

EVIL EMPIRE: SPECTACLE AND IMPERIALISM IN HOLLYWOOD

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It was just robbery with violence, aggravated murder on a great scale and men going at it blind—as is very proper for those who tackle a darkness. The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only. . . something you can set up, and bow down before, and offer a sacrifice to. . .

Heart of Darkness, Joseph Conrad, 1902

Next time I'll know to send Rambo.

Ronald Reagan, 1985

Conrad's *Marlowe* and Reagan's Rambo can still speak with one another. Despite what we could call a diminution in aesthetic language they address the same epoch—the epoch of imperialism, what we call the last stage, grimly and optimistically, of capitalism—and its violent transformation in wars and revolutions. Marlowe's tale is the tragic derangement of the ennobling mission, civilization imperilled by the wilderness's evil impulses—in the tradition of the nineteenth century realist novel, both **romanticisation** and lament over advancing capitalism and its ideological contradictions. Rambo, equally enamoured of imperial adventure but hardly gesturing at 'the idea', is merely ready for tactical duty, rhetorically and physiologically fitted to serve the chief imperialist's bitter, if laconically phrased, vengeance.

It is not surprising that the actor in the White House turns to the movies for political rhetoric, perceives the world, the international class struggle, as if he were in the more comforting, more entertaining world of the movies. But it is still surprising to see the bellicose ruling cohorts of the most powerful and dangerous imperialist nation in history invoke a comic-book superhero for flamboyant rhetoric and justification.

Indeed, cinematic allusions have entered the foreground of American political talk. *Star Wars* is not only a kids' space fantasy but the designation for America's plans for aggressive violation of the ABM Treaty, ultimately part of the drive for first-strike capability. Borrowing implicitly from the same films, Reagan castigates the Soviet Union as 'an empire of evil' (it must surely be the most extreme instance of projection as defence

in recent political language). Even more prominently, Rambo has become a media phenomenon in North America. It has received spectacular promotion—magazine covers, the celebration of a 'new American spirit', entry into everyday language—which can only be *partly* organised by the film industry. An integral part of such media hype is quasi-sociological 'analysis'—wonder at what the industry has wrought, liberal fretting over the debilitating effects on **youth**.¹ Such attention is all part of the pleasure, all part of producing a crowd at the movies.

But much of the interest in Rambo centres on the way the film and a string of popular films of the '80s articulate with the political conjuncture. Hollywood keeps going back to Vietnam to rescue those poor **POWs** in *Uncommon Valor*, *Rambo: First Blood II*, *Missing in Action (I and II)*; fighting off evil invaders right at home in *Red Dawn*, *Invasion USA*; glamourising military training in *An Officer and a Gentleman*, *The Right Stuff*, *Top Gun*; solving hostage crises in *Iron Eagle*, *Delta Force*; even fighting and winning 'the next world war' in *Rocky IV*.² It is a collection of anti-communist, anti-Soviet, xenophobic, war-mongering propagandistic diatribes which, along with the action and fun, re-cycle cherished Reaganite themes and doubtless contribute to the jingoistic political climate of America. Even *Pravda* has protested.

Of course, radical critics have always seen that popular culture reflects or reproduces dominant ideology (increasingly perceiving that 'reflection' as a contradictory construction in the ideological text and the narrative form of a media product). The interest of these right-wing films is not just their mirroring of ruling ideology but their part in a broader 'aestheticisation of politics'. The phrase is from the Marxist critic, Walter Benjamin, responding, in the '30s, to fascism's organisation of politics as mass **spectacle**.³ While its tempting to equate teenage audiences slavering over the massacre of communists with fascism, the aestheticisation of bourgeois politics in advanced capitalism is more mundane and more pervasive. It is now axiomatic to describe the experiencing of politics as another branch of spectatorship within the entertainment and advertising of the media industries. We ingest 'politics' in fragments of 'news', in drastically circumscribed 'commentary', as a kind of fiction constructed by both political managers and media institutions. The 'show-business co-ordination' of the Libya air strikes and their media **representation**,⁴ the ogreish manipulation of the Chernobyl accident, the Nuremberg-ian Olympics in Los Angeles in 1984, the TV wars of the Falklands or Grenada, are only extreme instances. At all levels, the culture of advanced capitalism, media culture, coheres with political demands while politics is communicated through the dramatic codes and subterfuges of that culture. Cold War novels such as *The Spike* and *The Third World War* offer KGB conspiracies and 'safe' nuclear wars. Canada's General Richard Rohmer prolifically produces novels which follow the twists and turns of anti-Soviet politics. Supposed

documentary investigations like Claire Sterling's *The Terror Network* and various 'Plot against the Pope' *exposés* are especially clear examples of the fictional management of the 'news'. Gratuitous anti-Soviet caricatures even turn up in American television advertising. It is not surprising that the movies snap to attention; brutal fiction and the brutal exigencies of imperial policy overlap.

My main concern with Rambo and related films will be to consider their ideological terrain and effectivity and to show the mythical reconstruction of history upon which they depend. But I don't want to give the impression that's all there is to going to the movies today. On the contrary, the remnants and products of the movements of '68, of which Rambo is the cinematic antithesis, are simultaneously and sympathetically represented in contemporary Hollywood. Their representation also reflects the 'aestheticisation of politics'. And, as I shall argue in the conclusion, their limitations need to be fully apprehended in any consideration of an alternative politics and art.

Re-fighting History: 'Do we get to win this time?'

Rambo's question echoes throughout the right-wing films and the answer is, of course, a triumphal 'we' sure do! The most publicised and scandalous 'achievement' in these films has been a coherent codification of a metaphoric narrative in which the world-historic defeat of America in Vietnam can be resumed and reversed. The simple formula is initiated in *Uncommon Valor* (1982); a group of Vietnam veterans go back to rescue their secretly held POW comrades from the communists and succeed against enormous odds. The adventure is explicitly offered as a corrective resolution to the original defeat; as Colonel Rhodes says 'This time no one can dispute the rightness of what we are doing.'

The epic struggle of the Vietnamese communists against imperialism is deleted; the war is extrapolated from any social and political context and microcosmically reduced in an obscenely melodramatic conceit. If the over-arching political logic seems to be wish-fulfillment about the central confrontation in world politics—between imperialism and **communism**⁶—the fervour and resonance of the formula must be placed in the specific conjuncture of intensification Halliday calls the 'Second Cold War'. We have seen a near hysterical revival of classic anti-communism; an evil and expansionist Soviet Union is answered by the ritualistic incantations of 'America', 'freedom', 'democracy'. The themes of American imperial hegemony are re-stated; declining military superiority and a wave of third world revolutions⁷ are met by a trillion-dollar arms budget and military interventions. Post-war presidents have given tactical signatures to these themes: the Truman doctrine; Kennedy's missile gap and Alliance for Progress; Nixon's Vietnamisation; Carter's 'human rights' and Rapid Deployment Force. Reagan's variations are familiar; the 'window of

vulnerability'; the hysterical denunciations of 'terrorism'; the commitment to 'roll back' communism—Nicaragua, Grenada, Angola, Afghanistan, somewhat differently in Poland. The domestic corollaries include attacks on the working class and social services, strengthening state repression against unions, minorities and the left, the various campaigns of the Moral Majority for 'moral' re-armament.

Re-fighting Vietnam is clearly part of this ideological revivalism. Although Hollywood has been enamoured of Vietnam as a subject since the late seventies, there is a discernible shift; the early films (*Coming Home*, *The Boys in Company C*, *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deerhunter*, *Who'll Stop the Rain*) are all '... saturated with pain, confusion and/or guilt over moral and political choices. . .'⁸ for which the 'rescue' films provide the palliative of conservative certainty. More precisely, Vietnam in the early films is *already* an apolitical landscape of myth and violent spectacle, a 'set' for display of American **quandaries**.⁹ The 'confusion and guilt' in the films indicate their relationship to the tepid liberal residue of the American anti-war movement and its failure to address the imperialist nature of the war. The rescue films' version of mythic Vietnam shifts not only to a more confident conservative vision of imperialism but also to the generic recuperation of the simple war film in which rousing action can be wedded unambiguously to nationalist polemic. The contrast and connection between the two moments is exemplified by John Milius (*Uncommon Valor*, *Red Dawn*, *Apocalypse Now*). Suitable for the eighties, he is a conscious ideologue, a self-described 'right wing anarchist.'" In fact, *Apocalypse Now's* mockery of bureaucratic and moral restraint can now be seen to fit well with more obvious revisionism.

The rescue becomes a scenario in which American nationalism at war can have its usual purchase; rather than rhetorically justified, war becomes 'necessary', the reversal of 'crazy', which is the limit of explanation in the anti-war films.¹¹ Villainous Russians and Vietnamese slot in where Germans and Japanese were. Many WWII films defined the war's aim in the multi-ethnic democracy of the patrol or squad. Interestingly, many of these films were scripted by noted Communists and sympathisers during the party's 'national front against fascism'; nationalism was flexibly inflected to the left.¹² Now America is represented by heroic rescuers and tortured, pathetic POWs; the Vietnam vet is not only rescued from anti-war derision but, in a virtual apotheosis, the POWs become the object of the narrative, guaranteeing the manufacture of innocence and necessity—the absurdly truncated '... idea (to) bow down before. . .'¹³ for the new war effort.

Once that idealism is codified the structure of the action melodrama takes over. These 'male' genres (the war film, the swashbuckler, westerns, adventure stories) are typically marked by just such linear narratives, obvious **hero/villain** conflict, triumphant resolution, emotional fixation on exciting action.¹³ Like any mainstream film, the audience must balance

the acceptance of relatively fantastic conventions with the film's production of realistic effect. In a war film, we must 'believe' the mythic quality of the events and assess the rousing imitation of what we think war is like (which circularly, we know largely from other war films). For instance, the outrageous invention of the POWs is communicated in quasi-documentary film techniques in most of the films—the language verifies the 'veracity' of the myth.

On one hand as a kind of historical romance, these films could pick any war as their locus (other films, like *Red Dawn* and *Conan The Barbarian* make the point by inventing past and future epics). On the other hand, the rescue films speak to both ideological and military issues of the '70s and '80s. The rescue reverses and conflates key traumas—the defeat by those little 'gooks' and the strategically insignificant but ideologically resonant Iranian hostage crisis.¹⁴ The POWs in *Rambo: First Blood II* are specifically described as hostages held for huge ransom. (Of course, the crusade against demonic 'Arab' terrorism is explicit in *Iron Eagle* or *Delta Force*.) Tactically, the rescue is inspired by the commando groups of the war, the Green Berets or the Phoenix assassination squads, and by counter-terrorist escapades (*Entebbe*, the London Iranian *Embassy*).¹⁵ Strategically, this can be seen as a microcosmic translation of the development of strike forces—the New Action Army, the Rapid Deployment Force—which would allow America to intervene more effectively in the 'limited' wars necessary against third world upheavals.¹⁶

Operationalising the rescue underlines a cherished project of the American right. The cohesive 'rightness' of the heroes confronts bureaucratic sabotage and indifference at every stage; Colonel Rhodes is sidetracked for ten years; Rambo's mission is betrayed by a venal functionary; in M.I.A., the bureaucrats are virtually in league with the Communists. America is morally re-armed against the 'Vietnam syndrome' that saps the will for necessary imperial intervention,¹⁷ and, retroactively, offers a Hitlerian stab-in-the-back theory of the defeat; invulnerability was 'restrained' by the amoral machinations of politicians and bureaucrats. (This contradiction between ideal and 'real' America is a theme to which we shall return.)

All this is translated rambunctiously and self-consciously, into various venerable cinema lineages. The rag-tag patrol on an impossible mission is, of course, a staple of the war film. Uncommon Valor is modelled closely on the misfit groups of *The Dirty Dozen* (1968) or *China Gate* (1957) in which Vietnamese Communists are also the enemy. Television replication of paramilitary adventures on, for example, *The A-Team* or *SWAT Squad*, which takes counter-terrorism to the domestic front, are also an influence. John Ford's *The Searchers* (1956) is now considered the 'locus classicus' of the search for a lost innocent which structures the POW rescues, *Commando* and many recent Hollywood productions—*Star Wars*, *Taxi-*

Driver, Hardcore, etc. The solitary hero—Colonel Rhodes, Rambo, Chuck Norris—has elements of the lone gunfighter from Westerns as well as the obsessed avenging vigilante or rebel cop of series like *Death Wish* or *Dirty Harry*. The avenger is specifically cleaning up the streets of a decayed city, in a coded response to both the social struggles of minorities and increasing immiseration and violent lumpenisation. Increasingly, the city's **nightmare** underside is designated a 'third world' jungle, a terrorised admission of racist institutionalisation within the metropolis. Like the Vietnam films, moral restraints are irrelevant and liberalism and bureaucracy are just part of the problem (in itself, a perfectly valid observation). The connection to Vietnam is explicit in *Year of the Dragon*; the Chinatown mob is wiped out with pathological racist fervour and Rambo's question is echoed: 'Its Vietnam all over again—doesn't anybody here want to win?'

Bits of 'history' and 'cinema' interpenetrate. Unfortunately, this does not render history comprehensible at all. The notion that America 'lost' Vietnam because of its military restraint is especially grotesque: 'At the height of their invasion of Vietnam, the US had used **60** per cent of their total infantry, **58** per cent of their marines, **32** per cent of their tactical air force, **50** per cent of their strategic air force, fifteen of their **18** aircraft carriers, **800,000** American troops (counting those stationed in satellite countries. . .) and more than **1** million Saigon troops. They mobilised as many as **6** million American soldiers in rotation, dropped over **10** million tons of bombs and spent over **\$300** billion, but in the end the US Ambassador had to crawl up to the helicopter pad looking for a way to flee.'¹⁸ Yet the right-wing myth of the stab-in-the-back of appeasement is notoriously useful in compensatory military rhetoric for a failure of strength. History is reworked into the film narrative's aspiration towards myth; real historical trajectories collapse into the present, mere grist for the ideological moment. While presidents routinely discuss winnable nuclear wars and rolled back revolutions, the movies triumphantly illustrate revenge against history.

Heroism and Masculinity: He may be a monster but he's our monster

Hollywood revanchism is accomplished and complemented by a particular kind of man, to put it mildly. The heroes who accomplish their quests are propelled not only by streamlined narratives but by a hard-won masculinity. Especially in the films with group heroes, we spend an inordinate amount of screen time with men training to be . . . men? We can only assume masculinity demands arduous construction: in *Uncommon Valor* we go through basic training and dress rehearsals for combat; almost all of *An Officer and a Gentleman*, *The Right Stuff* and *Top Gun* involve testing, competing, preparing; the prisoners in M.Z.A. ZZ get elaborately tortured for most of the movie—this somehow readies them for battle. In

each case such testing culminates in violence of some kind which affirms masculinity as much as it accomplishes the ideological/military/narrative tasks of the film.

This masculinity is more or less mystical, more or less articulate. *Uncommon Valor* affirms a kind of laconic camaraderie of males in which war serves a therapeutic function. In *The Right Stuff*, the 'stuff' is not quite named though the astronauts spend an extraordinary amount of time staring significantly at each other. This 'spirituality' may be due to the film's setting within the space programme, once conceived as the 'innocent' arm of America's imperial 'race' with the Soviet Union; in the place of combat we thus have a series of orgasmic communions with the 'heavens'. The teen guerillas of *Red Dawn* undergo an escalating series of rites—mutual **peeing**, drinking blood of deers, massacring Russians and Cubans ('what did killing feel like? It felt good!')—to celebrate their particularly grotesque group. The kind of masculinity demanded in *An Officer and a Gentleman* is explicitly in the service of brutal imperialism; 'Would you napalm those gooks? Yes, sir!' In *Top Gun*, the desexualised camaraderie of these male groups is rendered (in as explicit a fashion as Hollywood allows) homoerotic in joking 'gay' banter amongst the pilots, which then deflects back into a phallusmissile worshipping finale which shows that 'War is... fun!' The essence of masculinity seems to be functionally controlled hysteria.

But this looks tame when we turn to the super-heroes/super-stars—Stallone, Schwarzenegger, Norris—who display a pneumatic masculinity so extreme it is almost comically distanced. They seem to have always had their super-powers; indeed we in the audience can probably 'construct' their prowess from our cinema memories—old Hercules and Tarzan movies, Kung Fu epics, *The Incredible Hulk* on TV—and across diverse entertainment businesses—comic-books, wrestling, fitness and body-building. Schwarzenegger came to fame in *Pumping Iron*, a documentary on body-building, Norris is a cult favourite in Kung Fu films and world Karate champion. In relation to these **sports/businesses**, the male bodies of the stars become the apex of a transformation which perhaps we could do ourselves—much like the already-perfect bodies of advertising. (The process exemplifies capitalist leisure's tendency to become work; the individuals perceive themselves as commodities to be worked on, transformed, exchanged.) The multiple sources indicate not so much self-conscious film-watching or making but the fluidity of cultural production's commodities/images/stories across different segments of increasingly integrated conglomerate industries. Despite the macho bombast, the essence of Rambo is to function as a malleable image available for marketing—to sit beside other physical cartoons like E.T. in the toy section of department stores.

Nonetheless, the first order of super-heroism is clearly the crassest

patriarchal narcissism—the hero is a figure of omnipotence and authority, if a somewhat B-grade variant. But the exaggerated physicality of the figure indicates that we are involved in homoerotic spectatorship as well. Despite the widespread interpretation of the superheroes as a response to feminism and the sensitive man, **Stallone** and Schwarzenegger inevitably call up comparison to stars of exaggerated femaleness; perhaps a Jane Russell–Marilyn Monroe pairing, although the guttural Rambo will have to work on his dialogue. Schwarzenegger even has a little of the wise-cracking, self-parodying persona (and accent) of a Marlene Dietrich. The camera pays exaggerated attention to bared, struttingly displayed and sweating male parts; throughout the films, the fetishisation of the body associated largely with female stars is simply extended. Of course, this is hardly admitted; the visual pleasure is deflected and united with an equally fetishistic concern with weaponry, in elaborate detail, frequently in the same shot.

We are never able to forget, however comic the swaggering body-builders look, that the films are celebrating killing machines. In perhaps the most intriguing generic influence, our heroes are presented frequently with the connotations, the style, of the monsters in contemporary horror films like *Halloween* or *Friday the 13th*. Certainly they mow down legions of helpless victims, just as invulnerable as any monster; the deadly Hunter in *Invasion USA* materialises and disappears magically; *Friday the 13th* is parodied in one horrific sequence in *Commando*; most explicitly, each Rambo film presents the wiping out of a patrol in exact replication of a horror film's sequence and structure. *First Blood*, the introductory Rambo film, attempts some thematic coherence on this point. The ex-Green Beret, brutalised by small-town cops, takes to the mountains, over-loaded with iconic labels: vet as deranged victim; the white man gone native-Tarzan; the re-incarnation of what America fought—the guerilla, the Indian; the killing machine out of place, produced by the war and now useless. The dominant logic is the Frankenstein myth although when the 'mad doctor', Colonel **Trautman**, arrives that logic is deflected into a sentimental recuperation of monster and creator—Rambo breaks down, 'feminised', because 'Somebody wouldn't let us win.' The familiar didacticism readies us for the sequel where the monster's skills find the correct political and geographic focus. America's hero is also a monster.

Of course, it's a *good* monster, really more of a stylistic 'frisson' than an intention to confront any moral ambiguity in America's wars. They are 'our' monsters, just like the **contras**, or the Afghanistan mullahs or the South American death squads or the Israeli air force—'good' **terrorists**.¹⁹ The films uniformly refuse the structure of entwining hero and villain, menace and protectors, monster and normalcy, which marks the suspense and the subversiveness in classic horror and film noir thrillers. *Rocky IV* and *Invasion USA* do explicitly pair hero and chief villain. Rocky's

opponent, Drago, is so loaded with evil signifiers—he is a devil, a Frankenstein monster, a vampire, a machine—he becomes an absolute Other to Rocky's sentimental everyman. The evil Rostov (this is a Red who even shoots Christmas trees) is haunted by his nemesis, Hunter, but the logic is not reversed to undermine any of the hero's impenetrable resolve. This simplicity is in stark contrast to the self-conscious 'classicist' of *Year of the Dragon*, *Tightrope* or *To Live and Die in L.A.* whose obsessed cops are intricately enmeshed with the villains, and their vengefulness is specifically regarded as a problem. If it is implied the superheroes have harnessed the primal, the savage, this is not even presented as a potential dilemma. There is never any inkling our heroes will succumb or be defeated. For all the labelling—evil Russians, torturing Orientals, crazed Arabs—the villains are mostly faceless victims for the super-heroes, tremulously passive, though their lack of individuation short-circuits any empathic response; they fall as markers to the heroes' brawn, with masochistic subjection complementary to masculine narcissism. Despite all the violence, the blood and explosions, this inevitability gives the films a curiously bland tone; the suspenseful variations are circumscribed, charted as in a football game—and the audience similarly **cheers/rates** the repetitive 'thrills'. It is tempting to observe that if we (following the professor of the Cinema of Car Crashes in Don DeLillo's satirical novel *White Noise*) 'look behind the violence. . . to the essential spirit of innocence and fun. . .', the imperial monster becomes a fairly typical Hollywood construction of havoc and silliness.

America über alles?

The interesting tension, even hostility, in the right-wing films is in the contradiction between the 'ideal' America of the heroes and the 'real' America represented. The heroes of *Uncommon Valor* are lost misfits in the morass of everyday America; escaping it, in shared combat, they find themselves. Similarly, the astronauts of *The Right Stuff* commune with each other against the caricatured bureaucrats and **politicians**.²⁰ The most venom is reserved for those functionaries who lost the Vietnam war, who inexplicably restrained America's invulnerability. The whole movement of return in *Rambo: First Blood II* is to 'get' the double-crossing bureaucrat who sabotages the mission. Although several hundred **Russian** and Vietnamese do get in the way, the climax of the film is the symbolic destruction of the bureaucrat and his computer—apparently even more heinous enemies.

The America Rambo serves is specifically abstract; it surely can't be the small town America, traditional cinematic stand-in for the benevolent social order, he has literally destroyed in *First Blood*. *Invasion USA* is most explicit in its desire to save existing America from its own **laxity**—even the CIA are too wimpy. *Red Dawn* follows a logic even more absolute.

Small-town USA falls to the red invaders, undefended by any military or political authority, but also discovered to be rotten to the core, almost deserving its fate.²¹ America's guard is down—morally and militarily—and the heroes are left to resuscitate the ideal. *Red Dawn*, which aspires to be the pubescent *Mein Kampf* of the right-wing cinema, is explicit about that ideal. The teen guerillas take to the mountains with all the exhilaration of 'School's Out!' But their adventure is stretched with significance: Teddy Roosevelt and the glory days of Imperialism, the mountain men of legend who fought Indians on the frontier, re-claiming the revolutionary heritage of America. In the classically empty landscape, fleeing a debased civilisation, they will initiate, in blood and violence, an America emptied of everything but ideology and enemies.

The vacillation from celebration to condemnation in this contradiction is rooted in American literature and popular culture: the crew of the Pequod or Huck, Tom and Jim embody a democracy nowhere realised in the surrounding America, an America they must flee—lighting out for the territories, the imperial frontiers. The corollary of their flight is that America finds them intolerable, too. This is most extreme in the classic solitary hero D.H. Lawrence famously called ' . . . hard, isolate, a killer' who is re-stated in caricature by Stallone, Schwarzenegger and Norris.²² Each comes from a distant somewhere (gratuitously loaded with signs of rebelliousness, the counter-culture, designated part-Indian etc.) to enact a violent salvation and leave, alone.

This dramatised contradiction between crusading, invulnerable heroes and corrupt, weakened America has diverse roots in American political culture; in conservatism's glorification of the military and condemnation of the state; in the shifting apprehension of national mission and imperialism expressed in isolationism and manifest destiny; in the compromised liberal guilt over the monstrous crimes against blacks, native peoples, Asians in the pursuit of that mission. The contradiction is part of a rich cultural tradition which allows a symbolic critique of America while affirming it again and again.

Ideology and Consumption: The Coexistence of Rambo and Liberalism in Hollywood

But what does this mean? What does it portend? If we wish some realist comprehension of the social order of advanced capitalism, very little. It does give us the ideological flavour of American political culture's . . . suspicious, fearful and often primitive. . .²³ view of foreign policy and the world. If the films repetitively reveal a deeply coded fear of revolution (as Reds, terrorists, invading hordes) they respond with a ferocious desire for revenge. . . against the world, against history. But even this is not atavistic; the films show a brutal naivete in their desire to idealise America and its actions.²⁴

Though even here, the films reveal intriguing contradictions about just **what** America is worth dying for: the belligerent and bland video game of *Top Gun*; or the America the heroes must save and flee; or the ideal beyond democracy which the right-wing hysteria of *Red Dawn* can resolve only in fascist fantasy. (Fortunately, the Red Army wipes out the little thugs.) In a schematic sense, these reflect the tensions within the Reaganite coalition between populist nationalism and far right, the 'strong' state and individualism, petty-bourgeois frenzy and super-power **contingency**.²⁵

In fact, this 'America' (like most of the films ideological themes) is suited for dramatic rhetoric more than ideological effectivity in the existing world. It is hard to imagine 'war is fun', 'war is the business of superheroes', 'war guarantees manhood' as mobilising real masses to war. Nor is rampant vigilantism a predictably cohesive legitimation for strong state violence. There is some sense that masculine obsessiveness can contribute to the reactionary counter-attack against feminism. But overwhelmingly the films define masculinity against the Red 'Other'. Women are simply absent or accommodated with the tokenism of liberal feminism. Rambo's guide is a female guerilla; girl teens get to kill commies in *Red Dawn*. But it is little more than a gesture amidst structural changes in gender relations. Similarly, the films offer no coherent vision of class beyond vague populism or the casual elitism of mobility available for supermen. The absence of a realised social order and ideological complexity becomes part of a regressive pleasure, a moment of utopian harmony for our ticket price.

Indeed beyond the accoutrements of current rightist rhetoric, the films are relatively routine Hollywood fare. They are highly-promoted blockbusters (of a conspicuously low-budget grade) which promise and deliver simple plots of repetitive spectacle. The right-wing themes are part of that promotion, providing publicity, scandal, an occasional specious topicality. In a sense, they are pretext to the passive if exuberant consumption of images dependent on big-sound, big-screen, elaborate special effects. Form and ideology re-unite as we celebrate not only the production of violent cinema spectacle but military imperialism as a succession of such satisfying moments.²⁷

To evaluate this 'politicising' of the aesthetic, we need to look more broadly at Hollywood and then more broadly at bourgeois ideology and political culture in advanced capitalism. On the one hand, the right-wing films I have discussed clearly present the agenda of resurgent imperialism and its various elitist, populist and patriarchal undertones. Their vindictive violence reminds us of Reaganism's encouragement of Nazi and Klan violence; as mass spectacles, they replay the fictional propaganda of 'democracy' at war with some of the flavour of fascism. However, the right is not homogeneously victorious even in an increasingly brutal and authoritarian America. Ideological contradiction continues: if the left is in

retreat, bourgeois liberalism retains some vitality, if not hegemony.²⁸

Logically, then, the Rambo films are not predominant or solely representative of Hollywood (even commercially, the list includes flops like *The Right Stuff* or *Delta Force*). To understand how much we need a broad view of dominant ideology, its contradictions and circumscriptions, it is crucial to look at the integration of the movements of the seventies. The most obvious correspondence to the 'new imperialism' is the prototypical integration of liberal feminism. Probably no social movement has ever received such attention and, sometimes, sympathy from the media. Radicals have had for some years now, to consider feminism, not only as the ideology of a protest movement, but as an integrated theme in dominant ideology—perhaps to the degree that it is extracted from the movement, or to the extent that the movement's mass character becomes more fragile.

Media feminism is most visible around several major 'stories': the transformation into a 'new' woman, strong, independent; a parallel 'new' man, sensitive, non-macho; their combination into an egalitarian couple, the validation of a fragmented family or the exposure of the oppressive family. None of these are new and they all overlap or even, since they are largely de-politicised, emerge in ideologically opposed films. They are motifs in ideology and narrative which we read throughout the mass media. The new woman or man is explained in innumerable magazine articles as advice for our own transformations; the strong woman as integrated token is replayed in each sports figure, politician or news-reader—most repeatedly in advertising's creation of a prototype upper-class career woman. The conventional line of Hollywood feminism begins in the late '70s and stretches on to today: *Julia*, *An Unmarried Woman*, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*; on to the unions with *Norma Rae*, the music business with *Coal-Miner's Daughter*; combined with anti-nuke environmentalism in *The China Syndrome* and *Silkwood*; tragic variations in *The Rose* and *Frances*; comic versions in *9 To 5* and *Private Benjamin*; and down to the farm in *Places in the Heart*, *Country* and *The River*; most didactically in the 'cross-dressing' parables *Victor/Victoria*, *Tootsie*, *Yentl*, *All of Me*. In fact, the 'strong woman' can be easily integrated into more obviously reactionary films, simply inserted in the male role: female avengers in *Lipstick* or *Sudden Impact*; *Red Sonja*, a match for *Conan*; *Supergirl* or supervillains like *Grace Jones* in *A View to a Kill*, super-mother anti-communist in *Eleni*. Or the female survivors of horror film massacres who must rise heroically to the challenge, detached from collective resolution or authority's salvation—*Alien*, *The Terminator*.

Clearly we could construct a 'progressive' tendency of liberal feminist films and add some teen movies with their dancing rebellions and mild anti-institutional mockery (eg. *Grease*, *Fame*, *Flashdance*, *Footloose*); the obvious persistence of such old-style liberals as *Norman Jewison* (*A*

Soldier's Story) or Warren Beatty (*Reds*), or even the liberal anti-imperialism of *Missing!*, *The Year of Living Dangerously*, and *Under Fire*. This would be the completion of the binary structure of **reactionary/progressive** which is so crucial to dominant ideology, and it would provide an equally plausible line of popular hits and trends to place beside *Rambo*.²⁹ I don't, however, wish to offer a celebration of this 'tendency'. It can be argued, in fact, that this progressive tendency is insipid and partial in its response to contradiction and social change. Feminists probably feel that media feminism reduces their struggle to a status and imagery not very different from the fitness 'movement'. Hollywood's bland liberalism may be indicative of the rightward drift of liberalism; indeed, a liberalism which can hardly defend its own welfare state extracts a lingering vitality ~~from~~ feminism, as well as from the self-congratulatory **philanthropics** of its rock-stars. Some liberals may see the persistence of liberalism in Hollywood as a sign of optimism, that 'democratic debate' continues. But radicals need to perceive dominant ideology with the complexity it demands, and recognise that both the dangers of Reaganism *and* the persistence of liberalism are aspects of repressive and integrative strategies—all speaking in the voice of domination: from the screen, the faces of 'imperialism' and 'feminism' smiling or glaring down on us.

Because, of course, it's the *same* Hollywood that produces all of the 'hits' listed, both liberal and conservative. In fact, 'progressive' and 'reactionary' ideologies are inadequate responses to social reality in the same way that ideological characterisations are skeletal approximations of films. If we look at bourgeois ideology in the social formations of advanced capitalism over much of the century, we cannot consider it simply reactionary or even dominated by any exclusive concern. We would see a complex inter-connection of themes usually considered under the term 'liberalism', with various adjectives from 'corporate' to 'welfare', and varying levels of social reality—the market, the family, the **nation-state**, gender—but, over-arching all, Progress, capitalism's perennial Utopian rhetoric of its own transformative power, writ at the level of the subject as an agitated individualism.

What is worth emphasising against a notion of monolithic ideology is the fact that bourgeois ideology has not been homogeneous or univocal: it contains contradiction and contestation. In fact, the most prevalent definition of ideology as the imaginary resolution of real contradictions implies fissure and shortfall inscribed within any ideology. Older themes are subsumed; anachronisms may flourish; different ruling factions fight it out: oppositional ideologies develop under bourgeois hegemony. At best, bourgeois ideologies come to a kind of contradictory unity.

This unity lauds capitalism as the bearer of 'modernity' in some 'neutral' way. Marx by contrast, saw this as a remorseless dialectic of construction and destruction engulfing individuals, classes, technology, nature, the

capitalists themselves, but always running into the class relations of production—always organising its potential destruction. History is not written ideology: it is finally, class struggle. This is not a self-perception of bourgeois ideology, but it must encompass a comprehension of the 'permanence' of class authority and the constant social challenge and chaos it engenders. In a simple example, this involves the translation of the 'freedom' of the market to the level of ideological structure. In the bourgeois democracies, we don't receive ideology as solely an authoritative announcement; we receive a 'choice' of ideas, a 'debate', where competing positions have the status of consumer goods.

Towards a Radical Opposition

It is precisely this 'intensity' (or lack of it) that we bring to our choice of 'aesthetic politics' at the movies; politics is just part of entertainment consumption—hit trends and images, campaign ads and slogans, national moods, public opinion. Curiously, the politicising of the aesthetic I have been discussing, is most comprehensible as part of the depoliticisation of political culture in advanced capitalism. The pervasive dramatisation of ruling ideology is purchased at the cost of its 'trivialisation' into just another moment in the consumption of image and spectacle. That this vacuity co-exists with the militant organisation of the right and the marked lack of coherence in right or left mass politics makes the building of oppositional politics all the more necessary.

Naturally many radicals look nostalgically at the '60s, or at the movements which persist, as a way out of the conservative '80s. This focus on the movements tends to interpret Reaganism or Thatcherism (or Rambo) monolithically and we simply see the liberating rebellions of the '60s and '70s answered by the repression of the '80s; a dramatic overestimation of collapse and an equally dramatic re-installation of authority. On the contrary, it seems to me that we can appreciate the importance of the eruptions of the '60s—their challenge, their politicisation of a generation of radicals—and perceive how much they remained within bourgeois liberalism. The anti-war movement dissipated overnight: its broad but shallow pacifism largely failing to deepen into anti-imperialist politics. The fate of 'black liberation' is just as salutary. By the early '70s it was derailed or defeated by a combination of violent repression against militants, the dominance of a legalistic civil rights strategy, the promotion of a small black middle-class based on poverty programmes, token integration and Democratic electioneering. Blacks in America are materially worse-off now while black Democrats preside over the deteriorating ghettos like a procession of Bantustan chiefs. The movements of the '70s (environmentalism, anti-nuke, women, gays) have often been sporadic, disorganised and politically marginal; surely that is one of the enabling features of the right turn. Their continued existence into the '80s is some

grounds for optimism—they have popularised critical ideas, made modest gains and raised difficult issues of how sexual, racial and class oppression interpenetrate. However, if the movements have broadened the radical agenda in the last decade, it is a sign of the right turn that radicals have been unable to present a comprehensive radical alternative, and have largely acquiesced in the **sectoral** and reformist 'consensus' of the movements. Part of the reason for this failure lies with dilemmas in socialist ideology, part of it rests with the fact that the 'movements' were partially integrated into the programmes and policies of the liberal state—always pleased to broaden its interventionist and regulatory power, happy to police attitudes and images.

Of course, modest gains are now subject to threats from the right, but that should not obscure the fact that many of the gains were superficial. For instance, racism may have become less significant as an ideology in most capitalist countries with their human rights commissions, charters of Rights etc., but racism has perhaps never been more crucial to the national and international organisation of labour. The tenuous tolerance for gay 'liberation' in urban enclaves is matched by vicious police **harrasment**. Feminists in many countries have constitutional and legislative programmes of equal rights, affirmative action, etc., while the main difference in the position of women resides in their entry into **wage-labour**—a reorganisation of the labour force towards the service **sector**—both lessening the isolation of women in the family and fixing their oppression more obviously to capital.

Nostalgia for the '60s or the valorisation of the 'new social movements' must ignore such integration. More importantly, it is a continuation of that New Leftism which, disillusioned with the working class and its apparent failure to fulfill its historic Marxist tasks, discovers **transformative** agencies in 'vanguards—blacks, youth, students, women, gays, native people, **lumpen**, third world nationalists. Rebellion against authority is emphasised rather than class structure. However, even if these groups may be crucial to revivifying radicalism, none (with the partial exception of third world nationalists who have also been Communists) occupies anything like the strategic location within production which prompted the Marxist proposition, and none has ever mounted a comparable challenge to even relatively routine class struggle. The politics of the movements have tended to ignore or efface class; in fact, only as specific oppression is understood operating through class structure, and political differentiation and class consciousness develops within the 'movements', can there be some hope for a comprehensive radicalism.

It may be time to reckon the hope for these movements, the turn from the working class, as misplaced when we recall the key features of the right turn. Is it directed exclusively against the movements? Is it the **re-assertion** of Patriarchy, reviled by feminists? Not at all. The last ten years

have seen, amidst spiralling recessions, a turbulent restatement of very old-fashioned class struggle—from the local to national levels and largely to the advantage of the ruling class. Second, it is marked by a resurgence of similarly old-fashioned anti-communism (specifically in the service of armed imperial intervention and ultimately world war). On these issues, there is essentially unity amongst liberals, conservatives and, all too often, at least where they are in power, social democrats. In this terrain, the space for an oppositional movement based on militant class politics should prove to be deep and available, even while its development will be daunting and uneven. Such a class politics will give connection and coherence to the multiple responses—union and minority struggle, democratic rights, disarmament and anti-war—required to confront a broad and encompassing ruling class strategy.

Popular films provide a limited translation of such struggles, from the point of view, in a broad sense, of the ruling class. However, the search for the ideological effect of mass art is an arduous and inconclusive one. Mundanely, empirical sociology, integrated with sensational journalism or state repression, periodically discovers the specific, horrible effects of the media. TV, comics, rock and roll, pornography, video, war films and toys all receive similar outraged analysis from both liberals and conservatives. In the opposing direction, some radical criticism has begun to investigate how audiences may appropriate popular culture in ways that emphasise collective or individual empowerment or rebelliousness, beside or beyond more obvious political messages. This highlights the imaginative complexities and formal autonomy in any artistic rendering, which ideological analysis, including mine, inevitably downplays.

The effectivity of the films of the right (or, similarly, of integrated liberalism) resides somewhere between these approaches. As topical propaganda they popularise aggressive imperial and domestic manoeuvres, at the cost of making them, to some extent, 'unreal'. More broadly, the fictions contribute to the ideological structures within which already **realised/conceived** actions can be rhetorically apprehended and naturalised.

A political look at popular films reveals dominant ideology to be both pervasive and superficial. Hollywood's version of imperialism trails and reinforces, contradictorily, 'entertainingly', the real ravages of the evil empire. But real and fictional worlds always collide; it is real people who die in imperialism's wars and famines and it is not glorious adventurers or supermen who police this barbarous system. We can observe a glimmer of American military 'hubris' on the screen but the left's challenge is to defeat imperialism and its state and that will be a spectacle beyond the movies.

NOTES

- A clear example of such fretting is in William Johnson's 'Military Mentality Colours all Society', *The Globe and Mail*, (Toronto), May 30, 1986, which presents data from the liberal military think-tank, Centre for Defence Information. War films and toys are placed alongside military expenditures and personnel, abstracted from any politics, as quantifiable symptoms of a bad attitude, presumably open to amelioration like racism or sexism.
2. Other related films in diverse genres, include: *Commando*, *Eleni*, *White Nights*, *Pale Rider*, *Year of the Dragon*.
 3. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in The Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, London, 1970.
 4. Edward Said, 'America and Libya', *London Review of Books*, Vol. 8, No. 8, May 8, 1986. He observes, quoting David Stockman, that for Reagan and his advisors 'reality-time' is the evening news.
 5. See Fred Halliday, *The Making of the Second Cold War*, London: Verso, 1983, p. 14.
 6. This designation emphasises the systemic confrontation, its basis in class relations and property ownership as well as the pivotal conflict of the American and Soviet states. See Halliday, p. 25.
 7. *Ibid.*, pp. 81-92.
 8. Steve Fore, 'Kuntzel's Law and *Uncommon Valor*', *WIDE ANGLE*, Vol. 7, No. 4, p. 24. For a superb political reading of these early Vietnam films see Andrew Britton, 'Sideshow: Hollywood in Vietnam', *MOVIE*, No. 27/28, pp. 2-23.
- Indeed, the gross metaphor of the POW rescue is pre-figured in the earlier films allegorical mutation of real war events. In *Apocalypse Now*, Col. Kurtz's mad war seems surrogate to the actual secret wars in Laos and Cambodia; the story of the Viet Cong amputation of villagers' arms is pure invention to verify the Communists primal Oriental otherness. The *Deerhunter* introduces the POW rescue theme and the Russian roulette torture which is not only invention but inversion of the most famous single news image of the war—General Loan's execution of a Viet Cong suspect during the Tet offensive. More duplicitously, several films ascribe brutal massacres to Communists and South Vietnamese soldiers; Americans don't want to kill anyone.
10. Fore, p. 24.
 11. Cf. Reagan, '... we are just beginning to appreciate that (our troops) were fighting a just cause', quoted in Fore, p. 24. See Noam Chomsky, *Towards A New Cold War*, New York: Pantheon, 1982, on the idiotic narrowness of American political debate on Vietnam, pp. 134-153.
 12. Peter Biskind, in *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1983, p. 59. It is also worth noting that I am discussing a relatively tiny group of films; by contrast Hollywood in WWII mobilised for hundreds of features and documentaries; directors like Capra, Wyler and Ford joined the army! Similarly, during the '50s Hollywood produced numerous anti-communist films; they were uniformly unsuccessful—popular '50s cinematic anti-communism was metaphoric. See Biskind, p. 3.
 13. Michael Walker, 'Melodrama and the American Cinema', *MOVIE* No. 29/30, p. 33. His comments on the swashbuckler are also relevant: '... romanticization of history; the displacement of historical events by a ritual of action-pieces (duels, chases, escapes); the stylization of form and content (eg. balletic sword-play, romanticized setting); archetypal characters—hero, villain, damsel in

- distress; the triumph of good over evil and the meting out of punishment to evil-doers', p. 39.
14. Fred Halliday, in *Threat from the East?*, London: Penguin Books, 1982, remarks 'The unrequited humiliations of Vietnam and the hostages affair find expression in a new preparedness for military intervention in the Third World,' p. 24.
 15. See R. Paterson and P. Schlesinger, 'State Heroes for the Eighties', *SCREEN* Vol. 24, No. 3, May-June 1983, pp. 55-72 which analyses the news and fictional representations of Britains SAS commandoes.
 16. Eqbal Ahmed, 'What's Behind the Crises in Iran and Afghanistan?', *SOCIAL TEXT* No. 3, Fall 1980, pp. 45-58, provides a useful survey of '70s strategic 'doctrinal' thinking in the US.
 17. If any such syndrome really stayed the military hand it was only briefly in Angola in 1975. The strategic and literal re-arming was already under-way. See Chomsky, pp. 188-192.
 18. General Van Tien Dung, *Our Great Spring Victory*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1977, pp. 235-236.
 19. 'Good' terrorism relies on the demonology of terrorism that is a pervasive melodrama of the decade. In contrast, Marxism has always disagreed with terrorists on grounds of the tactical effectivity of 'propaganda of the deed' against political or military symbols. Attacks on civilians by radical nationalists or far left remnants are not defensible within this paradigm and contribute to the demonology; however, their real casualties are dwarfed by state terrorism or corporate mass murder (Bhopal, Johns Manville).
 20. Milius and Philip Kaufman (*The Right Stuff*) are consciously, if perfunctorily, appropriating the 'Hawksian' group from films of Howard Hawks like *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939), *Air Force* (1943), *Rio Bravo* (1959). These are exemplary male adventures in which the heroes allegiance and worth are defined in relation to an all-male group hostile to any other social relations, virtually abstracted from society.
 21. *Red Dawn* and *Invasion USA* are part of the apocalyptic cycle of films (eg. horror, *Dawn of the Dead*, post-nuclear, *Mad Max*, *The Terminator*, even anarchic comedy, *Blues Brothers*) which derive enormous delight from the detailed destruction of the bland normalcy of America, regardless of ideological explanation or recuperation; the 'end of the world' becomes a subject of aesthetic commodification.
 22. Quoted in Judy Lee Kinney, 'The Mythical Method: Fictionalizing the Vietnam War', *WIDE ANGLE*, Vol. 7, No. 4, p. 39. Cimino's *The Deerhunter* attempts to re-consider, in the light of the war, the classic hero from James Fenimore Cooper's *The Deerslayer*. In contrast, Rambo philosophises: 'To survive war you must become war' which echoes Colonel Kurtz: 'Make friends with horror'. Each film celebrates, more or less contentedly, a monstrous imperialist hero, Conrad's dilution of potential anti-imperialism into the rhetorical swamp of good-evil dualism can fit in with imperialism as cinematic spectacle. See Britton, p. 14. Also Saul Steier, 'Make friends with Horror and Terror: *Apocalypse Now*', *SOCIAL TEXT* No. 3, Fall 1980, pp. 114-122.
 23. Halliday, 1983, p. 105.
 24. For those unfamiliar with American political discourse which casts imperialism in the rhetoric of 'ideals', while discussing limited nuclear war, anti-communist 'revolutions' (*sic.*), see Charles Krauthammer, 'The Poverty of Realism', *The New Republic*, February 17, 1986, p. 15.
 25. On the distinction between ultra and conservative anti-communism see Ralph Miliband and Marcel Liebman, 'Reflections on Anti-Communism', *Socialist Register* 1984, London. The Merlin Press, 1984, p. 18. *Rocky IV* contains both

- extremes; the most demonic Russians are recuperated as 'just people' in a last-second conversion to peaceful co-existence.
26. See my 'Capital at Play: Form in Popular Film', *CineAction!* No. 314, Winter 1986.
 27. The entertainment value of the third world and imperialism is pervasive, encompassing diverse ideological rhetoric. From the big budget sweep and guilty celebration of colonialism, *Gandhi, A Passage to India, Out of Africa*; to the respectable adventurers, the foreign correspondents in *Under Fire, The Year of Living Dangerously, The Killing Fields*; to the swashbuckler, *Raiders of the Lost Ark, Romancing the Stone*. (For analysis of cinematic self-consciousness and its disguise of politics see Patricia R. Zimmerman, 'Soldiers of Fortune', *WIDE ANGLE*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 34-39.) There is even a recent revival of Conrad's contemporaries in adventuring imperialism, *Kipling, Burroughs, Haggard; The Man Who Would Be King, She, Tarzan, the Ape Man, Lord Greystoke, Sheena, Queen of the Jungle, King Solomon's Mine*.
 28. See Vicente Navarro, 'The 1980 and 1984 US Elections and The New Deal', *Socialist Register 1985-86* for an interpretation of right-wing hegemony, continuing 'liberal' public opinion and inconsistencies of Reaganism as a mass politics. See also Reg Whitaker, 'Fighting the Cold War on the Home Front: America, Britain, Australia and Canada', *The Socialist Register 1985*, especially on the lack of a mass right politics in America in the first cold war and the liberal fear of 'authoritarian' masses, pp. 28-30.
 29. The right-wing films I have discussed are considerably less flexible and sophisticated. There are some exceptions; *Pale Rider's* gunfighter is an avenging **angel/monster** against an evil corporation, *for* the people; the cynical, racist *Volunteers* also satirises Kennedy-era Peace Corps liberalism as a front for CIA counter-insurgency (true enough!); the rabid John *Milius* appropriates 'revolutionary' designations for his *Red Dawn* heroes, just like Reagan's contra 'freedom fighters', but he also has the ideological perspicacity to have the Red Army announce to defeated Americans 'You have betrayed your revolutionary heritage' and then make the Maoist deviation of equating Soviet and American 'aggression'.