

Cinema Wars

*Hollywood Film and Politics
in the Bush-Cheney Era*

Douglas Kellner

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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Introduction

Film, Politics, and Society

From the 1960s to the present, US culture, society, and politics have been the site of intense political struggles. In this context, film and media culture in the United States has been a battleground between competing social groups, with some films advancing liberal or radical positions and others reproducing conservative ones. Many films, however, are politically ambiguous, exhibiting a contradictory mixture of political motifs or attempts to be apolitical.

During the past decade, the United States suffered through some of the most compelling drama in its history since what many consider to be the stolen election of 2000 (Kellner 2001), an event that inaugurated an eight-year nightmare, the consequences of which we are still suffering. The Bush-Cheney administration began by pushing a hard-right agenda.¹ After the September 11, 2001 terror attacks on New York and Washington, it rammed through harsh restrictions on civil liberties in the so-called USA Patriot Act and began a disastrous war in Iraq in the name of protecting the US from terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. In a meeting with Karl Rove in Hollywood, film producers were called upon to serve the country in the “war on terror” and make patriotic films.² However, the credibility of the Bush-Cheney-Rove era eroded as the costly failure in Iraq became evident, the administration showed utter incompetence in the Hurricane Katrina catastrophe, and divisive conflict emerged over Iraq, civil rights, energy policy, the environment, the economy, and a wealth of other issues. The extent of the disaster of the Republican regime was capped by the meltdown of the US and global financial markets in Fall 2008, during a hard-fought US presidential race won by Barack Obama.

Cinema Wars will attempt to show that the turbulence of the era is reproduced in the Hollywood films of the 2000s.³ While during the

2 Introduction: Film, Politics, and Society

Vietnam War the Hollywood film industry generally avoided presenting films engaging the conflict, waiting until years after the US had pulled out, a whole series of films has emerged on the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, as have cycles of films on terrorism, war and militarism, environmental crisis, and the conflicts of the 2000s over gender, race, class, sexuality, religion, and other hot button issues.

Hollywood Film as a Contested Terrain

From this viewpoint, contemporary Hollywood cinema can be read as a contest of representations and a contested terrain that reproduces existing social struggles and transcodes the political discourses of the era.⁴ I use the term *transcode* to describe how specific political discourses like Reaganism or liberalism are translated, or encoded, into media texts. For example, *Easy Rider* (1969) and *Woodstock* (1970) transcode the discourses of the 1960s counterculture into cinematic texts in image, sound, dialogue, scene, and narrative. Films like *Red Dawn* (1984) and *Rambo* (1984) transcode the conservative discourses of Reaganism (see Kellner and Ryan 1988), while *Syriana* (2005) transcodes mistrust in the Bush-Cheney era of government, big oil corporations, and corporate power, and *Michael Clayton* transcodes fears of corporate corruption and wrong-doing. As we will see, many conservative films transcode Bush-Cheney discourses on foreign policy and militarism, while films like *Lions for Lambs* (2007) and *Rendition* (2007) transcode liberal discourses critical of Bush-Cheney administration politics in cinema wars over US foreign policy (see discussion of these films in the Conclusion).

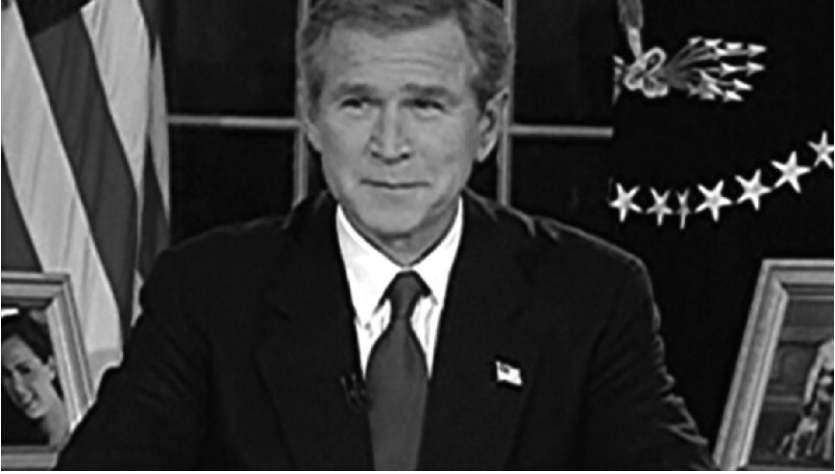
Further, while some Hollywood films articulate in aggressive fashion contemporary liberal, conservative, or radical ideologies, and thus intersect with current public controversies,⁵ other films are complex, multilayered, and open to multiple readings, like *No Country For Old Men* (see below), or the *Star Wars* films (see chapter 4), while many are simply incoherent.⁶ Sometimes the political ideologies of films are implicit, while at other times they are quite explicit,⁷ as in the liberalism of certain films by Robert Redford, George Clooney, and Michael Moore, or the conservatism of Chuck Norris, Mel Gibson, and the *Rambo* films.

Since the 1960s, culture wars in the US have tended to be between liberals and conservatives with radicals on the left and right articulating more extreme and oppositional positions.⁸ Traditionally, conservatism

in Western democracies affirmed the market and capitalism over the state, advocated individualism and freedom over equality and justice, and supported traditional values like the heterosexual patriarchal family, religion, and conservative cultural values. During the 2000s, “conservatism” was represented by the Republican Party, although many claim that Bush, Cheney, and many of their followers are better labeled “right-wing extremists” as they pushed militarism and an aggressive unilateralist foreign policy, discarded civil liberties in their USA Patriot Act, and broke with international law in its advocacy of torture, “extraordinary rendition,” and “preemptive war.” “Liberalism,” in turn, since the New Deal in the 1930s, has been associated in the US with a regulatory state, civil liberties and rights for minorities, equality, and secularism, although liberals also largely champion a so-called free market economy. We will see that over the 2000s a hegemonic rightwing conservatism advocated by the Bush-Cheney administration was defeated by a social liberalism represented by the Obama campaign and that the battle was played out in Hollywood film of the era.

Hence, I will attempt to show that cinematic wars over issues like terrorism, war and militarism, the environment, rights, and other issues have been intensely fought in the 2000s on the terrain of Hollywood cinema. Although I use the term *Hollywood* to refer to a specific style and type of what has become a globally dominant cinema, contemporary US cinema also exhibits a wider range of styles and aesthetics, types of film, and critical-oppositional works than the more mainstream genre films usually categorized as Hollywood cinema. Indeed, as we shall see, film itself is highly contested in the United States and globally, with alternative and oppositional cinematic works emerging even within the mainstream, as with Spike Lee and Michael Moore, as well as from the independent film movement. Moreover, global film production has often absorbed Hollywood techniques and personnel, just as Hollywood film has drawn on global financing and production teams, as well as talent. Likewise, independent cinema has passed into the mainstream, as the number of Academy Awards for low-budget and independent films in 2005 and 2008 testifies, generating a symbiosis of Hollywood and independent film production sometimes labeled “Indiewood.”⁹

There has also been a growing overlap between film and television production as the quality of TV improves, especially on pay TV channels like HBO and Showtime (see Johnson 2007). Further, Hollywood films increasingly use digital cameras and equipment associated with



George W. Bush was satirized in many entertainment films and documentaries of the era.

video. Computerized special effects and editing have also undercut the divide between film and video. Actors, directors, and other talent have long crossed over between US film and television, and differences in viewing are also eroding as more people watch TV and films at home on large-screen entertainment systems. Hence, I will occasionally deal with television movies or series that articulate with the themes under investigation.

Films are an especially illuminating social indicator of the realities of a historical era, as a tremendous amount of capital is invested in researching, producing, and marketing the product. Film creators tap into the events, fears, fantasies, and hopes of an era and give cinematic expression to social experiences and realities. Sometimes the narratives are contrived to represent political figures and events of the era, as when *Primary Colors* (1998) provides an explicit satirical take on Bill Clinton, or *W.* (2008) presents a biopic of George W. Bush. Sometimes, however, films provide indirect commentary and critique of their social and political context, as do many of the films discussed in this book.

The cinema wars over religion in the United States, for instance, were evident in the success of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* and the popularity of Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* and a blockbuster film modeled on the novel.¹⁰ Deployment of violence and fear to promote

an ultraconservative Christian agenda is evident in Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Almost completely ignoring Christ's social gospel and teaching, the film focuses on the last hours of Jesus's life and especially his arrest, torture, and crucifixion. Wasting little time in getting into torture and violence, the film begins with the temple guards arresting Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, where they savagely beat him and take him to the Jewish high priest, Caiaphas. On the way, they suspend Jesus from a bridge, choking him and dangling him over the water, incidents for which there is no gospel basis.¹¹

Gibson's version of Christianity is exceptionally violent and blood-thirsty, and evokes horror at the magnitude of Christ's suffering, as well as hatred for his tormentors and torturers. Gibson conveys his messages through images and spectacle, not words, thus undercutting a key aspect of Christianity as a religion of the book and the word. Gibson's film purposely uses the archaic Aramaic language and is very sparing in its use of subtitles; hence, it is the spectacle that most engages viewers. This follows a contemporary trend to promote a culture of image and spectacle, but goes against a more traditional Christianity that is suspicious and critical of graven images and relies on "the word" for its teaching. Gibson, however, is clearly a purveyor of graven images, and highly problematic ones at that.

Like the Bush-Cheney administration, Gibson's *Passion* employs tactics of shock and awe to overpower its audience. It overwhelms rational faculties with its intense and horrific images, unrelenting violence, and seductive music. Like every great work of propaganda, it manipulates its audience into its traps, in this case a fundamentalist Manicheanism which divides the world into a battle between absolute Good and Evil.¹² It is significant that Gibson's *Passion* works on a visceral level of emotion rather than thought, which seems highly foreign to Gibson's mindset. Gibson, like George W. Bush, is disdainful of intellectuals and critical thinking, privileging emotion and faith over reason, operating at a "gut" level.

Indeed, there is a series of interesting similarities between George W. Bush and Mel Gibson. Bush has famously declared that Jesus is his favorite philosopher, and part of Gibson's highly effective publicity for *The Passion* stressed his allegedly deep Christian beliefs, which drove him to produce and market the film. Both Gibson and Bush Junior are born-again Christians who claim they have overcome struggles with drugs and alcohol to embrace a highly fundamentalist Christianity.

Both are Manichean to the core, see themselves on the side of good, and view their enemies and adversaries as evil. For both, you're either with us or against us; Gibson and his followers attacked critics of *The Passion* as anti-Christian and even minions of Satan. Both Bush and Gibson are morally self-righteous and champion redemptive violence in the struggle for good. Both are extremely megalomaniac, seeing themselves as chosen vehicles of God, yet often appear addled and inarticulate when confronted with difficult questions (possibly due to years of excessive drug and alcohol abuse that impaired their cognitive faculties). Each deploys his political or cultural power to advance the ends of his conservative version of Christianity, arguably with highly controversial effects. And both have been accused of mendacity and a purely instrumental relation to truth, using language to justify themselves, whatever the veracity of their claims.¹³ And as a popular joke has it, the similarities between Jesus Christ and George W. Bush are evident in that both believe they are appendages of God and both owe their job to their father.

Gibson's *Passion* was one of a series of popular films that feature graphic violence which were a mark of the second Bush-Cheney administration. As the violence in Iraq accelerated in 2006–2007, a spate of powerful films emerged that interrogated violence in US society and culture, such as *American Gangster*, *No Country for Old Men*, *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead*, *Zodiac*, *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, *The Dark Knight*, and *There Will Be Blood*. In addition, a wave of marginal violent films of the era, often highly successful at the box office, like *Saw I–V*, *Halloween*, *Hostel I and II*, *The Girl Next Door*, *Shooter*, *Street Kings*, *War*, *Shoot 'em Up!*, *You Kill Me*, *We Own the Night*, *Lakeview Terrace*, *Torture*, and countless others, put on display the violence and brutality in contemporary US culture.

While the most popular and awarded films often put on display key insights into current sociopolitical dynamics, sometimes less mainstream films present ideological problematics and are socially revealing, portraying phenomena not acceptable in mainstream cinema, such as extreme violence and sexuality, or torture. One can also practice “reading against the grain” – finding progressive insights in putatively reactionary films and conservative moments in relatively liberal films. While I focus on major filmmakers, blockbusters, and some of the most popular and discussed films of the era, marginal films can also be socially revealing and articulate key experiences and critical visions.

For example, the violence and brutality of the era is on display in a cycle of horror films that feature torture, such as the *Saw* and *Hostel* film series. The *Saw* franchise, which unveiled a five installment torture and gorefest series between 2004 and 2008, puts on display the demented illusions, grotesque hypocrisy, obscene violence, and utter lunacy of the Bush-Cheney era, which finds its true face in the sick and twisted killer-ex-machina Jigsaw (Tobin Bell). The premise of the series is that Jigsaw evolves complex “tests” and torture devices to punish miscreants of various sorts. *Saw IV* (2007) provides the back-story that indicates Jigsaw became crazed when his pregnant wife was accosted by a junkie in a violent encounter and lost their child. Thereafter, Jigsaw turned his energies as engineer and builder to construct elaborate torture mechanisms and tests to punish “Evil” of various sorts, just as the Bush-Cheney administration was constructing apparatuses of torture in Afghanistan, Iraq, Guantanamo, and other sites throughout the world to punish its alleged enemies and “evil doers.”

In *Saw II* (2006), Jigsaw kidnaps seven convicted drug users or dealers and submits them to torture and survival tests, leaving rules for “games” on a cassette tape à la *Mission: Impossible* that usually pits the “players” against each other, so it is either kill or be killed – a brutal Darwinian vision that informs the series, as well as the political unconscious of contemporary conservatism and, especially, Dick Cheney and his minions. While the 1980s stalk-and-slash films punished teenagers who had sex by having them slashed by a faceless killer, Jigsaw pursues a rigorous anti-drug morality, torturing and killing individuals who dealt or used hard drugs, just as the Bush-Cheney administration imprisoned a record number of inmates – often poor and of color – for drug possession, and a record number of terror suspects held without trial and proper legal procedure. And just as Jigsaw legitimates his monstrous activities through demented appeals to a higher morality, so too did the Bush-Cheney administration.

Yet *Saw II* also attacks corrupt police, as it turns out that every one of the dealers/users kidnapped in his survival game had evidence falsely planted on them that led to their imprisonment, leading Jigsaw to capture and torture the wayward cop Eric Matthews (Danny Wahlberg), who framed the victims. Jigsaw has also imprisoned Eric’s son, who would be in great danger if his identity was discovered by the drug dealers. The incarceration of an innocent young man transcodes fears of kidnappers and sexual abuse of children; this is especially ironic, given that Bush and

Cheney did, in a sense, kidnap the sons (and daughters) of many American people, whose children were faced with tortures, brutality and harm in far more graphic and realistic manners than in Jigsaw's games, losing limbs, being ambushed and blown apart with improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and suffering from post-traumatic syndrome.

Ironically, the policeman Matthews was pursuing the same Vengeance-Outside-the-Law morality as Jigsaw, planting evidence to punish wrongdoers and thus carrying out his own form of vigilante justice – just like the Bush-Cheney administration, which became like its most “evil” enemies when it resorted to constructing false evidence, rendition, torture, and murder. Another feature of Jigsaw's “games” involves complex torture devices that test one's will to survive by forcing victims to dismember vital organs in order to free themselves. *Saw IV* exhibits a pedagogical device that attempts to justify Jigsaw's machinations and recruit followers to his twisted philosophy and deeds. A SWAT team cop, Rigg (Lyriq Bent), who is obsessed with finding the tormentors and killers of his police colleagues, is recruited to play Jigsaw's games. The plot mechanisms attempt to get Rigg to see and feel what Jigsaw feels; to see that society's scum and enemies require the fiercer retribution of Jigsaw's machinations, providing an allegory of how the Bush-Cheney administration attempted to get the public to accept its doctrines of torture, preemptive war, and savage military intervention (“shock and awe” to flush out and destroy evil doers).

In the contemporary context, the lunatic killer Jigsaw can therefore be read as a metaphor for Dick Cheney and his subordinates, a group of fanatical, warped, and vicious advocates of torture and murder, believing that their torturing and murdering is in the cause of good because it is punishing evil. The motif of vengeance that runs through the *Saw* franchise articulates the conservative and Old Testament “eye for an eye” mentality that brutally punishes and eliminates wrongdoers and enemies. This Manichean mentality projects evil onto its “other,” denying its own violent and aggressive tendencies.

The *Saw* franchise thus puts on display the brutality involved in US policies of torture and retribution, showing individuals who defend and practice such atrocities – at odds with traditional American political morality – to be ill, depraved, and extremely dangerous. Thus the *Saw* franchise can be read as an acute diagnosis of US society's most heinous features, and to demonstrate the noxiousness and lunacy of the rightwing extremists running the country. On the other hand, that these films have



The villain Jigsaw in the *Saw* franchise can be seen as a metaphor for Dick Cheney and his subordinates, who believed that torture and murder could be in the cause of good because it is punishing evil.

been extremely popular is a cause for worry that there are more potential recruits to take over from disillusioned Pentagon, CIA, and other potential torturers and killers. Many viewers may identify with the torture sequences and obtain sadomasochistic pleasure from watching them, pointing to a propensity to take pleasure in others' misfortunes and suffering. The *Saw* films may also convince viewers that guilty individuals are worthy of punishment and torture. The *Saw* franchise's popularity and continuation is thus an index of a pathological society riven with unmastered aggression and violence.

The Dark Knight, the highest grossing film of 2008,¹⁴ also can be read as a critical allegory about the corruption, violence, and nihilism of the Bush-Cheney era. *Superman I* and *II* (1978 and 1980) and other superhero films of the late 1970s and 1980s showed the yearning in the American popular imagination for a Savior/Redeemer who would save the country from the morass of confusion coming out of the 1960s and 1970s and restore an older America, helping to fuel Reaganite conservatism (see Kellner and Ryan 1988: 217ff). Some of the superhero films of the last years of the Bush-Cheney administration, by contrast, can be read as a critique of the failed conservative regime. The Batman films of the late Bush-Cheney era show the polity to be utterly corrupt

and the economic, political, and legal system in paralysis, approximately the case by the end of the failed era.

The theme of police, military, and government corruption and failure to solve social problems is on display throughout Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2004). His Batman (Christian Bale) is a human-all-too-human figure who must overpower his fears (of bats) and remorse over the murder of his parents after Bat-figures in an opera frightened the young lad and he maneuvered his parents to leave early, leading them to a mugging and murder. Grown up, he is devastated with remorse and guilt, but learns the martial arts disciplines and gains the technology necessary to be a crusader against evil.

The evil in *Batman Begins* involves the deranged scientist Dr. Jonathan Crane, a.k.a. Scarecrow, plotting to poison Gotham's water supply – a barely disguised figure for weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Other villains involve the League of Shadows and its sinister and mysterious leader Ra's al Ghul, a figure for the threat of China as a potential strategic enemy. These villains possess a gas extracted from a rare flower that can decimate the populace – another WMD figure, evoking fears of biological weapons.

Evil also dwells within Batman's family corporation, as it is Earle (Rutger Hauer), the ruthless CEO of Wayne Enterprises, who is producing, among other things, WMDs, and who aids the villains. Further, the film presents an almost totally corrupt legal system, dominated by corporate and criminal powers, an analogue to the Bush-Cheney partisan evisceration of the political and legal system, just as the malfeasance of corporate criminals in the film is an analogue to corporate corruption and crime in the contemporary era.

In Nolan's follow-up Batman saga, *The Dark Knight* (2008), the vision is darker, the corruption and chaos more pervasive. The film overlaps with recent social apocalypse films that portray the system under crisis and careening toward collapse (see chapter 1). Crime is on the rise again in Gotham, but tabloid newspapers are questioning Batman's vigilante tactics with headlines screaming: "Batman: Crusader or Menace?" Bruce Wayne/Batman's longtime love, Rachel (Maggie Gyllenhaal), is involved with Gotham's charismatic and committed DA Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart), who is presented as the squeaky-clean Good Knight. Despite Dent's involvement with his beloved Rachel, Batman, questioning his own tactics and outside-the-law vigilante status, comes to believe that Gotham needs a completely honest

and competent DA to clean up crime and replace Batman as the center of law enforcement, and thus strongly supports Dent.

It appears that the Joker (Heath Ledger) is behind the recent crime outbreak in Gotham, which includes hits on a mob bank, unleashing retaliatory crime by the town's criminal elements. The Joker is presented as the spirit of anarchy and chaos of a particularly destructive and nihilistic nature. In the contemporary context, the Joker represents the spirit of terrorism and the film is full of iconography related to 9/11, with dark whirling clouds of smoke and explosions of sound in the opening frame suggesting a city under attack. As the convoluted plot unfolds, the cinematic spectacle portrays a series of assaults on the inner city, targeting corporations, banks, the police, and the legal system. In this desperate situation, Batman goes after the Joker, employing surveillance of the telephone system, putting civil rights and the constitution aside, and torturing the Joker once he is caught. This appears to legitimate Bush-Cheney politics against terrorism: if our enemy, the logic runs, is absolutely evil, anything we do to destroy him is good, including going over to the Dark Side.¹⁵ In fact, a columnist for Rupert Murdoch's *Wall Street Journal* claimed that Batman was a figure for George W. Bush himself, who went over to the Dark Side to fight terror and took criticisms from liberals for pursuing his unpopular but supposedly necessary policies of torture and surveillance.¹⁶

The film, however, sharply puts in question the tactics of the Dark Side, as it appears that the Joker has manipulated Batman, Dent, and the police to get them to carry out his evil agenda. Surveillance helps capture the Joker who, when submitted to torture, lies, leading Rachel to be kidnapped and murdered. The previously upright Dent is drawn into the abyss by the Joker, killing one person a day to keep Rachel alive. When she is killed he goes over the edge and into the Dark Side himself, symbolized by his disfigurement and transformation into Two-Face. Like the villain Chirgyh in *No Country for Old Men*, Dent sacrifices morality and choice for a flip of the coin, deciding people's fates through a plunge into a completely meaningless existence of pure contingency and nihilism.

Thus, *The Dark Knight* portrays the morass and abyss of the Bush-Cheney era. Together, the Batman films of the 2000s articulate the dark, deep pessimism of people plagued by their own economic and political elites and deadly enemies who want to destroy them. The murky political allegory suggests that going over to the Dark Side twists and corrupts individuals and society. To paraphrase Nietzsche, if you look into the face of a monster long enough you become the monster.

In this book, I argue that there are a number of recurring themes in many of the major and minor Hollywood films of the past decades, which articulate some of the key events and sociopolitical and economic conflicts of the time. Many of these films resonate with and can be read within the history of the social and political struggles and context of their period. In this way, film can help interpret the social and political history of an era, and contextualizing films in their matrix of production, distribution, and reception can help illuminate the multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings and effects of specific films, genres, and filmmakers. *Cinema Wars* engages a broad array of films, genres, directors, and cinematic spectacle, ranging from some of the most popular films and acclaimed directors to more marginal fare. Often, Oscar-winning films reflect the mood and zeitgeist of an era, as when during the relatively peaceful and prosperous 1990s feel-good years affirmative films like *Forrest Gump* (1994), *Titanic* (1997), and *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) won Oscars. By contrast, films like the Academy Award winning productions of the last three years of the Bush-Cheney administration – *Crash* (2005), *The Departed* (2006), and *No Country for Old Men* (2007) – reflect a more anxiety ridden era, when events appear out of control, violence is rampant, and socioeconomic insecurities and crises are intensifying.¹⁷ Although films dealing with Iraq and terrorism did not do well at the box office, suggesting audience fatigue with Bush-Cheney politics, in 2005 “message movies” dominated the Best Picture nominations, including *Brokeback Mountain*, *Capote*, *Crash*, *Munich*, and *Good Night, and Good Luck*. While the masses did not turn to these movies for escapism, serious members of the production community, critics, and audiences turned to these cinematic visions for insight into the contemporary morass.

The 2009 Academy Awards could be read as a fierce repudiation of the Bush-Cheney years and an embrace of the Obama vision of diversity, progressivism, and hope. The number of awards won by non-Americans attests again to the increasingly global nature of film and cinematic culture, but also constitutes a rejection of the narrow nationalism and chauvinism of the Bush-Cheney years. The eight awards for *Slumdog Millionaire* in particular exhibit a yearning for diversity, complexity, critical vision, and sympathy for the marginalized and oppressed after eight years of one-dimensional conservative ideology and an administration and culture attuned to wealth and power. *Slumdog* obviously resonated for a global audience distraught by the crisis of capitalism that exploded around the time of its release.

Sean Penn's upset win as Best Actor for *Milk* over Mickey Rourke's performance in *The Wrestler* attests to recognition that Penn is one of the greatest actors of his generation, but also provides a nod to the individual who was probably the fiercest critic in Hollywood of the Bush-Cheney regime. Penn played heroic gay activist Harvey Milk in *Milk*, the first openly gay elected representative in US politics, who was assassinated by a deranged homophobe. Bestowing Oscars on Penn and *Milk*'s script-writer Dustin Lance Black, who won acclaim for Best Adapted Script, represents a strong repudiation of the homophobia that continues to fester in the US. In particular it represents Hollywood's rejection of the Proposition 8 California ballot initiative that denies gays and lesbians marriage rights previously granted. Black and Penn got some of the most rousing ovations of the evening and both made well-received political speeches accepting of gays and lesbians. Black stated that as a 13-year-old gay moving to California, hearing about Harvey Milk's activism gave him hope that he could live an open life and be accepted and respected. Penn's expression of genuine surprise in winning led him to open with an exclamation: "You Commie, homo-loving sons of guns." His denunciation of homophobes demonstrating outside was well received and attests to the liberalism of the Hollywood community.

However, the ceremonies and speeches also put on display the limitations of Hollywood liberalism in confronting grave crisis. Although the format was based on Depression era spectacle and Hollywood as a dream machine and mode of escape, no one really mentioned the economic crisis or the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (protested in earlier Oscar ceremonies), nor were there references to the ecological crisis and need for immediate and serious action, topics that Hollywood films of the era dealt with and that will be engaged in the following chapters.

Cinema, Politics, and Social History: From Cinematic Realism to Allegory

In general, cinema is a form of vision that provides ways of seeing, either reproducing conventional modes of seeing and experiencing the world, or enabling one to perceive things one has not viewed or experienced. There is also an important aural dimension to films, so that audiences can sometimes see, hear, and experience things differently, from another perspective, thus enlarging their range of vision and experience. Cinema

frames the world, offering “a world viewed” (Cavell 1971), proliferating motion pictures (“movies”) that depict action and movement and thus provide panoramas of time and vistas of history. Cinema may focus vision on external, surface appearances, or provide deeper and more critical visions of human beings, social relations, or historical processes, as do many of the best contemporary films.

Films can display social realities of the time in documentary and realist fashion, directly representing the events and phenomena of an epoch. But films can also provide allegorical representations that interpret, comment on, and indirectly portray aspects of an era. Further, there is an aesthetic, philosophical, and anticipatory dimension to films, in which they provide artistic visions of the world that might transcend the social context of the moment and articulate future possibilities, positive and negative, and provide insights into the nature of human beings, social relations, institutions, and conflicts of a given era, or the human condition itself.

Films marked by the conventions and style of cinematic realism attempt to present actual events and persons. They include critical documentaries and films like Oliver Stone’s historical dramas, which try to provide a representation of events like the Kennedy assassination (*J.F.K.*, 1991), the Vietnam War (*Platoon*, 1986; *Born on the Fourth of July*, 1989), *Nixon* (1995), or countercultural figures like *The Doors* (1991), as well as Stone’s post-9/11 film *World Trade Center* (2006). Stone’s cinema combines epic historical scope with depictions of constructions of the everyday life of figures like Richard Nixon, the firefighters of *World Trade Center*, or George W. Bush in *W.* (2008). Using the classical techniques of Hollywood cinema, Stone attempts in these films to create highly realistic characters, plots, and narratives to capture the historical actualities of the moment.

These cinematic mappings attempt to represent historical events, individuals, character types, cultural norms, and other defining features of a specific society.¹⁸ Of course, documentary films, however rigorous, and cinematic realism are both constructs. As the Oliver Stone examples easily suggest, films are interpretations whose critical visions of social and historical realities have their own ideological and idiosyncratic biases and perspectives.¹⁹ Properly interpreted and contextualized, films can provide key insights into specific historical persons, events, or eras.

Allegorical films include fantasy and horror genres that require informed interpretations concerning what social realities, or fantasies, specific films represent.²⁰ Critical allegorical interpretation requires searching for the

social conditions and experiences behind their cinematic representation. The series of haunted and collapsing house films of the late 1970s to the present (e.g., *The Amityville Horror* films and the *Poltergeist* trilogy), for example, can be interpreted as projecting the fears of middle-class families losing their homes or having their families torn apart during the Reagan era (see Kellner 1995), when the middle class was indeed downwardly mobile, divorce was up, and families were losing homes (as happened again in accelerating fashion in the 2000s, when a mortgage crisis exploded in the Bush-Cheney era).

Historical dramas or contemporary thrillers can also provide allegories of the contemporary era. Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood* enacts a scathing denunciation of a hypermasculine American will-to-power and the destructive effects of greed and predatory capitalism. While *No Country for Old Men* grounds evil and violence in a remorseless nature and fallen human beings, *There Will Be Blood* roots greed, violence, and madness in an unrestrained capitalism and patriarchy, uneasily bolstered – and sometimes undermined – by the pillars of religion and family. Anderson's epic historical drama thus attempts to get at the roots of America's malaise and madness and shows its problems deeply rooted in its core institutions and values, ultimately providing a critical commentary on the contemporary moment.

This family saga of oil wealth and its bloody consequences can also be read as an allegory about the Bush family and its vicious quest for money and power, culminating in George W. Bush and Dick Cheney's invasion of Iraq – in part for oil – and resulting in blood.²¹ The story centers on the rise to wealth and power of oilman Daniel Plainview (Daniel Day Lewis), whose son is nicknamed H. W., precisely the initials of George H. W. Bush. In Bush family history, H. W. refers to Herbert Walker, one of the pioneering buccaneers of the Bush-Walker family dynasty who was the business partner of Prescott Bush and father of Dorothy Walker, who Prescott Bush married. Prescott Bush and Herbert Walker made their fortunes, among other ventures, by managing the American interests of German businesses and the Nazis, including industrialists like Krupp, who helped initially finance German fascism and built sectors of its military infrastructure. Dorothy and Prescott Bush's son George H. W. Bush in turn was infamously to go into the oil business, as was his wayward son George W. Young George W., known in the family as Junior, spectacularly flopped in all his oil ventures, but managed to identify with the interests of the industry throughout his presidency, no doubt

contributing to, first, record oil prices and, then, economic crisis by the summer and fall of 2008.²²

In the context of the present era, one could also read *There Will Be Blood* as an allegory about the Bush-Cheney Iraq invasion. Like Plainview, the key members of the administration, connected to the oil and energy industries, sought new sources of oil and there was blood and hellish fires and explosions following the “shock and awe” invasion. Like Plainview, Bush-Cheney are stubborn and unyielding, failing to see the errors of their ways, and driven by dark forces of power and domination. Like Plainview, Bush-Cheney have arguably taken leave of their senses and no good end for their violent ventures was in sight during their Reign of Error.

I suggested allegorical readings of *There Will Be Blood* and the *Batman* films of the 2000s, so that they can be read as providing commentary on the Bush-Cheney administration, as well as embodying other themes. Likewise, a series of political thrillers during the waning of the Bush-Cheney regime can be read as allegories articulating liberal fears of rightwing oppression, including *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004), *Syriana* (2004), and *V for Vendetta* (2006), which I engage in chapter 4.

Films thus provide illumination into the contemporary moment through their images, scenes, and narratives. As Walter Benjamin and T. W. Adorno argued, cultural forms like films can provide “dialectical images” that illuminate their social environments.²³ Films may be a less sublime mode of culture, although they have their aesthetic moments of beauty and transcendence, and modernist moments of style, innovation, contestation, or resistance.

Readings of films thus can engage themselves with the aesthetic dimension that ranges from analysis of cinematic form and style to philosophical visions of life.²⁴ The Coen brothers’ *No Country for Old Men*, which won Academy Awards for Best Picture and Best Director in 2007, is based on a novel of the same title by Cormac McCarthy, and both take a pessimistic look at violent masculinity run amok in their story of a working-class man who finds a stash of money from a drug deal gone awry and is pursued by both the criminals and the sheriff. Thematically, *No Country* transcodes bleak existentialist philosophy that God is Dead, existence is without meaning or redemption, life is always haunted by the abyss of nothingness, destructive fate can strike at any time, Evil prevails over Good, the Good are punished or impotent, and the Evil Ones get away with it. Indeed, the film is pervaded by an existential ethos of anxiety,

dread, treachery, and the always imminent possibility of violent death. This is clearly the most grim vision of an existentialism without the heroism of authentic action, self-creativity, or self-overcoming advanced by Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and others.²⁵ Yet, as Daniel Cho has suggested, one can also read the film as an anti-Bush-Cheney allegory where the Law and Patriarchy are impotent to deal with Terror. In fact, *No Country* is a multilayered film that can give rise to multiple readings.²⁶

By virtue of their style and form, innovative films can present visions of a better life, as well as provide critical insight into the present moment, or philosophical illumination of human existence. Films potentially have a utopian dimension which enables audiences to transcend the limitations of their current life and times to envisage new ways of seeing, living, and being. They can also project idealized views of a better world that can provide ideological halos, which when critically decoded can generate insights into the ideological problematics and struggles of their era. As Fredric Jameson (1981) pointed out, even popular films like *The Godfather* (1972) and *Jaws* (1975) can have utopian moments, such as the opening scenes of communal family life in *The Godfather*, and in *Jaws* the New England community before the shark attack, and the bonding and heroism of the men seeking to protect the community. Further, films can provide dystopic warnings about coming catastrophes, as my discussion of eco-disaster films in chapter 1 will illustrate.

In sum, films are a crucial part of contemporary cultures and are embedded in fundamental economic, political, social, and cultural dimensions of the present age. Films raise issues and can provoke debates over salient concerns of the present moment, as when Andrew Light (2003) claims contemporary films raise important debates concerning surveillance technology, identity politics, or environmentalism, generating arguments that can contribute to political enlightenment or philosophical understanding. Throughout this book, I attempt to show how critical interpretations of film can help provide understanding of contemporary US culture and society, and thus contribute to important debates over politics and the state, corporations and the economy, economic and environmental crisis, terrorism, war and militarism, and threats to democracy.

In general, I use history and social theory to analyze Hollywood films from 2000 to 2008, and use the films in turn to illuminate historical trends, conflicts, possibilities, crises, and anxieties of the era. Reading film contextually thus involves situating films within their sociohistorical environment and showing how they articulate sociopolitical events and

struggles of the time. Political discourses are often relational, opposing contrasting positions in a specific historical situation over war or militarism, gender or sexuality, religion or the state. There may, of course, be more than two opposing political positions, but in mainstream corporate media and entertainment it is roughly a contrast between liberal and conservative discourses, although more radical discourses may emerge and there are frequently levels of contradiction and ambiguity. From this diagnostic perspective, Hollywood films provide important cinematic visions concerning the psychological, sociopolitical, and ideological make-up of US society at a given point in history. Reading films contextually allows one to gain insights into social problems and conflicts, and to appraise the dominant ideologies and emergent oppositional forces.

Hollywood Film and the Contemporary Moment: Signs of the Times

Representations of the present era and its sometimes hidden histories are evident in key films of the 2000s. The transition from the Clinton-Gore era of relative peace and prosperity to the militarist interventionism and multiple crises of the Bush-Cheney administration was anticipated in a series of war films and political thrillers released before and just after 9/11. Films have an anticipatory dimension and can predict and anticipate events of the era. Before the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, Hollywood films presented domestic terrorist attacks on US soil and threats of attacks from a variety of terrorist groups. Edward Zwick's *The Siege* (1998) contains astonishing anticipations of the domestic terrorism that would emerge in the US and globally in the 2000s. Playing out debates, still heated and ongoing, about how to deal with terrorist threats, *The Siege* anticipates the extreme positions the Bush-Cheney administration would take and lays out counterarguments.

The film opens with footage of a bombing of Khobar Towers holding US troops stationed in Saudi Arabia and reflecting a 1996 bombing of US barracks. News footage shows a suspected Arab terrorist behind the plot, Sheik Ahmed Bin Talal, uncannily resembling Osama Bin Laden. Clips from Bill Clinton threatening retaliation are followed by the sheik driving through the desert and tracked by US satellite technology, leading to his capture. Shortly thereafter, a sinister looking American eyes him, whom we