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SPECTACLE VS. NARRATIVE

Action political movies in the new millennium

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Spectacle is hardly a new concept in Hollywood film studies. Having been part and parcel of the commercial, artistic and academic approach to the industry from its inception, by the 1970s it was, as Scott Bukatman reminds us, the reinvention of the science fiction genre with Star Wars (Lucas, 1977) that paved the way for the summer blockbuster routine that has subsequently become a staple of the Hollywood calendar. George Lucas’s film was important for a number of reasons: “With that first shot [Star Wars] redefined space, displaced narrative, and moved cinema into the revived realm of spectacular excess,” confirms Bukatman (1998: 248).

In Bukatman’s telling description, Star Wars “exploded the frame of narrative cinema” referencing the medium’s early epics while pointing towards the technological revolution in on-screen pyrotechnics as well as future home-viewing wizardry (ibid.). In short it “re-legitimated the spectacular” as Barry Langford would have it, after a period of reflexive reconsideration during the so-called New Hollywood renaissance of the early 1970s (2010: 248). Nevertheless, Bukatman is keen to emphasise that the film did not forsake narrative entirely; merely reproduced it in a comforting formula for a new generation that could appreciate its age-old good vs. evil scenario on a whole new level. What Star Wars achieved with its camerawork therefore, became the template for sci-fi to explore space, planets, cities and alien craft in a blaze of wonderment and traditional story-telling: from Star Trek: The Motion Picture (Wise, 1979) to Stargate (Emmerich, 1994), from Close Encounters of the Third Kind (Spielberg, 1977) to Blade Runner (Scott, 1982) (Bukatman 1998: 252).

Still, whatever these films – and this genre – achieved by way of productive narrative ingenuity, the argument stuck that the blockbuster spectacle was here to stay and narrative was starting to be devoured at its expense. Geoff King contends that spectacle had an important economic retort to confront too. That the challenges from beyond the movies such as TV and consumer culture more widely, pushed Hollywood to create ever more lavish sci-fi, disaster, and ‘sword-and-sandal’ epics, all reimagining the studio routine in ever greater, larger-than-life situations. As if to remind us that the industry likes reinvention, twenty-first century incarnates such as Gladiator (R. Scott, 2000), Alexander (Stone, 2004) and Troy (Petersen, 2004) not only served to cast the latter sub-genre’s historical epic tradition in a new light, with the latest special effects on display, but also served, King states, as a “reminder of the
extent to which little has changed in nearly a half century of New Hollywood tradition” (King 2002: 178). Recurrent tropes in the action spectacle have also been accompanied by key scholarly interventions in aspects of capitalism, history – as above – and masculinity, a trait David Bordwell describes as one of the longest running ‘crises’ in film studies, let alone blockbuster action movies (2006: 104).

Nevertheless, despite such interventions, the central conceit remained. “Some suggest that spectacle has become the dominant tendency of contemporary blockbuster production. Narrative is usually identified as the victim”, King surmised in the early 2000s (2002: 179). A generation on from Bukatman’s examples, spectacle had reached well beyond the confines of blockbuster science fiction, crisscrossing genres with creatures of all kinds in Alien (R. Scott, 1979) and Predator (McTiernan, 1987) as well as the dinosaurs of Jurassic Park (Spielberg, 1993) and the submerging Titanic (Cameron, 1997). Indeed the trajectory that Bukatman and King describe might be seen to have its apotheosis in the current, powerful age of spectacle epitomised by the Dark Knight (2005–), Iron Man (2008–), Avengers (2012–), X-Men (2000–), Thor (2011–) and Captain America (2011–) franchises. Hollywood film has reaffirmed itself as a “cinema of attractions” to use Tom Gunning’s famous phrase (quoted in Bukatman 1998: 254).

Graphically plotting the change in structure of films over time also seems to confirm the trend for visual display. An evolutionary line rising to a crescendo of action at the climax of movies of the earlier period has now been transformed into a contemporary rollercoaster ride where the spectacle film today is interrupted by periodic, and concentrated, bursts of excitement, maintaining an audience’s emotional but also thrill-seeking involvement throughout the duration of the movie (King, 2002: 185–193).

Despite this plotting, King, like Bukatman, is right to speculate as to whether narrative has truly been superseded, not least working on the premise that, as hinted at, spectacle has in fact always been an endemic part of Hollywood’s cinematic construction, and narrative continues to remain prevalent within current spectacle-induced fantasies like those above as well as the Twilight (2009–12) and The Hunger Games (2012–) series, to name but two more variants. More than that, as the likes of David Bordwell (1985), Richard Maltby (1995), Elizabeth Cowie (1997) and others have pointed out, narrative has hardly been a stable construction on its own terms either, and whatever “classical narrative form” there is in Hollywood works within a multitude of different strains adaptable to these and other blockbuster behemoths. “Narrative and spectacle aren’t mutually exclusive concepts,” charges Bordwell. “Every action scene, however ‘spectacular’ is a narrative event” (2006: 104). Indeed, where this argument logically ends up is accepting, if not purposefully arguing for blockbusters adopting their own ranking according to quite discreet and sophisticated spectacle and narrative conceits combined. To achieve both while at the same time maintaining a critical and commercial trajectory, is the sign of blockbuster spectacle heaven, or, as King puts it, “something akin to the sublime” (King 2006: 334).

At the head of this construction in modern Hollywood is a director such as Christopher Nolan. At once a blockbuster franchise luminary, exemplified by the rebooted Batman series, while also an auteurist visionary capable of engaging his audience with stand-alone spectacle in the form of Inception (2010) and Interstellar (2014), Nolan has become the spectacle-auteur par excellence in the early twenty-first century. Of crucial concern here, though, is that his films have also offered something of the ‘political’ in their fixations on corporations, establishment forces and institutional characters and representatives. Furthermore, the penchant for comic book adaptation derived from Marvel and D.C. Publications especially, has seen dystopian science-fiction mix action and adventure with fantasy and even horror as the
archetypal templates of such franchises. Despite Nolan’s presence, however, the ‘political’, where it does intervene, largely remains a ‘lower-case’ idea, rather more than it is an ‘upper-case’ precept. It is true that his *Dark Knight* trilogy has reimagined Batman’s Gotham milieu as a site of political allegory in the global terror age; and a series like *X-Men* has provoked critical responses in its attention to historical political settings – the Cuban Missile Crisis, the assassination of President Kennedy, etc. – as well as constructed diegetic political actors within the confines of the stories’ world view. But these films have been very different texts in comparison to 1990s movies such as *Independence Day* (Emmerich, 1996) and *Air Force One* (Petersen, 1997) where overt political actors appear in largely recognisable situational form – though the former does of course involve alien invasion! – whilst being wedded to blockbuster aesthetics.

In 2013 then, in the face of the overwhelming dominance of the blockbuster/comic book adaptation juggernaut, it was with some surprise that two ‘politically’ charged spectacle movies did appear staking a claim for a newly energised role in a crowded summer movie marketplace. *Olympus Has Fallen* (*Olympus*) directed by Antoine Fuqua and ‘blockbuster veteran’ Roland Emmerich’s *White House Down* (*WHD*) were curious entities in a number of ways. For one, their premise – of the White House being attacked and taken over by rogue/foreign/mercenaries – appeared nearly identical to each other. In *Olympus*, ex-communicated presidential protection agent Mike Banning (Gerard Butler) launches a one-man rescue mission to rid the White House of invading North Korean terrorists, while *WHD* features Channing Tatum’s aspiring Washington DC cop who wants to work on the presidential detail and yet finds himself on nothing more than a White House tour with his daughter when a selection of mercenaries led by retiring Head of Detail, Martin Walker (James Woods), bomb the Capitol and take over the Oval Office.

Second, with the so-called ‘war on terror’ of the Bush era well over a decade old and American forces removed and/or retreating from Iraq and Afghanistan, the films’ forceful reactionary nature towards the politics of terror seemed – on the surface at least – somewhat at odds with Obama-era positivism; though the events in the Middle-East at the time of release as well as the films’ prototypical national nemeses, Iran and North Korea, chimed with the fecundity of fear about events taking place in those regions. Within a year, indeed, the rise of Islamic State (IS) across large swathes of Syria and Iraq brought fears of further instability and global threat so the films might be accused of being not far short of the foreign policy mark retrospectively. Third, while the two films – presidents once again in peril and called upon to save the day – had clear antecedents in the form of the aforementioned 1990s pictures – one of which Emmerich directed – their socio-cultural agendas and political rationale were anything but straightforward and gung-ho, even if the two paved the way for obviously redemptive ideological and political endings.

The sudden re-emergence of the spectacle political movie confirmed their paucity in the Hollywood stable. The spy thriller, foreign policy movie and war-on-terror age had produced notable franchises in the early 2000s, not least the *Bourne* series of films (2002–) where security and military services linked directly and indirectly to political affiliates. And the minor franchise *National Treasure* was an unexpected hit with an original in 2004 grossing over $370 million worldwide and a 2007 sequel (an even more impressive $457 million worldwide take), both of which toyed with the idea of conspiracies and secrets related to America’s founding fathers and the nation’s political past.²

The ‘war on terror’ in its military guise received plenty of attention too (*Rendition* [Hood, 2007], *Lions for Lambs* [Redford, 2007], *Redacted* [De Palma, 2007]), not least the twin assault by director Kathryn Bigelow on the dangers of foreign policy incision and occupation
(The Hurt Locker [2008]) and the belated identification and elimination of Osama bin Laden (Zero Dark Thirty [2012]). And on television, the runaway success of Fox TV’s 24 over eight seasons from 2001 (with 24: Live Another Day rebooting the show in 2014), as well as Homeland (2011–) and Hostages (2013–), saw successive political figures – predominantly presidents – caught in the web of terrorist cabals and repetitive threats to office and country.

And yet while Fuqua’s and Emmerich’s films had lineage to these previous productions, their films were respectively at odds with this collection and they were anything but obvious rejoinders to a youth market coached in the manner of modern Marvel/D.C. pedagogy where, thanks to almost limitless technological CGI, space, time and possibilities for conflict and destruction on an epic scale seemed endless. Indeed, surrounding Olympus and WHD during 2013 were examples – Iron Man 3 (Black, 2013), Avengers Assemble (Whedon, 2012), Star Trek: Into Darkness (Abrams, 2013), Man of Steel (Snyder, 2013) – whose spectacle and conflagration appeared to visually throw the White House assaults into anachronistic relief. The sub-texts of these sci-fi/superhero movies also offered the appearance of deliberative and philosophical engagement with America’s actual diplomatic world view, captured in a sci-fi vortex of ‘unknown others’, institutional secrecy, and conflictual world-policeman status.

And yet Olympus, on a budget of $70 million, recouped just short of $100 million by the spring of 2013 in the US alone. Its worldwide gross turned out to be $161 million placing the movie forty-third on the 2013 list of highest box-office takes. White House Down had a production budget that was more than double its rival but still managed to take a very respectable $205 million worldwide in 2013, putting it thirty-seventh on the year-end list. These were hardly record-breaking returns but they were anything but commercial flops either.

Olympus has Fallen and WHD lacked substantial critical appeal as well. Both were objected to on a number of levels, the principal one being their preposterousness. Both films lacked what Terry Christensen and Peter Hass would describe as the ability to “mimic and/or re-create reality” or, put simply, to be convincingly authentic (Christensen and Hass 2005: 6–7). The look, aesthetics, construction and generic form of political movies are what give meaning and understanding to their mimicking of the actual political establishment around them, argue Christensen and Hass. By their model, Olympus and WHD failed spectacularly in this regard.

From the latter’s opening sweep across the Capitol with the Marine One helicopter making any number of illegal manoeuvres, to the gapping lax security inside the Capitol Building that gets blown to smithereens early in Emmerich’s film, WHD’s action film pretensions literally overwhelm the political settings from the very first moments, to little effect for some. As critic Peter Bradshaw observed: “[t]he basic silliness of all those CGI effects and all the digitally fabricated action mean that real thrills – dependent on real, believable jeopardy – are not on offer: just cheerfully absurd spectacle and a little bit of humour” (Bradshaw, 2013).

Olympus, on the other hand, begins with the president (Aaron Eckhart) engaged in an unlikely boxing scene, sparring with Banning, his personal protection detail, and joking that he’s not supposed to be hit in the face, a signal of his resilient fighting ability later in the picture. The audience are subsequently confronted with a Korean diplomatic mission sprouting into an all-out assault force who proceed to take over the White House inside and out without any thought to security and background checks having ever been entertained. Trapped inside while the carnage rages outside, Banning and the president’s young son display an alarmingly good knowledge of every nook and cranny of the White House almost as if their inside information had been waiting for just such a crisis to emerge.
Yet inauthenticity like this actually helps explain some of the appeal of the two films. Preposterousness alone may not act as a guiding principle for the critical or commercial acceptance of action spectacle political movies or indeed their relevance and import beyond the confines of today's multiplex culture. But inauthentic preposterousness has actually been quite a significant factor in political drama and, I want to suggest in this chapter, has in fact encompassed a political discourse over the last decade that has some ideological force and resonance. Using Thomas Elsaesser's arguments concerning narrative, realism in cinema can have a "purposive" reading to it on the part of the audience who are willing to suspend disbelief for the benefit of some wider goal. "Such an interpretation could account for the fact that one can tolerate a good deal of improbability in the characters [and] lack of plausibility in the situations," says Elsaesser. As long as there are "sufficient elements which allow for the possibility of 'consistent reading' on another level of articulation," the film can have meaning and import for its audience (2012: 99). In political spectacle movies, this import may not be along the lines of an ideological left and right built out of aesthetic signifiers, a conservative and liberal binary contesting policy and philosophy if you will. But it does operate figuratively, in a more deeply embedded psychological arena where politics now resides in the inauthentic space between culture, meaning and discourse. Examining that space offers some profitable analysis to contend with.

**Spectacle as political agency**

Debating the merits of whether spectacle has displaced narrative or whether narrative has always been subject to translation and reformulation, is a useful exercise in building up seams of inquiry in the post-Classical era then. Spectacle is, as King restates, the “interruption”, the “intrusive presence” (2002: 179) that forces us to gasp, or behold, the visual repertoire before our eyes. Narrative remains the traditional trajectory of a film; and today it has become increasingly idealised as theoretical/conceptual shorthand for character-driven, thoughtful, intensive, maybe even cerebral fare. In other words, narrative films belong for some in a particular mode of filmmaking while in the blockbuster world at least, spectacle has more or less triumphed as an object of narrative momentum in and of itself. Narrative is thus the stuff of drama, be it historical, social and/or political.

Spectacles, on the other hand, maintain central components that are energetic and confrontational on an epic scale, increasingly concerning the fate of the planets/universe. While films such as *The Dark Knight Rises* (Nolan, 2012), *Prometheus* (R. Scott, 2012) and *Iron Man 3* have garnered some praise for their complex inner-workings within a spectacle-fuelled milieu, the intended rush of adrenalin accompanying action-driven films like the *Fast and Furious* series (2001–), the Marvel/DC adaptations led by *Avengers Assemble*, and the eye-popping scale of *Oblivion* (Kosinski, 2013), *After Earth* (Shyamalan, 2013) and *Pacific Rim* (del Toro, 2013) leaves one in no doubt as to spectacle's force, driven on by ever-increasing technological capability.

It would be amiss, however, not to recognise the “coercive dimension” of spectacular mise en scène too, as Barry Langford’s description would have it. Quoting Robert Kolker – a critic of Steven Spielberg's blockbuster mentality – Langford sees spectacular films like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* as a potential sublimation of free-will predicated on such an overwhelming confrontation with spectacle form, that the viewer has no choice but to succumb to the will of the visual meta-narrative. For Kolker, this tactic has a “fascist aesthetic” to it that he believes closely ingratiates Spielberg’s work, for example, with outright propagandists, even extreme ones, like Leni Riefenstahl (Langford 2010: 249; see also Kolker 2010). For Langford and Kolker, as for others then, the political force of what appear on the surface as very unpolitical texts emanates
out of a bridge joining spectacle to ideological construct or fascism as art, as German political thinker Carl Schmitt’s writings have sometimes been translated as, within a film context.\(^3\)

But what then of the spectacle/narrative debate translated into overt political spaces like the White House with specific political characters attached? As the likes of Escape from New York (Carpenter, 1981), Deep Impact (Leder, 1998), Independence Day and The Day After Tomorrow (Emmerich, 2004) demonstrate, it is not like political actors and/or settings have not been purposefully engaged with in a series of spectacle movies before; but rarely have any of these types of film been analysed for their political content or inference, and even more rare has been their analysis pitted against more ‘traditional’ political films; political films where ‘narrative’ in its various guises seems to rule the day, lauded upon classic exponents of the genre like Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (Capra, 1939), The Manchurian Candidate (Frankenheimer, 1962) and All the President’s Men (Pakula, 1976) that are especially pre-disposed to classical Hollywood narrative concepts rather more than post-classical conceits. However, if we accept Philip Giannos’s maxim that “politics and movies inform each other …. Both tell about the society from which they came,” and ally this to Elsaesser’s “purposive” reading, one might begin to gauge the greater unidentified impact of spectacle political movies, as well as considering their merits in the light of ‘classic’ political texts such as the examples above (Giannos, quoted in Christensen and Hass 2005: 4).

In the first instance, it helps to discover where narrative and spectacle political cinema first drew the battle lines. Douglas Kellner’s Cinema Wars (2010) locates the dimensions of a cultural battle for supremacy in political cinema dating back to the 1960s with the counterculture, the end of the studio era, and political hot-button issues that raged throughout society and in the name of right- or left-wing agendas. More recently, though, for Kellner, everything in American society since the 2000 election and the post 9/11 Bush era has been a political contest, not least film, and hence a reason why he thinks certain forms of genre, the social engagement of particular actors, directors and producers and subject matter itself, all compete for the ideological oxygen and influence around them. American film, he asserts – encompassing more than just Hollywood – is a “highly contested terrain” exhibiting a “wide range of styles and aesthetics” (2010: 3). And the historical narrative established from this political battle forged in different artistic formulations is also clear for Kellner: “[O]ver the 2000s, a hegemonic right-wing conservatism was defeated by a social liberalism represented by the Obama [2008] campaign and that battle was played out in Hollywood film of the era” (ibid.). He goes on to reason that representing a political era, intentionally or obliquely, is done by what he calls “transcoding”, or how the likes of Reaganism, liberalism and, more recently, Tea Party conservatism are translated or encoded into media texts (2010: 2).

Film is not just a social barometer of the times by this argument then, so much as it is a contestable political space where ideology and critique can be engaged and deliberately provoked in the service of particular agendas. In Kellner’s eyes at least, a variety of movies came and went in the early 2000s that entertained just such a crucial battleground – and a picture like The Passion of the Christ (Gibson, 2004), he argues, provides important evidence for this – and the rise, influence and cross-over of TV and film working in cahoots with each other, adds even more piquancy to this theory (2010: 3–4). Kellner’s social influence, for instance, is to equate movies like the Saw horror franchise (2004–10) as well as The Dark Knight with causal, metaphoric pastiches of the Bush–Cheney “nightmare” era as he unapologetically describes it (2010: 1). They are codes, in other words, for the state of society around them and the ideological and philosophical conflicts that so infused the first decade of the new millennium. If the thesis is quantitatively difficult to prove, you nevertheless know what Kellner means when trying to portion off mere influence and allegorical interpretation, from immersive political contestation.
The question is, does such a theory hold true; and even if it does, is this any different from other Hollywood eras? Are the violently sociopathic and nihilist characters of the films above shorthand signifiers for American or even western society in the grip of fundamentalist and/or extreme thought that challenges every staple of institutional and cultural life around it? The proliferation of horror may seem an obvious rejoinder for a society steeped in random violence, but there are all sorts of other connotations to do with its recent renaissance, not least the freeing of censorious restriction as well as developing cinematic technology, accounted for above. It is nevertheless prevalent to Kellner’s argumentative treatise to recognise that a government which is unequivocal about violence cannot expect society to be any less so. Horror had popularity in 1930s Hollywood too, in another era of social and economic dislocation, but Kellner’s sense that it is a genre loosened of any prevailing moral and restorative foundations is certainly persuasive.

The contemporary crop of films also exemplifies Hollywood’s ability to pick up on social fears/norms/perceptions as a manifestation of the zeitgeist in some way. The Cold War

Figure 23.1 Landmark monument destruction in (a) White House Down and (b) Olympus Has Fallen.
nuclear texts of the 1960s for instance, led by The Manchurian Candidate, Dr. Strangelove (Kubrick, 1962), Fail Safe (Lumet, 1964) and crossover British/American texts like The Spy Who Came in from the Cold (Ritt, 1965), Funeral in Berlin (Hamilton, 1966) and of course James Bond, all preyed upon the fear of nuclear and bipolar rivalry. The 1970s paranoia pictures, including The Parallax View (Pakula, 1974), Three Days of the Condor (Pollack, 1975) and All the President’s Men, laid into fears about government secrecy and unaccountability in the backdrop to Watergate. The 1990s comedic revival of screwball terms and conditions set in train by Dave (Reitman, 1994), The American President (Reiner, 1995) and My Fellow Americans (Segal, 1996) rang out as a nostalgic revisitation upon a kinder, gentler age, suddenly becalmed in the period immediately after the Cold War. So Olympus and WHD are no different in that respect in picking up on the scent of terrorist cabals, prominent monuments and buildings subject to attack, and government undermined, all part of the decade-long fear of collusion and infiltration brought on by the ‘war on terror’ (see Figure 23.1).

If this potted history of the political film makes sense and tells us that a wide array of movies provide a rich vein of institutional and ideological engagement with wider issues, where do we begin to theorise out the separation between narrative-driven texts above from the spectacle-induced politics of Olympus and WHD in particular; and why might these latter movies have as much if not more political capital immersed within them as the better known, seemingly more resonant movies above? One answer is to consider that link to television for a moment.

Imagine a story where a White House communications director relinquishes her role only to go into private business where she ‘fixes’ things for clients in all sorts of trouble, from an office in the capital that nobody but the Washington DA it seems, knows exists. Only she seems to have trouble of her own kind, principally for having been formally the mistress of the President of the United States, for whom she now works on occasion, and to whom she appears to have virtually unending access both around and within the White House, whenever she likes. Giving new meaning to the preposterous and inauthentic, the resume is for ABC’s leading TV drama, Scandal (2012–) starring Kerry Washington as fixer Olivia Pope.

Shows as outlandish and yet as compulsive as Scandal, the aforementioned 24 and even the more serious and acclaimed Homeland have found viewers and plaudits on the small screen, while the likes of Olympus, WHD and lesser action fare such as Shooter (Fuqua, 2007), The Sentinel (Johnson, 2006) and Vantage Point (Travis, 2008) have consistently been denigrated as implausible, histrionic, cartoonish and preposterous. Why? Well, as the viewing figures testify to, Scandal, Homeland and the rest are successful and compulsive because, not in spite of, being over-the-top, wholly unreconstructed, removed-from-reality, inauthenticised texts. It also helps that multiple episodes and several seasons allow time for characters to develop, plots – however ludicrous – to unfold and tension to ripen.

It is true too that these series have had competition for their political settings among shows that place a far greater emphasis on ‘re-creative realism’. The continued prevalence of the award-winning The West Wing (1999–2006) in the early 2000s, and more recently the popularity of series like The Good Wife (2009–) and House of Cards (2013–) give pause for thought about the way the iconic and ideological work in tandem with the authentic. But even these shows knowingly add humour, bathos and outlandish Machiavellian plotting to their substantive political milieus. They thus demand a “purposive reading” of their storylines that condition audiences to the practice and discourse of political elites working at the margins of any institutional accountability, let alone logic.

If TV in the 2000s has seemingly been able to work politics into any form it liked, could the extension of preposterous inauthenticity as a theory hold true for the Hollywood spectacle film? And if the relative success of Olympus Has Fallen and White House Down has
any meaning to it, might we suggest that these films subliminally and discursively set an agenda for political discourse that is now more freely and actively reflective of wider opinion? Certainly more freely accepted and encoded than a host of pedagogic texts in the 2000s, like the above-mentioned *Rendition*, *Lions for Lambs* and *Redacted*, conjoined with worthy but also commercially poor-performing movies such as *In the Valley of Elah* (Haggis, 2007), *Battle for Haditha* (Broomfield, 2007) and *Green Zone* (Greengrass, 2010). Moreover, does the emergence of these two films also suggest two strands of political filmmaking that have reached a very distinguishable impasse? If the former is more important than the latter, if *Olympus* and *WHD* are likely to elicit ideological responses from the demographic they are both aimed at, what does this suggest about political filmmaking overall in the twenty-first century?

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, I want to suggest that *Olympus has Fallen* and *White House Down* are but two examples of a persistent and formidable force in contemporary Hollywood political films. They are utilising what Michael Shapiro interprets as, drawing on Jacques Rancière’s work on Sergei Eisenstein, “aesthetic treatments” of their subjects. In other words they are political texts in a critical sense, rather than an ideological one. They are concerned with being “about what we see”, as Rancière noted of Eisenstein’s films (Shapiro 2009: 4). This goes to the heart of not only a popular cultural consensus about what political movies might be doing as pedagogic and ideological tools, but it also hints at the issues of scholarly interrogation too. In his book, *Cinematic Geopolitics*, Shapiro happily confesses to the scepticism of certain audiences to which he has relayed his work. Where is the empiricism, is film not just a mediated practice that conjoints a certain fictional narrative with some immediate reference points and no more? It is just about movies isn’t it, they all cried? In short, says Shapiro, “many academics tend to dismiss the epistemic significance of cinema” (Shapiro 2009: 5). If that under-appreciation of cognition is true of films with a pervasive social and political critique to hand, then one might question how spectacle films like *Olympus* and *WHD* could ever really achieve such an impact upon wider philosophical attitudes and general public opinion.

Shapiro’s answer is to allude to what Elsaesser conceives of as the “phatic aspect of communication” heightened by recognition that contributes towards an emotional response at the heart of going to the movies. This emotion is then translated into an “intellectual” calculation that does not need “real” or actual emotion/recognition/cognition to inform it on the screen, but merely “typical drive patterns” that prompt responses and trigger mechanisms of acceptance, understanding and ideological coherence (Elsaesser 2012: 102–3).

This assertion moves on from Christensen and Hass’s interpretation of already grounded political texts having aesthetic rights imbued within them that add meta-textual dimensions. It also advances further than Kolker’s formulation through Langford of the blockbuster text being injected with ideological venom that catches the unsuspecting viewer unawares. Here, the spectacle-induced political text connotes what we might term obviousness. In short, the kidnapping of the President, the destruction of the Washington monument, the blowing up of the Capitol Building and the White House, are not encoded with anything other than American democracy’s battle for preservation, and that is the strongest political/critical/ideological statement there is in the US polity. Does that automatically mean that the movies can only be gung-ho, protectionist, patriotic and conservative? Possibly, but *Olympus* and *WHD* have a female vice-president and an African American president, not characters one would affiliate with the right-wing automatically. Political allegiance for these highly politicised figures is often mediated out of such texts to the point of abstraction,
but even so are they meant to be Republicans necessarily? With Aaron Eckhart as Benjamin Asher in Fuqua’s film, and especially Jamie Foxx as James Sawyer in Emmerich’s, the assumption is far from clear. Indeed, the premise upon which the attacks are made is that these presidents and their administrations have somehow been too lenient, progressive and liberal in their past dealings with foreign powers and rivals.

And while identifying a clear-cut political manifesto in these constructed political figures is testing in itself, a wider examination of ideology also adds to the confusion. Daniel Franklin, for one, mentions political values and beliefs in his book Politics and Film (2006) that add up to a checklist of democratic criteria permeating movies. Franklin privileges Lockean liberalism as a recurrent value in films thrusting forward capitalism, individualism, natural rights and even the immigrant experience as quintessential factors in the politicising of Hollywood (2006: 20–22). They are key ideological staging posts in iconic landmark films as diverse as Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, Young Mr. Lincoln (Ford, 1939) , JFK (Stone, 1991) and All the President’s Men. However, what none of these films has that Olympus and WHD deal in is the political mandate to survive: as a nation, as a superpower and perhaps as the world’s policeman.

The survival of the American democratic experiment therefore resides in these two pictures; an ideological precept that crosses political, social and ideological boundaries regardless of the debate as to whether Asher and Sawyer are Republicans or Democrats, and which readily connects with Elsaesser’s emotional and intellectual compact. Survival of a nation not only deeply divided along ethnic, religious and social lines, but divided from a world that increasingly sees no redemption for the US; no outlet from its self-appointed role as protector and purveyor of the world’s cultural and political norms. As James Woods’s rogue Chief of Staff informs the president in White House Down’s climactic sequence as he presses for nuclear annihilation of America’s enemies: “The Middle East will be our last war. It will either be us or them.” The end game of the nation’s world role can only be ultimate triumph or catastrophic failure, therefore; no other route is explainable by a decade-long crusade to shape hearts and minds in the world’s most traumatised regions. Walker meanwhile, inspired to take over the White House as a result of the loss of his son in combat, justifies avenging this death with ultimate American might as an act of patriotic redemption. Patriotism as momentum for continued military endeavour in perpetuity is the reasoning, and Republican or Democrat, left or right, neo-conservative or liberal can have no differentiation in this war to the end. As the politics of the war-on-terror age have demonstrated, avoiding America’s recurrent military and diplomatic destiny, whether you are George W. Bush or Barack Obama, is a tricky and unavoidable pursuit.

If this one unifying treatise is the real ideological “phatic connection,” as Elsaesser has it, for audiences attuned to blockbuster aesthetics, then the subtleties and nuances of narrative political films like The Ides of March (Clooney, 2010), Lincoln (Spielberg, 2012) and television series like House of Cards are not the route to understanding American institutional ideas and philosophy. Political spectacle movies like Olympus Has Fallen and White House Down are the real purveyors of America’s twenty-first century cultural politics and discourse on screen.

Notes

1 King, using Pfeil, plots this out on a series of graphs with the later blockbuster structure starting to emerge in the late 1990s in films like Die Hard with a Vengeance (McTiernan, 1995), Speed (de Bont, 1994) and Armageddon (Bay, 1998).
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2 All figures were taken from Box Office Mojo (www.boxofficemojo.com), accessed 9 January 2014.
3 Richard Wolin identifies a direct link within Schmitt’s writings between political ideas and aesthetic representation. Wolin uses Schmitt as an inversion of the bourgeois depoliticisation of art so as to fashion an idea of the self-sustaining fascist state, “the state is a work of art” (Wolin 1992: 443).

Bibliography