

HOLLYWOOD'S WAR ON THE WORLD: THE NEW WORLD ORDER AS MOVIE

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Introduction

Time itself has got to wait on the greatest country in the whole of God's universe. We shall be giving the word for everything: industry, trade, law, journalism, art, politics and religion, from Cape Horn clear over to Smith's Sound and beyond too, if anything worth taking hold of turns up at the North Pole. And then we shall have the leisure to take in the outlying islands and continents of the earth. We shall run the world's business whether the world likes it or not. The world can't help it – and neither can we, I guess.'

Holroyd, the American industrialist in Joseph Conrad, *Nostromo*, 1904.

'Talk to me, General Schwartzkopf, tell me all about it.' Madonna, singing 'Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend,'

Academy Awards Show, 1991.

There is chilling continuity in the culture of imperialism, just as there is in the lists of its massacres, its gross exploitations. It is there in the rhetoric of its apologists – from Manifest Destiny to Pax Britannica to the American Century and now the New World Order: global conquest and **homogenisation**, epochal teleologies of the most 'inevitable' and determinist nature imaginable, the increasingly explicit authoritarianism of political discourse, the tension between 'ultra-imperialism' and nationalism, both of the conquerors and the conquered.

In this discussion, I would like to consider recent American films of the Reagan-Bush period which take imperialism as their narrative material – that is, America's place in the global system, its relations with diverse peoples and political forces, the kind of America and the kind of world which are at stake. I will query to what extent the New World Order, the latest moment in imperialism's grisly proclamations of global hegemony, is pictured, prepared or contested in certain popular films of our time. Readers will see that this is an updating of analysis of what has been called Reaganite cinema from the 70s and 80s. Left critics have argued that Hollywood over the last twenty years had responded to social and political conflict and change with particular intensity. By integrating and **aesthetising** some of the politics of the movements of the 60s and 70s – civil rights, anti-war, counter-culture, feminism – films challenged much of the

iconography and generic myths of old Hollywood and retained youthful audiences alienated by popular anger over Vietnam, Watergate, racism, etc. But Hollywood has enthusiastically joined the Reagan 'counter-revolution'. Not only with the children's serials dressed up as blockbusters, like *Star Wars*, *Rocky*, *Superman*, *Indiana Jones*, or *ET*, which amused and reassured, but memorably with the string of war thrillers – *Rambo*, *Missing in Action*, *Top Gun* – which specifically relayed strategic and tactical Reaganite themes of anti-communism, 'freedom-fighting', vengeance and military masculinity.'

The films of the later 80s and early 90s both continue these trajectories and revamp them. How has Hollywood responded to the waning of the Second Cold War and then the collapse of the Communist adversaries, ultimate Reaganite wish fulfilment? To the continued conflict and turmoil throughout the third world? To continued economic crisis and social decay at home? To the waning of Reaganism itself?

The Gulf War as Movie: 'Globocop'

'No one in the world doubts the decency, courage and integrity of America.'

George Bush, February, 1991

'I can't find the words to express how the leadership of this government sicken me . . . (they) are a bunch of corrupt thieves, rapists and robbers.'

Anti-war activist Ron Kovics in *Born on the Fourth of July* (1990)

American culture has always stretched across this ideological traversal; the brutal realities of the American enterprise as settler-state, as imperial power, produce both the confident, blood-dropping simplicity of Bush and the inarticulate anguish over what America really does. Squaring these contradictory perspectives is often the project of American literature and film, even as an authoritarian chill creeps over political and cultural discourse in the West. The case study for this fear remains the overwhelming role the media played in the successful promulgation of the Gulf War. The Gulf War as media spectacle is crucial to understanding the ideology and aesthetics of the **dominant** culture. How imperialism represented and continues to represent itself was on display at the most politically controlled and conscious level. The success and strength of this obscene celebration of massacre and racism depended on the convergence of aesthetic and ideological developments of venerable standing in **American** and Western imperial culture. But it also witnessed their transformation and intensification in the media of the 80s.

It will not give solace to the many thousands of dead and dying in the West's brutal 'liberation of Kuwait' that to millions in the West it was really just another movie. But of course this was a movie on a grand scale, its promotion, pre-production and execution and exhibition the most costly block-buster of all. The authoritarian narrative propulsion of that build-up

was immense; as Ted Koppel helpfully explained, it would have been a real 'letdown' if war had not broken out. At a superficial level, the attraction of the spectacle was that of *vérité* documentary, the excitement of 'real' events relayed live. But that representation was obviously managed and controlled in the most rigid manner by teams of anchormen and 'experts'; the model was not only World War II propaganda, both Allied and Nazi, but the lessons learned in producing the smaller spectacles of Grenada, the Libyan raid, the invasion of Panama.⁷

For most of the audience, the media's war drew wildly on diverse fiction and entertainment forms. We couldn't help notice that Bush and his generals talked with the staccato grim humour of movie tough guys: they would kick ass, beat the Vietnam Syndrome, not fight with one arm tied behind their back, here's the luckiest man in Iraq tonight . . . In the manner of generals, they were re-fighting the last war, but it was Rambo's cinematic version, not the real one.

Similarly, we sometimes felt we were watching an exciting Western; a Toronto tabloid headlined the day of the land invasion *High Noon*. Or we switched to turgid talk shows with only retired generals as guests. More upbeat, many American commentators were obviously inspired by the Super Bowl. Much war footage was literally Nintendo-style, but also, in the extreme sanitation of the censorship, like horror or pornography; what we couldn't be shown provided a ghoulish frisson. Or we watched fragments of war flicks: jets took off repeatedly, just as in *Top Gun*, poignant vignettes of the boys or – ersatz feminism served – women at the front. Even generic details like an enemy who is both awesomely powerful and finally inept cannon fodder, a 'turkey shoot', were reproduced. Melodrama proved useful with weeping families at home or gas masks on, we were inside brave Israelis' homes. But the millions of Palestinians, maskless, under murderous curfew only miles away, were invisible. 'Our' side were constantly humanised. 'They' were faceless masses or demonised, calling on explicitly racist imagery of the Islamic Other deep in the West's Christian heart. The personalisation of the war as a crusade against **Saddam** as a particularly brutal dictator was audaciously successful, given his status as a typical pliant puppet, 'our son of a bitch', for years before the war.

The war marched on in homecoming parades, variety shows, highlight videos, on the Academy awards, with cards and dolls. Although it may be difficult to dramatise a war of such a character, we can expect new *Top Guns*. One wonders how the central strategies of firebombing civilians or destroying water supplies or napalming surrendering, retreating convoys or burying conscripts alive will play on the silver screen.

The essence of the New World Order's proclamation at the completion of the war was that America asserted an absolute right to extreme military intervention in the majority of the world we call the third world, that

Western economic interests are sacrosanct, that the most iniquitous relations in the world's economy must be absolutely enforced and maintained. The same old imperialism announced itself as re-invigorated. In the service of this order, the war was really a demonstration massacre, its story pre-determined; its numbing display as spectacle ensured everyone would get the message.

The War on the Third World

'All over the world, rock and roll is all they play.'

Theme from *Red Scorpion* (1989)

The essence of the New World Order, culturally, economically and militarily, is the threat to the third world – and the third world is everywhere in the popular media of the 80s. Even the ubiquity of the phrase indicates a naturalisation of grotesque hierarchies of unequal development. It provides exotic peoples and geography for countless rock videos and commercials and it fills the headlines with lurid and repetitive news of economic and natural catastrophes, famine, civil war, massacre and ecological devastation.

Seen through the prism of recent Hollywood war and cop thrillers, the third world is a frightening place for America. It is a world where America, as nation, state and myth, is constantly menaced and Americans fear a litany of villains – drug lords, crazed Arab terrorists and dictators, revolutionaries or Communists, especially if they're Vietnamese and, decreasingly, if they're Russians. In image and atmosphere, the menace is as much the hordes of the dark jungles or teeming cities of that world, and their swarthy colours and unfathomable exoticism: racial spectres haunt the screens with extraordinary intensity. Thankfully, those hordes are exorcised in gorgeously bloody climaxes. But as terrifying, *they* are increasingly invading the metropolitan shores, or worse, they are already here! For America itself can often be pictured only as a class-polarised social world reduced to the nightmares of fearful whites menaced by Reaganism-scarred ghettos, saved only by the military power of the state or its vigilantes. Of course, America and its feisty individualist heroes fight back, usually with the technological bombast and super-masculine muscularity which Stallone, and Schwarzenegger and Norris and, now, Van **Damme** and **Seagal** have taken from the comic books to the wide screen. (Not to mention those instances where the heroism required is *more* than human – *Robocop*, *The Terminator*.) Generically, these films have taken the precise location the West occupied on the silver screen, moving from continental conquest and genocide to encompass the global dimensions of American imperialism. In particular, they dramatise strategic Reagan-Bush campaigns – the militarisation of the War on Drugs and the continuing War on Terrorism, that is *their* terrorism, not *ours*. The

aesthetics of this cinema is literally visceral, centred upon elaborate illusions of grisly violence, first as evidence of the brutality of America's enemies, then as celebratory vindication of 'our' heroes' sadistic righteousness, as punctuation in cyclical and repetitive narratives of outrage and vengeance. But that bloody victory, satisfactory as it is, is usually provisional and precarious. America in the movies is both weak and strong, never safe for long.

This movie plays over and over, in countless television cop or spy shows or in the **mercenary/commando** thrillers, like *A-Team*, *Mission Impossible*, *Lightning Force*, *Counterstrike*, in racks of direct-to-video action flicks, and in many sequels to key Reaganite films. I will discuss a thematically representative number here. To begin with an egregious case, *Flight of the Intruder*, released during the Gulf War, refights the Vietnam War once more and concludes with an ecstatic celebration of the barbaric Christmas bombing of Hanoi in 1972, neatly eliding defeat. John Milius (*Apocalypse Now*, *Red Dawn*) is the sub-Kipling laureate of Reaganism, the most consciously reactionary of important Hollywood directors and writers. Here we see the generic simplification of central truths of the Right: the war could have been won; politicians and bureaucrats tied our hands; the purpose of the war is irrelevant compared to the successful use of power. Milius even has the audacity to begin the film with Johnson's announcement of the escalation of the war in response to the faked **Tonkin** Gulf incident, without comment. In the familiar master narrative, the heroes organise a renegade raid, in this case on downtown Hanoi, against the bureaucratic constraints, which force them to kill only 'farmers'. (With disturbing similarity to what we were watching on TV, the plot goes to absurd lengths to claim their bombs will hit nothing but 'concrete and steel'). The macho warrior culture of the Navy is just cute; that the heroes are bloodthirsty becomes humorous: 'I do love the work'. In an interesting variation, the heroes are saved from courtmartial when **Nixon** orders the Christmas raid. Kissinger's Madman Theory is the climax, with napalm bursting to the strains of both rock and roll and the Lord's Prayer.

This generic reduction of Vietnam to being a site for retro imperial fantasy played all decade. But the most impressive films about Vietnam continued to be anti-war. *Platoon*, *Casualties of War*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and *Born on the Fourth of July* have powerfully retained the repugnance and disgust a generation felt for that horrific war. They have been particularly acute in dissecting the sick, but absolutely 'normal' masculinity the military and a **militarised** society requires for the maintenance of everyday rule. This is the inverse of Milius' cute psychopaths. Similarly, they attempt to use the 'realism' of current representation of violence to **provoke** the moral outrage the war and its 'normal' atrocities demanded. *Born on the Fourth of July* even begins to take on the authoritarian nationalism of America in a painful and intimate fashion: 'There is no

God, there is no country!' the crippled hero screams. It is worth noting, however, that even these serious films can address the war only in the vaguest of political terms – it is a tragedy, certainly, but as much one of the American spirit, at war with itself. The Vietnamese can hardly be given any voice whatsoever, the war as imperialist against revolutionary struggle has no purchase in the truncated discourse of American liberalism. For example, Oliver Stone, the most radical and manifestly political of Hollywood directors, specifically folds the anger and militancy of his film into Democratic rhetoric, literally into the Party's 1976 convention.

While the strength of these films' anger should prevent Vietnam's total reduction to generic playground, this is the direction of the cop thriller *Off Limits* or the anti-war comedies *Air America* and *Good Morning, Vietnam*. The hilarious satire of the CIA's airline in Cambodia does provide a clear view of the machinations of American interests in Indochina, the drug-dealing, mass-murdering, dictator-loving realities behind those perpetual good American intentions. Unfortunately, the lovable comic heroes, like Robin Williams' manic disc jockey never disavow those intentions: they just become cynical or 'wise' about human tragedy.

Elsewhere, our heroes roam the third world, searching for new enemies, often literally as sequels to earlier rampages, always offering their adventures as 'good, small wars' that can be fought and won. Fresh from re-fighting Vietnam, *Rambo III* wipes up the Russians in Afghanistan. The film's chief interest, aside from the aesthetics of 'blowing things up good', lies in its determination to prettify Reagan's 'freedom fighters', here that most loathed enemy, Islamic fanatics. The iconic purchase is easily provided by that venerable trait of American and imperial heroism, the desire to 'go native', to dive into violent primitivism. Similarly, in *Red Scorpion*, a KGB Rambo, sent to destroy tribal rebels, joins them and the CIA, to the sound of rock and roll, as noted above, against Russians, Cubans and their African puppets. This undisguised celebration of UNITA or RENAMO seems to have been scripted by the South African secret service. *Delta Force 2*, having wiped out Palestinian terrorism in the opening film, sets its target on a favoured contemporary villain, a psychotic drug lord, who must be kidnapped to justice from his lair in a suitably corrupt and pliant Latin American country. The plot is one of numerous homages to the invasion of Panama and capture of General Noriega. As always, it is insubordinate commandos who must do the job, there are hostages to be saved and bureaucrats to be battled. The film goes to great lengths and extreme racist humour to justify 'morally' America's intervention militarily in sovereign nations: only America has the 'integrity and courage' to act resolutely; the weakness and corruption of the third world justifies the ferocity of the treatment meted out.

Notably, the military leaders, as in *Flight of the Intruder*, come on-side, with a wink and a nod, so the mission can be accomplished: the Right is

confident that the vigilantes and renegades are now in charge. For example, Clint **Eastwood** welcomes and reprises the Grenadan invasion in *Heartbreak Ridge*; it's a good chance to test that masculinity all these warriors spend so much time training to acquire. In *Toy Soldiers*, the 'rebel' sons of officers – at a training school, of course – prove their mettle to their dads in a battle with Columbian drug terrorists. Likewise in *Delta Force III*, state and tough guys are of one mind. The enemy is again Arab fundamentalist terrorism: this time with the Bomb. As in numerous films, the most visceral racism pictures Arabs as either exotic background or 'Indians' to be massacred. Not only is there no question the military fully supports our daring commando raid into some **tinpot** third world dictatorship; interventionism is not even at issue. In fact, the Americans are joined by Soviet commandos in what is surely the New World Order's favoured generic variation so far, the superpowers in alliance against crazed Arabs. A similar alliance of macho Yanks and Soviets propels *Iron Eagle II's* attack on yet another crazed Arab dictator.

This cooperation between the old enemies appears in a few films and, along with the replacement of Soviet villains with drug lords and Arabs, it is undoubtedly a reference to the collapse of Stalinism as an enabling condition of the ferocious interventionism the New World Order promises. As in the real world, the presence of the Soviets was a restraint and a challenge for unbridled American power, throughout the Cold War's hot wars in the third world over the last decades. But in general, Hollywood has not responded to the 'end of the Cold War' with anything like the topical opportunism of third world thrillers. The spy thrillers which dramatised the central, bipolar confrontations of the Cold War seem to be temporarily marginalised. There are a few exceptions. Soviets can still be villains who wish to destroy America, as in *The Hunt for Red October*, a noxious Red-baiting fantasy, but the film announces itself as dated, 'Before Gorbachev came to power'. In *Spies Like Us* and *The Russia House*, brutal espionage games are mocked and both CIA and KGB are defeated by romance. In *No Way Out*, the hero in the midst of insane CIA/State Department intrigue is a KGB agent. But the basis of these films is a banal convergence theory, a liberal version of the Cold War, and both sides can be equally culpable or venal.

Hollywood thrillers are much more involved with terrorism than the manifest ideological battle with Communism. *Die Hard* and *Die Hard II: Die Harder* are particularly clear updates of this central Reaganite melodrama. (Of course, it was usually placed within the Communist conspiracy, but these films illustrate its useful portability). The films play, almost parodically, tales of a lovable rebel cop battling bumbling bureaucrats to save 'America'. Secondary animus is directed against contemporary careerist feminism in a feeble resuscitation of a male-dominated couple and against 'the media', in a hysterical Spiro Agnewish denunciation of its

complicity with 'our' enemies. But the real interest is the portrayal of terrorism itself. Like key earlier films, (*Red Dawn, Invasion USA*), that ultimate fear, the invasion of America is at stake. Advanced capitalism is attacked in its most exemplary edifices, bank towers and airports. The America saved is weak and vulnerable to a terrorism it has created. This conundrum and plot reversal speaks to both the enormous popular cynicism about politics in America since the Iran-Contra scandals and its unsatisfactory cover-up by media and Congress, and to the pervasive fear of America's decline.

Of course, in most films such decline and weakness are blamed on others or cleansed by purgative violence. In *Delta Force II* the drug lord taunts that America is morally corrupt and needs his drugs . . . just before his spectacular death. *Marked for Death* presents the drug trade and the threatening relationship between America and the third world as a literal invasion of Jamaican gangs. Here the defender of America from this scourge must, in a particularly extreme version of vigilante justice, personally invade Jamaica to defeat the drug lords. The film stands out, even among the films discussed here, for its visceral racism and the blatant political coding given its villains. The gangs are the most loathsome combination imaginable – Rastafarianism, voodoo, quasi-revolutionary cult and conspiracy against the children of America.

In many important Reaganite narratives, hostages provide the plot and vengeance motives. This anxious lineage harks back to the captivity narratives of early settler America and on through the foundations of the Western in literature and film. The sagas of innocents held by savages speak to deep fears and desires about miscegenation, civilised identity and the nature of the American project in general. They can explore the delights of 'going native' – either to begin to oppose the 'civilising mission' altogether or for taking on the savagery necessary to its achievement. Hostages figure schematically in many of the thrillers mentioned above, but nowhere so emotionally effective as in *Not Without My Daughter*. This women's melodrama goes to the source of the great **hostage trauma** of recent years, Iran, for a 'true story' recreation. An American is brutally held with her daughter in Teheran by her born-again Islamic fanatic husband. We are forced to respond **to the** fanaticalfaces of the Islamic Other with fear and total incomprehension. While American racism seems to provide some of the motives for the husband's conversion, its extremism overwhelms and invalidates any liberalism. The feisty heroine escapes finally: an American flag fills the screen as she whispers 'Baby, we're home'. It is a useful example of how vague liberal ideas can be subordinated to the vigour of reaction.

In contrast to the emotional power of this film, feminism is either ignored or appropriated with casual opportunism in many of the films discussed. Women are occasionally allowed to be tough **guys**.³ Mostly they

figure as objects of the outrages of America's enemies or as sexual entertainment for heroes and audience. In these melodramas, masculinity is the overwhelming concern. The extreme masculinity the films construct and celebrate is a fantastic, comical solution to America's weakness. Women, and sexual escapades, punctuate the films, as protection against the homoeroticism of the military camaraderie of all these male groups – the buddies, the platoons, the army itself. These are films of functional male hysteria.

In a few films, the third world can be sensuously attractive as well as dangerous. In *Revenge*, a basic military hero crosses the border to Mexico for an adventurous discovery of real masculinity and erotic bliss with the wife of a drug lord. Despite that lover's brutal death, the film ends in mystical male communion; this is one drug lord who gets to live. *Wild Orchids* also uses the third world, in particular Rio and its carnival, as a site of wild abandon where Westerners can overcome their repressions and discover their sexual desires. It is also, rather lamely, one of the few films to attempt to represent the working of transnational capital. In most of the films, the only transnational economies are those of the drug trade and the military.

Overall, most of these films about the third world offer several important political allegories. First, the narrative trope of rebel heroes against spineless, amoral bureaucracy maintains a vicarious and vacuous individualism which social reality allows little room for: an ersatz rebelliousness is enlisted for the status quo. This also negotiates central confusions in conservative ideologies about the state itself. On the one hand, the Right detests its laxness, liberalism and bureaucracy and set out through the 80s to destroy the social, welfare and regulatory functions built up over decades of social compromise in advanced capitalism. On the other, Reaganism bloated that state even more with unprecedented military Keynesianism, vast subsidies of all kinds in its 'socialism for the rich' and the reinforcement of the repressive apparatus to police the class relations of a leaner, meaner capitalism. This double movement is fictionally negotiated; the heroes fulfil the needs of the *nation* for, and despite or even against, the state. These *para-state* warriors do what the state should do, glorifying its repressive might at second hand, privatising and deregulating state violence itself. Of course, this narrative also literally played in newspaper headlines all decade, in Reagan's dirty secret wars, in the secret armies of Oliver North or Adolph Coors, in the death squads of every American client state. The importance of the cinematic version is to make these horrors and violations entertaining and 'natural'. While this narrative still propels countless films and TV thrillers, increasingly our rebels and commando squads become legitimate agents of the state, their illegality or immorality is much less of an ideological problem in fiction just as it is not a problem for the US news media in Panama or Iraq or Nicaragua.

A central contradiction for dominant ideology in art is always that even the most reactionary resolutions require the exciting dramatisation of fears, dilemmas and disruptions of the normal social order. The third world in general – its unavoidable place in the world – causes fear and anxiety in all these films. That fear is materially rooted since the social turmoil and economic devastation the West brings is hurled back in collective struggles of revolution, nationalism and communism. Perhaps the fear is a translation and rejection of the liberal or Christian guilt many Westerners experience contemplating the widening gulf between rich and poor, the evident pillaging of the 'developing' world by the developed. This fear and guilt is obviously part of American political discourse and strategy, however liberal or reactionary. But in the revenge flicks, such struggles are folded into the narratives, depoliticised, criminalised; any action against America is likely criminal or insane. The masses appear as passive background or target practice for super-heroes. The third world is something like a vast ghetto, whose relationship to America is only threat or military target. This drastic circumscription fits the exigencies of a New World Order and its string of 'low intensity conflicts' with alarming simplicity. But still those threatening masses linger as image.

As noted earlier, America in the movies is both mighty and weak, never safe for long. On the one hand, smug triumphs, banal rhetoric and globalising hubris conclude most of these films. But the fears which begin the films are of American weakness in the face of global hostility. America is rarely represented with interests to secure in the third world; this is much less explicit celebration of the benefits of imperialism than, for example, British imperial culture of the late 19th century. The only transnational economies seem to be drugs and guns; America brings rock and roll . . . and death. Often America is represented only by the 'democratic' military group or the super-heroes. Like the ambivalence about the state, the simultaneous reduction of American presence and celebration of its global reach addresses a contradiction in ideology: it tries to square isolationism with the demands of super-power imperialism. It dramatises the extremism of contemporary international inequality, but also shows some hesitation or confusion about its appropriately benign or democratic costume. This American weakness also surely refers to bourgeois anxieties about America's decline in the world economically in relation to European and Japanese capital or other foreigners. The future of American national capitalism, let alone its leadership, in an emerging and uncertain transnational economy is not sure. The combination of weakness and might speaks to the contradiction between ultra-imperialism and nationalism for America itself.

Wars on the Ghettoes

'... in the conservative tradition, crime is a figure for class struggle.'

Fredric Jameson

Of course, America does not need to invade ghettoes around the world, it has plenty right at home. That is where the War on Drugs really started to say No! If we switch our view briefly to the related and complementary films which play out their violent dramas domestically, in America itself, this weakness of America is even more glaring. Cinematically, the nation's social landscape is very often a ghetto nightmare of violence, **drug**-addicted despair and gang war, with a few crusading cops to stave off anarchy. The central political contradiction the films reveal, in their intense overlapping of bombast and anxiety, is that the America heroes defend and fight for all over the world is a hollowed-out shell at home. This is not an exact political economy, of course, but a dramatisation and fearful extrapolation of real social and political processes and conflicts.

In dozens of TV cop thrillers, in the crudely sensational police *vérité* shows like *Cops*, in film after film, the social decay of urban America is literally the narrative pre-text and structure. To cite some recent films, from hundreds of examples: the *Death Wish* and *Dirty Harry* series and their many imitators over 20 years, the *Beverly Hills Cop*, *48 Hours*, *Lethal Weapon* series, the teen gang 'tragedies' like *Colors* or *Boyz n' the Hood*, all the films of **Stephen Seagal**, the authoritarian educational morality tales like *Stand Tall*, the striking revival of the gangster film, *The Untouchables*, *Goodfellas*, *The Godfather III*, *King of New York*, *New Jack City*, or to cross genres, in the nightmare ghettoes of *Jungle Fever* or *Bonfire of the Vanities*.

These films dramatise American capitalism, often more expressedly than the third world allegories discussed above. Again, this social decay filled the headlines of news media all decade: the homeless, **de**-industrialisation, racial conflict, gang wars, drug epidemics, declining living standards and the institutionalisation of the so-called under-class, to note the obvious. But the ghetto predates Reagan, it is the structural form of the constitutively racist nature of American capitalism. The films' use of the ghetto variously contains this history – of slavery, of civil war, of the Great Society reforms, of the civil rights movement and its derailment, of the Black Panthers – even while they dramatically address conjunctural exacerbation. The Hollywood ghettoes are filled with echoes of the past and victims of Reaganism; either as objects of sentimental sympathy or as villains to fear and vanquish.

In more reactionary films, that is all they are and this fear is specifically racial; it is the black and increasingly **hispanic** masses who are demonised and criminalised and targeted in film after film. They are the exact equivalent to the exotic masses of the third world; repeatedly, the ghetto is

labelled a jungle. Normal America appears, as in the third world films, largely to be outraged and invaded by this always-there third world inside the first. Similarly, this circumscribed world becomes part of the justification for military action as solution to these socially and politically produced dilemmas. Here the repetitive tale of rebel against bureaucrat and against evil criminal is an argument for increased militarised policing, for reduced rights for everyone to defeat the menace, for harassment and destruction of dissidence, always coded as criminal. It is the same argument that played in the Reaganite media, judiciary and Congress all decade.

There is a class dimension in this narrative and imagery, as well, most obviously, with the rich in their towers and the poor in their jungles below. But, importantly, and more submerged, this is also a fear of the working class, in America historically multi-racial. The working class is practically invisible in American cinema, but the destruction of America's industrial infrastructure, the punitive assaults on working class jobs, wages, rights and unions are part of and pre-condition of this devastated American cityscape, coded into racial and criminal antagonism.

But this view of urban America decayed and declining should also be seen as anxious from a bourgeois perspective. The destruction of urban infrastructure, of whole regions and industries, of that 'normal' social life called a bourgeois civil society is also a source of ruling class worry. (Even if the films, and much of that ruling class, favour the most violent and authoritarian responses.) Capital may well hurtle with elastic mobility around the globe but the creative destruction of productive capacity is still destruction. American capitalism is still left with its declining profits, its financial speculation bubble bursting, its questionable ability to compete in a competition it has organised. This destroyed America speaks to the anxieties of a national capitalism declining in a rapidly transforming world. To take one generic detail: a striking number of the ghetto thrillers climax in empty, gutted factories of the Northeast Rustbelt. The fierce ideological resolutions play against and are surrounded by the literal evidence of America's glory days and its present decay. As will be noted, the critique of capitalism becomes increasingly explicit in recent American film.

In a number of films, a progressive slant on Jameson's remark begins to take shape. In the long tradition of social bandits, several films place criminality as a justified social response to intolerable conditions, gang warfare as the only collective struggle available. The gang in *New Jack City* and *King of New York* justify their crimes as responses to the Reaganite devastation, the class struggle directed against their communities. These good/evil drug lords are partially valorised against the usual renegade cops. Christopher Walken's over the top *King* is especially notable: he leads the black youth in a crime crusade for socialised medicine! (This is testimony to both the insistence of the social in contemporary criminality and the extreme circumscription of 'normal' political discourse.)

Elsewhere, in Hollywood genres, social banditry has enjoyed tremendous popularity in the last few years: the film and TV *Robin Hood*, the anti-corporate outlaws of *Young Guns I* and *II*, the brilliant overlaying of gender and class in the feminist outlaw saga of *Thelma and Louise*.

This class and ethnic struggle is part of the gangster film's history in Hollywood: the gangsters rise in revenge against a white and WASP class structure. Of course, the social rebellion has an expressly capitalist trajectory. The social structure violates the class mobility the American Dream offers; the gangster's organisation is specifically a shadow version of capitalist enterprise. But it always foregrounds the criminality of legitimate business. When Don Corleone wants to go legit, he tries to buy a transnational corporation; the subsequent intrigue and double-dealing leads him to conclude sadly: 'the higher up you go, the crookeder it gets'. This is an easy translation from American capitalism of the 80s, popularly understood as criminal, in its wheeling, dealing boondoggles, the conviction of key financial figures, the indicting of most of the Reagan cabinet, the S&L scandals, and on and on. Several liberal or comic 'exposés' cover the same territory – *Wall Street*, *Working Girl*, *Bonfire of the Vanities*: even cartoon superheroes struggle in film noir nightmares of decaying capitalist cities – *Batman*, *Darkman*, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* A popular cinematic critique of American capitalism has clearly developed, with confused and vague political features.

Often, this social explanation of crime and capitalism specifically refuses politics. Young gangsters pointedly mock the failed reformism of their civil rights elders in several films. The derailing of that movement and the bankruptcy of the black Democrats in real social conflict is clear enough. The vague politics of black nationalism and pride, would-be capitalism, or return to moral rearmament and patriarchal certainty, circulate in these ghetto thrillers. But the climatic solutions offered are usually the same law and order vengeance across all the films.

This version of America may be considered apocalyptic, but Hollywood is prepared to go even further. A series of successful science fiction films through the 80s projects a capitalist, and particularly Reaganite, future, only a few years away. It is a future of collapse, of further catastrophic decay, of more extreme gang and racial warfare. The future is both technologically hyper-modern and socially barbaric. This is the dark, dystopian inverse of the triumphalism and utopianism of rhetoric and headline. Hollywood has seen the New World Order already – its a New Bad Future, as one critic puts it. With generic roots in both dystopian sci-fi and film noir and the particular influence of *Blade Runner* and the *Mad Max* series, recent films have become more explicitly anti-capitalist. *Robocop I* and *II* project a mad fantasy world of corporate megalomania, drug-dealing, ghetto-bashing and precisely condemn its capitalist basis. The cop avenger narrative fits unevenly with the anti-Reaganite satire, but

even the robot-hero is a parody of the artificial masculinity these superheroes require. *Gremlins II unleashes* its nasty monsters on the totalitarian techno-utopian tower of a Donald Trump clone. In *They Live*, it is finally revealed that yuppies, the ruling class and Reagan himself are alien lizards. (I always suspected this.) It is the homeless and the displaced working class who lead the assault on the TV towers. A victorious rebellion also concludes *Total Recall*. Here corporate maniacs have created a slave capitalism on Mars. Schwarzenegger must lead a mutant proletariat to wash away this intolerable world in an apocalyptic ecological and class explosion. Class struggle is usually absent or submerged in mainstream film; oppositional films like *Matewan* with its celebration of union courage, or the cleverly hilarious assault on Reaganism and call for a return to the days of militant resistance in *Roger and Me*, are rare exceptions on commercial screens. But these sci-fi entertainments call for and contain images of collective struggle against domestic and international capitalism; the movies are capable of imagining different futures.

The Sequel? Contradiction and Resistance

'It's never over, so we never lose!'

CIA agent in Havana

As I have indicated, notwithstanding the simple and disturbing picture many films offer, the same Hollywood, in the waning of Reaganism since the Iran-Contra Scandals of the mid-80s, has also produced films which, more or less militantly, criticise capitalism's role in the world. These films carry the politics of anti-racism and black nationalism, protest at the imperial rampaging of America's armies and spies, and positively portray anti-imperialist struggle, particularly in Central America and South Africa.

Cry Freedom!, *Biko*, *A Long White Season* and *A World Apart* sympathetically dramatise the collective struggle against South African apartheid and have been part of the popular solidarity which has aided that fight. *The Mission* exposes the depravity of Christian and European invasion of Latin America hundreds of years ago. It shows those usually faceless and voiceless in militant and armed resistance. Liberation theology is also given an unusual, spiritual presence on screen. This is important, as well, to *Romero* in contemporary El Salvador. The portrayal of the atrocities which maintain the New World Order, as it has existed for decades, is moving and provocative. The sympathetic picture of leftist opposition is particularly important as a corrective to *Salvador*, which was even more corrosive in its condemnation of America's role, but derided or ignored the opposition altogether. The vicious satire of *Walker*, following American imperialism in Nicaragua back to its beginnings and forward to

the contemporary world, was particularly militant. It was also, in solidarity, produced in Nicaragua, difficult for an American company in the late 80s. Somewhat more gently, *Ishtar* portrays the CIA as vicious maniacs and romanticises fanciful third world revolutionaries. Turning to domestic imperialism and racism, the hero of *Dances with Wolves* goes native in service of native struggles; *Glory*, in the American civil war, movingly celebrates armed black self-liberation in that second unfinished American revolution; *Do the Right Thing!* updates that militancy expressly to racial antagonism now; and *The Milagro Beanfield War* champions Hispanic resistance to racism and ongoing economic ~~attack~~.⁴

It would be appropriate and conventional to offer **Marxist** qualifications to this praise. Indeed, several of these films direct their anger into liberal sentimentality, fudge issues of class, hinge their identification on Western or white characters, slip into the portrayal of third world people as exotic or passive. But, nonetheless, they contribute, and are evidence of, an increasingly coherent critique of imperialism, America's role in it and the direction of struggle against it. They will be an invaluable beginning in cultural politics of solidarity and resistance over the years to the crimes the New World Order is likely to perpetrate. (This discussion obviously leaves aside the essential and admirable work in oppositional documentary film and video on many of these themes by militants throughout the third world and in solidarity work in the first.)

A concluding example is even more striking. *Havana*, in 1990, is a specific romanticisation of the Cuban revolution. In homage to *Casablanca*, its hero must be transformed from desultory gambler to commitment. While Bogey had to learn to defend Democracy, **Redford** must come to the side of the revolution: in this case, the continent's most obsessively detested target of American imperialism for 30 years. It is an important sign of cultural contradiction that Hollywood can produce such a glamorous ode to a revolution, and a revolution likely to be the next target of the New World Order.

Hollywood's belligerence, its war on the third world and much of the domestic population, is a translation of the military and economic targets of the restructuring of American and global capitalism and its particular present-day variants. But the America which must carry out the task is a disastrously weakened shell of its former glory, all puffed up ideology and armed bullying, constantly preyed upon by internal and external enemies, at war often with itself as well as the world. In 'triumph', American culture also pictures itself in something of a death agony. The resolution of such fears requires the utmost in delightful violence but constantly raises the very dilemmas and fears, in an exciting and disruptive way, which it claims to resolve. At both the utopian level of the New World Order, and the string of 'good small wars' it promises and Hollywood aestheticises, its targets are those produced, made miserable by and variously resisting the

system which all the violence is required to maintain. Necessarily, the targets keep fighting back, even in the form of endless sequels. But Hollywood has also produced important images of resistance and critique, as well, where the logic of struggle against this system becomes popularly comprehensible. But even the worst triumphalism parades in debased or demonised form its own potential 'grave-diggers'.

'Did you win or lose?', Redford's newly committed gambler asks the CIA agent fleeing revolutionary Cuba in 1959 for a new assignment in, of course, Saigon: the foreboding answer is 'It's never over so we never lose.' It is crucial to see that this phrase is both triumphal boast and anxious prediction. The Left must surely, however the New World Order purports to rearrange the terrain and intensify the onslaught, begin to rebuild its own sense of intransigence. The New World Order promises the same misery throughout two thirds of the world and increased travails for the working classes and oppressed of the 'rich' first world; it will produce the same kinds of courageous opposition capitalism always has. This message is there in the shadows of Hollywood's, and capitalism's, 'glorious' wars.

NOTES

1. For a comprehensive survey, see Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988); also, Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), Scott Forsyth, 'Evil Empire: Spectacle and Imperialism in Hollywood', *Socialist Register 1987*, (London: Merlin Press, 1987).
2. It often seemed the military and the media were literally following the lessons of authoritarian propaganda; the categories of the Frankfurt School's analysis of cultural industries, built up in relation to war propaganda and military intelligence, never seemed more *emotionally* astute, albeit theoretically overstated. See Theodor Adorno, 'Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda' in Paul Roazen, (ed.), *Sigmund Freud* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1975).
3. In a complementary discussion of fear of the third world in science fiction, the heroine of *Aliens* is considered an example of opportunistic feminism enrolled in defence of the first world against a monstrous and metaphoric third world. See Charles Ramirez Berg, 'Immigrants, Aliens and Extraterrestrials: Science Fiction's Alien "Other" as (Among Other Things) New Hispanic Imagery', *CineAction*, 18, 1989.
4. Other films, though aware of issues of imperialism and racism, are much more equivocal. *Mosquito Coast* and *Farewell to the King* are both consciously Conradian parables. In the former, a crazed patriarch flees a corrupt America to recreate the settler Utopia in the Caribbean. This cross between *Swiss Family Robinson* and *Heart of Darkness* specifically mocks America's sense of itself in the world, its claims to ultimate knowledge and technological hubris. But the hero's descent into madness exonerates America once more. In the latter, the ever-surprising John Milius condemns Japanese, British and American imperialism in the most extreme nativist fantasy of historical regression. Away from *civilisation*, a white king can rule over an arcadian jungle of patriarchal bliss.