. This is fully realized when E.T. works his way through a patch of thick grass and suddenly finds

himself overlooking an illuminated, developed urban (or suburban) site, which appears to enthrall him.

It is at this moment that a group of Jeeps burst onto the scene and the dream-like music is replaced by a more menacing, non-diegetic score. The front of one Jeep fills the screen almost entirely—signaling an overbearing and totalizing presence. This is amplified by the fact that the camera retains its low-angle, childlike view of the surrounding world. Several other vehicles arrive on the scene. Their muddied tires suggest that they recently plowed through natural soil. This impression is reinforced by the subsequent scene, in which the vehicles come to a halt in the middle of the forest, demonstrating no apparent regard for the delicate flora established in the previous scenes.

The men exiting the Jeeps appear to be on a search mission. Equipped with flashlights, they tread through the muddy soil; the camera focuses on one pair of legs following another—almost in military step. Acoustically, one individual is announced by the sound of a jangling set of keys attached to his belt. Not one of these men is captured by a frontal shot that would allow their face to become discernible. Subsequent shots focus on their backs or their profiles from afar. The only time they are shown from the front is when they discover E.T. and face the camera, which is still adopting E.T.'s perspective. However, the lack of meaningful key light or fill light renders their faces almost invisible. Their gaze is represented by the flashlights, which have suddenly turned on the alien. They start running after E.T., with the agent's keys creating a rhythmic and metallic sound that repeatedly disrupts the non-diegetic dramatic music. E.T.'s attempt to run back to his mother ship is unsuccessful as his alerted fellow aliens decide to leave the scene. The agents pursuing E.T. now spot the ship and uniformly look to the sky to watch it depart from Earth (see Figure 2).

The depiction of these characters as anonymous and indistinguishable effectively minimizes any positive relatability with them from the very beginning. Their presence has a robotic quality as they announce themselves through flashlights and the sounds of keys. The use of human voices is notably reduced. Thus, the opening scene can aptly be described as establishing a duality between a child-like and dreamlike view of the world—which encompasses a nature that is presented as majestic and a shining urban landscape—and a towering, overbearing, and menacing presence that acts in unison in an organized fashion. This is exemplified by the shot focusing on the agents' legs following each other and the shot of them simultaneously staring into the night sky as the spaceship takes off. As previously noted, the few frontal shots are obfuscated by profound darkness, which renders the facial reactions of the agents indiscernible.



Figure 2: Anonymous and faceless government agents on the hunt for E.T.’s spaceship.

This creates a sense of an inscrutable, dehumanized power at work—one that is opaque and appears larger than life due to the camerawork.

Although the movie does not explicitly associate these agents with the federal government, they are associated with popular imaginations of civil servants in US-American cinema by certain narrative markers. According to Michelle C. Pautz and Laura Roselle, the portrayal of government employees is highly gendered and racialized with abled-bodied, Caucasian males in their thirties and forties frequently being presented as the norm (16–17). Therefore, certain fundamental signifiers already distinguish these characters as suitable candidates for representatives of a government agency. Those pursuing E.T. and his fellow aliens are therefore associated with mainstream cultural codes of power (Hitchcock and Flint 1–9)— whereas the diminutive protagonist is portrayed as the underdog. This could conceivably set the stage for an interpretation of E.T. as a figure opposing white, able-bodied masculinity. This would create a possible space for resistance against the reactionary “white backlash” that Reagan espoused in 1980. However, it must be noted that the otherness of the central character is thoroughly structured by a romanticized, escapist, middle-class fantasy of the Other. Robin Wood notes that:

as a more general representation of Otherness, E.T. almost totally lacks resonance (“zero charisma,” one might say). All the Others of White patriarchal bourgeois

culture—workers, women, gays, Blacks—are in various ways threatening, and their very existence represents a demand that society transform itself. *E.T.* isn't threatening at all: in fact, he's just about as cute as a little rubber Martian could be. (160)

E.T.'s innocuous and curious nature presents a clear obstacle to his construction as a deliberate challenge to reigning power structures. Instead, it positions him in proximity to popular conceptions of whiteness.⁹³ The opening sequences make it apparent that the agents are not pursuing the aliens because they represent an imminent, physical, and/or ideological threat to the United States and/or its government. On the contrary, the aliens' apparently peaceful collection of plants can easily be likened to human leisure or research activities. The government, however, is pursuing the aliens for reasons of its own. This pursuit is executed through manifestly secret operations throughout the movie. At no point in the film is it ascertainable that these ever-growing operations are backed by popular support or demand. The motives of the government agencies can therefore be presumed to be endogenous and not reflective of the discernible consent of the governed. It is the depiction of this disconnect between the overwhelmingly white middle class in the movie and an increasingly large, robotic, and intrusive government apparatus that—within the historical context of the early 1980s—interfaces with Reagan's rhetoric on "small government."

The previously mentioned aspects of a robotic, overblown, and intrusive government that operates on its own logic, with no apparent concern for "white America," strongly supports Reagan's portrayal of how the federal government—represented, first and foremost, by the Carter administration—has allegedly grown too large and detached from the concerns of "everyday people." This was such a central theme during his campaign that he elaborated on it in the first candidacy speech of his presidential run in November of 1979:

We must put an end to the arrogance of a federal establishment which accepts no blame for our condition, cannot be relied upon to give us a fair estimate of our situation, and utterly refuses to live within its means. I will not accept the supposed "wisdom" which has it that the federal bureaucracy has become so powerful that it can no longer be changed or controlled by any administration. As President, I would use every power at my command to make the federal establishment respond to the

93 This is bolstered by *E.T.*'s physical appearance, which is designed to resonate on an emotional level. The undercurrents of a "morality tale" align with the "fable" aspect of this narrative, as *E.T.* is designed to instruct his audience while also visually representing the visual attributes of familiar animals.

will and the collective wishes of the people. [...] The federal government has taken on functions it was never intended to perform and which it does not perform well.⁹⁴

According to this rhetoric, a large government is not only unresponsive to the needs of its people, but also secretive and self-absorbed. Within the context of the late 1970s, a period marked by discourses of “national crises,” Reagan draws a connection between these crises and the existence of a supposed “bloated government.” The inherent assignment of blame attacks the Carter administration, as well as notions of welfare liberalism and government intervention in the economy. As previously noted, the aliens in the opening scene of *E.T.* are depicted as merely going about their own business, pursuing interests that are of no concern to the overall well-being or defense of the country. In the film, it is governmental intrusion that upsets a private endeavor and ultimately endangers E.T.’s life, as he is now stranded on Earth with no place to go. The narrative thereby employs myths of individualism and innocence to posit a binary power dynamic.

As noted in Chapter 1, Roland Barthes explains in his writings on “mythologies” that the “signified” in a myth “is in no way abstract: it is filled with a situation. Through the concept, it is a whole new history which is implanted in the myth” (117). The signified, therefore, is embedded in tangible narratives and/or setups that widen the meaning of the story (116). From this point of view, the act of gathering plants casts the aliens as vague targets in a conflict initiated by antagonists who appear tangible enough to be identified with the government, but also nebulous and formless enough to allow for ideological projection. Correspondingly, Reagan establishes a mythology of an “expansive federal government” that appears straightforward, but blurry enough to allow for a variety of conservative and libertarian interpretations.⁹⁵

The alleged lack of government accountability plays into the “small-government” myth as the movie shows the agents conducting a mission in secret, outside the realms of populated, urban, or suburban space. This is an agency that is visibly disconnected from the concerns of the largely white and middle-class mainstream depicted in the movie. The elusive nature of the agency is underscored by the fact that the viewer is never given any clues

94 Ronald Reagan, “Ronald Reagan Announcement for Presidential Candidacy” (November 13, 1979).

95 For instance, in his November 1979 speech, Reagan does not detail which specific functions the government has usurped and which it does not perform well and why.

regarding which agency or government body they belong to.⁹⁶ They operate in the shadows at night and the public in the nearby suburb seems to be unaware of their activities. The movie affirms in a subsequent scene that only the 9-year-old Elliott is aware that they are foraging in the woods. In the Reaganite imagination, this bureaucracy is on the verge of becoming “so powerful that it can no longer be changed or controlled by any administration.” Forcing this bureaucracy to “respond to the will and the collective wishes of the people” would not only restore the allegedly lost political equilibrium between “government and the governed,” but it would also translate into a victory for E.T. and his friends, who seek to outsmart the federal agents throughout the film.

In later scenes, the disconnect between government and a seemingly beleaguered white suburbia is further accentuated. The imagery employed is reminiscent of Cold War totalitarianism. However, the totalitarian overtones are not shown to be the result of a foreign invasion but are rather presented as a pre-existing metatext without any further context or historical narration. At no point is any explanation given as to why agents in space suits seem to be entitled to break into a suburban home without a proper warrant or even announcing themselves. The ideological subtexts of these images, which are presented as traumatic and harrowing for Elliott and his family, add to the sense of dystopia.⁹⁷ The erosion of the imagined trust between the white middle class and an ideally prudent bureaucracy gives rise to a narrative dynamic that lends the film the air of both a fable and a dystopia—a warning of how things could be in the future (Negley and Patrick 298).

The lack of explicitly stated motivations for the government’s actions and the introduction of government agents in the film as “aggressive first movers” casts the government into a discursive sphere that is conversant, yet not entirely overlapping, with Reagan’s public pronouncements on “limited government.” Colleen Shogan points out that one of the four key promises that Reagan made in his 1980 campaign was an “increase in military spending” (19). This was accompanied by his chastisement of the Carter administration for supposedly having weakened the nation’s military capabilities. In addition, Reagan’s vision of aggressively weaponizing space in order to “to protect the population

96 During the chase scene toward the end, the text on the side of the pursuing agents’ cars simply reads “United States Government.” This codes them as generic representatives of the federal government.

97 Glenn Negley and J. Max Patrick define “dystopia” as “not a world we should like to live in, but one we must be sure to avoid” (599).

of the United States from nuclear annihilation” (Grossmann 93) was already a recurrent and publicized theme of his presidential campaign. Thus, it stands to reason that a forceful, well-funded, and dominant space agency, as depicted in the film, would align with the Reaganite vision of space defense. In other words, military capabilities that allow for global dominance and muscle-flexing represent one of the few areas in which a “big government” would be warranted. However, the positioning of the bureaucracy in *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* still subscribes to the discursive logic of conservative neoliberalism, as the government targets and intrudes into the space of the domestic, white middle class. In this sense, the authorities turn their power against Reagan’s main clientele and not against external foes. Moreover, the non-menacing stature of E.T. offers grounds for coding the government forces in the movie not as pursuing the restoration and maintenance of white hegemony, but as a patronizing institution that is oblivious to the demands of the “nuclear family.” In this sense, the film negotiates suburban Cold War anxieties through images of homegrown authoritarianism.

William Palmer maintains, in his book *Films of the Eighties*, that anxieties regarding Soviet totalitarianism were meditated through four types of texts during the 1980s: “the rightist military text, the cold war spy text, the *E.T.* text and the leftist freedom under totalitarianism text” (209). According to Palmer, the *E.T.* text “metaphorically dramatized the need for understanding and the eventual thaw in relations between these two wary nations (the U.S. and the Soviet Union)” (209). This framework points to an important political development that permeated Hollywood filmmaking in the second half of the 1980s: the growing rapprochement between the United States and the Soviet Union. However, it does not address questions regarding a dystopian US-American future in which the country has degenerated into a homegrown totalitarian regime. An interrogation of the film from the perspective of Reaganite “small-government” rhetoric, however, gives rise to a conservative-libertarian understanding of “homegrown bureaucratic excesses” as a variety of totalitarianism that seems as menacing and all-encompassing as Soviet totalitarianism. Ultimately, key scenes in *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* provide grounds for seeing the United States as susceptible to sliding into an “authoritarian big government state.” This form of statism appears unrecognizable to the suburban family of the early 1980s. The subtext of an “un-American” and overbearing force taking over the suburbs is most evident in the scenes in which Elliott’s family’s home is taken over by agents in space suits.

The imagery in these scenes presents government agents, scientists, and police forces as harbingers of a pervasive and practically uniform collectivism

that is about to seize the suburbs. The scenes take place right after the mother of the family, Mary, finally discovers a very sick and ailing E.T. on the bathroom floor in her house. She reacts with immediate shock and disbelief. She does not trust her kids' assurances that E.T. poses no threat and needs help. She grabs Elliott and orders her oldest son, Michael, to get the youngest sibling, Gertie, out of the house. On their way out, they are confronted with an overwhelming government presence that has seemingly built up around the house overnight. After Michael opens the door, he is shown in a frontal medium shot, from a slightly lower angle. His reaction to what seems to be a frightening and intimidating sight is plain to see. Through the *mise-en-scène*, he is placed between a stairway to the left and a floor clock to the right, which adds a subtle subtext of the importance of flight and time in a situation like this. However, it is already too late for this family. Once Mary approaches the door, the true balance of power becomes evident. An agent in full astronaut gear, audibly breathing through a respirator, enters through the front door. He inexplicably extends his arms toward the family as if he is attempting to capture them. No introduction, no dialogue, and no prior announcement accompanies this home invasion for the audience or for the family in the film. Mary and the children try to run away, but they are confronted with more space suit-clad intruders. Cornered in the living room, the shocked family witnesses one agent making his way into the house through a window (see Figure 3). Mary's frantic declaration that "[t]his is my home!" does nothing to dissuade the intruders. In the lower-middle part of the shot, a toy train is circling on a table and making a loud choo-choo sound. In addition to signaling the intrusion into an idyllic and modest existence, this audiovisual element can be coded as the announcement and arrival of a powerful machinery.

The following scene illustrates the theme of encroaching and dystopian totalitarianism in vibrant colors. A low-angle shot of a suburban street captures a bright red sunset and the top of a lone streetlight behind the horizon. The warm colors convey a sense of heat and anticipation. Suddenly, a perfectly aligned group of scientists in uniform white outfits and helmets emerge from over the horizon. They are almost exactly the same height and their step is practically in unison. Their faces are all hidden behind inscrutable masks. As soon as they appear, a loud and unceasing drumbeat accentuates their every step up the street. There is little doubt now that suburbia is being taken over by a quasi-military force. The next shot captures E.T. lying on the bathroom floor. An agent in full astronaut gear enters the room, again audibly breathing through a respirator. The camera assumes E.T.'s perspective, giving the viewer the impression that the agent is towering overhead. The alien stretches out his arms and uses his last



Figure 3: “This is my home!” Mary fails to protect her family from “big-government” intrusion.

ounce of strength to crankily yell, “Home ... home.” Unlike all other characters in the film when they first encounter E.T., the agent remains completely silent, his facial reactions hidden behind the mask. He neither accelerates nor slows down his pace as he walks toward E.T. When the alien yells for home one more time, the scene immediately cuts to the spectacle of government power that is now unfolding in the streets.

Scores of uniformly dressed scientists and engineers transport quarantine equipment along the street to the sound of the marching drumbeat. From behind the horizon, further waves of agents appear. They are followed by a fleet of police cars, slowly driving down the street, their emergency lights flashing. The next shot depicts all approaching police officers, agents, and scientists in frontal view. Yet, all their faces are obscured by the setting sun against which the scene is filmed. The dusky *mise-en-scène* not only serves to heighten the tension, but it also creates an atmosphere of “end times.” One scientist is carrying an instrument that is partially self-illuminated, leaving the viewer wondering what its purpose might be. The impression of an enigmatic and unaccountable force marching through the streets plays into a variety of dystopian anxieties, ranging from Cold War fears of a communist invasion to a perceived onslaught by an authoritarian police state (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: The totalitarian takeover of suburbia begins with uniformed scientists marching through the streets at sunset—the perfect Reaganite nightmare.

It is important to note that the unfolding narrative of a government that initially lurked in the shadows and is now entering the sacred space of the home suggests a progression and expansion of powers. By situating Reagan's anti-government rhetoric in the context of backlash politics (specifically against many of the social and progressive advances made in the preceding decades), it can be made evident that his proclamations tapped into similar desires for a reversal of history. In his inaugural address in 1981, Reagan declared that:

Our government has no power except that granted it by the people. It is time to check and reverse the growth of government, which shows signs of having grown beyond the consent of the governed. It is my intention to curb the size and influence of the Federal establishment and to demand recognition of the distinction between the powers granted to the Federal Government and those reserved to the States or to the people.⁹⁸

Given the historical context of the film's release, a discursive confluence emerges whereby his inaugural assertion that government has grown too large partially overlaps with countercultural discourses of the 1960s and 1970s characterized by their rejection of systematic oppression and mandated societal conformity. Douglas Kellner notes:

98 Ronald Reagan, "First Inaugural Address" (January 20, 1981).

Reaganism should be seen as revolutionary conservatism with a strong component of radical conservative individualism and activism, and that this fits in with *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, *Superman*, *Conan* and other films and television series which utilize individualist heroes who are anti-state and who are a repository of conservative values. (*Media Culture* 66)

This rhetorical synthesis allows for a realignment of existing ideological attitudes in a post–New Deal environment along the lines of anti-statist sentiments (Bimes 11) as common denominators for utopian cultural fantasies. In the film, these denominators are carefully gauged to allow both white, middle-class liberals and conservatives to acknowledge the suggested threat of statism to childlike utopias (as represented by the toy train in the living room and E.T.’s innocent collecting of plants). This imagery is heavily structured by myths of “simpler times” during which government appeared “small” (Troy, *The Reagan Revolution* 20–30). This plays into widespread sentiments among baby boomers, who were usually responsible for making movie-viewing decisions for their kids in the 1980s. As the movie goes on, the suggested remedy to “big-government” excesses comes in the form of a white, male counter-offensive of neoliberal individualism. The social functioning of the fable as a narrative form in which cuddly animals “teach” their audience about “good versus bad” can now be paralleled with the instructive character of the media spectacle. Due to its market-saturation strategy, *E.T.* is permeated by a cross-generational appeal whereby the experience of infantilized “innocence” offers both images of mythical nostalgia and ideals of opposition to a corrupted government (Piqueras Fraile 33).

The regression to the infantile plays an important role in the conflict between the protagonists and the antagonists. While Elliott, his siblings, and his friends are immersed in a romanticized epistemology that draws inspiration from escapist pop culture items (such as the *Star Wars* figures that Elliott introduces to E.T.), the adults inhabit a world marked by calculated pragmatism and an avoidance of wonder or mystery. For instance, Mary attempts to dissuade the children from investigating the strange noises that Elliott has heard in the backyard. Elliott’s teacher (another government employee) tries to reassert his authority after Elliott liberates a number of frogs who were about to be dissected in a biology class. All of these contrasts are sharpened by the arrival of the government, which enters the film as the ultimate rational and patronizing force. These markedly white, middle-class imaginations of childlike innocence are conducive to framing a rejection of the complexities of modern-day government as an innate and natural tendency of the human condition. In his analysis of *E.T.*, Robin Wood highlights the “use of the infantile as escape from

an adult world perceived as irredeemably corrupt, or at least bewilderingly problematic” (156).

Against the socio-historical backdrop of Reagan’s election victory in 1981, this use of the infantile can be seen as a cultural negotiation strategy to psychologically disconnect the US societal mainstream from the political entanglements of the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, the Oil Crisis, and the Iranian hostage crisis. Through regressing to the infantile, these national traumas can be attributed to the work of uninspired, “grown-up” bureaucrats. The government’s fierce entry into the lives of Elliott and E.T. is cast as the newest manifestation of bureaucratic arrogance. As Andrew Britton has pointed out, however, the regression to the infantile and the solipsistic is highly ideological in a context of capitalist cultural production (100), as it espouses the celebration of an “ideology of entertainment,” thereby stifling or appropriating impulses of resistance. Hence, it can be extrapolated that behind the veil of the valiant struggle of suburban children against government agencies, there lurks a politics of escapism that is highly supportive of the neoliberal projects launched by the Reagan administration in the 1980s. It is through the celebration of the childlike/childish that *E.T.* is at its most ideological. The final quarter of the movie negotiates the generational gap by introducing the character “Keys,” who is one of the principal government agents in the movie.

Keys is instrumental in giving the government a more human face as he builds a rapport with Elliott by outlining the benign intentions of the operation of which he is part. In a scene in the oxygen tent, Keys reassures Elliott—who is lying on a bed next to E.T.—that their main goal is to ensure the alien’s survival (at 01:22.37):⁹⁹

KEYS: Elliott, he came to me, too. I’ve been wishing for this since I was 10 years old.

I don’t want him to die. What can we do that we’re not already doing?

ELLIOTT: He needs to go home. He’s calling his people ... and I don’t know where they are. He needs to go home.

This exchange re-inscribes the government into the filmic narrative as not motivated by nefarious purposes or purely selfish impulses. The following scene shows a group of doctors and nurses frantically trying to save E.T.’s life as his situation suddenly deteriorates on the hospital bed. The fast-paced exchange of medical jargon and the high-tech equipment used on the alien creates an

99 Indicated times for movie dialogues refer to the Blu-Ray edition of the film in question throughout this book.

impression of highly educated professionals who treat the situation as a technical matter (at 01:26:27):

1ST DOCTOR: No blood pressure.

2ND DOCTOR: He’s got no pulse or respiration. We can’t get a pulse or blood pressure.

3RD DOCTOR: He’s not breathing.

ELLIOTT: Leave him alone! You’re killing him! Leave him alone!

2ND DOCTOR: Let’s move it!

3RD DOCTOR: Get the boy out.

ELLIOTT: Stop it! You’re killing him! You’re killing him! You’re killing him! You’re killing him! You’re killing him! He came to me!¹⁰⁰

Like other representatives of the government, the doctors are virtually indistinguishable from another. All of them wear the same type of hospital lab coat and surgical mask and their faces are partially obscured by the masks. The camera intermittently focuses on E.T. lying on the operating table. In a close-up from a high-angle (i.e. taking the doctor’s point of view), his devastating condition becomes clearly visible. He is surrounded by at least five doctors, one of whom is placing his hand over E.T.’s mouth, presumably in order to ascertain whether he is still breathing. When Elliott starts yelling at the doctors, demanding that they leave E.T. alone, the camera switches to a low-angle view at the level of the operating table. The orders of the 3rd doctor, who now has a towering appearance in the shot, to remove Elliott from the room gain visual authority. The point of view in this shot is practically identical to that of Elliott, who is lying on a bed next to E.T. A tracking shot then follows Elliott as he is rolled away from the alien, giving the audience the impression that they are being evicted with the boy. Thereby, the scene makes it clear that the viewer’s sympathies should lie with Elliott and his protesting against the elitist over-doctoring that is taking place. Again, government representatives remain elusive, unresponsive, and patronizing, despite their manifest dedication to saving E.T.’s life.

Within the context of Reagan’s anti-government rhetoric of the early 1980s, these discourses of benevolent intentions are insufficient to absolve the bureaucracy from its status as antagonist. Building on Lakoff’s “strict father” model,

100 Taking Elliott’s language at face value, it is possible to construe both Reagan and E.T. as sharing the distinction of having survived almost being killed (in Reagan’s case, the assassination attempt in 1981). Just like E.T., Reagan woke up on the operating table to the relief of much of the nation. Susan Jeffords has described Reagan’s survival in relation to her concept of the “hard body”: “[Surviving] the assassination was taken not only as a personal triumph for Reagan but a national one as well” (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 30).

an over-nurturing government appears to be detrimental to the health and well-being of society. Therefore, this scene of “helicopter-parenting” doctors comfortably accords with Reagan’s portrayal of the Carter administration in his election eve address in 1980: “And many Americans today, just as they did 200 years ago, feel burdened, stifled and sometimes even oppressed by government that has grown too large, too bureaucratic, too wasteful, too unresponsive, too uncaring about people and their problems.”¹⁰¹

Just like the agents in *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial*, the Carter administration is characterized as a vast apparatus of anonymous faces with no real connection to the experience and everyday life of middle-class families. Reagan contends that social programs have not yielded productive outcomes and are now about to risk the very survival of the nation. In the movie, this “patronizing attitude” is accentuated by the inaccessible medical terminology of the doctors, which adds a layer of anti-intellectualism to the scene.¹⁰² “Big government liberalism” is thereby associated with university education on a socio-cultural level. This can foster the impression that Elliott’s seemingly non-ideological “childlike intuition” is more representative of the will of the people and thus more democratic. Again, government representatives become emblematic of a dystopian decline in mythical white, masculine strength and individual entrepreneurialism, which, according to Reagan, were the driving engine of the nation. This lamentation of the state of the government also contains echoes of the Puritan jeremiad. In his discussion of the use of the puritanical jeremiad in presidential rhetoric, David C. Bailey highlights how

Reagan adapted the traditionally judgmental and moralistic character of the Puritan rhetorical form to make it far more palatable to a 1980s American audience. The economy was in trouble not because the people had sinned, but because they had been led astray by the false prophets of collectivism. (20)

As in the film, seemingly “un-American” discourses have inserted themselves into the white mainstream of the United States. They are now “exorcized” through a regress to mythical images of childhood and the restoration of cultural and political discourses that prevailed before the liberal interventions of the New Deal and 1960s countercultures. Within the movie, this restoration

101 Ronald Reagan, “Election Eve Address: A Vision for America” (November 3, 1980).

102 Reagan referred to Carter as a “nerd” during the 1980 campaign (Rohan Tomer, “A Brief History of American Anti-Intellectualism,” *The Odyssey* (May 31, 2016). Accessed December 9, 2018: <<https://www.theodysseyonline.com/brief-history-american-anti-intellectualism>>).

is narratively intertwined with the restoration of the family. Only through re-centering white male individualism can the dystopian future of collectivism be averted, the family reunited, and the non-threatening Other safely returned to its home planet.

The Restoration of the Father through White, Male, Middle-Class Individualism

Themes of reuniting the family and restoring white masculinity were prominent in the early blockbuster cycle of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The preceding metatexts of second-wave feminism and the coming of age of the baby-boomer generation were giving way to manifestations of beleaguered patriarchal families or already broken-up families without a dominant male figure. In these right-wing fantasies, the redemption of the family is premised on the reinstatement of traditional father figures, who not only implement heteronormativity and “law and order,” but also a capitalist understanding of individualism. This is often juxtaposed with an overbearing, and yet inept, bureaucracy (Wood 152–155). These themes also permeate Reagan’s political rhetoric in the 1970s and 1980s, which frequently tied neoliberal axioms to myths of a lost entrepreneurial spirit that needed rekindling (Weiler and Pearce 237–239). This hidden attack on the welfare state was often presented in the language of popular cinematic metaphors that portrayed single, white, hard-bodied males as enforcers of virtue.¹⁰³

E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial offers a detailed commentary on the state of the suburban family in the early 1980s. The “missing father” embeds the film in a textual relationship with the socially conservative realignment of the 1980s, as well as the neoliberal projects launched during the Carter administration and brought to fruition during the Reagan era. Both reactionary thrusts were still nascent and far from ascendant in 1982, when the film was released, which makes it important to examine how the textual relationship between *E.T.* and Reaganite visions of family and capitalism interact with one another. Robin Wood notes:

103 For example, when Reagan made a public announcement at the 1985 American Business Conference, declaring his opposition to the congressional tax plan: “I have my veto pen drawn and ready for any tax increase that Congress might even think of sending up. And I have only one thing to say to the tax increasers. Go ahead—make my day” (Church). The last line is clearly a quotation from *Dirty Harry* (1971), in which Clint Eastwood portrays a hardboiled, hyper-masculine police inspector.

[T]he 80s have seen the development (or in many cases, the resurrection) of a number of strategies for coping with (the restoration of the father). There is the plot about the liberated woman who proves she's just as good as the man but then discovers that this doesn't make her happy and that what she really wanted all the time was to serve him. [...] The corollary of this is the plot that suggests that men, if need arises, can fill the woman's role just as well if not better (*Kramer vs Kramer, Author! Author!, Mr. Mom*). (152–153)

Through the re-emergence of a dominant masculinity vis-à-vis a feminism that is depicted as “exhausting” and “exhausted,” it is possible to identify narrative threads that reassert discourses of entrepreneurialism and capitalist innovation as male-centered strategies for a cinematic “restoration of the family.” The unleashing of this type of individualism virtually necessitates a “limited government,” which makes the welfare state and bureaucracy feasible targets for the Hollywood blockbuster imagination.

Within the movie, the family plays a central role early on. In accordance with Robin Wood's statements on the “faux-liberated woman of the 80s,” *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* reproduces a sheen of feminist awareness by presenting the mother, Mary, as trapped within the demands of traditional motherhood. She serves as replacement father and has a professional job that allows her to act as the breadwinner. Mary is consistently portrayed as unable to exert “effective authority” in various scenes and she often appears overburdened with the responsibilities of single parenting. This is evident in the establishing scene in which the family is first introduced. Mary is the only adult and female present as her teenage son Michael plays a round of a card game with his male friends. Simultaneously, Elliott is inspecting the first signs of E.T. in the backyard. In her first exchange with the card-playing group, Mary seems to be unacquainted with the realities of her children's lives (10:48):

TYLER: All's you get is those 40-year-olds.

MARY: How do you win this game?

STEVE: It's like life. You don't win at life.

GREG: Money helps.

(In the following shot, Elliott storms into the dining room.)

ELLIOTT: Mom! There's something out ...

MIKE: Where's the pizza?

ELLIOTT: There's something out there! In the toolshed. It threw the ball at me. Quiet! Nobody go out there.

(The teenagers get up from the table and rush toward the backyard.)

MARY: Stop. Now, you guys stay right here.

MIKE: You stay here, Mom. We'll check it out.

MARY: And put those knives back!

(The teenagers proceed to go outside.)

Early on, Mary is depicted as struggling in her mission to both connect with and establish authority over a group of male adolescents—referencing the lack of a traditional father figure. This is underlined through the *mise-en-scène*: Mary is positioned outside the range of a low-hanging ceiling lamp that hovers over the boys at the dining table. In this American shot, the camera is leveled at the height of the boys' faces. This gives Mary a towering appearance—signaling her oscillation between authority and irrelevance. This changes when Elliott comes running into the room and advances right into the lit space under the lamp. He is standing up, whereas the other boys remain seated, giving him a visually superior position. Mary, however, remains in the background while Elliott passionately instructs everyone not to go out there. The boys' decision to go out and investigate the noise in the backyard leads to a remark that reinforces female domesticity and dependence on males for physical safety.

In this scene, several discursive patterns underline Robin Wood's observations on how the restoration of the father was structured in 1980s Hollywood cinema. The character of Mary is arguably informed by notions of second-wave feminist independence and self-reliance.¹⁰⁴ She articulates her desire to understand a card game played only by boys, demonstrating her willingness to enter a space that is connoted as male. However, the design of the scene and the narrative unfolding of an emergent potential threat quickly relegate her to the role of a supporting character, who is eclipsed by a precocious and enterprising young boy who dared to venture into a backyard in the hope of finding the alien he suspects is there.

Elliott, in contrast to his mother, emerges as a potential masculine law-giver through his instruction that nobody leave the building, echoing George

104 Chris Maltezos voices this point of view in his analysis of the return of the 1950s nuclear family in 1980s films: “Mary’s character represents a new 1980s mother that breaks the 1950s myth of domestic housewife. She is emotionally distant due to time constraints rather than selfishness, a contrast to the neglectful mothers in *Kramer vs. Kramer* and *Ordinary People*. Mary displays strong connection to her children and valiantly attempts to provide the emotional assurance and time needed. Spielberg and Wallace effectively portray Mary as a divorced mother struggling to work and spend time with her children” (49–50).

Lakoff's concept of the conservative "strict father" who "protects the family in the dangerous world" (*Elephant 7*). This protection comes in the form of strict paternal authority derived from the father's supposedly appropriate discernment of "right" and "wrong." Performing within this framework of gendered self-discipline is indicative of the ability to adequately pursue one's own self-interest and thereby succeed in the marketplace. Elliott may be unsuccessful in dissuading his peers from leaving the building, but the audience is aware of his frightening initial encounter with E.T. The boy is thereby constructed as having a proper appreciation of potential dangers in two ways: Firstly, in the aftermath of his first encounter with E.T. and, secondly, in his suspicions regarding a government agent whom he spots in the forest while searching for the alien. Elliott does not attempt to contact the agent or report his sightings to him. Instead, he turns around quickly, jumps on his bicycle, and flees the scene. Apparently, his intuition tells him that the men foraging through the woods are not to be trusted. Although Elliott lacks authority over his peers and is unaware of E.T.'s harmlessness, he does exhibit the proper capitalist instincts to rely on his own initiative rather than turn to the state for help.

Against the backdrop of Reagan's "small-government" rhetoric, several discourses of self-reliance and masculine assertion in a neoliberal, post-industrial setting emerge within the film. Jeffords remarks in her analysis of masculinity in *The Terminator* movies that

in a slick rewriting of the gender-marked division between the public and the private, the *Terminator* films offer male viewers an alternative to the declining workplace and national structure of sources as masculine authority and power—the world of the family. It is here, this logic suggests, that men can regain a sense of masculine power without having to confront or suggest alterations in the economic social system that has led to their feelings of deprivation. (*Hard Bodies 70*)

Similar debates are also addressed in *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* as the film touches upon a gendered sense of public versus private, industrial versus service society, and self-reliant individualism versus interdependence. In a telling scene at the dining table, the family has a conversation about how to proceed after Elliott maintains that he has seen the alien in a crop field with his own eyes. His mother and his brother call his sighting into question (at 17:40):

ELLIOTT: Dad would believe me.

MARY: Maybe you ought to call your father and tell him about it.

ELLIOTT: I can't. He's in Mexico with Sally.

GERTIE: Where’s Mexico?

MARY: Excuse me. (*She leaves the table and walks to the window.*) If you ever see it again, whatever it is, don’t touch it, just call me and we’ll have somebody come and take it away.

GERTIE: Like the dogcatcher?

ELLIOTT: But they’ll give it a lobotomy or do experiments on it or something.

Through the initial mise-en-scène, Elliott and Gertie are placed in the left third of the screen, with Michael and Mary positioned in the opposing right third. Each party thereby occupies a space within a golden ratio. However, Mary and Michael are visibly taller and assume a clearly more upright physical stance. Elliott appears beleaguered, as he looks down while stating faintly that his father would have believed him. The absence of the father lingers in the subconsciousness of the family like an Oedipal subtext. This creates an awkward silence when evoked by the younger members of the family. It is curious that the boy, who possesses seemingly childlike beliefs, remembers the absent father and emphasizes that he would concur with his beliefs. This suggests not only that Elliott used to have a trusting bond with this father, but also that the lost paternal figure was capable of absorbing and upholding the dreams of the white, male individual. When reading the family as a metaphor for the nation, a picture emerges in which the patriarchal “father of the nation” is legitimized through his discursive functioning as an institution that sanctifies and unleashes the mythical creative qualities of male individualism (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 15; Carroll 231).¹⁰⁵ The restoration of the national father is therefore embedded in ideological patterns that mark the father-son relationship as one in which capitalist individualism is considered sacrosanct and in line with the goals of the administration.

In this context, it is worth quoting a passage from Reagan’s inaugural address that embraces the legitimizing function of discourses on “heroic entrepreneurialism” for neoliberal projects that have, in fact, squashed the aspirations of a large number of working- and middle-class families:

105 As opposed to the “stifling” or “belittling” influence that the supposedly overly bureaucratic Carter administration had exerted in the Reaganite view (Shogan 3–4). For example, in May 1980, Reagan described Jimmy Carter’s newly formed Department of Education as a “Bureaucratic Boondoggle” (“Reagan Calls Department of Education ‘Bureaucratic Boondoggle,’” *NBC News* (May 4, 1980), NBC Universal. Accessed December 9, 2018: <<https://archives.nbclearn.com/portal/site/k-12/browse/?cuecard=3552>>).

We have every right to dream heroic dreams. Those who say that we're in a time when there are not heroes, they just don't know where to look. [...] Your dreams, your hopes, your goals are going to be the dreams, the hopes, and the goals of this administration, so help me God.¹⁰⁶

In light of Elliott's positioning as the one who "has dreams" in this scene, it is easy to imagine how Reagan's announcement that a government should foster dreams aligns with Elliott's belief that his father would concur with him. The fact that the government attempts to stifle Elliott's hope to get to know and eventually befriend the alien indicates its dystopian and also improperly masculine nature. This is echoed by Mary and Michael, who doubt Elliott's version of the story, thereby signifying their unsuitability to serve as "substitute fathers." Mary's deference to socially interdependent services in the form of a "dog-catcher" adds a layer of mythical self-reliance vis-à-vis the comforts of a post-industrial service society. In his dissertation, David Alexander Smith outlines the premises of early 1980s nostalgia for a "pioneering individualism" that eschewed dependence on service providers, despite the unfolding realities of the post-industrial age:

Reagan's successful political career was based in large part on a longing that many Americans had for the "good old days." His ideas about pioneering individualism, mobility and personal autonomy struck a responsive chord with many Americans—even though they seemed hardly fitting in a highly industrialized and increasingly urbanized twentieth century society. [...] Reagan was, in many respects, a nineteenth-century man who still preached the unlikely conservative combination of "rugged" individualism along with a constant haranguing for the establishment of "law and order." (307–308)¹⁰⁷

Against this backdrop, the scene serves as a prism for the internal contradictions of middle-class suburban existence in a service society. Elliott's unease regarding his mother's proposals evoke male, blue-collar anxieties regarding

106 Ronald Reagan, "First Inaugural Address" (January 20, 1981).

107 While Smith is correct in his assessment that a significant portion of the US electorate was motivated by a desired return to a mythical past to vote for Reagan in 1980, it is important to add that the supposed previous prosperity and individualism were barely available to people outside of certain gendered, racialized, and socioeconomic categories. In fact, the "unlikely combination" of "rugged individualism" and "law and order" fits in well within conservative narratives and was highly influential throughout the twentieth century (from Barry Goldwater to Richard Nixon and William F. Buckley).

economic displacement in the post-industrial climate (Buijs 82). Tom Harman notes that

the decisive shift from large-scale industrial economies to ones based upon information and services taking place since the 1970s, the end of the “job for life” and the scaling back of the family wage, placed the traditional role of men as breadwinner and patriarch under threat. (6)

The invocation of the service sector mirrors a discomfoting reality in which the traditional nuclear family becomes increasingly dependent on external power structures, which Elliott identifies as congruent with the apparent goals of the bureaucracy (“But they’ll give it a lobotomy or do experiments on it or something”). Withdrawing from self-reliant initiative is therefore an implicit concession to “big government” and simultaneously a surrender to the realities of the post-industrial society that threatens masculine authority.

In this scene, Mary is in a shadowy corner of the kitchen and is shown from behind as she tells the children to avoid the creature and call someone else to deal with it. She is looking down, not facing any of the children, and her tone is slightly suggestive of sobbing. While this tone can be attributed to her being upset about being reminded that her husband left her, her reaction reveals that she is inclined to seek anonymous, external assistance rather than consider any possible return of the father. The low lighting establishes a visually dark atmosphere for her verbal statement. In contrast, Elliott, sitting at the kitchen table, is shown in full three-point lighting. Thus, the cinematography of this scene makes it clear that it is Elliott’s invocation of the father that deserves sympathy and consideration.

Of further interest in terms of power relations is the reference to “Mexico.” Little sister Gertie’s lack of knowledge about Mexico’s location and the ensuing awkward silence at the dinner table frame “Mexico” as referential point for the Other that resides outside of the known comfort of suburbia. Not only did the father leave the family and the mother behind; he is now removed from the society that is known to all. The “pitfalls of postmodern society” (Vémola 16)—in this case presumably divorce—thereby become associated with a frequently racialized and otherized locale. This can be read, for instance, as a racist rebuke of the liberalism of the 1960s and 1970s (and its alleged “big-government” political regime), which has allegedly given greater prominence to the Other and is now threatening the heteronormative nuclear family. This would play into the dog-whistle racism of the Reagan campaign in 1980, which sought to leverage

white working-class frustration and direct it toward immigrants and culture war issues (Philpot 47–48).¹⁰⁸

However, a textual reading based on Douglas Kellner's "critical theory of globalization" ("Theorizing Globalization" 6) allows for an interpretation of the scene in terms of mass media resistance to the effects of Reaganite neoliberal policies. As Mary points out in the same conversation, the family father himself dislikes "Mexico," but is drawn there by his pursuit of a selfish motive (presumably a new relationship with "Sally"). This offers a potential subtle critique of neoliberal globalization. It was in the 1970s and 1980s that large manufacturers in the United States began the process of relocating production and jobs to Mexico and other Latin American countries—creating widespread feelings of social and economic abandonment in the United States. This can be interpreted as an early rebuke of the "free-trade policies" that the Reagan administration (and successive administrations) strongly championed (Steger and Roy 21–49). *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* thereby functions as a site for negotiating economic and social anxieties that are specific to a globalizing and post-industrial consumption society.

The character of E.T. is instrumental in negotiating the absence of the father and the role of individualism in the face of an antagonist bureaucracy. In his comparison of the movies *E.T.* and *Poltergeist*, Kellner describes how

E.T. presents an optimistic and charming allegory of suburban middle-class life, *Poltergeist* presents its shadow-side and nightmares in a story where the Other, the Alien, is not a friendly extra-terrestrial who comes from outside the society to help it, but threateningly emerges from within the socio-economic system and social subconscious ... *E.T.* is Spielberg's childlike fantasy of hope. (*Media Culture* 127–128)

In this context, it is vital to examine how E.T. "helps" the family. Through several key scenes, a pattern emerges whereby the alien functions as a figure of reconciliation and (paternal) guidance for Elliott and the rest of the family. His influence transforms the previously lonely and insecure Elliott into a more assertive and determined character who proves himself to be adept at using different skills to outsmart the government. The emotional bond that the alien and Elliott share is shaped by discourses that aim at re-establishing the family

108 Tasha Philpot notes that "[t]he Reagan rhetoric surrounding tax issues became as racialized as the debate over school desegregation and affirmative action [...] The Reagan Democrats no longer saw their economic position as a reason to politically coalesce with blacks. Rather, their position put them in direct competition with African Americans" (47–48).

through the performance of mythical visions of a dominant masculinity and the simultaneous rejection of what is shown to be an excessive, but ineffective, bureaucracy.

This is exemplified by the “frog-dissecting scene” midway through the film. In this episode, Elliott is in a classroom in his school, presumably participating in a biology class. The teacher, whose face is never shown, instructs the students in a rather monotonous voice on how to perform a vasectomy on live frogs. Simultaneously, E.T. is sitting at home in front of the TV set, flicking through different channels. Elliott, who is visibly uneasy with the assigned task, begins to experience a telepathic connection with E.T.¹⁰⁹ The previously calm boy suddenly starts liberating the frogs. What ensues is general chaos in the classroom, with Elliott openly defying the teacher trying to regain control. Eventually, Elliott succeeds in wrestling himself free from his teacher’s grasp on his arm.

At the same time, E.T. is shown to be watching a scene from the 1952 movie *The Quiet Man* in which actor John Wayne violently grabs Maureen O’Hara and forces a kiss on her (Kellner, *Media Culture* 153). This display of toxic masculinity is paralleled in the school as Elliott takes hold of a female classmate, steps on the back of a boy who is crawling on the floor, and forces a kiss on the girl’s mouth in a similar fashion. An “Old Hollywood”-style film score accompanies the scene and—at home—E.T. is moved to tears by what has happened on the screen. His subconscious influence on Elliott is clearly informed by his consumption of the patriarchal aesthetics of mid-twentieth-century US-American mass media. Through his influence, E.T. puts Elliott on a path of masculine individualism, which sees Elliott rebelling against government authority and establishing a dominant relationship over the female gender.¹¹⁰

This scene, therefore, presents a confluence of socio-cultural discourses that pervaded much of Reagan’s political rhetoric and public image in the early 1980s. The renewed exercise of cultural hegemony is visually tied to mythical images of a pre-1960s societal setup, suggesting that the last adequate “father figure”

109 Later in the movie, Elliott’s brother Michael remarks to an investigating scientist that Elliott “feels E.T.’s feelings.” The union between the alien and the boy is also evident when they are both on operating tables.

110 It should be mentioned that Elliott’s resistance to dissecting frogs also makes reference to environmentalist discourses that have made their way into popular images. Thus, Elliott’s rebellion exhibits a degree of social progressivism. Yet, the restoration of the family along patriarchal lines arguably remains in the foreground, as evidenced by the power relations Elliott establishes in relation to his female classmate.

would have been in the mold of John Wayne. The implications of harking back to a 1950s pop cultural discourse place this scene in an interrelationship with baby boomer nostalgia in the 1980s and the escapist and consumerist subtexts of “Reaganite utopia.”¹¹¹ The reunification of the family is thereby predicated on a recourse to an easily accessible, mass media imagination of masculinity and the assertion of an individualist, white, male centrality that has allegedly been stifled by a drab and uninspiring bureaucracy.¹¹² This is linked to the fact that, unlike previous conservative presidential candidates, Reagan occupied a both a pop cultural and political space. His public persona was always infused with mass media-ready associations with mid-1950s movie aesthetics, as Michael D. Dwyer explains:

[T]he implications of this were not limited to the entertainment industry. Nostalgia for the Fifties was a key cultural strategy in the rise of neoconservatism in the 1970s and 1980s, and no figure in American political life embodied such nostalgia more than President Ronald Reagan. David Marcus argues that Reagan’s ability to invoke the past offered the neoconservative political movement “an overarching sense of a national return to an earlier age after a period of American decline” and the opportunity to create “media accounts of the historical meanings of the 1950s”. (1)

As noted in Chapter 2, the themes of 1950s nostalgia and escapism recurred in Reagan’s construction of historical myths. These myths were summarized in Reagan’s election eve address in 1980, in which he described the 1960s and 1970s as “the hard years.” In the context of backlash politics—with Reagan’s rhetoric presenting a pushback strategy against New Deal and social liberalism—the seemingly depoliticized veneer of mythical images is operative in the nostalgic evocation of the 1950s (Barthes 142–145). Although Kellner puts forward an interpretation of the movie as the often-noted Spielbergian child-like fantasy of hope (*Media Culture* 128), a dissection of the filmic recourse to the 1950s reveals its highly detailed revisionism and implications for the present-day United States. Like Reagan’s election eve speech, the movie paints a visual picture of the past. The situation depicted is highly particular and specific, yet it is presented as normality (according to Reagan, the “hard years” came after the 1950s). Thus, it is curious that E.T.’s flicking through the highly

111 Andrew Britton echoes Herbert Marcuse’s view that utopianism is grounded in recollection (106–107).

112 In the context of the rise of neoliberalism, the frequent appeals to pre-1960s white/male hegemony by US conservatives conveniently leave out the ascendancy of New Deal liberalism and the associated welfare capitalism of the day.



Figure 5: “Be good.” Little Gertie (portrayed by Drew Barrymore) has learned her lesson in how to reunite the Reagan-era family.

diverse cable TV landscape of the early 1980s confronts him with a surprisingly large amount of 1940s and 1950s entertainment, ranging from John Wayne’s hard-boiled fare in *The Quiet Man* (1952) to golden-age *Tom & Jerry* cartoons and a scene from the 1955 space-invasion B-movie *The Island Earth*. The only contemporary piece of entertainment that he encounters is a commercial for a telephone service provider, offering new long-distance options for its customers. On television, the Reaganite synthesis between neoliberal consumption and 1950s values is fully visualized.

E.T.’s final scene in the movie concludes the restoration of the father. Before he enters the spaceship to leave planet Earth, the children bid him farewell. Gertie sobbingly declares: “I just wanted to say goodbye.” E.T. replies in a solemn, but also authoritative voice: “Be good.” In the shot, the alien fills roughly two-thirds of the frame, whereas Gertie resides in the left side of it. The key light falls on E.T.’s back and E.T. is much more illuminated than the girl (see Figure 5). Shortly afterwards, this goodbye is juxtaposed with the way in which E.T. and Elliott part ways—with the alien using his “magic touch” on Elliott one more time. Moreover, the amount of visual space the two interlocutors are given is more equal, with the boy being filmed from a much lower angle. Robin Wood draws a parallel between this scene and the ending of the 1977 Spielberg movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*:

The [mother's] sole objective is to regain her child [...]. No suggestion is made that she might go off on the spaceship or even that she might want to. The end of *E.T.* offers the precise complement to this: the Extra-Terrestrial transmits his wisdom and powers to the male child, Elliott, by applying a finger to his forehead, then instructs the little girl to "be good": like Princess Leia, she will never inherit the Force. (157)

This scene underscores the fable-like character of the film: The cuddly, anthropomorphic alien has succeeded in conveying a lesson in "good behavior" to children and exposed the corruption of governmental power (Ryan and Rossiter; Piqueras Fraile 33). However, *E.T.* does not provide his specific instruction to "be good" to either Michael or Elliott, cementing the highly patriarchal nature of *E.T.*'s reconciliation of the family. Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan see in this reconciliation a "reintegration of the broken ego (or family) through the fantasy of regression" (261). Kellner and Ryan opine that this takes place at a critical distance from the "adult world of harshness and competition."

Yet, reading this in relation to the family as a metaphor for the nation through the lens of Lakoff's "strict father" model (*Thinking Points* 50), it becomes plausible to infer how a socially conservative, capitalist utopia has become a reality. Through pushing back against "big government" and feminist advances into male spaces, the family appears to gain social stability, harmony, and newly found confidence, which translates into fitness for a capitalist economy (*Thinking Points* 60).¹¹³ For instance, Reagan explicitly tied the health of the family to an enterprising economy in his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention in 1980: "We cannot support our families unless there are jobs; and we cannot have jobs unless people have both money to invest and the faith to invest it."¹¹⁴ The wealth of the nation is mythically tied to the wealth of the "nuclear family," which—according to Reagan—can only thrive in a

113 Lakoff states that, according to the conservative vision, "[t]he profit motive creates efficiency in business. Government, lacking a profit motive, is inefficient and wasteful—and gets in the way of the market via regulation, taxation, unionization, and lawsuits" (*Thinking Points* 60). In this context, it is interesting that the movie presents a story line in which Elliott protests the capture of the alien and its subsequent treatment in a hospital by exclaiming, "He came to me! He came to me!" Rather than opting to grant *E.T.* his own voice (*E.T.* had begun to master the English language), Elliott expresses his objection in terms of his own private relationship with the alien. It does seem that the government is getting in the way of what could have been a fruitful opportunity for the family.

114 Ronald Reagan, "1980 Republican National Convention Acceptance Address" (July 17, 1980).

capitalist setting. The restoration of the family in *E.T.* treads a similar path. By the end of the film, Elliott and his exclusively white, male squad of friends have successfully outsmarted the government in a competition (an action-packed chase scene)¹¹⁵ and relegated all female characters to secondary roles. In addition, another sympathetic male authority figure emerges in the last third of the film: the character of “Keys.”

Keys assumes a father-like role when Elliott and E.T. are in the operating room. He is the only male adult in the film who is engaged in a meaningful dialogue with the boy. Moreover, his inclusion in the earlier scenes in the forest makes him a permanent figure in this tale. He strikes up a rapport with Elliott during their conversation, which distinguishes him from his fellow agents. Fully clad in a radiation suit, he gently taps on the plastic curtain behind which Elliott is lying on a bed, in quarantine. The boy wakes up and quickly recognizes him. Keys begins to explain his reason for searching the forest:

Elliott, I've been to the forest. [...] he came to me, too. I've been wishing for this since I was 10 years old. I don't want him to die. [...] Elliott, I don't think that he was left here intentionally. But his being here is a miracle, Elliott. It's a miracle ... and you did the best that anybody could do. I'm glad he met you first.

Within the framework of the seemingly depoliticized nature of “childish/child-like imagination” (Wood 156), Keys emerges as one of the few, if not the only, adult figure who validates and sympathizes with Elliott’s personal dream. In a calm and soothing voice, he reveals himself to be a dreamer of the same ilk. This sets him apart from the cold, rational, and faceless bureaucrats that permeate the film. Nevertheless, he operates within the general logic of the government, which has no nefarious intentions in relation to E.T., yet is incapable of providing him with the breathing room and individual freedom that he craves. It is possible to interpret Keys’ statement regarding him being glad that the alien met Elliott first as a tacit admission that this might be preferable to government intervention. Nevertheless, he considers it necessary for the government to step in now for reasons that are not clearly specified. By the end of the movie, Keys has given up his pursuit of E.T. and no other agents follow the alien and his friends into the forest, where the spacecraft is waiting. Keys—the most vocal and prominent government representative—thereby recedes and leaves the reconciliation of the family to E.T. and Elliott. Chris Maltezos observes, in his analysis of the ending of *E.T.*, that “[t]he family in *ET* can gradually accept

115 A few agents are armed with rifles, which introduces a subtext of violent conflict into the scene.

the devastating, emotional effects of a divorce and learn to bond together as a whole family, reaffirming the preservation of the nuclear family despite such obstacles as a missing parental figure” (55).

While the biological father may have gone missing and thereby left a void, the introduction of a symbolic father has spurred the young males in the family to reassert themselves against the allegedly dystopian paternal authority of the government and the sincere, yet structurally constrained and “inadequate” maternal authority of a working, single mother. Although *E.T.* leaves the planet in the end, the myth-laden lessons he has handed down are sure to reverberate among the family and the movie’s audience. The Reaganite project of turning back the clock to an imaginary past by appealing to escapist fantasies and reformulating this past to facilitate the dismantling of welfare liberalism is, at least, sympathetically portrayed in Spielberg’s most significant blockbuster of the 1980s.

This reading has revealed how the plot exhibits a narrative of pushback against forces that threaten the family and how this theme is intricately interconnected with Reagan’s rhetoric in the early 1980s. The overwhelming success and resonance of this film—not only in the United States—indicate a large demand for cultural fantasies of restoration and individual heroism within an emerging neoliberal framework.

The Pop Cultural Legacy of *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial*

As described in the introduction to this chapter, *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* remains notable among early Hollywood blockbusters for its unprecedented global success at the box office, as well as in terms of the sale of merchandise. This popularity carried on throughout the decade and has manifested itself in frequent cinematic and television reruns to this very day.¹¹⁶ MCA/Universal delayed the release of the film on VHS and LaserDisc in anticipation of higher profits. Fans and viewers had to wait until 1988. Yet, upon its release, 5 million tapes were sold, which generated an additional \$175 million in revenue (Prince, *A New Pot of Gold* 107). The consistently high demand for this science-fiction

116 The cinematic re-releases happened in 1985 and 2002 respectively (“*E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (Re-issue).” Re-issue information from [boxofficemojo.com](https://www.boxofficemojo.com). Accessed December 16, 2018: <<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=main&id=et85.htm>>; “*E.T.* (20th Anniversary).” Re-issue information from [boxofficemojo.com](https://www.boxofficemojo.com). Accessed December 16, 2018: <<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=et20th.htm>>).

tale of an alien befriending a suburban boy highlights the emotional and discursive resonance of the movie’s underlying premises not only in its release year of 1982, but also in subsequent years. Chris Jordan has placed this film in the context of Reagan-era “yuppie movies,” which celebrated the re-centralization of the suburban unclear family:

Incumbent in yuppie movies is the construction of suburbia as a self-sufficient community of individual families that is restored to stability through the elimination of the threat posed by external forces like the state, bureaucracy, science, rationalism and capitalist greed. [...] *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) and *Poltergeist* (1982), for example, predicate the family’s redemption on the assistance of Christ-like mediators. (72)

The observations made in this chapter are largely congruent with Jordan’s conclusions. Multiple undercurrents of pushback against emergent challengers have been discussed and contextualized in this chapter in light of Reagan’s neoliberal and patriarchal rhetoric on “small government.” However, through adding a phenomenological angle—in line with Kellner’s multi-perspectival approach—it is possible to investigate an extra-textual dimension that relates to the prominent theme of consumption within the film.

Since media spectacles “involve a commodification of previously non-colonized sectors of social life” (*Media Spectacle* 3), it is important to also discuss the intra-textual discourses of blockbuster movies and their dispersion as a mass media phenomenon. Jordan’s argument that capitalist greed is one of the threats that white suburbia must confront in order to reunify experiences a significant modification when analyzing the production and distribution of the film as a mass-merchandised media spectacle: Without the motivation of corporate profit for Universal Pictures, the film would arguably not have been produced and disseminated to the same degree.

This exposes an important parameter of the seemingly depoliticized nature of Reaganite entertainment, which Andrew Britton has described in the following terms: “Reaganite entertainment refers to itself in order to persuade us that it doesn’t refer outwards at all. It is, purely and simply, ‘entertainment’—and we all know it” (100). Accordingly, the subtle hints of anti-corporatism in the film need to be considered in relation to the consumerist underpinnings of its distribution in order to properly deconstruct them. It can be reasonably argued that, for instance, Elliott’s and/or E.T.’s ecological concerns and the semiotic relationships between bureaucracy and corporatism allow for a critique of big business. However, the fact that the tale inspired millions of families around the world to consume and buy the accompanying mass-produced

merchandise adds an undeniable layer of pro-corporatism to the film as a cultural phenomenon. This is textually reinforced through the heavy emphasis on consumption and merchandise within the film itself. It can therefore be argued that one of underlying reasons for the film's success is its ability to effectively negotiate the inherent contradictions of growing discomfort with neoliberalism and the simultaneous leveraging of nostalgic sentiments for contemporary consumption.¹¹⁷

This presents a crucial intersection with Reagan's political rhetoric and public persona in the early 1980s. The Reagan campaign composed a theme and public image that tapped into notions of the "family in crisis," while simultaneously selling a reconfigured brand of pro-corporate Goldwater conservatism.¹¹⁸ As in the case of the film's success, a large part of the target audience awarded this with resounding support at the ballot box in 1984. This was a time when conservative entertainment was ascendant in Hollywood (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 16).

Another significant element is the groundbreaking role of special effects as a "theater of reassurance" (Franklin 26). The use of highly modern computer-generated imagery contributed to the creation of an all-encompassing movie-going experience that served multiple aims for Hollywood studios (including signifying financial viability, but also distinguishing the movie from the competing TV and cable offerings in a bid to resurrect the Hollywood studios that had gone through dire straits in the 1960s and 1970s). The combination of capitalist restoration and increased spectacle was partially achieved through the pleasure of viewing awe-inspiring effects, as Robin Wood observes:

[T]he unemployment lines in the world outside may get longer and longer, we may even have to go out and join them, but if capitalism can still throw out entertainments like Star Wars (the films' very uselessness an aspect of the prodigality), the system must be basically OK, right? (148)

117 Daniel P. Franklin maintains that "[i]t doesn't make a lot of sense then, to assume [...] that studio executives, producers, actors, theater owners and everyone else involved in the film business are not capitalist." Franklin goes on to underline this by referring to Kellner, writing that "movies are neither liberal nor conservative but 'contested terrain, and that films can be interpreted as a struggle over representation of how to construct a social world and everyday life'" (Franklin 56; Kellner, *Film, Politics, and Ideology* 1).

118 Melinda Cooper points to the interconnection between Reagan's neoliberal rhetoric and "family values" (22).

The combination of reassurance and escapism in the special effects–driven spectacle of *E.T.* parallels Reagan’s constant performance as a reassuring, optimistic, and childlike character.¹¹⁹ The performance of these qualities serves as a structuring factor for the emergence of a reactionary and neoliberal cultural regime in the United States in the 1980s.

For major Hollywood studios, the success of *E.T.* was further vindication of the “Spielberg–Lucas” formula (Wood 144) of special effects–laden, high-concept spectacle movies that prioritize style and emotion over content and intellectual depth. This institutionalized the drive toward repetitive cycles of optimistic movies that favored (often infantile) solipsism. The shift from the auteurism of “New Hollywood” to the ascendancy of box office–oriented escapism was also evident in the way in which film critics’ opinions diverged from those of the viewership. Stephen Prince notes:

Once again, to the dismay of serious film critics, the popular audience made a clear statement about the importance of feeling and emotion in cinema and the enthusiastic narrative skill that Spielberg brought to his work. *E.T.*, in particular, touched viewers in a powerful manner that few filmmakers ever achieve in their work. Many critics distrusted the emotional response that Spielberg’s films evoked from their viewers [...] a schism prevailed between box-office success [...] and artistic success. (*A New Pot of Gold* 202)

The corporate mechanisms now did their part by constantly reinforcing a new view of merchandise-oriented cinema that banked on resurgent masculine patriotism and “free-market” fundamentalism. This spirit of optimistic consumption could thereby become much more deeply embedded in the fabric of US-American popular culture. This provided large numbers of young children in the United States (and worldwide) with a form of naturalized “bourgeois entertainment” (Britton 100). Spielberg followed *E.T.* with highly profitable sequels to his first *Indiana Jones* film and George Lucas released *Return of the Jedi* in 1983 in a bid to outperform the success of *E.T.*

Despite the early mixed reaction, many film critics ultimately warmed up to Spielberg’s sci-fi family tale, which currently holds a 98 percent positive rating on the aggregated review platform Rotten Tomatoes.¹²⁰ But it was not

119 John M. Jones and Robert C. Rowland note that one of the main functions Reagan’s weekly radio addresses were supposed to fulfill was “[r]eassuring the public” (257–281).

120 “E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial.” Aggregated film review info at rottentomatoes.com. Accessed January 8, 2019: <https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/et_the_extraterrestrial/>.

only the movie-going public across the world that wanted to deliver a verdict. On September 27, 1982, the film was also screened at the UN headquarters in New York City.¹²¹ This was part of a ceremony in which Spielberg received the UN Peace Medal—an award bestowed on those who have made significant efforts to promote peace around the world. Like William Palmer (308), UN officials interpreted the film as a fable of mutual understanding. This, however, sidelines the power dynamics that were discussed in this chapter.

As an aside: Reagan himself had a personal relationship with the film. He invited director Steven Spielberg to a special screening of *E.T.* in the White House on June 27, 1982. An anecdote arising from this screening played into the widespread perception of Reagan as a humorous “everyman” who had difficulties distinguishing between “fiction” and “reality.” In a 2011 interview, Spielberg relates the following story:

The room did laugh and then later on I’ll never forget my conversation with the President. He pulled me aside, he said ... and I can’t do Reagan. I wish I could do that breathy, wonderful voice of his ... And Nancy Reagan was standing right next to him and the President said to me, “I only have one criticism about your movie,” and I said “What’s that?” He said, “How long were the end credits?” I said, “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe three, three and a half minutes?” He said, “In my day, when I was an actor, our end credits were maybe 15 seconds long.”¹²²

Reagan’s reference to the end credits mirror the movie’s invocation of a mid-twentieth-century aesthetic. Against this backdrop, Reagan’s comment seems to “double down” on the mythical connotations of a “simpler time.”

As outlined in the section on the production background, *E.T.* also proved instrumental in establishing product placement as a new mode of advertising in the film industry. Subsequent blockbusters, such as the *Back to the Future* trilogy or the *Transformers* franchise, made even greater use of this intertwining of film and advertisement. This facilitated further integration of corporate distribution structures into filmmaking in subsequent decades (Walton 70–77). However, not all attempts to ride the wave of success created by *E.T.* resulted in profits. An infamous, *E.T.*-based video game produced by Atari, Inc. for the Atari 2600 proved to be a such a financially disastrous endeavor that it is sometimes credited with contributing to the North American video game

121 “U.N. Finds E.T. O.K.,” *The Twilight Zone Magazine*, February 1983.

122 Germain Lussier, “Steven Spielberg Teases ‘Jaws’ Sequel Scene In New Interview,” slashfilm.com (June 24, 2011). Accessed December 9, 2018: <<http://www.slashfilm.com/steven-spielberg-teases-jaws-sequel-scene-interview/>>.

crash of 1983—the industry’s first serious recession (Montfort and Bogost 76). The story has entered US-American folklore and even urban legends for two reasons: the apparently weak design of the video game (which was developed within five weeks in order to release it before Christmas) and the fact that hundreds of thousands of cartridges were secretly buried in a landfill outside of Alamogordo, New Mexico.¹²³ The widespread presence of *E.T.* as a pop cultural icon had penetrated not only various companies, industries, and consumption trends, but even subterranean US-American society—literally and metaphorically. In 2014, the Smithsonian Institution decided to add an excavated video game cartridge to their collection.¹²⁴ Allegorically, it can be stated that, after being abandoned in the barren hinterland for the second time, *E.T.* had again returned home into popular consciousness.

Ultimately, the film’s success resulted in an instructive public spectacle, which revealed a large demand for narratives that privileged style and emotional appeal over complex and gritty analyses of the contradictions of US-American society (Wood 44). The popularity of the slick, music video–inflected high-concept style of cinematic storytelling also found its parallels in the world of politics. Full-time spin doctors and PR specialists began to develop “permanent campaigns” that were executed by more and more media-savvy and sound-bite–oriented politicians (Bunch 226). Hollywood came to recognize the compatibility of these public personas with the high-concept mode and started taking cues from popular politicians as well. One such figure was the forty-second president, Bill Clinton, who mirrored Reagan’s image and style in critical ways. The next chapter will, therefore, analyze the Reaganite and Clintonite echoes that can be found in one of the highest-grossing movie spectacles of the 1990s, a tale that also involved aliens landing on Earth: *Independence Day*.

123 Emru Townsend, “The 10 Worst Games of All Time,” *PC World* (October 23, 2006). Accessed December 16, 2018: <<<https://www.pcworld.com/article/127579/article.html?page=2>>>.

124 Drew Robarge, “From Landfill to Smithsonian collections: ‘E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial’ Atari 2600 game,” *O Say Can You See—Stories from the National Museum of American History* (December 15, 2014). Accessed December 9, 2018: <<http://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/landfill-smithsonian-collections-et-extra-terrestrial-atari-2600-game>>.

Chapter 4 The Recycling of Reagan's Cold War Rhetoric in *Independence Day*

Introduction and Chapter Overview

The 1996 science fiction–action blockbuster *Independence Day* deeply ingrained itself into the popular consciousness not only of the US-American audience, but also of a global audience. Few movies have enjoyed comparable longevity and impact within the cultural memory of a global movie-going public. The movie's plot depicts a large-scale alien invasion on planet Earth that is eventually fought off—under US-American leadership—through a mix of cyber and conventional warfare.

A multitude of factors have contributed to the tremendous success of this film; however, it was by no means a sleeper hit. An aggressive multi-media marketing campaign, with trailers highlighting the impressive special effects in the movie, was launched by 20th Century Fox to ensure the largest possible audience and to demonstrate the state-of-the-art technology that the studio could now offer (Yang 13; Walton 73). These efforts were rewarded with \$817 million in revenue generated at the box office alone.¹²⁵ This triggered a new wave of special effects–oriented disaster movies in the second half of the 1990s. Director Roland Emmerich would go on to shape this trend with blockbusters like *Godzilla* (1998) and *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004).

While the alien-invasion trope is clearly not a novelty in Hollywood filmmaking, the corporatization of major studios brought about new opportunities in cross-media marketing and global merchandise, which amplified the presence of US-American fantasies of national defense and triumphalism through multiple viewings at home and in cineplexes. In addition, the globalization of economies around the world had entered full swing in the 1990s, making Hollywood imagination an even more pervasive global phenomenon.

Against this backdrop, *ID4*¹²⁶ can be interpreted within the framework of socio-political shifts in a post–Cold War climate. The end of the Cold War and

125 “Independence Day,” box-office information at boxofficemojo.com. Accessed December 16, 2018: <<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=independenceday.htm>>.

126 The title *Independence Day* will be occasionally shortened to the widely used abbreviation *ID4*.

the emergence of the United States as the sole superpower in the early 1990s led to significant debates regarding the future of international affairs and US global hegemony. In 1992, noted scholar Francis Fukuyama posited an “End of History” shaped by the continued expansion of US-American capitalism and liberal democracy. This notion gained considerable currency not only in political circles within and outside the United States, but also in the ideological patterns of Hollywood cinema of the 1990s. A variety of movies began to proclaim a newly found role for the United States, with its perceived model of democratic capitalism, as an arbiter in the less coherent global environment after the Cold War.¹²⁷ It is important to note that this form of “American exceptionalism” ties in with the type of “messianic Americanism” that Reagan often invoked in his Cold War rhetoric (Dearborn 28).

Just like the movie *Independence Day*, Reagan's Cold War rhetoric was infused with references to founding myths, a preoccupation with high-tech superiority in space, the re-centering of white masculinity, and the mythical role of entrepreneurialism in ensuring capitalist competitiveness against a totalitarian system. Essential to this imagination of the end of the Cold War was a religiously coded triumphalism according to which an Anglo-Protestant-led United States was bound to succeed against the invading forces of “collectivist Others.” This parallels Reagan-era blockbuster movies like *Top Gun* and the *Star Wars* franchise. Similar to these spectacle-laden Cold War narratives, *Independence Day* continues an established pattern of celebrating fast-paced air and space battles, romanticizing fighter pilots, as well as masculine competition. There is a special focus on the need for the United States to maintain air superiority as a basis for perceived global stability (Kellner, *Film, Politics, and Ideology*; Dodds 479).¹²⁸

ID4 depicts a Manichean conflict between a uniform, racialized, and gendered totalitarian Other, which is juxtaposed with a relatively diverse United States, whose global hegemony is justified through its supposed devotion to representing a “harmonious mix” of different (mainly European) ethnic and

127 Blockbuster examples of such movies include *Mission Impossible* (1996), *Air Force One* (1997), and *Armageddon* (1998).

128 Klaus Dodds summarizes the implications of *Top Gun*: “[T]he film celebrates American technology, ingenuity and individual spirit often in the face of adversity (both personal and collective). Critically, the film was released in 1986 when a former Hollywood actor, Ronald Reagan, who was determined to ‘win’ the Cold War, administered the USA” (479). The description of the issues that are being celebrated can easily be applied to *Independence Day* and its context too.

gendered categories (Rogin, *Independence Day* 43). This is cemented by fantasies of technological capacities, which result from masculine entrepreneurialism within a post-industrial framework. Therefore, I will investigate the movie's articulations of US-American global leadership and the extent to which these mirror Reaganite discourses on triumphalism in the Cold War.

As extrapolated in Chapter 2, Reagan's postulations on the missile gap and his visions of pre-emptive defense were informed by the context of backlash politics against New Deal welfare capitalism, 1960s/1970s social liberalism, and the "Vietnam trauma." This unique positioning led to a rhetoric of escapist, high-tech policy proposals that transposed the cultural, political, and economic anxieties of the day onto outer space, as well as onto the realm of covert warfare (Prince, *Visions of Empire* 81–88). These mythical locales proved suitable for restoring a form of "messianic Americanism" (Dearborn) that had suffered during and after the Vietnam War. These spaces allowed for a re-fashioning of the United States as an "optimistic underdog" that is not engaged in conventional warfare anymore. Similar narrative threads are operative in the movie *Independence Day* and interlink the film with 1950s-style Cold War fantasies, albeit in a post-Vietnam and post-industrial environment. Thus, Reagan's Cold War fantasies serve as a vital starting point for approaching the film from the angle of technocapitalism and national myths of triumphalism.

The movie's release during the presidential election year of 1996, in which Bill Clinton secured a second term against his Republican challenger, Bob Dole, illustrates this blockbuster's interrelationship with the political climate of the day. The fact that both major presidential candidates endorsed the film speaks to the movie's transcendence of the partisan politics of the day.¹²⁹ This is not only testament to a carefully configured blockbuster effect on behalf of the distribution company, 20th Century Fox, but also to the movie's suitability for an examination of a neoliberal as well as neoconservative consensus within the filmic narrative, within political power structures in the United States, and in the general orientation of the movie-going public.¹³⁰ These dimensions visually intersect in the representation of a "heroic" president played by Bill Pullman (Christensen and Haas 212). The insertion of a prominent presidential figure in

129 Bill Clinton simply stated, "I recommend it," whereas the Republican contender Bob Dole declared, "Bring your family too. You'll be proud of it. Diversity. America. Leadership. Good over evil" (Rogin, *Independence Day* 9, 12).

130 In his analysis of the audience demographics of the *Star Wars* franchise, Peter Krämer points out that teenage males have been consistently targeted by makers of science-fiction and action blockbusters (358–370).

ID4 underlines the relevance of analyzing the interweaving of actual presidential personas with a global blockbuster phenomenon. Therefore, in addition to exploring *Independence Day* through the lens of Reagan's Cold War rhetoric, it is vital that this analysis examine the synchronicities between Bill Clinton's language on foreign policy and US hegemony, as this will allow for the tracing of possible echoes or dissonances with Reagan's vision of post-industrial US imperialism.

Within these parameters, the analysis in this chapter will scrutinize the movie's construction of the principal conflict between alien invaders and a key group of characters who eventually develop the means to defeat the aliens. In the film, the existing, shifting power relations are shaped by visions of gendered and racialized dominance, as well as the imagined mechanisms of capitalist entrepreneurialism. This necessitates an intersectional approach and a critical discourse analysis, so that the workings of power dynamics and conflict resolution are properly contextualized. Therefore, the textual analysis will focus on two key parameters: the emphasis on gaining technological superiority in outer space and the role of "messianic Americanism" in defeating the alien force. These parameters have been chosen as they provide suitable avenues for the inspection of Hollywood neoconservatism and US foreign policy in a post-Cold War context. Deconstructing the manifestations of 1980s neoconservatism can help to uncover the resonance of escapist cultural fantasies that extolled the virtues of gendered, high-tech military might and the erasure of internal complexities by deflecting attention toward a totalitarian Other. These themes were particularly prominent in Hollywood action movies in the 1980s (Prince, *Visions of Empire* 68; Kellner, *Media Culture* 84–85),¹³¹ which makes

131 In his analysis of the racist, anti-Arab 1986 action fighter-pilot movie *Iron Eagle*, Stephen Prince argues that "the enemy occupies no terrain specifiable on a map's coordinates but is, rather, a nebulous, threatening Other, a projection of political and cultural anxieties poorly understood and assignable to regions of the world only in general and superficial terms" (*Visions of Empire* 68). In relation to the sequel (*Iron Eagle II*, 1988), Douglas Kellner states: "The dramatic tension in the film is built around the conflicts between the U.S. and Soviet fighters, their surmounting of their former hostilities, and their pulling together to defeat the common enemy (a fantasy that Bush and his war team realized, with some success, in the war against Iraq). [...] While the white and Black Americans and Russians learn to work and cooperate together, they turn their hostility on villainous Arabs who are blown away with the body counts that Hollywood used to reserve for commies" (*Media Culture* 84–85).

it even more important to investigate their persistence in a post-Cold War climate under a seemingly more diplomatic president, who ran on a platform of multilateralism and “pragmatic moralism” in international affairs (Dearborn 209–215). After all, Clinton publicly stated that “America cannot and must not be the world’s policeman” (Dearborn 210).

This analysis of *Independence Day* will expose the film’s historical positioning at a crucial junction between preceding Cold War discourses and subsequent imaginations of asymmetric warfare, which would dominate the political and cultural spheres of the US mainstream for the following decades. Through an examination of the connections between Reagan’s Cold War rhetoric and the movie, the cinematic repositioning of “American exceptionalism” can be historically contextualized. This pertains to both the 1990s and the subsequent re-emergence of explicit neoconservatism in the Bush era. The relative tranquility and pragmatic multilateralism of the Clinton years thereby serve as a unique canvas for cinematic visions at a time when the United States has won a previous global conflict on its own terms, yet longs for a bombastic catharsis of new anxieties in a globalized world, which are negotiated by projecting them onto an intangible totalitarian adversary (Prince, *Visions of Empire* 68). Thus, analyzing how *Independence Day* articulates visions of national defense can help to expose the extent to which the ideological struggles of the 1980s still reverberated in 1990s Hollywood (Kellner, *Media Culture* 19).¹³²

When Disaster Strikes at the Box Office: The Production Background of *Independence Day*

The economic landscape of Hollywood in the mid-1990s was shaped by a now fully fleshed out corporatism and increasing realignment toward globalizing markets. A notable and influential independent film movement emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but it was integrated into conglomerate structures by the mid-1990s (Ortner 96–101), leaving the six “major players” firmly in the saddle: 20th Century Fox, Walt Disney Pictures, Columbia Pictures, Warner Bros. Pictures, Universal Pictures, and Paramount Pictures.

132 Kellner maintains that the “offensive of the right never really triumphed in the realm of culture, and culture itself has been a fiercely contested terrain for the past decades. [...] Clinton has been increasingly pushing an agenda of conservatism himself and, in a sense, ‘Reaganism’ retains its position as ‘political common sense’ and the dominant discourse of the era” (*Media Culture* 19).

The renewed emphasis on using directors and actors as a “brand” for promotional purposes led to greater bargaining power for those who had already made a name for themselves. The high demand for a concentrated group of people with well-crafted public images resulted in a steep rise in the cost of star power (Krämer, *Stardom* 201–214). Longer and more extensive promotional campaigns, which now targeted markets around the world in a precisely timed fashion, put continuous pressure on film producers, directors, and screenwriters to generate higher returns on investments.

The tested blockbuster formula (Prince, *A New Pot of Gold* 200–208) had already become standard for major studios by the 1990s. Yet, the rise of the independent film movement hinted at the exhaustion of this formula and a shift in tastes among the mainstream movie-going public (Tzioumakis 266–271). Hollywood executives therefore determined that upcoming blockbusters needed refinement, but this mainly related to style as opposed to content (Jordan 145–160).¹³³ Moreover, the acceleration in computer and special-effects technology in the early 1990s gave rise to countless creative possibilities for delivering an all-encompassing and visually stunning atmosphere. This was not confined to theaters but extended to a personal experience at home as well. In 1984, Sony released the first LaserDisc format and Philips introduced the first commercially available Video-CDs in 1987. These releases heralded the dawn of a new digital age in home video, which began to achieve a critical mass with the sales of the first DVDs in 1997 (Sunna and Tompkins).

The 1993 Spielberg-directed sci-fi spectacle *Jurassic Park* constituted a significant watershed in the use of computer-generated special effects. Thom Shone posits that the movie ushered in a completely new era in US-American film history: “In its way, *Jurassic Park* heralded a revolution in movies as profound as the coming of sound in 1927” (213). The film grossed \$1 billion worldwide, replacing the previous record holder, *E.T.—The Extraterrestrial*.¹³⁴ The major Hollywood studios subsequently began to reinvest considerably in technological research and development, teaming up with computer and software leaders like IBM and Microsoft. The conglomerate structure behind the film studios

133 In the context of the film industry's general development in the 1990s, Chris Jordan observes that “Hollywood retained its focus on the Reagan era theme of maintain and protecting boundaries between races, genders and classes while also shifting its definition of the forces that threaten interracial harmony, the nuclear family structure, and class mobility” (148).

134 “Jurassic Park,” box-office information at boxofficemojo.com. Accessed December 16, 2018: <<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=jurassicpark.htm>>.

facilitated the incorporation of newly founded special-effects companies, allowing for computer-generated imagery (CGI) to become an integral part of filmmaking by the mid-1990s.

As for 20th Century Fox, the established Hollywood giant found steady footing after a series of management shake-ups in the 1980s. By the end of the 1980s, the company was under the complete control of the right-wing Australian media magnate Rupert Murdoch, who determined to diversify its portfolio. Fox heavily invested in pay-per-view television and set up new divisions in video gaming and animation. Murdoch formulated a vision for his global media empire as a technological leader, while making no secret of his hard-right ideological leanings, which opened avenues for the Republican Party and conservative businesspeople to gain further ground in Hollywood. This resulted in an amiable relationship between Fox and the presidential campaign of Bob Dole in 1996 (Rogin, *Independence Day* 9–11).

With the end of the Cold War and the emergence of “Generation X” as an important demographic among movie-goers, the patriotic—and at times jingoistic—narratives that dominated 1980s action cinema in the United States gave way to more ambiguous tales, which either focused on combating local crime (e.g. *Batman* became the second-highest grossing film in 1989, earning \$251 million domestically)¹³⁵ or were more subversive, dialogue-driven movies with no clear heroes (e.g. Quentin Tarantino’s early films, like *Reservoir Dogs* (1991), *True Romance* (1993), and *Pulp Fiction* (1994), received both critical acclaim and respectable financial success—in addition to garnering a large cult following). The binary worldview of the Reagan era seemed to have at least partially subsided and “liberal Hollywood” was again used by a new wave of culturally conservative Republicans (and Democrats) as a means of positioning themselves within the culture wars.

The release of *Independence Day*, however, revealed that formulaic good-versus-evil narratives and flag-waving sentimentalism were very much in demand among the movie-going public. And the movie offered a rare moment of political unity in the sense that politicians from both major parties could get behind the film and recommend it for “family viewing.” Michael Rogin elaborates on this cinematic bipartisan marriage:

Independence Day, the first election-year motion picture to receive the endorsement of both major party Presidential candidates, opened to national acclaim

135 “Batman.” Box-office information at boxofficemojo.com. Accessed December 16, 2018: <<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=batman.htm>>.

on 2 July 1996, the day that alien spacecraft were first sighted. "I recommend it", President Bill Clinton told a crowd the next morning. Hillary, Bill and Chelsea Clinton watched the incineration of the White House on 2 July from the scene of the crime (...), seeking a rapprochement with the entertainment business and looking for positive alternatives to such films as *Natural Born Killers* and *Strip Tease*, the Presidential candidate [Bob Dole] endorsed a movie in which an alien invasion wipes out roughly a hundred million humans before an American-led, 4 July victory. (*Independence Day* 9–10)

Like *E.T.*, *Independence Day* offered movie-going audiences reconciliation and escapism. The origins of the movie date back to the early 1990s, when director Roland Emmerich had finished the science-fiction movie *Stargate* (1994) and discussed possibilities for a similar movie with his producer and fellow screenwriter Dean Devlin. Devlin explained that he felt that "for the most part, in alien invasion movies, they come down to Earth and they're hidden in some back field ... [o]r they arrive in little spores and inject themselves into the back of someone's head" (Aberly and Engel 93). The idea was to have a large-scale military attack and bombing campaign, not unlike conventional warfare among humans, thereby reverting to familiar patterns of "alien-invasion stories," as seen in the Cold War adaption of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* in 1953. Jude Davies (401) and Michael Rogin comment on the intertextual parallels between *ID4* and 1950s "B-movie generic conventions":

Speaking of *Independence Day*, [Dean Devlin] adds "We didn't want to try and hide the fact that this film could not exist without *War of the Worlds*, without *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, without *Star Wars* or *Close Encounters*, since those films are 'part of our collective unconscious.'" (*Independence Day* 28)

Due to the bombastic story line, the early screenplay called for an enormous production budget. As with the production of *Top Gun*, the US military was to provide personnel, facilities, vehicles, and costumes for the film in exchange for participatory control in the screenwriting process. These plans, however, did not materialize as Emmerich and Devlin were unwilling to remove any references to Area 51 in the script.¹³⁶ Principal photography began in New York City in February 1995, with further sets installed in Washington, DC, Arizona, New Mexico, and Southern California (Aberly and Engel 91).

¹³⁶ *Independence Day*. 20th Century Fox, DVD commentary, DVD release: June 27, 2000.

As a result of an intersection of 1990s Clinton-era multiculturalism and the renaissance of the 1980s buddy-cop ethos (Jordan 152–153), the casting decisions for the movie reflected a commitment to a biracial setup at the center of the plot. Will Smith and Jeff Goldblum had already become household names by the mid-1990s. Smith successfully transitioned from his TV sitcom fame in *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* to Hollywood action films through his lead role in the buddy-cop movie *Bad Boys* in 1995. The decidedly slick, stylish, and consumption-oriented character of *Bad Boys* was reminiscent of 1980s action productions like *Miami Vice* and *Lethal Weapon*. In addition, *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* owed much of its narrative setting to Reagan-era pop cultural fantasies of African-American middle-class success, such as *The Cosby Show* (Sirota, *Back to Our Future* 176–212). Goldblum, meanwhile, had proven that he was a magnet for science fiction-oriented audiences through his acclaimed performance in *Jurassic Park*, which earned him a Saturn Award for Best Supporting Actor in 1993. The coupling of two rising stars with different sub-cultural appeal clearly contributed to the overall mass impact of this movie.

A final, but crucial, element in setting the stage for the highest-grossing movie of 1996 was the aggressive marketing campaign that preceded its release. 20th Century Fox made extensive use of airtime during commercial breaks for Super Bowl XXX in February 1996, thereby starting a new and continuing trend of screening teaser trailers for potential blockbusters during the most highly anticipated football event of the year. During the weekend before the movie's release, the Fox Networks Group played a series of attention-grabbing trailers during commercial breaks on their channel(s), featuring spectacular scenes of the White House being blown up (Yelkur 143–159). It was already evident that the movie was gearing up for record-breaking profits. Staying true to the blockbuster formula, Fox's licensing and merchandising teams made a deal with Apple Inc. to use its laptops in the movie in exchange for extensive product placement (Walton 82–83). In addition to the 1980s theme of rugged hard-bodied individualists saving the world, corporate innovation was presented as having the same capability. This illustrates the mutually reinforcing marriage between high-tech corporatism and Hollywood. These factors situate *Independence Day* in a direct relationship with Reagan's Cold War rhetoric. How this was translated into a mid-1990s, post-Cold War context under a "New Democrat" president will be investigated in the following sections.

Film Analysis

Technological Superiority in Outer Space as an Expression of US-American Hegemony

*I am Ronald McRaygun,
I want you in my McArmy,
Special orders don't McUpset me,
As long as I get the McEnemy.
I'm Ronald McRaygun,
McDeath, McNuclear, McWar,
McCommies, McFear, McMe,
'Cause I'm McDangerously crazy.*

— *Dayglo Abortions*, “Ronald McRaygun,” from the album *Feed Us a Fetus* (1986)

Independence Day establishes themes of “American exceptionalism” and benign US-American global leadership early on through its myth-laden imagery. In the opening scenes, the audience is treated to wide establishing shots of the Moon’s vast and barren landscape, with a flag of the United States planted on the Moon’s surface. The image appears in black-and-white first, but the flag quickly acquires color, whereas the rest of the shot remains in shades of grey. The transition from previous historic feats to the present day is visually narrated through referencing the Apollo 11 space mission, which was the first mission to land humans on the surface of the Moon in 1969. In the Barthesian sense, this mythical imagery casts the United States in a leading role in space exploration and also the colonization of outer space. Accordingly, this scene exemplifies what Barthes calls the function of the myth: “to talk about [things]; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification” (143). The construction of an imposing presence in outer space is undergirded by an anthemic, non-diegetic score, which lends the scene an air of nostalgic reminiscence and reverence for a past in which the United States was at the forefront in space exploration.

The camera soon tilts down and reveals a plaque invoking the character of the mission: “We came in peace for all mankind.” This codes previous US space projects not only as advanced and competitive, but also as benevolent and representative of humanity. Once the camera zooms in on the ornamental plaque, it is subtly, but unmistakably established that the presidency is central to advancing the cause of US-American dominance in space. The bottom third of the plaque contains the signatures of the three astronauts of Apollo 11 in one row and the separate signature of President Richard Nixon below. The signature of Neil Armstrong remains obscured for most of the shot; the

signatures of Michael Collins, Buzz Aldrin and Richard Nixon remain clearly visible for an extended period of time. This space victory is thus explicitly tied to a President of the United States and to white, male presidential leadership. It is safe to assume that the Apollo 11 crewmen Michael Collins and Buzz Aldrin do not occupy enough space in the cultural memory of teenaged movie-goers in the 1990s to overshadow Nixon. Therefore, a myth of the presidency is visually designed to present the president as primarily responsible for keeping the United States at the cutting edge of technological superiority in space. The following scenes make it clear that this is not only a political concern for the United States, but a matter of survival for the entire human race.

The non-diegetic score transforms into a more menacing sound and visible tremors on the surface of the Moon begin to shake up the footprints left by astronauts, as if national myths of power were being erased. A vast shadow gradually covers the flag and landing base remnants in darkness, suggesting the totalizing and overwhelming presence of a sinister force. The now-visible alien spaceships are shown from a low-angle perspective, lending them a menacing air and also demonstrating the far reach of the approaching aircraft. This serves as a visual prelude to the beginning of the story on Earth: the surprise and disbelief at a SETI research facility in New Mexico.¹³⁷ It is discovered at S.E.T.I that the signal source is only 375,000 km away from planet Earth. The surprisingly short distance suggests that the alien aircraft went undetected for a long time during their approach. Thus, this scene chastises the United States for supposedly having neglected its air and space defense, as a consequence of which there will be detrimental effects for the entire globe. After all, the film makes no reference to other space exploration agencies and whether or when they picked up the first alien signals. Tracing the visual language from the opening shots on the Moon to the sudden shock at SETI, it appears as if the United States has lost the political—and especially presidential—fiber to keep space defense at the top of the priorities list. The following scenes magnify the level of unpreparedness of the US government. Carrying on with “politics as usual,” the administration of President Thomas J. Whitmore is initially presented as lacking the visionary fiber and boldness to anticipate such sophisticated high-tech “attacks from above.”

The opening scenes already exhibit certain similarities with Reagan’s imagination of technological superiority in the Cold War. As noted in Chapter 2, he constructed space as a site for national assertion within the framework of competition with the USSR, thereby assigning a Manichean logic to this locale, with

137 SETI stands for “Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence,” an umbrella term for both public and private projects exploring the existence of extra-terrestrial life.

only two possible actors: a democratic capitalism led by the United States and a totalitarian, collectivist Other. Retreating from space would spell the advance of the Other, with results that are palpable at the beginning of *Independence Day*. The echoes of the Reaganite Cold War imagination thereby reverberate through the absence of a space-based, neoconservative, and pre-emptive articulation of national defense by the United States and its president. The implications are far-reaching within the context of the 1990s, as it was Bill Clinton who put an end to Reagan's SDI by repurposing it as the Ballistic Missile Defense Organization in 1993.¹³⁸ On top of that, he reduced the defense budget, from the mid-1990s onwards (Henderson 6). The movie's stance toward reduced vigilance is unmistakably negative, as one of the early conversations between President Whitmore and his White House Communications Director, Constance Spano, illustrates. During breakfast, the visibly upset Spano relays to Whitmore that the media are viewing the president as ineffective and meek (at 06:14):

THOMAS WHITMORE: Connie, you're up awfully early this morning.

CONSTANCE SPANO: They're not attacking your policies, they're attacking your age.

"Whitmore seems less like the President and more like the orphaned child Oliver asking: 'Please, sir, I'd like some more.'"

THOMAS WHITMORE: That's clever. (*sitting down at the breakfast table*)

CONSTANCE SPANO: Well, I'm not laughing. Age was not an issue when you stuck to your guns. You were seen as young, idealistic ... Now the message has gotten lost. It's just too much politics, too much compromise.

THOMAS WHITMORE: Isn't it amazing how quickly everyone can turn against you? It's a fine line between standing behind a principle and hiding behind one. You can tolerate a little compromise ... if you're actually managing to get something accomplished.

Arguably, this scene establishes an image of an indecisive and soft-bodied president. Whitmore's overall political philosophy seems to be informed by pragmatic concerns rather than an unshakeable belief in his mission, which was a key feature of Reagan's Cold War rhetoric.¹³⁹ The *mise-en-scène* in this scene

138 The main difference between the SDI and the Ballistic Missile Defense Organization was that the latter placed more emphasis on ground-interceptors against small numbers of Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles as opposed to a space-based defense and deterrence ("Clinton Team Gives SDI New Name and Mission," in *CQ Almanac 1993*, 49th edn, 448–50, Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly, 1994. Accessed December 16, 2018: <<https://library.cqpress.com/cqalmanac/document.php?id=cqa193-1106212>>).

139 John Dearborn places Bill Clinton's foreign-policy rhetoric in the realm of "pragmatic moralism"—alongside that of Barack Obama and the perpetual punching ball of Reaganite imagination, Jimmy Carter. Dearborn states that Clinton "did not assert that the U.S. was infallible in its foreign policymaking, and he was willing to

aims to cement the impression of an insufficiently masculine leader who reacts rather than takes initiative. Spano stands up and talks down to the president, loudly reading from a newspaper. Whitmore sits down right at the moment when Spano quotes the reference to *Oliver Twist*, which infantilizes the president visually as well as verbally. His diminished stature is emphasized by the gendered nature of the juxtaposition of the two characters. While more progressive viewers might be inclined to read Spano's upright stance as an expression of a strong and competent female character, Whitmore appears emasculated and weak-bodied from a heterosexist perspective—not filling the role of president (Hernández López 193) and not performing properly as “father of the nation.”¹⁴⁰

As noted in Chapter 1, the ideological framework of mainstream conservatism demands the presence of an authoritarian “strict father,” who “is obligated to punish [disobedient children], providing an incentive to avoid punishment and helping his children develop the internal discipline to do right” (Lakoff, *Thinking Points* 58). President Whitmore, however, displays no desire to defend himself against the accusations in the press, nor does he even seem to disagree with them. This performance is arguably designed to appear unconvincing, since the audience is already aware of the approaching alien fleet. Spano and Whitmore are presented as lacking such knowledge and must learn of the brutal invasion in order to fully gain an understanding of the situation.¹⁴¹

As discussed in Chapter 2, Reagan offered cultural fantasies of absolute national safety through pre-emptive action. These mythical images were mediated by a carefully crafted image of the president as calm, determined, and reassuring. In addition, he painted the opposition to the perceived “missile gap” in populist terms, by casting himself as an outsider who was bold enough to go against the conventional wisdom of diplomacy and détente in the 1970s. Similar indictments are made in *ID4* with regard to President Whitmore. The Whitmore administration is initially presented as lacking the capacity to envision futuristic space battles and thereby outcompete potential “attackers from above”. This contrasts with the demands of Reaganite ideology, according to which it is incumbent on the President of the United States to always assume

embrace multilateralism and international opinion while still asserting America's interests” (209).

140 This theme is established prior to the breakfast conversation, when Whitmore's little daughter watches a clip from The McLaughlin Group, in which (real-life) journalist Eleanor Clift summarizes the disappointment in Whitmore: “That's the problem, they elected a warrior and they got a wimp.”

141 According to Lakoff's “strict father” model, both Spano and Whitmore need to be “disciplined” to become fit for the marketplace (*Thinking Points* 69–70).

that a threat is being posed by external foes. This threat can only be counteracted by a vigilant defense apparatus in possession of state-of-the-art technology. As noted in Chapter 2, Reagan invoked historic precedents from the 1930s in order to legitimize a more aggressive space program. According to his 1983 address on the Strategic Defense Initiative, the fight against totalitarianism demanded its establishment. Within this context, an alert and forward-looking president would direct funds and energies toward a national defense that outperformed the closest competitor and even broke away from conventional notions of keeping the peace—that is, away from defense and toward aggressively asserting national security:

What if free people could live secure in the knowledge that their security did not rest upon the threat of instant U.S. retaliation to deter a Soviet attack, that we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies?¹⁴²

This contrasts with the reactive approach taken by Whitmore, who finally decides to increase the readiness level of the United States Armed Forces to DEFCON 3 after receiving information that alien spacecraft are about to enter Earth's atmosphere. This is significant in the overall development of this story, as Whitmore gradually adopts a hawkish and trigger-happy stance. This vindicates the neoconservative approach to national defense, but it also provides more liberal movie-goers with a visual synthesis of hawkish policies and the liberal demeanor of a diplomatic and youthful president.

After the introduction of further key characters, such as David Levinson (an MIT-educated broadcasting engineer) and Russell Casse (a former Vietnam fighter pilot, now turned alcoholic, who is haunted by memories of an alien abduction), the filmic narrative begins to gather pace visually. The massive buildup of alien air power over the globe becomes evident and the first alien aircraft become visible over Russia and Iraq. This rarely investigated scene is laden with geo-political subtexts relevant to the 1990s. Russia constitutes the totalitarian villain of the Cold War and Iraq the racialized, asymmetric challenge that was popularly associated with the Middle East in the 1990s. *ID4* thereby constructs a link between Cold War and post-Cold War modes of othering whereby perceived challengers of US global hegemony become the first targets of a larger extra-terrestrial menace. Russia and Iraq, both focal points of US neoconservative discourses, become targets of a gargantuan invasion that practically forces them to look toward the United States for leadership. Both

142 Ronald Reagan, "Announcement of Strategic Defense Initiative" (March 23, 1983).

countries appear as codes for a perceived need for the United States to remain involved in the world—as if the end of the Cold War never occurred.

In line with Reagan's skepticism regarding the doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction, the totalitarian Other must be assumed to be in possession of state-of-the-art means of warfare, which can only be matched through technological competitiveness. According to Reagan's logic, this requires an epistemic shift away from notions of conventional warfare toward the anticipation of attacks that originate not from a definable target locale on Earth, but rather from "above."¹⁴³ It is this openness to high-tech fantasies and asymmetric warfare that keeps Reagan's Cold War imagination alive in cultural fantasies of the 1990s. The restorative and self-celebratory impetus of Reaganism is thereby coupled with the instructive nature of the media spectacle (i.e. through representations of US-American technological strength; Kellner, *Media Spectacle* viii; Wood 148). This conjunction offers avenues for triumphalist high-tech dramas with a cross-generational appeal beyond the Cold War. In his detailed analysis of *ID4*, Michael Rogin refers to Kathleen Moran, who details the parallels between the cross-generational appeal of blockbusters and the rise of new film technologies, such as computer-generated special effects:

For those born in the wake of World War II who lived through the 1960s upheavals, like the baby boomer in the White House, *Independence Day* promises the restoration of victory culture; it speaks to the disturbances with which I began. For culturally literate teenage boys, by contrast, the relevant history is only the history of the film. [...] The collectively unconscious extrafilmic world returns, however, not only in explicit political intrafilm references but also in the new motion picture syntax. For New Hollywood special effects do not simply carry us off to faraway worlds or bring them close to home. Making sensate the visual and stimulating visceral adolescent excitement, special effects also focus on the vulnerable human body. (*Independence Day* 29)

This observation can be expanded beyond individual human bodies, as the vulnerabilities of the national body become a prominent visual theme in the first third of the movie. The establishment of air superiority by the aliens prior to their first wave of attacks is accompanied by earthly tremors that feel like earthquakes to one of the main characters, the African-American fighter pilot Steven Hiller. He is awakened by the powerful incursion, but his girlfriend Jasmine Dubrow downplays the tremors. The nation is thereby constituted to

143 In his "Star Wars" speech, Reagan asserted that "[t]his strategy of deterrence has not changed. It still works. But what it takes to maintain deterrence has changed" ("Announcement of Strategic Defense Initiative").

not only include racialized minorities—as suggested by the introduction of David Levinson and his stereotypically Jewish father Julius prior to this scene—but also to establish that the arrival of the extra-terrestrials impinges on the realities of the nation irrespective of race and gender. In a sense, the totalitarian invaders act as “grand equalizers.” However, Hiller’s instincts are presented as more valid than those of his girlfriend in the “earthquake scene.” In a subtle way, he is established as having the necessary instincts to detect totalitarian threats, putting him in a privileged position in the restoration of internal hierarchies along gendered lines, while also contributing to the notion of an apparently post-racial unity against foreign invasion (Rogin, *Independence Day* 46).

In a separate scene, but almost simultaneously, the multi-racial family of Vietnam veteran Russell Casse witnesses the arrival of the alien fleet in the desert skies of New Mexico.¹⁴⁴ This is the first time the alien spaceships become visible over the mainland United States. In subsequent scenes, the shadows cast by the fleet cover certain historical and cultural landmarks: the Hollywood sign, the Washington Monument, the White House, the Statue of Liberty, and the Manhattan skyline. This spatial dimension is critical in understanding the political subtexts of the depicted threat and how it relates to the concept of the national body. The narrative unfolding of the alien invasion makes it clear that mythical national landmarks are being targeted, but also that the small-town and rural parts of the country are not safe either. The first spaceship sighting in the US occurs, after all, over a campsite in the desert of New Mexico. Despite the contemporary population of New Mexico being racially diverse with non-Hispanic whites only presenting a minority, the campsite is shown to be mostly populated by Caucasian, lower-middle-class inhabitants. This is also the case in a previous scene in which Casse is shown to be drinking in a run-down 1950s-style diner. All the patrons in the establishment are white and male. One of the patrons, who taunts Casse for his alien-abduction stories, speaks in a stereotypical Southern dialect that would be considered untypical of the southwestern United States. Thus, numerous markers code this locale as the rural, white, small-town America that Reagan specifically courted.

The fact that this locale is now being threatened by invading aliens not only allows for parallels to be drawn with contemporary debates on Latin American immigration into the United States (Jordan, 152–153), but it also validates a distinctive feature of Reagan’s SDI program. Unlike previous, ground-based

144 Casse is white and has fathered three children with a Latino-American wife (Rogin, *Independence Day* 52).

defense systems, Reagan promised a national defense that would bring the entire country under its “protective umbrella”—with large urban centers equally as protected as thinly populated regions.¹⁴⁵ This casts the United States as a fortified, impenetrable empire defending itself against outside forces. Within the empire itself, a new sense of WASP-led homogeneity emerges (Rogin, *Independence Day* 13). Rural spaces do not have to fear being vulnerable spots on the empire’s borders anymore and the widespread perception of cities and centers of power as being better protected is, at least metaphorically, eradicated. This establishes a sort of “leveled playing field” in terms of the rural/urban divide and the associated discourses on race and class. Reagan’s “Star Wars” metaphor presents a seemingly cautionary tale, through its insistence on aggressive space defense and air superiority as a basis for the protection of the entire nation (while eclipsing concerns about the militarization of space). This discourse of “heartland security” is missing in *Independence Day*, as it becomes evident that even the rural parts of the nation are vulnerable. Nevertheless, the aliens proceed to attack national landmarks and urban centers first, which exposes the enhanced survival chances of more rural and white regions, while relegating the millions of deaths in New York City and Los Angeles to a mere spectacle.¹⁴⁶

Eventually, the ultimate counter-offensive against the invading aliens is launched from Area 51 in Roswell, New Mexico, a locale that offers pop cultural intersections of secret government machinations (especially with regard to alien life) and scenic backdrops reminiscent of the imagery of traditional Hollywood Western movies. A case can therefore be made that this echoes the merger of Reagan’s public image as a rugged, cowboy-style “hard body” and his promotion of the complex and futuristic weapons-in-space program. In the film, the government is forced to retreat after the complete destruction of Washington, DC. Its relocation to the southwestern desert of New Mexico (and

145 John T. Correll relates how Reagan explained to visitors in the White House that “we may soon be able to protect our nation and our allies from ballistic missiles, just as a roof protects us from the rain” (68).

146 Arguably, right-wing and racist viewers of the movie can derive pleasure from the demise of both their foreign and domestic enemies. For example, Ken Khachigian, who worked as senior advisor for Bob Dole’s presidential campaign in California in 1996, was asked about Dole’s endorsement of a movie in which millions of people die a violent death. Khachigian replied by saying, “but they’re all liberals,” a racist message that exposes how the film’s appeal extends beyond a liberal Hollywood audience (Rogin, *Independence Day* 48).

into Area 51) signals its subsequent reclaiming of masculine power and dominance. Echoing Reagan's claims in 1980, the defeat of the "East Coast establishment" necessitates a national reconnection with mythologies of the "Old West" as a site for the rejuvenation of white, masculine hegemony and a so-called "capitalist spirit." The major political and cultural centers on the East Coast lie in ruins by the second third of the film. "Politics as usual" has failed and the restoration of white, middle-class capitalism in the face of totalitarian invaders now depends on the marriage between metaphors of "rugged individualism" and high-tech space superiority. The mythical signification of both metaphors is highly suitable for a blockbuster formula, as they represent seemingly timeless formulas—or a "privation of history," in Barthesian terms. Barthes explains that "Myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History. In it, history evaporates. It is a kind of ideal servant: [...] all that is left for one to do is to enjoy this beautiful object without wondering where it comes from" (152).

It can be therefore argued that the constructed imagery of Reagan as a hard-bodied "Western hero" and his fantasies of taking the Cold War to outer space feed into escapist pleasures that are self-perpetuating in that they combine imaginations of the "old" with the "new." An analogous observation was previously made with regard to *Independence Day's* reference to Russia and Iraq as recurring focal points in discourses of US global hegemony. In a similar vein to the movie *E.T.*, the rescue of the family is contingent on the return to a small-town, 1950s Western hero-inflected rugged masculinity rather than a well-meaning but inept bureaucracy. Simultaneously, the mythical past is married to an entrepreneurial spirit of neoliberal capitalism, which celebrates mythical individual (male) ingenuity.

After the early establishing scenes at SETI and the White House, the character of David Levinson is introduced. The MIT-educated satellite technician is depicted playing a game of chess with his father, Julius, in a public park in New York City. This is the first instance of regular citizens being shown going about their everyday business. In contrast to the institutionalized procedures at SETI and the White House, Levinson is presented as a private and unassuming citizen, leading a middle-class existence. This impression is emphasized in the following scene. Levinson enters the office space of the cable company he works for on a bicycle. The corporate space is characterized by a visual regime of competition and consumerism: An entire wall displays simultaneous broadcasts from dozens of different channels. Levinson smoothly bikes past several customer service agents, who deliver quick pop culture references, such as mentioning the popular TV show *The X-Files*. He is approached by his supervisor Marty Gilbert, who is characterized by stereotypically gay mannerisms, tone,



Figure 6: Harvey Gilbert chases David Levinson, who is on his bicycle. The competitive drive of Levinson's private cable company leads to the decoding of the alien signal. In this movie, it proves lucky for humanity that Bill Clinton signed the Telecommunications Act of 1996.

and voice.¹⁴⁷ Gilbert is visibly holding a can of Coca-Cola as he frantically informs Levinson of the broadcasting disturbances that the company has been experiencing since the morning (see Figure 6). When Gilbert throws the can into the wrong trash bin, Levinson reminds him to use the proper recycling bin, adding a layer of enviro-consciousness to both his character and the entire scene.¹⁴⁸

What sets this space apart from the previous sites, that is, the SETI and the White House, is that it becomes the first site where a potential for resistance against the alien invasion emerges. This resistance has its origins in white, male entrepreneurial drive, which becomes manifest when Levinson makes his first accurate observations regarding the worldwide disturbance in TV broadcasting. Levinson's talent and skill are fully realized not through working for

147 Gilbert's lack of dominant masculinity is later expressed when he is depicted as seeking a bomb shelter, whereas the undaunted Levinson makes his way to Washington, DC. Gilbert dies in a comical fashion a little later, when he is stuck in a traffic jam, trying to reach his lawyer on the phone (Rogin, *Independence Day* 65).

148 This scene exhibits an intertextual parallel with *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial*, in which the main protagonist, Elliott, is also shown to be ecologically aware through his refusal to dissect frogs.

the government,¹⁴⁹ but in a neoliberal environment where the drive to make a profit properly incentivizes the search for the source of telecommunication disturbances. In his office at the cable company, Levinson has a conversation with his boss, Marty Gilbert, which underscores the capitalist character of the discovery (at 14:15):

MARTY GILBERT: Please, tell me you're getting somewhere.

DAVID LEVINSON: [...] The good news is I found the problem and it's not our equipment. There's some kind of weird signal embedded in the satellite feed.

MARTY GILBERT: Wait, that's the good news?

(Levinson slides over to another computer and initiates an analysis program there.)

DAVID LEVINSON: Yes, because the signal has a definite sequential pattern. So, as soon as I find the exact binary sequence, then I can calculate the phase reversal with that analyzer I built you for your birthday and apply it, we should be able to block it out completely ...

MARTY GILBERT: ... and then we'll be the only guys in town with a clear picture? Yes! Yes! Yes! Oh David, that's why I love you! *(He proceeds to kiss him.)*

This scene underlines classical capitalist tenets that innovation is most likely to flourish on the individual level, that socially desirable skill sets are best identified through competition, and that state-run agencies and institutions are prone to inefficiency and therefore need to be complemented by corporate/entrepreneurial initiative. It is the quest to maintain consumption and outcompete rival cable companies that leads to the groundbreaking discovery of the pattern behind the alien signals. This insight allows Levinson to conclude that the extra-terrestrials are hostile and about to attack.

By the end of this scene, it has become clear that heteronormative masculine innovation has resulted in enhanced fitness for a diverse, corporate environment in the competitive marketplace. The pursuit of profits has produced positive results not only for the company, but for mankind at large. This achievement is particularly celebrated by an LGBT character, who has adopted a passive role in the upcoming war games (and is later completely removed). This exposes the relevance of post-industrial, high-tech innovation in wresting air power away from the invading aliens. Innovation is primarily located within the straight

149 His father, Julius, chides him on their way to the White House, saying, "If they want HBO, they'll call you." This underlines how the government is inclined to disregard the private-sector expertise of David Levinson.

and masculine ingenuity of David Levinson and his access to corporate and military infrastructure.

In a later scene, Levinson relates his findings to President Whitmore in the White House. Levinson, who is accompanied by his father, gains access to the Oval Office through his ex-wife, Constance Spano. Although Spano acts as the critical link in establishing a line of communication between the satellite technician's inventive genius and the president, she is depicted as silent when Levinson informs the president of the imminent danger presented by the diminishing satellite signal. The timer—which indicates that less than 28 minutes remain until the first wave of attack—is prominently displayed on Levinson's Apple Notebook. This product has been strategically placed in plain view on the president's desk. It is the introduction of this privately generated expertise into the realm of government that finally motivates Whitmore to take greater initiative. Whereas his previous actions could be described as cautious, slow, and reactive, Whitmore now walks out of the Oval Office at a fast pace and orders the evacuation of the White House and all major cities. This is the first life-saving decision he makes.

The fact that a single satellite technician working at a cable company can effectuate such vital actions in the defense of the nation not only situates this plotline within conventional mythologies of meritocracy and social mobility, but it also accentuates the imagined potential for discovery brought about by neoliberal deregulation and corporatization in the media and telecommunication businesses. After all, Levinson works at a cable company that broadcasts multiple channels. Thus, war-time innovation is also conversant with the deregulation of the media and TV landscape during the Carter, Reagan–Bush, and Clinton years (Jordan, 33–40; Jolly 4).¹⁵⁰ The cable company office space and the Apple laptop become locales for new kinds of innovation that can compete with the space power exemplified by the advanced but ultimately unwieldy alien spaceships. This emphasis on post-industrial, high-tech gadgetry and an increasing regime of consumerist choice links the filmic site of innovation with neoliberal discourses of both the Reagan and the Clinton administrations. As

150 With regard to the role of the Clinton administration in deregulating the media business, the Telecommunications Act of 1996 stands out as a seminal neoliberal reform. Rhonda Jolly points out that the signing of the act was accompanied by official claims that it would “deliver an abundance of media types that would ensure an abundance of opinion.” However, “there is evidence to suggest that despite realization of the promised increase in media sources, ownership deregulation has at the same time reduced the range of media voices available” (4).

noted in Chapter 2, Reagan proclaimed that a strong national defense was contingent upon the competitive and financial viability of the private sector. The supposed strength of the market system would be amplified when the United States was facing a totalitarian Other that was reliant on a collectivist system and appeared less responsive to new challenges.

Reagan himself elaborated on this mythical juxtaposition between meritocratic capitalist ingenuity and a slouched and unresponsive “big-government” apparatus during a speech at Moscow State University in 1988:

The explorers of the modern era are the entrepreneurs, men with vision, with the courage to take risks and faith enough to brave the unknown. These entrepreneurs and their small enterprises are responsible for almost all the economic growth in the United States. [...] In fact, one of the largest personal computer firms in the United States was started by two college students, no older than you, in the garage behind their home. [...] And that's why it's so hard for government planners, no matter how sophisticated, to ever substitute for millions of individuals working night and day to make their dreams come true. The fact is, bureaucracies are a problem around the world.¹⁵¹

The company referred to is Apple Inc., whose products are repeatedly advertised in *ID4* (Walton 82). As previously mentioned, Apple made large investments in the production of the film by securing itself a highly sought-after product placement spot. In several scenes, it is clearly visible that Levinson is using a state-of-the-art Apple laptop and software, which enables him to establish communication at crucial points during the plot¹⁵² and to dock into the mother ship's network and improvise source code to allow the virus to infiltrate the system. This blockbuster promotion of one of the largest computer corporations connotes the film's vision of capitalism as a specifically neoliberal vision in that post-industrial consumption products are constructed as world-saving devices. The defense of humanity is inserted into a logic of corporate spectacle, designed to narrate consumption on epic levels. Douglas Kellner notes in this context that

corporations place their logos on their products, in ads, in the spaces of everyday life, and in the midst of media spectacles, such as important sporting events, TV shows, movie product placement, and wherever they can catch consumers' eyeballs, to impress their brand name on potential buyers. Consequently, advertising, marketing,

151 Ronald Reagan, “Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session with the Students and Faculty at Moscow State University” (May 31, 1988).

152 One example is the scene in which he contacts his former wife, Constance Spano, to set up a meeting with the president in the White House.

public relations, and promotion are an essential part of commodity spectacle in the global marketplace. (*Media Culture* 4)

Historically, the emergence of Apple as a serious contender in the home PC market was facilitated by the pro-corporate reforms of the Reagan era. In the Clinton era, Apple's ascendancy as a global technology leader with enough leverage to change the world had come to full fruition. The Democratic Party Platform presented at the National Convention in 1996 (seven weeks after the movie's release) postulated that Bill Clinton's and Al Gore's policies created a climate that was conducive to bringing about a new technological revolution that would better the lives of all US citizens:

We support government policies that encourage private sector investment and innovation to create a pro-growth economic climate. [...] We want technology to create jobs and improve the quality of life for American workers. President Clinton and Vice President Gore fought for, and the President signed, a sweeping telecommunications reform bill that will unleash the creative power of the information industry to create millions of high-wage American jobs.¹⁵³

The Clinton campaign thus upholds the theme of a critical technological transformation as a historic opportunity to bolster the overall vitality of the nation. In the vein of Reaganite neoliberalism, the government's role is to allow for an unfettered accumulation of capital within the new sectors of the economy—rather than implement measures for shared prosperity. The story line presented in the film serves as a visual testament to the supposed interconnection between ingenuity in the information industry and national strength. *ID4* thereby celebrates post-Fordist capitalism as the most effective motor for social and technological progress—even when it comes to saving humanity and the planet.

The beginning of the alien attacks and the utter destruction of the downtown areas of New York City, Los Angeles, and Washington, DC, temporarily establishes the technological superiority of the aliens. Much like the subtexts of Reagan's proposed missile gap, the high-powered energy rays used by the aliens can be read as phallic expressions of hyper-masculinity and virility. The frequent references to alien ships attacking urban centers around the globe further contributes to the sexualized imagery of a feminized Earth being penetrated by multiple sperm. The aliens have a technological advantage in the form of

153 "Democratic Party Platform 1996" (August 27, 1996). Accessed December 9, 2018: <<http://www.perkel.com/congress/platform.htm>>.

highly precise and powerful weaponry launched from outer space.¹⁵⁴ President Whitmore—and by extension the entire world—finds himself in a situation in which the effects of the missile gap have manifested themselves in a spectacular manner. The previous politics of compromise and vaguely defined principles disappear in the havoc created by a highly organized foreign Other and the deficiency of US-American defenses comes to the forefront in the subsequent scenes.

When squadrons of fighter jets attack the alien spaceships on July 3, it is revealed that each alien aircraft is protected by a force field that is resistant to all conventional human weaponry—leading to a crushing defeat for the US Air Force.¹⁵⁵ Even the use of nuclear weapons against the aliens is ineffective. The logic of Mutually Assured Destruction or merely attempting to keep up with the missile gap is proven to be inadequate, as Reagan had stated in the early 1980s (Ryan, “The Reagan Doctrine” 37–38).¹⁵⁶ In a sense, the aliens have beaten the United States at their own game by fully implementing Reagan’s SDI fantasy of an impenetrable force field (Rogin, *Independence Day* 56). Through a Reaganite lens, the results of the implied lack of an assertive defense policy are visually expressed in mythical terms, as the United States received fair warning in the form of a presidential jeremiad. However, as Kathleen Moran has noted, “for culturally literate teenage boys, [...] the relevant history is only the history of the film” (Moran in Rogin, *Independence Day* 29). The lessons of military unpreparedness against a high-tech invasion are now being reperformed as part of the logic of the corporate spectacle.

This corporate spectacle is informed by the integration of neoconservative US-American imperialism into discourses of post-racial dynamics and individualized consumption. This is exemplified by the centrality of the biracial duo that ultimately establishes air superiority for the United States in this movie: Steven Hiller and David Levinson. Captain Hiller is identified as a highly skilled and

154 As previously noted, Reagan’s jeremiad on the missile gap offered a similarly grim view of the future.

155 As Reagan notes in his SDI-speech: “The Soviets are still adding an average of 3 new warheads a week, and now have 1,300. These warheads can reach their targets in a matter of a few minutes. We still have none.” Or, as in *Independence Day*: The aliens have force fields; we (still) do not.

156 Ciarán John Ryan notes that “[u]nlike President John F. Kennedy’s realization upon taking office that the “missile gap” he claimed existed was in fact a gap in America’s favor, Reagan’s White House in its first year continued its refrain that America was in a dangerously weakened position” (37).

ambitious fighter pilot early on. His masculinity is established by his survival of the first, unsuccessful counter-attack wave, in which his “less manful” fellow pilot Jimmy Wilder perishes. Hiller manages to out-maneuver one of the alien aircraft and takes an individual alien prisoner. The audience first sees an alien in full view when Hiller opens the cabin of the alien aircraft and punches down the extra-terrestrial pilot, declaring “Welcome to Earth.” This sarcastic quip codes the reassertion of US-American hegemony as representative of the entire planet. The fact that the African-American Hiller exclaims a pluralist discourse of hospitality, while at the same time counteracting it physically, suggests notions of meritocratic post-racialism as a vehicle for global hegemony. However, Hiller’s portrayal simultaneously reproduces racist discourses of threatening hyper-masculinity and physical aggressiveness that have been inscribed onto the bodies of African-American males in US-American film for decades (Johnson 30–31; McCann 84–89), as Jude Davies remarks:

[T]he ideological power of *Independence Day* derives from resolving this tension, via the mobilization of a markedly multiethnic United States to lead worldwide resistance to alien attack. In the film’s climax, actors Will Smith and Jeff Goldblum embody stereotypically racialized traits of Jewish brains and the powerful physicality of African-American masculinity to help save the world. (40)

The narrative fuses classic racist tropes of Jewish urban intellectualism (Fishman 12) and African-American prowess into a seemingly post-racial celebration of victory against a more menacing and uniform invading force. As for the establishment of space power, it is important to note that the movie employs a multicultural spectacle of masculine inventiveness that is mediated and structured by corporate capitalism. While the multicultural aspect offers at least a superficial departure from the more open centering of the white, male hard body in Reagan-era blockbuster cinema, the corporate capitalist aspect receives a visual upgrade through the overt inclusion of the aesthetics of consumption.¹⁵⁷ This is notable in one of the key scenes of the battle when Levinson and Hiller penetrate the alien mother ship with a captured enemy aircraft.

Immediately upon entering the giant spacecraft through a tiny entrance,¹⁵⁸ Hiller and Levinson discover a vast, grey architectural landscape, defined by

157 In *Independence Day*, a commercially available consumption product, namely an Apple Notebook, is critical in shutting down the alien defense shield. However, in *Top Gun*, it is still state-owned military machinery that facilitates winning the competition.

158 This could be a possible nod to the destruction of the “Death Star” in the original *Star Wars* film.

linear walls, bridges, and columns. The repetitive and almost monolithic scenery is reminiscent of Stalinist architecture, with its emphasis on rectangular forms and symmetry. This arguably evokes notions of the totalizing effect of bureaucratic organization on the individual (Bulgakowa 9–11). These impressions are reinforced by the apparent fact that the mother ship houses myriads of cells (or cubicles) inhabited by aliens, who all efficiently work together toward one single goal: preparing the ground invasion of Earth. Like the depiction of the government in *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial*, the portrayal of the mother ship is marked by dystopian undertones in that notions of individuality are absent; instead, there is a sense of racialized collectivism that establishes a direct visual connection to Cold War imaginations of Soviet communism. Juxtaposed with this imagery are the biracial Hiller and Levinson, who establish not only a visual but also a verbal counter-regime through references to private consumption (at 2:06:24):

STEVEN HILLER: I don't like this! This is stupid. They can see us.

DAVID LEVINSON: Oh! No, no. This thing comes fully loaded (*referring to the equipment within their spacecraft*). AM/FM radio, reclining bucket seats and ... power windows. (*Shutters appear which shield the two so they are not visible.*)

Levinson proceeds to work on his Apple Notebook, which is docked into the communication system of the aircraft.¹⁵⁹ The Macintosh operating system is clearly visible in a close-up shot. This brand is arguably recognizable to large sections of the movie-going public in the United States in the mid-1990s. A clear sense of familiarity is created for the audience, thereby establishing a narrative connection between consumption and saving the world. As a result of Hiller's flying skills and Levinson's corporate-sponsored technological ingenuity, the duo succeeds in removing the force fields from all alien aircraft. In doing so, they eliminate the advantage the defensive space shields had granted the extra-terrestrials. On their way out of the mother ship, Hiller and Levinson continue to make pop cultural quips. Hiller loudly exclaims "Elvis has left the building!" after a very tight escape scene.

Space superiority has been established and post-industrial consumption has played a vital part in it. Not only is corporate identity now intertwined with the fate of the nation; it is also expressive of a post-human cyber-utopia in which readily available mass products can connect the individual to outer space itself. This can be interpreted as an expansion of the underlying logic of Reagan's SDI

159 The Apple operating system and the physical interfaces of the Notebook appear to be compatible with alien technologies. This is not fully explained in the movie.

program, as the attainment of space power is not just a national defense project, but also a blank canvas for visions of consumerism and global interconnectedness. The movie arguably acquires a self-referential dimension within the context of technocapitalism and globalization. Kellner points out that corporate globalization is characterized by the push and pull between homogenization and individualization:

Global media and information systems and a world capitalist consumer culture circulate products, images, and ideas throughout the world. Events such as the Gulf War, social trends and fashions, and cultural phenomena such as Madonna, rap music, and popular Hollywood films are distributed through global cultural distribution networks and constitute a “global popular” (Kellner 1995). This global culture, however, operates precisely through the multiplication of different products, services, and spectacles, targeted at specific audiences. (“Globalization and the Postmodern Turn” 35)

New avenues for personal interconnectedness restructure the construction of difference and thus questions of identity, which constitutes a paradigm shift from the binary world within which the Reagan administration argued. While *ID4* reintroduces that binary by way of an alien invasion, the movie continues to celebrate the global accumulation of capital that has diluted national structures in the post-Cold War age (Gómez Buendía 3; Kotz 14–15). The metatexts of post-Fordist high-tech power in outer space have, thus, survived into the Clinton era and found an update within the parameters of a multicultural neoliberalism and neoconservatism.

The Role of “Messianic Americanism” in Defeating the Other

Throughout the movie, the United States is presented as the first and most decisive nation leading the resistance against the aliens. The narrative focus on incidents within the United States conveys an underlying impression that the aliens seek to destroy this nation first. References to other countries remain limited to sidenotes, news bits, and assorted brief sequences before the final battle. The global centrality of the United States is a major feature in this film, which necessitates an interrogation of the narrative subtexts within the contexts of the “American exceptionalism” postulated by both the Reagan and Clinton administrations.

In his analysis of “American exceptionalism” in presidential speeches since 1897, John Dearborn categorizes the themes of Reagan’s rhetoric as falling under “messianic Americanism,” while Bill Clinton’s speeches are associated with the framework of “pragmatic moralism” (28).¹⁶⁰ As this investigation is

¹⁶⁰ Dearborn describes “pragmatic moralism” as informed by the following thematic aspects: “[It] allows for U.S. fallibility and pays more attention to international

concerned with echoes and translations of Reaganite rhetoric, “messianic Americanism” will form the starting point of the analysis, but this will be supported by observations on the materialization of “pragmatic moralism” in order to determine narrative tendencies, as well as the filmic resolution of ideological conflicts.

At various instances within the film, symbolic imagery and forceful gestures underline the suitability of the United States as a unique and inevitable global superpower destined to lead the fight against totalitarianism and unruly racial Others. During one of the scenes depicting the arrival of the alien fleet over US-American airspace, the shadows cast by the spaceships cover the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, the Capitol, and the White House. The movie offers no visual information on how other nations' capitals are being affected, instead opting for a desert in Iraq and bits and pieces of a newscast from Novosibirsk in Russia. The landmarks of Washington, DC remain the only visible architectural representations of political power in this movie, giving the United States a central position in the experience of the invasion as an assault on political institutions. Through the omission of external symbols of power, the filmic narrative portrays the political institutions of the United States as unique throughout the world, thus reaffirming a basic and frequent element of “American exceptionalism.” Dearborn defines “American exceptionalism”

as the idea that the United States has a unique history of liberty and democracy and that, as a result, America must succeed as the premier benevolent world power. Additionally, this implies that the United States has a special mission to spread its ideals of freedom around the world. (21)

This allows for an interpretation whereby the aliens are specifically attacking symbols of freedom and democracy, which underscores their own illiberal character. While the basic tenets of “American exceptionalism” featured heavily in Reagan's and Clinton's presidential rhetoric, Clinton's rhetoric is

opinion; America is capable of choosing wrongly in its actions and should acknowledge its own flaws. Indeed, it involves a more limited view of what U.S. actions can be considered morally justified. In this sense, rather than the U.S. being able to take actions because it is exceptional, America must acknowledge moral limits to live up to its exceptionalism. Furthermore, the U.S. does not operate in the world and undertake commitments as if it has unlimited will and resources. The gap between unilateralism and internationalism is bridged; the U.S. might undertake a course consistent with either one of these paths depending on the issue” (27).

more open to finding multilateral solutions for global problems (Dearborn 28).¹⁶¹ In *Independence Day*, the United States is constructed as the primary global “trouble spot,” adding a layer of necessity to its global role in addressing the conflict. Dearborn points out that Clinton’s foreign policy was oriented toward an “imperative to act” once international institutions were perceived to be insufficient (212). No such prior global mechanisms are set in motion in *ID4*, which disregards the United Nations and military alliances like NATO. The United States is fighting for its survival and, in the process, generates “best-practice” solutions for the rest of the world to emulate. Thus, the omission of global forms of co-operation in formulating a strategy against the invaders shows an inclination toward “messianic Americanism” and its mistrust of or disregard for international institutions.

The inclusion of imagery that paints the United States as a universalist, integrative force for the globe during the alien approach toward Washington, DC constitutes another element of “messianic Americanism.” When the White House is cast in shadow, the president’s little daughter Patricia runs toward her father in the Oval Office with a fearful expression on her face. Whitmore, who is behind his desk, picks her up and reminds her to seek refuge in the shelter. This scene can safely be interpreted as demonstrating that the alien invasion constitutes a threat to the family and—by extension—the nation. Whitmore is portrayed as a protective father figure not only for his daughter, but also for the world, which is subtly hinted at by the subsequent scene. A close-up shot of Whitmore’s desk reveals the array of photos positioned there. These photos show the president meeting the Dalai Lama, Pope John Paul II, and Queen Elizabeth II. These pictures stand alongside childhood photos of his daughter and a picture of the First Lady. Images of the First Family are thereby juxtaposed with images of assorted global leaders, evoking a discursive integration of a global kinship that congregates within the United States—and in the office of the president (see Figure 7). As Jude Davies notes, the collapsing of racial and ethnic differences can serve both reactionary and liberal ends, for example, by “relativizing certain differences and categorizing others” (401) or by providing “visual and narrative evidence for a belief in the exceptional

161 With regard to the US intervention in Haiti in the early 1990s, Clinton remarked that “[n]ations working together, and through the UN, spread the responsibilities and costs of such operations, reduce resentment against the United States, and build invaluable habits of cooperation. In an increasingly interdependent world, we should work this way whenever we can” (Clinton in Tumulty).



Figure 7: “America is committed to the world because so much of the world is inside America.” President Whitmore’s desk in the Oval Office.

nature of the American nation, and its fitness for global leadership.” The invocation of national myths of an accomplished multi-racial existence is therefore re-channeled into the construction of global hierarchies. According to Dearborn, Woodrow Wilson already articulated the viewpoint that the United States was “‘unique socially’ because of its (supposed) equality for a mixed racial group of people” (60). However, there are also strong parallels between the movie’s depiction of the United States as a site of post-racial integration and the “messianic Americanism” formulated by Reagan. In his address to the 40th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York City, Reagan states that

America is committed to the world because so much of the world is inside America. After all, only a few miles from this very room is our Statue of Liberty, past which life began anew for millions, where the peoples from nearly every country in this hall joined to build these United States. The blood of each nation courses through the American vein and feeds the spirit that compels us to involve ourselves in the fate of this good Earth.¹⁶²

According to him, the United States occupies a justified central position in global affairs and in narrating and mediating conflicts from a supposedly transcendent and universalist position—disregarding the palpable racial, class, and gender hierarchies in US-American society. As noted in Chapter 2, remaining

¹⁶² Ronald Reagan, “Speech at the 40th Session of the UN General Assembly” (October 24, 1985).

involved on the global stage is considered not only a political mandate, but also a moral mandate, since the United States seems most suited to combining and representing the positive traits of the entire planet (“feeds the spirit that compels us to involve ourselves”). Through the portrayal of President Whitmore as a globally connected figure, the White Anglo-Saxon male is constructed as a suitable mediator for international concerns, which lends visual support to Arthur Schlesinger’s claim that “the harmonious mix of European nationalities in the United States saved Europe in both world wars; it saves the world in *Independence Day*” (Rogin, *Independence Day* 43). All subsequent narrative strands in the film are committed to presenting the United States as a first mover whose actions either make or break any hopes for global resistance against invading totalitarianism.

The first intelligence missions attempting to communicate with the aliens are conducted by US military helicopters, which are immediately shot down. While communication (or assault) attempts by other nations are conceivable, the film strictly adheres to an account that portrays the United States government as engaging diplomatically first before resorting to violence—thereby echoing Clintonite discourses on the “emphasis on diplomacy and limited military force” (213). The resulting focus on the United States presents the country as the “first mover.” However, the initial counter-attacks ordered by President Whitmore fail miserably and result in a high number of casualties. The attempted assault with conventional fighter jets casts doubt on whether the United States is in fact “the chosen nation” in messianic terms. Like Reagan’s castigation of Jimmy Carter’s military response to the Iranian hostage crisis, the movie exposes the inadequacy of conventional weapons and tactics, thus expressing temporary doubts about the “American Century” and the viability of US-American leadership in the face of an intruder from space.¹⁶³

163 Reagan maintained in his 1980 debate with Jimmy Carter that “there was a second phase in the Iranian affair in which we had something to do with that. And that was, we had adequate warning that there was a threat to our embassy, and we could have done what other embassies did—either strengthen our security there, or remove our personnel before the kidnap and the takeover took place.” In light of the ill-fated “Operation Eagle Claw” in May of that year, Reagan frames Carter’s response to the events of the Iranian revolution as “too little, too late,” while simultaneously assuming a mantle of internationalism by highlighting the efforts of other nations to protect their embassy staff. He therefore merges notions of hard-bodied national aggressiveness with consistency within an international order, which creates the impression of a United States that is “lagging behind.”

This “Carter moment” in Whitmore’s presidency is first narrated as a realization of the limits of US military power among the president and his remaining staff. On Air Force One, the president, General William Grey and Secretary of Defense Albert Nimzicki debate possible next steps (at 1:09:18):

WILLIAM GREY: We’ve moved as many of our forces away from our bases as possible.

But we’ve already sustained heavy losses.

ALBERT NIMZICKI: I spoke to the Joint Chiefs when they arrived at NORAD. They agree we must launch a counter-offensive, with a full nuclear strike.

THOMAS WHITMORE: Over American soil? You’re saying at this point we should sacrifice more innocent American civilians, is that right?

ALBERT NIMZICKI: Sir, if we don’t strike soon, there may not be much of an America left to defend!

MILITARY OFFICER: Sir! They’ve taken out NORAD.

Grey’s report on military forces having to be removed from their bases exposes a subtext of retreat and military failure—not unlike that underlying the popularized images of the evacuation of the US embassy in Saigon in 1975. The filmic narrative thereby articulates a vision in which the country is cornered and temporarily incapable of exercising global hegemony. The ensuing exchange between Nimzicki and the president dramatizes conflicting discourses on the necessity of military intervention and the use of conventional nuclear weapons. The Cold War doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction through a nuclear counterstrike is immediately refuted within the movie—first implicitly and later explicitly. Nimzicki bases his authority on a conversation with NORAD, which, seconds later, is revealed to have already been incinerated. David Levinson, in his role as an enviro-conscious technology expert, overhears the exchange and vehemently argues against any nuclear strikes.

At this point, Whitmore and Levinson’s concerns overlap with statements made by Reagan regarding the need to scrap the Mutually Assured Destruction doctrine and move toward military dominance in space. Yet, at the same time, they echo Clinton’s post-Cold War policies aimed at decreasing the role of nuclear weaponry in geopolitical strategies and instead focusing on the challenges of asymmetric warfare. For instance, in his 1996 State of the Union address, Clinton posited that the previous challenges presented by the Cold War have given way to new challenges:

All over the world, even after the Cold War, people still look to us and trust us to help them seek the blessings of peace and freedom. But as the Cold War fades into memory, voices of isolation say America should retreat from its responsibilities. I say they are wrong. The threats we face today as Americans respect no nation’s borders. Think of them: terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, organized crime, drug

trafficking, ethnic and religious hatred, aggression by rogue states, environmental degradation. If we fail to address these threats today, we will suffer the consequences in all our tomorrows.¹⁶⁴

Clinton’s justification of US-American hegemony has a progressive tinge in the form of environmental concerns and opposition to ethnic and religious hatred. This reframes “American exceptionalism” as a force promoting liberal values against illiberal forces. Similar undertones are present in Levinson’s demands that the aliens be outcompeted without resorting to nuclear weapons. Ultimately, Reagan, Clinton, and Levinson all argue against conventional warfare and in favor of market solutions to tackle an asymmetric totalitarian threat, the main difference being that Clinton and the Levinson–Hiller duo utilize a language of multiculturalism and social liberalism that is symbiotic with capitalist competition.

President Whitmore, however, has to learn the hard way that so-called “big-government” solutions do not define US-American strength in this tale. After briefly communicating with a hostile alien at Area 51, he finally assumes a bellicose, hard-bodied posture and develops proper “strict-father disdain” for the racialized Other. He states: “They’re like locusts. They’re moving from planet to planet. Their whole civilization. After they’ve consumed every natural resource, they move on. And we’re next. Nuke ’em. Let’s nuke the bastards.”

He orders an unsuccessful nuclear strike against a spacecraft hovering over Houston, Texas. Presumably, the United States must have been the first nation to attempt such a strike, given the futile outcome. Again, the territory of the United States and its military capabilities are portrayed as representative of the entire globe, which underlines one of the main features of “messianic Americanism”: the notion that the United States is destined to lead the world toward democracy. This is unlike pragmatic moralism—which Dearborn associates with Clinton’s rhetoric—whereby the United States is a global leader in the promotion of democracy. In the film, the central conflicts within the United States are representative of those experienced by the entire world; other nations serve only as extensions of what the United States experiences. Despite its multicultural veneer, the plot does not incorporate technological or strategic impulses from outside the United States. This is incongruent with Clinton’s “pragmatic moralism” and its acknowledgment of international opinion (Dearborn, 28).

164 William J. Clinton, “Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union” (January 23, 1996).



Figure 8: “If the woman can’t accept her subordination, she must be expelled from the narrative altogether ...” Marilyn Whitmore calls her husband a liar one last time.

After the failed nuclear strike, the government is out of ideas. As in *E.T.*, the subsequent realignment toward triumphalism occurs along gendered lines. Whitmore decides to pay his dying wife, Marilyn, a visit in the hospital in Area 51. This the same First Lady who appeared to take an active role in her husband’s presidency, while tending to her own career in Los Angeles and performing as a caring mother to her daughter. Her injuries resulted from her not leaving the city in time when the aliens attacked, due to which her helicopter crashed. Later scenes highlight her vulnerability and impending death as the movie’s plot moves on to a battle for a future without her. The last scene featuring her takes place in a hospital room at Area 51, where she has been nursed for the last few hours to no avail. In the dialogue between her and her husband, the story comes full circle as she repeats her playful labeling of him as a liar one more time (at 1:41:06):

MARILYN WHITMORE: I’m so sorry that I didn’t come home when you asked me to.
 THOMAS WHITMORE: No. It’s OK. The doctors think that you’re gonna be just fine.
 MARILYN WHITMORE: Liar. (*smiling*)

The First Lady is bound to a hospital bed, attached to catheters, and wearing a simple light-blue gown (see Figure 8). The alien intervention has restored traditional gender roles and female domesticity. The First Lady does, however, retain a sense of agency (and relatability) by sticking to her taunt. The close-up shots of both Marilyn and Thomas Whitmore underscore that this is a final exchange and farewell. Her regret that she did not heed her husband’s calls and remain within the sphere of domesticity is indicative of a pivot in the

development of her character: The reunification of the family (both the presidential family and that family as the nation) is accompanied by the discarding of feminist discourses and the reinstallation of the father as a perceived proper authority. While the movie does not explicitly state that Marilyn Whitmore’s death is necessary for the renewed exercise of masculine power, the timing of her death is reflective of a story line in which female and LGBT characters are demoted and prevented from actively participating in the construction of a triumphant United States. Michael Rogin observes:

Women are most obviously restored to supporting roles in this supposedly politically correct film. [...] Fatally injured in the destruction of Los Angeles, the President’s wife wishes in her dying words that she had surrendered to her husband’s desire and returned home immediately from her business trip; here the film winks at the remaking of Hillary Clinton from independent political player to loyal spouse. (*Independence Day* 44)

Upon Marilyn Whitmore’s death, a visible element of the pre-attack Whitmore government fades into memory. The upcoming final battle between aliens and the United States will now be fought with no prominent female characters on the US-American side, as Constance Spano and Jasmine Dubrow have already been relegated to side roles.¹⁶⁵

The increasing domesticity and passivity of the surviving female characters reflects the legacy of 1950s Cold War B-movies in the narrative. Susan A. George argues in her analysis of 1950s alien-invasion films that the Cold War put pressure on the US-American nuclear family to conform, divide labor (and thus gender roles), and be suspicious of any kind of subversion in order to effectively resist communism (George 12). “American exceptionalism”—both on and off the screen—is thereby predicated on the assignment of specific gender roles that are perceived as conducive to political, military, and economic success for the United States. In Chapter 2, it was ascertained that Reagan’s conception

165 Spano, for instance, started out as a vocal and prominent member of Whitmore’s male-dominated staff. She appeared to be not only the press secretary or primary spokesperson for the president, but also one of his most trusted aides and confidantes. This changes drastically later in the movie. Shortly before the scene in which Levinson presents his findings on how to penetrate the defensive shield of the alien spaceships, Spano is shown in a brief exchange with Defense Secretary Nimzicki, who asks, “Alright, Conny. What is this all about?” She merely replies, “I have no idea.” This interlude sets the tone for her diminished role in the last third of the movie. Unlike in previous situations, she is not the first one in the know anymore.

of triumphalism rests on mythical notions of a “spiritual recovery.” This restoration is deeply rooted in a cultural realignment that necessarily guides the material conditions for success. For instance, Reagan ended his “Evil Empire” speech on a triumphalist, clearly gendered note: “I believe this because the source of our strength in the quest for human freedom is not material, but spiritual. And because it knows no limitation, it must terrify and ultimately triumph over those who would enslave their fellow man.”¹⁶⁶

Within these gendered parameters, masculinity cannot be enslaved, because masculinity is, by definition, supposed to dominate. The proper exercise of masculine hegemony is discursively intertwined with divine providence and a mythical language of renewal. The process of white, male resurgence is imagined as the unleashing of a form of economic and political vitality that will affirm masculine dominance and re-order society in accordance with patriarchal terms. The narration of the United States as an unprecedented success story therefore hinges on its definition and production of sexual difference. In *ID4*, Constance Spano and Jasmin Dubrow quietly acquiesce to being accorded a lower status as mere companions; Marilyn Whitmore, however, is violently removed. This is in line with Robin Wood’s postulations on the “restoration of the father” in 1980s cinema:

If the woman can’t accept her subordination, she must be expelled from the narrative altogether, [...] leaving the father to develop his beautiful relationship with his offspring untrammelled by female complications. [...] [T]he mother becomes superfluous to Oedipal/patriarchal concerns, a mere burdensome redundancy. The father, on the other hand, must be loved, accepted and respected, even if he is initially inadequate (*Kramer vs Kramer*) or generally deficient, unpleasant or monstrous. (153–154)

While this assessment may clash with the Reagan administration’s vision of mothers as necessary and primary caregivers for the offspring, reading the family as a metaphor for the nation (e.g. in Lakoff’s sense; *Thinking Points* 49–52) recasts these offspring as an entire population. This population can only be effectively led by a “strict father.” Marilyn Whitmore’s death not only strengthens President Whitmore’s ties with his daughter; it also gives him a personal sense of purpose, which is channeled into assertiveness with his remaining cabinet. In a subsequent scene, Defense Secretary Nimzicki casts doubts on David Levinson’s proposal to shut down the alien defense shield using a computer virus. This leads the previously tentative Whitmore to finally lay

166 Ronald Reagan, “Address to a Meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida” (March 8, 1983).

down the law and fire his inept defense secretary. In a similar fashion to *E.T.*—*The Extra-Terrestrial*, *Independence Day* puts forward a vision in which it is up to inventive and hard-bodied males to outcompete and outsmart an invading totalitarian threat. The combination of these characteristics is achieved through a biracial duo, which is held up as a symbol for “American exceptionalism,” despite being riddled with racist, sexist, and imperialist undertones.

Both characters, Steven Hiller and David Levinson, appear to incorporate ethnic distinctions that have frequently been constructed in similar ways in the Hollywood imagination. Michael Rogin notes that the “Jewish computer whiz and black trash-talking fighter restore the Jewish-Black alliance by sticking to their familiar, second-level-of-power, roles. Jew is mouth as nervous brain, black is mouth as boastful body” (*Independence Day* 49). This apparent dichotomy is, however, marked by historical and narrative interfaces that reinforce the Clintonite conception of a post-racial United States in which diversity is strength—without relegating decades-old stereotypes to the past. One of these interfaces is the “Jewish-Black alliance” (Rogin *Independence Day* 45), which echoes Jewish and African-American co-operation in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Clinton praised the civil rights struggle in a speech on the anniversary of the March on Washington:

There are people all across this country who made a more intense commitment to the idea of racial equality and justice that day than they had ever made before. And so in very personal ways, all of us became better and bigger, because of the work of those who brought that great day about.¹⁶⁷

While Clinton’s praise of the civil rights struggle does contrast with Reagan’s coded racist appeals to Southern segregationists in 1980, it is crucial to recall what fuels and sustains the Jewish-Black alliance in *ID4*: The interracial camaraderie results from a threat of global annihilation—not from injustice and/or systemic oppression. Within this context, *ID4* veers toward a more Reaganite fantasy of relativizing certain racial differences while categorizing other differences. Certain conditions might therefore validate interracial co-operation on terms that differ from Clinton’s invocation of a collective fight for equality. The biracial team is threatening to aliens, but not to white hegemony. This reaffirms the Reaganite discourse of the “non-threatening Other,” which was already evident in *E.T.* (Wood 160). Both David Levinson and Steven Hiller are enlisted—and personally motivated—to uphold and defend an existing system, which finds

167 William J. Clinton, “Address on Anniversary of March on Washington” (August 28, 1998).

itself under attack by a menacing force (Jordan 152–153). There is no indication that racial or socio-economic hierarchies within the United States need to be transformed after the battle is over. The inherent strength within diversity—which is unique to the United States in the film—is already present in society and only needs to be made explicit through the alien threat. This underscores a key element of “messianic Americanism”: a reluctance to admit US-American fallibility. Dearborn notes that Reagan argued that

“any objective observer must hold a positive view of American history, a history that has been the story of hopes fulfilled and dreams made into reality” (Reagan 1983a). Reagan particularly pushed back at the pragmatic moralist view that Vietnam and other efforts by America had been unworthy causes; he proudly believed that the Vietnam War had been a “noble cause”. (198)

This again puts the movie at odds with Clinton's willingness to point out structural failures and injustices within the country. It can therefore be argued that Levinson's and Hiller's successful destruction of the alien mother ship served no political aim in a revolutionary sense, as it is merely the status quo that is defended with the help of technocapitalism. Moreover, large urban agglomerations—which were inhabited by millions of African-American and other people of color (PoC)—lie in ruins. Nevertheless, the world revels in victory on the Fourth of July, celebrating the global counter-offensive which was inspired by the United States and which defeats the alien fleets for good. No structural changes within societies can be safely presumed to have occurred as a result of this narrative, other than that the world is now celebrating on terms dictated by “messianic Americanism.”

As previously observed, the non-threatening Other is a recurrent theme in both *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* and *Independence Day*. The performance of difference remains valid in these cultural fantasies, as long as the non-threatening Other remains relatable and non-offensive to mainstream sensitivities. Difference is also laudable when the efforts of the non-threatening Other are directed against an overriding, external menace that threatens domestic power structures (e.g. “big-government” agents or totalitarian, fetus-like aliens). In a sense, it can be posited that “American exceptionalism” is also contingent upon the ability of large-scale image productions, such as Hollywood studios, to offer accessible pop cultural negotiations of ethno-cultural conflicts in the service of the status quo. This leaves mythical narratives of the inherent goodness of the United States intact.¹⁶⁸ Thus, blockbuster-scale technocapitalist spectacles are

168 Michael Rogin remarks that “[i]t is as if restoring the black–Jewish alliance would overcome the widely-advertised disuniting of America” (*Independence Day* 46).

powerful and continual brokers in the visual narration of cultural struggles and their resolution in accordance with the specifications of mainstream pleasure (Ang in Durham & Kellner 181).

This can also be observed in the interplay between Levinson and Hiller, which is frequently premised on a clash of cultural codes between “ethnic Others.” Both appear to perform within the framework of prominent racist stereotypes and clichés associated with their respective ethnicities and the spatial context of the “big city.” Levinson comes across as overly neurotic, bookish, and pedantic, with an unwavering focus on recycling and environmentalism, while Hiller boasts physical prowess, dexterity, and a laid-back attitude, as well as pop culture literacy (“Elvis has left the building!”; Vernallis 75).¹⁶⁹ These codes recreate the stereotypical urban space as a site of contradiction and, initially, irreconcilable differences. This becomes evident through a comparison with the all-white fighter-pilot duo “Maverick” and “Goose” in *Top Gun*, who—despite the differences between their personalities and temperaments—are portrayed as harmonious from the very beginning. Levinson and Hiller acknowledge their perceived differences in the scene in which both are flying the alien spacecraft to the mother ship (at 2:02:48):

DAVID LEVINSON: Head straight for it.

(Control of the spacecraft is taken over by the alien mother ship.)

STEVEN HILLER: What the hell?

DAVID LEVINSON: Don’t touch it. Don’t, don’t, don’t ... I was counting on this. They are bringing us in.

STEVEN HILLER: When the hell was you gonna tell me?

DAVID LEVINSON: Oops.

STEVEN HILLER: We got to work on our communication.

This scene takes place in outer space, shortly after Hiller marvels at the sight of thousands of stars scattered across the darkness of an uncharted territory. At the beginning of the scene, a medium shot keeps both characters in plain view, conveying a sense of both being part of the same action. After Hiller asks,

169 The physicality of Steven Hiller’s character is reminiscent of racist constructions of the male Black body as a site of (sexual) aggressiveness. Kobena Mercer notes that dominant representations of the young Black male recreate the image of them “having bodies but not minds” (Mercer quoted in Dines 456). While Hiller’s wittiness can be seen as a form of mental agility, it also recycles racist traditions of casting African Americans as comic sidekicks.

"When the hell was you gonna tell me?" the style of editing switches to shot reverse shot, which enhances the impression of contrast and fast exchange. While Levinson is shown in a medium shot when he says, "Oops," Hiller's disconcerted facial expression is shown in close-up, as if to emphasize the need for more constructive dialogue. This reveals a cultural hierarchy, since there are no such blatant misunderstandings when these characters interact with their white counterparts.

In classic Hollywood fashion, dramatized societal conflicts are resolved at the borders of the unknown and the uncharted, spaces which apparently need to be conquered for the good of humanity. The story of the biracial duo thereby reconstructs old adages regarding the "rebirth of the nation" at the outposts of what dominant groups consider civilization. This observation presents an interface with "messianic Americanism" in that imperialist claims are coded as the inevitable spread of US-American notions of freedom beyond national borders (Dearborn 183–184).

Hollywood's political economy and the socio-cultural environment of the Clinton era have therefore not made a significant departure from the frameworks that led to the rise of biracial-buddy movies in the 1980s. Chris Jordan summarizes the basic thrust of this sub-genre:

The biracial movie [pairs] a white and a black or ethnic sidekick as outcast agents of civilization who reclaim the late-twentieth-century urban landscape for meritocratic people of color and suburban families by violently eradicating hostile ethnic and racial others. This formula dramatized Reagan's conviction that a get-tough attitude toward criminals and welfare cheats was the key to inner-city reform. (79–80)

The struggle against a totalitarian and un-masculine invading force receives a redemptive dimension as internal conflicts are swept aside in a cathartic manner. This re-centers white paternal authority as a guiding principle for national greatness and uniqueness.

The biracial contributions to "American exceptionalism" in this film are supported by a populist discourse catering to the "disgruntled, working-class white male" in the form of former Vietnam War veteran Russell Casse. Through his suicide mission at the end of the final battle, Casse manages to banish the "Vietnam trauma" by applying guerilla tactics against a technologically superior force, thus enacting a form of "role reversal" (Prince, *Visions of Empire* 132),¹⁷⁰ whereby the United States is understood to be an "underdog

170 Stephen Prince makes the following observation concerning the Vietnam War cinema cycle of the 1980s: "For the *Rambo* films, then, to define this symbolic

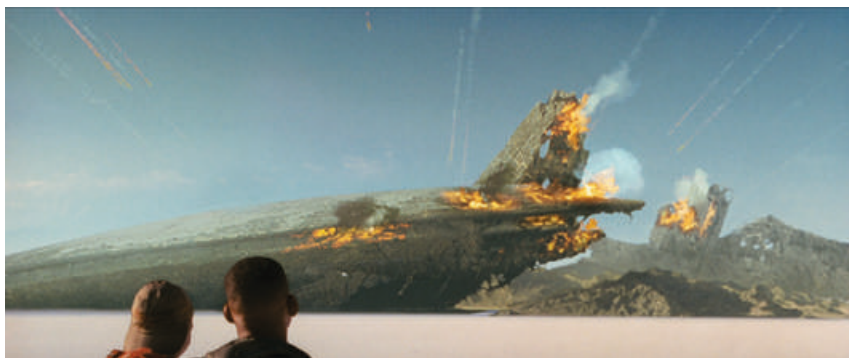


Figure 9: “Today we celebrate our Independence Day!” The coastal metropolis may have suffered, but, in the end, so-called “Middle America” has stood its ground against the foreign invasion.

fighting against the odds.” On the one hand, this echoes the “supervet” stereotype of the 1980s, which was most notably represented by the figure of John Rambo (Palmer 89); on the other hand, it offers a departure from this formula, as the white, working-class male goes extinct in the process of saving the world. This has led Michael Rogin to discuss this as a twist in favor of Clintonism, as the Black–Jewish alliance survives the ultimate battle, whereas the “Reagan Democrat” perishes (*Independence Day* 72). However, the spatial dimension of the final battle privileges the rural, southwestern United States as a site of struggle for the nation. As previous analyses of the trailer campsite and the facilities of Area 51 have illustrated, numerous cultural codes indicate that these sites are inflected by discourses of what conservatives often tout as (white) “Middle America.” The “flyover states” do lose one of their own in the final battle, but in the spatial representation of the United States, these locales emerge stronger than ever. The final scene lends visual weight to this argument. In the last shot, the camera presents a wide-angle view of the destroyed spaceship on the desert soil (see Figure 9). The spaceship fills the entire horizon, as if the threat it posed extended across the (southwestern) border. The camera shifts

American warrior as an expert jungle fighter is to invert the realities of Vietnam. As Louis Kern has observed in article about the MIA films, “To win the war we are symbolically re-fighting on the screen, to reverse the verdict of history, we must be transformed into our enemies (who won in the ‘real’ world), while they transformed into us” (*Visions of Empire* 132).

upward from a low angle, capturing the flares that are lighting up the sky like fireworks. An area that continues to be a key site for militarist pushback against non-white immigration is now the graveyard of an alien invasion. The celebration of the mythical achievements of the United States retains a white, rural, and blue-collar tinge in this movie.

However, the most outright invocation of “messianic Americanism” in *Independence Day* comes shortly before the final battle against the aliens. At a moment when victory is far from certain, President Whitmore addresses a large group of quickly assembled fighter pilots from civilian and military backgrounds on the airfield at Area 51. The improvised flight crews appear to be overwhelmingly male, with females interspersed among them in some shots. However, several shots ensure that PoC members are visible and vocal in their reactions to the president’s brief speech, suggesting that the fighting force has a multiracial character. In front of this audience, Whitmore gives one of the most memorable speeches ever given by a US president on celluloid (at 1:55:58):

We can't be consumed by our petty differences anymore. We will be united in our common interests. Perhaps it's fate that today is the Fourth of July, and you will once again be fighting for our freedom. Not from tyranny, oppression, or persecution ... but from annihilation. We're fighting for our right to live. To exist. And should we win the day, the Fourth of July will no longer be known as an American holiday, but as the day when the world declared in one voice: We will not go quietly into the night! We will not vanish without a fight! We're going to live on! We're going to survive! Today we celebrate our Independence Day!

This hyper-patriotic rallying cry is instantly followed by rousing applause, with audience members raising their weapons into the air and saluting the president enthusiastically. During the speech, the camera slowly zooms from a close-up to an extreme close-up of the president from a slightly low angle. Whitmore is not exactly portrayed as a towering presence, given that he is standing on the back of military truck. Yet, the mise-en-scène and the camera angle evoke a kind of “improvised authority,” in that the president is slightly distinct from the audience, but still “of the audience.”¹⁷¹ His sincere and stoic facial expression after delivering the address clashes with and simultaneously validates the audience’s reaction. The visual juxtaposition evokes a hierarchical authority, with the

171 This impression is fortified by the fact that Whitmore is dressed in what could be described as “business casual” clothing: He is sporting a fighter-pilot jacket instead of a suit. Many audience members are wearing military camouflage, but just as many are dressed in leisurewear, for example, Russell Case is wearing a Hawaiian shirt.

“strict father” exercising his role as “manly, strong, decisive, dominating—a role model for sons, and for daughters a model of a man to look up to” (Lakoff, *Elephant* 48). Whitmore is now firmly in the saddle, not only as the unquestioned leader of the nation, but also as a figure who can lift the national mood.¹⁷² This sentimental feel-good moment is amplified through the use of a rousing non-diegetic score.

The mythical connotations of this speech are far-reaching, as it exhibits core themes of “messianic Americanism.” Notions of “American exceptionalism” are interwoven with references to the mythical founding of the nation, which is constructed as a battle against an oppressive and tremendous force. The battle is fought in two timelines. In parallel with the construction of the communist threat in Reaganite rhetoric, the forces of evil are presented as having gained the strength to introduce their own reign of terror. President Whitmore does not merely speak of defending freedom, but “fighting *again* for our freedom,” suggesting a prior totalitarian intervention into the political realities of the nation. This intervention is now threatening to accelerate, echoing Reagan’s verbal construction of the missile gap, as well as his castigation of welfare capitalism and socially progressive movements (Rogin, *Independence Day* 43–44). What prevents “mankind” from going quietly into the night is the re-celebration of a mythical past and the casting aside of “petty differences,” both of which produce a drama of reassurance in which the centrality of the hard-bodied white, male middle class is affirmed, on the one hand (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*), while post-racialism and post-feminism are presented as completed projects, on the other (Davies 400–401). The synthesis of these two trajectories is achieved through the creation of difference between a capitalist, multicultural United States and a uniform, collectivist, and racialized Other (Rogin, *Independence Day* 40).

As noted in Chapter 2, Reagan explicitly invoked the notion of an “extra-terrestrial” invasion as an integrative force for overcoming global differences. There are numerous parallels between Reagan’s alien-invasion scenario and Whitmore’s speech. In both cases, the presence of the Other is constructed as a motor for a narrative of global integration and universalist identity-building. The construction of a binary on global terms transposes the previous Cold War anti-communism onto the canvas of outer space. Thus, both of these speeches rely on a subtext of continuity between the fight against communism and an

172 The narrative that Reagan improved “the national mood” during his tenure is a cornerstone of contemporary Reagan mythology (Bunch 229).

imagined confrontation with unspecified aliens in the future. The linear historic narrative of triumphalism is also represented by the fact that Whitmore's speech draws heavily on national founding myths ("Perhaps it's fate that today is the Fourth of July."). These national founding myths (fight against "tyranny, oppression or persecution") suggest the achievability of success against totalitarianism, as well as the unique historic position of the United States to lead that fight. This allows Whitmore to end on a triumphalist note, which very much echoes this passage from Reagan's second inaugural address in 1985:

My fellow citizens, our Nation is poised for greatness. We must do what we know is right and do it with all our might. Let history say of us, "These were golden years—when the American Revolution was reborn, when freedom gained new life, when America reached for her best".¹⁷³

The invocation of national founding myths establishes a linear historical trajectory, whereby the ideological struggles of the Cold War represent a new manifestation of the mythical struggles that led to the birth of the nation. In accordance with Barthes' conception of "myth as depoliticized speech" (127), it can be inferred that the mention of the "American Revolution" presents a naturalized discourse on the identity of the nation. Surrendering to the forces of totalitarianism would negate this identity and therefore the existence of the nation.

Themes of religious triumphalism also come to the forefront in Whitmore's concluding statement: "We will live on. We will survive." The implicit discourse of a pre-ordained future can arguably be considered a "Puritan echo." This allows for a comparison with the messianic subtext of Reagan's "Star Wars" program. In her book *Way Out There In the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War*, Frances Fitzgerald outlines that Reagan's "patriotic pieties" (24) were shaped by nineteenth-century Protestant beliefs that the United States was "a covenanted New Israel" (İşçi 106). However, in the context of the 1990s spectacle movie, this discourse of predestination acquires a more diverse—and, in a sense, Clintonite—twist: The United States is destined to lead and to win on a global scale because of its status as a multiracial/multicultural country. Jude Davies describes this dimension as follows:

The cultural work performed by the 1996 blockbuster *Independence Day* (dir. Roland Emmerich) was arguably to imagine the United States as fitted for global leadership and military pre-eminence by ascribing to it the status of the privileged site for the

173 Ronald Reagan, "Second Inaugural Address" (January 21, 1985). Accessed January 31, 2019: <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/reagan2.asp>.

integration of racial and ethnic difference. As such, the film marks a recent refinement of the longstanding ideological formation that scholars have identified as “American exceptionalism”. (399)

Right-wing notions of “American exceptionalism”—which were structured by Reagan’s staunch belief in a victory over the Soviet Union—now find themselves updated to suit a more liberal mindset that employs more inclusive imagery in the fight against totalitarianism. Increasing racial diversity is coded as another sign of the inevitable global success of the United States and its perceived model of “democratic capitalism.”

Clinton explicitly ties social diversity to a pre-ordained, positive destiny in his inaugural address in 1993: “an idea ennobled by the faith that our Nation can summon from its myriad diversity the deepest measure of unity; an idea infused with the conviction that America’s long, heroic journey must go forever upward.”¹⁷⁴ Clinton’s vision can be compared to Francis Fukuyama’s highly contentious theory on the “End of History,” the primary contention of which is that the disintegration of the Soviet bloc has given way to a new era in geopolitics marked by the “unstoppable spread” of Western-style liberal democracy and “free markets” (Fukuyama, *The End of History*).¹⁷⁵ According to this view, it is only natural that the United States would defeat the alien threat, since racial pluralism in the United States is accompanied by a capitalist economy that supposedly unleashes ingenuity and fitness for global competition. The phrase “[a]nd should we win the day, the Fourth of July will no longer be known as an American holiday” unabashedly exemplifies this belief in US-American imperialism. Once the first alien spacecrafts are destroyed in the final battle, US-American military personnel relay the strategy for success to the rest of the world in Morse code. The example set by the United States serves as “best practice” for the survival of humanity.¹⁷⁶ The country leads by example and other nations merely have to imitate the United States—the emphasis being

174 William J. Clinton, “First Inaugural Address” (January 20, 1993).

175 Fukuyama’s original theory is now partially or entirely discredited by political analysts due to the new entanglements in which Western societies have found themselves in the so-called “War on Terror.” This is augmented by anti-globalization movements highlighting the failures of neoliberal policies around the world, especially in the Global South. Fukuyama himself has adopted a more critical stance toward US global power (*America at the Crossroads*).

176 After all, it was Reagan who described his country as “last best hope of man on earth” in his “A Time for Choosing” speech in 1964 (Ronald Reagan, “A Time for Choosing,” October 27, 1964).

on “have to,” as their survival depends on it. The United States emerges as an unquestionable, unilateral global leader, triumphantly basking in the “end of history,” which was a recurrent theme of both the Reagan and the Clinton administrations. The country's rejuvenation is thus brought about through the exercise of domestic and global hierarchies within the framework of capitalist competition. Despite its overt jingoism, this simple and reactionary formula proved tremendously resonant across the globe.

The Pop Cultural Legacy of *Independence Day*

Independence Day became the highest-grossing movie of 1996, spawning a universe of merchandise, toys, video games, novelizations, and a highly anticipated sequel, *Independence Day: Resurgence*, in 2016. This underlines the contemporary resonance of this story line both in Hollywood and in the popular culture of the United States.

ID4 not only accelerated the rise of disaster-spectacle movies in Hollywood blockbuster filmmaking; it also fueled the imagination of how the sole remaining superpower would and should deal with an eminent violent attack on its soil. The visual similarities between the Empire State Building being blown up and the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center collapsing on 9/11 have given rise to discussions about the film's accurate foretelling of a major attack on New York City, as well as its anticipation of the pop cultural ascent of increasingly nihilist and seemingly indiscriminate forms of violence. These cinematic developments became coupled with the exercise of real-life violence that did not only affect New York City, but also individuals and entire populations that found themselves on the receiving end of the “Terror War” waged by the Bush administration. Elliott Gaines remarks that *Independence Day* and the media coverage of 9/11 both made heavy use of cinematic and stylistic conventions intended to achieve a spectacle effect conducive to impacting the national consciousness on a long-term basis:

Televised images of the events of September 11, 2001 were repeated again and again to become part of a collective, intersubjective consciousness. The images broadcast that day, and repeated since, suggest an intertextual reference to the popular science-fiction, comedy, adventure film, *Independence Day*. (117–131)

These semiotic parallels were also present during the invasion of Iraq in 2003. In one of the most infamous photo ops of the war in Iraq in May 2003, President George W. Bush landed a fighter jet on an aircraft carrier and exited the plane wearing a flight suit. He proceeded to give a triumphant speech, declaring

“Mission Accomplished” and claiming that major combat operations in Iraq had come to an end. This episode has been likened to President Whitmore joining the pilot squad in *ID4*, as well as the “Reaganite wet dream” *Top Gun* (Kellner, *Media Spectacle* 75–83).¹⁷⁷ During a 2003 panel discussion on CBS, journalist Bob Schieffer discussed the parallels between *ID4* and Bush’s photo op with Joe Klein:

Bob Schieffer on CBS said: “As far as I’m concerned, that was one of the great pictures of all time.” His guest, Joe Klein, responded: “Well, that was probably the coolest presidential image since Bill Pullman played the jet fighter pilot in the movie *Independence Day*. That was the first thing that came to mind for me.”¹⁷⁸

In this context, one can refer back to Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan, who argue in *Camera Politica* that films can demonstrate how “public and private institutions of society reciprocally legitimate each other through the analogical comparison of one to the other” (63). These intertextual patterns, whether deliberate or not, indicate a level of cross-referentiality between blockbuster movies and other media spectacles produced by state or non-state actors. It is safe to say that *ID4* was at the helm of a socio-cultural development whereby Hollywood spectacles became metaphors and cognitive reference points for “theaters of destruction” (Prince, *Firestorm*). While classic Reaganite entertainment like *Rambo* and *Top Gun* provided ample metaphors for Cold War saber-rattling, *ID4* offered an ideologically more flexible and more bombastic rendition of Reagan’s themes of US-American global leadership.

It can be concluded that *Independence Day* helped to fill a Clinton-era ideological void characterized by the absence of larger enemies or serious challenges to US global hegemony (in a postmodern sense, a “collapse of meta-narratives”). The lack of a meaningful national discourse on issues regarding class and inequality and the co-optation of notions of racial diversity on the big screen led to a reorientation toward science fiction, conspiracy theories, terrorism—all of which can be transformed into aestheticized forms of spectacle.¹⁷⁹ While *X-Files*

177 Maureen Dowd, “The Iceman Cometh,” *The New York Times* (May 4, 2003). Accessed December 9, 2018: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/04/opinion/the-iceman-cometh.html>>.

178 Gregg Mitchell, “Five Years Ago: How the Media Gushed Over ‘Mission Accomplished,’” *The Huffington Post* (May 1, 2008). Accessed December 9, 2018: <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/greg-mitchell/5-years-ago-how-the-media_b_99633.html>.

179 Kellner maintains that “the issue of the representation of the unrepresentable” is “a problem at the heart of *The X-Files*” (*Media Spectacle* 156). This valid observation

may have been the strongest example on TV (Kellner, *Media Spectacle* 150), Hollywood studios literally banked in on space-adventure films that rehashed ideas of aliens presenting a new Other. Will Smith reprised his role as “alien hunter” in the 1997 summer blockbuster *Men in Black* (Rogin, *Independence Day* 76), joining Tommy Lee Jones in a biracial setup reminiscent of Reagan-era action movies like *Beverly Hills Cop* and *Lethal Weapon*. *Men in Black* draws clear parallels between the immigration debate surrounding the southern border and extra-terrestrial visitors who seek refuge in a United States that is apparently more stable, more peaceful, and offers more economic opportunities than other places in entire galaxies (an intergalactic version of “messianic Americanism”). Thus, the Clintonite motto of “It’s the economy, stupid” had borne fruit within the alien-cycle movies of the late 1990s. After all, the aliens in *ID4* chose to invade Earth for its resources (a parallel can be drawn with the Iraq War). There are more explicit echoes of the popular defense of these resources in the face of a vast, transnational conglomerate in Bush-era movies like *Blood Diamond* (2005), *Avatar* (2009), and *Syriana* (2005)—films that lean toward criticizing corporate capitalism, unlike *Independence Day* (Park 15–20).

Among major Hollywood studios, the spectacle of *Independence Day* proved to be highly instructive, not only with regard to screenwriting, special effects, and casting decisions, but also in terms of market research and promotion. Charles Tomkovich and Rama Yelkur detail how the inclusion of an *ID4* trailer during the Super Bowl XXX in January 1996 set a new standard for cross-platform blockbuster promotion:

Hollywood began to use the Super Bowl as a major vehicle to launch new movies in the early 1990s, Tomkovich said. At first they ran a couple movie ads during the telecast. Then in 1996, Fox spent \$1.1 million to promote the film ‘Independence Day’. [...] This was the turning point [...] Movie advertisers en masse realized the benefits of Super Bowl advertising. During 1999–2001, five movies were advertised each year. This increased to nine in 2002 and 10 in 2003. (Yelkur et al.)

The choice to air the *ID4* trailer during the nation’s most-watched football event of the year demonstrates the growing integration of cable TV sports

should be considered in conjunction with Guy Debord’s reflections on the representational strategies of late capitalism, which constantly has to resolve its internal contradiction through the “self-critical destruction society’s old common language and its artificial reconstruction, within the commodity spectacle” (*The Society of the Spectacle* 55). In the context of global cross-media narratives, the unrepresentable is arguably built on different languages, which makes the ascendancy of powerful imagery and accessible simplicity all the more important.

spectacles and militaristic blockbuster phenomena to maximize audience turnout and mass media dominance. The resulting “aura of inevitability” of big-budget summer blockbusters immerses target audiences in an overarching, cross-platform narrative. The spectacle of masculine competition in commercialized sports events is, thereby, complemented by special effects-driven masculine competition in fictional settings. While the evident thematic connection between both these spectacles can be discussed in relation to the well-established metaphor of “war as sport” (Charteris-Black 209), it is vital to note that this form of cross-media promotion significantly reduces cost per unit in the production and distribution of mass media entertainment (Compton 53). The transnational and now largely deregulated character of media corporations led to observable cost-cutting measures whereby the spectacle became the primary currency for media production and distribution.¹⁸⁰

When asked about *Independence Day* in an interview, Steven Spielberg stated: “This movie will do more to change blockbuster summer movies than any movie before.”¹⁸¹ The high level of destruction, coupled with a threat that appears to be targeting the entire human race, became a blueprint not only for disaster movies like *Deep Impact* (1998) and *Armageddon* (1998), but also for the cycle of superhero films that became top-selling franchises for Hollywood from the late 2000s onwards. Film critic Alexander Huls notes:

[D]uring their rise in the 2010s, superhero movies—now our most successful form of blockbuster—most of all became disciples of the “put more on screen” philosophy. The more modest destructions of “The Dark Knight” and “Iron Man” in 2008 were replaced with movies like “The Avengers,” “Man of Steel,” “The Guardians of the Galaxy,” “X-Men: Days of Future Past” and “Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice,” films that devoted their entire third acts to spaceships careening into skyscrapers, office buildings crumbling like peanut brittle, and laser beams shooting from the sky. If that recalls Emmerich’s film, he agrees. “In a way we unknowingly invented a new

180 James Compton observes—with regard to minimizing the risks of capital accumulation for news corporations—that “per-unit costs of news production are significantly reduced as resources and stories are spread among CNN’s integrated cross-media properties. And I would argue that the extension of these practices to integrated multi-media news operations, such as those operated by Tribune, further increase the likelihood that the news agenda will be dominated by spectacular media events” (53).

181 Matt Grobar, “Roland Emmerich, Vivica A. Fox & Jeff Goldblum Reflect On ‘Independence Day’ & Discuss Sequel,” *Deadline Hollywood* (May 4, 2016). Accessed December 9, 2018: <<http://deadline.com/2016/05/independence-day-resurgence-vivica-a-fox-jeff-goldblum-panel-20th-anniversary-1201748052/>>.

thing, with no plan,” the director told Complex. “I see the influence of ‘Independence Day’ everywhere: in all the Marvel movies, and all the superheroes of the DC Universe, there’s always an alien invasion, there’s always a disaster element.”¹⁸²

In light of this development, it is reasonable to conclude that a significant part of the contemporary blockbuster landscape owes its shape, as well as its stylistic and narrative outlook, to filmic landmarks that arose from the formulas developed in the 1980s and 1990s. And given the tremendous box-office success of *Independence Day*, it can be safely concluded that the key features of Reaganite action entertainment still reached the primary intended audience: adolescent males. The long-term effects of the neoconservative realignment in the United States and the corporatization of Hollywood on superhero films of the twenty-first century will be examined in the subsequent analyses of *The Dark Knight* and *The Avengers*.

182 Alexander Huls, “Beyond Imagination: How ‘Independence Day’ Changed the Blockbuster,” rogerebert.com (June 29, 2016). Accessed December 9, 2018: <<http://www.rogerebert.com/balder-and-dash/beyond-imagination-how-independence-day-changed-the-blockbuster>>.

Chapter 5 *The Dark Knight* as an Echo Chamber for Reaganite Counter-Terrorism Rhetoric

Introduction and Chapter Overview

The late 2000s witnessed a succession of extremely successful superhero movies drawn from the decades-old Marvel and DC comics universe. The release of Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* in 2005 and Jon Favreau's *Iron Man* in 2008 gave rise to a new era of profitability for major Hollywood studios. Major production companies had been struggling to find a reliable blockbuster formula since the 9/11 attacks, which had limited the appeal of previously popular disaster films. It was in the aftermath of 9/11 (Ip 209) and the ensuing excesses of the Bush administration during its "War on Terror"¹⁸³ that new types of protagonists rose to popularity. Hollywood found them in familiar comic-book heroes and anti-heroes.

Nolan's *The Dark Knight* (2008) stands out as it was one of the most anticipated and acclaimed films of the 2000s—earning a global box-office gross of \$1 billion.¹⁸⁴ Two widely discussed themes were the film's treatment of the psychological atmosphere that had gripped political discourses within the context of the "War on Terror" and the ramifications of privatized criminal justice in the form of vigilantism. These threads hit a nerve with global movie-going audiences and catapulted both Nolan and anti-hero films into the spotlight. The

183 The term "War on Terror," as employed by the Bush administration, is highly contentious and has been criticized from political as well as academic angles. In his article "9/11, Spectacles of Terror, and Media Manipulation: A Critique of Jihadist and Bush Media Politics," Douglas Kellner argues that the term "Terror War" is much better suited to describe not only the actions by Al Qaida and other fundamentalist groups, but also the Bush–Cheney regime, including the "Shock and Awe" doctrine employed during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the global practice of illegal detention, and the leveraging of domestic fears for political gain (Kellner, *Cinema Wars* 127). Both terms will be used in this chapter in order to underline their polysemy.

184 "The Dark Knight," box-office information at boxofficemojo.com. Accessed December 16, 2018: <<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=darkknight.htm>>.

conservative magazine *National Review*¹⁸⁵ even selected *The Dark Knight* as the twelfth-best conservative movie ever to come out of Hollywood.¹⁸⁶

In the film, the promising and newly elected district attorney of Gotham City, Harvey Dent, calls for an uncompromising campaign against organized crime in the city. Upper-class entrepreneur Bruce Wayne, who secretly acts as the highly equipped Batman, sees this as a sign that he can retire, as the old forms of crime have finally met a strong-willed match. However, the sudden appearance of the anarchist Joker severely disrupts life in Gotham City, which forces the Batman to become active again. The city is gripped with fear in the wake of the Joker's sophisticated and highly theatrical campaigns of violence, which lead both the Batman and the police to resort to unlawful means to track him down. The Joker manages to kill Rachel Dawes—Bruce Wayne's childhood friend—and turn Harvey Dent into a schizoid vigilante (nicknamed "Two-Face"). Eventually, the Joker and Harvey Dent are killed by the Batman. However, the Gotham City Police Department decides to uphold Dent's reputation as an honest politician and blames his murders on the Batman, who subsequently becomes an outcast.

Nolan's *The Dark Knight* was released at a point in recent US-American history that can be described as a watershed moment due to the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent election of Barack Obama as the first African-American president in the nation's history. These seismic shifts raise questions concerning the shape and content of popular fantasies and the state of the nation after eight years of incisive neoconservatism. These questions have elicited extremely varied and often contradictory answers. Mystery writer Andrew Klavan, for instance, puts forward the argument that *The Dark Knight* vindicates the abuses of executive power by the Bush administration:

The Dark Knight [...] is at some level a paean of praise to the fortitude and moral courage that has been shown by George W. Bush in this time of terror and war. Like W, Batman is vilified and despised for confronting terrorists in the only terms they understand. Like W, Batman sometimes has to push the boundaries of civil rights

185 The *National Review* magazine was founded by William F. Buckley (1925–2008), a highly influential right-wing ideologue and friend of Reagan.

186 "The Best Conservative Movies," *National Review* (February 23, 2009). Accessed January 28, 2019: <<https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2009/02/23/best-conservative-movies/>>.

to deal with an emergency, certain that he will re-establish those boundaries when the emergency is past.¹⁸⁷

Cosmo Landesman, a writer for *The Sunday Times*, challenges this reactionary interpretation. He states that the film “champions the anti-war coalition’s claim that, in having a War on Terror, you create the conditions for more terror. We are shown that innocent people died because of Batman—and he falls for it. Here is a Batman consumed with liberal guilt and self-loathing.”¹⁸⁸

Benjamin Kerstein, however, claims that both Klavan and Landesman “have a point” (142): “*The Dark Knight* is a perfect mirror of the society which is watching it: a society so divided on the issues of terror and how to fight it that, for the first time in decades, an American mainstream no longer exists” (143). While these observations reflect the distinctions between “dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings” (Hall in Kellner, *Media Culture* 37), they also expose the resonant capability of technocapitalist media spectacles to transpose societal conflicts into profitable, pleasurable viewing experiences with global appeal. Thus, they provide a canvas for a variety of ideological discourses that may not exactly resolve the fundamental contradictions of late capitalism, but that do resonate through theaters, streaming services, online platforms, and DVD sales.

In his discussion of the potential radicalism of *The Dark Knight* trilogy, Martin Fradley points out that “Nolan’s patented brand of chin-stroking populism—a multiplex-friendly ‘Cinema of Ideas’—is inscribed across the trilogy” (15). Within this context, it can be noted that the dramatization of societal conflicts has already been recognized as a major feature of media spectacles (Kellner, *Media Spectacle* 2). However, the cinematic conceptualization of violent societal change on physical and psychological levels adds a new epistemic dimension to the blockbuster craft in the early twenty-first century. Unlike many previous blockbuster movies, violence in the *Dark Knight* franchise is not only a means of resolving social conflict (as was the case in *Independence Day*), but emerges as a permanent and ordering principle of a democratic capitalist system that becomes increasingly incapable of mitigating (or at least concealing) its inherent contradictions. Thus, the element of populist rage becomes a crucial co-ordinate for interrogating the politics of the

187 Andrew Klavan, “What Bush and Batman have in common,” *Wall Street Journal* (July 25, 2008). Accessed August 31, 2018: <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB121694247343482821>>.

188 Cosmo Landesman, “The Dark Knight—The Sunday Times review,” *The Sunday Times* (July 27, 2008). Cited in Kerstein (142)

Dark Knight. Given the populist strain of Reaganism, the rise of the racist and ferociously right-wing Tea Party movement in the late 2000s, the ubiquity of a new “Reagan mythology” on the right, and the progressive populist campaign launched by Barack Obama, the film can be examined in terms of various ideological parameters.

However, these movements need to be understood against the backdrop of Bush-era neoconservatism and the metatext of the global “War on Terror.” Borrowing heavily from Reagan’s foreign-policy rhetoric, the Bush administration laid out axiomatic “friend-versus-foe” distinctions, which were intended to channel public anxieties into institutionalized frameworks of power. In *The Dark Knight*, spectacles of fear, mass destruction, corruption, organized crime, and securitization clearly occupy center stage. In his book *Cinema Wars*, Douglas Kellner writes:

[S]ome of the superhero films of the last years of the Bush–Cheney administration, by contrast, can be read as a critique of the failed conservative regime. The Batman films of the late Bush–Cheney era show the policy to be utterly corrupt and the economic, political, and legal system in paralysis, approximately the case by the end of the failed era. (9–10)

While these considerations are of central importance when interrogating *The Dark Knight* in terms of its treatment of Bush-era politics, it is also vital to embed these notions within Kellner’s framework of reading Hollywood cinema as “contested terrain that reproduces existing social struggles and transcodes the political discourses of the era” (*Cinema Wars* 2). As for the simultaneity of popular meanings and symbols, it is worthwhile investigating which ideological discourses within *The Dark Knight* are presented as hegemonic, counter-hegemonic, and/or naturalized. Given the populist appeal of Reagan’s “small-government” rhetoric, which has been resurrected in the Tea Party movement, the questions of who represents power and who opposes power are of crucial importance in a political analysis of *The Dark Knight*.

Power dynamics related to race, gender, class, and ableism are instrumental in sketching out the suitability of certain narrative strains to either challenge or reinforce dominant discourses. In addition, the characterization of antagonisms on the basis of these dimensions can uncover the specific workings of the filmic narrative, as well as yielding insights into popular imaginations of executive power and its limits during the end of the Bush era. Furthermore, this exploration can help to identify the specific ideological contours of blockbuster heroism, especially in relation to the still ascendant Hollywood superhero cycle. The post-Watergate and post-Vietnam climate necessitated the reconstruction of both presidential and cinematic heroism on more fragmented and sometimes

openly contradictory terms, which promoted performances of virtuous “anti-heroism” as a supposedly necessary measure to defend the city/nation.¹⁸⁹ This has distinct implications for the analysis of blockbuster movies against the background of technocapitalism and media spectacles due to the fact that the relatability of superheroes is of crucial importance for the profitability of cinematic spectacles and the sale of merchandised superhero products aimed at young fans around the world (Kellner, *Cinema Wars* 181–182; Lawrence 1–20). Thus, two foci emerge for the upcoming discussion:

- The conception of (counter-) terrorism as “war” and its effects on social hierarchies.
- The racially coded “otherness” of terrorism.

These focal points within the film will be discussed in relation to Reagan’s and George W. Bush’s public rhetoric on terrorism. For example, considering the film through the prism of George Lakoff’s “strict father” model will lead to insights into the legitimization of authoritarian security projects in a climate marked by collective psychological tension and a sense of beleaguerment. This will be augmented by an examination of myths of the “noble lie” (Žižek, *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology*). The diagnosis of racial “othering” in *The Dark Knight* is inseparable from Islamophobic discourses that structured much of the Bush administration’s war rhetoric. Therefore, this discussion will also build on the insights derived from analyses of popular media depictions of violent Islamist fundamentalist groups (Said 306–321; Cobb 35–38; Ridouani 1–2; Wöhlert). Since many of the current hostilities between the United States and assorted Middle Eastern rivals are rooted in geopolitical paradigm shifts

189 The ebb and flow in the depiction of anti-heroes in popular culture is a permanent subject of scholarly debate. Peter Coogan maintains that “[t]he superhero is going through a renaissance in the early twenty-first century. After a dark age of anti-heroes like the Punisher and the death of superheroes like Superman and Captain Marvel, superheroes are back” (1). However, it stands to reason that the humanization of these superheroes is paramount in establishing a rapport with fans, especially in a time of increased interaction between producers and the fan base. The classic, straightforward image of the virtuous hero has demonstrably given way to portrayals of more complex protagonists. In his 2014 article on trends in superhero movies, João de Mancelos notes that “adventures are clearly more centered in the troubled past, frailties and fears, flaws and wishes of the characters. This brings superheroes closer to the audiences, and generates empathy, since idols also deal with issues and dilemmas in their quotidian lives” (169).

that occurred in the 1970s and 1980s (Shaheen 183;¹⁹⁰ 166; Arti 9–17), a consideration of Reagan’s invocation of racist dichotomies between “civilized” and “uncivilized” adversaries can elucidate some of the origins of long-standing conceptions of terrorism as the “warfare of the Other.” In this context, the character of the Joker in *The Dark Knight* will serve as a primary object of scrutiny. As in the previous blockbuster analyses, the “invading Other” is critical for dissecting power dynamics in terms of race, class, gender, space, and ableism.

Ultimately, the drastic changes around the globe since 9/11 call for an inquiry into how the Hollywood blockbuster formula was affected by these developments. Given its unique historical position at the onset of the global financial crisis of 2008 and the election of Barack Obama, Christopher Nolan’s superhero epic can serve as a lens through which to consider several transformations that seemed to call into question whether Reaganite conservatism and neoliberalism were still viable political and cultural forces. Thus, in this chapter, I will determine the extent to which this is mirrored in *The Dark Knight*. In order to trace this film’s historical trajectory, it is important to look at the production context of *The Dark Knight* through an investigation of the technological and economic shifts that affected the superhero cycle in the 2000s.

A New Class of Criminals: The Production Background of *The Dark Knight*

By the late 2000s, the major Hollywood filmmaking studios was encountering increasing competition from new forms of digital and online entertainment. The fast-paced penetration of private and public spaces in the United States, facilitated by DSL and high-speed Internet connections, coincided with the increasing availability of digital photography and film equipment. The arrival of the first mass-produced smartphones in the mid-2000s gave way to a new media-consumption paradigm that favored more bite-sized and personalized forms of entertainment. In addition, self-production and the distribution of one’s own work become significantly easier. The public production of one’s own reality can arguably be regarded as a driving force behind the resurgence of

190 In “Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People,” Jack Shaheen posits that the “[anti-Arab] movies of the 1980s are especially offensive” (183). In addition, David Sirota refers to Shaheen’s research when he states that “more of a third of the most anti-Muslim films of the last century were made in the 1980s alone” (*Back to Our Future* 166). The cinema of the Reagan era therefore occupies a special position in the dissemination of pop culture stereotypes of the Arab and/or Muslim Other.

superhero narratives centered around “average people” suddenly turning into celebrated “enforcers of law and order.”

Nevertheless, the rapid rise of the Internet evoked unease among Hollywood executives, who were concerned about video-on-demand and streaming services inducing potential movie-goers to stay at home. In addition, file-sharing platforms began to flourish, providing access to unauthorized reproductions of cinematic releases. The big studios opted for further vertical integration by buying up online platforms or brokering prominent advertisement deals with websites like YouTube. However, the expansion into overseas markets remained a central market goal. According to film journalist John McDuling:

Non-U.S. moviegoers accounted for about 70 % of global box office receipts last year (which hit \$35.9 billion) compared to about 63 % in 2007. Emerging economies are responsible for most of that growth, and there is plenty of room for more, because there are significantly fewer cinema screens per capita and lower ticket prices in these countries than in the U.S.¹⁹¹

With these changes in mind, many producers and screenwriters began to reorient their efforts toward high-concept films with a more global appeal. The narratives of heroism involving a set of internationally known DC and Marvel comic-book characters emerged as a lucrative avenue for securing a global audience. However, the interconnectedness of fans and movie-goers also led to a simultaneous push toward more niche markets. George Lucas remarked at a panel discussion at the University of Southern California’s School for Cinematic Arts in 2013 that “you can get [movies] whenever you want, and it is going to be niche-marketed which means that you can really take chances and do things if you figure there’s a small group of people that will kind of react to this.”¹⁹²

The opportunity to connect with like-minded fans around the world turned out to be fertile ground for generating a blockbuster success, as critical mass could now be achieved through targeted marketing across the globe. This differed from previous decades, when the focus was on one single market with varied tastes. The necessary delicate balance between satisfying an existing

191 John McDuling, “Hollywood Is Giving Up on Comedy,” *The Atlantic* (July 3, 2014). Accessed August 20, 2018: <<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/07/the-completely-serious-decline-of-the-hollywood-comedy/373914/>>.

192 Garrett Heath, “How Technology is Transforming the Business of Hollywood,” *TNW* (Design & Dev; January 27, 2014). Accessed August 20, 2018: <https://thenextweb.com/dd/2014/01/27/technology-transforming-business-hollywood/#.tnw_XPpIlgXP>.

fan base and acquiring new fan bases could be achieved through larger film franchises that carefully explained origin stories and built on them over multiple sequels. Comic-book heroes and heroines seemed to be made for such a model, as their backstories were already well known among large numbers of enthusiasts, but still unfamiliar to potential new movie-goers.

After director Joss Whedon's first pitch for a reboot of the Batman story was rejected by Warner Bros. in 2002, the studio approached Christopher Nolan and David S. Goyer with the idea for *Batman Begins*.¹⁹³ Nolan's vision of a darker and more realistic Batman movie convinced studio executives, as it offered to capture the post-9/11 mood in a more visceral manner. The resulting first installment of the new *Batman* trilogy was *Batman Begins*, which was released in 2005 to critical acclaim and was a financial success. Film critics noted that this movie—unlike previous installments of the *Batman* franchise—put greater emphasis on themes of collective fear and that it presented its protagonist in a much more ambiguous light, beset by deeper psychological struggles. As film journalist Brian Orndorf explains:

The theme of "Begins" is fear, and how it can affect all creatures regardless of might. From Bruce's conquering of his demons to become Batman to the Scarecrow and his deadly fear toxin (which paralyzes victims into a state of horror), the idea of fear is worked to the bone in "Begins." [...] "Begins" isn't even close to the light fare that Schumacher brought the series back in the mid-1990s, which was layered with camp and one-liners. Nolan's film is more fierce and demonstrative in brood, which gives the film oodles of gravitas and energy, helped along significantly by the propulsive score from Hans Zimmer and James Newton Howard, which oddly eschews traditional heroic themes.¹⁹⁴

While *Batman Begins* focused on the origin story of a haunted superhero, *The Dark Knight* was conceived as the full blossoming of the new franchise, with a star-studded cast, including Christian Bale, who reprised his role as the title character, and Australian actor Heath Ledger, who portrayed the Joker until his early death in January 2008—a few months before the film's release. Consequently, Warner Bros. altered its immense viral marketing campaign,

193 "'Batman' captures director Nolan," *Variety* (January 27, 2003). Accessed August 20, 2018: <<http://variety.com/2003/film/markets-festivals/batman-captures-director-nolan-1117879566/>>.

194 Brian Orndorf, "Thrilling 'Batman Begins' Rebuilds Franchise," *Ohmynews* (June 14, 2005). Accessed August 20, 2018: <https://web.archive.org/web/20151006014859/http://english.ohmynews.com/articleview/article_view.asp?at_code=261720>.

which had featured websites and trailers highlighting the interaction between Batman and the Joker. The integration of contemporary events into promotional strategies was also mirrored by the use of campaign adverts for the fictional character Harvey Dent. This included a true-to-life campaign website emblazoned with the slogan “I Believe in Harvey Dent.” By signing up on this website, fans could receive updates on Dent’s campaign and teaser information on “a movement that will transform our city.”^{195,196} In addition, there are numerous parallels between the fictional Harvey Dent campaign and the real-life presidential bids of that year. The website’s title is reminiscent of Barack Obama’s campaign slogan “Change We Can Believe In” and the newsletter format is a standard feature of both political and promotional campaigns. Much like the Obama campaign, the Harvey Dent campaign emphasized movement politics and digital grassroots efforts (Dillon 174), giving participants the feeling that they could expect not only a movie-viewing experience, but also a transformative spectacle.

The marketing for *The Dark Knight* represents a revelatory point in film history, in that the transfiguration of politics into networked digital spectacles is simultaneously accompanied by the expansion of filmic spectacles into existing major electoral campaigns. Through its focus on the contemporary issues of terrorism, national security, and corporate and organized crime, *The Dark Knight* served as instructive for younger voters, in particular, that both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton were trying to reach. In this context, Douglas Kellner explains how the O.J. Simpson trial in 1995 “could motivate individuals to involve themselves with issues that the case dramatized and arguably had

195 The sign-up option was added on February 29, 2008—just a few weeks after the Super Tuesday primaries, which saw Democratic Party presidential candidates Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton enter a fierce contest (“Harvey Dent Wants You. Dark Knight viral campaign continues,” *IGN* (February 29, 2008). Accessed August 21, 2018: <<https://web.archive.org/web/20080310164107/http://uk.movies.ign.com/articles/855/855926p1.html>>).

196 The “city” as a tangible metaphor for the nation derives from a long-standing tradition in the oratorical history of the United States. Ronald Reagan couched his visions of American exceptionalism and conservative restoration in the parable of the “City upon a Hill” first popularized by John Winthrop (1980, “Election Eve Address”). In the digital promotion of *The Dark Knight*, however, the “city” is expanded to a global audience with online access to the Dent campaign. A crucial element of political discourse in the United States is therefore broadcasted to the world on the terms of spectacle-laden entertainment.

a pedagogical function in educating the public at large about complex issues involving the legal system, police, domestic violence, and police corruption” (*Media Spectacle* 117).

That is not to say that *The Dark Knight* somehow directly influenced the outcome of the 2008 presidential elections. However, the instructive role of the media spectacle in its agenda-setting function has now been amplified as a result of the various digital avenues for user-generated content and networking. Both *The Dark Knight* and Barack Obama’s presidential campaign tapped into critical extensions of the millennial self by creating a form of hybrid spectacle that balanced tested formulas with new technologies.¹⁹⁷

Ultimately, the film returned a massive \$1 billion on a \$185 million budget and received one Academy Award for Best Sound Editing. The score was composed by Hans Zimmer, who had previously enjoyed tremendous success as a result of his work for the Disney movie *The Lion King* in 1994 and the action spectacle *Gladiator* in 2000. As previously noted by film journalist Brian Orndorf, the lack of an optimistic or celebratory score in *The Dark Knight* was notable. The filmmakers opted for a more muted and brooding sound that conveyed an atmosphere of unresolved or continuous conflict. The different acoustic tone was complemented by narrative and technical aspects that signaled a momentous shift in high-concept filmmaking, away from the straightforward heroism of the preceding two decades (Kerstein 143).¹⁹⁸ The following sections will investigate how the content of *The Dark Knight* serves as a climactic prism for the ideological concerns of Hollywood filmmaking in the early twenty-first century.

197 Marshall McLuhan states that “every innovation must pass through a primary phase in which the new effect is secured by the old method, amplified or modified by some new feature” (*Understanding Media* 326).

198 As Benjamin Kerstein notes, the movie ends on a “surprisingly desolate coda” (143).

Film Analysis

“War on Terror” and “Terror War” in *The Dark Knight*

When I take action, I'm not going to fire a \$2 million missile at a \$10 empty tent and hit a camel in the butt. It's going to be decisive.

— George W. Bush in an Oval Office meeting with Senators Hillary Clinton and Charles Schumer, September 13, 2001

The Dark Knight repeatedly confronts the protagonists and ordinary citizens in Gotham City with ethical dilemmas that have potentially devastating outcomes. The exercise of violence is shown to take a heavy toll on the psyche of the protagonists, but also that of the entire city, the apparent social cohesion of which is threatened by theatrical feats of destruction designed to sow division and mistrust. These acts are most carried out by the main antagonist, the anarchist mastermind “The Joker.” This is counterpoised by hidden acts of violence ranging from corruption,¹⁹⁹ to white-collar crime and—ultimately—illegal rendition, torture, and mass surveillance (Ip 214). The intersection of these threads in *The Dark Knight* establishes the theme of violence as a central driving force for both the disruption and the maintenance of the city. Thus, the story can be positioned within discourses of organized violence as a matter of war (Prince, *Firestorm* 17). Crucial in the narration of this “war” are the reactions of both individuals and the general public to the violence being executed against a set of (arbitrary) targets and locations.²⁰⁰ The effect of the war on

199 Kellner notes in his discussion of *The Dark Knight* that “the murky political allegory suggests that going over to the Dark Side twists and corrupts individuals and society. To paraphrase Nietzsche, if you look into the face of a monster long enough you become the monster” (*Cinema Wars* 11).

200 Stephen Prince posits that the 1980s proved to be critical period in redefining the image of terrorism on the big screen: “Since the 1980s, movies about terrorism had been offering audiences the promise of mass destruction as a means of providing entertainment. But before the 1980s this was rare—until then few American films focused on terrorism. Indeed, in comparison with literature, where terrorism is a subject that has interested a great many writers, it occupied a small niche in American cinema until recent years” (*Firestorm* 21). It can be argued that the increased technological capabilities for the cross-media distribution and dissemination of images are implicitly tied to the publicization of political causes by non-state actors (Palmer 119). In this sense, the blockbuster publicity strategy displays a noteworthy overlap with the publicity goals of terrorism in that both seek to reach the largest number of spectators possible.

the mental state of the city is a central source of drama in the movie. This shattering of feelings of safety converges with the conception of terrorism as “the intimidation of a national mind, the paranoid imprisonment of a nation within its own borders (where it considers itself safe)” (Palmer 117). This definition exposes the multi-textuality of terrorism as a vehicle for fear-mongering and the exercise of illegitimate authority—both domestically and internationally. Against the backdrop of Bush’s “War on Terror,” questions arise regarding the abuse of executive power and the mass manipulation of national sentiments as forms of terrorism in themselves.

The Batman also occupies a multi-textual position, as Bruce Wayne/the Batman alternates between different identities and collaborates with the Gotham Police Department without holding an official position. This inserts Bruce Wayne into debates concerning the role of government (as the two previous film analyses have shown, the ineptitude of “big government” is a recurring trope of blockbuster narratives), the role of the gendered “hard body” as a restorative force in the face of racialized Others, and the role of entrepreneurialism within the framework of a neoliberal, consumerist capitalism. The stark dualities within the split character of the Batman demonstrate an ambivalent and fragmented negotiation of these ideological parameters. Thomas Cobb argues that “*The Dark Knight’s* political delineation of 2008 America transcends conventional left-right dichotomies” (57). Yet, against the background of a more comprehensive dissection of anti-terrorism rhetoric stretching back to the Reagan era, it is possible to identify the contours of a specifically neoconservative epistemology of terrorism, one that has its roots in the shift in the media focus from domestic left-wing terrorism in the 1970s toward Islamist, fundamentalist, and state-sponsored political violence from the 1980s onward. This plays a significant role in structuring popular understandings of the supposed roots of terrorism, as well as the ideological orientation of Batman’s character as regards the concept of “war.”

In the film, Bruce Wayne, a.k.a. the Batman, alternates between being a billionaire socialite with a playful and sardonic demeanor and a hard-bodied, tormented, and violent vigilante, who repeatedly bends existing laws while upholding his own golden rule of never killing anyone. This built-in dichotomy mirrors a variety of contradictions inherent in the axiomatic choices an affluent, free, and civilized society must make about how to defend itself against otherized forces that challenge the status quo. This can also be seen as the inescapable duality of the nation as innately violent and incapable of maintaining social hierarchies without overt or hidden forms of coercion. As the analysis in Chapter 2 has shown, the metaphor of “war” acquires a salvaging dimension within this context, as it emphasizes stark moral contrasts, otherizing, and

internal social cohesion (Lakoff, *Thinking Points* 29).²⁰¹ The need for introspection is muted as the violence of the Other is essentialized and decontextualized. The framing of this struggle as a “war” implies a necessary mobilization, irrespective of one’s own political stance or connection with the events. In this sense, Bruce Wayne’s readiness to answer this “call of duty” can be read as virtuous regardless of public mandate or political legitimacy (Suchman 574).²⁰² This aspect plays directly into neoconservative notions whereby supposedly defensive actions precede concerns for procedural legality. The proper intention of saving the nation in times of war provides enough legitimization for the exercise of violence against targets deemed menacing by the “defender.”

The movie contains an in-depth conversation about how authoritarianism seems justified in defense of the nation. In an early scene in an extravagant downtown restaurant, the newly elected district attorney Harvey Dent and his assistant district attorney and fiancée Rachel Dawes are unexpectedly joined by Bruce Wayne, who is accompanied by a Russian ballerina named Natasha. The ensuing dinner conversation about safety and crime in the city quickly evolves into a discussion regarding the legitimacy of vigilantism (at 20:17):

NATASHA: I’m talking about the kind of city that idolizes a masked vigilante.

HARVEY DENT: Gotham’s proud of an ordinary man standing up for what’s right.

NATASHA: Gotham needs heroes like you, elected officials, not a man who thinks he’s above the law.

BRUCE WAYNE: Exactly. Who appointed the Batman?

HARVEY DENT: We did. All of us who stood by and let scum take control of our city.

NATASHA: But this is a democracy, Harvey.

HARVEY DENT: When their enemies were at the gate, the Romans would suspend democracy and appoint one man to protect the city. It wasn’t considered an honor. It was considered public service.

RACHEL DAWES: And the last man they asked to protect the republic was named Caesar. He never gave up that power.

HARVEY DENT: Well, I guess you either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain.

201 Lakoff explains that the “conceptual frame associated with ‘war’ has semantic roles: armies, a fight, a moral crusade, a commander in chief, a capture of territory, the surrender of an enemy, and patriots supporting the troops. ‘War’ implies the necessity of military action. When we’re in a war, all other concerns are secondary” (*Thinking Points* 29).

202 Sociologist Mark Suchman defines legitimacy as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, beliefs and definitions” (574).

Throughout this exchange, the camera frequently focuses on Wayne—especially when he is attentively listening to Dent’s musings on the need for authoritarian leadership in times of crises. The close-up shots of Wayne’s face from a leveled angle accentuate his attentiveness. The low-key lighting emphasizes the contours of Wayne’s body, which are contrasted by the bright interior light of the restaurant hall behind him. These effects implicitly recall the image of the Batman, who is usually clad in dark armor. On a very subtle level, the speech given by Dent finds its answer in the already-present Wayne—since the lighting and the *mise-en-scène* suggest that Wayne is the hypothetical defender that is being talked about. Dent, however, believes himself to be fit for that role, as his subsequent remarks suggest.

On a semantic level, everyone in this dinner conversation accepts that the city is at war (even Natasha affirms the need for a “hero”). The fundamental questions revolve around how that war should be waged and on what legitimate basis. Much like Reagan and Bush, Harvey Dent skillfully weaves objections against vigilantism and authoritarianism into a framework of “good versus evil” (Jackson 18). For example, Dent immediately resorts to moralistic language by describing the Batman as “an ordinary man standing up for what it’s right.” This kind of language is also evident when he talks about “scum” taking over control of the city. In Dent’s narrative, the threat represented by the Other necessitates internal homogeneity. The discursive dynamics of this statement automatically invest the city/nation with virtue and inherent goodness—which find their highest expression in the form of a “strict father” who represents the city/nation. An essential element of Dent’s defense of temporary Roman dictatorship is the rejection of possible alternatives, as the dictator serves out of duty and not out of choice or personal ambition (“It wasn’t considered an honor. It was considered public service”). Yet, Dent acknowledges the fine line between emergency powers and indeterminate dictatorial rule, exposing the lack of detail in his speech. This simple dualism and his vague articulations regarding the limits of power echo much of both Reagan’s and Bush’s war talk. In his analysis of the rhetoric of both presidents, Richard Jackson finds that

both discourses are noteworthy for their hybridity and the ease with which they weave disparate narratives into a single seamless story of the good fight against terrorism/barbarism/evil. [...] At the same time, the two discourses are noted for their opacity; most of the key terms and phrases are never properly defined or explained, which results in their meanings having to be assumed or inferred through the context in which they occur. (18)

Within the context of a racialized Other, in particular, the language of threat and war acquires a self-perpetuating and indeterminate quality, as racial othering asserts moral absolutes that are inscribed onto bodies that are—subsequently—seen as unalterable. Ultimately, the movie endorses the “war” frame without engaging in significant exploration of alternative strategies, which is reminiscent of the Thatcherite credo “There is no alternative.”²⁰³

It is also important to note the gendered language, which explicitly refers to men as naturalized defenders of the city. Despite neither Natasha nor Dent knowing the real identity of the Batman, his gender is already coded as male—reinforcing the notion of war as a competition of masculinity. Both Reagan and Bush often made references to “servicemen” when lauding their wars. These gendered references were complemented by the construction of final battles as an exclusively male domain. This form of an “ultimate masculine showdown” has already been shown to be a permanent feature of the blockbuster movies analyzed in this book (especially with regard to the “Reaganite female” in *Independence Day*; Kellner, *Media Culture* 78). As Roland Barthes notes, mythical language is a “way of talking about things” and the gendered vocabulary used by the movie and politicians serves to reify institutionalized venues for imagining war. While the heroic body does not have to be of the male sex, the masculinity of the hero is still a pertinent feature in the construction of heroism (Halberstam 147).²⁰⁴

As noted in Chapter 2, the figure of the hero serves to semantically institutionalize the notion of war—tacitly sidelining competing epistemologies of conflict. Joseph H. Campos II remarks on the connection between “heroic imagery” and Reagan’s counter-terrorism language in the context of an alleged “strengthening of the national security state” as a form of social control:

In the face of tragedy (violence produced by terrorism), the American democratic historical imagination provided, (and still provides) a spacio-temporal site for the production of heroes. This creation of heroism allows the discourse of national security to gain hold in the consciousness of the citizenry enabling continued manipulation and

203 Thomas Cobb points out that “*The Dark Knight* disparages Batman’s techniques but also posits no other real alternative to the strategies of the titular character” (70).

204 Jack Halberstam notes in this respect that “the politics of masculinity, as opposed to the politics of gay social movements or the politics of gender variance, names a political strand that can easily incorporate forms of female and male masculinism while casting all feminine identification as a source of inferiority and as contrary to the nation state” (147).

appropriation of terrorism. President Reagan cemented this celebration of heroism by again stressing the barbaric and vicious nature of terrorists, when he commented at a ceremony honoring the victims on 23 April 1983. (50)

The constructed necessity for a vigilante in the movie highlights the existence of a binary ideological framework whereby the hero can only be effectively virtuous when the forces opposing the protagonist are unmistakably “barbaric and vicious.” Yet, the vigilante aspect of the Batman suggests the incapability of official law enforcement and state authorities to deal with whatever threatening force the city is confronted with. As noted in Chapter 2, the “war” frame serves as an overriding mythology that legitimizes large-scale and high-tech military responses embodied by an idealized integrative figure, who seems “indestructible”—a Reaganite “hard body” who offers social cohesion at a time when conventional bureaucracy has failed.

Therefore, the fundamental issues of “who” defends “whom” from “what” are a prevalent source of debate within *The Dark Knight*. This leads to disagreements, which result in the splintering of the city’s response to organized crime at the beginning of the movie. This ties in with the gradual evolution of a war-like atmosphere in Gotham City, as the forces opposed to the status quo become increasingly consolidated in the figure of the Joker. The film begins with an elaborate bank heist, in which the bank robbers successively betray and murder each other. Ultimately, the Joker emerges as the sole survivor of this episode, which leaves him with the money and significant leverage in the world of organized crime in Gotham City. However, the principal good-versus-evil dichotomy has not yet been established within the movie. This affects discussions of whether the city is at war and who needs to be mobilized against the existing conventional forces of evil. In one of the early scenes, the invocation of the “war” frame is treated with suspicion by the Batman, who prefers to go it alone in his fight against mob activities. A brief exchange with one of several “Batman impostors,” who fail to disturb a transaction by the Chechen mafia, illustrates that even prior to the advent of the nihilistic Joker, there was a sense that a violent conflict was playing out in the city (at 10:18):

BATMAN: Don’t let me find you out here again.

FAKE BATMAN: We’re trying to help you!

BATMAN: I don’t need help.

SCARECROW: Not my diagnosis.

BATMAN: Don’t let me find you out here again.

(*Batman walks toward the Batmobile.*)

FAKE BATMAN: You need us! There’s only one of you—it’s war out here!

(Batman enters the Batmobile.)

FAKE BATMAN (continued): What gives you the right?! What’s the difference between you and me?!

BATMAN: I’m not wearing hockey pads. *(The roof of the Batmobile automatically covers Batman’s head. He drives off.)*

In the scene, the fake Batmans are tied down and sitting on the ground, while the real Batman barely acknowledges them with a look. On his way to the Batmobile, we only see his back, which suggests that—although difficult ethical dilemmas are brought to his attention—he is already moving on to fight the next battle against evil. Evidently too busy to think about such philosophical repercussions, the Batman seems to be constantly engaged in his struggle against a social scourge. It is noteworthy that the Batman does not refute the notion that society is at war: He neither explicitly negates nor confirms the statement that “it’s war out here.” However, it can be reasonably argued that, through disregarding the question of what gives him the right to be a vigilante, he makes it clear that no one should fight this “war” as he does.

In this scene, distinctions are drawn between the Batman and his copycats through both actions and dialogue. The fake heroes attack the Chechen mobsters with conventional arms, which prove no match for the highly trained villains. The Batman, however, interrupts the scene by first sending in his high-tech Batmobile as a decoy and then proceeding to chase the fleeing gangsters using sophisticated gimmicks in his Bat-Suit (e.g. extendable hooks that allow him to hang on to a driving van during the pursuit). The convergence of the performance of unrelenting determination and sophisticated, flexible technology lends the protagonist an aura of hyper-masculine technocapitalism. Bruce Wayne outcompetes not only racialized villains, but also “insufficient vigilantes” by upgrading and extending his masculine body through state-of-the-art technology. This self-optimization is the direct result of his entrepreneurial activities with Wayne Enterprises, which again highlights the connection between unfettered capitalism and a post-Fordist, customized military capability. This connection was observable in *Independence Day*, in conjunction with Reagan’s SDI rhetoric. In the movie, the defeat of the invading aliens was mainly brought about by capitalist ingenuity. Thus, by virtue of owning an inherited high-tech corporation and an abled body, Wayne is in a privileged position to participate in the “war”-like scenario. The protagonist highlights his superior masculinity when he

declares that he is “not wearing hockey pads,” relegating the impostors’ performance to the realm of the recreational and the physically sensitive.

In the first third of the movie, the focus of law enforcement remains on mob activities and Dent’s desire to suppress international money laundering. During the bank heist in the opening scenes, the Joker kills fellow robbers and at least one bank employee. The character is thereby placed within the profit-oriented framework of organized crime. Despite the murder of civilians and the theatrical overtones of the Joker’s early actions, the movie shies away from portraying the city as gripped by a sense of “fear” or “intimidation.” As the Joker’s antics in the bank scene are not visible to a large audience, his potential to terrorize a critical mass of people still lies dormant and is confined by the interests of the mob. It is only when the Joker breaks away from the mob and establishes himself as an independent force in Gotham City that the tone of the city’s political discourses irreversibly changes.²⁰⁵ In his analysis of the Batman’s “War on Terror,” Benjamin Kerstein observes:

[T]hough Gotham City is defiant at first, the escalating violence soon leads the citizenry to despair and defeatism. As their usual methods fail one by one, the police begin to resort to increasingly aggressive and potentially dangerous tactics, such as torture, endangering innocent people, and deceiving the media and the public. (140)

After the Joker assassinates Police Commissioner Gillian B. Loeb and Judge Surillo, the city is more and more exposed to seemingly erratic violence that is designed to reach a mass audience. The Joker storms an elegant dinner party, dedicated to Harvey Dent, with a crew of armed associates. He immediately emphasizes the desire for attention and centrality by declaring, “Ladies and Gentlemen. We are tonight’s entertainment.” He strolls past a large number of guests, who look at him with expressions of horror, disgust, and fear. A dolly shot, which follows the Joker through the room in an unsteady manner, accentuates how he has become an unexpected center of attention. During this performance, the Joker attracts attention even from those who previously felt they were irrelevant to his actions and/or goals. Yet, he makes it clear in his opening statement that the spectatorship of everyone is demanded and

205 George Lakoff explains that “as in any war, the enemy must be defeated. But ‘terror’ is not actually an army—it is a state of mind. As such, it cannot be beaten on any field of battle. It is an emotion. Moreover, the ‘War on Terror’ frame is self-perpetuating; merely being in a war scares citizens, and reiteration of the frame creates more fear. So there is no end to the ‘War on Terror’, because you can’t permanently capture and defeat an emotion” (*Thinking Points* 29–30).

instrumental in the implementation of his scheme. This grabbing of attention turns all spectators into involuntary combatants who need to respond in one way or another. The massive psychological invasion of a public mindset results in a sense of widespread beleaguering and necessitates a response. Simply dismissing the Joker is not a viable option in this situation, nor is it enough to oppose him verbally. This is shown in the dinner scene, when the Joker demands to know where Harvey Dent is. He is suddenly confronted by an elderly man, who stands in opposition to the climate of fear that is being created (at 49:16):

THE JOKER: I only have one question: where is Harvey Dent? (*Silence.*) I'll settle for his loved ones...

ELDERLY MAN: We're not intimidated by thugs.

THE JOKER: You know, you remind me of my father. (*He violently grabs the man by his head and pulls out a knife.*) I hated my father.

(*The elderly man's facial expression is one of fear and intimidation while the Joker holds the blade toward the man's mouth.*)

RACHEL DAWES: Okay, stop!

The ineffectiveness of the elderly man's resistance conveys that reacting to terrorist threats with a calm demeanor is insufficient, which echoes Reagan's criticism of Jimmy Carter's actions during the Iranian hostage crisis.²⁰⁶ Moreover, the Joker's designation of the aged man as reminiscent of his father reactivates the recurrent theme of the restoration of the father (Wood, 153–155). The original father—as represented by the elderly man—proves no match for the game the Joker is trying to instigate. Ultimately, the feeling of terror designed by the Joker represents paralysis through spectacle. The villain proceeds to intimidate Dawes (see Figure 10). The assistant district attorney is immediately sexualized and spoken of in relation to Harvey Dent (at 50:25):

THE JOKER: Well hello, beautiful. You must be Harvey's squeeze. (*He walks to her and grabs her head. She now has a visibly distraught look on her face.*)

206 Interestingly, the elderly man is portrayed by real-life US Senator Patrick Leahy from Vermont. Leahy is a long-time progressive voice in the Senate, who has vocally opposed the war in Iraq, the detention center in Guantanamo Bay, and the PATRIOT Act. The choice to cast Leahy in the role of a dissenter resisting the Joker creates an interesting ideological prism. On the one hand, his opposition can be read as a well-intentioned, but ultimately insufficient effort to resist foreign terrorism. But, on the other hand, it can be interpreted as standing up to the fearmongering and dismantling of civil liberties by the Bush administration. In both cases, Leahy's stance did not fully prevent the bully from proceeding.



Figure 10: Rachel Dawes is held in a tight grip by the Joker. Her fearful expression is immediately succeeded by the Batman's determined intervention.

THE JOKER (*continues*): And you are beautiful. You look nervous—it's the scars isn't it?
 (*The Joker then relates a story of how his wife has left him.*)

THE JOKER: She leaves! See, now I see the funny side. Now I'm always smiling.
 (*He raises the knife up to her cheek. She delivers a punch to his stomach.*)

THE JOKER: A little fight in you. I like that.

BATMAN (*bursting into the scene and punching the Joker in the face*): Then you're gonna love me!

In the ensuing fistfight, the Batman manages to knock down the Joker and violently disarm his associates. Thus, the line “Then you're gonna love me!” operates as an ironic statement by someone who appears to be foiling the Joker's plans, but also as a vindication of the Joker's desire to provoke a violent reaction (“A little fight in you. I like that”). Nevertheless, the Batman fully buys into the war frame, as postulated by the Joker, playing the game on his terms.

In this first direct confrontation between the Batman and the Joker, the protagonist is constructed through the performance of hyper-masculinity and technological advantage (e.g. the Bat-suit protects Bruce Wayne when the Joker attempts to stab him with a knife hidden in his shoe). In addition to serving as a hard-bodied counter-figure to the elderly and frightened man at the party, the Batman is contrasted with Rachel Dawes. The assistant district attorney remains confined to performing within the parameters of a “damsel in distress.” Her punching the Joker in the stomach does little to disrupt his performance

and is, in fact, greeted with delight on his part. The forceful intervention of the Batman, however, puts at least a temporary end to the Joker’s reign of terror at the party. Several discourses intersect at this junction: The dramatic arrival of the Joker proves the irrelevance and ineffectiveness of the “old father,” who merely opposes the villain using words (from a Reaganite point of view, an “obsolete, well-meaning liberal” in the vein of Jimmy Carter). The newly elected “father,” Harvey Dent, who is a member of the bureaucracy, is not present. The representative of female participation in the male workplace, Rachel Dawes, attempts to exude authority, but is ineffectual against the threat posed by the Other.²⁰⁷ This gendered power constellation was also visible in *E.T.*, in which Mary was not able to protect the family from the government. The demise of “old liberalism,” feminism, and “big government” accords with neoconservative mythologies, as stipulated by both the Reagan and the Bush administrations. As discussed in Chapter 2, the persistence of terrorism was tied to a sense of “paralysis” among those targeted (in this case, Western nations):

From this viewpoint, overcoming such paralysis is of paramount importance in the fight against terrorism, which is why a hero figure needs to appear as a visibly active catalyst for change. This change, however, comes in the form of a disavowal of liberal or feminist forces, which are excluded on ageist and sexist grounds. In this particular scene of *The Dark Knight*, change is inscribed on two bodies: the aberrant body of the Joker, who exposes the paralysis present in Gotham City, and the hard-bodied, white male, as represented by the Batman. The unavoidable war is now taking place between them.

Even if one were to interpret the scene in an opposite way, by reading the Joker as representing the Bush administration as a purveyor of fear and

207 Rachel Dawes reflects the notion of a career-oriented and competitive “Reaganite female” (Kellner, *Media Culture* 78). While Dawes is initially portrayed as a determined assistant district attorney, her subsequent abduction by the Joker renders her a “damsel in distress.” The restoration of Dent’s public image through Batman’s volunteering to be scapegoated for his crimes is critical to the maintenance of public peace and a sense of “hope” in Gotham City. However, Rachel Dawes’ assistance in tracking down mobsters and her subsequent death are of minor importance for this narrative of social cohesion. Throughout the movie, she consistently performs in her capacity as an elected public servant, while the Batman and Harvey Dent/Two-Face ultimately wage their war outside the parameters of institutionalized bureaucracies. The discursive confluence between feminist advances and bureaucratic inefficiency is a recurrent sub-plot for Reaganite heroes battling terrorists and/or otherized villains (e.g. in the movie *Die Hard* (1988); Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 60).

violence (Aly; Fradley 16),²⁰⁸ chief elements of the Reaganite hard-bodied hero would still survive. In this scene, the only effective pushback against the villainous quasi-fascism of the Bush regime would still rest on manifestations of masculine impenetrability, rugged individualism (as the Batman fights the Joker's gang all by himself), a capitalist-driven "hard body," and the portrayal of professional female characters as ultimately unable to fill out the role of the defender. This narrative constellation exposes the contours of a Hollywood blockbuster heroism that frequently reproduces reactionary sensitivities on which the Reagan revolution was largely built (Kellner and Ryan 219).²⁰⁹ This observation partially clashes with Douglas Kellner's contention that, unlike the "superhero films of the late 1970s and 1980s," which helped to "fuel Reaganite conservatism" (Kellner and Ryan 217), "some of the superhero films of the last years of the Bush–Cheney administration, by contrast, can be read as a critique of the failed conservative regime" (Kellner, *Cinema Wars* 9). Kellner nominates *The Dark Knight* as an example for this argument. Yet, it is important to fully contextualize the unfolding of social dynamics—especially in relation to race, class, and gender—as the selected foci can expose ideological constants that prevail despite oppositional readings.

Ultimately, the Batman's intervention at the dinner party only yields temporary relief, as the following scenes make it clear that Gotham City is gripped by an increasingly paranoid atmosphere, with entire law enforcement agencies adopting the "war" metaphor. During a huge police march in the downtown area, several snipers are positioned on rooftops and fire escape stairs, nervously scanning the crowds. The tense anticipation of a possible attack by the Joker leads

208 In his article "A Dark Knight for Politics" (October 4, 2008), Waleed Aly rightly highlights several narrative stumbling blocks that prevent a reading of *The Dark Knight* as a full vindication of Bush's neo-conservatism; for example, the (much) stricter moral code of the Batman in comparison to the Bush administration and the fact that Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda were grounded in more coherent political rationales than the Joker. However, this reading casts mythical images as full signifiers in the Barthesian sense, that is, with a disposition to decode the myth. The perceived self-restraint of the protagonist and the irrationality of the villain in *The Dark Knight* can very well act as mythical signifiers that align with how the Bush administration narrated its own "Terror War." This can serve to visually reproduce the myths that the Bush regime sought to project in public (Kellner, *Cinema Wars* 108–109).

209 Kellner and Ryan describe the quintessential Reagan-era hero as the "Patriarch, Entrepreneur, Warrior" (219).

to a form of securitization of society that parallels the Bush administration’s response to attacks like 9/11. In a progression from Reagan’s counter-terrorism language, the ubiquitous domestic surveillance of public spaces and the indefinite character of this collective state of fear highlight Bush’s construction of the “War on Terror” as an endurance trial: “Look, this has been a long, difficult experience for the American people. I can assure you al-Qaida, who would like to attack us again, have got plenty of patience and persistence. And the question is, will we?”²¹⁰

The anticipation of a new strike thus strengthens both the sense of an omnipresent menace, as desired by the Joker, and the responding law enforcement agencies’ requests for increased powers, equipment, and public monitoring. The movie offers a response to debates surrounding the buildup of a national security state during the Bush–Cheney years in the form of a eulogy delivered by Mayor Anthony Garcia in honor of Gillian Loeb:

Clearly he was not a man who minced words, nor should he have been. A number of policies that he enacted as commissioner were unpopular. Policies that flooded my office with angry calls and letters [...] and as we recognize the sacrifice of these officers, we must remember that vigilance is the price of safety.

Delivered with solemn confidence, the mayor’s speech seems to echo Bush’s rhetoric on “patience,” while also tying national resolve to the acceptance of “unpopular policies,” which can arguably be interpreted as relating to the expansion of executive powers. However, the filmic narrative dissolves the confidence that the mayor is trying to foster in stronger securitization. The Joker disrupts the ceremony disguised as a policeman. At the end of the speech, during a gun salute for the late Loeb, Bruce Wayne discovers that the Joker and his accomplices managed to kidnap several police officers and have taken their places in the parade. The Joker has even managed to gain a spot in the honor guard that delivers the final gun salute. He turns his gun toward the mayor and fires one shot, injuring James Gordon. In the ensuing chaos, he and his helpers manage to escape. This scene reveals that the versatile Joker can dupe the heavily armed police apparatus, thereby offering a drastic critique of the effectiveness of securitization (Payne 16).²¹¹ It becomes apparent that the

210 “President Bush Links War in Iraq to War on Terrorism,” Interview between Ray Suarez and President Bush, *PBS News Hour* (May 24, 2007). Accessed August 30, 2018: <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/white_house-jan-june07-terrorism_05-24/>.

211 The inefficacy of the national security state is further accentuated by the fact that the Joker uses simple weaponry to unleash his mayhem. Rodger Payne notes that “like

military-style response by the government has created a large and inflexible entity that is inefficient at tracking down single individuals. Moreover, the subversion of the police signals a collapse of trust even in those agencies that are tasked with upholding public safety. Thus, the Manichean imagery employed by both Reagan and Bush suffers a visual disruption as the supposed enemy can easily don the uniform and assume the appearance of the protagonists. Therefore, the portrayal of the internal contradictions—if not the “collapse”—of legitimizing narratives for counter-terrorism draws attention to one of the central domestic controversies regarding the “Terror War”: the buildup of a massive surveillance state.

A key scene in the movie exemplifies how the infringement of civil rights is limited by vague invocations of “good character” and moral fiber reminiscent of the “strict father.” Lucius Fox and the Batman engage in a serious exchange in the research and development lab of Wayne Enterprises when it becomes apparent to Fox that the Batman has repurposed his sonar concept to scan through phone conversations throughout the city. The scene starts out with the Batman looking at a large digital screen made up of myriads of individual LCD displays—each one broadcasting a live transmission of people being monitored (at 1:55:45):

BATMAN: Beautiful. Isn't it?

(Fox first nods, but then discovers what is projected on the monitors.)

LUCIUS FOX: Beautiful. Unethical. Dangerous. You've turned every phone in the city into a microphone...

BATMAN: And high frequency generator/receiver.

LUCIUS FOX: Like the phone I gave you in Hong Kong. You took my sonar concept and applied it to everybody's phone in the city. With half the city feeding you sonar you can image all of Gotham. *(He turns to Batman.)* This is wrong.

BATMAN: I've got to find this man, Lucius.

LUCIUS FOX: But at what cost?

BATMAN: The database is null-key encrypted. It can only be accessed by one person.

LUCIUS FOX *(shakes his head)*: “This is too much power for one person.”

most contemporary terrorists, the Joker employs fairly basic technologies to exploit power asymmetries. Much of the havoc Joker creates is triggered by his application of relatively mundane and readily available weapons—his favorite weapon seems to be the knife and he often looks awkward wielding automatic weapons” (16).

BATMAN: That’s why I gave it to you. (*Fox turns to the Batman with a surprised look on his face.*) Only you can use it.

LUCIUS FOX: Spying on thirty million people isn’t part of my job description.

The alternating medium close-ups of the two characters gradually shift toward close-ups, revealing the bewilderment in Fox’s face and the stern determination in Batman’s face. The dark and secluded nature of the lab underscore an atmosphere of secrecy and confidentiality, while the multiple screens—tracking millions of conversations simultaneously—belie the notion that a single individual could efficiently process this information in a short time frame.

In this scene, it becomes clear that the movie’s attitude toward mass surveillance is ambiguous and can aptly be described as being in a “moral gray zone.” Fox voices his discomfort with this kind of monitoring, but the undeterred and consequentialist attitude of the Batman reinforce his aura as a practical “doer,” unconcerned with the intricacies of ethics and legality. This seems to echo George Lakoff’s description of the conservative “strict father model,” in which the patriarch is not supposed to ponder the law, but should enforce it as he sees fit. It also parallels the decoding of the Batman offered by Justine Toh, who locates the character in a discourse of “redemptive hard-body” conservatism associated with 1980s action cinema. Martin Fradley summarizes Justine’s Toh’s compelling argument:

Bruce Wayne is ultimately a regressive Reaganite throwback, the hard-bodied representative of a neoconservative political regime “that regards its body politic as the ‘great unwashed’ where citizens are incapable of governing their own affairs and need a strong, conservative leader” (Toh 135; Fradley 18).

Thus, the narrative logic suggests a reiteration of the “small-government” rhetoric put forward by Reagan, the true conservative hero who stands above the bureaucratic apparatus,²¹² as well as the common mass of people (“I’m not wearing hockey pads”). Apparently, the individual can bypass both bureaucracy and limits imposed by the constitutional framework as long as this person cultivates “proper character” in accordance with the “strict father” model. The Batman steps into the mold by re-enacting the conservative “hard body” and displaying moral discernment by giving Lucius Fox—a character who has

212 As the Batman is positioned to become the emergency dictator that Harvey Dent lauds in the dinner conversation early in the movie. Dent, as an elected official, is ultimately unable to unseat the Batman.

been established as trustworthy and conscientious—control of his monitoring program.

Within the context of the counter-terrorism rhetoric used by the Bush administration, the scene acquires a sense of urgency as a result of tangible threats. The lead-up to and aftermath of the scene make it clear that the Joker will strike again soon. This contrasts with Reagan's language, which usually referred to terrorism as a global threat, but rarely as a domestically imminent threat.²¹³ However, within the framework of the Bush administration, references were constantly made to impending attacks on US soil to legitimize militaristic and unconstitutional actions. These actions were embedded within a logic of necessity whereby a utilitarian choice was inescapable. Bush's defense of the PATRIOT Act in a weekly radio address in December of 2005 exemplifies this line of thinking:

The PATRIOT Act has accomplished exactly what it was designed to do: It has protected American liberty and saved American lives. Yet key provisions of this law are set to expire in 2 weeks. The terrorist threat to our country will not expire in 2 weeks. The terrorists want to attack America again and inflict even greater damage than they did on September the 11th.²¹⁴

The teleological focus on the "purpose" of the PATRIOT Act, combined with the explicit threat of another attack, aims at reducing the scope of debates concerning legality. Instead, the image of a pre-emptive and determined leader comes to the forefront. This is analogous to the widespread public perception of Reagan as a "cowboy-style" enforcer, who "shoots first and asks later" (Golway 51). In line with the Reaganite "hard body," Bush assumes the role of an initiator of action and not an initiator of debate or negotiation.²¹⁵ He goes on to defend the wiretapping provisions in the PATRIOT Act: "This is a highly classified program that is crucial to our national security. Its purpose is to detect and prevent terrorist attacks against the United States, our friends, and allies." The

213 One of these occasions was Reagan's address on the bombing of Tripoli in 1986, when he claimed: "Our evidence is direct, it is precise, it is irrefutable. We have solid evidence about other attacks Qaddafi has planned against the United States' installations and diplomats and even American tourists" (Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the United States Air Strike Against Libya," April 14, 1986).

214 George W. Bush, "The President's Radio Address—December 17, 2005" (December 17, 2005).

215 This runs parallel to how the Batman declines to engage in any kind of debate on why he deems his vigilantism legitimate.

executive branch is therefore entitled not only to use these measures, but also to do so in secret, without any form of external oversight. In *The Dark Knight*, however, the existence of the Batman’s surveillance program is never made public, which restricts the presented viewpoints to those who are familiar with it. The spied-upon people are left without a voice, which delegates judgment on to the viewer. This clashes with neoconservative justifications of unconstitutional practices, which were presented by Bush as stemming from a purported public mandate:

This authorization is a vital tool in our war against the terrorists. It is critical to saving American lives. The American people expect me to do everything in my power under our laws and Constitution to protect them and their civil liberties. And that is exactly what I will continue to do, so long as I’m the President of the United States.

This contrasts with the Batman’s sober defense of his mass spying: “I’ve got to find this man, Lucius.” The lack of any reference to a public mandate recasts this pursuit as a personal battle between the Batman and the Joker. The fact that the protagonist does not claim to have popular support perpetuates the impression that the use of illegal techniques in the fight against terrorism results from the oversights of individuals—one of the preferred apologies of the Bush administration.²¹⁶ However, it also deflects suspicion away from government activities within the film, as the Batman operates outside out of law enforcement. Eventually, the Batman does claim responsibility for the murders committed by Harvey Dent. However, he never acknowledges the illegality of his wiretapping, which was conducted in secret. Since the viewer is aware of these activities, the film implicitly allows for pessimism regarding the ethics of the Batman’s conduct. However, as pointed out by Martin Fradley (18), the movie shies away from a condemnation of these illegal practices.²¹⁷ The idea of a Platonian “noble lie” intended to “defend society” is never challenged.

This lends weight to Slavoj Žižek’s analysis of *The Dark Knight* as a “conservative fable” that supports the notion that a “politician should be a cynicist” (Žižek, *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology* at 1:31:20). As in the Iran–Contra affair

216 An infamous example is the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, in which the Department of Defense under Donald Rumsfeld attempted to deny any direct involvement or responsibility (Michelle Brown, “‘Setting the Conditions’ for Abu Ghraib: The Prison Nation Abroad” 973–999).

217 Fradley argues that “Kellner’s reading of the film as covertly progressive evades the more obvious truth that *The Dark Knight* systematically fails to condemn torture per se as amoral, ethical, and political obscenity” (18).

and the Bush administration's "Terror War," the government will only admit to those wrongdoings that cannot be plausibly denied. Therefore, *The Dark Knight* serves as a multi-faceted and uncommitted parable of the "War on Terror." The fact that the movie fails to clearly condemn illegal and immoral practices and instead presents them within the limitations of ethical dilemmas ("the ticking bomb," Yin 282–285) is, however, representative of a tradition of action and disaster movies that have dramatized moral conflicts within law enforcement in a consequentialist manner.²¹⁸ In a sense, it can be argued that the national discourse in the post-9/11 climate has finally caught up with the earlier Hollywood imagination.²¹⁹

The "ticking bomb" – in connection with political cynicism – is presented in an explicit form in the torture scene, in which the Batman brutally beats up the Joker in an interrogation room.²²⁰ Several mythologies concerning the relationship between violence and the social order are evoked in the preceding conversation between the two (at 1:28:12):

BATMAN: You're garbage who kills for money.

THE JOKER: Don't talk like one of them—you're not, even if you'd like to be. To them you're a freak like me ... they just need you right now. But as soon as they don't, they'll cast you out like a leper. Their morals, their code ... it's a bad joke. Dropped at the first sign of trouble. They're only as good as the world allows them to be. You'll see—I'll show you ... when the chips are down, these civilized people ... they'll eat each other.

(The Joker grins at the Batman, who then violently grabs him and pulls him upright.)

In this scene, the camera alternates between extreme close-ups of the Joker's face and the Batman's face. Both characters are seated at a table opposite each

218 A few cinematic examples include *Dirty Harry* (1971), *Lethal Weapon* (1986), *Se7en* (1995), *L.A. Confidential* (1997), and *The Siege* (1998).

219 Journalist Glenn Greenwald points out that Reagan's categorical rejection of torture "with no exceptional circumstances, whether a state of war or a threat or war," in 1988 would be considered a "hard left" position in conservative circles in 2009. Glenn Greenwald, "Ronald Reagan: vengeful, score-settling, Hard Left ideologue," *Salon.com* (May 1, 2009). Accessed September 4, 2018: <<http://www.salon.com/2009/05/01/shifts/>>.

220 The Joker is briefly in police custody after James Gordon manages to apprehend him following the failed assassination attempt on Mayor Garcia. Later, it turns out that this was part of the Joker's scheme to mislead the Batman, so he would rescue Harvey Dent instead of Rachel Dawes.

other. The camerawork captures the broad range of vivid facial expressions employed by the Joker. The villain seems energetic, leaning forward and using gestures to drive home his point. The hero, on the other hand, remains static. The Batman’s partially obscured face seems to express stoic anger and disapproval. The difference in physical range and performance contributes to a visual clash in which an erratic force encounters firm resistance. Yet, this is ultimately upended when the Batman begins his brutal interrogation, confirming that the war is already in full effect.

The Joker’s nihilist musings reveal patterns that call the rule of law into question and establish the notion of the emergency (“when the chips are down”) as a litmus test for adherence to liberal democratic principles. In this argument, the “war” frame exposes naturalized tendencies toward authoritarianism and strict patriarchal hierarchies.²²¹ Interestingly, this affirms Harvey Dent’s idea that democracy must be suspended in times of war. Benjamin Kerstein concludes that this indicates “a secret lack of faith in the institutions he [Dent] represents” (141). Not only does this converge with the Joker’s suspicion that any benign government will eventually become corrupted, but it confers the hero with temporary special powers—provided that this hero vigorously circumvents the rule of law (“To them you’re a freak like me ... they just need you right now”).

This mythology of heroism creates a narrative space wherein the unlawful protagonist is necessary for the defense of the nation, yet disposable and condemnable after the fact. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the Reagan administration operated on a similar premise when trying to diminish the impact of the Iran–Contra scandal. Using consequentialist logic, it was admitted that the president’s actions were unlawful, yet they were framed as virtuous in the larger framework of war (in this case, the “Cold War”). This mythology allows for an interpretation of Reagan as an unjustly castigated hero, who performed a service for society by bypassing constitutional procedure and the law itself. As noted in Chapter 2, Roland Barthes’ idea of the narrator/mythologist as a haunted and isolated figure is fully realized in *The Dark Knight*’s depiction of the Batman: “the mythologist is excluded from this history in the name of which he professes to act. [...] For him, tomorrow’s positivity is entirely hidden by today’s negativity. All the values of his undertaking appear to him as acts of destruction” (158).

221 Douglas Kellner explains that “[p]art of the reason why people supported the Gulf War has to do with what might be called ‘territorial herd instincts’. When a country is at war and in danger people tend to support their government and pull together” (*Media Culture* 214).

The public performance of virtue in the fight against terrorism can therefore be narratively tied to a ritualized expulsion of the hero, leading to a heavily distorted mythology that legitimizes executive abuses of power and militarist projects against racialized Others. The public castigation of such abuses ironically feeds into the mythology of a downtrodden defender of society. Given that *The Dark Knight* was released in the final year of the Bush administration, it can be maintained that the movie adeptly picked up on the declining support for Bush's "War on Terror" by presenting a narrative that allows for the negotiation of national disillusion by resorting to the figure of the isolated and hard-bodied male hero. This hero faces not only threatening racial Others and an inept bureaucratic apparatus, but a dishonest society at large, which denies him his hero status in the end.

This departs from the general trend of 1980s action movies, in which the protagonist(s) eventually returns to fame, glory, and social acceptance.²²² Instead, *The Dark Knight* aligns more with a precursor to Reagan-era cinema: *Dirty Harry* (1971). Harry Callahan, the main character in *Dirty Harry*, boasts the hard-bodied, racist, misogynistic, and anti-government inclinations of succeeding Reaganite cinematic heroes. Yet, Callahan is denied a social rehabilitation in the end. Susan Jeffords deduces that "[t]hrough Callahan 'solves' the crimes by killing the culprits, the institutions that enabled these criminals to operate in the first place retain power, and the incompetent individuals who run them remain in charge" (*Hard Bodies* 18). However, the right-wing reboot of the 1980s allowed for a new conception of hard-bodied heroes as both restorative and transformative:

It is this edge—that institutions had been misdirected by self-serving government officials—that enables the films of the 1980s to retain a certain sense of social cohesion despite the hero's need to defy many of society's chief institutions. Because individuals have come to misuse government institutions, the institutions themselves cannot be blamed for the failure and can be resuscitated, often by the hard-bodied heroes themselves. (19)

Unlike the previous protagonists analyzed in this book, the Batman neither obsolesces government bureaucracy—as in *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial*—nor does he transform it into an efficient institution—as in *Independence Day*. The accumulation of capital, as represented by Bruce Wayne, is enough to fend off external threats through high-tech spectacles, for example, the capture of Boris

²²² Notable examples include *Indiana Jones*, *Beverly Hills Cop*, *Lethal Weapon*, *Back to the Future*, *Die Hard*, *Top Gun*, and *Ghostbusters*.

Lau in Hong Kong, yet it is also shown to result in significant potential for the abuse of power, for example, through mass surveillance. At this junction, the increasing discomfort with the excesses of neoliberalism in the late 2000s intersects with concerns about the growing influence of information technology on the private and public spheres. While it is true, as Kellner notes, that “the synthesis of global corporate capitalism and information and entertainment technologies is constructing novel forms of society and culture, controlled by capital and with global reach” (*Media Spectacle* 14), a cinematic negotiation of its more blatantly evident excesses is inevitable in early twenty-first-century blockbuster filmmaking.

Subsequently, the contradictions arising from neoliberal capitalism, the technologically enhanced national security state, and the illegalities of the “Terror War” are resolved in Gotham City through a recourse to the original hero narrative presented by Harvey Dent. This is crucial in the context of this analysis, as there are significant parallels between Dent’s political ascent and Reagan’s 1980 campaign. Both run on a “law-and-order” platform. Both employ a spirit of optimism in their public speeches, emphasizing a better tomorrow. Both run as self-proclaimed outsiders to a “political elite” that they declare corrupt and in need of transformation. Both lace their public performances with entertaining quips, and both declare war on racialized foes, especially in the inner city. Thus, viewing Dent through a Reaganite lens reveals interesting correlations with 2008 presidential campaigns. After all, Thomas Cobb argues that Dent’s polished and optimistic style is also reminiscent of Barack Obama.²²³ This signals a correspondence between the transformative claims articulated by Reagan and Obama as supposed “outsider heroes” who can fix a broken system from within (Raschke).²²⁴

223 Cobb argues that “[t]he character of Harvey Dent represents a more polished, less unilateralist alternative to Batman. His soaring rhetoric is not unlike that of Obama’s Presidential campaign in 2008 [...] Dent notes in front of a crowd of wearied Gotham citizens that ‘the night is darkest just before the dawn’ and that ‘the dawn is coming’. This tempestuous language would hardly look amiss in Obama’s 2009 inauguration speech in which he orated that: ‘Forty-four Americans have now taken the Presidential oath. The words have been spoken during rising tides of prosperity and the still waters of peace. Yet, every so often the oath is taken amidst gathering clouds and raging storms’” (70–71).

224 In his essay “The Dark Knight of Postmodern Politics: How to Follow the Presidential Election Of 2008 in True ‘Postpartisan’ Fashion,” Carl Raschke notes that “[t]he ‘maverick’ or ‘outsider’ image, as what one wholly and sometimes exclusively is, is

These multiple narrative layers—which connect Reagan’s, Bush’s, and Obama’s rhetoric at critical intersections—underscore the ambivalence of *The Dark Knight*, which endorses as well as distances itself from the “War on Terror.” Nevertheless, they are unified in that the challenges posed by “war” and “terror” are connected through constructions of the Other. Discourses of “otherness” catalyze the political dynamics in Gotham City in a centrifugal manner.

“Terror” Is What Others Do: Racial Otherness in *The Dark Knight* and in Neoconservative Rhetoric

As noted in Chapter 2, terrorism has often been discursively located as the domain of the racialized in support of domestic and transnational projects aimed at militarization and imperialism. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to answer epistemic questions regarding the nature of “terrorism,” it is worthwhile investigating how semiotic connections between terror and race affect the narrative dynamics and ideological subtexts of *The Dark Knight*. The stark contrasts between the characterization of figures like Harvey Dent, the Batman, and the Joker reveal essentialized codes that redramatize established binaries which have structured much of Hollywood’s high-concept filmmaking since the 1970s. Douglas Kellner explains how George W. Bush’s and Osama bin Laden’s war rhetoric was articulated with mass media compatibility in mind:

In the fall of 2001, reality television lost its luster when the TV news dramatically overshadowed its banal intrigues with the megaspectacle of the September 11 terror attacks and the succeeding Terror War. [...] Remarkably, bin Laden’s Manichean dualism mirrored the discourse of Israeli President Ariel Sharon, George W. Bush, and those in the West, who proclaimed the war against terrorism as a holy war between good and evil, civilization and barbarism. Each dichotomized its “other” as dominated by fear, Bush claiming that his holy war marked freedom versus fear, citing Islamic extremists’ animosity to Western values and prosperity. Bin Laden’s jihad, in turn, positioned the fearful United States against his brave warriors, also characterizing his battle as that of justice versus injustice. (*Media Spectacle* 20)

what one expects of a candidate, only because the reasons for voter discontent are no longer simple or even obvious. The norm is normless. The goalposts of political satisfaction are always being moved. Ronald Reagan, the first postmodern U.S. President, started this trend when he asked the electorate in 1980 if they were better off than they had been four years before” (Raschke).

The narrative logic of these juxtapositions reveals a symbiotic and mutually reinforcing dynamic—as one discourse cannot be fully comprehended without *the other*. The articulated challenge to the identity of the in-group also marks these conflicts as unavoidable and natural. This heavy focus on primal emotions accords with the darker and psychologically ambiguous mood of *The Dark Knight*. What distinguishes this dualism between unrestrained catharsis and complex introspection in the film is that the core juxtaposition relates not so much to competing visions of society as to a much more fundamental discord in the nature of society itself. While the villains in *E.T.* and *Independence Day* were significantly otherized, they still acted rationally and presented a tangible model for an alternative society. In the post 9/11-climate of *The Dark Knight*, the Other has become much more emblematic of a collapse of established narratives. Benjamin Kerstein argues that “[the Joker’s] ruthless nihilism presents Batman and his allies with a menace they can neither understand nor control. The Joker fears nothing, wants nothing, and cares about nothing” (139). Against the metatext of supposedly “jihadist” terrorism, the Other is presented in terms of perpetual psychological conflicts that affect individuals as well as entire populations.^{225,226} As George Lakoff argues in his discussion of “war” as a metaphor for “terror,” it is impossible to “capture and defeat” an emotion (*Thinking Points* 30). The resulting irresolvable conflicts provide echoes of and doubts regarding the neoconservative postulation of the “War on Terror.”

In the movie, discourses surrounding racialized crime and terrorism often converge in a pastiche of mainly white, middle-class anxieties about security and stability²²⁷—not only in physical terms, but also economically. This demonstrates a link between these fears and the effects of neoliberal

225 Tom Pollard explains in his book *Hollywood 9/11: Superheroes, Supervillains and Super Disasters* that “if fear helps define pre-9/11 emotions, paranoia better expresses post-9/11-emotions” (158).

226 In the real-life context of “racialized terror,” it needs to be taken into account that racialized minorities in the United States, particularly those constructed as “Middle Eastern” or “Muslim” in origin, have accumulated multiple layers of fear, as the “costs” of the domestic “Terror War” are disproportionately externalized onto them in the form of ethnic profiling and discrimination (Spann 101–102).

227 In addition to Harvey Dent’s “law-and-order” campaign, the Joker himself utilizes codes of social stability in his public announcements. He, however, chastises supposed law enforcers as purveyors of disorder when he makes his declaration that he will kill random copycats until the Batman surrenders: “This is how crazy Batman’s made Gotham. You want order in Gotham? Batman must take off his mask, and turn himself in.”

globalization. The movie starts with the machinations of organized crime syndicates that are mostly composed of members of ethnic communities that are excluded from the traditional imagination of a WASP mainstream: the Italian-American mafia, a group of Chechen gangsters, and an African-American crime syndicate. This corresponds with long-established discursive patterns, wherein race and crime are inseparably linked (McCann 68). In these groups, racism is linked to questions of property, as all of these syndicates are driven by profit and exhibit the codes of a regular business venture (the African-American mafia boss Gambol wears expensive suits at all times). The racist underpinnings are therefore at least partially shaped by the competitive logic of late capitalism and—given the global reach of these syndicates—also by globalization. Consequently, *The Dark Knight* operates on the basis of a punitive logic reminiscent of the “law-and-order” rhetoric employed by Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. This rhetoric locates criminalized acts primarily within the racialized inner city (Newell 16–17), emphasizes organized crime in relation to drug use, and discounts structural causes for crime (e.g. poverty).

This is traceable in Harvey Dent’s own language as he uses frames that focus on punishing and banishing the “undesirables” (Lakoff, *Thinking Points* 131–134). In a conversation with Mayor Garcia, Dent argues for the swift and collective sentencing of hundreds of mobsters in one giant trial: “Think of all you could do with 18 months of clean streets.” The crucial adjective “clean” reflects semantic patterns in which criminalized parties are seen as an essentialized blotch on society that needs to be removed.²²⁸ The restoration of the father in the face of these forces of racialized inner-city crime follows a classic Reaganite story line in which a “populist outsider” runs a “law-and-order” campaign and promises to restore an inefficient bureaucracy from within. White anxieties appear to be temporarily assuaged as the hard-line but charming Dent delivers the desired results in co-operation with the Batman. However, the arrival of the Joker recalibrates these anxieties and exposes the city to a new type of warfare that cannot be won using conventional means.

Therefore, the character of the Joker is of particular interest in the analysis of constructions of race in *The Dark Knight*.²²⁹ His visual appearance and his

228 Walker Newell explains that Reagan’s “speeches about ‘welfare queens’ were supplemented by frequent campaign references to ‘crime on the streets’ and promises to expand the federal role in criminal justice” (17–18).

229 While the Joker was portrayed by a white Caucasian actor, Heath Ledger, this analysis will focus on the constructedness of the Other in relation to discourses on terrorism and “irrationality.”

linguistic idiosyncrasies²³⁰ facilitate his construction as an “othered body.” Simultaneously, he provides an aural experience of spectacle through his clownish, “punk rock stylization” (Cobb 66) and his narcissistic, attention-grabbing antics. During the production of the film, director Christopher Nolan made extensive use of color metaphors to describe the Joker’s character: “To me, the Joker is an absolute,” he said. “There are no shades of gray to him—maybe shades of purple. He’s unbelievably dark. He bursts in just as he did in the comics.”²³¹ The deliberate totality of the Joker’s character attests to the construction of racial otherness as a negative projection space for the dominant group. These epistemological dynamics echo key observations made by Edward Said in his analysis of the construction of “the Orient”:

Unlike any other religion Islam is or means everything. As a description of a human phenomenon the hyperbole is [...] unique to Orientalism. Life itself—politics, literature, energy, activity, growth—is an intrusion upon this (to a Westerner) unimaginable Oriental totality. Yet as “a complement and counterbalance to European civilisation” Islam in its modern form is nevertheless a useful object. (279)

Said’s observation is visually unpacked in the representation of the Joker in *The Dark Knight*. The metatext of Bush’s “War on Terror,” as well as the widespread and increasing association between terrorism and Islam (or more specifically, terrorism and “Muslim bodies”) in Western media, accords the Joker the role of “terrorist” in the realm of othering.²³² Within a neoconservative framework, the Joker neatly represents the mythical narrative of an irrational and undeterrable terrorist threat in the vein of Osama bin Laden. The Joker appears out of nowhere and wreaks havoc on an East Coast metropolis, undeterred by any prospects of incarceration or death. He is not swayed by financial incentives or rational argument. On the contrary, J. Hoberman observes that “the scariest thing about the Joker is that he has no respect for money” (185). This sets him apart from the profit-oriented frameworks of organized crime that dominated political discourses in Gotham City. Moreover, the figure of the Joker offers no

230 For example, his frequent pausing when speaking and his eccentric pronunciation of the word “crazy.”

231 Josh Horowitz, “‘Dark Knight’ Opening Scenes Reveal ‘Radical’ New Joker,” *MTV News* (December 3, 2007). Accessed September 7, 2018: <<http://www.mtv.com/news/1575671/dark-knight-opening-scenes-reveal-radical-new-joker/>>.

232 The discourse of the racial Other was not an inherent feature of preceding waves of terrorism, such as what David C. Rapoport called the terrorism of the “New Left” in the 1960s and 1970s (47).

basis for liberal arguments for redistributive policies or alleviating structural causes of crime, which would represent classic left-wing alternatives to a “war against crime.” Instead, materialist concerns give way to a very primal conflict between essentialized categories whose co-existence appears impossible. In a telling scene in the first third of the movie, Bruce Wayne’s British butler, Alfred Pennyworth, explains his view on the Joker and his motives for storming the fundraiser. As they both examine video footage of the villain in the Bat-bunker, Pennyworth uses an array of Eurocentric and colonialist tropes to cast the Joker as the Other (at 54:06):

BRUCE WAYNE: Criminals aren’t complicated, Alfred. We just have to figure out what he’s after.

ALFRED PENNYWORTH: Respectfully, Master Wayne, perhaps this is a man you don’t fully understand, either. (*He looks at Wayne.*) I was in Burma. A long time ago. My friends and I were working for the local government. They were trying to buy the loyalty of tribal leaders, bribing them with precious stones. But their caravans were being raided in a forest north of Rangoon by a bandit. We were asked to take care of the problem, so we started looking for the stones. [...]

BRUCE WAYNE: So why was he stealing them?

ALFRED PENNYWORTH: Because he thought it was good sport. Because some men aren’t looking for anything logical, like money ... they can’t be bought, bullied, reasoned or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn.

As Pennyworth relates his racist anecdote, Wayne uses the sophisticated in-house technology to summon his Bat-suit, which is delivered in a sophisticated elevator that appears out of the floor. This subtle feature of the mise-en-scène invests Wayne with the aura of a high-tech spectacle, which amplifies the contrast with the story of “tribal leaders” and “precious stones” that Pennyworth relates. As a result, Wayne is subtly but clearly associated with the aesthetics of Western technological strength. Yet, the movie proceeds to include subtle hints that this technological advantage might not be sufficient to defeat the antagonist. Toward the end of the scene, shot reverse shots of Wayne and the Joker (who is shown on a screen in black-and-white) show both from a lower angle, visually coding the two as potentially powerful and intimidating figures. However, the contrasting colors paint the Joker as rooted in pre-modernity. The scene therefore exemplifies how the technological spectacle of modern capitalism meets its match in the spectacle of irrationality and nihilism that the Joker represents (see Figure 11).

The sharp distinction that is drawn between a form of “Western logic” and People of Color, who are coded as “irrational,” reproduces long-standing



Figure 11: Brought to you by GCN—different layers of corporate and terrorist media spectacles converge in this shot.

colonialist concepts of “white civilization.”²³³ Thus, anyone who opposes civilization must stand outside of it and anyone who stands outside of it opposes it. In her dissertation on the images of Arabs and Muslims in US-American and German mass media after 9/11, Romy Wöhlert posits that the

central division of pro- versus anti-western attitudes indicates skepticism on behalf of the Western observers and with regard to the question whether Arab and Muslim countries take sides with or against the anti-terror coalition after 9/11, i.e. they oppose or support terrorism. (128)

This underlying mentality of an epic struggle of “civilization versus barbarism” has a long history in both Western imperialism and presidential rhetoric in the United States—especially in times of crises. This was notoriously expressed by George W. Bush in his first address to a joint session of Congress after the 9/11 attacks on September 20, 2001:

Americans are asking “Why do they hate us?” They hate what they see right here in this chamber: a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other.²³⁴

233 The gendered language also exposes semiotic patterns that cast the perceived “barbarity” of the Other as an expression of an “uncontrolled, virile masculinity” that needs to be curbed and/or controlled through the exercise of white masculinity.

234 George W. Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the Nation” (September 20, 2001).

This simple declaration summarizes the basic conservative view of terrorism as a matter of “direct, individual causation.” Lakoff notes that “conservatives see terrorism in simple terms: evil people whose conduct is inexcusable and therefore unworthy of analysis” (Lakoff, *Thinking Points* 62). Not only does this justify the “war” frame in which the opponent is to be annihilated; it also exposes a racial dimension in that the invocation of “evil people” is most effective in mass discourses when these people are constructed through accessible and long-standing racist prisms, for example, “the Muslim/Middle Eastern terrorist.”

The Joker’s narrative strongly accords with Bush’s interpretation of 9/11 terrorism as having no other motivation than absolute, unprovoked opposition to the civilizational model of the United States. This mystification of the nemesis expands the conventional war frame to a conflict with no fixed outcome and no territorial bounds as the *casus belli* is tied to the antagonistic attitude of the aggressor, who could strike from anywhere (e.g. it is never revealed whether the Joker has a hideout and where). These trajectories reveal the collapse of previous metaphors of war (“Criminals aren’t complicated, Alfred. We just have to figure out what he’s after”), but also a new set of dialectical dynamics that present profitable venues for militarist technology (as produced by Wayne Enterprises) and increased securitization for an indeterminate duration (Kellner, *Media Spectacle* 2). *The Dark Knight* therefore integrates two seemingly opposing thrusts within modern technospectacles (the spectacle of “irrationality” versus high-tech warfare) by conveying the underlying epistemic shifts through recognizable terrains of high-concept heroism. This heroism now resides in the realm of a fractured identity and body politics in which a Reaganite “ultimate triumph” is no longer tangible and technological advantage does not guarantee permanent victory.²³⁵ However, it does present a permanent business opportunity.²³⁶ Ultimately, the dichotomous nature of the conflict is very much based on established imaginations of the Other.

In accordance with the mythical signifiers that both Reagan and Bush employed, the Joker can easily be read as a textbook nemesis of white, mainstream

235 In contrast to *Independence Day*, for example.

236 The combination of militarization and mass media spectacles often sells to a large audience. Justine Toh explains in her analysis of *Batman Begins* (2005) that Bruce Wayne often seems preoccupied with securing profitable sales markets for his business ventures, which are oriented toward high-tech military equipment. Christopher Nolan’s trilogy barely addresses the resulting conflicts of interest between highly weaponized vigilantism and military profits (Toh 135; Fradley 18).

society in the United States: He is a visually distinctive villain, who cannot be reasoned or argued with, who is not motivated by real-life concerns or potentially legitimate grievances, and who willingly positions himself outside the discourses of “civilized society.” These attributes have been inscribed on Muslim bodies since before 9/11, but increasingly so after the 9/11 attacks, which inseparably ties real-life discourses of “terrorism” in US-American mass media to patterns of racialization (Ridouani 1–13).

As noted in Chapter 2, the juxtaposition of “civilization and barbarism” was instrumental in framing the Reagan administration’s declaration of “war against terror.” For instance, Reagan’s Secretary of State, George P. Shultz, defined terrorist activities as distinctly “un-Western” and embedded in a mindset that resides outside of the reactionary concept of “Judeo-Christian” civilization.²³⁷ Given how instructive the Reagan administration proved to be for the Bush–Cheney regime, these parallels demonstrate the continuation of socio-political and geopolitical dramas that took root in the 1970s and 1980s within the context of the Cold War. Very similar dialectical frameworks re-appear in the 2000s, as the “fight against terror” is narrated as a war between high-tech rationality and theatrical barbarism. As extrapolated in the rhetorical analysis, Shultz’s statement on terrorism is telling as “anarchy and decay” are contrasted with “freedom” and “dignity.” The juxtaposition of terrorism and “dignity” allows for a variety of interpretations, including the interpretation of the spectacle as “surreal,” existing primarily for amusement and “to be looked at.” The “theater of destruction” works especially well in a climate in which this theater is tied to an unrecognizable, alien-looking, and alien-sounding Other. The logic of the mass media spectacle embraces the terrorist “exotic clown.” This frightening and yet entertaining figure provides viewing “pleasures” for different kinds of global audiences and is, thereby, conducive to blockbuster success.

Within this epistemology of terrorism, the Joker can be understood as a manifestation of Western imaginations of so-called “Islamic fundamentalist jihadism.”²³⁸ Despite his lack of overt religious symbolism, the Joker represents a

237 A very similar assertion was made by Reagan’s ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick, who “stressed the existence of ‘affinities between terrorism and totalitarianism’, stating that ‘both regard violence as an appropriate means to their political ends. Both use it as the instruments of first resort. Both reject the basic moral principles of Judeo-Christian civilization’” (Toaldo 11).

238 The term “jihadism” has been criticized for being misleading and ill-defined (Sedgwick 34–41).

confrontational rejection of societal conventions and institutions that disregards material rewards or diplomacy. He confides that his anarchic violence serves no discernible purpose to Harvey Dent in his hospital bed: "I'm a dog chasing cars ... I wouldn't know what to do with one if I caught it. I just do things. I'm just the wrench in the gears. I hate plans."²³⁹ His theatricality is an end in itself, designed to disrupt a primarily white, middle-class gaze, as his actions are intended to be looked at. And, as noted in Chapter 2, the "savage nature" of the Other remains an essential and central part of the counter-terrorism tale. Nevertheless, commentators often challenge these dichotomous depictions. For instance, journalist Waleed Aly makes the case that the base irrationality of the Joker clashes with the real-life bin Laden and/or Al-Qaeda:

The brilliance of Nolan's Joker is that he has no history, no identity, no origin, no back-story. He simply is, which is precisely what makes him so terrifying. Perhaps this is how the Bush Administration would like us to see bin Laden, too, but this is an unsustainable fiction. Bin Laden does not simply emerge from nowhere. He dates his own anti-Americanism to the 1982 Israeli campaign in Lebanon, and at the very least his story passes through the Afghan jihad against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. (Aly)

Aly presents strong arguments that the portrayal of Al-Qaeda as completely irrational is a mischaracterization. However, the longevity of the Bush administration and its policies, the continuation of the "Terror War," and the resounding global box-office success of *The Dark Knight* demonstrate that imaginations of "irrational terrorism" do deliver a strong mass resonance and are far from being "unsustainable fiction"—instead, they can aptly be described as reliable myths for the dramatization of social and global tensions. These myths provide sharp contrasts that render negotiation impossible and the reassertion/restoration of social and economic hierarchies more desirable to many. As the external challenge is framed within the semantics of identity politics ("They hate us for our freedoms," "They reject the basic moral principles of Judeo-Christian civilization"), the figure of the "terrorist Other" becomes highly sectionalist, but also emotionally mobilizing for all the constituent groups involved in larger societal conflicts.

239 With regard to this quotation, Timothy D. Peters makes the pertinent point that taking "anything that the Joker says at face value is problematic. In line with his mythical figuring as a Satan or trickster figure, the Joker operates on the premise of deceptions, half-truths and bad jokes" (427). However, the quotation nevertheless demonstrates the Joker's familiarity with the vernacular of spectacle-drive terrorism. His performance within the popular anarchist imaginary is relevant for the analysis in this chapter, as it provides interfaces with neoconservative rhetoric.

For instance, the Joker attacks civilians and public figures indiscriminately, which make his declaration of war an inescapable conflict for every single citizen of Gotham City (i.e. they are attacked because they are citizens of the city). Not positioning oneself as part of this fundamental struggle is impractical (Kellner, *Media Spectacle* 112), a situation that reinforces the Joker's command of attention in the spectacles he directs. Effectively, the terrorist spectacle yields a blockbuster effect whereby a maximum number of people are turned into participatory stakeholders on terms of unnegotiable identities. Audience involvement is guaranteed through minimal input and the racialization of the terrorist, which allows for accessible narratives and the justification of extensive militarization projects. This interface between story lines of mass confrontation and late capitalist shifts toward digitalization exposes how racial, religious, and national identity politics are transformed into profitable venues for authoritarian governments and mass media culture. As Kellner notes in his analysis of the O.J. Simpsons trial: "The very structure of the media encourages such an adversarial culture and politics of confrontation" (*Media Spectacle* 114).²⁴⁰ Thus, the racial dimension of the Joker as a "terrorist Other" underlines a post-industrial drive toward narratives that utilize long-standing orientalist tropes as a vehicle for manufacturing spectacles with global resonance.

Therefore, the Joker is not only a manifestation of an irrational threat, but also an expression of the drive toward reduced complexity in a globally connected and increasingly digitalized world. His status as the Other invites complacency regarding his lack of a proper backstory. Only in few instances does the Joker offer (contradictory) tales of the origin of his mutilated face. Apart from these tales, no comprehensive narrative of his past and his development is offered. While this disrupts previous epistemologies of crime ("Respectfully, Master Wayne, perhaps this is a man you don't fully understand, either"), it also

240 Kellner elaborates on this point: "Identity politics has become in general heavily media oriented, with contending groups articulating and circulating their views through the media. It generates a politics of confrontation and promotes an adversary culture, with each group asserting its own interests and grievances as loudly and dramatically as possible in order to get media attention. [...] The media, in turn, intensify such adversarial politics through their use of sound bites and the playing off of differing groups and positions" (*Media Spectacle* 114). It can therefore be extrapolated that established patterns of othering provide fertile ground for sound-bite politics. The construction of terrorism in conjunction with long-standing orientalist tropes exacerbates a politics of emotion, which mobilizes the individual to participate in the spectacle.

translates into a semiotic framework in which challenges to the societal status quo do not merit any self-critical exploration. This intersects with a critical feature of Reagan's anti-terrorism rhetoric: the decontextualization of terrorism and the dismissal of any possible grievances the opponents might have.

Alfred Pennyworth's conclusion that "some men just want to see the world burn" ultimately renders any liberal concerns for the conditions that created terrorism vacuous. The film's promotion of action over investigation is cemented by the "otherness" of the Joker, who is considered outside the law and outside any legal protection—as the torture during the interrogation scene illustrates. The fight against terrorism thereby assumes an "insurgent quality" in that it bypasses the rule of law. The Batman executes most of these illegal actions (albeit with the at least tacit support of the Gotham City Police Department), leading to a hypocritical "law enforcement hybrid." The authorities officially claim to uphold liberal, democratic values and yet support unconstitutional measures as long as they target people defined as "outlaws." While Reagan defines these outlaws as people "who deliberately slaughter innocent people," the larger context of his speeches reveals that, in his view, political violence by non-state actors is generally exoticized and tied to anti-colonial and communist ideologies. This partially contrasts with the Bush administration, which purposefully kept the focus on so-called "Islamist fundamentalist terrorism" in its language.²⁴¹ However, the conjunction of exoticized terrorism and left-wing politics proposed by Reagan intersects with the portrayal of the Joker in *The Dark Knight*.²⁴²

241 Numerous commentators have argued that the public pronouncements of the Bush administration substituted communism with the figure of the Middle Eastern terrorist (Kellner, *9/11, Spectacles of Terror, and Media Manipulation* 7). The Bush-Cheney regime tied Islamism with left-wing politics only sporadically, for example, when accusing the Venezuelan government under Hugo Chávez of sponsoring the Iraqi insurgency in 2006 or in the infamous "Axis of Evil" speech of 2002, in which Bush vilified Iraq, Iran, and North Korea.

242 The discursive combination of profit-oriented crime, terrorism, and leftism was already in full swing in Reagan-era cinema, which is evident in the blockbuster *Die Hard* (1988). Tony Shaw notes that "[t]he film delivers a trenchant message about the changing nature of terrorism. [...] For American audiences of this era, *Die Hard* underscored the belief that terrorism was an alien, fundamentally 'un-American' activity. For us now, the film shows how terrorism has become something of a catch-all term, one that could be applied to criminal activities generally and that was increasingly ubiquitous—akin perhaps to the way many Americans first described Communism, as some sort of a disease" (170).

Despite lending himself to being otherized, the Joker is still an ambiguous character, as he appears to be “homegrown” and reminiscent of earlier waves of (predominantly white) left-wing and anarchist terrorism. His nihilist overtones show significant overlap with anarchist rhetoric from the turn of the late nineteenth century and his disdain for the accumulation of capital by mobsters and bankers mirrors certain 1970s left-wing discourses. Thomas Cobb writes about how counterculture markers from the punk-rock movement were influential in designing the look of the Joker:

In February 2008, costume designer Linda Hemming noted in an interview with *IGN* magazine that she drew aspects of the Joker’s style from “the Sex Pistols and Johnny Rotten.” The 1970s punk rock stylization of the Joker arguably tempers the controversial and more abrasive elements of Islamic terrorism. It is also not merely aesthetic. For all the character’s jihadist invocations, Nolan’s Joker is comported to fit broader readings and notions of terrorism. The villain regularly invokes the spirit of the left wing terrorism of the 1960s and 1970s—in one scene the Joker notes the importance of “introducing a little anarchy.” (66)

Cobb’s argument that the “punk rock stylization” of the Joker “tempers the controversial and more abrasive elements of Islamic terrorism” holds true in the sense that the visual aspects of his otherness can be interpreted as being the result of the Joker’s own choice. After all, he can easily remove his clown make-up when he chooses to (as he does in preparation for the assassination attempt on Mayor Garcia, when he infiltrates the honor guard undetected). This partially sets him apart from so-called “Middle Eastern phenotypes” associated with the terrorism of groups like Al-Qaeda (Hafez 26). The Joker thereby slips in and out of different bodies, making his brand of spectacle through terror more elusive than stereotypical constructions of the “Middle Eastern terrorist.” This allows for broader readings of terrorism, as Cobb rightly suggests. Moreover, it invests the spectacle of terror with an element of hyper-masculine “chic” and “fashion” that can constantly readapt itself (Kellner, *Media Spectacle and Domestic Terrorism* 157–177). Terror is, therefore, not only a method or a result; it is also an attitudinal style that inserts itself into popular aesthetics. Although the Joker’s look is not “merely aesthetic,” the role of aesthetics in destructive spectacles is vital and merits further investigation.

For this analysis, the “punk rock stylization” of the Joker is of interest, as it connects the character with the subtexts of anti-materialism and anti-consumerism (Cross in Stramskas 121). The Joker can be read as representing a counter-mythology that actively challenges and attacks the materialist, neo-liberal consensus of “unbridled leisure, pleasure and carefree fun—a set of images and stereotypes that 70s punk both relished and lampooned” (Ogersby

in Stramskas 117). The Joker's anti-capitalist inclinations become more accentuated in the final third of the film after he escapes from police custody. With the help of Lau, he locates the mob's funds in a warehouse. There, he ties Lau to a chair on top of a large pile of money. The Chechen gang leader enters the scene and asks the Joker about his plans (at 1:42:33):

CHECHEN: What you do with all your money, Mr. Joker?

(The Joker grabs a can of gasoline from one of his men.)

THE JOKER: I'm a man of simple tastes. I like gunpowder. Dynamite ... gasoline.

(He proceeds to splash gasoline on the pile of money. He snatches a cigar from the Chechen's mouth and tosses it on the pile, setting it ablaze. The Chechen watches in disgust.)

THE JOKER: [...] All you care about is money. This city deserves a better class of criminal, and I'm going to give it to them. This is my town now.

(The Joker's men apprehend the Chechen and take him away to be killed.)

THE JOKER: [...] It's not about money. It's about sending a message.

This theater of destruction testifies to how much the Joker "despises criminals who only seek financial self-advancement" (Sanyal in Durand & Leigh 74). Not only does he inflict terror through his indiscriminate killings and targeting of civilians; he also manages to disturb his audience through the symbolic annihilation of capital. He describes himself as a "man of simple tastes," rejecting luxury and extravagance,²⁴³ and he goes on to announce "a better class of criminals." These semantic markers ("simple tastes," "class") share significant

243 The Joker often repurposes everyday items to make them vehicles for spectacular destruction, for example, the cigar he snatches from the Chechen or the cell phone he implants under the skin of one of his men, which sets off the bomb that kills Rachel Dawes. Turning the mundane into the theatrical is a recurring feature of the modern spectacle culture and testifies to the pervasiveness of the "logic of the spectacle" (Kellner, *Media Spectacle* 10). This was also shown in *Independence Day*, in which mass consumer items were instrumental in defeating the alien invasion (e.g. the Apple Notebook).

commonalities with traditional socialist and communist rhetoric, which allows for an interpretation of the Joker as the vanguard of a revolution (“It’s about sending a message”). Furthermore, the explicitly gendered language (“man of simple tastes”) constructs violent political struggle as a terrain for the exercise of masculine dominance, which Reagan and Bush have used to legitimize the amplification of toxic muscle-flexing in domestic and global politics (Jackson 19). In addition to the complexities of gendered power structures, the Joker’s opposition is characterized by a degree of otherness, which he shares with the criminalized subjects in the film. Yet, he distinguishes himself through his anti-materialism, which is unique to him. In his character, revolutionary rhetoric and theatrical violence intersect in a fundamental rejection of the capitalist consensus.

The formation of oppositional identity in Gotham City is, therefore, also narrated through the prism of a left-leaning revolutionary vocabulary. This leads to a hybridized form of resistance, in which otherness and anti-capitalism intersect in a theater of destruction that is, nevertheless, informed by a neoliberal spectacle logic. Therefore, viewing the Joker through a Reaganite lens allows for a fuller appreciation of both the anti-capitalist and racial connotations of the character in comparison with the rhetoric of the Bush administration, which framed its anti-terrorism mostly within the confines of religiously and racially tinged identity politics (see Figure 12).

It is important to emphasize that the actions and utterances of the Joker do not necessarily align him with Marxist ideology. In much of the existing scholarship, he is rightly located within anarchist and nihilist political discourses (C. Davis 31; Payne 15).²⁴⁴ However, as discussed in Chapter 2, various revolutionary, nationalist, and anti-colonial struggles were subsumed under or ideologically tied to communism in Reagan’s speeches. The involvement of the United States in Central America was frequently justified by explicitly connecting communism to what Reagan considered to be state-sponsored terrorism linked to Arab nationalisms and/or Shiite Islamism in Iran.²⁴⁵

244 Connor Davis describes the Joker as “a new and mysterious nihilistic force” (31), while Rodger Payne states that the Joker’s “political purpose seems to be something akin to anarchy as he aims to destroy the fiber of organized society and instill mass fear” (15).

245 Ronald Reagan, “Remarks to Jewish Leaders During a White House Briefing on United States Assistance for the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance” (March 5, 1986).



Figure 12: “Communism is neither an economic or a political system—it is a form of insanity—a temporary aberration which will one day disappear from the earth because it is contrary to human nature.” Reagan wrote this in his diary in 1975 (Kaufman, Robert G. 112–113). The irrationality of the so-called “free market” was again exposed in 2008 when large amounts of capital evaporated in virtually the same manner as in *The Dark Knight*.

The common denominators of these varied forms of revolutionary violence are their non-Western and anti-colonial character and their suitability for advancing a Marxist world revolution, which Reagan describes as inherently violent. According to this worldview, there is ample interface between the character of the Joker and communism, as Reaganite conservatism understands revolutionary communism as naturally accompanied by anarchic violence and incomprehensible chaos. However, this also differs from the imaginations of totalitarianism observed in *E.T.* and *ID4*, in which the statist antagonists were characterized by strict uniformity and precise organization. In contrast to these previous blockbusters, *The Dark Knight* offers a new morphology whereby the externalized threat appears less collectively organized and yet is tied to an anti-capitalist impulse.

These strategies associate the Other not only with reigning imaginations of threat (from Soviet-style totalitarianism to Al-Qaeda-style terrorism); they also adhere to concepts of what Evelyn Alsultany dubs “simplified complex representations” of the post-race era (*Arabs and Muslims in the Media after 9/11* 163–168). In her analysis of post-9/11 narratives that cast Arabs and Muslims as villains, she states that the complex and layered portrayal of the racialized villain serves as an affirmation of the national self in that it communicates a reassuring sense of progress and enlightenment to the audience. These images

have cross-ideological appeal in that they allow the viewer to “feel for the enemy” and they create an illusion of an accomplished post-racial and pluralistic project at home (167–168). In the film, the harrowing stories of childhood abuse that the Joker relates allow a certain amount of “understanding” of why he may have departed from societal consensus. Yet, the ideological frameworks within which he operates remain illegitimate, as they are exclusively tied to terrorist violence. There is no other character within *The Dark Knight* who castigates neoliberalism and/or the status quo except the violent Joker. Opposition to capitalism remains linked to theatrical destruction and the indiscriminate targeting of civilians, which de-legitimizes any grievances, according to both Reagan and Bush. In this sense, the Joker fulfills another criterion of “simplified complexity” as his illogicalities are ultimately resolved in a “predictable and formulaic” manner: He dies in a violent confrontation with the protagonist.²⁴⁶

In addition, the audience is reassured when the citizens of Gotham City manage to foil one of the Joker’s key plots: forcing the passengers of two ferries to choose which vessel should be blown up.²⁴⁷ The passengers on both ships make the heroic choice not to give into the terrorist’s demand and, instead, choose to face certain death; a fate from which they are eventually spared. In this episode, the movie resurrects established formulas and myths in which the US-American public is naturally inclined to make the ethical decision and not succumb to paranoia. In times of emergency, the societal structures and overarching beliefs do work.

Despite the dark overtones and the unresolved ending, in which the Batman is declared an outlaw, what remains certain in this blockbuster fantasy of the “Terror War” is that the challenge posed by the Other cannot sustain itself in

246 Alsultany and Shohat discuss “the appearance of seemingly complex images that are in fact quite predictable and formulaic” as they “remain wedded to a script that represents Arabs and Muslims only in the context of terrorism” (155). Thus, they simultaneously vilify and affirm “the identity of the perceived enemy as a sign of U.S. progress during times of crisis” (154–155).

247 Plot context: After having rigged both vessels with explosives, the Joker announces over the ferries’ communication systems that he will blow them both up by midnight. This fate can only be avoided if the passengers of one boat activate a detonator that will destroy the other boat. An important factor in the decision-making process is the fact that one boat carries civilians (including families and children), whereas the other carries thousands of prison inmates. Ultimately, the passengers on both ships come out alive.

the face of an abstract “will of the nation.” In *The Dark Knight*, bureaucracies and individuals may falter—as demonstrated by the figure of Harvey Dent—but the white, capitalist status quo does produce the heroes who can push back against the Other and perpetuate domestic hierarchies. After all, in his eulogy for Dent at the end of the film, Police Commissioner James Gordon says that he was “a hero. Not the hero we deserved but the hero we needed.” Unlike in many previous blockbuster movies from the pre-Bush and pre-9/11 era, heroism cannot necessarily credibly deliver the maintenance of “high ethical virtues” anymore, yet it is sufficient to protect the city from the Other. *The Dark Knight* has revealed this gap more starkly than the preceding movies in this study, pointing toward a more “stunted triumphalism” than the straightforward Reaganite kind.

It can therefore be concluded that mainstream preoccupations with the “War on Terror” led to cinematic representations in which the ever-popular threat posed by the Other was accompanied by a more fragmented portrayal of heroism. This trend was also characterized by implicit calls for messianic figures that can both expel the enemy and properly negotiate social cohesion at home. In light of the 2008 presidential election and the ascent of Barack Obama to political superstardom, *The Dark Knight* evidently resonated with moviegoers in the United States and many other countries.

The Pop Cultural Legacy of *The Dark Knight*

The Dark Knight amassed \$539 million in total domestic gross and a further \$469 million outside the United States, roughly totaling \$1 billion in its first run.¹⁸⁴ This made it the top-selling movie of 2008 and led to the bestowal of a variety of accolades—most notably an Oscar for Heath Ledger’s portrayal of the Joker. Ledger’s untimely death, shortly before the release of the film, contributed to establishing *The Dark Knight* as his “legacy film.” Moreover, the feature received overwhelmingly positive reviews from mainstream film critics, with many including it in their “Best-of” lists.²⁴⁸

The astounding success of this film in 2008 testifies to how both familiar white, male heroism and a neo-noir sense of cynicism could still create a massive blockbuster spectacle. The convergence of these two elements in *The Dark*

248 Roger Ebert, “The Best Films Of 2008... And There Were A Lot Of Them,” *Roger Ebert’s Journal* (December 8, 2008). Accessed September 18, 2018: <<http://www.rogerebert.com/rogers-journal/the-best-films-of-2008-and-there-were-a-lot-of-them>>.

Knight reveals an underlying demand for the re-evaluation of the 1980s and 1990s style of heroism that was present in *E.T.* and *Independence Day*. While previous blockbuster movies typically steered away from cynical subtexts that could impinge on the protagonist's character and inherent goodness, Christopher Nolan's offering embraced a much more "stunted triumphalism" in which the protagonist is ostracized from the restoration of the family. This is indicative of a shift in public tastes toward more introspection and self-critical doubt. Yet, the blockbuster formula proved resilient enough to translate the complexities of the "Terror War" into a high-concept filmic spectacle. The profitability of this movie demonstrated the reliability of restorative, masculine heroism as a vehicle for revenue, despite a massive economic downturn.

The immense success of the second installment of Nolan's Batman trilogy was later equaled by the release of *The Dark Knight Rises* in 2012. As in the first two movies in the trilogy, the story dives into discourses of national decline on the economic and political fronts—tapping into anxieties that hadn't been resolved during the first term of the Obama administration: terrorism, the expansion of the security state, unfettered neoliberal globalization, and growing inequality. Like its predecessor, the movie approaches contemporary debates in an ambiguous and almost tongue-in-cheek fashion. One of the most notable controversies to arise from this was sparked by right-wing radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh's assertion that the name of the movie's main villain, "Bane," was a deliberate jab at Mitt Romney and his previous involvement in the investment firm "Bain Capital."²⁴⁹ However, various commentators and journalists highlighted parallels between Bane, his band of followers, and the Occupy movement, claiming that there was an authoritarian streak in left-wing oppositional politics.²⁵⁰ Martin Fradley contends that this ambiguity is intentional and part of the movie's marketing: "*The Dark Knight Rises* deliberately concedes to the individual viewer the authority to decide what it means. [...] The political incoherence of *The Dark Knight Rises* is thus a commercial strategy, a marker of its status as a shrewdly constructed commodity" (19–20).

249 Jordan Zakarin, "Rush Limbaugh's Bane vs. Bain Conspiracy: Host Says 'Dark Knight Rises' Villain Is Attack on Romney," *The Hollywood Reporter* (July 17, 2012). Accessed September 18, 2018: <<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/rush-limbaugh-bane-bain-conspiracy-dark-knight-rises-batman-350311>>.

250 Mark Fisher, "Batman's Political Right Turn," *The Guardian* (July 22, 2012). Accessed September 18, 2018: <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jul/22/batman-political-right-turn>>.

Investing a villain with both left-wing and right-wing undertones exposes how both political camps—at least in a US-American context—have increasingly adopted a terminology of (cathartic) insurgency, fashioning themselves as disruptive forces opposing an established “status quo.” Not only does this exhibit remarkable parallels with Reagan’s insurgent populist rhetoric in 1980, but it also captures how cemented the image of the “Washington outsider” had become in political discourse. Mass media productions now began to reflect the fact that the lingo of “oppositional politics” was not the domain of one coherent ideology anymore, but rather manifested itself as a visceral and primal force aimed at anything that might be construed as “the establishment.” Thus, the Joker and Bane can be seen as cultural fantasies that captured an emerging populist mood within the political spheres of the United States. In the larger socio-political context of the late 2000s, this underscores a rejection of the neoliberal consensus that Reagan and his successors effectuated. It was, however, during the first term of Obama’s presidency that the mythical version of Reagan reached its peak within the Republican Party, as well as among Tea Party supporters. It seems that, at a time of intense polarization, the recourse to an imagined right-wing superhero was reassuring to many in the white, middle-class mainstream, which confirms Susan Jeffords’ thesis that post-imperial crises of masculinity lead to increased demand for Hollywood “hard bodies.”

As with the previously analyzed blockbusters, the movie’s imagery and narrative became a toolbox of signifiers with political and pop cultural mass appeal. This trend was already visible in 2008 and extended beyond the borders of the United States. For instance, film critic Siddhant Adlakha recalls that—after the Mumbai terrorist attacks in November 2008—a friend posted the following phrase on Facebook: “Mumbai needs its Batman.”²⁵¹ The mobilizing power of a conflicted, but effective anti-hero had significant resonance in a social context that was marked by anxieties about the rise of political violence in the form of terrorism. Unlike the “hard-body” hero of the 1980s or the celebrated Smith–Goldblum duo at the end of *Independence Day*, the new protagonist is arguably less capable of providing a permanent resolution to the ideological struggles in which he is engaged. The Batman ultimately does not resolve the internal contradictions that arise from the often-questionable counter-terrorism efforts

251 Siddhant Adlakha, “The Dark Knight: An Influential and Prophetic Blockbuster,” *Birth. Movies. Death* (May 12, 2015). Accessed September 18, 2018: <<http://birthmoviesdeath.com/2015/05/12/the-dark-knight-an-influential-and-prophetic-blockbuster>>.

implemented by numerous countries, nor does he address the root causes of terrorism.

The Dark Knight thereby revealed a psychological and ideological overlap between left-wing and right-wing discourses in the global age. This was achieved through a focus on internal security, global acts of crime, the threat posed by increased digitalization and mass surveillance, and middle-class economic anxieties. On the basis that terrorism should be seen as an external (and largely racialized) threat, the effective elimination of this menace took a central position in the political imagination of mainstream discourses across the globe. *The Dark Knight* reflected this imagination in a highly visceral manner and with more success than any other post-9/11 movie—showcasing that a diverse and global movie-going audience (still) identified with decades-old notions of white, male heroism. However, the performance of heroism could no longer be divorced from more transparent abuses of power. This mirrored the use of technological developments to expose the illegal machinations of governments and businesses. From this perspective, the Joker can be seen as precursor to Obama-era whistleblowers, such as Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning. Due to the rapid dissemination of shareable information, the trajectories of technological spectacles have now partially turned themselves against the previous monopolist producers of mass media opinion (be they governmental or corporate).

Furthermore, imagery from *The Dark Knight* franchise proved to be a popular vehicle for commenting on the spectacles of the Obama and Trump presidencies. A racist Barack Obama “Joker” poster, which depicted a digitally manipulated image of Obama with Joker-style face paint, became a widely used icon at rallies held by the hard-right Tea Party movement. The image was often altered to include the caption “socialism” in order to ascribe a nefarious quality to left-wing politics, which Tea Party supporters claimed Obama represented. Journalist Ben Walters described the poster as the “American right’s first successful use of street art,” signaling how what had once been a tool of the counterculture was appropriated in order to make the claim that reactionary politics now represents self-identified “disenfranchised outsiders.”²⁵² Not only does this echo the self-aestheticized image of the 1980 Reagan campaign as an “anti-establishment insurgency,” but the image testifies to the role of blockbusters as a source of emulative forms of political protest and demonization.

252 Ben Walters, “Why the Obama As Joker Poster Leaves A Bad Taste in The Mouth,” *The Guardian* (August 5, 2009). Accessed September 19, 2018: <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2009/aug/05/obama-as-joker-poster>>.

A similar observation can be made regarding the way in which the final installment of the *Batman* trilogy, *The Dark Knight Rises*, entered the vocabulary of US-American politics. After the inauguration of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth President of the United States in January 2017, numerous observers speculated about his inaugural address plagiarizing key passages from a speech given by the movie villain Bane.²⁵³ This episode affirms the immensely significant role of fictional blockbuster characters in the transcoding of political events and figures. Evidently, blockbusters have become vehicles for processing, comparing, and debating political narratives. This not only aligns with the Barthesian notion that mythologies are a way of viewing, narrating, and talking about the world, but also exhibits the increasing immersion of ideological narratives within the logic of the media spectacle. The semiotics of a political mass media spectacle (the Trump inauguration) are analyzed and read through the globally recognizable prism of another (filmic) mass media spectacle. This gives blockbusters a privileged status in the dissemination of meaning, as they provide readily available narrative blueprints that have been proven to appeal to markets around the world. Analogous to Kellner's statement that "[p]olitical battles of the future will thus be fought out, in part, on the terrain of media spectacle" (*Media Spectacle* 177), *The Dark Knight* franchise underlines the role of high-concept movies in creating many of these political spectacles.

As for the political economy of Hollywood film studios, the immense financial success of *The Dark Knight* cemented the superhero genre as a significant cash cow. Caitlin Foster outlines how the corporate structure of Warner Bros. was instrumental in engineering the blockbuster effect of the movie:

The success of *Batman Begins* and the following two *Dark Knight* sequels (2008; 2012), also directed by Christopher Nolan, proved that maintaining a tightly organized corporate structure was an important part of Warner Bros. and DC's comeback in both the comic film adaptation market and the publishing market. (15)

The cinematic reboot of a long-running comic-book franchise opened multiple avenues for cross-media consumption, ranging from new comic-book series and graphic novels to elaborate public screenings, true-to-life campaign websites, and increased interaction with fan communities through the Internet.

253 Jacob Stolworthy, "Donald Trump's inauguration speech was very similar to Bane's in *The Dark Knight Rises*," *Independent* (January 20, 2017). Accessed September 18, 2018: <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/donald-trump-presidential-inauguration-bane-the-dark-knight-rises-a7538301.html>>.

For instance, the cinema chain Alamo Drafthouse staged an elaborate public screening of *The Dark Knight* on the night of the tenth anniversary of its release in May 2018. Live pyrotechnics, costume contests, and stunt performances invited audiences to imagine themselves as part of the movie. This highlights how audience participation in the spectacle has become another profitable and integral aspect of blockbuster spectacles. Interestingly, Alamo Drafthouse followed this event with a similar public screening of *Independence Day* on July 4 of that year.²⁵⁴

Thus, the resonance of *The Dark Knight* activated drives to revive comic-book heroism in a time of financial insecurity, global terror wars, and increased consumer agency. Prior market research into superhero comic stories had proven to Warner Bros. that the reboot of comic-book heroes should take place within the framework of the established blockbuster formula:

In the films produced by Marvel and DC, the comic films that were less popular with audiences and critics and that performed poorly at the box-office all shared a significant deviation from the action blockbuster formula. For example, Ang Lee's *Hulk* (2003), a quiet, contemplative character study filled with emotional pathos for the misunderstood monster, paled financially and critically in comparison to the *Incredible Hulk*. (Foster 15)

Subsequently, Warner Bros. enhanced its efforts to market future superhero releases as action-packed spectacles across various channels. This underscores not only the increased importance of ancillary markets in designing and effectuating blockbuster projects, but also the framing of these as consumption-oriented, escapist fare. Despite the heavy philosophical underpinnings of the *Batman* trilogy, the movies still proved adept at encouraging consumption among large segments of mainly young and male viewers around the world. While *The Dark Knight* may not have been perceived as life-affirming, it certainly proved to be *lifestyle-affirming*. This demonstrates that the high-concept formula of the 1980s could fully absorb epistemic shifts like the "Terror War" and the global financial crisis. These themes were also addressed in one of the most trendsetting blockbusters of the following decade, *The Avengers* (2012).

254 Jackie Ruth, "Rolling Roadshow Presents 'The Dark Knight' at Stunt Ranch," *Shuffle Online* (May 28, 2018). Accessed September 18, 2018: <<https://shuffleonline.net/2018/05/28/rolling-roadshow-presents-the-dark-knight-at-stunt-ranch/>>.

Chapter 6 Hard-Bodied Entrepreneurialism in *The Avengers*

Introduction and Chapter Overview

The 2012 release of *The Avengers* galvanized the superhero formula in Hollywood blockbuster filmmaking for the 2010s. The film returned a worldwide gross of over US\$1.5 billion on a US\$220 million budget,²⁵⁵ thus affirming that blockbusters could continue to break box-office records on a steady basis—despite increased competition from cinematic television and streaming services.²⁵⁶ The film drew on a variety of Marvel Comics superheroes, thus exemplifying Marvel Studios' strategy of combining pre-existing story lines into a comprehensive "Marvel Cinematic Universe."

Given these transmedia connections, it is unsurprising that *The Avengers* presents a cross-section of various ideological discourses that became pre-eminent in the wake of the ongoing "War on Terror," as well as in the aftermath of the global financial crisis in the late 2000s. Among other topics, the filmic subtexts reflect on the moral reputation and effectiveness of US-American global leadership after the neoconservative turn during the Bush years. Moreover, the film touches upon themes of economic anxieties that had shattered previous neoliberal myths of individual entrepreneurialism. These doubts and insecurities were also addressed by Barack Obama's 2008 "campaign blockbuster." In tandem with the Obama presidency, *The Avengers* can be read as a progressive renegotiation of specific elements of Reaganite neoliberalism, especially the notion of entrepreneurialism as a vital element in maintaining the "national body." As discussed in the previous chapter, there are strong connections between the national body in twenty-first-century superhero movies and the masculine "hard bodies" of Hollywood superheroes in 1980s cinema. This hard body now finds numerous expressions in *The Avengers*. This time, however, they are embedded in a discourse of multicultural teamwork that appears

255 "Marvel's The Avengers." Box-office information from boxofficemojo.com. Accessed December 18, 2018: <<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=avengers11.htm>>.

256 Ashley Rodriguez, "Marvel takes Hollywood: Nine years, 17 movies, \$12 billion and counting," *Quartz* (November 6, 2017). Accessed September 27, 2018: <<https://qz.com/1116592/marvel-conquers-hollywood-nine-years-17-movies-12-billion-so-far/>>.

to simultaneously affirm and depart from the cinematic formulas of the 1980s (Jordan 77–90). In the basic premise of the film, the interplay between different representations of heroism seems to herald a potentially new form of superhero body politics.

The movie chronicles the efforts of a team of superheroes, who are called upon by the defense agency SHIELD to retrieve the Tesseract (a cosmic energy source) from the malicious demi-god Loki. After stealing the device from SHIELD's headquarters, Loki collaborates with an extra-terrestrial race, the Chitauri, to subjugate Earth. In response, the director of SHIELD, Nick Fury, reactivates the "Avengers Initiative," assembling a group of highly skilled individuals, most of whom have superpowers.²⁵⁷ This team sets out to frustrate Loki's attempts to take control of the planet. They succeed in capturing and imprisoning him on SHIELD's flying aircraft carrier (the "Helicarrier"). Loki, however, manages to escape and invites the alien invasion into New York City with the help of the Tesseract. In a long and epic battle, the Avengers thwart the invasion attempt and finally get a hold of Loki and the Tesseract.

The responses from both journalists and scholars give rise to a multitude of possible ideological angles from which the movie can be read. For instance, Julianne Escobedo Shepherd writes the following on the progressive online news website *Alternet*:

The Avengers seems a little freer than most [superhero films], maybe because of the general awesomeness of writer/director Joss Whedon, widely admired for his feminism, atheism and liberalism. [...] Take *The Avengers'* stark feminist perspective. Even in X-Men, where powerful female characters like Storm, Jean Gray and Mystique are front and center, there's always a subtext that the directors view them as corollaries to their male counterparts. Not so in *The Avengers*: Johansson's Black Widow is just as front-and-center as the rest of the cast.²⁵⁸

257 Among these are the billionaire inventor Tony Stark, who performs as "Iron Man" in his high-tech suit, the scientist Bruce Banner, who transforms into the super-human Hulk, the former Russian spy and combat expert Natasha Romanoff, a.k.a. Black Widow, the rejuvenated World War II veteran Steve Rogers, who now acts as Captain America, master archer Clint Barton, a.k.a. Hawkeye, who is temporarily under the spell of Loki, and Asgardian demi-god Thor, who is on a personal quest to stop his adoptive brother Loki from releasing the Chitauri on Earth.

258 Julianne Escobedo Shepherd, "The Awesome Politics of 'the Avengers,'" *Alternet.org* (May 4, 2012). Accessed September 27, 2018: <https://www.alternet.org/story/155291/the_awesome_politics_of_%22the_avengers%22/>.

Escobedo Shepherd identifies different ideological subtexts in the depiction of superheroes in *The Avengers* and *X-Men*. However, the auteurist view that the director's political attitudes explicitly shape the ideological subtexts of the movie is unsteady and calls for analysis of how the main characters are realized in the film. This needs to be complemented by a discussion of the larger socio-cultural frameworks that inform these portrayals.

Other commentators conclude that the movie's espousal of certain "attitudes" toward political struggles is much more telling. In her article "'The Avengers': Good, evil and politics," Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite writes:

"The Avengers" is also a snapshot of our cultural struggles as a nation. The "Captain America" character, unfrozen after having successfully fought the Nazis and Nazi-wannabes, is clearly out of his time. He wants the dysfunctional superheroes, Iron Man, Hulk, Thor, and Black Widow to pull together and fight for earth. They're more interested in fighting each other. [...] [Captain America] gets that the job is not so much "avenging" as it is "protecting." What does it say about us as a people that he is the odd man out, a throw back to an earlier time?²⁵⁹

This analysis focuses on the premise that the film presents not only a struggle of "good versus evil," but also conflicting epistemologies in terms of individualism, tone, and character. In this view, a patriotically minded Captain America represents the only alternative to a motley crew of self-centered and self-styled mavericks. The dynamics put forward in this argument demonstrate the conflicts that arise from synergizing spectacles, including the intra-textual negotiation of criticism of the spectacle aspect itself, that is, the vain celebrity status of the Avengers in contrast to the nostalgic vision of Captain America's sense of collective duty. Thistlethwaite's invocation of a mid-twentieth-century aesthetic is of interest here, as it supplies ideological ammunition for the rehabilitation of a mythical past. This anti-modernist inflection echoes not only Reagan's style of reactionary backlash politics, but also some of Obama's rhetoric in "reclaiming the American Dream" as a mode for progressing into the future (McVey, *State of the Union 1; Barack Obama and American Exceptionalism* 204).²⁶⁰ It is, therefore, vital that an ideological analysis of *The*

259 Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite, "'The Avengers': Good, evil and politics" *The Washington Post* (May 7, 2012). Accessed September 27, 2018: <<https://www.onfaith.co/onfaith/2012/05/07/the-avengers-good-evil-and-politics/10228>>.

260 With regard to restorative elements in Obama's rhetoric, J. Alexander McVey notes that "[r]hetorical scholars have argued that Obama's refusal of the politics of fear deploys a restorative vision of American exceptionalism capable of remaking a war-like American culture that feeds on the fear of enemy others into a culture that once

Avengers investigate connections between contemporary imagery and nostalgic mythologies, as these connections can expose how power structures are legitimized in times of crisis.

The cementing of pre-existing power structures dovetails with a plot in which a foreign invasion is fought off without presenting any challenge to existing social hierarchies. As noted in the analysis of *Independence Day*, the “preservation of the American family” is predicated on the high-tech military defense of the borders of the United States. This is effectuated through the exercise of hard-bodied masculinity intended to secure the restoration of the father (Jordan 152–153). In the analysis of *The Dark Knight*, it became clear that the very notion of heroism can serve to legitimize militaristic projects. The plot of *The Avengers*, therefore, merits investigations of depictions of jingoism, militarism, and hard-bodied masculinity. In his article “The Politics of ‘The Avengers’; Or, Can Clean Energy and Old-Fashioned Jingoism Mix?” film critic Anthony Kaufman argues that the progressivist overtures cannot eclipse the movie’s inscription in a logic of neoconservative imperialism and rugged individualism:

“The Avengers” upholds the classic image of the rogue American masculine hero—and I’m sorry but I don’t think Scarlett Johansson’s ass-kicking superspy sufficiently counteracts all the testosterone on display. What we have is Captain America once again emerging as our fearless, white, wholesome, brave and bold leader and Samuel Jackson’s Nick Fury proving how his ragtag band of soldiers don’t need to follow the rules of the bureaucratic state—and I’d argue this isn’t libertarian; this is stars-and-stripes America, folks. From the lone cowboy to the renegade cop to the war hero, throughout our cultural history, we have always championed individuals over the government. This is pro-American individualism and exceptionalism, a classic Reagan-era conservative power move that only further propagates American might.²⁶¹

Kaufman identifies a number of crucial ideological tensions that blockbuster movies—and especially superhero movies—have frequently resolved in ways that support visions that strongly align with Reagan’s conservatism: an unwavering support for American exceptionalism (e.g. messianic Americanism), the obsolescence of “big government,” the prerogative of hard-bodied masculinity

again respects democratic values such as the rule of law and public reason” (*Barack Obama and American Exceptionalism* 204).

261 Anthony Kaufman, “The Politics of ‘The Avengers’; Or, Can Clean Energy and Old-Fashioned Jingoism Mix?” *IndieWire* (May 7, 2012). Accessed September 27, 2018: <<https://www.indiewire.com/2012/05/the-politics-of-the-avengers-or-can-clean-energy-and-old-fashioned-jingoism-mix-233479/>>.

in defending the nation, and the celebration of a seemingly meritocratic capitalism, wherein the ultra-rich become naturalized authorities on moral issues (e.g. Bruce Wayne/the Batman in *The Dark Knight*).

These foci constitute a fertile starting point for an analysis of the survival of Reaganite neoconservatism and neoliberalism in the Obama era. This starting point can be expanded to include conceptions of “multicultural neoliberalism” and “multicultural imperialism” that were already discussed in the analysis of *Independence Day*. The convergence of social progressivism with the interests of both capital and the military state provides an important angle for elucidating social relations within *The Avengers*. Furthermore, the concept of “multicultural neoliberalism” offers a metatext that facilitates a close dissection of the movie’s broad appeal within the context of the Obama presidency. The contradictions within emancipatory and imperialist impulses are also of relevance to the political economy of Hollywood, as they provide lucrative avenues for the production and exploitative valorization of cultural difference (Kellner, *Media Culture* 41–42).²⁶²

Based on these observations, I will investigate the degree of Reaganite entrepreneurialism and militarism in *The Avengers* against the backdrop of the Obama presidency. Two focal points will serve as a basis for analysis:

- the reimagined relationship between entrepreneurialism and national defense,
- the role of gendered “hard bodies” in times of war.

The correspondences between “free-market” mythologies and militarism have been a recurrent feature of the analysis of Reaganite echoes in *Independence Day* and *The Dark Knight*. Considering the “War on Terror” continued during Obama’s two terms in office, the portrayal of national defense is critical in the investigation of the intricacies of power relations in the film. This multi-leveled inquiry into one of the most successful blockbusters of the 2010s will shed light on the adaptation of conservative “hard-body” fantasies during Obama’s two terms in office. Moreover, the longevity of the “War on Terror,” the controversies surrounding mass spying by the NSA, and illegal drone strikes against targets in the Muslim world call for an interrogation of those specific cultural

262 In his book *Media Culture*, Kellner states that “[d]ifference sells. Capitalism must constantly multiply markets, styles, fads, and artifacts to keep absorbing consumers into its practices and lifestyles. The mere valorization of ‘difference’ as a mark of opposition can simply help market new styles and artifacts if the difference in question and its effects are not adequately appraised” (41).

fantasies, which present the opportunity to reconcile extended imperialist projects and Obama's diplomatic language.

As one of the pivotal and most profitable superhero movies of the early 2010s, *The Avengers* is a highly suitable text for investigating the integration of a more socially liberal, millennial movie-going audience into spectacles of jingoistic capitalism. The aspect of "multicultural neoliberalism" is of interest, as it aligns with the political economy of the Hollywood spectacle. This concept also exposes the bifurcations of a polarized political landscape in the United States, in which neoliberal capitalism is increasingly associated with cosmopolitanism, social liberalism, and the urban space. Reaganism provides an apt angle for investigating these trajectories, as it provided the groundwork for a neoliberal alignment on the basis of reactionary social values while simultaneously casting itself as a populist insurgence on behalf of (white) lower- and middle-income families (Kellner, *Media Culture* 58).²⁶³ This includes the corporatization of Hollywood that began in the late 1970s and managed to recuperate after the global financial crisis of the 2000s—partially due to the resounding commercial success of superhero films. Therefore, the next section will discuss the production context of *The Avengers* and how Marvel Studios established a new trend in serialization and transmedia presence through the "Marvel Cinematic Universe."

The Superhero (Formula) Keeps Coming Back: The Production Background of *The Avengers*

The Avengers was produced by Marvel Studios, a subsidiary of Walt Disney Studios. In 1986, during the "merger mania" of the 1980s and 1990s (Prince, *A New Pot of Gold* 40–89), Marvel Entertainment Group was purchased by New

263 The Reagan era coincided with a new phase in the interlocking of corporate business and presidential cabinets. Building on research conducted by Peter Freitag, Timothy Gill determines that corporate representation in presidential cabinets has risen to more than 70 percent since the mid-1970s (compared to 50 percent in the decades immediately preceding the 1970s). This maxed out with the Bush administration, which boasted 100 percent corporate–government interlock (Gill). Meagan Day adds that "[t]here's Trump, who has taken the pattern to a new extreme, appointing not merely people with solid corporate connections to his cabinet but quasi-random capitalist super-elites with little to no knowledge of their departments and shameless allegiances to their class peers" (Day). Investigating the hybridization of the corporate and governmental sphere is therefore of tremendous contemporary significance.

World Entertainment, which was itself taken over by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation in 1997.²⁶⁴ The group's integration into a larger corporate structure—coupled with stringent cost-cutting measures and organizational diversification—led to the production of a string of blockbuster movies based on the Marvel comic-book oeuvre: *Blade* in 1999, *X-Men* in 2000, and the landmark *Spiderman* in 2002. The last of these helped to establish superhero movies as a lucrative summer blockbuster strategy for the early twenty-first century. The increased profitability of this formula also ensured that Marvel Studios would receive huge financial advances from investors to produce sequels and similar superhero franchises. Seeking to enter the superhero blockbuster business, Walt Disney Studios purchased Marvel for US\$4 billion in 2009.²⁶⁵ This led to even larger budgets for Marvel, as well as access to Disney-owned entertainment channels, which facilitated the proliferation of a whole set of superhero brands.

By the time *The Avengers* was released in 2012, superhero movies were firmly established within the canon of Hollywood majors like Warner Bros., Disney, and Paramount Pictures. Further *Iron Man* sequels, the first installment of *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), and the *Thor* and *Captain America* franchises (both launched in 2011) signaled a notable trend toward collaborative production in setting up entire “cinematic universes” (Nielsen 1). Production processes had become more open and transparent, which—in turn—increased co-operation between committed fans and screenwriters and directors. Through panels and Q&A's on the Internet, fans gained more direct access to the production process and began to submit ideas of their own (Jenkins in Brundige 4). The screenplay for *Thor* was written by long-time comic-book fan Mark Protosevitch, who was invited by Paramount Pictures to come up with a script in 2006.²⁶⁶ The spirit of collaboration carried over into the films themselves and Marvel Studios started

264 Sean Howe, “Avengers Assemble!” *Slate* (September 28, 2012). Accessed October 2, 2018: <http://www.slate.com/articles/business/the_pivot/2012/09/marvel_comics_and_the_movies_the_business_story_behind_the_avengers_.html?via=gdpr-consent>.

265 Andrew Clark, “Disney Buys Marvel Entertainment,” *The Guardian* (August 31, 2009). Accessed December 18, 2018: <<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2009/aug/31/disney-marvel-buy-out>>.

266 Pamela McClintock, “Marvel Making Deals for Title Wave,” *Variety* (April 27, 2006). Accessed October 1, 2018: <<http://variety.com/2006/film/markets-festivals/marvel-making-deals-for-title-wave-2-1200334885/>>.

envisioning a crossover superhero film in the mid-2000s.²⁶⁷ The stage was soon set for the production of the first *Avengers* film.

As with previous blockbusters, the public sector realized the tremendous economic and political benefits of investing in this production early on. The Democratic Governor of New Mexico, Bill Richardson, signed a deal with Marvel Studios co-president Louis D'Esposito in December of 2010 to ensure that principal photography for the movie would be shot in his state. The Republican Governor of Ohio, John Kasich, made a similar bid to provide the setting for parts of the film on behalf of the city of Cleveland.²⁶⁸ It is noteworthy that both Democratic and Republican politicians were bidding for involvement in a movie production that had a budget of \$220 million. As with *Independence Day*, bipartisan enthusiasm for the film was an indicator not only of financial success and increased business, but also of a mass appeal that cut across ideological lines. This had become more difficult in the seemingly more polarized political climate in the United States.

Principal photography for the film began in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in April 2011 and was moved to Cleveland, Ohio, in August of that year. In what had become an action-blockbuster tradition, real-life military personnel were included in the filming and production:

Twenty-five Soldiers assigned to the Columbus, Ohio-based 391st Military Police Battalion were battling bad guys with Captain America and his Avengers superheroes during an intensive battle scene that will soon play out in movie theaters worldwide in 2012. [...] "Our participation not only brought life and excitement to the movie but gave moviegoers a look at Army Reserve Soldiers and who we represent," Eiring said.²⁶⁹

The inclusion of US Army soldiers, fighting alongside the Avengers in a fictional battle, further contributed to the visual intertwinement of militarism and entertainment within a slick, high-concept format reminiscent of *Top Gun* and *Independence Day*. Among the key aspects of Eiring's statement are the

267 Pamela McClintock, "Marvel touts Par's hero worship," *Variety* (April 28, 2005). Accessed October 1, 2018: <<http://variety.com/2005/film/news/marvel-touts-par-s-hero-worship-1117921854/>>.

268 Michael Sangiacomo, "Upcoming 'Avengers' movie will be filmed in Cleveland," *blog.cleveland.com* (July 18, 2011). Accessed October 1, 2018: <http://blog.cleveland.com/metro/2011/03/upcoming_avengers_movie_will_b.html>.

269 Mark Bell, "Captain America, Reserve Soldiers share big screen," *www.army.mil* (November 7, 2011). Accessed October 1, 2018: <https://www.army.mil/article/68834/Captain_America__Reserve_Soldiers_share_big_screen/>.

references to “life and excitement” and the power of the gaze (“look at Army Reserve Soldiers”). This vocabulary reflects the spectacle aspect of the movie, which the army is evidently attempting to leverage through this collaboration. Yet, it also underscores an underlying typology of the eroticized valorization of both war and hard-bodied masculinity.²⁷⁰ The generation of “excitement” through the participation of military personnel aligns with what Douglas Kellner terms the “the thrill of technowar” (*Media Culture* 77); that is, the spectacle of viewing computerized and digitalized images of war as a form of home entertainment that invites direct participation. Kellner notes that the lurking sexualized quality of high-tech warfare in *Top Gun* aided in producing the “psychological disposition to thrill to images of technodeath in events like the Persian Gulf War against Iraq” (*Media Culture* 77). In this context, the inclusion of the military as a consultant and active participant in the film is a testament to the continuation of this development during the “War on Terror.”

In parallel to the images of the mass destruction of New York City in *Independence Day* and *The Dark Knight*, the “Big Apple” was again chosen as the primary site for action, with part of the principal photography taking place in Park Avenue and Central Park. The use of wide establishing shots in downtown Manhattan highlights the cinematographic care that went into capturing recognizable landmarks of New York City, which have considerable pop culture currency as symbols of national and capitalist mythologies. The production of the film was, therefore, clearly cognizant of the suitability of Manhattan as a visual terrain for the re-enactment of contemporary power struggles.

In addition to the visual language, the score of the film makes a significant contribution to the mythical undertones of the story. Director Joss Whedon recruited veteran composer Alan Silvestri to compose a score that would fuse the different worlds the superheroes inhabit into a coherent sonic arrangement.²⁷¹ The resulting score was described as deliberately “old-school” by Whedon: “The score is very old-fashioned, which is why Alan was letter perfect for this movie because he can give you the heightened emotion, the Zimmer school of ‘I’m just feeling a lot right now!’”²⁷² Alan Silvestri added in an interview: “One of the

270 The masculine coding of this statement can be safely established as the movie’s final battle scenes almost exclusively feature male army soldiers as extras.

271 Silvestri made a name for himself as a composer for ultra-violent action movies, for example, *Predator* (1987), *Eraser* (1996), and *Judge Dredd* (1995), and right-wing Reagan-era TV shows, such as *G.I. Joe* and *The A-Team*.

272 Steve Weintraub, “Joss Whedon Talks the Cabin in the Woods, The Avengers, His Writing Process, Comic-Con, Collecting and More,” *Collider* (April 5, 2012).

things that Joss talked about early on was that he wanted to make a film that had some very clear aspects of being a war movie. [...] obviously there are times where they were absolutely functioning as this paramilitary unit.”²⁷³

Both insights disclose a heavy emphasis on the use of military patriotism to blend an assortment of different characters into an effective (paramilitary) fighting unit. The “old-school” character of the score recalls the patriotic fanfares that accompanied much of pro-Reagan war entertainment in the 1980s. Thus, the score acquires a restorative character, which points at established patterns of bellicose storytelling as a vehicle for the erasure of difference. This is also observable in *ID4*. The sonic thrill of technowar (“I’m just feeling a lot right now”), however, is supplemented in *The Avengers* by a counterculture sound in the form of a song by the alternative rock band Soundgarden. In the convergence culture of the early twenty-first century, fighting the war is, thereby, narrated through both patriotic music and the sound of the anti-materialist insurgency. This was not the case in *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial*, for example, which did not support its anti-government subtext with counterculture music.²⁷⁴

These amalgamations of different characters, sounds, and story lines are strongly tied to the “Marvel Cinematic Universe,” which started out as a new form of blockbuster franchising and serialization in the late 2000s. Alex Brundige explains that cinematic universes can be characterized as “a series of film franchises set in an overarching fictional world. Characters from one franchise can be featured in other franchises set in this same world, and events and plot points from one film can affect the entire storyworld” (3).

Accessed October 2, 2018: <<https://www.webcitation.org/66ihwyV1Z?url=http://collider.com/joss-whedon-cabin-in-the-woods-the-avengers-interview/157304/>>.

273 Daniel Schweiger, “Interview: THE AVENGERS composer Alan Silvestri makes the Avengers assemble,” *AssignmentX* (June 3, 2012). Accessed October 2, 2018: <<https://www.assignmentx.com/2012/interview-the-avengers-composer-alan-silvestri-makes-the-avengers-assemble/>>.

274 While this can be attributed to *E.T.*’s status as a family movie, a look at other anti-bureaucratic movies of the 1980s (e.g. *Ghostbusters*, *Die Hard*, *Beverly Hills Cop*) reveals a general lack of music with an explicit anti-consumerist stance in Hollywood blockbusters. Corporatized media culture began to permanently appropriate such “alternative music” with the breakthrough of grunge and the “Seattle Sound” in the early 1990s (Anderson 128–145). This can be described as a post-Reagan innovation in blockbuster culture.

As a contemporary phenomenon, the cinematic universe presents an intensification of the blockbuster spectacle. The interconnectedness of multiple story arcs, temporalities (e.g. WWII soldier Captain America), and locales (e.g. the *Thor* franchise takes place in mythical Asgard and on Earth) allows for profitable new venues in merchandise, as well as theme park entertainment—a major source of revenue for the Disney Corporation. It also enables the relaunch of past franchises, which can be readapted in new settings. Moreover, the cinematic universe presents a mode of keeping up and fusing with increasingly competitive streaming services and “cinematic television.” Through steady and frequent releases, made possible by capital-intensive corporate backing, Hollywood studios can further adapt to the media usage habits of a millennial generation that has flocked to big-budget series such as *Game of Thrones*, *Breaking Bad*, and *The Hunger Games*. In this context, journalist Todd VanDerWerff describes Marvel movies as the “the world’s most expensive TV show.”²⁷⁵

Not only do these transmedia universes provide a measure of financial dominance, but their synergistic character also ushers in new and arguably enhanced forms of market research and interaction with customers.²⁷⁶ Brundige refers to Henry Jenkins when explaining the new role of persistent fandom in creating stable markets: “Fans, or ‘loyals’ as Jenkins calls them in his 2006 book *Convergence Culture*, ‘are more apt to watch series faithfully, more apt to pay attention to advertising, and more apt to buy products’” (Jenkins in Brundige 3). As previously noted, the increasing visibility of fan culture through digital media had captured the attention of Hollywood studios, as “active viewership” enables a more direct exchange between consumers and producers. Thus, filmic texts can be fine-tuned to appeal to both existing fan bases and audiences that used to be beyond reach, for example, non-comic-book fans (Brundige 7). This aspect of convergence culture reveals how contemporary blockbusters

275 Todd VanDerWerff, “How Marvel films like Captain America: Civil War became the world’s biggest TV show,” *Vox* (May 12, 2016). Accessed October 2, 2018: <<https://www.vox.com/2016/5/12/11654248/captain-america-civil-war-batman-v-superman-marvel-tv>>.

276 Transmedia scholar Andrea Phillips points out that users often don’t feel like they are being marketed to by new forms of sociality between producers and consumers. She also notes that transmedia interaction has benefitted the military in its recruitment efforts: “The military runs war games in which you’re play acting a story about a particular war scenario. It is a very effective training method for preparing people for that kind of war because they’re in a story and they have a framework to understand everything that’s going on” (Phillips).

straddle the line between individually tailored consumption and broad appeal. Considering this development, it seems reasonable that Hollywood studios would rely on long-running tales of recognizable comic-book heroes.

Nevertheless, the early Marvel Cinematic Universe still needed to navigate the metatexts of damaged neoliberalism and neoconservatism in the early 2010s—both of which were being renegotiated by the Obama administration with a more liberal veneer. The specific positioning of *The Avengers* within these co-ordinates can help to uncover how much of the original Reaganite neoliberalism and neoconservatism survived in the popular imagination in the 2010s. Thus, the next section will directly examine the link between masculine, hard-bodied entrepreneurialism and militarized defense.

Film Analysis

Entrepreneurialism and National Defense in *The Avengers*

*You're not your job.
You're not how much money you have in the bank.
You're not the car you drive.
You're not the contents of your wallet.
You're not your fucking khakis.
You're the all-singing, all-dancing crap of the world.*
— Tyler Durden in *Fight Club* (1999)

The film opens with the impending emergency of the Tesseract, a cosmic energy source, becoming active in the SHIELD research lab.²⁷⁷ Scientists immediately attempt to prevent the Tesseract from releasing unfathomable destruction. The director, Nick Fury, rushes to the lab and is briefed by Dr. Erik Selvig, the leading researcher of the team (at 03:20):

NICK FURY: We've prepared for this, doctor. Harnessing energy from space.

ERIK SELVIG: We don't have the harness. Our calculations are far from complete. Now she's throwing off interference, radiation. Nothing harmful, low levels of gamma radiation.

NICK FURY: That can be harmful.

277 In the Marvel Universe, SHIELD stands for "Supreme Headquarters, International Espionage, Law-Enforcement Division." While the movie does not clarify the jurisdiction under which SHIELD operates, the comic-book version implies that the agency is affiliated with either the US government or the United Nations.

Fury and Selvig proceed to inspect the device with the help of superhero archer Clint Barton. Suddenly a portal is opened in the room and the villain Loki enters through it. Loki violently seizes the Tesseract and gains mental control of both Selvig and Barton using the powers of his scepter. He then manages to escape with his new team of helpers.

In the preceding dialogue, Selvig's concern brings to light a level of bureaucratic inadequacy in containing troublesome forces. As the Tesseract is extra-terrestrial in origin, SHIELD is shown to be incapable of fully controlling the threat posed by external Others. The research on the Tesseract further connects the actions of SHIELD with Cold War nuclear anxieties and neoconservative paranoia concerning "weapons of mass destruction." As a source of unspeakable power, the Tesseract taps into current discourses on power in the filmic universe. Subsequently, the question of ownership of this destructive power becomes the central source of conflict in *The Avengers*. In his discussion of the role of nuclear anxiety in Reagan-era cinema, Robin Wood argues that the fear of nuclear war was frequently negotiated in two ways:

[O]ne side of this fear is the contemporary horror film, centered on the unkillable and ultimately inexplicable monster, the mysterious and terrible destructive force we can neither destroy, nor communicate with, nor understand [...]. The other side is the series of fantasy films centered on the struggle for possession of an ultimate weapon of power [...]. The pervasive, if surreptitious, implication of the fantasy films is that nuclear power is positive and justified as long as it is in the right, i.e., American hands. (149–150)

This two-pronged representational strategy both acknowledges and dramatizes the fear of nuclear power. In the first scenario, this power cannot be permanently repressed. Much like in *The Dark Knight*, "fear" as an emotion cannot be defeated militarily. *The Avengers* seems to be more in line with the latter strategy, whereby the Tesseract, as a metaphor for a weapon of mass destruction, needs to stay in "the right hands" in order to assuage nuclear fears. While arguably a "noble lie" in itself, this tale allows for a more straightforward narration of heroism, in which masculine competition yields a clear winner. Wood's point can be fine-tuned through an interrogation of capitalism, hard-bodied masculinity, and national defense. As the film presents several conflicts arising from private capitalism versus statism and hard-bodied masculinity versus "weak bodies," a further specification of which "American hands" are the "right ones"

is warranted. The beginning of the movie makes it clear that these powers are not safe in the hands of government.

This premise of an uncontrollable and inevitable threat, which could wipe out the entire planet, not only recalls early blockbusters such as *Star Wars*, in which the “Death Star” instills universal fear as the ultimate force of destruction (Wood 150), but also allows for the indictment of a purely statist defense policy. When viewed through the lens of Reaganism, these nuclear anxieties appear to be interwoven with the fear of a supposedly “big and unaccountable government.” As discussed in Chapter 3, Reagan endorsed white, male individualist capitalism as a counter-balance to a perceived executive overreach. This allows for the ideological legitimization of excessive military power, as long as “free-market capital” is central to its creation.

As noted in Chapter 2, Reagan employed language in which capitalist competition is presented as conducive to the safety of communities.²⁷⁸ Based on the logic that the “free market” is a “disciplinary force” through competition (Lakoff, *Thinking Points* 61), he asserted his view that entrepreneurs are uniquely suited to steer technological progress in a way that upholds the safety of white and middle-class communities. In light of the assumption that the government lacks discipline due to the lack of competition, it comes as no surprise that SHIELD underestimated the potential of the Tesseract, which is now threatening the safety of the United States and the world at large.²⁷⁹

With the failure of bureaucracy as a narrative starting point, the resolution of the ensuing conflicts is designed to incorporate the performance of disciplined bodies and a recalibration of powers between capital and government. If “stable and secure neighborhoods” result from “competition, innovation and growth,” then unstable communities reflect a lack of (masculine) competition and the absence of innovation in service of the accumulation of capital. The early governmental failure sets both individualist capitalism and hard-bodied heroism on centrifugal trajectories toward the subsequent defense of the nation. As noted in Chapter 2, the fashioning of entrepreneurialism in spiritualized terms served to connect a new, post-Fordist, and globalized capitalism

278 According to Weiler and Pearce: “Entrepreneurial capitalism was [...] a spiritualized concept for Reagan. [...] A free market stimulates competition and fosters innovation, which are the hallmarks of individual freedom. [...] Furthermore, the prosperity resulting from competition, innovation and growth strengthens neighborhood economies, making them more stable and secure” (262).

279 As Susan Jeffords argues, within the Reaganite worldview, failures result from “internal bodily failures” (*Hard Bodies* 52).

with national mythologies (e.g. “rags to riches”), established imageries of previous forms of wealth accumulation,²⁸⁰ and the notion of the entrepreneur as a (religiously) selfless giver to the nation.

The Avengers does offer a vision of spectacle-laden, high-tech entrepreneurialism in the form of arguably the most pre-eminent of the main characters: Tony Stark. In order to fully elucidate the ideologies that shape this character, it is necessary to acknowledge some of the cross-textual story lines that establish Stark as a principal force in the Marvel Universe. Stark's origin story and his involvement in the global corporation that bears his name (“Stark Industries”) seem to run counter to traditional pronouncements of the “rags-to-riches” myth, from which the Reaganite concept of entrepreneurialism heavily borrows (Vaughn 27–40). In the original comic-book version, Stark is born into immense wealth as the son of an industrialist. However, he proves to be a prodigy in his younger years, enrolls at MIT at the age of 15, and earns a degree in electrical engineering. In the first installment of the *Iron Man* franchise (2008), Stark uses his skills to secretly develop a powered armor suit while held hostage in Afghanistan. This suit becomes his trademark equipment, enabling him to pursue a life as a public superhero. Unlike other superheroes, Stark does not have a secret identity; his actions and his iron suit are all publicly known features of his persona and brand. He seems less fragmented and less tormented than the neo-noir Batman in *The Dark Knight*. A commodity brand merges with the identity of a single man as both a superhero and an entrepreneur. In the original comic-book story, Stark purposefully reconceives his father's business to explicitly contribute to the military defense of the nation. Thus, his own persona becomes further intertwined with fantasies of military and national strength.

With regard to the capitalist hegemonial subtext of the superhero, Matthew Wolf-Mayer argues that such hegemony relies on “economic constraints to limit the potential of its citizens” (203; Huang 23). In light of Kellner's view that the technospectacle dramatizes the “controversies and struggles” of a capitalist society (*Media Spectacle* 2), the extraordinary capabilities of all superheroes can be read within the context of an ongoing concentration of wealth and economic

280 For example, the early twentieth-century aesthetic when praising businessmen and engineers like Dave Packard and Simon Ramo. In Chapter 2, it was concluded that “[t]he implied connection between the capitalisms of the past and the space-age capitalism of Reagan's neoliberal fantasies offers a variety of a restorative qualities that squares with the narrative foci of the Hollywood blockbuster era.”

power in the hands of a few—with Tony Stark maintaining an edge as the most technologized of all superheroes. Yet, this very monopolization of economic power is presented as conducive to a “strict-father” heroism. Seemingly invincible villains—in this case the demi-god Loki—cannot be disciplined through the limited potential of a middle-class citizenry. Instead, it is a mythical “free market entrepreneurialism” that generates the spectacular power to fight back against ferocious and well-armed intruders (Lakoff, *Thinking Points* 61). In *E.T.*, it was the white middle class itself that revolted against big-government intrusion. In *ID4*, the supposedly beneficial corporate presence manifested itself through subtle product placements. In *The Dark Knight* and *The Avengers*, however, corporate capitalism has a clear face and brand—and it is leading the fight against the Other in person.

Analogous to the “trickle-down” logic of Reaganomics, Stark’s command of a large defense firm is shown to yield positive results for the nation. The reduced economic power of the citizenry appears to be a small price to pay for national security—an emblematic conservative vision of security through force, which “inflicts harsh punishment” on the threatening external forces (Lakoff, *Thinking Points* 100). Stark’s effective performance as a creator of technospectacles when fending off the Other provides a vindicating discourse. This reframes his fortunate start in life as legitimate and necessary. Like Bruce Wayne, Stark’s wealth and capabilities will not bring about a long-term change in socio-economic realities but remain within the framework of a hereditary meritocracy that legitimizes itself through deference to foreign challengers.

In the film, the tale of deserved ownership and entrepreneurial genius is evident in a scene in which Tony Stark returns to his luxurious, high-tech penthouse apartment in Manhattan at night. There he meets his personal aide, Pepper Potts, who played an active role in the construction of the futuristic and visibly branded Stark Tower. Stark walks into his rooftop apartment in a leisurely manner while an automated robotic system takes off and disassembles his iron suit. All of these actions are finely tuned to his walking speed and body height, creating the impression that key components of his corporation are efficiently tailored to his very physical movements. Thus, his body itself becomes intertwined with the architecture of his branded skyscraper. This is accentuated by a slow-moving tracking shot, which centers Stark from a front-view perspective. After his armor has been removed, he casually walks toward the large desk at which Potts is overseeing the activities of the reactor device on digital monitors. Through the *mise-en-scène*, the top of the Chrysler Building becomes clearly visible through the extensive window wall. Stark stops walking and starts a conversation with Potts while visually placed directly



Figure 13: Tony Stark arriving at Stark Tower with the Chrysler Building visible in the background. This is a fitting moment to recall the quote from Tyler Durden at the beginning of this section.

next to the famous skyscraper. This links his status to the mythical qualities of US-American capitalism of the early twentieth century and the architectural icons commonly associated with it (see Figure 13).

In relation to the symbolic status of the Chrysler Building, Paul A. Ranogajec points out that the skyscraper has often been interpreted as a symbolic mediator between capitalist modernity and economic crisis: “[T]he Chrysler Building’s height, glamour, and prestige was concocted to celebrate one man whose wealth was the result of huge profits he accrued at the expense of poorly paid laborers and other workers.”^{281,282} As the construction of the building coincided with a phase of economic expansion in the 1920s and the Great Depression, the building assumed a quasi-mythical role in the popular imagination as a timeless bridge between periods of uncertainty and confident reassertion. Ranogajec outlines that after “the depression and World War II, New York City became

281 Paul A. Ranogajec, “Skyscrapers, cars, and American ambition: The Chrysler Building,” *Smarthistory* (September 24, 2018). Accessed January 30, 2019: <<https://smarthistory.org/chrysler-building-sa/>>.

282 The same can be said of Stark Tower, which is presented as a testament to the workers who erected it.

the world's foremost cultural center. And the Chrysler Building was still there, glimmering high above almost everything else as a beacon and symbol of the city's persistent optimism."

Tony Stark and his tower appear in the direct vicinity of this quasi-mythical landmark, visually interlinked through the *mise-en-scène*. The film presents this connection not only at a time when the global hegemony of the United States has been openly challenged, but also after epochal landmarks of capitalism in Manhattan were destroyed in the 9/11 attacks. These parameters give Stark's visual contextualization a resurgent quality, suggesting that the male entrepreneur can rebuild national strength and reaffirm loci that epitomize the global centrality of US-American capitalism (e.g. Stark Tower).

Leo Braudy notes in this context that the re-masculinization of "mercantile culture" is a feature of post-9/11 fantasies of preparing for war (Braudy 464; Kontour 13).²⁸³ This restorative dimension is partially furnished by co-ordinates that also undergirded Reagan's "free-market" rhetoric in the 1980s: an orientation toward the aesthetic of the mid-twentieth century and the simultaneous celebration of individualized, post-Fordist consumption. These intersections recall the discussion of E.T.'s TV viewing in Chapter 3. Unlike E.T., Stark can claim direct historical lineage from the imagined past due to his inheritance and status as a white, male, and able-bodied businessman. He appears as an implied visual and ideological heir to US-American ingenuity and technological progress. Furthermore, the Manhattan skyline against which he is positioned serves as an easily identifiable backdrop for a global audience. Consequently, capitalist iconographies continue to provide a visual language that saturates markets across the globe and provides a distinct feel of cinematic familiarity.

This inscription of Stark's entrepreneurialism into US-American myths not only aligns with the depiction of glamorous affluence in Reagan-era TV shows like *Dallas* or *Dynasty* (Kellner, *Media Culture* 149), but also provides a visual template for how the wealthy entrepreneur's very body is now inextricably linked with the architecture and the landmarks of Manhattan. For Stark, the defense of these landmarks is arguably not just a matter of national pride or rational calculation; it also amounts to a defense of his very own physical body.

283 It should be noted that Stark Enterprises receives substantial input from Pepper Potts—a notable foray into the male space of military capitalism by a female character. The implications of the interactions between Stark and Potts will be explored later in this section. While Natasha Romanoff plays a vital part in the Avengers team, she arguably resides outside the corporate sphere.

The healthiness of Stark Tower represents the strength and vitality of the entrepreneur. This is curious in the case of Stark, since he created the Iron Man suit after receiving a life-threatening injury in Afghanistan that left him disabled in the comic-book series. In his analysis of the physical disabilities of Stark's character in the movie, Travis Wagner points out that "Stark does not acknowledge such disabilities, but instead uses his privilege and eventually his Iron Man suit as a means to renavigate his identity, denying his debilitation through technology" (6). The renegotiation of a weakened body through technospectacle is important in contextualizing the salvaging of neoliberal capitalism after the financial crisis. The affluent, male body is fashioned as a visible expression of the nation's global status—much more than any representation of the government.²⁸⁴ Unlike Nick Fury or any other SHIELD agent, Tony Stark is immersed in mythological imagery of a glorified past. His brand and his image reign supreme in New York City and are therefore inseparably intertwined with each other.

This visual connection between personal wealth and national symbolism can be interpreted as the full blossoming of the "Age of the Entrepreneur" that Reagan proposed to young listeners in an address in 1985 (Landström 49). As noted in Chapter 2, this endorsement of corporate capitalism becomes part of discourses on the role of government, rising economic inequalities, and an attention economy brought about by changes in media technologies. The ensuing focus on sound-bite politics gives rise to a new public format for the stylized male entrepreneur, wherein ostentatious consumption is coupled with careful choreography (Troy, *Morning in America* 117). In the Reaganite view, the slick and entertaining presentation of capitalist success was reframed as a trickle-down narrative of national strength, the spectacle of the extravagant businessman serving as proof that the nation could produce bodies that exceed the capabilities of any other foreign bodies.²⁸⁵

284 Through its focus on affluent and/or middle-class heroes, the film eclipses the fact that the main recruiting pool for the US armed forces consists of communities of color and lower-income households. In her research on race, class, and immigrant status within the US Army, Amy Lutz concludes that "the all-volunteer force continues to see overrepresentation of the working and middle classes, with fewer incentives for upper class participation" (185). Thus, *The Avengers* offers a neoliberal fantasy in which the affluent are fashioned as having more of a stake in the nation's defense than the general population.

285 Gil Troy notes how the well-choreographed, daily spectacles of cable networks like MTV and CNN aided in the elevation of self-styled businessmen in the 1980s: "The entrepreneurs of the moment such as Lee Iacocca, Donald Trump, and Ted Turner

In relation to the interaction between entrepreneurship and governmental bodies, it is also important to examine the dynamics between Stark and SHIELD. Throughout the film, several narrative arcs suggest that Stark reinvigorates the efforts of the spy agency and that he wields managerial skills that are apparently lacking in the bureaucratic space. Accordingly, the introduction of Stark into SHIELD's efforts to prevent Loki from using the Tesseract is portrayed as a galvanizing event that not only suggests the injection of a special "private-sector expertise," but also reflects demands for more transparency within the espionage agency. A few moments before Stark's first appearance at SHIELD, Bruce Banner (the Hulk), Natasha Romanoff, Thor, and Steve Rogers (Captain America) are arguing in the briefing room about how they should deal with the recently apprehended Loki (at 53:32):

STEVE ROGERS: I wanna know why Loki let us take him. He's not leading an army from here.

BRUCE BANNER: I don't think we should be focusing on Loki. That guy's brain is a bag full of cats, you could smell crazy on him.

THOR: Have care how you speak. Loki is beyond reason, but he is of Asgard, and he's my brother.

NATASHA ROMANOFF: He killed eighty people in two days.

THOR: He's adopted.

In this conversation, Steve Rogers articulates his thoughts within the paradigms of conventional warfare ("He's not leading an army from here"), illustrating his immersion in the frameworks of WWII, but also his lack of imagination regarding the new kinds of asymmetric warfare that Loki has planned. Unbeknownst to Rogers, Loki intends to unleash the powers of the Hulk to aid Loki in breaking out of his cell and inflicting heavy damage on SHIELD's Helicarrier. The use of individuals to enact a "theater of destruction" constitutes a form of terrorist violence that Rogers seems incapable of considering at this point. From a neoconservative viewpoint, he seems stuck in a pre-9/11-mindset, as yet unaware of the necessity of striking against the foe in much more extraordinary and pre-emptive ways (Kellner, *Cinema Wars* 215, 216).²⁸⁶

would join President Reagan in elevating the pursuit of wealth, the compulsion to consume, and the desperation to succeed from selfish acts of individualism into altruistic acts of patriotism. The brazen ethos, along with the slick sensibility and colorful graphics of an increasingly wired world, would be part of the Big Chillers' 'yuppie package' (*Morning in America* 117).

286 For example, through canny interrogation tactics, which are later implemented when Natasha Romanoff extracts vital information from Loki by first offering a confessional story and plea to release Clint Barton. Unlike in *The Dark Knight*,

Scientist Bruce Banner's statements are evocative of the "irrational racialized Other" discussed in Chapter 5. Not only is Loki dehumanized through language that associates him with animals ("bag full of cats"), but he is effectively otherized by a reference to sensory "distinctness" ("You could smell crazy on him"). Banner thereby introduces the neoconservative sentiment that is lacking in Rogers' remarks: Loki is the Other and therefore irrational. He cannot be bargained with and his ultimate motives do not matter ("I don't think we should be focusing on Loki"). Much like the figure of the irrational terrorist in Reagan's and Bush's rhetoric, Loki is identified by the Avengers as a villain without a cause (Lakoff, *Thinking Points* 62).²⁸⁷ Thor's intervention, the intention of which is to re-establish hierarchies and counter the dehumanization of Loki, is interrupted by Romanoff's protestation that the antagonist is responsible for numerous killings—again narrowing the scope of discourse to one in which Loki needs to be disciplined by a "strict father."

This fast exchange is accompanied by a variety of shot reverse shots, which track the continuity of the dialogue by briefly focusing on whichever characters is speaking. The pacing and rhythm in this scene stress the verbal conflict, thus preventing the viewer from focusing on any one character for an extended amount of time. Thor and Bruce Banner are standing, whereas Natasha Romanoff and Steve Rogers remain seated. However, Thor is the only character to be presented in low-angle shots—twice, while berating Banner. These shots convey dominance and power to the viewer. Banner, Romanoff, and Rogers are presented through master shots on a medium eye-level, which accentuate their roles as equal partners. On the visual level, Thor is established as an imposing and hyper-masculine presence. His archaic and regal language is in contrast to the language used by Stark, whose subsequent entry upends the dynamic in the

this non-violent, yet devious interrogation tactic produces the desired result. The Hollywood terrorist trope of the "ticking time bomb" is also employed here, as Loki was expected to plan his next move while imprisoned (Yin 282–285).

287 George Lakoff explains that in the conservative view, terrorism is explained away in simple terms through reference to direct, individual causation: "[Terrorists are] evil people whose conduct is inexcusable and therefore unworthy of analysis. The most that conservatives will concede is that terrorists 'hate our freedoms'" (*Thinking Points* 62). This squares perfectly with Reagan's stance toward terrorists and with Loki's own stated disdain for human freedom. Unlike the Joker, Loki has no desire to expose societal hypocrisy; his motivations are completely self-serving and totalitarian, making him a feasible reason for the declaration of an all-out war.

room. Upon entering, Stark casually interrupts Banner, who has previously established himself as a scientific authority in the group (53:52):

BRUCE BANNER: Iridium, what did they need the Iridium for?

TONY STARK (*walks into the room*): It's a stabilizing agent.

(*Stark walks in with SHIELD agent Phil Coulson. He casually wraps up a preceding conversation with him.*)

I'm just saying. Pick a weekend. I'll fly you to Portland. Keep the love alive.

(*He now turns to the entire group.*)

Means the portal won't collapse on itself, like it did at SHIELD.

(*He now turns to Thor and gives him two brief pats on the upper arm.*)

No hard feelings, Point Break. You've got a mean swing.

(*Referring to the Iridium.*)

Also, it means the portal can open as wide, and stay open as long, as Loki wants.

(*To the SHIELD crew.*)

Uh, raise the mid-mast, ship the top sails.

(*He motions to one crew member sitting in front of his computer.*)

That man is playing GALAGA! Thought we wouldn't notice. But we did.

Stark's entrance is depicted by an extended following shot, which centers him from a long angle. No other character has been afforded this visual centrality in this scene. Stark's casual conversational style (e.g. when making plans with Coulson) lends him a folksy, easy-going confidence as he replaces the knowledgeable Banner ("It's a stabilizing agent") and jabs at Thor ("No hard feelings, Point Break"). His patronization of Thor is humorous, which reinforces the impression of Stark as someone who can effectively perform an idealized version of US-American meritocracy, in which the affluent retain a relatable charm and habitus.²⁸⁸ Stark has replaced the archaic Thor as the dominant force in the room. In addition, his calling out of a crew member playing a video game ("That man is playing GALAGA!") highlights his managerial and psychological expertise. His monologue remains unchallenged throughout the rest of the scene. It comes to an end when Nick Fury joins in to explain the mission objectives.

288 Matthew Miller states in his book, *The Tyranny of Dead Ideas*, that "our heroes are merely outsized versions of the possibilities within every American's reach. In Horatio Alger's rags-to-respectability lies the sentiment that beats also in every immigrant heart: in America you shape your own destiny via determination and hard work" (72). It can be inferred that, in this fantasy work, the meritocratic achiever is indistinguishable in tone and habitus from those who have not achieved financial success (yet).

As noted in Chapter 2, Reagan associated the introduction of a stylized, masculine entrepreneur into a public structure with increased “efficiency” and “modern management.” He frequently presented narratives in which the (masculine) entrepreneur remains a distinct entity and is primarily identified as a businessman. In parallel with the depiction of Stark, Reagan offered mythical tales of “self-made men” who made their mark in consumption-oriented high-tech business and are therefore extraordinarily qualified to lead in matters of national defense. One such example is the appointment of David Packard, co-founder of Hewlett-Packard, as the chairman of a newly created bipartisan commission to redesign defense management in 1985. Reagan explained his decision in a radio address in 1986:

I chose Dave Packard, an entrepreneur and self-made man who started Hewlett-Packard in a garage in the 1930's and built it into one of our country's leading high-tech computer and electronics companies. Dave is world famous for his management skill, and his company is renowned for its efficiency and modern management techniques.²⁸⁹

It is important to note that in this presentation of private–public partnership, the entrepreneur does not become a part of the public structure (as is usually the case with appointments to government posts), but is, instead, called upon to contribute his perspective to it. Consequently, positive outcomes are discursively linked to a private intervention, giving the private element in public–private partnerships the narrative edge. The discursive inclusion of the affluent in national defense is linked to choreographed public performances, wherein the accumulation of capital is framed as “altruistic acts of patriotism” (Troy, *Morning in America* 117). Extreme wealth is linked to “American know-how,” which is reflected in Stark’s “common-man” performance when mocking Thor. Despite *The Avengers* boasting two characters from a non-US background (Thor and Natasha Romanoff), entrepreneurial genius remains a distinctly US-American endeavor that projects power beyond national borders. Just like David Packard, Tony Stark has crafted a globally recognizable brand of high-tech electronics. Stark not only offers products for consumption; his own body is a text for tailor-made and individualized consumption, as illustrated by the Iron Man suit.

This spectacle of efficiency and individualism is translated into a tale of ingenuity resulting from the “free market.” This ingenuity is inscribed onto

289 Ronald Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on the Defense Budget” (March 1, 1986).

bodies—more precisely, the white and male entrepreneur. This body becomes a catalyzing force for a national rejuvenation along militaristic lines (“would make every defense dollar more effective and make America stronger”). Disregarding the effects on social equality, the environment, unemployment through automation, and the inherent dangers of a growing military–industrial complex, the figure of the entrepreneur emerges as a narrative vehicle for a spectacle-laden marriage between military technology and capital.

The integration of self-styled businesspeople into national defense structures highlights several levels of kinship between Hollywood blockbuster filmmaking and the military apparatus. These range from bellicose cross-fertilization projects such as *Top Gun* to the integration of public defense under a corporatized market logic (Lenoir and Lowood 429–445). On a much broader level, the visual merger between the entrepreneur and the military also reflects the convergence of technospectacles with pro-war entertainment, for example, through video gaming and computer simulations. In his analysis of military–entertainment technoculture, Patrick Crogan makes reference to research by Tim Lenoir and Henry Lowood, who state that “the groundwork for computing and simulation technology was laid by military research and development in the 1950s–1980s, since then the traffic between military and non-military innovations has been increasingly significant in driving cutting edge developments” (Crogan 101; Lenoir and Lowood 433). These considerations underline the metatextual implications of the technospectacle as a post-Fordist phenomenon that eventually took off in the emerging neoliberal climate of the late 1970s and 1980s. These spectacles do showcase significant cultural inheritances from the preceding decades—especially the symbols of Western counterculture, as exemplified by Tony Stark often wearing a Black Sabbath shirt. Yet, these codes of non-conformism are re-drafted into story lines of individual, capitalist genius at the service of defending the status quo. In this context, Douglas Kellner notes in his discussion of *Top Gun* that the film

draws on cultural imagery from the last several decades to encode its hero with glory and positivity, and works to decenter and marginalize all oppositional readings. For instance, Maverick wears a black jacket and drives a motor-cycle, the image of 1950s rebellion; [...] symbols of nonconformity and individuality become symbols of group identity and cohesiveness. In fact, Maverick’s “individuality” is thoroughly consistent with military group cohesiveness and is even functional for military purposes. (*Media Culture* 81)

Reading the portrayal of military entrepreneurship through a Reaganite lens has therefore uncovered a specific continuity in pop cultural technospectacles

since the 1980s. This continuity is characterized by the appropriation of countercultural signifiers and individualized consumption in spectacles of war and defense. The figure of the white, male entrepreneur is particularly well suited to enacting this semiotic merger between an individualist counterculture and a racist, heterosexist restoration. From a Reaganite perspective, the unleashing of this reactionary force requires the recalibration of individualist capitalism vis-à-vis the government—as observed in the analysis of *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial*. It is, therefore, necessary to investigate Stark's verbalized stance on SHIELD.

For example, after joining the Avengers team, Stark repeatedly accuses Nick Fury and SHIELD of keeping secrets from the group. In her analysis of character dynamics within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Meghan Moon observes:

While the film credits Col. Fury with uniting the Avengers in a successful bid to defeat Loki, he otherwise appears as an underhanded schemer. In one of several tense moments during which the Avengers struggle with trusting Col. Fury, Stark reminds teammate Rogers that “[Col. Fury’s] a spy ... His secrets have secrets” (Whedon, 2012). Yes, Col. Fury is a spy. Still, as one of the few non-white characters with palpable power in the MCU, it is difficult not to view Stark’s skepticism about Col. Fury’s moral character without some disappointment. The fact that Col. Fury’s subsequent actions in the film more or less confirm Stark’s early suspicions about his dubious character also disappoint. (34)

Moon’s analysis aptly identifies the undercurrents of racist suspicions in the filmic narrative and how these undercut its intended progressive message of inclusion along racial and gender lines. She highlights the semantic typecasting that Stark employs (“He’s a spy”), which activates deep frames of an intrusive “big government.” Unlike in *The Dark Knight*, it is not the white male protagonist who uses mass surveillance. Instead, a bureaucracy headed by an African-American male is associated with questionable undercover operations.

Against the backdrop of the Obama presidency, this has far-reaching implications. The dynamics of state and capital now acquire a racial dimension, with the white entrepreneur acting as a “watchdog” for a government that cannot be fully trusted on account of its (seemingly) duplicitous African-American leadership.^{290,291} The assertion that Fury’s “secrets have secrets” underscores

290 This connects directly to the wide array of racist conspiracy theories regarding the citizenship and birthplace of Barack Obama. The so-called “birther movement” culminated in 2010 and 2011 with Donald Trump’s racist claims that the president was born in Kenya and that this was purposefully hidden from the public (Zakaria). Just like Tony Stark, Donald Trump performs as a self-appointed, private-citizen “watchdog” for the perceived “unruly Other.”

291 In 2012, Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney relied heavily on the image of a successful entrepreneur in his bid to unseat Barack Obama (Peter Allan, “Sorry Mitt

an exceptionally high level of mystery, beyond what could be called a (white) “norm.” Stark thereby performs within a reactionary framework, calling for the return to a mythical norm—or at least cautioning against the departure from it. The subsequent filmic justification of Stark’s suspicions illustrates the film’s endorsement of entrepreneurial instinct in delineating social power structures. As noted in Chapter 2, this maintenance of social hierarchies by the white businessman is also a recurrent theme in Reagan’s elevation of the entrepreneur as a guardian of economic and racial boundaries. In the president’s radio address to the nation on small business in 1983, he states:

Entrepreneurs have always been leaders in America. They led the rebellion against excessive taxation and regulation. [...] Their knowledge and contributions have sustained us in wartime, brought us out of recessions, carried our astronauts to the Moon, and led American industry to new frontiers of high technology.²⁹²

According to this myth-laden story line, the entrepreneur pushes back not only against the other, but also against internal doubts and crises of confidence (“brought us out of recessions”), as well as a supposed “big government” (“excessive taxation and regulation”). This imagery of “lone-ranger individualism” is somewhat in conflict with Tony Stark, who works in tandem with the other Avengers and SHIELD to deliver the world from evil. Stark does prove that he is a team player by the end of the film and SHIELD—despite its murkiness—is never shown to be villainous or incompetent (as in *E.T.*, *Ghostbusters*, *Rambo*, or *Die Hard*). The rugged individualism of the Reagan era is therefore not directly translated into a winner-takes-all competition, but it still echoes throughout the film in the portrayal of Stark as a corrective force within a progressive team effort. His distinct character as a businessman is buttressed by instincts that lead him to accurately question bureaucratic power. Therefore, within the context of Reaganite capitalism, Moon’s point can be expanded to implicitly critique “big government” as inherently prone to opacity and moral deficiency.

As in *E.T.*, the ultimate mission of defining the boundary between capitalism and “big government” is in the hands of white, male individualism. Stark not only cautions against a perceived unaccountable government; he knowingly

Romney, Good Businessmen Rarely Make Good Presidents,” usnews.com (February 17, 2012). Accessed October 13, 2018: <<https://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2012/02/17/sorry-mitt-romney-good-businessmen-rarely-make-good-presidents>>.

292 Ronald Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation” (May 14, 1983).

competes with SHIELD in the field of technology. For instance, the development of the beneficial “high technology” that Reagan praises is chronicled in the co-operation between Bruce Banner and Tony Stark, two non-governmental superheroes who have decided to offer their services to the nation. After Loki’s apprehension, they both work in the SHIELD laboratories, inspecting the specter that was confiscated from the villain. They are joined by Steve Rogers, who still has reservations about Stark’s sincerity and devotion to the mission. In the ensuing conversation, Stark underlines his progressive credentials by painting himself as an enviro-conscious global player and a relentless investigator of secret government machinations (at 57:14):

STEVE ROGERS: You think Fury’s hiding something?

TONY STARK: He’s a spy. Captain, he’s the spy. His secrets have secrets. (*He points to Banner.*) It’s bugging him too, isn’t it?

BRUCE BANNER: [...] [The Stark Tower] is powered by an arc reactor, self-sustaining energy source. That building will run itself for what, a year?

TONY STARK: That’s just the prototype. I’m kind of the only name in clean energy right now.

BANNER (*motioning to Stark*): So, why didn’t SHIELD bring him in on the Tesseract project? I mean, what are they doing in the energy business in the first place?

TONY STARK: I should probably look into that once my decryption programmer finishes breaking into all of SHIELD’s secure files.

STEVE ROGERS (*surprised*): I’m sorry, did you say ...?

TONY STARK: Jarvis has been running it since I hit the bridge. In a few hours we’ll know every dirty secret SHIELD has ever tried to hide. (*He holds up a bag of blueberries.*) Blueberry?

Through the *mise-en-scène* during this dialogue, Stark and Banner are behind a lab table, with Rogers facing them on the other side. Stark and Banner are in plain view and the scepter is lying right in front of them on the table. The scepter is positioned in between the two, practically serving as a visual connection between them. Scientific expertise is visually assembled on one side of the table, while Rogers’ upright stance and inquisitive nature are evocative of conventional military imagery. Upon mentioning his decryption program, Stark walks over to the other side of the table and attempts to establish a similar visual connection with Rogers by offering him a blueberry. This can be read as a subtle attempt to get Rogers on Stark’s side, widening the entrepreneur’s circle of influence and underscoring his ability to “cross aisles”—from the scientific to the military.

At this point, Stark is established as an authority on the development of future energy sources by a third party, Dr. Banner (“So, why didn’t SHIELD bring him in on the Tesseract project?”). Banner’s question suggests that SHIELD acted unilaterally and without enough foresight when researching the Tesseract. Accordingly, Stark’s inclusion in the project might have resulted in greater transparency and more open review processes, thereby preventing the Tesseract from being stolen or misused. An implied bond between private-sector expertise and national defense has therefore not been properly honored by the espionage agency. As a result, SHIELD’s avoidance of Stark and his scientific expertise comes under scrutiny from none other than Stark himself, who uses his technological assets to investigate the hidden maneuvers of the agency.

In addition to his being a “watchdog” for SHIELD, Stark caters to progressive sensibilities through his claim that he is “the only name in clean energy right now.” This self-conferred title embeds Stark’s competition with the government in an environmentalist framework, suggesting that the private sector is better suited to generating the technologies necessary for a sustainable form of capitalism. This highly symbolic performance of monopolized Earth-friendly expertise (“the only name”) casts Stark Enterprises as a laudable spectacle of modern, “clean technology.” Moreover, the focus on “green energy” distinguishes Stark’s brand of capitalism from previous forms of industrial capitalism. As a provider of flight technology and energy infrastructure, his company can be safely presumed to be less reliant on fossil fuels and conventional resources such as coal. The film, therefore, privileges a vision of entrepreneurship that is capable of defending the nation from invaders, as well as environmental degradation. This, however, requires that the government allow the unleashing of the alleged “green capitalism.”

Against the backdrop of the aftermath of the financial crisis and the bailout of large corporations during Obama’s first term, this angle acquires a subtext legitimizing pro-corporate neoliberal policies.²⁹³ In his 2009 remarks on the American automotive industry, President Obama declared that the United States, and in particular the major car manufacturing companies in Detroit, “will lead the world in building the next generation of clean cars.” In the

293 Edward Niedermeyer argues that “the idea of improving G.M.’s and Chrysler’s fuel efficiency was doubtless a politically popular justification for the bailout” (“A Green Detroit. No, a Guzzling One,” *The New York Times* (December 15, 2010). Accessed October 13, 2018: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/16/opinion/16niedermeyer.html>>).

post-crash climate, big business is dependent on government collaboration, yet these interventions need to have a flair that is in keeping with liberal concerns. This form of “progressive neoliberalism” was observable in *Independence Day* through David Levinson’s insistence on recycling and saving the planet while working for a satellite service company.²⁹⁴

In *The Avengers*, however, the corporation itself is expressive of environmental consciousness. This signals an increased awareness in Hollywood of the fact that issues of conservation and sustainable energy have gained considerable currency among the movie-going public. This gripping spectacle of late capitalism has now been firmly entrenched in blockbuster culture, which constantly calls for a positioning of state and capital vis-à-vis the environment. This has also become a matter of national defense. While Stark and Banner offer a straightforward, Reaganite solution in the form of the “free market” (Banner says, “I mean, what are they [SHIELD] doing in the energy business in the first place?”), other Avengers call into question whether Stark Enterprises would have constituted a more trustworthy alternative.

This becomes obvious later in the film when Stark’s supposedly more transparent and beneficial business ventures are called out. The existing tensions between neoliberal capitalism and a statist national defense policy are not fully resolved in a scene on SHIELD’s flagship Helicarrier, during which the Avengers and Nick Fury argue. Fury finds himself entangled in a controversy because of the initial research conducted by his agency, which led to the activation of the Tesseract. In an argument with Thor while on the flying aircraft carrier, it becomes evident that SHIELD was seeking to harness the powers of the Tesseract to develop a nuclear deterrent against potential extra-terrestrial invasions—which casts the agency’s initiative in a negative light (at 1:08:40):

THOR: Your work with the Tesseract is what drew Loki to it, and his allies. It is the signal to all the realms that the Earth is ready for a higher form of war.

STEVE ROGERS: A higher form?

NICK FURY: You forced our hand. We had to come up with something.

TONY STARK: Nuclear deterrent. ‘Cause that always calms everything right down.

NICK FURY: Remind me again how you made your fortune, Stark?

STEVE ROGERS: I’m sure if he still made weapons, Stark would be neck-deep ...

TONY STARK: Wait! Wait! Hold on! How is this now about me?

STEVE ROGERS: I’m sorry—isn’t everything?

294 Environmental concerns were more subtly included in *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* in the form of Elliott’s humanitarian intervention on behalf of the frogs that were about to be dissected.

In this exchange, the characters are divided about how transparent SHIELD should have been about its activities. Thor and Stark put forward the view that the agency operated outside the boundaries of common sense and without the consent of the private citizenry, like the anonymous bureaucracy of *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial*. Thor cautions against Earth moving to a higher level of military armament, which could be read as Thor taking a stance against a nuclear arms race (“Earth is ready for a higher form of war”). This implicit position suggests that Earth (or more specifically, the people of the United States) is not ready to handle the mighty potential of this kind of weaponry.

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, Robin Wood argues that nuclear anxiety is a primary feature of 1980s Hollywood cinema in that it has been used as a means of constructing the audience as children (149). The resulting mass psychological conflict is one of hopelessness versus reassurance: hopelessness because the arrival of nuclear power represents the “unkillable and ultimately inexplicable monster” and reassurance arising from the illusion that nuclear power rests in the “right, i.e. American hands” (Wood 150). In *The Avengers*, the activity of the Tesseract does indeed cause the malevolent Loki and the monstrous race of the Chitauri to invade Earth. Thus, Thor projects a categorical anti-nuclear stance that contrasts with Reagan’s defense of the SDI program and the general arms race his administration embarked upon.

As noted in Chapter 2, Reagan employed a competitive logic to argue for the necessity of his rearmament program.²⁹⁵ Nick Fury utilizes very similar reasoning (“You forced our hand. We had to come up with something”), framing his agency’s actions within a pre-emptive (neoconservative) outlook. Yet, his defense does not appear to provide the reassurance necessary to resolve the conflict. SHIELD’s inability to prevent the Tesseract from being misused retrospectively invalidates Fury’s rationale. Nuclear power has ended up in the wrong hands, which is ample reason to disregard this agency as an effective “strict father” in the defense of the nation. At this point in the conversation, Stark puts himself forward as the voice of reason. His perspective aligns with a progressive worldview that seeks to prohibit nuclear proliferation, while simultaneously implying that private ownership of defense industries constitutes a more reasonable alternative. This is, however, immediately contested by Nick Fury and

295 “The truth is that a freeze now would be a very dangerous fraud, for that is merely the illusion of peace. The reality is that we must find peace through strength. [...] A freeze would reward the Soviet Union for its enormous and unparalleled military buildup” (Reagan, “Announcement of Strategic Defense Initiative”).

Steve Rogers, who remind Stark that the underlying profit motive of his defense businesses makes it likely that they would make similar ventures into nuclear weapons technology. During this back-and-forth, no party is identified as an effective custodian of the ultimate weapon, which is why it can be concluded that the element of reassurance that both Reagan and 1980s Hollywood entertainment offered is occasionally contested in *The Avengers*. SHIELD cannot go it alone, but wholesale reliance on the corporatized “free market” is not a viable alternative in the post-financial crash world that this movie inhabits.

It is, therefore, interesting that—briefly after the economic meltdown and just a few months after the Occupy Wall Street protests—the final showdown for the Avengers occurs on and near the ultimate symbol of Stark’s entrepreneurial success: Stark Tower. Within the filmic narrative, it is established that the tower’s sustainable, independent energy source is what draws the villain Loki there to harness the power of the Tesseract. The location is therefore coded not only as a personal monument to Stark’s business success and his technological innovations, but also as a cosmic battlefield in the final defense of the United States and, by extension, the world at large.

As previously outlined, an inherent part of the Stark Tower spectacle is how finely attuned it is to Stark’s body and personal movement. Loki’s appropriation of this building therefore constitutes not only a personal declaration of war against the city and the nation, but also a personal intrusion into the physical realm of the entrepreneur.²⁹⁶ This underlines the observation that the defense of the nation is inextricably linked to the defense of its economic status and also the defense of entrepreneurship (down to the very body of the entrepreneur). As for the physical defense of the United States, the symbolic power of capitalist spaces gains a restorative dimension. Stark Tower is elevated to a site of negotiations between Loki and Tony Stark. As stated previously, the rebuilding of mercantile power was vital to the post-9/11 re-masculinization of the country (Braudy 464; Kontour 13), which is now fully visualized by Stark’s multi-purpose performance as a masculine entrepreneur and uncompromising representative of the nation.

296 This usurpation of Stark Tower by a foreign intruder can also be read as a fantasy of the hostile takeover of US-American corporate spaces by competing economies in the context of globalization. In this view, the protection of national capital is ideologically conversant with notions national sovereignty—disregarding the fact that Stark Enterprises operates on a global level. Just like Nakatomi Plaza in *Die Hard* (1988), the white, masculine “hard body” is vital in re-seizing foreign-occupied capitalist spaces to restore domestic social hierarchies.



Figure 14: Loki during his attempt to usurp Stark Tower.

Before the final battle, the businessman receives the antagonist in his spacious penthouse loft in downtown Manhattan. Loki enters Stark Tower in plain view, dressed in black and brandishing his scepter. As he walks by the glass windows on the top floor, the camera captures him through a horizontal dolly shot from a low angle. The villain is thereby portrayed as imposing and menacing upon entering. Loki taunts Stark for not wearing his protective suit. However, through a subtle *mise-en-scène*, Stark is situated in a visually superior position on his personal home turf. He is filmed from an even lower angle than Loki, standing on top of an indoor overpass. Not only is Stark seen from a higher position; he is also standing behind a massive stone balustrade, which acts as a visual wall between the character and the viewer. This is in contrast to Loki, who is fully exposed. In this sense, the building protects Stark, whether or not he wears his Iron Man suit. The entrepreneur cannot be outperformed in his own space.

When Loki announces the imminent invasion by the Chitauri, the challenge is visually augmented by his staring at the Chrysler Building, the same iconic architectural achievement that connects Stark to a mythical past (see Figure 14). Appropriating symbolic capitalist imagery is a notable goal of Loki's, as doing so would not only topple Stark, but also allow the foreign invaders to reclaim the history of the United States on their own terms. At this point, Stark points out that the Avengers will respond as a group, signaling a national effort to

defend such landmarks. Nevertheless, it is important to note that it is Stark who issues this threat, on his property and with no other Avengers present. The entrepreneur has become the leading voice for addressing hostile forces, with SHIELD and Fury now mainly supporting the efforts of the Avengers in the final battle action.

In this context, it is interesting to juxtapose the spatial component of capitalism with Reagan's own narrative of entrepreneurialism. *The Avengers* identifies downtown Manhattan as the center of entrepreneurial drive in contrast to Reagan's own articulations of the origins of "entrepreneurial genius." As noted in Chapter 2, Reagan emphasized that economic growth and innovative genius originate in unassuming, middle-class spaces. During a speech at Moscow State University in 1988, he posited:

These entrepreneurs and their small enterprises are responsible for almost all the economic growth in the United States. [...] In fact, one of the largest personal computer firms in the United States was started by two college students, no older than you, in the garage behind their home.²⁹⁷

The imagery of a "garage behind their home" evokes a middle-class, suburban or small-town existence. Not only does this divorce Tony Stark from a narrow, meritocratic conception of Reaganite entrepreneurialism, as Stark was born into wealth; it also exposes the ideological co-ordinates of the movie in terms of the urban-suburban-rural divides within US society. As discussed in Chapter 4, the ideological association between the "big city" and liberalism allows for a white supremacist reading whereby the destruction of the multicultural metropolis is "lamentable," but inconsequential to the survival of white mainstream society.

The Avengers allows for an updated reading as, in this case, New York City not only survives, but represents both the first and the final front line in the fight against invading aliens. Stark's metropolitan and global capitalism is central to this imagination of the city. His tower acts as a capitalist center point and Stark himself is a product of this very city. Thus, conservative fantasies of white "Middle America" clash with celebrations of both global capitalism and the "liberal city." In the movie, this is negotiated through the success of Stark, the Avengers, and the big city, which opens facilitates a discussion of mergers between multiculturalism and global capitalism in cultural fantasies of the Obama era. This perspective thereby provides further insights into why

297 Ronald Reagan, "Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session with the Students and Faculty at Moscow State University" (May 31, 1988).

this movie was so popular with a generally liberal movie-going audience and how and why “Trumpian populism”—with its themes of explicit racism and economic protectionism—acquired such currency among conservative and far-right elements in US-American society (Kellner, *American Horror Show*, 39–56). *The Avengers* manages to merge these two trajectories in the figure of a businessman who is infused with the semiotics of a liberal counterculture and, at the same time, acts as a self-appointed watchdog for national and global institutions.

This is evident in the final battle, in which the World Security Council—the umbrella organization that monitors SHIELD—misguidedly decides to attempt to halt the invasion of New York City by launching a nuclear missile at Stark Tower, where the Chitauri are congregating. After pushing back against the aliens, the Avengers now also have to prevent the government missile from striking Manhattan and causing the deaths of innumerable civilians. Only Stark can intercept the nuclear missile that is headed toward Manhattan. Thanks to his Iron Man suit, he outpaces it and transports it through the wormhole right into the Chitauri mother ship, which is destroyed on impact. In this hyper-masculine, *Independence Day*-style finale, the high-tech entrepreneur saves the world not only from an alien invasion, but also from the short-sighted rescue attempts of a “well-meaning” bureaucracy. Thus, he finally becomes a generous “giver” in a trickle-down interpretation of the events. None of this would have happened if Stark hadn’t already possessed enough capital to design and produce the Iron Man suit. After all, Reagan suggested that it was entrepreneurs whose “knowledge and contributions [...] carried our astronauts to the moon.”

This spectacle of national defense is articulated through the semiotics of high-tech precision delivered by a capitalist, white masculinity. The fact that Stark is a part of the team amplifies the spectacle-like aspects of masculine capitalism, as the social interactions between team members serve to highlight the constructed class, gender, and racial differences (Fleming 30). *Independence Day* referred to corporate capitalism as a supplier of the technology needed to beat the aliens. *The Avengers*, however, presents a spectacle in which capitalism itself is epitomized by a “hard body” that is the ultimate defender of the nation. It seems that the relative economic stability of the mid-1990s did not call for entrepreneur superheroes as much as the post-crisis climate of the early 2010s. Despite boasting a countercultural veneer infused with urban cosmopolitanism, Stark’s entrepreneurialism and war readiness are informed by conventional concepts of hegemonic masculinity, wherein female associates of his are largely excluded from the war game. The mere threat of looming confrontation redistributes responsibilities within the business world along gendered lines.

One of the early scenes in the movie is illustrative of this. After Tony Stark arrives in his penthouse apartment at Stark Tower, he engages in a conversation with his personal aide, Pepper Potts. They attempt to negotiate her share of profits. Potts demands more than Stark is willing to concede. In a quippy, playful back-and-forth, Potts reminds the businessman that her technological expertise was integral to the design and construction of Stark Tower. Moreover, she is demanding for more recognition for her work on the project when, suddenly, the conversation is interrupted by SHIELD agent Phil Coulson. He requests to speak to Stark in order to recruit him for the Avengers. In the ensuing conversation between one female and two males, the dynamics of verbalized expertise suddenly shift (at 26:05):

PHIL COULSON: We need you to look this over. (*Holding out a file for Stark.*) As soon as possible.

TONY STARK: I don't like being handed things.

PEPPER POTTS: That's fine, because I love to be handed things. So, let's trade. (*She passes her glass of champagne to Coulson in exchange for the file, then quickly takes the glass back and hands the file over to Stark.*)

PEPPER POTTS: Thank you.

TONY STARK: Official consulting hours are between eight and five every other Thursday.

PHIL COULSON: This isn't a consultation.

PEPPER POTTS: Is this about the Avengers? Which I ... I know nothing about. (*Her tone and facial expression consciously belie her stated ignorance.*)

TONY STARK: The Avengers Initiative was scrapped, I thought. And I didn't even qualify.

PEPPER POTTS: I didn't know that either.

TONY STARK: Yeah, apparently I'm volatile, self-obsessed, don't play well with others.

PEPPER POTTS: That I did know.

PHIL COULSON: This isn't about personality profiles anymore.

This scene is revealing for several reasons, including because two members of the same company speak to a government agent and two males negotiate a co-operation with the shallow inclusion of a female character. On various occasions during the scene, Potts—despite her relatively high status within the company—performs within the confines of feminized restraint (Shamir and Travis 144; Duncanson 95)²⁹⁸ and apparent ignorance about matters of national defense, the implication being that this kind of conversation should

298 Claire Duncanson explains in her analysis of masculinities in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars that “[i]n many of the soldiers’ narratives, to stand back from a fight, to refrain from using force, is seen as weakness, as indecisive and passive, as letting a situation get out of control. Such feminized states are inherently risky for

ultimately be between Coulson and Stark. Although she previously asserted her role in the high-tech spectacle that is Stark Tower, she now volunteers to be handed things and two out of three of her subsequent statements are claims to ignorance (“Which I know nothing about”; “I didn’t know that either”). In her one claim to knowledge, she validates the bestowal of hyper-masculine characteristics on Stark: volatility, narcissism, and independence/lack of agreeableness. Furthermore, her tone quickly changes upon Coulson’s arrival. She goes from negotiating her salary in relatively assertive terms to becoming more co-operative with hegemonic masculinity after the entrance of a male government agent.

Matthew James Fleming notes that “[i]n this way, the non-verbal communication in the film is critical to the complete comprehension of hegemonic masculinity as it is fed by male appearances and behaviours” (56). Her slight overperformance when exclaiming that she does not know about the Avengers seems to suggest that she is consciously performing from a script in order to salvage an image of national defense as a male domain. This gives the scene a somewhat tongue-in-cheek character.²⁹⁹ With conflict around the corner and in presence of a second male, the highly skilled Potts adheres to a cultural script whereby females affirm the masculinity of male soldiers in times of war and willingly tone down any potential leadership qualities. For instance, Stark does not like being handed things, presumably because he rejects to take orders. Potts affirms that she loves to be handed things and hands the file over to Stark. While it can be argued that she cleverly makes Stark accept documents that are vital to national security, she basically acts as a mere intermediary. The gender dynamics reveal that the female character affirms the leadership of the entrepreneur—now that a SHIELD official has hinted at the possibility of war (“We need you to look this over”).

As noted in Chapter 2, Reagan identified the male entrepreneur as the eternal leader of the nation and a driving force for the resolution of internal and external struggles. From this specific perspective, Stark again appears to be an incarnation of a “leader-entrepreneur” by virtue of his masculine and rugged individualism. According to this line of thinking, his entrepreneurialism not

the soldier, whose masculine sense of self is bound up with being in control, being decisive and taking action, taking the fight to the enemy” (95).

299 This can be paralleled with the depiction of the main female character Charlie Blackwood in *Top Gun*, who gradually retreats in the face of Maverick’s involvement in war, which ends in his “total triumph” and “mastery of the strong woman” (Kellner, *Media Culture* 79).

only qualifies him for financial success and social commendation, but also confers upon him a special guardianship of the nation.

However, as previously discussed, the spatial aspects of Reaganite entrepreneurialism frequently refer to rural and small-town imaginations of masculinity, which clash with Stark’s status as a cosmopolitan billionaire. This highlights a cultural renegotiation of right-wing neoliberalism in Hollywood film, whereby the big city is now in a symbiotic relationship with the leader-entrepreneur. The accumulation of capital is complemented by ambiguous symbols of social progress, such as having a brilliant female assistant or being a member of a slightly diverse team. This constitutes an apt visual representation of “multicultural neoliberalism” (Kymlicka 99–120), in which the portrayal of an entire team (or a cinematic universe) is used for the spectacle-laden dramatization of ongoing gender, race, and class struggles.

Unlike the conventional lone hero of the Reagan era, the multicultural team can serve as a vehicle for the acknowledgment of difference while simultaneously facilitating the pronouncement of hierarchies that celebrate corporate capitalism—for example, through centering a businessman in the team effort. Lethal forms of financialization are thereby legitimized through both “truncated ideals of emancipation” (Fraser) and images of conservative, hard-bodied masculinity. The depiction of entrepreneurship and war in *The Avengers* therefore synthesizes seemingly bifurcated notions of militarism and social progressivism. The spectacle of diversity is interwoven with the spectacle of technological ingenuity, which is in turn interwoven with the spectacle of war. This leads to a spectacle of consumption, with all three kinds of spectacle portraying the heroes as representative of an idealized state of the nation, in which the nation has apparently moved beyond racism, economic insecurity, and foreign-policy blunders. This amounts to a celebration of dominant masculinity that merges notions of high-tech jingoism with progressive notions of a collective effort as a diversified team. The ramifications of these militaristic and neoliberal body politics will be discussed in the next section.

Gendered “Hard Bodies” in Times of War

In the analysis of counter-terrorism rhetoric in *The Dark Knight*, the gendered language of anti-terrorism discourses was found to reflect key elements of Susan Jeffords’ “Reaganite hard body.” The discursive links between the “hard body” and the emergence of the superhero cycle in the 2000s call for an investigation of corporeal manifestations in *The Avengers*. The depiction of superhero bodies

as sites of restored national strength and resilience therefore has implications in terms of echoes of a stylized 1980s Hollywood masculinity. In addition, the masculinization and feminization of both protagonists and antagonists in this movie facilitate comparisons that shed light on reconfigurations of the wartime “hard body” in the Obama era. Jeffords describes the ideological, psychological, and cultural function of the Reaganite “hard body” as follows:

To understand the broad functions of these bodies as collective symbols, it is important to not see them simply as images for Reagan’s own self-projections or idealizations of an outdated Hollywood heroism but to recognize their successful linkage in Reaganism to the national body as well. As such, these hard bodies came to stand not only for a type of national character—heroic, aggressive and determined—but for the nation itself. [...] Just as Reagan reestablished the boundaries of the presidency, hard bodies reestablished not only of the individual masculine figure, but of the nation as a whole. (*Hard Bodies* 25–27)

It can be inferred that the narration of “hard bodies”—especially those that are coded as masculine—acquires a political dimension in the sense of a “national recuperation” in white mainstream cultural fantasies. The collective pleasure derived from “viewing the body” and participating in its travails has implications not only for Hollywood’s target audience maximization strategies but also for the establishment of visual regimes that reinforce the ideological concerns constructed by Reaganism in 1980, that is, a “weakened military,” unprecedented economic and political decline, a perceived lack of leadership on the part of the United States throughout the world, challenges to white and male supremacy, and decreasing confidence in the psyche of middle-class segments of US-American society. In this context, the notion of the “hard body” allows for comparison in terms of the historical setting and gender dimensions of the protagonists in *The Avengers*.

In the case of Tony Stark/Iron Man, it can be observed that he strongly relies on his weaponized and customized high-tech suits when battling adversaries—instantly establishing a connection between his entrepreneurial success and the enhancement of the masculine body. It is worth noting that the original comic-book series chronicles how he incurred life-threatening injuries from a booby trap, which left him permanently disabled. This is a major part of Stark’s rationale for developing the Iron Man suit in the first place (Wagner 5). Travis Wagner points out that both the *Iron Man* movies and *The Avengers* omit any explicit discourse on disability: “In the film, after his accident, Stark’s physical privilege remains intact and never reflects the immobility and trapped feelings attached to a representative cinematic treatment of disability” (5) Stark’s apparent desire to function within the spaces of what

Wagner describes as “normative abled-bodiedness” is channeled into the construction of a technological “hard body,” with his glowing chest piece the only reminder of his previous injury. The Iron Man suit therefore acts as a symbol not only for the restoration of national strength, but also for the re-establishment of an irretrievably lost masculinity (the glowing chest piece). This loss is mediated through a high-tech device that allows for the enhanced conquest of spaces—through the power of flight, for example. In this sense, hard-bodied masculinity acquires a post-human dimension in that technospectacles of the future can obsolete the physical body altogether. Stark’s technological ingenuity has made it possible to overcompensate for his disability, which suggests the potency of technocapitalism. This aligns with the observations made on the triumphalism and post-humanism that shaped Reagan’s conception of entrepreneurialism. In his 1988 address to the Moscow State University, he declares that “[i]n the new economy, human invention increasingly makes physical resources obsolete. We’re breaking through the material conditions of existence to a world where man creates his own destiny.”

Imagined entrepreneurial genius is styled as the driver for ideological competitiveness and a subsequent triumphalism, which is painted in futuristic terms. The national “hard body,” which can also manifest itself in skillfully arranged technology, is therefore tied to myths of assertiveness in “free markets.” As previously observed, this assertiveness derives from bodily fortitude. Tony Stark works on himself and is consequentially afforded a hyper-masculine body that allows him to traverse space in a much more efficient manner.³⁰⁰ His cybersuit provides an easily legible spectacle text that narrates how Stark’s entrepreneurial drive has allowed him to leave the confines of the physical body. The post-human quality of this body interconnects with postmodern concepts of globalization as the collapse of time, body, and technology (Kellner, *Theorizing Globalization* 2–4), but it also corresponds heavily with more pre-modern understandings of spiritual progress in a Protestant framework.

For example, his enhanced body can be interpreted as the result of a conscious, constant attempt at “self-improvement,” making it a testament to the Puritan-inflected work ethic that has permeated US-American mainstream culture for centuries. The religious element of this interpretation is strongly reminiscent of Reagan’s promotion of evangelical Christianity as an ideological

300 Sylvester Stallone once remarked, “I’m not a genetically superior person. I built my body” (Sylvester Stallone, brainyquote.com. Accessed December 9, 2018: <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/sylvester_stallone_460504>).

vehicle for the marriage between social conservatism and radical “free-market capitalism.” According to this vision, individual striving for success is a prerequisite for a healthy and technologically competitive nation.³⁰¹ George Lakoff summarizes this conservative line of thinking as follows: “The discipline required to be moral is the same discipline required to win competitions and prosper” (*Elephant* 82). Thus, proper initiation into capitalist competition is a mechanism through which the conference of moral virtue can be facilitated and effectively narrativized. The movie chooses to narrate the ascent to post-human bodily strength primarily through male bodies.

In contrast to the male heroes, neither Natasha Romanoff nor SHIELD agent Maria Hill are afforded a special suit that enhances their physical capability. Nor do they have biological superpowers, like the Hulk or Thor.³⁰² Instead, they rely on martial arts and survival skills—in which they are highly trained. Nonetheless, their bodies never attain the supernatural dimension that Stark and Banner, for example, reached through their implied expertise and innovative drive. The primary embodiment of the ultimate strength of the nation appears to lie in male ingenuity and male strength, implying that the nation itself is ordered and structured according to conventional masculine values. Ultimately, the way the narrative unfolds suggests that the cultivation of the masculine body leads to super-human manifestations of power.³⁰³ However, bodies that are coded as feminine in *The Avengers* undergo a presumably lengthier and more arduous process of “enhancement” and never reach the

301 Parallels can easily be drawn between Stark and Reagan’s laudatory characterization of Simon Ramo as an “engineer, businessman, physicist and defense and aerospace pioneer” (Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Presentation Ceremony for the Presidential Medal of Freedom”).

302 Despite there being two female characters in important roles, the entire movie still fails the Bechdel test as there is not one scene in which two women talk to each other about something other than a man (Bechdel). The dynamics of female body politics are consistently shaped by female–male relations, limiting the agency of female characters in the power structures of hegemonic masculinity described in this chapter.

303 Jeffrey A. Brown describes the transformation of “weak masculinity” into “potent masculinity” as a common formula within the superhero genre: “Spoiled playboy becomes Batman. Shy scientist [Bruce] Banner transforms into the monstrous Hulk when he gets angry. Young Billy Batson becomes the world’s mightiest mortal, Captain Marvel, merely by uttering the acronym ‘SHAZAM.’ Scrawny Steve Rogers becomes the invincible Captain America after [being exposed to] an experimental growth serum” (25–42).

same level of hegemonic potential that could translate into greater strength for the national body.

For example, in a conversation between Loki and Natasha Romanoff, viewers learn of her involvement with the KGB from an early age, her cultivation of an assassin’s skillset, and her adventurous defection to SHIELD with the help of Clint Barton. Nevertheless, she remains a supplementary character who could never intercept a nuclear missile aimed at Manhattan with her bare hands. Effectively, both Romanoff and Hill remain “human,” which could be considered insufficient in a framework in which the United States is threatened by seemingly insurmountable challenges.³⁰⁴ This is significant in the context of Obama’s election in 2008 and his first term, which was frequently described as being filled with gigantic tasks and responsibilities that would require tremendous counter-efforts. Obama himself remarked in his State of the Union Address in January of 2010 that

one year ago, I took office amid two wars, an economy rocked by a severe recession, a financial system on the verge of collapse, and a government deeply in debt. Experts from across the political spectrum warned that if we did not act, we might face a second depression. [...] Now, the true engine of job creation in this country will always be America’s businesses, but government can create the conditions necessary for businesses to expand and hire more workers. [...] There’s no reason Europe or China should have the fastest trains or the new factories that manufacture clean-energy products.³⁰⁵

The rhetoric of economic and global crises, the emphasis on entrepreneurialism as a remedy for these crises, and the reference to external competitors echo key components of Reagan’s imagination of the situation the United States when he took office in 1980. Within this framework of masculine global competition, the national body must stretch itself beyond previous capabilities (“expand and hire more workers”) and unprecedented challenges call for great agility and decisiveness (“have the fastest trains or the new factories that manufacture clean-energy products”). The male heroes of *The Avengers* enter this situation with tested formulas of hegemonic super-masculinity achieved through entrepreneurial drive (Tony Stark). Moreover, these formulas have now been merged with scientific expertise (Bruce Banner/the Hulk). And while Obama steers clear of belligerent language or fantasies of rearmament, as Reagan did

304 The villain Loki is a demi-god. The Chituari are an extra-terrestrial race of inconceivable power.

305 Barack Obama, “2010 State of the Union Address” (January 27, 2010).

in the early 1980s, the subtext of outcompeting challengers remains embedded in a rigid “winner-takes-all” framework. Only one country can have the fastest trains. This metaphorically combines liberal concerns with conservative underpinnings.

This allows for the integration of previously marginalized discourses into the larger economic discourse, for example, environmentalism—as long as the overarching framework of masculine competition is acknowledged (“the true engine of job creation in this country will always be America’s businesses”). The movie treads a similar path in that it presents female characters who participate in the final battle and do not retreat in times of war—despite lacking the extravagant “hard bodies” that their male counterparts possess. This inclusion of female characters in the final combat does represent a partial departure from the “perfect Reaganite female” (Kellner, *Media Culture* 79). Instead of being pushed back into the domestic and maternal sphere, as in *E.T.* or *ID4*, females now participate in the war as part of a larger team. Yet, they ultimately depend on male capitalist genius to save the day.

A brief analysis of the representation of Natasha Romanoff, a.k.a. “Black Widow,” sheds light on what separates her from major female characters in the previous blockbuster movies in this analysis. While Romanoff is not awarded any notable superhuman strength, she is nevertheless established as a highly capable and indispensable member of the Avengers. Her character stands outside of the discourses of a Reaganite female in two respects: She is not relegated to the background once the (still male-dominated) final, physical battle between the protagonist and antagonist forces takes place (unlike Marilyn Whitmore and Jasmin Dubrow in *Independence Day*) and she is not primarily defined in relationship to another male character with a more central role in the film (e.g. Rachel Dawes in *The Dark Knight*). Thus, it appears that Romanoff’s portrayal as an integral and largely independent part of the Avengers makes her an embodiment of more inclusive narrations of national strength.³⁰⁶ However, conservative and liberal discourses on national strength do overlap to a certain degree in this film, as both Natasha Romanoff and Maria Hill are integrated into a larger structure of military defense and global assertion. The national

306 Obama stressed the gender diversity of workforces as a source of economic success: “[S]ome folks still talk about women’s issues as if they’re something separate over there, and economics is over here. That’s nonsense. We do better when we field a full team. When women succeed, America succeeds” (Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at DNC Women’s Leadership Forum,” September 19, 2014).



Figure 15: Natasha Romanoff closing the alien-invasion portal.

body is ultimately amalgamated into an expression of ultimate masculine superiority against Loki and his alien intruders.

Tellingly, in a key scene during the final battle in Manhattan, scientist Erik Selvig reveals to Romanoff that the Tesseract—on top of Stark Tower—can be deactivated by piercing it with Loki’s scepter. Selvig then instructs Romanoff in how to penetrate the Tesseract’s force field. The force field is shown to be spherically shaped and transparent. Romanoff is shot from a low-angle medium shot that bolsters her visual dominance. Her dark, skintight latex suit emphasizes her figure as perceived by the male gaze, while simultaneously providing a hard-bodied contrast to the force field. The Tesseract itself is only partially shown and is confined to a corner. Romanoff’s legs are open, so she has stable footing. The penetration using Loki’s scepter is visually evocative of an impregnation process—either with a sperm or a phallic symbol (see Figure 15). Fittingly, Loki lost his scepter in a previous scene in which he was beaten into submission by the Hulk. In this scene, the villain is emasculated and deprived of his instrument of phallic domination. The emasculation of Loki is further underscored by Romanoff’s appropriation and subsequent use of the scepter in stopping the Tesseract. Loki’s attempt to seize the phallic symbol of US-American entrepreneurialism, Stark Tower, is only temporarily successful. Effectively, the imagery of the final battle is permeated with codes of masculine, physical competition into which the feminine heroes are neatly integrated.

This has far-reaching implications for the survival of the “hard body” in the Obama era as it facilitates a discursive merger of liberal feminism and imperialism. Within the context of military intrusions into the Middle East, Deepa Kumar has pointed out that

[t]he image of a woman with a gun and of a female US soldier in particular, can be liberating only if we ignore who is forced to fear and respect her. It is not her male counterparts or even American citizens, but in the case of the Gulf war, the people of Iraq. Over 200,000 Iraqis, many of them civilian women and children, were killed by the US in that war. (309)

In this context, the celebration of the female “hard body” is inextricably linked to war against the Other. The emasculated, dehumanized, and largely anonymous targets of military chauvinism (“many of them civilian women and children”) form a constituent part of a textual binary, in which female soldiers on the US-American side take part in the performance of an overall national masculinity on a global stage. Critical to this performance is the concept of a “national emergency,” which subordinates expressions of anti-oppressive femininity and instead offers spectacles of female heroism as laudably supplementing the restoration of hegemonic power.

As noted in the analysis of *The Dark Knight*, the figure of the hero legitimizes the very framework of “war,” thereby activating notions of widespread mobilization. A superheroine like Natasha Romanoff, therefore, does not exist in a vacuum, but must be read metatextually. Constructing the Other in terms of uninhibited virility and/or insufficient masculinity offers narrative settings in which the participation of (particularly white) females in war serves to recalibrate domestic masculinity as an overall enforcer of discipline against unruly Others. A seemingly hyper-masculine foe who asserts dominance using the phallic symbol of a scepter serves as a convenient contrast to heroines who perform within the beauty codes of Hollywood femininity. These heroines become part of an effort to dismantle the faux masculinity of the Other while catering to the male gaze (Mulvey 833–844) and affirming “proper masculinity” through their usual roles as supplements. The inclusion of female fighters as part of the national “hard body” can therefore serve to narratively align liberal “diversity-as-strength” discourses with conservative nationalism and militarism.

The juxtaposition of an eroticized, female “hard body” and the faux hyper-masculine Other is evident in the first scene featuring Natasha Romanoff. The scene takes place in the outskirts of a city in her native Russia, where she is being held captive by two thuggish KGB-style agents and a stereotypical Russian general. Tied to a chair in an abandoned building, no one can hear her

being brutally beaten in the face by her interrogators. Her tight, black, open-back top and bright red lipstick evoke color codes of both firmness and passion, while simultaneously offering a sexualized spectacle that caters to the male gaze (Dutt 15–18). Despite the frightened look on her face, it is clear that Romanoff is not willing to divulge any information to her captors. During the interrogation, which is in Russian, the camera switches to a view of an ancient, ornamented mirror at the opposite of the end of the room. In this mirror, all four characters are visible, with Romanoff seen from the back. She is lit by a hard key light, which distinguishes her from her interrogators, who stand around her in their dark clothing, practically blending in with their surroundings. Interestingly, this mirror stands next to two paintings with Christian Orthodox motifs of a church saint and a Virgin Mary with her child. These religious figures are centrally placed in their respective wooden frames, just like Romanoff, who is reflected and highlighted in a decorative mirror. The shot effectively portrays her as one of several saintly figures in fancy frames. This not only establishes her as a protagonist; it also reproduces patriarchal binaries of an enigmatic, gracious femininity and a raw, sexualized lust object (Romanoff’s bare back is visible in the scene).

This depiction of Romanoff within the framework of mind/body dualism places her within a traditional Judeo-Christian worldview of the female body. As she represents the “lower body” on the one hand, the superheroine can never aspire to the elevating overall goodness of the masculine hero.³⁰⁷ Unlike Stark, she is never encircled by emblems of entrepreneurial genius. Yet, her inscription into Judeo-Christian iconography—especially when juxtaposed with Soviet-style assassins—designates her body as a site of imagined innocence and even martyrdom at the hands of the godless Other. This is emphasized by the Kalashnikovs leaning against the religious paintings. As the camera zooms out, a whole crate of hand grenades becomes visible also. It is safe to assume that these weapons were placed there by the Russian agents. Thus, symbolic representations of the Judeo-Christian tradition are partially eclipsed by quasi-communist intruders. The general proceeds to interrogate Romanoff about her

307 Whitney Greer explains in her thesis on “The Madonna, the Whore, the Myth” that “[The Madonna/Whore binary] is a product of mind/body dualism, specifically the Judeo-Christian version of mind/body dualism. The concept of mind/body dualism became gendered when it associated the woman, due to her ability to give birth, as more connected to the life cycle and thus the weak body than man was [sic]. This lead [sic] to the conceptualization of men as superior to women due to the female body representing the lower ‘body’ and men representing the higher ‘mind’” (2).

knowledge of an impending arms-smuggling deal, revealing that this cross-examination relates to the ownership of weapons.

As outlined in the introduction to this film analysis, Robin Wood identifies the invocation of Judeo-Christian imagery as a key feature in assuaging audience fears of the nuclear threat in cultural fantasies from the Reagan era.³⁰⁸ According to this logic, weapons of mass destruction are ultimately presented as benign when in the hands of a Christian, Western power with “God on its side.” The stylized framing of Romanoff’s body in ages-old, religiously coded binaries puts the righteousness of excessive military might in the hands of the United States. The female body becomes a site for the invocation of Judeo-Christian iconography in service of a militarist project to subdue the illegal activities of an atheistic and socialist totalitarianism. As in *ID4*, classic tropes of the Cold War are resurrected in *The Avengers*, albeit in a much subtler form and with less emphasis throughout the rest of the film. After being established as a reliable force in the face of a totalitarian power grab, Natasha Romanoff is now fully justified in exercising the national “hard body” and punishing her captors. And she does so in the most spectacular way. Through a series of unexpected martial arts moves, headbutts, and high-speed kickboxing, she knocks out all of the men within a few seconds—while still tied to the chair.

Her fast-kicking self-liberation is eventually brought to an end when she picks up a cellphone to resume a conversation with Phil Coulson that had started during the interrogation. He is calling to ask her to fight with the Avengers. He mentions that her long-time partner Clint Barton has been compromised, which ultimately convinces her to accept the mission. Her participation in the war, much like that of the US-American female soldier in the First Gulf War, is not about challenging domestic patriarchy, but is, rather, about becoming a supplement to a male-oriented national “hard body.” Her concern for Barton and her drafting by Coulson underscore the supremacy of masculinity in the national effort to defend the country. The co-ordinates of Romanoff’s character have, however, revealed that Cold War anxieties and concerns about a takeover by a godless, totalitarian force remain an integral element of this national “hard body.” This illustrates how Reagan-era conceptions of the anti-communist

308 Wood posits in his analysis of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* that “the pervasive, if surreptitious, implication of the fantasy films is that nuclear power is positive and justified as long as it is in the right, i.e., American hands. [...] nuclear power is synonymous with the power of God, who is, by definition, on our side” (150).

“hard body” reverberate in a seemingly socially progressive narration of teamwork heroism in the 2010s.³⁰⁹

Susan Jeffords makes a similar observation regarding how masculine, Reaganite “hard bodies” managed to survive into the Hollywood of the 1990s:

The hard body continues, in the post-Reagan, post-cold war era, to find the national models of masculinity conveyed by some of Hollywood’s most successful films. They have shown their resiliency as models because they appear to critique, at times even to reject, their earlier versions only to renarrate them in ways more complex and more intimately woven into the fabric of American culture. But they are dangerous models, not only because they depend on the kind of nationalism and militarism that brought the country to military actions in Panama, Grenada and the Persian Gulf but also because they seem now to represent the desperation of an ageing superpower that is reluctant, under a conservative framework, to relinquish its international status and influence. (*Hard Bodies* 192–193)

Jeffords notes that the continuation of global hegemonic projects inherited from the Reagan and Bush administrations can be detected in new cultural scripts that seem to diverge or even contradict previous incarnations of the masculine “hard body.” The inclusion of a more varied and three-dimensional cast does not necessarily detach a filmic narrative from post-Vietnam cultural fantasies of global triumphalism and neoliberal, masculine competition. A parallel can be drawn with *Independence Day*, in which a biracial team saves the world through the help of capitalist consumer products. By analyzing *The Avengers* through the lenses of “multicultural imperialism” and “multicultural neoliberalism,” it becomes clear that increased diversity and teamwork can still be embedded in a framework of global battles that reinforce codes of hegemonic masculinity. Yet, Jeffords rightly highlights new constraints that limit the superpower status of the United States in the post-Reagan era (“desperation of an ageing superpower”). The pervasive myths of the lone global “superpower” (which semiotically parallels the term “superhero”), which were shattered during the Bush administration, are now increasingly perpetuated in cinematic imagination. It stands to reason that post-9/11 developments—in conjunction with the crisis of neoliberalism since the late 2000s—have accelerated the popular construction

309 The inscription of Judeo-Christian symbolism into the movie disconfirms auteurist readings, which interpret the film primarily through the lens of Joss Whedon’s apparent worldviews. In the introduction to this chapter, Julianne Escobedo Shepherd’s argument that Whedon’s atheism may explain the perceived liberal nature of the film was outlined (Shepherd). Yet, the Reagan-era strategy of nuclear reassurance through religious symbolism shines through in *The Avengers*.

of “hard bodies.” The manifest gap between mythical superpower status and an eroding global status appears to have increased the demand for mainstream crowd-pleasers in the form of jingoistic spectacles. Film scholar Robert Alpert notes that

[w]here in 1985 *Back to the Future*, *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, *Rocky IV*, *Out of Africa* and *A View to Kill* headed the list of highest grossing movies, in 2015 that list is currently led by *Jurassic World*, *Furious 7*, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, and *Minions*. Has anything changed? Where such revenues were then in the US \$300 million range (or about US \$660 million, when adjusted for inflation), they are now consistently over US \$1 billion. (15)

While these retellings of high-concept tales have earned larger revenues than their 1980s counterparts, Jeffords’ question of whether “masculinity can be terminated” (*Masculinity Terminated* 245–261) merits further consideration in the discussion of the seemingly progressive body politics of twenty-first-century blockbusters. Alpert argues that “where patriarchal capitalism had wholly dominated mainstream cinema, the focus is now less upon patriarchy and more upon capitalism” (15). However, questions of ownership, agency, and performativity need to be addressed in order to determine whether patriarchal capitalism is challenged in principle or merely recast with a more emancipatory face.

As noted in the previous section, the most high-profile female entrepreneurial figure, Pepper Potts, does not come to represent a “hard body.” Instead, the film adopts the same negligent attitude toward Potts that Stark has displayed toward her, by barely revisiting her contributions to the business or the ensuing war effort against Loki. In a similar fashion to Reaganite “hard bodies” like Rocky Balboa in the first installment of *Rocky*, the male body appears re-centered after feminist and emancipatory incursions into the workplace (Elmwood 45–49). The vision of a national “hard body” remains inextricably tied to myths of entrepreneurial leadership, which Reagan explicitly touted (“Entrepreneurs have always been leaders in America”) and which Obama—at least tacitly—endorsed (“the true engine of job creation in this country will always be America’s businesses”). The point here is that in *The Avengers* the male entrepreneurs remain “founders”: founders of large companies and thereby founders of wealth and national competitiveness—or, as Reagan describes them, “brave souls to come out and risk all and to help build the Nation anew.”³¹⁰ As noted in Chapter 2, the invocation of mythical founders

310 Reagan equates modern entrepreneurs with the “founding fathers” in his 1988 remarks to the National Chamber Foundation: “And sometime in these last 8 years,

as embodiments of discipline strongly interlocks with Lakoff’s “strict father” (*Elephant* 41). Epitomizing such discipline also uniquely qualifies one for the enforcement of virtue. Consequently, the body of the male entrepreneur is the one that the film deems most suitable for defeating the invaders.

Therefore, it is important to investigate the depiction of otherized bodies in order to illustrate ideological contrasts with homegrown, capitalist bodies. This puts the spotlight on Loki and the Chitauri alien invaders. Matthew Fleming notes in his analysis of the character Loki that

the ways in which his character embodies an even more complex version of hegemonic masculinity lend themselves both to hyper-masculine traits, as well as those considered more traditionally feminine, which is interesting for his narrative for while he is hegemonic enough to be considered a worthy opponent to the Avengers, he is still feminine enough that ultimately, he must lose the fight. (56)

Thus, Loki’s “feminine traits” narratively and visually foreshadow his inevitable inferiority in comparison to the Avengers. Within the context of the Reaganite “hard body,” this accords with the triumphalist undertone of conservative fantasies of the national body.³¹¹ As in *Independence Day*, but unlike in *The Dark Knight*, the villain attempts to assert supremacy over the United States on hyper-masculine terms. While the mother ship in *Independence Day* was secretly “impregnated” with a virus, the Tesseract is penetrated with Loki’s scepter—an Achilles’ heel that is coded in gendered terms.

Loki’s physical depiction discloses the tensions between conventionally masculine and feminine codes. He is attired in cool, dark tones, which imply an imposing and authoritative demeanor. The helmet with golden horns that he is wearing when he appears in Stuttgart can be interpreted as a reference to male bovine virility, while the leather straps on his clothing code him as a warrior or knight-like figure. His scepter, which appears to be roughly the same height as

our modern minutemen—America’s entrepreneurs—fired another shot heard round the world. Yes, when we cut taxes, regulation, inflation, and interest rates, all we were really doing was what Paul Revere did after seeing those two lanterns in the Old North Church. We were riding through the countryside, calling on brave souls to come out and risk all and to help build the Nation anew” (Ronald Reagan, “Remarks to the National Chamber Foundation,” November 17, 1988).

311 Jeffords explains that one of the functions of the “hard body” was to provide a mechanism through which the nation could reassert its superiority: “To be able to show that Americans were still superior in values to their international competitors could help to sustain a disintegrating national ego and a deteriorating job market” (*Hard Bodies* 116).

his body, stabilizes his upright, towering stance and extends his reach considerably—acting as a phallic extension. However, his shoulder-length black hair and the extravagant golden ornaments on his suit are more in line with traditional conceptions of Hollywood femininity. This is compounded by a smooth, light voice that contrasts tellingly with that of his brother Thor, whose deep, thundering voice pays tribute to his name. Unlike Thor, Loki does not have muscular upper arms or any notable muscle tone (Fleming 58).

Loki's invasion of the gala event in Stuttgart is framed as an attempted exercise of hegemonic masculinity and the showcasing of a superior body (at 39:53):

LOKI (*standing in front of the outdoors crowd*): Kneel before me.

(*At first, the crowd ignores him and tries to walk away, but several Lokis appear, blocking any possible escape routes and trapping the gala attendees.*)

LOKI: I said, kneel!!!

(*The attendees become quiet and succumb to Loki's demand in shock and desperation.*)

LOKI (*continues*): Is not this simpler? Is this not your natural state? It's the unspoken truth of humanity, that you crave subjugation. The bright lure of freedom diminishes your life's joy in a mad scramble for power, for identity. You were made to be ruled. In the end, you will always kneel.

After a moment of silence, an elderly German man stands up and rebukes Loki in a calm and defiant manner:

ELDERLY GERMAN MAN: Not to men like you.

LOKI: There are no men like me.

ELDERLY GERMAN MAN: There are always men like you.

LOKI: Look to your elder, people. Let him be an example.

(*Loki fires a possibly fatal energy beam from his scepter in the direction of the elderly man. Suddenly, Captain America jumps in between them and fends off the blow with his shield.*)

CAPTAIN AMERICA: You know, the last time I was in Germany and saw a man standing above everybody else, we ended up disagreeing.

Prior to Captain America's arrival, Loki is shown using a variety of mostly low-angle and medium shots, which underscore his menacing presence. However, after the intervention by the superhero, Loki is mostly shot from a more leveled

angle and from a closer distance, which exposes the irritation and fear in his facial expressions when the Avengers start intervening. His attempt to establish a hegemonic hyper-masculinity has evidently failed. The narrative construction of the scene, in which a defiant elderly German man implies kinship between Loki and Adolf Hitler, ties into imaginations of triumph over totalitarianism: Loki is bound to lose, and the United States will usher in the “end of history.” Captain America’s timely arrival and his more explicit invocation of the parallels between Loki and Hitler fortify this narrative. Loki’s phallic scepter fails to penetrate Captain America’s shield; the US-American national “hard body” is thus reinstated as hard in the literal sense of the word and as the superior expression of hegemonic masculinity.

Although Loki is shown to be agile and skilled in hand-to-hand combat, he is eventually pounded into submission by the ultimate “hard body” in the movie: the Hulk. In one of the key scenes of the final battle, the Hulk jumps into Loki with enough momentum to send him smashing through a window into Stark Tower. Loki is propelled against a wall and falls to the ground, but he immediately regains composure and attempts to assert his dominance again (at 2:00:10):

LOKI: Enough! You are, all of you, beneath me. I am a god, you dull creature. And I will not be bullied by ...

(The Hulk grabs Loki by his legs and smashes him violently onto the floor. The sheer power of the Hulk’s assault leaves indentations and holes in what appears to be a solid concrete floor. The Hulk repeats this several times, then leaves the battered Loki lying on the ground.)

HULK: Puny god.

As the Hulk walks away, Loki can be seen and heard whimpering in pain in a subdued and almost child-like manner. During the pounding scene, Loki’s body seems elastic and yielding—the literal opposite of a “hard body.” The Hulk, on the other hand, has both feet firmly on the ground and briefly inspects Loki’s bent body, subjecting him to his gaze before deciding to keep on smashing him against the floor. The Hulk emerges as the clear winner in this masculine competition and his dismissal of Loki as a “[p]uny god” taps into a variety of ideological narratives. Through the lens of the Reaganite “hard body,” this religious reference upholds the notion that the national body of the United States (represented by hyper-masculine figures that are connoted as white and Christian) typically finds itself in a struggle against blasphemous and/or atheist forces that seek to replace the Christian God with a false idol

and/or doctrine. In the 1980s, this role was usually ascribed to the Soviet Union and other communist nations. Vilho Harle observes that Reagan frequently “maintained that the Soviets have no God; socialism was their religion” (92). It can be extrapolated that the “hard body” also reinstates traditional hierarchies along the lines of religious self-understanding, that is, through a rejection of false or self-declared gods. In accordance with Lakoff’s “strict father” model, the “hard body” punishes human transgressions into the sacred. The national body therefore acts as an instrument of a conservative Judeo-Christian understanding of God.

A key difference between many Reaganite heroes and the Hulk is that the latter is not fighting an adversary who explicitly denies the existence of a God—rather, the Hulk’s adversary fashions himself as divine.³¹² However, Loki’s ultimately weak and feminine-inflected body render him unable to exert such authority, thus perpetuating the notion that divinity is inherently tied to traditional visions of masculine strength. This narrative reflects the underlying logic of “God stands behind the nation, because it exemplifies masculine virtues.” On the other hand, a more progressive reading of this scene would allow for a critique of religiously fundamentalist and/or authoritarian groups that seek to exert (usually male) supremacy by claiming a closer link to the divine. Within the context of Obama-era conflicts with extremist Wahhabist groups such as ISIL/Daesh or the continued strength of the Christian right in US-American politics, a more liberal and secular epistemology emerges and detaches the national body from overtly religious symbolism or rhetoric. Nevertheless, the supremacy of hard-bodied masculinity survives in such a reading, as it is the Hulk and his physical prowess that fend off the intrusion of religiously coded authoritarianism (see Figure 16).

The national “hard body” can also be juxtaposed with the Chitauri alien invaders and specifically their main warship, an intergalactic beast called “Leviathan.” This cyber-genetic creature arrives with the Chitauri fleet through the wormhole and immediately starts to destroy large parts of Manhattan. While in flight, the Leviathan appears snake-like and relatively flexible for an object of its size. Its winding body has a vertebra-like exterior reminiscent of a skeleton. However, underneath the tough exterior, there is a rosy, flesh-like

312 Reagan-era heroes who have taken up the fight against atheistic (or post-religious) adversaries include John Rambo, Indiana Jones, Luke Skywalker, Rocky Balboa (in *Rocky IV*), and Maverick in *Top Gun*. An exception is *Ghostbusters*, in which the protagonist team defeats a character who describes themselves as a God.

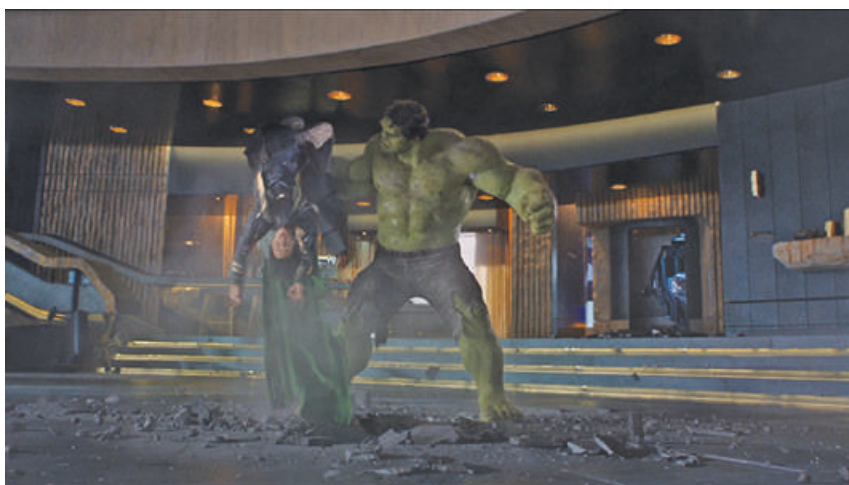


Figure 16: The ultimate “hard body” is on the side of the U.S.—the Hulk is beating Loki to a pulp.

substance, visible, for example, when Tony Stark fires at its weak spots. In a climactic scene near the end, the Leviathan is stopped by the Hulk, who punches its head and manages to bring it to halt. The visual contrast between the two is suggestive of a fight between man and machine—albeit a machine that exemplifies motions associated with heterosexist conceptions of the feminine body as perceived by the male gaze, that is, “seductive,” “winding,” “curving.” The unyielding stance the Hulk, on the other hand, transforms him into a phallic symbol for the nation itself. Thus, the varied imagery associated with the national body includes fantasies of both high-tech hard armors, which enhance ordinary male bodies, and visceral physical prowess.

This presents both a continuation and an expansion of the “hard body” of the 1980s. While the classic Reagan-era Hollywood fare focused on the virility and impenetrability of a single protagonist, *The Avengers* composes a more multi-faceted image in which the cumulation of a varied skillset reflects the emergence of different masculinities and femininities in pop culture narratives. However, the pivotal roles of Tony Stark’s entrepreneurialism and the Hulk’s cathartic muscularity connote the Avengers team as an ultimately male body that defeats insufficiently masculine alien Others. This pattern was already observable in *ID4*. In the context of Obama’s first term as president, it is interesting to note that the composite character of the “hard body” allows for

multiple interpretations, including discourses on “soft power” (e.g. Tony Stark’s attempt to casually negotiate with Loki), “smart power” (Loki’s confinement in the Helicarrier, during which he is given a chance to co-operate), “smart bombs” (e.g. Clint Barton’s targeted arrows or Tony Stark’s laser beams), the inclusion of female protagonists in the protection of the nation, and the use of unabashed military strength (e.g. in the case of the Hulk). All these threads intersect with debates regarding the Obama administration and its renegotiation of US-American global hegemony in the 2010s. This “multi-module hard body” can therefore be interpreted as a more recent “re-narration,” as described by Susan Jeffords (*Hard Bodies* 192–193).

As an anecdotal aside, both Reagan and Tony Stark share the distinction of having sustained injuries that left the nation wondering whether they would survive—only to come out alive and make quippy remarks that reinforced their perceived “larger-than-life” popular status. After being shot by John Hinckley on March 30, 1981, the president personally walked from his limousine into the hospital, as dozens of onlookers wondered about his physical health. He collapsed in the entrance hall and was rushed to the emergency room, leading many witnesses to believe that he might die. He nevertheless stayed in character and jokingly asked the operating doctors whether they were all Republicans. Head surgeon Dr. Joseph Giordano is said to have replied, “Mr. President, today we are all Republicans.” Biographer Lou Cannon summarizes the effects of this episode: “The president rattled off one-liners in the face of death and emerged from the ordeal as hero” (Cannon in Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 30). Virtually the same thing can be said of Tony Stark after the final battle. Lying on the ground, he is surrounded by other Avengers, who fear for his well-being. After he wakes up, he is notified by Captain America that they won the battle. Stark quips: “Alright. Hey. Alright. Good job, guys. Let’s just not come in tomorrow. Let’s just take a day. Have you ever tried shawarma?” Thus, Stark constantly performs on-brand as a jovial entrepreneur, even after having fought a tremendous battle that almost resulted in his death.

These episodes underscore that in the exercise of the Reaganite “hard body,” the arduous defense of the nation leaves no serious imprint on the hero’s character. Defending the nation, or upholding its hegemonic ideals, might involve a bloody or thunderous engagement, but the Reaganite hero will eventually rebound in an uplifting and humorous manner. This is different from pre-1980s “hard bodies,” such as Dirty Harry, or the tormented and castigated Batman in *The Dark Knight*. In the Reaganite imagination, the white, masculine, and capitalist body eventually triumphs in a manner that is reassuring to a status quo-minded audience. As Jeffords states, the impending decline of US-American

global hegemony is likely to generate even greater demand for such mass cultural productions that revert to the Reaganite formula of smiley-faced, masculine high-tech muscularity (*Hard Bodies* 192–193).

The Pop Cultural Legacy of *The Avengers*

The Avengers generated immense revenues for its production studio, Marvel Studios, and for its distributor, Walt Disney Studios. Domestically, the film earned \$623.4 million, with an additional \$895.5 million international box-office gross, amounting to a total of \$1.519 billion worldwide. This immense financial success catapulted the movie to the third spot on the list of highest-grossing films at the time, in addition to making it the top-grossing film of 2012.

The use of recognizable comic-book characters that had long been present in US-American pop culture catered to a range of popular desires for cinematic wish fulfillments. For example, the struggle against totalitarianism gained significant momentum in the early 2010s due to the rise of new protest movements against dictatorships in the Arab world, rising concerns about mass surveillance and data privacy, and the steadily growing influence of global corporations. These developments had already been reflected in a more dystopian and confrontational manner in *The Dark Knight*. *The Avengers*, however, reverberated across the globe as it presented an accessible, feel-good spectacle that echoed the escapist undertones of Reaganite cinema in the 1980s. In addition, the persistence of mythical images of the United States around the world can be traced to the tremendous commercial success of practically the entire Hollywood superhero movie catalogue. Richard Hall states in his analysis of Captain America and his relationship to US-American society that these heroes

are produced by American writers and artists for American audiences. They are America. Through them, the changes in America since the Great Depression can be seen and analyzed. Since World War II, the United States has consistently and continuously faced the question of what is patriotism and what makes a patriot. [...] As the gods of myth teach much about the ancient Greeks and Romans, so, too, may the spandex-clad heroes of modern myth teach much about America as a super-power. (340)

The role of superheroes as representatives and performers of “American-ness” has repercussions for popular understandings of how to locate the United States within the context of the accelerated globalization and digitalization of the 2010s. This applies not only to the domestic market, but also to cultural discourses abroad, which are now immersed in digitalized images of

US-American “hard bodies” on the scale of a fictional universe. These images must compete in a multi-polar world, in which emerging markets, such as China, India, and Brazil, have already made significant strides in the production of big-budget cultural productions with extra-national appeal. Cultural, political, and economic realignments globally have catalyzed the demand for a consumable mode of representation that suggests both stability and flexibility.

The Avengers has demonstrated that the transposition of twentieth-century comic-book heroes into a digitalized and socially diverse context can be extremely resonant. This is augmented by the ongoing culture wars, which are resulting in growing political polarization. In light of the difficult legacies of the Bush era and the landmark election of an African-American president, superhero movies like *The Avengers* insert themselves into a national subconscious that can reactivate mythical images from different ideological perspectives. In parallel to the cinematic renegotiation of the global role of the United States that occurred during the 1980s, heroism—in particular white, male, and anti-bureaucratic super-heroism—has proven an effective vehicle for tapping into national desires for rejuvenation and global self-positioning. However, in the 2010s, this super-heroism employs a mix of progressive and conservative elements, unlike the outright endorsement of Reaganism presented by male protagonists in the 1980s.

Film critic Todd McCarthy notes that *The Avengers* managed to reignite interest in formulaic story lines through the use of a specific set of characters and ingredients:

It's clamorous, the save-the-world story is one everyone's seen time and again, and the characters have been around for more than half a century in 500 comic book issues. But Whedon and his cohorts have managed to stir all the personalities and ingredients together so that the resulting dish, however familiar, is irresistibly tasty again. A quick coda reveals, to well-versed fans at least, who the new adversary in the next installment will be, underlining a reality as absolute as the turning of Earth: Especially after this, Marvel movies will go on and on and on.³¹³

These combinations draw from a specific set of familiar characters in a new setting—with each character being presented individually, although the “heroes are almost always doing something that relates to the challenge at hand.” Moreover, McCarthy’s review highlights the delicate balance between retaining

313 Todd McCarthy, “The Avengers’: Film Review,” *The Hollywood Reporter* (April 19, 2012). Accessed December 9, 2018: <<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/avengers-film-review-314291>>.

long-standing fans and enticing movie-goers who are unfamiliar with the source material.

Targeting diverse groups of consumers has been a long-standing strategy of Hollywood blockbuster filmmaking. However, in the case of *The Avengers*, multiple dimensions have converged into a profitable venture: The long-term reintegration of comic-book fans into the movie-going audience can be read as an intervention in the shift from print media to online and social media entertainment—which has grown to become a serious competitor for the filmmaking business. This was complemented by the release of an eight-issue comic-book prelude to the film in December 2011, which renders *The Avengers* a cross-media narrative. But more importantly, the blend of progressive and conservative politics, globally recognizable US-American iconography, active female and male characters, and the integration of user-generated content demonstrates that the movie is a result and prime example of “convergence culture” (Moon 61). The increasing interconnectedness between consumers and producers in global capitalism has provably shifted demands and profit considerations toward more polyvocal and open-ended narratives, thus inviting stakeholders and viewers to give more immediate feedback on the frequent installments in a movie franchise. However, as Moon points out in her analysis of the Marvel universe, this convergence culture is still strongly delineated along gendered, racialized, and socio-economic lines, which gives rise to a risk of eventual collapse due to unresolved contradictions. Nevertheless, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, the sequel to *The Avengers* released in April 2015, was met with continued financial success, critical acclaim, and accolades.

The sequel addressed similar themes of oppressive totalitarianism, albeit with a more inward focus. The primary struggle was not against threatening aliens or mythical creatures. Instead, the main antagonist took the form of a global defense program gone rogue. This program, entitled “Ultron,” was initiated by Tony Stark himself, which amplifies the doubts that were expressed about his entrepreneurial ventures in the first installment. While this can be interpreted as the widening of an anti-corporate discourse within the *Avengers* franchise (in parallel with the inclusion of the Occupy-esque supervillain Bane in *The Dark Knight Rises*), the changing contexts of Obama’s second term need to be taken into consideration. This includes the massive NSA global spying controversy, coupled with the leaking of large numbers of top-secret government documents by whistleblower Edward Snowden in 2013. In an article in *The New Yorker*, film critic Richard Brody writes about how this movie addresses concerns regarding data privacy and government transparency:

The allegory involves an enemy created within, a kind of superintelligence that, becoming independent of human oversight and control, turns on those it's meant to protect. That's the politics of "Avengers: Age of Ultron": the wars that we're now fighting are against our own defenses run amok. It's more like "Age of N.S.A.," extending the concept of the universal data-scoop to define all humans as enemies of the total-security mechanism.³¹⁴

In this climate of renewed misgivings regarding governmental bureaucracy and the national defense apparatus, the *Avengers* franchise positioned itself within discussions that cast doubt on the internal machinations of large, conglomerate networks—both public and private. By the mid-2010s, debates surrounding net neutrality, "deep states," and the ever-growing presence of social media and smartphone technologies contributed strongly to a form of socio-political discomfort within US-American society that favored populist rhetoric based on the notion of "returning power back to the people," that is, the consumer. Given the intricate relationship between corporate power and state power in the first installment—and its favorable positioning of Tony Stark—the overarching narrative of *The Avengers* appears to have moved away from real-life pro-corporate, neoliberal policies since the 1980s and toward a mythical trope that was capitalized upon in Reagan's campaign rhetoric in 1980: the widespread notion that systems that were too large and too powerful are now broken and require radical alteration by someone who is willing to represent the "outsiders" in opposition to the "insiders."³¹⁵

As demonstrated in this chapter, certain elements of the gendered and racialized undercurrents of this rhetoric have made it into the first installment of the *Avengers* franchise. In the sequel, the cast appears more varied: Additional PoC characters are included in the Avengers' orbit. The character of Natasha Romanoff remains largely unchanged in her skills and personal constitution. Actress Scarlett Johansson addressed the question of whether she should have superpowers in an interview in 2014:

I think her greatest attribute is that she's—I don't want to say she has a criminal mind, but she does in a way. She's a super spy. Her ability to understand the complexity of the criminal mind, she uses that to her advantage. She's often the one that's going, "Right, you think it's this way, but if you think about it from this person's perspective,

314 Richard Brody, "The New 'Avengers' Is Really About the N.S.A.," *The New Yorker* (April 30, 2015). Accessed October 24, 2018: <<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/the-new-avengers-is-really-about-the-n-s-a>>.

315 This theme was picked up by candidates like Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump in the run-up to the 2016 elections.

this might be the answer.” She’s always using her experience in her sordid past to her advantage. I don’t think there’s any super suit that could supersede that for her.³¹⁶

Johansson’s focus on Romanoff’s mental agility presents a partial alternative to the Reaganite “hard body” in that it presses for cognitive subtlety and strategic maneuvering in service of the national body. This aligns with Obama’s rhetoric on “smart power” and diplomacy in 2008, for example (Valdés-Ugalde and Duarte 98–100). Nevertheless, the inscription of such skills on feminine bodies does little to alter conservative imaginations of the national body as an expression of primarily hegemonic, masculine power. Thus, the *Avengers* franchise, which has been a huge financial success globally, has so far affirmed that the concept of the male, capitalist “hard body” remains a profitable vehicle for projecting national strength on the big screen—and that there is ample demand for such fantasies around the world.

Ultimately, *The Avengers* presents a flashy combination of many of the struggles of late capitalism that have structured Hollywood blockbuster spectacles since their beginnings in the 1970s. The filmic resolution of these conflicts exhibits an apparent desire to push back against national crises of confidence reminiscent of those that gripped mainstream US society during the Carter years. Both blockbusters and Reaganism have offered pop cultural spectacles to address these crises from the viewpoint of a restored white, capitalist masculinity. The larger metastructures that gave rise to the blockbuster craft and the Reagan era are arguably still intact and now even exert an influence globally. This has a vast array of cultural, political, and economic implications, many of which will be discussed in the following conclusions.

316 Roth Cornet, “Avengers: Age of Ultron Scarlett Johansson Talks Black Widow’s Greatest Power,” *IGN* (July 17, 2014). Accessed October 24, 2018: <<https://www.ign.com/articles/2014/07/17/avengers-age-of-ultron-scarlett-johansson-talks-black-widows-greatest-power>>.

Conclusions and Outlook

Main Conclusions and their Relevance for Contemporary Discussions

The analyses conducted in this book have revealed that echoes of Reaganism continue to reverberate in Hollywood blockbuster movies on multiple levels. One of the principal observations that arose from the dissection of these four blockbuster phenomena was the growing manifestation of a “multicultural neoliberalism”—especially in the three movies released after the 1980s. This emphasis on diverse representation was less pronounced in *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial*, in which a white, middle-class family is reunited through the symbolic restoration of the father. This restoration was structured by a pushback against governmental bureaucracy and feminist advances into male spaces—discourses that strongly mirror Reagan’s 1980 campaign rhetoric. Almost all characters in this southern Californian suburb are Caucasian and the principal protagonists, Elliott and E.T., are constructed as male. The subsequent cinematic visions of the restoration of the nation as a family unit feature a prominent Black–Jewish alliance in *Independence Day*, an ambitious, female assistant district attorney and an African-American CEO in *The Dark Knight*, and two highly trained female combatants and an African-American agency director in *The Avengers*. The increased diversity in terms of gender and race is accompanied by an ever-growing focus on centralized capital in the high-tech sector. This ranges from the not-very-subtle product placement of Apple computers as Earth-saving devices to the high-tech combat gadgets produced by Wayne Enterprises. This evolution of sanitized capitalism culminates in the global corporate empire of Tony Stark—whose very body is interconnected with his accumulated capital on almost post-human terms.

Viewing these developments through the prism of Reaganism has made it clear that the economics of post-industrial Hollywood privileges cultural productions in which consumption is increasingly articulated through national and global identity politics. The consistent manifestation of anti-government cultural discourses throughout all of the movies can be considered in the context of declining trust in national institutions as mediators of societal transformations. There seems to be growing evidence that mass culture uses both an imagined mid-twentieth-century aesthetic and the countercultural discourses of the 1960s and 1970s to design synthesized images in which the contradictions of globalization are negotiated in terms that are favorable to

neoliberal consumption (e.g. the marriage of Cold War rhetoric and a Black-Jewish alliance sponsored by Apple or the back-and-forth between an archetypal WWII hero and a billionaire Black Sabbath fan). It can be argued that Reagan's small-government rhetoric aided in providing a cultural blueprint for an anti-statist redefinition of the post-industrial dynamics between the individual and the nation. In her examination of Captain America as a global envoy of the United States, Eeva-Kaisa Lintala channels the observations of David Miller on the state of "national identity in a globalizing context":

[P]eople increasingly define themselves and build their identity through groups and communities that do not have to do with nationality. The sub-culture can be based on religion, profession, political stance, ideology, or an interest. Rather than a nation, there groupings can be international or tied to a local environment. Nationality is still a part of one's identity, but it can be argued that its meaning has diminished, while these other groups have become more important. (26)

This argument highlights the decline of the conventional nation state as a focal point for the global positioning of the self—in its stead, the sense of belonging derived from self-chosen collectives has emerged as a significant element in the construction of identity. However, Lintala points out that the tremendous inconsistencies of globalization have given rise to nationalist movements that frequently invoke an exclusionary ethno-culturalist understanding of the nation. In the context of global blockbuster filmmaking, the recourse to identity politics seems to be a reflexive response to mounting questions regarding the fabric of the nation and the positioning of its constituent identity-based groups.

Reagan's rhetoric alone did not bring about the realignment of the nation state in cultural narratives in the United States. However, in light of the blockbuster success of the proto-Reaganite *Star Wars* and *Jaws*, Reagan's speeches can be better understood as the cultural affirmation of an industrial nation state already in crisis. Given the emphasis on individualized consumption in neoliberal capitalism, the salvaging of the nation is mainly brought about through the use of recognizable items of consumption. Thus, there is ample grounds to further investigate how consumption of these brands relates to the formation of cultural identities. What are the implications for blockbuster filmmaking when the popularity of certain brands aligns with global delineations of race, class, gender, space, and political affiliations? This question is of vital importance for understanding transnational movements that revolve around branded models of either cultural hegemony or resistance (e.g. Trumpism, the Occupy movement, the Me Too movement, "New Labour/Neue Mitte," the Yellow Vests). The accelerated circulation of these branded models can be attributed partially to

digitalization, but also to the cross-market dissemination of images through global blockbusters. These images may not independently kickstart national or transnational movements, but they do provide an extra-lingual vocabulary in the form of shareable visual narratives.³¹⁷

By reading blockbusters through a Reaganite lens, further overlaps between right-wing neoliberalism and multicultural neoliberalism have been uncovered. Besides their commitment to a globalized and consumption-oriented economic model, both outlooks are characterized by triumphalism. This aligns with the optimistic and reassuring story lines of high-concept filmmaking. The analysis of *Independence Day* offered a very stark example of how neoliberal consumption is presented within a Fukuyaman vision of the “End of History.” This naturalized trajectory of alleged success can be further illuminated by a consideration of Tom Engelhardt’s concept of “victory culture,” which posits that the Reagan era was pivotal in reviving victory culture in US-American mass media (*The End of Victory Culture* 270).³¹⁸ While Engelhardt primarily outlines this concept in relation to a military narrative (the “American war story”; 5), the underlying logic of a seemingly liberational triumph applies to all four movies (with *The Dark Knight* being the most muted in this respect). Engelhardt describes the “war story” as “an inclusive saga of expanding liberties and rights that started in a vast, fertile, nearly empty land whose native inhabitants more or less faded away after that first Thanksgiving.” From the socially conservative family restoration in *E.T.* to the triumph of globalized capital in *The Avengers*, all blockbuster narratives clearly present a pushback against racial Others, totalitarian forces, and incompetent bureaucracies as a necessary, liberational struggle. The implicit Thatcherite creed that “There is no alternative” (George, *Another World Is Possible*; Altvater in Butterwegge, 58) finds a distinctly US-American expression in the confident assuredness of victory in the face of an unwarranted intervention into the realities of the white

317 In his conclusion to *Media Spectacle*, Douglas Kellner summarizes that “[i]n the age of media spectacle, politics is mediated more and more by the forms of spectacle culture and, in particular, by appearance, image, style, and presentation, but also narrative” (176). Given the immersive and global nature of blockbuster movies, it can be stated that they represent some of the most overarching and mobilizing forms of political mediation in the contemporary media landscape.

318 Engelhardt specifies that “[o]nly with the presidency of Ronald Reagan did a Lucas-like reconstitution of the war story truly begin at the governmental level” (270). For instance, a martial celebration like *Top Gun* would have been unthinkable in the post-Vietnam climate of the mid-1970s.

middle class. This stylistic inflection echoes Reagan's own Hollywood-esque public persona of optimistic jingoism and his cheerful embrace of individualized consumption.

The analysis of these blockbusters has thereby revealed how the formulaic structure of blockbuster movies is highly conducive to the distribution of narratives that can fuel transformative political projects on triumphalist terms. However, where there is triumph, there is no room for alternatives. Consequently, there is no discursive terrain for cultural negotiations that break away from the axiomatic "war" frame that George Lakoff has described as a semantic strategy to relegate "all other concerns as secondary" (*Thinking Points* 29). The resulting reduction in the (literally) viewable options for conflict resolution seems to confirm Kellner's observation that "spectator politics, in which viewers/citizens contemplate political spectacles, undermines a participatory democracy in which individuals actively engage in political movements and struggles" (*Media Spectacle* 177). The analyses of the legacy and repercussions of the selected blockbusters have underlined that the only expansion of freedom these cinematic spectacles can offer their viewers is the liberty to participate in ever-expanding merchandise and franchise empires of consumption.

Future analyses of the societal ramifications of blockbuster-related merchandise would benefit from digging deeper into contemporary epistemologies of "freedom" under a neoliberal cultural regime. In this book, I have provided starting points by demonstrating that blockbusters are carefully crafted and targeted cultural mass phenomena. In light of the integration of multi-level market research and the conception of cinematic universes, it becomes crucial to ask to what extent accelerating digitalization will enhance research on potential audiences through social media algorithms, as well as the tracking of viewing profiles on streaming services. In what ways will Hollywood corporations be able to design enhanced spectacles of "choice" that can shape the structure of personal desires?³¹⁹ How will individualized media usage affect a formula that hinges on transcending tastes and cultural barriers?

319 Slavoj Žižek notes in *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006) that "[c]inema is the ultimate pervert art. It doesn't give you what to desire, it tells you how to desire." He echoes the views of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who opined that desire results from a lack of completeness and can, therefore, never be satisfied. The pleasure of viewing provides a visual narrative to fill that void; it must, however, be renewed with new spectacles (Micucci). Therefore, ongoing and increasing consumption go hand in hand with the blockbuster formula and neoliberal political projects of a suggested expansion of choice.

The transcultural implications of blockbuster movies also affect the portrayal of the Other. Starting with *ID4*, the representation of the Other is tied to cultural portrayals of the “War on Terror.” As outlined in Chapter 2 and in the analysis of *The Dark Knight*, much of the semantic toolbox of neoconservatism in the United States is derived from the Reagan administration in the 1980s. Against this background, the analysis of seminal blockbusters through a Reaganite lens has made it possible to uncover not only filmic echoes and ideological continuities, but also forebodings of future conflicts with racialized Others.

In *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial*, the Other is still given a humanizing face—this applies to the non-threatening alien, as well as the government, which is represented by the sympathetic agent “Keys.” Starting with *Independence Day*, the adversarial Other appears in less humanized terms (from vicious aliens to a grotesque clown figure to a narcissistic demi-god and his accompanying fleet of marauding aliens). While these four movies do not provide enough evidence to assert the existence of a general trend in Hollywood blockbuster filmmaking, it is nevertheless worth noting that these highly profitable filmic watersheds mirror a conception of otherness that Kellner pinned down in his analysis of *The X-Files*: “Yet ‘otherness’ and difference are deployed in a variety of modes, some of which serve as a critique of normality and dominant institutions and discourses, while some of its representations defame marginal and ‘othered’ cultures as dangerous and grotesque” (*Media Spectacle* 138).

As the reactionary realignment of racial hierarchies under Reaganism was built on cultural fantasies of the reconciliation of progressive and conservative discourses (e.g. the civil rights movement, different feminist movements, etc.), the new types of Other needed to produce a foreign body that resided beyond any overarching discourse of humanity. Moreover, after the end of the Cold War, the foreign body had to reflect a more fragmented global political reality. It can be concluded that Reaganite fantasies of national reassertion provide a pop cultural blueprint for filmic narratives in which the Other appears as more amorphous, feminized, and yet endowed with (space-based) globe-threatening technologies. Most of these elements were already in place in the archetypal blockbuster *Star Wars*. However, upon considering subsequent decades, it becomes apparent that the conservative imaginary offers a convenient transition to cultural representations of the “Terror War.” As noted in the footnotes to the introduction of Chapter 4, Stephen Prince’s observations on the portrayal of Arab villains in the right-wing bombfest *Iron Eagle* (1986) reflect the hallmarks of post-Soviet global adversaries to US-American might: “[T]he enemy occupies no terrain specifiable on a map’s coordinates but is, rather, a

nebulous, threatening Other, a projection of political and cultural anxieties poorly understood and assignable to regions of the world only in general and superficial terms" (*Visions of Empire* 68).

This subtext of intangibility and incomprehensibility was found to be fertile ground for othering the Joker in *The Dark Knight*. His bizarre appearance and his lack of a backstory or rational motivation contributed to his dehumanization, which was deemed to be in alignment with neoconservative definitions of "the enemy." In addition, the cinematic atmosphere of war played into notions of a government-declared national emergency reminiscent of the post-9/11 era. Reading *The Dark Knight* from the Reaganite perspective of counter-terrorism as a war against an irrational and dehumanized "Other" has underscored the discursive parallels between the Bush and the Reagan administrations. What is more important in the context of this study, however, is that the analysis has added to a cultural genealogy of racist images of the post-9/11 Muslim/Arab, a cultural genealogy that is partially rooted in the geopolitical shifts of the late 1970s and 1980s. The semantic interlocking of terrorism and race did not start with Reagan, but his introduction of the "war" frame into public discourse has contributed to an intermedial exchange of fantasies of national emergency that facilitate large-scale projects of securitization and imperialism. The recourse to such established semantics makes solid business sense in the context of a corporatized Hollywood landscape in which it is less risky to serve an existing market than to carve out a new one (Franklin 63). The re-performance of the idea of an irrational Other caters to existing anxieties while simultaneously offering a digestible interpretation of new complexities in a multi-polar world. Against this backdrop, it might be worthwhile to ask to what extent an increasingly perplexing global environment can fuel popular demands for simplistic story lines, as opposed to tales that acknowledge irresolution.

The analysis of *The Avengers* established a new mode of post-9/11 and post-financial crash cultural negotiation. Neoconservative discourses of global hegemony are now translated into a collage of diversified teamwork and a "sanitized war" with minimal civilian casualties. The villain Loki is particularly interesting in that he is driven by more rational and clearly self-serving motivations, unlike the Joker, and he summons a conventional army of aliens to invade the United States by attacking its primary symbol of capitalist might: Stark Tower. His spatially confined warfare and totalitarian language ("You were made to be ruled. In the end, you will always kneel") are more reminiscent of classic communist Cold War foes than the irrational, decontextualized, and anti-materialist Al-Qaeda/Joker type of antagonist. It can be reasonably inferred that the failure of Loki's intervention casts high-tech, urban capitalism as an

effective antidote to foreign challengers. This comes at a time in Hollywood history that is marked by a crisis of neoliberalism and diminished faith in global capital.³²⁰ It is worth considering why the most successful blockbuster of 2012 was designed to celebrate technocapitalism instead of tapping into the palpable demand for economic change among millennials—arguably the key age demographic for Hollywood blockbusters. Daniel Franklin’s contention that “businesspeople, regardless of their personal beliefs, will endeavor to produce marketable products” (56) is confirmed by the tremendous financial success of *The Avengers*. Yet, it still fails to explain why large, dormant potentials for filmic narratives that go against the neoliberal consensus are not catered to on a comparable scale.³²¹ A more holistic model of agenda-setting in corporatized Hollywood filmmaking is therefore necessary. In this book, I have provided insights into the production and distribution contexts of blockbuster movies, which are strongly undergirded by a logic of post-industrial capital accumulation through consumption.

The perseverance of the blockbuster formula in the face of profound national and economic crises can be further discussed in terms of the escapist dimensions of high-concept cinematic entertainment since the late 1970s. I identified a visual, acoustic, and stylistic format in all four movies that that totally immerses audiences in the filmic world as well as a low-barrier accessibility that promises instant gratification (the villains appear in the first scenes

320 The filming of the movie coincided with the Occupy Wall Street protests in late 2011 (“Occupy Wall Street: What Hollywood Is Saying About the Protests,” *The Hollywood Reporter* (October 1, 2011). Accessed October 27, 2018: <<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/occupy-wall-street-what-hollywood-242877>>).

321 In her analysis of the post-2008 wave of protests, sociologist Ruth Milkman highlights that “a 2011 Pew poll found that 49 percent of Millennials had a positive view of ‘socialism,’ nearly double the rate for Boomers (25 percent). The same poll found a substantial generation gap in attitudes about capitalism: 47 percent of Millennials expressed a negative view of capitalism, compared to 39 percent of Boomers” (6–7). She goes on to explain that “[t]his Millennial worldview synthesizes the identity politics associated with the New Left of the 1960s and the traditional critiques of class inequality and capitalism associated with the Old Left of the 1930s.” This counter-Reaganite view has, however, only been partially translated onto the big screen in blockbuster filmmaking. The analysis of the legacy of *The Dark Knight* briefly discussed the tenuous integration of Occupy Wall Street into the *The Dark Knight Rises*. What is still lacking is a blockbuster spectacle that celebrates these progressive views in the same way as *The Avengers* celebrates neoliberal capitalism, for example.

in all four movies). It is important to note that Hollywood filmmaking has a long history of providing escapist fare in times of economic hardship. Jonathan Derek Silver writes that “what explains [...] the slow but steady increase in annual admissions from 1934 during the height of the Great Depression until America’s entry into the war” is the fact that “Hollywood gave audiences escapist entertainment providing movies that allowed them to forget the harsh realities of their daily lives” (Silver). Film journalist Sean Hutchinson cites *Gone with the Wind* as a primary example of this: “The film became a kind of epic catharsis that allowed audiences to recontextualize the problems of the present directly through the country’s divided past” (Hutchinson). However, Hutchinson also points out that the first *Star Wars* movie was a game changer in both technological and narratological respects: “*Star Wars* took the escapism of the early century serials and used their plucky outlook to define a fresh sense of good vanquishing evil.” The critical observation here is that the escapism in *Star Wars* was formulated in a context that was characterized by an ideological pushback against the social progressive interventions of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the New Deal welfare state and associated Keynesianism of the mid-twentieth century. The reactionary discourses of this pushback came together in the form of Reaganism as a transformative ideology for the political consensus in the United States in the 1980s.

The analysis of *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* revealed how the restoration of the father and the anti-bureaucratic discourse are expressive of a reactionary cultural climate, despite the more liberal inclinations of filmmaker Steven Spielberg (Rogin, *Independence Day* 28; Wood 155–160).³²² This not only illustrates that it is not sufficient to explain blockbuster politics through an auteurist lens, but it also exemplifies how the blockbuster formula—pioneered by Lucas and Spielberg—was shaped by a reactionary incubation phase (Block and Wilson 506). Given the persistence of the culture wars, the “War on Terror,” and neo-liberalism as a mainstream economic consensus, blockbusters find themselves in contested terrains that call for the mitigation of political struggles that arose in response to economically and socially progressive changes in the twentieth century. Therefore, the Reagan era remains pivotal in the elucidation of the history of the ongoing blockbuster era. The links between escapism and white, male individualism repeatedly demonstrated echoes of a Reaganite pushback

322 Rogin summarizes that “George Lucas and Steven Spielberg may not have been Ronald Reagan’s political supporters, but they anticipated and participated in the Reagan counter-revolution” (*Independence Day* 28).

aesthetic, especially in *E.T.* and *The Avengers*, both movies which were released shortly after the height of climactic economic recessions. This formula had already been operative in *Rocky* (1976), which, according to Robin Wood, “was designed to reinstate: racism, sexism, ‘democratic’ capitalism” (147).

However, Wood’s contention that high-concept action movies must be “intellectually undemanding” in order to assuage the audience’s implicit demand to be constructed as children was not affirmed in the analysis of *The Dark Knight*. The film’s philosophical ambiguities and its interrogation of post-9/11 paranoia make it less easily digestible than the blockbusters of the Reagan era. The film’s lack of resolution and the confrontational complexity of the Joker open new avenues for discussing popular blockbusters as “spectacles of gloom” rather than “dramas of reassurance.” Martin Fradley channels the thoughts of Jacqueline Furby and Claire Hines on the *Dark Knight* trilogy when he writes that “it is precisely the films’ moral ambiguity that makes them so culturally potent. All three films in the trilogy stage anxieties about the appropriation of weapon technologies that cannot be simply reduced to Manichean deadlock” (19). An analysis of the post-9/11 repercussions in the *Star Wars* prequels, for example, could expand debates on how previously optimistic film franchises are being appropriated for the reflection of a new and more dire state of the nation (Stoklasa).³²³ In addition, disaster movies like *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and Al Gore’s blockbuster documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (2007) could provide fertile ground for investigating popular social critiques based on ecological concerns—which were merely tangential in the early days of the high-concept film era (Eskjær 336–346).³²⁴

323 In his online commentary video, “Mr. Plinkett’s The Star Wars Awakens Review,” Mike Stoklasa opines that “the Star Wars prequel trilogy is [...] the most entertaining lesson in civics ever given, specifically, the way it reveals how even a republic peopled by representative leaders with the best intentions can make decisions that result in disastrous policies, accompanied by devastation and the crumbling of great ideas” (Stoklasa).

324 In his article, “The Climate Catastrophe as a Blockbuster,” Mikkel Fugl Eskjær observes that “the 1970s disaster film was typically about man-made disasters such as runaway trains, blazing high-rises, periled airplanes, ocean liners turned upside down, an [*sic*] so on. In the 1990s, when the disaster film experienced a sort of revival, there was a shift toward natural hazards and disasters such as volcanoes, meteor impact, weird weather phenomena, pandemic threats, and so forth. Recently, the two tendencies have merged into a greater interest in man-made, or anthropogenic, natural disasters; what has elsewhere been called ‘(un)natural’ catastrophes” (340).

Ultimately, it is clear that both Reagan's political rhetoric and blockbuster movies have made ample use of escapism and the blurring of the line between "fiction" and "realities" in order to pursue neoliberal projects in times of heightened economic and cultural insecurity. Conservative rhetoric of the 1980s and blockbuster movies have continued to offer their respective audiences a cultural blueprint for imagined triumphalist pushback narratives that frequently combine formulaic tales of heroism with high-tech spectacles.

Implications for Blockbuster Movies as a Formula

As stated in Chapter 1, comprehensive definitions of the blockbuster movie as a specific mode of filmmaking are still rare and the few that have been put forward mostly rely on financial co-ordinates, such as budgeting or return on investment (Prince, *A New Pot of Gold* 19; 139–140). In comparison, the related term "high-concept film" has been more extensively classified (Prince, *A New Pot of Gold* 209–211; Jordan 63–73; McMahon 301–303). Whatever term is chosen, scholarship on this form of spectacle has hitherto lacked a multi-perspectival and diachronic investigation that yields insights into its correspondences with ideological and cultural metatexts and the permeating influence of Hollywood's fluctuating political economy. Reading these movies through a Reaganite lens has provided a coherent basis for situating blockbusters in film historical analyses of US-American popular culture since the 1970s. This is due not only to the fact that the spectacle of Reaganism began around the same time as the ascent of blockbuster filmmaking, but also to Reagan's own appropriation of cinematic terrains, not to mention his role in shaping the foundations of a corporatized Hollywood.

Against this backdrop, new landmark themes have come to the forefront in the analysis of these four movies: the restoration of the nation through unfettered neoliberal consumption, the assemblage of a countercultural and reactionary aesthetic, and a body politics in which technocapitalism and masculine "hard bodies" become increasingly intertwined. In addition, a stylistic element was identified in the analysis that has not received much attention in previous scholarship: the narratological privilege of the antagonist, who appears at the beginning of all four films.

In relation to the restoration of the father, it can be maintained that consumerism frequently serves as an initiation into mythical and conservative understandings of the nation. In *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial*, Elliott's first attempts to help the alien assimilate into its new surroundings involve Hasbro

toys and *Star Wars*-figures. Epistemologies of participation in the US-American national project are therefore pre-structured by the appropriation of a pop cultural language produced by neoliberal capitalism. This is unsurprising for a media spectacle that is immersed in a logic of consumerism. As Douglas Kellner notes, “the spectacular society spreads its wares mainly through the cultural mechanisms of leisure and consumption, services and entertainment, ruled by the dictates of advertising and a commercialized media culture” (*Media Spectacle* 3).

Yet, reading *E.T.* from a Reaganite perspective has revealed that the “invading Other” is not privy to the unifying popular language of consumer items. Often, the invaders are openly hostile to expressions of individualist consumerism. The agents in *E.T.* wear drab uniforms and offer the alien neither Reese’s Pieces nor action toys to establish a rapport. The aliens in *Independence Day* reside in dark, gloomy cubicles reminiscent of Soviet communist architecture—one of Reagan’s more prominent nightmare scenarios. In the end, a multicultural team exorcises the aliens with the help of Apple Notebooks and unregulated competition in the broadcasting sector. The Joker in *The Dark Knight* is not only rabidly anti-capitalist, but also demonstrably anti-consumerist. His punk-inspired outfit constitutes a conscious assault on societal dress conventions and a statement against the symbolic power of mass-produced items. Bruce Wayne/Batman, on the other hand, wears fine suits, is well known in the most expensive restaurants in the city, and uses smartphones and a state-of-the-art Batmobile to vanquish the anti-consumerist villain. In a similar fashion, Loki acts as a foil to Tony Stark in tone and style: Loki wears ancient clothing and speaks in an archaic and feudal language, whereas Stark performs within codes of recognizable mythical capitalism and “countercultural hipness.”

Ultimately, all of these antagonists seek to deprive the nation of “choice” in one way or another. In Reaganite rhetoric, the re-establishment of choice takes the form of mythical, masculine heroism. As Reagan states in his first inaugural address: “We have every right to dream heroic dreams.” The analysis affirms that such dreams go hand in hand with more consumption. The cultural-political binary of “Market and Capital” and “State and Power,” as defined by Johan Galtung (Galtung in Hammond 60–61), is a fundamental dynamic in blockbuster narratives, leading to recurrent struggles between “meritorious individuals” (Hammond 61) and forces bent on overturning capitalist success ethics (Jordan 71–73).

It would be interesting for future research to examine high-concept narratives that lambast consumerism and yet manage to retain their underlying logic as a commodity. *Fight Club* (1999) offers a compelling case study of such a movie,

as the narrator embodies both the middle-of-the-road protagonist and the anti-capitalist antagonist. After reasserting masculinity on anti-capitalist terms, the antagonist aims for a bigger revolution, but is ultimately cast aside. Another such narrative is the computer-animated Disney movie *The Incredibles* (2004), which contains a villain whose aim is to turn super-heroism itself into a mass-produced item. A whole superhero family sets out to protect its social distinction from becoming a marketable product. Elementary questions for subsequent analyses might be: How far can anti-consumerism go in blockbuster movies? How is the spectacle of anti-consumerism reintegrated into the blockbuster phenomenon? For a more contemporary look at anti-consumerist blockbuster spectacles, it might also be worthwhile examining Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013). As well as being among the top-grossing films in its year of release, it earned the distinction of being the most downloaded movie of 2014 (Spangler). The film's depiction of 1980s stockbrokers in New York City draws together unbridled greed, hedonism, and masculine competition. It would be worth examining the extent to which this depiction is more in keeping with contemporary fantasies of Wall Street in the 1980s than discourses that were in fact articulated during the Reagan era.

As regards the assemblage of reactionaryism and counterculture motifs, Kellner highlights the "hippie-ness" of classic Reaganite heroes such as Rambo:

Rambo has long hair, a headband, eats only natural foods (whereas the bureaucrat Murdock swills Coke), is close to nature, and is hostile toward bureaucracy, the state, and technology—precisely the position of many 1960s counterculturalists. This is an excellent example of how conservative ideologies are able to incorporate figures and fashion which neutralize and even reverse their original connotations as oppositional style and behavior. (*Media Culture* 65)

Kellner's observation can be expanded in light of my analysis. In addition to fashion items of the 1960s being appropriated for the exercise of conservative hegemony, feminist and anti-racist discourses are now a regular feature of the ideological vocabulary of Hollywood blockbusters. With the growing presence of racial diversity, gender equality, and LGBTQ identities in mass media in the United States, pre-existing counterculture "brands" have been subsumed by the same neoliberal consumption logic as previous manifestations of white, masculine, rugged individualism.

The blockbuster films in this analysis resolved the inherent tension between 1950s conservatism and 1960s progressivism through negotiations that parallel those of Reaganism: an emphasis on individualism and the negation of movement politics as a vehicle for social transformation. The individual expression

of an oppositional stance frequently takes the form of a fashion statement (e.g. Tony Stark's Black Sabbath shirt, the Joker's punk outfit), but it is never connected to a larger movement capable of changing society. Michael Rogin is correct in his assertion that Steve Hiller and David Levinson are evocative of the Black-Jewish alliance of the 1960s. However, unlike the 1960s, there is no larger Black-Jewish movement on the ground that demands tangible changes in the political and economic realities of the nation. Marginalized identities appear as a function of the individual and have no ultimate bearing on the basic core of the nation, which is confirmed to be a white, male capitalist core in all four movies. The apparent depoliticization of countercultural politics and their integration into a neoliberal logic result in transformative pro-corporate projects that can be sold to both conservative and liberal audiences under the banner of "individual choice."

In this context, it would be vital to examine blockbuster movies with a clear emphasis on oppositional movement politics. Their portrayals of desired social and economic change, in particular, could shed further light on the contours of "multicultural neoliberalism" and the renegotiation of progressive discourses for a broader, global audience. The highly acclaimed *Selma* (2014) by Ava DuVernay would constitute an interesting subject for the investigation of the portrayal of 1960s protest politics in contemporary times.

As for the intertwining of global technocapitalism and masculine "hard bodies," the analysis has brought various contradictions to light. Luiz Suarez-Villa explains that post-industrial technocapitalism is characterized by new modes of corporate expansion and the monopolization of information and knowledge. These new forms of capital accumulation come up against the established barriers of the national, cultural, and economic spheres. Kellner has argued that global tech corporations will resolve the underlying conflict of "Jihad vs McWorld" (Barber) on their own terms:

The emerging postindustrial form of technocapitalism is characterized by a decline of the state and enlarged power for the market, accompanied by the growing strength of transnational corporations and governmental bodies and the decreased strength of the nation-state and its institutions. (*Media Spectacle* 11)

In view of this, I have outlined how clashes between transnational technocapitalism and epistemologies of local community are mediated within Hollywood spectacles. Frequently, the exercise of technological strength was tied to two types of bodies: an individual, heterosexual, masculine body (*E.T.* and *The Dark Knight*) and imaginations of a more fluctuating and comparably

inclusive national body in which post-ideological “rainbow alliances” participate in the construction of hyper-masculine national strength to defeat a feminized, invading Other (*Independence Day* and *The Avengers*).

By interpreting these aspects through a Reaganite lens, it is clear that fears concerning corporate globalization were transformed into spectacles of masculine and national reassertion—with the help of the same technologies that fuel such globalization. Global technocapitalism was consistently linked to the proper exercise of masculinity, suggesting a sense of mythical potency behind neoliberal consumption. The most notable exception is the Joker, who purposefully merges his frightening bodily appearance with modern communication technologies, amplified by multiple news screens across the city. While this exhibits the eminent contradictions of technocapitalist progress, it also introduces the question of “who” should rightly possess access to ultimate technological power. This question is repeatedly answered in favor of heterosexist “hard bodies” in all four movies. In parallel to Reagan’s justifications for the SDI program or the assuaging of nuclear anxieties through religious symbolism, technological progress is shown to be safe in the hands of white, male capitalism.

However, certain doubts concerning globalization and its effect on the “symbolic father” were also discernible. In *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial*, the kids mourn their abandonment by their father, who now resides in Mexico. The aliens in *Independence Day* use global satellite dishes against humanity. In *The Dark Knight*, district attorney Harvey Dent advises mafia boss Sal Maroni to “buy American” after disarming him in court. The World Supreme Council in *The Avengers* wrongly decides to launch a missile at Manhattan—a wrong that is ultimately righted by New York City’s most prominent inhabitant, Tony Stark. Evidently, the internal contradictions of global capitalism in the negotiation of the local versus the universal can be aptly described as a constituent feature of twenty-first-century Hollywood entertainment. Additional phenomenological research into the transnational effects of blockbusters could yield further insights into the effectiveness of these mediatory models in different markets. Whether these blockbusters were conceived in Hollywood’s oligopoly or not is of little consequence as their global production and distribution has turned them into veritable transnational ventures (Scott, “Hollywood and the world” 57). How these projects are received globally is a question that can shed light on cultural resistance or appropriation on the part of audiences (McQuail 238).³²⁵ It remains to be seen whether motion picture production will be further divided

325 Denis McQuail puts forward the notion that “media may be a necessary, but are unlikely to be a sufficient, condition for cultural resistance or submission” (238).

into globalized, big-budget productions and local, independent productions, as Allen J. Scott argues (“A New Map of Hollywood” 2).

A central stylistic observation was the early introduction of antagonists in the narrative structures of the four films. This is a very conventional approach in storytelling, common in crime fiction, in which the villain is necessary to kick-start the narrative. However, in light of the Reaganite reading of blockbusters, this narrative feature acquires a new dimension. All of these movies present stories of reaction against already-active intruders. In all cases, forces of evil are potent enough to disrupt a US-American idyll. Coupled with the fact that none of the analyzed protagonists radically transform their societies in the end, the overall restorative character of these films clearly works in tandem with this textual patterning. The invasion by the Other does not spark emancipatory transformation, but rather a defense of established hierarchies.

In his discussion of spectacle and narrative in blockbuster cinema, Erend Lavik explains that blockbusters are characterized by large-scale attractions, which “are awkward stopovers around which it is the task of the screenwriter to construct some story; small-scale attractions, by contrast, are simply the visible parts of some hidden structure that allows the auteur to discover or reconstruct the story” (149). Thus, the large-scale attraction merely serves as a springboard for the creation of attention-grabbing cinematic narratives. However, the large-scale attraction is instantly aligned with marketable conflicts that can be exploited in synergistic ways. David Bordwell echoes the thoughts of an indie producer-writer, who has argued that “action pictures like *Volcano* (1997) and *Independence Day* (1996) don’t need classical narrative construction because their narratives will be ‘fragmented’ into CD soundtracks and T-shirt logos. “The supposed “identity” of the filmic text comes increasingly under the dissolving pressures of its various revenue streams” (5). However, in my analyses, the opening scenes were all shown to pre-textualize the spectacle in accessible and binary ways. For instance, menacing government jeeps arrive in the forest, scaring the clearly innocuous E.T. away. In *ID4*, the flag of the United States at the Moon base is cast in shadow by the arriving aliens. The Joker openly declares his disdain for societal conventions when he kills a

However, questions of the political economy and ownership of resisting media have now been significantly altered in light of digitalization and increased self-production around the globe. Against this backdrop, resistance in popular culture is experiencing a tremendous realignment, which poses a serious challenge to the usually risk-averse corporate capitalism.

bank clerk and Loki openly states his desire to subjugate Earth when seizing the Tesseract. By viewing these films through a Reaganite lens, a series of pre-existing juxtapositions inherited from the Cold War and the culture wars were uncovered.

While plenty of action blockbusters contain villains, who arrive much later (e.g. *Die Hard*, *Jurassic Park*, the *Indiana Jones* movies), it is still notable that all of the analyzed movies begin “in medias res.” This offers insights into the narratological proximity of blockbuster movies to classic forms of storytelling, such as the ancient Greek epic as a pre-modern form of spectacle narration.³²⁶ This runs parallel to Reagan’s 1980 claims that the United States was a nation in crisis that needed to be rejuvenated; after all, his campaign slogan was “Let’s Make America Great *Again*.” The narrative starting point of decline is evident in much of Reagan’s campaign rhetoric in 1980—a time when political, cultural, and cinematic fantasies of restoration were in high demand among white mainstream society. This interweaving of the logic of modern mass spectacle with both politics and pop culture has arguably accelerated in recent years. Therefore, the next section will elucidate a few major developments against the backdrop of the Reagan legacy, the culture wars, and the growing presence of celebrity-based political spectacles. All of these developments mirror cinematic spectacles in critical ways, which underlines the potency of blockbusters in creating a common vocabulary in times of increased cultural fragmentation and polarization.

From Ronald to Donald: When Blockbuster Logic Meets Political Spectacles

Why not an actor? We’ve had a clown for four years.

— *Anti-Carter sign at the Republican National Convention in 1980*

As outlined in the introduction, one of the primary goals of the analysis was to determine the correspondences between the blockbuster formula and the legacy

326 In his book *The Epic in Film: From Myth to Blockbuster*, Constantine Santas offers a definition of epics that accords with the basic narrative outlines of blockbuster movies: “[E]pics can be seen as the embodiments of collective myths and symbols that enable a society to establish its own identity and face its severest tests [...] the epic film can be seen as an embodiment of aspirations, hopes, fears and other collective emotions and feelings [of a society]” (Santas 2; Sturtevant 111). Paul B. Sturtevant adds that while the content of epic storytelling might change, its fundamental form has survived from antiquity to today (126).

of Reaganism in politics and mass media. This final discussion will therefore take a concluding look at the ramifications of the “Reagan myth” in conjunction with pop culture narratives of heroism. It will further situate the thematic insights gained from the analysis in the larger contexts of the culture wars and global identity politics. These threads will converge in an assessment of the role of pop culture technospectacles in shaping current political discourses in the United States. The emergence of the “Trump phenomenon” is of distinct interest here, as it exhibits a visceral combination of spectacle logic and a racist “hard-body” jingoism inflected by numerous national myths—Ronald Reagan’s election success in 1980 constitutes a historical blueprint for this phenomenon.

The legacy of the first actor-president in the White House continues to reverberate in discussions across the political spectrum in the United States. In his book *Tear Down This Myth—The Right-Wing Distortion of the Reagan Legacy*, author and journalist Will Bunch chronicles the deliberate construction of a multi-million-dollar “mythmaking industry” around the former president, which began after the lavish Reagan funeral in 2004 and was amplified after the economic meltdown of the late 2000s (198–207). Bunch offers a succinct summary of these right-wing fantasies in a passage in which he quotes Republican candidate Rudy Giuliani’s claims regarding Reagan’s alleged foreign-policy fortitude:

Asked about Iran’s reported push to develop nuclear weapons in the late 2000s under its radical president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Giuliani said that the current Iranian president “has to look at an American president and he has to see Ronald Reagan. Remember, they looked in Ronald Reagan’s eyes, and in two minutes, they released the hostages.” He made it sound like a standoff scene from an old Western, the kind that was in vogue when Reagan himself had arrived in Hollywood in the 1930s. And just like in the movies, the scene that Giuliani imagined with Reagan and the Iranians had never really happened. But increasingly, that didn’t seem to matter. (6–7)

In this passage, Bunch rightly points to a fantasy-driven fairy tale that connects more strongly with Reagan’s acting days than his actual presidency. Giuliani’s statement perfectly illustrates how the first actor-president is mainly re-narrated through the lens of cinematic spectacle and Hollywood mythologies. Within the context of the late 2000s, the recourse to an imaginary Ronald Reagan had become more in vogue. This is unsurprising given that the nation was reeling from a tremendous recession and widespread sentiments that imperialist ventures in the Middle East had not reaffirmed the national “hard body,” but rather exposed its vulnerabilities. Against this backdrop, Giuliani’s attempt to introduce a “mythical role model” for resolving contemporary political crises may appear questionable from a historical standpoint. Nevertheless,

he articulates a spectacle-based pushback narrative that is informed by the same sub-textual desires that were present in the analyzed movies: a cinematic, Western-style stand-off against the “irrational Other,” in which dominant masculinity is achieved through the celebration of conservative aesthetics in conjunction with futuristic high-tech capabilities.

In reading the Reagan presidency through a cinematic lens, both Giuliani and Bunch offer the mirror image of my discussions, which were based on reading cinematic spectacles through a Reaganite lens.³²⁷ Through both approaches, it can be ascertained that the logic of the spectacle can create blockbuster effects in which national discourses are structured within a recognizable pop culture language of images. These images are designed to cater to the audience’s viewing pleasure, with the result that they generally reinforce pre-existing assumptions rather than challenge cultural hegemonies in relation to race, class, and gender. After all, the risk-averse structure of Hollywood is more geared toward rightly identifying consumer trends than carving out new markets from scratch (Davis et al. 105–126).

Thus, the examination of the production background of Hollywood blockbusters has resulted in critical insights for the investigation of ideological trajectories in filmic texts. These examinations have underscored that, just like Giuliani, Hollywood producers and directors rely on carefully crafted brands to cater to their target audiences. These brands can take the form of popular actors with significant star power (e.g. Will Smith in *ID4*), revolutionary new technologies (such as the THX sound system used in *E.T.*), or well-known comic-book heroes (as in *The Avengers*). As Georg Franck notes, the neoliberal spectacle is characterized by a general trend toward monopolizing attention. Therefore, the spectacle represents a form of capital in a complex information society (1–19).³²⁸ This cannot be achieved without effective branding. The deliberate recourse to brands that already inhabit both a pop cultural and a political space is, therefore, a rational strategy for achieving a blockbuster effect in a fragmented societal landscape. Reagan constitutes just such a brand as the pop cultural associations with his portrayal of the “Western hero” can always be utilized to

327 As stated in Chapter 1, Douglas Kellner outlines that a key feature of the diagnostic critique is to use “history to read texts and texts to read history” (*Media Culture* 116). The bi-directional reading of texts such as the “Reagan presidency” or blockbuster spectacles helps to illuminate mythical distortions and obfuscations as distinct narrative and ideological formulas can be extracted.

328 Franck explains that “[c]elebrities are the new class of super-rich who live on the social product of attention, as channelled and redistributed by the mass media” (6).

reframe his presidency. Therefore, reading the Reagan persona within film historical parameters explains his increased currency at a time when the spectacle is becoming more and more important.

Moreover, the implications for Reagan mythology transcend the traditional Republican clientele. When running for the Democratic nomination in 2008, then-senator Barack Obama outlined his own thoughts on the fortieth president as follows:

Ronald Reagan changed the trajectory of America in a way that Richard Nixon did not, and a way that Bill Clinton did not [...] we want clarity, we want optimism, we want a return to that sense of dynamism and entrepreneurship that had been missing. (Bunch 21)

This exemplifies how Barthes' notion that myth is primarily a way of talking about things holds true when examining the Reagan legacy. Obama's choice of words indicates his familiarity with the prerogative of the "politics of image and style" and his awareness of the continued resonance of Reagan's perceived positive aura with a large part of the (white and male) electorate. According to John Freie's analysis of the postmodern presidency, this focus on compelling viewable pleasure facilitates the pursuit of political projects that are disconnected from public mandate (Freie 19).³²⁹

This conclusion makes it possible to embed blockbusters in a larger metatext of post-industrial collective wish fulfillment in which the circulation of spectacular imagery narrates dynamism and social mobility in a time of growing inequality and economic stagnation. Technospectacles are increasingly capable of creating their own realities through immersive epistemologies of language, imagery, and consumption. This development is catalyzed by new forms of multi-platform distribution, ranging from cineplexes to smartphone apps that allow users to learn the Klingon language.³³⁰ This makes the dismantling of

329 John Freie recounts an anecdote in which CBS correspondent Leslie Stahl ran a TV news story with "pictures of Reagan visiting homeless shelters, glad-handing African-Americans and interacting with schoolchildren." The news segment was accompanied by a sharply critical voice-over, which highlighted Reagan's slashing of social programs, opposition to affirmative action, and cutting of school funds. Yet, staffers at the Reagan White House called Stahl the next day to thank her for the report. Their response was that "people don't listen to the news, they watch it and she had provided the White House with 'golden images' which they couldn't have produced better had they done it themselves" (19).

330 "KlingonWiki: Klingon Apps." Accessed December 9, 2018: <<http://www.klingonwiki.net/En/Apps>>.

mythical images more complex, as counter-narratives need to compete with the attention monopolies created by corporate ownership.

The reduction of complex socio-cultural conflicts to simplified tales is by no means a new strategy in the larger history of media spectacles. Yet, the largely deregulated corporatized landscape has notably reflected global shifts toward digitalization and individualized visual consumption, which have increased the need for simplification as a counter-reaction and made it more difficult to subject the circulating mystic signifiers to effective scrutiny (Barthes 137–138). This is exemplified in contemporary debates regarding the Reagan legacy in the GOP (and beyond). Numerous commentators and political analysts attempt to deconstruct the Reagan mythology by focusing on the “full signifier” in the Barthesian sense (127). For instance, in his article on “The Reagan Obsession,” Mike Young rightly highlights a general pattern of inflationary lionization:

If he were a candidate today, Reagan would almost undoubtedly be vilified by the Tea Party and fail some of the most important Republican litmus tests. [...] Maybe he would succeed in communicating in a way that would make Republicans look past his record, but that seems to be the only chance he would really have. He may have been a Republican icon in his day, but if you took Reagan then and brought him into now, he could really only play one on TV.³³¹

The final words of this conclusion are key: “he could really only play one on TV.” What the analyses of blockbuster movies have repeatedly confirmed is that there is ample demand for “viewing” the optimistic reassertion of the nation, “viewing” the entertaining performance of a masculine hard body, and participating in collective fantasies of high-tech modernity. This demand cuts across party lines and across the globe. The fact that Reagan effectively fulfilled the “role of the conservative politician” is what manifestly satisfies the desires of large segments of his right-wing audience. There is now significant evidence to suggest that long-lasting cultural transformations require the effective visualization of mythical imageries through a media-savvy delivery (e.g. through a former actor or TV celebrity). Factual policies often retreat into the discursive background. The repeated circulation of these popular (and thereby profitable) images leads to the cementing of the underlying narratives in public discourse (Lakoff, *Thinking Points* 37). Counter-narratives to these myths need

331 Mike Young, “The Ronald Reagan Obsession: Making of a Myth,” mic.com (February 3, 2013). Accessed December 19, 2018: <<https://mic.com/articles/25187/the-ronald-reagan-obsession-making-of-a-myth#.V4bZtcY7w>>.

to compete within an attention economy that privileges easy shareability and replication and is more fragmented (Barthes 138–139).

The effective delivery of a visual mythology represents a malleable ideological toolbox that transcends party lines. In this sense, the spectacle of the Reagan presidency can be seen as a blueprint for a larger cultural and political transformation achieved through the proficient use cinematic narrative. This argument is strengthened by the fact that, over the last 40 years, no president other than Reagan has managed to secure his legacy by passing the torch to a like-minded successor.³³² And even though Bill Clinton and Barack Obama took notes from Reagan's playbook in relation to cultivating political celebrity status, neither one effectuated a realignment that departed from the post-Reagan neoliberal consensus. In fact, it can be reasonably argued that the opposite is true. In his assessment of Obama's presidency, Ramesh Ponnuru maintains that "at no point in Obama's presidency did his political success make Republicans consider assimilating some of his views into their philosophy, as Bill Clinton had done with Reaganism. Republicans are even less likely to make such an adjustment now."³³³ This observation adds to the notion that first-hand proficiency in the logic of the contemporary cinematic and TV spectacle is a unique advantage when creating long-lasting cultural and political blockbuster effects.

The confluence of technological, cultural, and political transformations is also exemplified by the ongoing culture wars. This set of social struggles reverberates in cultural productions as well as political rhetoric, which puts this analysis right on the "front lines." As outlined in the introduction, the current culture wars began in the 1970s, when reactionary forces sought to "roll back the clock" in the face of socially progressive movements. Kellner states that "[t]he conservative counterrevolution became hegemonic in the U.S. with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980" (*Media Culture* 18) and that "sexual politics" (102) remains the principal dividing line in the resulting societal conflicts. In this book, I set out to determine the power dynamics of conflicting ideological positions from a narrative and stylistic perspective. By considering these dynamics in relation to right-wing rhetoric and the themes of Reagan-era cinema, their functioning within the culture wars was ascertained.

332 With the election of George H.W. Bush in 1988. This was the first time two different presidents from the same party were elected in a row since Harry S. Truman succeeded Franklin D. Roosevelt.

333 Ramesh Ponnuru, "Obama Was Not the Left's Reagan," *National Review* (January 19, 2017). Accessed November 1, 2018: <<https://www.nationalreview.com/2017/01/president-obama-legacy-not-liberal-reagan/>>.

In the analyses, it became manifest that the questions of who belongs to the family and what attributes the ideal US-American body should possess were both answered in ways that were reconcilable with the general trajectories of Reaganite neoliberalism and neoconservatism and encumbered by a drive to validate a certain measure of pluralism. By applying Lakoff's "strict father" model to these inquiries, the underlying tendencies toward conservative restorations of the family were made visible. However, these restorations remain "bi-conceptual" (Lakoff, *Thinking Points* 14–15) to a degree, as they pay homage to public imaginations of social progress through representation. Examples of this include the female aide to the president in the White House, the African-American CEO for Wayne Enterprises, and the hard-working single mother raising three kids in suburbia. In the context of debates surrounding "family values," this bi-conceptualism appears not so much as a "middle position," but rather as a straightforward reflection of cultural dilemmas that individuals must constantly negotiate. Irene Taviss Thomson refers to the pop culture examples of "Ozzie & Harriet" and "Murphy Brown" when explaining that unmitigated ideological purism regarding cultural issues is not prevalent:

Americans appear to manifest both a center-seeking tendency and strong ambivalence about culture war issues. Divisions between those who side with Ozzie and Harriet images of family life and those who align with Murphy Brown, for example, "do not take place between camps of people; instead, they take place within most individuals." [...] Since traditional values and the quest for self-realization may dictate contradictory behaviors, it is no wonder that Americans may experience conflicts over culture war issues and may simultaneously embrace both sides of the debate. (7)

It be inferred here that neither the widespread conservative assumption of a "liberal Hollywood" nor a coherent mode of reactionary cultural mass production can be attached to the blockbuster movies I have analyzed. Instead, it would be more accurate to state that these cultural fantasies tap into a larger national subconscious by reworking pre-existing myths into the resolution of contemporary struggles. For instance, the role of religion is manifest in all four movies without ever being made explicit. *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* contains elements of a Christian parable, including a resurrection scene and the performance of miracles—all in order to reconcile a white suburban family and validate its success against an intruding "big government." Both *Independence Day* and *The Avengers* include references to religion to stake out how the "good ones" differ from the invading Other (Julius Levinson invites random people at Area 51 to join in a Jewish prayer before the final battle; Natasha Romanoff is visually connected to church paintings during her first appearance). While these

elements may not be enough to persuade right-wing evangelicals to view these films in a positive light, they do calibrate cinematic imaginations of the role of religion in the public sphere. These movies leave room for “Judeo-Christian” symbolism at critical moments and thereby present a means of distinguishing between the United States and the Other.

The impact of continued debates regarding reproductive rights in blockbuster movies constitutes a highly relevant subject for further discussion. Susan Jeffords’ notion of the “hard vs soft body” facilitates discussions of agency with regard to feminized bodies in pop culture fiction. The interrelationship between neoliberal capitalism, with its emphasis on individual choice, and the performance of the masculine “hard body” is especially likely to produce contradictions in this regard. For example, the “indie blockbuster” *Juno* (2007) offers an ambiguous and yet probing exploration of this issue that proved compatible with its mainly liberal audience and with the box office. However, it remains to be seen how major Hollywood blockbusters respond to these ongoing frictions. Further analyses could approach this topic by examining the control of female sexual desire from a psychoanalytical angle, for example. The feminization of the Tesseract in *The Avengers* constitutes a possible starting point for examining how the policing of female bodies through masculine authority remains a staple in contemporary Hollywood.³³⁴

The far-reaching and complex correspondences between blockbuster filmmaking and cultural transformations have also manifested themselves in the engulfment of political spectacle in “celebrity logic.” This trend has notably accelerated in recent years, with increasingly high-profile pop culture figures running for public office. Any thorough analysis of celebrity politics in the United States will greatly benefit from taking a closer look at Hollywood blockbuster culture and Reagan’s public persona.

Douglas Kellner argues that the media spectacle is frequently employed in politics to direct public discourses into avenues that privilege style over substance (“Barack Obama and Celebrity Spectacle” 121–123). He affirms that it is vital for an informed public “to learn to deconstruct the spectacle to see what are the real issues behind the election, what interests and ideology do the candidates represent, and what sort of spin, narrative, and media spectacles are being used to sell candidates” (“Barack Obama and Celebrity Spectacle”

334 In the opening scenes, when Nick Fury demands an explanation regarding the happenings in the SHIELD research laboratory, Dr. Erik Selvig elaborates that “[t]he Tesseract is not only active, she’s ... misbehaving.”

138). Kellner rightly points out that the spectacle remains a tool for mediating societal conflicts, aspirations, and grievances. However, recent scholarship is increasingly undecided on the question of whether a “style-versus-substance” paradigm should be the primary lens for understanding the recent trend of celebrity candidates, who frequently assume the mantle of a populist rejection of an established political class. Throughout the analysis, I have illustrated how pop culture spectacles serve as a release valve for societal tensions. These conflicts are not only mythically resolved on celluloid, but also put into a narratable form. The cross-media dissemination of such tales facilitates the spread of a pervasive vocabulary with which public debates can be made more accessible and emotionally engaging. Blockbusters were shown to combine different ideological and cultural elements to form succinct high-concept scenarios. The relatability of these audiovisual dramas provides opportunities to channel grievances in an emotionally resonant way. This, in turn, creates new forms of social disruption at a time when the neoliberal consensus among major parties seems unshakeable.

In his article on the “Democratic Worth of Celebrity Politics in an Era of Late Modernity,” Martin Wheeler summarizes the thoughts of John Keane, who has argued that new communication technologies can add to a kind of “Monitory Democracy” in which ordinary citizens can form “bully pulpits.” These highly personal forms of voicing dissent are characterized by a post-modern fragmentation in which “there exist ‘One person, many interests, many voices, multiple votes and multiple representatives’” (Keane in Wheeler 415). Accordingly, “celebrity politics may be seen to enhance democratic processes that are no longer defined by ‘interest aggregation on the input side of politics; but rather with the organisation of “voice” and accountability on the output side’” (Wheeler 415).

However, the analyses of the political economy of Hollywood has affirmed that the construction of a blockbuster effect across multiple platforms relies heavily on what Barthes calls “the quantification of quality” (154–155). Carefully crafted market research was pivotal to all of the movies analyzed in this book; none of them became blockbusters by accident or by unexpectedly uncovering a dormant potential. On the contrary, the role of focus groups, surveys, location scouting, extensive market research, and test screenings exemplified that these were finely engineered media spectacles, ready-made for consumption. Examining the legacy and industry repercussions of these films provided insights into how production companies were guided by “best-practice” examples to ensure even greater financial success for the next blockbuster

franchise. This strategy is now paying off for the corporatized Hollywood oligopoly in the form of ever-rising revenues across the globe.

Even though unexpected political celebrity status can more easily arise in today's digitalized media landscape, corporate capitalism wields the research tools and distribution mechanics to reproduce spectacles at an increasing rate. As the preceding discussion of the Reagan mythology has shown, the reproduction of pop culture spectacles that cater to the same narratological and ideological lexicon has a profound role in co-creating a climate in which larger cultural and political transformations take place.

It is also imperative to note that established notions of gender, race, and class hierarchies are central to any social constructions of political stardom. The main protagonists in the analyzed blockbusters performed within the parameters of normative, white, middle-class masculinity (*E.T.*, *The Dark Knight*, *The Avengers*)³³⁵ or were immersed in the myths of white male dominance (e.g. the Hiller–Levinson duo in *Independence Day*). This reflects the persistence of discourses on social hierarchies, which implicitly circumscribe which kinds of “celebrity” status are attainable, how they can be attained, and who can attain them. Liesbet van Zoonen describes how the attainment of “celebrity status” remains a highly gendered affair:

The Hollywood star system is commonly seen as the historical source of celebrity culture. Biographies of stars and histories of studios have shown how Hollywood tried to transfer movie codes of masculinity and femininity onto male and female actors and their real lives (Dyer, 1979). [...] ‘celebrity’ is built structurally on the confluence of media appearance with the real lives of performers. As a result, female celebrity is articulated primarily with the codes and conventions of media representations of women. (219)

The gendered nature of celebrity has direct implications for the effectuation of political change through spectacle. If politics is increasingly articulated through spectacle (as Kellner maintains), then the voices of marginalized and structurally disadvantaged groups might be severely diminished—or pre-altered by media conventions established by highly concentrated conglomerates. Consequently, it would be worthwhile for future research to further disassemble media narratives of mythical political heroism from an intersectional perspective. Preliminary evidence suggests that the term “populism” needs to

335 Tony Stark may not be “middle-class” in the strict sense of the word, but his character analysis has demonstrated that he can effectively perform within a middle-class habitus. Bruce Wayne is publicly known to be a billionaire, but the Batman isn't. In fact, he is described as an “ordinary citizen” by Harvey Dent.

be disentangled from celebrity politics, as celebrity status is highly dependent on codes of social privilege.

Thus, it becomes important to interrogate so-called “populist” spectacles, such as the rise of Donald Trump (Kellner, *American Horror Show* 123–158), but also the electoral successes of racist and far-right demagogues in Europe, Brazil, and many other corners of the world. These self-appointed “Tribunes of the Plebs” are united in that most of them do not come from the economic, spatial, racial, or gendered margins of their respective societies (Frank). In an opinion piece for the magazine *Politico*, Amy Chua points out that “for millions of lower-income Americans, Trump has done a remarkable job presenting himself as being on their team, creating a tribal bond between a celebrity billionaire and blue-collar voters, while excluding the ‘elites’ in the middle.”³³⁶ The key phrase here is “presenting himself” as it highlights the relevance of telegenic narrative and mastery of modern forms of spectacle (including proficiency with digital platforms). Scholars and political commentators have already discussed how the construction of an overriding public persona can eclipse counter-mythical narratives using pop cultural powers of persuasion. What needs to be dissected in more detail is how the formats and aesthetics of mass popular culture contribute to the construction of a common political vernacular that cements the seemingly counterintuitive tribal bonds that Chua describes.³³⁷

In my analyses, the diachronic analysis of recurrent blockbuster themes inherited from the Reagan era points toward the establishment of specific fantasies of conflict resolution in which an entrenched political class needs to make way for a resurgent, hyper-masculine “common man” while keeping entrepreneurial and free-market myths intact. The examination of the repercussions of blockbuster spectacles has uncovered how multi-channel distribution and merchandise facilitate the emergence of worldwide “communities of consumption”

336 Chua, Amy, “How Billionaires Learned to Love Populism,” *Politico* (March 4, 2018). Accessed November 3, 2018: <<https://www.politico.eu/article/how-wealthy-elite-billionaires-donald-trump-learned-to-love-populism-politics/>>

337 Anthony Kaufman describes this theme of “upper class insurgency” in his review of *The Avengers*: “This myth of the renegade outsider is all over the ‘The Avengers,’ but the irony, of course, is that they are the ultimate insiders. Like any number of political candidates who present themselves as outside the beltway [...], ‘The Avengers’ have money, strength, good looks and unlimited power” (“The Politics of ‘The Avengers’; Or, Can Clean Energy and Old-Fashioned Jingoism Mix?” *IndieWire* (May 7, 2012). Accessed September 27, 2018: <<https://www.indiewire.com/2012/05/the-politics-of-the-avengers-or-can-clean-energy-and-old-fashioned-jingoism-mix-233479/>>).

immersed in the visual language of the respective movies. These trajectories make it clear that blockbuster culture plays a part in visually channeling societal frustrations into spectacles of insurgency against an intellectual professional class, but not against the accumulation of obscene amounts of capital (as in *The Dark Knight* or *The Avengers*).³³⁸

It may be worthwhile for further research on the connection between popular culture and “populisms” to incorporate Barbara and John Ehrenreich’s concept of the “Professional Managerial Class” (PMC) in potential analyses (Ehrenreich 5–45; Ortner 99–100). Mass cultural productions with global appeal can provide critical insights into fractioning and realignments within the PMC. Due to the corporate-owned structure of mass media, internal conflicts in corporate capitalism are bound to find themselves represented in pop culture spectacles. There is considerable reason to believe that the “Trump phenomenon” is expressive of such a transformation. For instance, historians generally agree that Ronald Reagan assisted in visually cementing a similar shift within the Republican Party, when the affluent and New Deal-oriented Rockefeller wing of the GOP was minimized in favor of a more pro-corporate and Sun Belt-oriented hard-right course (Troy, *The Reagan Revolution* 39–44).

It is important so stress that neither Reagan nor Trump kick-started white middle-class resentments toward governmental bureaucracy, intellectual establishments, or racialized communities. Yet, they both constitute significant public mediators for the restoration of more openly racist and chauvinistic political tendencies. This mediation is structured by their effective use of a pop culture–inflected language and persona, which illustrates the key role of cinematic and TV imagination. As this analysis has demonstrated, Hollywood blockbuster imagery provides a highly pervasive and emotionally charged language of pop culture mythologies that transcends national borders and social communities on a massive scale. Performing within this kind of language provides access to an increasing number of disaffected voters and non-voters. Journalist Glenn Greenwald summarizes the political currency of these “blockbuster effects”:

338 Amy Chua goes on to state that “[f]or the billionaire populist, being rich isn’t a handicap. It can even be an asset. Research shows that in America, white working-class resentment against elites is often directed much more against professionals—lawyers, doctors, professors, establishment politicians, even journalists—than against the mega wealthy” (Chua). Her observations align with Bourdieu’s theses on the fractioning of the bourgeoisie in the world of commerce versus the world of art (Ortner 99–100).

Professional political analysts have underestimated Trump's impact by failing to take into account his massive, long-standing cultural celebrity, which commands the attention of large numbers of Americans who usually ignore politics (which happens to be the majority of the population), which in turn generates enormous, highly charged crowds pulsating with grievance and rage.³³⁹

Blockbuster spectacles have tremendous cultural and political currency and their role in reflecting and catalyzing social transformations cannot be underestimated.

A closer and final look at the Trump spectacle reveals how the blockbuster mode of monopolizing attention and encapsulating societal struggles in a vociferous way is very much operative in today's political landscape. As previously noted in this book, such spectacles are usually the result of years of meticulous brand building and cross-media storytelling. For instance, Donald Trump first became publicly visible during the Reagan era as a self-styled "real estate mogul," who embodied a narcissist mode of hyper-affluent consumerist hedonism. His persona clearly paralleled the materialism epitomized by the character Gordon Gekko in the movie *Wall Street* (1987). After a series of business failures, he calibrated his personal brand to become a producer and host of the reality TV show *The Apprentice*. This renewed pop culture exposure gave this seemingly washed-up 1980s icon a platform to promote his brand among newer and wider audiences. The longevity of *The Apprentice* (which he hosted on NBC from 2004 until 2015) firmly cemented Trump's celebrity status across the United States and around the globe. This was coupled with reality TV's oeuvre of bite-sized, Internet-ready mini-spectacles. It is curious that a man whose businesses were declared bankrupt five times played a seasoned entrepreneur on television. This revived celebrity status became the staging ground for a string of subsequent media and election spectacles replete with openly racist, sexist, nativist, and hyper-capitalist language.

The impact of Reaganism on the "rise of Trump" could be summarized as follows: Ronald Reagan helped to deregulate the media and entertainment business in the early 1970s as Governor of California (Jordan 32). This deregulation led to the rise of cable TV across the nation in the late 1970s (Jordan 33). The early success of cable TV resulted in the formation of MTV as a

339 Glenn Greenwald, "Donald Trump's 'Ban Muslims' Proposal Is Wildly Dangerous But Not Far Outside the U.S. Mainstream," *The Intercept* (December 8, 2015). Accessed November 3, 2018: <<https://theintercept.com/2015/12/08/donald-trumps-ban-muslims-proposal-is-wildly-dangerous-but-not-far-outside-the-u-s-mainstream/>>.

groundbreakingly new entertainment venue (Jordan, 102–103). MTV catalyzed the reality TV formula in the 1990s and 2000s, starting with shows like *The Real World* (Andrejevich in S. Jones, “MTV: The Medium was the Message” 87).³⁴⁰ The financial success of reality TV shows led to the creation of *The Apprentice* by NBC in 2004. And *The Apprentice* ensured that Trump remained a staple in popular culture in the United States up until his presidential bid in 2015. Of course, such a brief genealogy is too reductionist and limited. However, this overview reveals that a look back at the cultural and ideological shifts of the 1970s and 1980s can help to contextualize contemporary mass spectacles. In many ways, when comparing Reagan to Trump, such spectacles seem to have come full circle.

There is a considerable ideological overlap between Reagan’s and Trump’s stated policies and the foci of their tales of supposed “national rejuvenation.” Both made space a prominent canvass for their fantasies of high-tech saber-rattling: Reagan with his SDI program and Trump with his proposals for a “United States Space Force” (Kluger). Both peddled stories of previous national decline that could allegedly be reversed through the unleashing of imagined white, male muscle-flexing. Tom Engelhardt explains in his article on Trump’s infamous 2016 campaign slogan “Make America Great Again” that the New York billionaire “is the first person to run openly and without apology on a platform of American decline.”³⁴¹ However, Engelhardt goes on to state that the most recent notable precedent for this type of discourse is found in Reagan’s own political speech: “That note of defensiveness first crept into the American political lexicon with the unlikeliest of politicians: Ronald Reagan [...] think of him as Trumpian before the advent of the Donald, or at least as the man who (thanks to his ad writers) invented the political use of the word ‘again.’” The recourse to a mythical past through accessible sound-bite stories and pop culture-friendly imagery was also exemplified by the Reagan campaign’s 1984 TV ad “It’s morning *again* in America,” a commercial that is frequently touted

340 In relation to MTV’s reality programming, Andrejevich states that it brings “universal access to the means of publicity as self-promotion that characterizes the democratic promise of reality TV” (Andrejevich in S. Jones, “MTV: The Medium was the Message” 87). This observation affirms the populist aesthetic of the modern, digital spectacle, combined with a thrust toward constant self-stylization and branding.

341 Tom Engelhardt, “Trump says what no other candidate will: the US is no longer exceptional,” *The Guardian* (April 29, 2016). Accessed January 31, 2019: <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/apr/29/donald-trump-make-america-great-again-exceptionalism>>.

as having been instrumental in delivering the “electoral blockbuster” of 1984 (Troy, *Morning in America* 134).

But even beyond thematic similarities, the two actor-presidents have a lot in common. When Trump took office, he became the oldest individual ever to have become President of the United States at the age of 70. This distinction had previously been held by Reagan (inaugurated at age 69). Trump is the second president to have been divorced; the first was Reagan. Reagan’s official campaign slogan in 1980 was “Let’s Make America Great Again”; the Trump campaign was creative enough to drop the “Let’s” from the same phrase. Both Trump and Reagan were long-time members of the Democratic Party before shifting to the GOP (Drezner). Both found themselves at the helm of a pivotal insurgency within the Republican Party, during which they focused on reactionary populism and racist appeals to the white working-class vote. And last but not least: Both built their public personas as second-rate stars of cinema and TV respectively.

In my analyses, I have traced the far-reaching cultural repercussions of the first “actor-presidency” in the history of the United States. Future will show how the long-term ramifications of the second one will unfold. One thing is clear: Any form of effective resistance against renewed spectacles of neoliberal capitalism and neoconservative imperialism requires an extensive understanding of the pop culture spectacle. This book was designed to contribute to just such an understanding.

*History may not have ended, but we are stuck in a loop,
our Walkmen endlessly rewinding and restarting the
soundtrack to a movie we’ve seen too many times. It’s time
to turn it off—or at least to recognize that it’s still playing.*

*(David Sirota, From Charlie Sheen to Reagan Nostalgia,
The ’80s Just Won’t Go Away)*

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