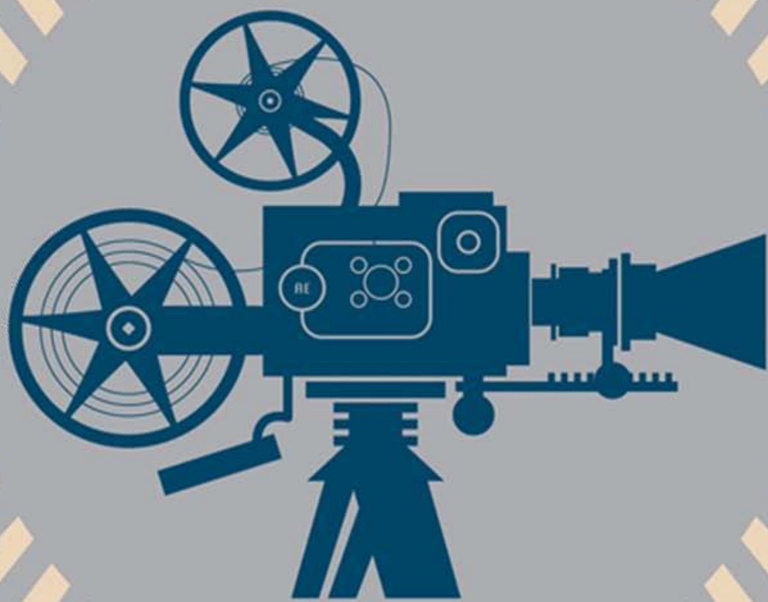
# POPULAR CINEMA AS POLITICAL THEORY

## IDEALISM AND REALISM IN EPICS, NOIRS, AND SATIRES



JOHN S. NELSON

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*John S. Nelson*

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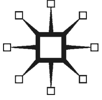

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*For Anna Lorien,*
*whose conversations encourage*
*and whose suggestions enhance*

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# Acknowledgments

The first time I taught political theory to university students, we found ourselves debating the virtues and advantages of idealism versus realism in political action. When do people of high principle improve our lives with politics of grand vision? When do we fare better with strategies of clear-eyed calculation and practices of hardball enforcement? This wasn't a focus I'd planned for the course, but it emerged unmistakably in our vigorous conversations. I've seen since that it comes often to the fore when analyzing political action, especially for the familiar venues of our everyday lives. I hope that this makes a book on political idealism and realism in popular cinema a good way to thank the generations of students who've been helping me learn politics, especially in popular culture. The book emphasizes movies that are epics, noirs, and satires because they are three of the popular forms most conventionally connected to politics of idealism versus realism.

Popular genres of film, television, and literature are more recent preoccupations of mine. To explore their politics is a telling way to carry out my long-standing fascination with inquiries that feature analysis of rhetoric in facing how certainties and necessities lie mostly beyond the horizons of the human sciences. Popular cinema turns out to be a special joy to explore with students in their teens and twenties. Sometimes it delves into complications of our everyday situations. Sometimes it summons elements from our diverse pasts. Sometimes it leaps toward possibilities for our distant futures. But always, it taps an impressive sophistication that young people in our culture develop early for making sense of moving pictures. This extends to their recurrent forms—from comedies, fantasies, and mysteries to romances, thrillers, and westerns.

The pages to come examine politics in many movies and a few television series. It also attends to several of the popular novels that have helped

inspire these entertainments. All these are popular in every sense. They are the kinds of films and shows that rerun almost continually on cable, and they are the sorts of best sellers or cult classics that linger year after year in book stores. You're likely to know lots of them already, and you're apt to enjoy most of the rest.

The essays in this volume spring primarily from discussions with students, and that's why the main acknowledgment must go to them. All the movies and shows analyzed here also have been discussed in great detail with family members. Especially they have been addressed with Connie Nelson, who's been my movie companion for many decades. Without her help, this book would have been inconceivable.

Colleagues have contributed too. Even though movies are not his thing, Bob Boynton is a fine and faithful sounding board for the "unusual" ideas about politics that inform my takes on popular cinema in particular and popular culture in general. Early versions of the chapters ahead have gained from suggestions at several professional meetings as well. The American Political Science Association accommodated discussion of one chapter; the Midwestern Political Science Association hosted examination of a second; the Western Political Science Association made time for talking through a third; and the Foundations of Political Theory Annual Workshop on Political Myth, Rhetoric, and Symbolism addressed a fourth. The University of Iowa Project on Rhetoric of Inquiry has helped improve my writing for more than three decades, and this book owes a lot to it. Colleagues in its Rhetoric Seminar have provided useful feedback on one of the essays to follow, then vetted another with an even wider audience. Likewise friends in the Foundations Workshop on Political Myth, Rhetoric, and Symbolism have sustained two decades of provocative essays, terrific commentaries, and otherwise wonderful conversations. I thank all these scholars for their intellectual curiosity, political wisdom, and generosity in sharing their own work as well as engaging mine.

# INTRODUCTION

# Doing Political Theory with Popular Films: Styles in Action in Everyday Life

## (Featuring *Star Trek Into Darkness*)

> Americans don't read books;
> Americans don't read newspapers;
> Americans go to the movies.[1]
>
> —Stephen Colbert

Popular movies, novels, and television series help make our politics by making our myths. These are the symbolic stories that shape and make sense of what people do.[2] It's easy to see political mythmaking in movies like *Argo* (2012), *Lincoln* (2012), and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012). Each concerns historical figures in the official, if sometimes secret, politics of government.[3] When we see Tony Mendez (Ben Affleck) of the CIA rescuing American diplomats from a hostile Iran, or we see "Maya" (Jessica Chastain) of the CIA tracking Osama bin Laden to his death in Pakistan, we need not see James Bond (Daniel Craig) resurrected in *Skyfall* (2012) to know that covert operations are back in heroic vogue. When we watch President Lincoln (Daniel Day-Lewis) shaving truths, trading jobs for votes, or otherwise playing gutter-ball to outlaw slavery, none of us misses that the current occupant of the Oval Office has a mighty model for stooping to compromise—and "get things done."

Yet it's not always easy to say what our myths of governing might mean for everyday politics in the mundane lives of ordinary people. Nor is it always clear how a popular movie presents any political stories, whether for

presidents or nonvoters. Why consider that potent myths of politics might lurk in a run-of-the-mill romantic comedy?[4] Why seek politics for us regular folks in a radically unrealistic thriller?[5] Or why think that the politics in watching prime-time television preoccupy many a vampire movie?[6] And if movie politics often seem elusive, how can carefully combined and refined ideas about those politics—in other words, how can political theories—be developed in movies, TV, or novels, whether mythically or otherwise?

### *Political Mythmaking in Popular Genres*

Even people prominently linked to popular literature and cinema go so far as to deny that movies can be vehicles for ideas of any kind. Author and provocateur Gore Vidal contended that "a moving picture, because it moves, is the one form of narrative that cannot convey an idea of any kind, as opposed to a generalized emotion."[7] Vidal knew all too well the major political figures of his day, he ran twice for public office, he wrote highly respected novels of politics and ideas, he even created screenplays for popular cinema and television.[8] So he was well-positioned to know. And yet . . . and yet . . . Vidal also acted in two movies with myths of popular politics that can speak instructively to political theory. He played Senator Brickley Paiste in *Bob Roberts* (1992), which surpasses even *A Face in the Crowd* (1957) at showing the everyday dynamics of right-wing populism in the United States. Then in *Shadow Conspiracy* (1997), Vidal played Congressman Page in a movie developed enough in its political ideas to name an entire subgenre of conspiracy thrillers for purposes of analysis by political theorists.[9]

That does not make *Shadow Conspiracy* particularly good as a movie, and maybe Vidal would have taken this to concede his claim. (Surely he wouldn't have acceded without some acerbic reply.) On the other hand, *Bob Roberts* is an engaging and enduring movie, analyzed later in this book. Moreover many of our most intriguing, powerful, and practical myths of politics for citizens in their daily lives are the symbolic stories captured by the conventions that define individual genres for novels, movies, television, and other popular media.[10] The ambition of this book is to show how we can learn from the political theories in these myths.

The mythic figures in popular genres are the characters, settings, and events familiar from many works in the genre. The myth of St. George and the dragon is conventional for epics. This means that, in many epics, a hero defeats a monster in its lair to rescue a damsel in distress. For all its feminism, *Titanic* (1997) articulates that pattern. Other epics enact an odyssey, as in *Cold Mountain* (2003), where a hero confronts diverse dangers in coming home. Still other epics lay a hero low before he rises again to liberate

his community, as in *Braveheart* (1995), *Gladiator* (2000), and *The Dark Knight* trilogy (2005, 2008, and 2012).[11] Further templates of myth have also become conventional for popular epics, but then most popular genres are sprawling and varied.

We also need to recognize that stray figures from any of these epic myths can appear in particular works that are not epics. By popular genre, *Hannibal* (2001) is horror and noir rather than epic. Still it features a female St. George in Clarice Starling (Julianne Moore). From a human monster, Mason Verger (Gary Oldman), Clarice rescues Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) as a male in distress, although admittedly monstrous himself. Of course, Hannibal contrives to be saved by Clarice from Mason and his mafia minions, so that she might learn to protect Hannibal. He even hopes that she might come to love him or at least emulate his strange, perfectionist leap beyond the movie's focal clash between her moral idealism and the political realism of an FBI that employs but harasses and scapegoats her. (This book's final chapter returns to perfectionism as peculiar politics that sometimes unsettle Western dilemmas of idealism versus realism.) But at a minimum, Hannibal wants to rescue Clarice from the predatory sexism and other aspects of patriarchy that she suffers in the Department of Justice. Then, more conventionally, he's St. George; and she's the damsel in distress—even as their movie remains horror and noir, not epic.

Therefore no individual convention of a popular genre can be a necessary or a sufficient condition for a movie to manifest that genre. Instead a popular genre is a somewhat ragged and changeable network of conventions. These recur much of the time and in various mythic permutations throughout the genre's many works. To identify the popular genre(s) of a particular work, we need to notice the conventions that predominate in making it meaningful. Mostly this is a quick, easy, consensual call. Popular forms help us cognitively as we ascertain and communicate meanings for politics or anything else.[12] And when there is uncertainty or controversy about the genre of a work, the resulting investigations can spur the sorts of productive discussions that improve our political theories.

My project here is to appreciate the political mythmaking in popular genres as especially practical and accessible theorizing about politics. In popular movies, novels, and television series, the politics are mostly in settings outside the modern institutions of government. To make sense of politics in popular genres is to do political theory with the myths that surface in the uses of genre conventions by specific stories or dramas. This requires resisting our academic and cultural assumption that myths are mistakes somehow embraced by many people, past or present. The mythic politics in popular cultures are not outdated beliefs, widespread falsehoods,

or appealing exaggerations.[13] Actually myths vary in purpose, power, and truth.[14] To understand the mythic politics in popular genres and to assess their implications for political theory, as our explanations of politics, we do especially well to compare genres and particular works within them.[15] Here the focus falls on epic movies, political satires, and neo-noir films.

Like all popular genres in our cultures, these are modes of political action. They remake the political myths we learn and live as citizens. The mythic accounts of politics we find in works for popular genres can refine and extend our academic accounts of politics. These popular theories of politics often pay more attention to the cultural, social, and psychological textures of our lives.[16] These popular theories of politics are sometimes more imaginative than our academic theories in choosing cases, configuring causes, and conceiving alternatives. In addition, the aesthetics of popular media such as cinema and television typically enable their accounts of politics to be more vivid in presenting political characters, actions, situations, and prospects. Such lessons spring from discussing hundreds and hundreds of movies with college students, graduate students, colleagues, and friends. Yet many of them would have me tell the story of this book in a more personal way.

### *Political Styles in Everyday Action*

The chapters to come feature three popular genres that almost everybody knows, although not necessarily by the names I favor: epics, noirs, and satires. Popular movies and novels have prospered in all three of these genres in recent decades, although the story of popular television is more mixed. Yet by academic reputation, none of the three genres seems strongly tied to the others, to the lives of ordinary people in electronic times, or to their everyday politics. Each of the genre studies ahead contributes to correcting those misimpressions. I conceived each as a separate, stand-alone study; and any of them can be read that way by anybody particularly interested in its focal genre or featured films. Yet in analyzing the films, I started to learn how strikingly the different studies can complement each other—for all address the Western antinomy of idealism versus realism.

In Western civilization, the antagonism between political realism and political idealism is at least as old as Niccolò Machiavelli's realist advice that *The Prince* "must learn how not to be good"—in part by turning away from ideal societies and principles.[17] Within a few years of Machiavelli's writing, Thomas More ventured a classic idealist counter in his *Utopia*.[18] But the dispute arguably goes back to the West's beginnings in ancient Greece, which pitted Sophists (often realists in a rough sense) against Platonists (idealists, if not exactly of a modern kind).[19]

There are many dimensions and dynamics of idealism, and the same goes for realism. By now, their running disputes have become convoluted in theory and complicated in practice. If we start simply, though, we can say that idealists guide political action by applying principles, thus shaping realities to principles and ideals far more than the reverse. Realists guide political action by calculating consequences, thereby letting recent results and current complications inform ideals and principles far more than the other way around.

On this basis, the respective criticisms are familiar.[20] Realists complain that, since ends must justify means, idealists confuse ends sought (ideals) with ends attained (results). This leads idealists to miss what's actually happening and why, typically at a terrible cost, all too often to others. The road to hell is paved with good intentions, say the realists. Idealists lament that, because means must constitute ends, realists let themselves assume that any means—however awful—can be redeemed by great enough ends. That induces realists to overreach in their aims and brutalize by their means, while excusing bad results now as steps toward better results later. Doing whatever it takes is a recipe for going disastrously overboard, answer the idealists. Bryan Cranston's Walter White in *Breaking Bad* (2008–2013) is a case in point.

Idealists pride themselves on high standards and deep sympathies, realists on hard heads and harder hearts. Realists also celebrate their capacities for success, and their insistence on this seems persuasive to most Americans. Isn't it most moral to get the best results practical? That's what realists promote; and they're right not to cede morality or virtue by definition to idealists. Realism deserves to be respected as political morality and not just as political strategy. The trouble is that realist claims to monopolize practical success or even strategy merely turn the definitional tables on idealists, who also can make good cases for practical as well as moral efficacy.

Philosophers go to town with idealism and realism. There are ontological idealists, such as Plato on *eidoi* (ideas, forms) as the true beings behind the shadowy appearances that are the ordinary things in our everyday lives; and there are ontological realists, such as the scientists who take the detailed subsistence of the world that they study to be completely independent of their inquiry. There are aesthetic realists, epistemic realists, ethnographic realists, legal realists, literary realists, photorealists, theatrical realists, and more.[21] In counterpoint, there are absolute idealists, actual idealists, linguistic idealists, musical idealists, objective idealists, transcendental idealists, and others. The twentieth century invented magical realism as a popular genre of fiction and film to explore the strange extremities of mundane existence in our oxymoronic conditions of partial totalitarianism, routinized terror, and creeping catastrophe.[22] Recent decades propose practical utopianism

as a form of theory-in-action for persistent radicals who refuse despair.[23] Eventually, almost inevitably, idealists scramble for the resources taken to distinguish realists, and vice versa.

Across their many fields and inflections, we may suspect, idealism and realism remain in some part projects of politics.[24] In the pages at hand, idealism and realism are political styles.[25] They are sensibilities for experiencing community affairs. Especially they are distinctive ways for doing community business—which is to say, for engaging people who share significant aspects of their lives. Often we analyze styles in terms similar to genres. Thus political styles distinguish themselves in part by the typical characters, settings, and performances they recognize and enact. So these aspects of idealism and realism dominate the detailed takes on popular movies to come.

Still we should pause to notice that politics are plastic and energetic enough to evolve simultaneously in several forms: as styles, structures, movements, ideologies, and more. At any given time, to be sure, different politics feature different forms. At present, monarchism and totalitarianism are principally politics of structure, featuring distinctive forms of government. Feminism and environmentalism are primarily movements, coalescing from diverse angles to move against patriarchal oppressions and industrial developments, respectively, more than toward some characteristic institutions or creeds. Socialism and libertarianism are currently articulated as ideologies. In other words, they specify social sciences and diagram ideal communities, which they use by contrast to diagnose current maladies. Then such ideologies offer prognoses; and if they project further ills along current trajectories, the ideologies prescribe therapies to cure political diseases and pursue political ideals. For a century, political theory has emphasized ideologies.

But these days, at least, neither idealism nor realism aspires to be an ideology of politics. Neither tries for the detail needed by a social science or a policy platform. If idealism or realism promotes a form of government at present, it sounds the same for both: "democracy." But for both, it remains a diffuse gesture more than a specific structure. In fact, the two use the same word for contrary structures. Idealism seeks direct or popular democracies; while realism wants elite, pluralist, or representative democracies. Neither faces well enough the practical and theoretical troubles with "democracy" as a form of government to proceed mainly in that mode.[26]

It's clear that idealists criticize realism, and realists contest idealism; but it's not clear that either kind of politics coheres tightly enough to specify government programs. Idealists show family resemblances in their political sensibilities and gestures, but idealists are too diverse in their priorities and methods to look much like a political movement. The same goes for realists. Therefore we do better to appreciate idealism and realism as political styles

for personal action, especially in everyday life.[27] Popular movies, novels, and TV are good at exploring such politics; and these media attend most acutely to political idealism and political realism via popular genres.

### *Political Forms in Cinema Analysis*

Political idealism is especially at home in popular epics. Therefore the first chapter considers the implications for political theory of a recent resurgence in epic movies from Hollywood.[28] It notices the role of computer graphics in accommodating affordably the vast scale and ambitious imagination conventional for epics. Nevertheless it shows how these resources support epic responses to challenges of imperial politics faced by the United States. The result is an idealist repertoire of political devices for liberating communities from dynamics of empire. To augment these epic lessons for political theory, a coda considers how the political preoccupations of epic movies also surface in the academic call for "epic political theory" as a mode of political action.

Satires ironize our hopes, fears, and realities, our standards and practices. They doubt, debunk, deconstruct, ridicule, and otherwise run riot with politics. Their motley styles often alternate between idealism and realism. The second chapter features three movies that satirize populism as campaign and movement politics, for populism also has become especially prominent in American politics in the last quarter-century. The three share a playful emphasis on popular songs, and this helps them explore rhythms of political action that scholarly theories of populism neglect. The three films also share the motley, episodic plots of epics. That helps them spotlight the political mythmaking in popular entertainments like movies. It enables them to demonstrate the acumen of some political theories apparent in popular cinema. And in a coda, it lets the three films contribute to our theories of political truth.

For several decades, the film noir that coalesced with the Second World War has become a popular genre often called neo noir. As a cluster of films, classic noir has been celebrated for its realism in aesthetics and politics. As a popular genre starting to reach beyond movies to literature and television, neo noir remains fascinated by realism; but it's becoming more open to idealism. The third chapter analyzes realist and idealist politics in three neo noirs of great cinematic power. Along the way, it refines the political theory of realism as a political style. Next it explicates a trenchant criticism of realism in everyday life, one that needs to inform more academic theories of politics. Then its coda sketches a theory of idealist style as an alternative for action in public and private endeavors.

The fourth chapter engages the political debate between realism and idealism in a series of eight movies made annually of late for television. Individually and overall, these movies meld the popular genres of epic and noir. Hence they provide occasions for articulating the political theories of epic and noir that have been emerging in the earlier studies, while doing the same for the accounts that have been coalescing for idealism and realism as political styles. These eight movies provide a rare and provocative experiment in everyday encounters of (epic) idealism with (noir) realism. As epic noir, each movie gives us a keen sense of idealism and realism as political styles in everyday action. Yet because the eight movies also work together as a dramatic series on television, a coda for the fourth chapter can explore several intriguing inferences about the political inclinations of American television by comparison with Hollywood cinema.

Idealism and realism are far from the only political styles prominent in our times. Among the many others is perfectionism after the fashion of Friedrich Nietzsche. Of late, it's coalesced as the style that distinguishes some of Hollywood's most striking characters. In confrontations, perfectionists often defeat idealists and realists, left and right; and perfectionist politics even unsettle Western oppositions between idealism and realism. The concluding chapter analyzes two recent classics of neo noir to identify key characteristics and consequences of perfectionism as a style of personal action. It also connects these to perspectivism in doing political theory. In turn, this enables a coda to acknowledge several kinds of formalism—on the way to answering worries that a formal analysis of political styles tends to favor idealism.

Each chapter—save, arguably, for this one—concludes with a coda. As a device, the coda is familiar to most people from music. In music, a coda is a passage that suits a composition enough to end it in style—yet differs from it enough (in pace, register, rhythm, or the like) to seem somewhat independent, to accomplish something further, and thus to expand its horizons. That's exactly the contribution from each coda to come.

As the next chapter explains, codas are conventional for popular epics. Rather than an argumentative chain of premises and conclusions or a historical line of causes and effects, an epic stitches several episodes into a loose series that need not follow or produce a linear logic. Each episode is an emblem of the epic's focal tale, hero, or community; each is a somewhat independent moment that evokes aspects of the whole. Accordingly an epic coda is a concluding emblem that shifts register to evoke the whole in a somewhat different way, adding to our awareness of what's at stake. It also reminds us that the exposition is not linear overall.

As a paradigm for political mythmaking, epic is an abiding concern here. That holds even when a different genre such as noir or satire takes

center stage for the moment, and the codas can remind us of the continuing interest in epic. Moreover this entire effort has an epic—which is to say, episodic—structure. Composed somewhat separately, each chapter has been stitched loosely to the others, providing an account of adventures in doing political theory as analysis of popular cinema. The codas help us reach for the greater horizons possible in such a project.

Perhaps paradoxically, though, this introduction ends with a proem for the whole book ahead—more than with a coda for the few pages already behind. In general, a proem is a preamble, an introductory discourse. In epics, a proem is an introductory emblem of the whole work. An epic proem is an opening episode that encapsulates and previews the principal pattern that helps the epic cohere. As literary theorists say, it evokes the figure in the carpet. It starts the epic with a sample moment that engages the audience, and it imparts an initial sense of how to receive the rest of the story. In this respect, a proem launches the epic in the midst of its action, with an exemplar of what's to come.

A rough equivalent for this appreciation of popular cinema as political theory is to start by analyzing idealism and realism in a movie of interest to prospective readers. For some readers, though, such a beginning could seem like starting in midstream. To entice, not confuse, the opening has been conventional for the human sciences. Yet we needn't miss all the advantages of leaping early into the political analysis of a popular film. We can end this introductory discourse with a proem for the book as a whole; and by epic convention, it can turn the sections so far into our invocation of the muse.

### *A Proem on the Prime Directive*

Through midyear, at this writing, one of the highest-grossing movies of 2013 has been *Star Trek Into Darkness*. By popular genre, it's not exactly epic; and it's far from noir or satire. But its genre of science fiction suits political theory especially well and often resembles epic.[29] In fact, there's outright overlap in stately works of cinema such as Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1969), *Dune* (1984), and *Cloud Atlas* (2012). Literary science fiction from Olaf Stapledon and Doris Lessing partakes too.[30] And *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (1979), the first of the many movies set in the *Star Trek* universe, is itself an epic. Yes, its sequels instead fit an action-adventure template that makes room for modern histories and individuals while keeping many conventions of epic.[31] And yes, a big part of the J. J. Abrams job as director in launching the latest series of *Star Trek* films, of which *Star Trek Into Darkness* is the second, seems to be adjusting the franchise further into thrillers. Yet more chases, fights, and surprises still leave thrillers

recognizable as epic offshoots, and *Star Trek Into Darkness* focuses on idealism versus realism.[32]

To clinch the case, *Star Trek Into Darkness* begins with its own proem on perplexities of political idealism and realism. The movie opens in the midst of a chase scene. A legend on the screen locates it on the Planet Nibiru. Known to viewers from a prequel and lots of predecessors, the captain and medical officer of the Federation Starship USS Enterprise sprint through something like a cornfield. Robes and cosmetics disguise them as Nibiruns, who race after Kirk (Chris Pine) and McCoy (Karl Urban) from a primitive city at the foot of a massive volcano. Suddenly a fierce creature looms before the two, but a phaser blast from Kirk knocks it down and out. Bones grouses that Kirk has just stopped their rescue. Kirk has been running with a scroll. Possibly to slow pursuit, he puts it high on a plant, where it unrolls to show a diagram with text. The Nibiruns pause before it. Kirk and McCoy run past more plants, reach a cliff, leap into an ocean, and board their submerged starship.

Meanwhile Spock (Zachary Quinto) places bombs in the volcano, to dampen its impending eruption and save the Nibiruns from extinction. The Enterprise can't link to Spock well enough to beam him back, but he's ready to sacrifice himself to save Nibiru, and he completes placing the explosives. To follow "the Prime Directive," the Enterprise and its mission must stay unnoticed by the Nibiruns, to keep from changing their nascent civilization. "If Spock were here and I were there," Kirk asks, "what would he do?" The matter-of-fact answer is, "He'd let you die." But Kirk is not willing for Spock to sacrifice himself. Against arguments from Spock and others, Kirk has the Enterprise rise from the sea and fly over the mouth of the volcano. This enables it to beam up Spock, then power toward the stars. The spectacle is breathtaking! Standing over the scroll, the Nibiruns see the Enterprise soar from the sea to loom over the volcano, see the volcano start to explode but sputter to a stop, then see the ship streak beyond the clouds.

This beginning is the film in a nutshell. Kirk reports the mission as a success, and arguably it is: saving Nibiru, the Enterprise, McCoy, Kirk, and Spock. But the Prime Directive—to explore and observe but not interfere—has been violated. By proem's end, the Nibiruns are already sketching the starship and debating what they've seen. And that's the account sent separately to headquarters by First Officer Spock.

Cut to Starfleet Command in San Francisco, on Earth. For trashing the Prime Directive against interference in a planet's early evolution and civilization, Kirk is stripped of his starship. His career continues only because Captain Pike (Bruce Greenwood), who'd induced Kirk to enlist, lobbies to reeducate him as first officer on another ship. Pike fumes that Kirk doesn't recognize how the rules apply to him even when he disagrees with them.

Lacking humility, Kirk thinks that rules are for other people. He doesn't comply with them, doesn't take responsibility for that or anything else, and doesn't "respect the chair" of a starship captain. Instead, says Pike, Kirk uses "blind luck to justify playing God." In this last complaint, though, is a telling observation. Kirk's audacity as a realist, who breaks rules so that he—but especially others—might live long and prosper, somehow keeps winning him and them the favor of an otherwise fickle Lady Luck. In other words, Kirk as a realist shows striking skill at courting *fortuna*, as theorized in *The Prince* by Niccolò Machiavelli to be crucial for modern political leaders who go boldly where no one has gone before.[33]

The Prime Directive is a focal convention of *Star Trek* shows, video games, and feature-length films. It's a wonderful figure for thought-provoking movies. Taken literally, however, it's a strange way to run a Starfleet, as the proem for *Star Trek Into Darkness* suggests. How could the initial mission to save Nibiru from extinction by a volcano sidestep a verdict of interference? By staying secret from the Nibiruns? Isn't interference undetected still interference? *Could* it make no difference to their culture? Have they no ideas to be affected by making the volcano implode rather than explode? How could Starfleet know? As a philosophical axiom of action, the Prime Directive is an exercise in perplexity: either an intervention has no unintended effects because it makes no differences at all, or it makes differences big enough for side effects to be inevitable. After all, intended differences have to be big enough to be worth the huge expenses, risks, and sacrifices involved in Starfleet missions.

Whether to reveal the ship in saving Spock arises as a challenge in the midst of a mission to interfere, with Kirk and McCoy already chased from the city, the scroll already unfurled, and the mountain already showing signs of eruption. Spock's readiness to sacrifice himself to keep the starship unseen is inspiring, if no less than we'd expect from such a renowned and rational idealist. But it's hard to see how Kirk is wrong to save Spock, and it's even harder to see how Spock or Starfleet Command can cite the Prime Directive as a reason to let Spock die.

Nonetheless Kirk goes down without any real resistance. He snaps at Spock for correcting the misleading report on Nibiru; but Kirk doesn't contest anybody's reasoning, let alone the directive's coherence. The brash young talent who beat the unwinnable Kobayashi Maru simulation in the previous movie had plenty to say to Starfleet about the incoherence of that test and his integrity in defying its intended lessons from defeat. Yet he doesn't contest the directive, the mission, or his punishment even though he'd surely handle them the same a second time around. Why?

My sense is that, even as a realist, Kirk recognizes the integrity of the Prime Directive as a prudential trope—an idealistic figure—for effecting

noninterference. Thus he knows to take the Prime Directive as a Starfleet way to do good by its human standards while keeping interference with others to a minimum. He accepts and agrees with it, but as a realist. A legalist might literalize the rule to dispute it, as I just did. A militarist might enforce a standard interpretation, as Starfleet does with Kirk. A bureaucrat might apply the rule, to abide by it for its sake or his own.[34] As Spock shows, an idealist might make the rule's spirit into a commitment to self-sacrifice for its fullest possible observance, not to vindicate the rule but to serve the Federation and the worlds it would explore. Yes, imploding the volcano interferes; but there wouldn't be a future for the Nibiruns without it, whereas showing them a starship won't serve them in any way but to spur their civilization onto paths otherwise unlikely. Taking the Starfleet oath, Spock pledges to practice the Prime Directive in all ways that make decent sense for the Federation and beings beyond. He promises to put this principle before his career, his life, even the lives of his family and friends.

For Spock as an idealist, the Prime Directive is a highly admirable and demanding ideal. For Spock as a Starfleet officer, the Prime Directive is the cardinal rule: possibly to observe above all others. But for Kirk as a realist and a Starfleet captain, the Prime Directive is a highly admirable and demanding rule of thumb.[35] It's one among several handfuls of major precepts that Kirk must attune to his situations and harmonize in his actions through his second-nature capacity of political judgment and good fortune. This judgment has been Kirk's lifetime in the making. It's been cultivated by his family, friends, foes, educators, entertainments, and other experiences. It's been refined by his reflections and his sense of new situations. Kirk's rules of thumb are more flexible than Starfleet's rules or Spock's ideals. Ironically it's not just Kirk's dawning sense of Spock as a fellow officer and a fast friend but particularly Kirk's feeling for Spock's potential importance to Starfleet and the Federation that we see in what Kirk does. He recognizes that he's already interfered with Nibirun development, and he judges that a further sensation is worth suffering to save Spock. But Kirk doesn't argue his perspective to Spock, Pike, or the rest of Starfleet Command because he sees as a realist that it wouldn't do him or them any good. They have styles and perspectives of their own, and the time isn't ripe for persuasion.

For Kirk as realist and Spock as idealist, the Prime Directive is the primary convention of action for all members of Starfleet. This doesn't make it absolute. No-interference of any kind under any circumstances with the internal development of alien civilizations is neither possible nor desirable, at least for Starfleet. Accordingly, realists, idealists, and many others respect such conventions as tropes—as figures—with meanings that are nonetheless clear and useful. Here we analyze idealism and realism as styles of political

action in popular movies. Political styles are networks of conventions for action, and popular movies use networks of conventions for meaning. Thus popular styles such as idealism and realism are genres of political action, just as epic, noir, and satire are genres of popular cinema, literature, and television. In the pages to come, we even start to appreciate popular genres of movies as popular forms of political action.

The rest of *Star Trek Into Darkness* pursues some of its politics of idealism versus realism by adapting recent headlines and history. Its most radical and fearsome realist is Admiral Marcus (Peter Weller), who schemes to use special Starfleet torpedoes to spark a war between the Federation and the Klingons. The film rehearses idealist *and* realist condemnations of American strikes by cruise missiles and drones in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Libya, and Sudan. By this point, Kirk is back as Enterprise Captain. Spock as an idealist talks Kirk as a realist out of using the Marcus torpedoes to bombard the Klingon planet safely and indiscriminately from afar. Spock appeals to Kirk's sense of honor, alive in him as it is in most realists, and Kirk beams down a landing party to accomplish their mission in person and more peacefully. (Realists no more lack all honor than idealists lack all calculation: the challenge for political theorists is to do better than the caricatures that such styles provide of themselves and others.) This headline contest between idealism and realism is meant to stay as obvious as can be. Therefore it calls little on conventions of *Star Trek*, let alone conventions of science fiction as a genre.

But that's not the way most of the movie works. Instead it echoes and develops this overt confrontation with many others between idealism and realism. These are sometimes less blatant but often more detailed. They emerge mainly in the film's clever use of conventions from the *Star Trek* complex or science fiction in general. Some literary critics define science fiction as "the literature of change," "the literature of cognitive estrangement," "a form of the fantastic that denies it is fantastic," or fictional "events that have not happened."[36] For our purposes, however, the popular genre of science fiction just is the use of conventions such as teleportation, faster-than-light (FTL) travel, time travel, space aliens, sentient robots, invented cultures, imaginary ecologies, and futuristic technologies.[37] Like the rest of the franchise, *Star Trek Into Darkness* makes ample use of many: its transporter beam teleports; its warp drive is FTL travel; Spock can be advised by Spock Prime (Leonard Nimoy) because the elder version has traveled back in time; and Klingons and Nibiruns are space aliens. Various *Star Trek* works abound in sentient robots (Data) and the rest.

An early, realist convention of science fiction is sometimes called "the cold equations," after a story of that name.[38] To respect knowledge of natural constraints, science fictions sometimes feature situations where scientific

analysis says that survival (or something else desperately desired) isn't possible. These challenge characters to adjust to the cold, hard facts. Toward the end of *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Kahn* (1982), radiation floods the compartment where Spock (Leonard Nimoy) is fixing the warp drive. To save others, he stays to complete the repair. As he dies, Kirk (William Shatner) arrives on the safe side of a transparent radiation barrier. Their fingers can't quite touch through the "glass." Kirk is horrified at Spock's sacrifice, but Spock gasps his famous refrain that "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few...or the one." This is the cold-equations scene (even though the film's sequel recreates Spock).

At an earlier time, *Star Trek Into Darkness* faces the same super-villain. Reworking the earlier movie with Kahn, it reverses roles to reprise the cold-equations scene: Kirk braves radiation to save the ship and possibly the world; Spock finds him, but they can't quite touch; Kirk speaks the famous words; then he dies. (McCoy brings Kirk back from the dead toward this movie's end.) Such striking use of a realist convention from science fiction enables the more recent film to climax its political education of Kirk. He remains a realist, but one scene after another has been teaching him some of the humility and self-sacrifice in many idealist politics. The dialogue that leads into Kirk's death scene shows him coming to humility and a capacity for self-sacrifice by a largely realist route, rather than simply converting to a kind of idealism. And the realist structure of the cold-equations scene helps the movie show that an impressively honorable realist is what Kirk remains.

The Abrams movies seem interested in getting little jokes from the impudent violation of minor conventions. The *Star Trek* reboot in 2009 plays with a corollary convention of science fiction that disasters ensue if people meet other versions of themselves through time travel. Spock Prime lets Kirk infer this corollary; but on the sly, the older Spock advises the younger—and ridicules the convention. *Star Trek Into Darkness* continues the counseling and the play with this corollary. It has Spock Prime warn that Kahn will try to manipulate Spock, enabling Spock to make a tricky but idealist plan for Kahn's defeat.

*Star Trek Into Darkness* also has Spock Prime suggest that he's learned over the years a more sophisticated version of the corollary convention of time-travel. It's exactly parallel to a more sophisticated take on the Prime Directive than the younger Spock had seemed to embrace. Asked for advice by Spock when he seeks to defeat Kahn, Spock Prime first says his "vow is never to give you information that could alter your destiny. That being said..." Spock Prime appears to recognize that never-alter-your-destiny can be just as perplexing and dubious a guide to action as never-interfere-with-your-development. So he proceeds to advise Spock on how to save the Enterprise from Kahn.