



POLITICS GO TO THE MOVIES

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND POLITICS
IN GENRE FILMS AND TELEVISION

JOEL R. CAMPBELL



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International Relations and Politics in Genre Films and Television

Joel R. Campbell

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For My Dad
He taught me to love movies, especially Westerns
Wherever you are now, hope you got to meet John Wayne

Introduction

MAGIC IN THE DARK—AND MAKING THE MOST OF A DARK TIME

The Film-Going Experience

The COVID-19 pandemic swept the globe in 2020. What a shock it was to everyone. When people looked ahead to the year 2020, it was with hope. Various government and corporate reports of the 1990s had used that year to sketch out bright futures. We were looking forward to a great year, and suddenly we were in lockdown, forced to hunker down at home. At first, it seemed like a pleasant little vacation, a time to reconnect with family. People reached out to friends online, and found common cause with health care workers, first responders and supermarket employees. But as the economy ground to a halt and millions lost their jobs, the experience became frightening, claustrophobic, and personally cataclysmic. Everyone wanted to get back to work or school as soon as possible. Asians approached that desire with sense, waiting for health authorities to bring the disease down to manageable numbers, and things started to return to normal in some countries in the summer. Americans rushed to open the economy before coronavirus was under control. Europe was in the middle, with fewer cases but more surges. The disease surged again in the autumn and winter, forcing most countries to at least partially shut down again.

Stuck at home for weeks, often without work to preoccupy them, keeping restless children busy, people searched for things to take their minds off the calamity. Some read books, others sang, and still others searched their computers for jobs. Most people watched movies or television series, and watched, and watched. It was the most natural activity for this period of stasis. I admit that there were a few days when I had the TV on most of the time. What a better way to deal with adversity than to escape for at least a couple of hours into a fantasy world.

Our ancestors were no different. For most of the past 300,000 years, anatomically modern humans were hunter-gatherers. They worked for a few hours a day hunting small or large animals and gathering the plant materials they needed to eat. Then, they spent the rest of the day into the night around the campfire telling stories from their tribe. Some went into deep caves, painting images of their myths on the walls. They told stories of heroes, tricksters, animal helpers, the great goddess, or myriad lesser goddesses and gods to rapt audiences. At Lascaux in France and Altamira in Spain, animals are painted as if moving, or are molded onto rock that suggests animals' shapes. These artists already knew *mise-en-scene* long before an actor stepped onto the first theater stage.

Ancient societies developed drama, the wellspring for all dramatic film. The Greeks immediately grasped that the stage could present both comedies and tragedies, the first genres. Comedy picked apart the absurdity of everyday life and crises that were usually resolved by marriages, while tragedy unveiled inevitable falls of great men and women due to their own failings. Medieval playwrights illustrated simple moral tales and religious miracles at work in the world. The first modern dramas, centered on the era of William Shakespeare, broke tragedies and comedies into sub-genres, and created a third genre, the history play. Shakespeare was a very political playwright, as several of his best works, such as *Richard III*, supported Tudor and Stuart claims to the British throne—a smart move in an era when government approval of the theater was ever precarious. By the nineteenth century, actors had become superstars, special effects became an art form, and popular playwrights such as Oscar Wilde were the toast of both sides of the Atlantic.

The stage had been set, if you will pardon the pun, for the first movies. A garden scene shot by French filmmaker Louis Le Prince in 1888 may have been the world's first short film, though a running horse shot ten years earlier was a first attempt (What Was, 2021: 1–2). Thomas Edison—yes, the same man who invented lightbulbs and phonographs—gave the world its first commercial film, *The Kiss*, eight years later and the romance genre was born. By World War I, we got Westerns, gangster movies, slapstick comedies, social commentary, horror, war stories and historical epics. Georges Melies was one of the most prolific directors of the period, creating elaborate fantasies and the first science fiction/fantasy movie, *A Trip to the Moon* (1902).

Our forebears relied on movies to get them through. The romantic yarns of the silent era helped people deal with social dislocation. Out of work and without much money, Great Depression era audiences sought hope in rags-to-riches stories, drawing room dramas, and screwball comedies where poor boys married rich girls (or vice versa). With the world on the brink of nuclear Armageddon in the 1950s, young people turned to science fiction and horror films, while families saw their religious values affirmed by

sword-and-sandal epics. Society seemingly collapsing around them in the 1970s, viewers saw their cynicism and paranoia vicariously lanced.

There is magic in the dark. We relax in our seats and the lights go down. We smell the popcorn, taste the cola, feel the sticky stuff beneath our shoes. Alone or with a date in the darkened theater, we can leave our mundane lives behind. We join with the whole audience to laugh, wince, gasp, and even cry. The better movies leave audiences quiet at the end, as they silently shuffle out of the theater. My gauge for this is whether the audience is willing to stay seated for the credits (most of the time, they don't). When I see movies on TV, I sometimes laugh to myself as the credits roll, "well, everybody has left the theater by now." The *Star Wars* movies first made me watch the credits; if I hadn't resisted the urge to leave, I would have missed some of the most thrilling music on the soundtracks. The best movies then stimulate discussion with our dates or friends for hours or days.

Our favorite movies stay with us for weeks, and we can't wait to see the movie again. If it is a movie that becomes a phenomenon like *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *The Sound of Music* (1965) *Titanic* (1997), or the *Lord of the Rings* (2001–2003) films, we may go back to see it again a few days later—and keep going back for months. If we were lazier or didn't have much money, we waited until we can watch the movie on cable TV, VHS tapes, or their successor DVDs. Now, we can live-stream virtually any movie made in the world—all for a relatively small monthly fee. Watching at home may not be as thrilling as seeing it in a theater—it's often not dark and there is no audience to share our laughter or tears. But watching on a big screen television or computer screen can be fun, too. You can pause, go to the bathroom, and play scenes you like again at your leisure. You can pick up the little details on the small screen that you may have missed in the theater.

Of course, not everyone has the same film-going experience. In some developing countries, movie projectors may be powered by portable generators and the images projected at night onto the side of houses or barns. In many places, people cannot afford to go to theatres, and so they can only watch films on a friend's cheap cell phone. In pre-1990s China, large groups of students used to watch movies on a single television in a common area. India, which boasts the world's largest film industry, known abroad as Bollywood, was long known as a nation of small theatres seating perhaps thirty people and charging only nominal admission. Those small theaters are dying out as India becomes more affluent, and this trend has been accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to watch movies at home. Where authoritarian regimes reign, movies often constitute the only voices that can speak truth to power, and they may be circulated only among trusted friends or relatives. Such movies work their political magic through allegory or genre stories that are not explicitly political, but the audiences can usually figure out

oblique political references. That has been true for Iranian and occasionally Chinese directors. In Latin America, films have been a vital way for beleaguered leftists to express their views and fight for political change.

The rise of the Marvel superhero movie has been fueled in part by growing film markets in developing countries, especially in East Asia. Superhero stories are easy to understand and, despite some references to fictional U.S. government entities such as SHIELD or well-known organizations such as the CIA, the stories are not specifically associated with a particular country. *Variety* notes that Marvel films became especially popular in China due to good timing: release of twenty-two films up to 2019 just as China began opening theater multiplexes and the number of American dramatic films approved for release in the country was falling (Davis, 2019: 1–4). Popular American movies now typically get most of their box office take outside North America, and the frequency of sequels (e.g., *Shrek* through *Shrek 5*) is driven by international demand for reiterations of popular stories.

Movies act as time capsules, showing us how people thought about social and political issues in former times. Some of their analyses hold up well, such as Alan J. Pakula's adaptation of Harper Lee's novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962). While set in the 1930s, the story of attorney Atticus Finch's defense of a black man accused of a crime he did not commit has direct relevance to the era of George Floyd and Black Lives Matter. The novel and film inspired many young people to study law or fight for social justice.

Other films were popular and impressed audiences in their time, but now seem dated. *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, based on Truman Capote's eponymous novella, was one of the big movies of 1961. Directed by Blake Edwards and showcasing Henry Mancini's sprightly and moving score, the story centers on the character Holly Golightly (Audrey Hepburn), an eccentric young woman who escaped from a life of drudgery in Tulip, Texas to search for success and a rich husband. Hepburn lights up the screen with every entrance, and her incandescent performance becomes the touchstone of her career. Along the way, Holly casually turns more than a few tricks, receiving fifty dollars "for the powder room," and carries messages to an imprisoned mob boss. She begins to reexamine her life when she meets a writer suffering writer's block and kept-man Paul Varjak (George Peppard). While charming, the movie is full of cringe-worthy scenes that today are considered racist (Mickey Rooney as a stereotyped Japanese character Yuniوشي), sexist (most of the women are insecure or unstable), or demeaning to non-Americans (a Brazilian aristocrat is friendly but not very bright). Everyone is constantly smoking and drinking to excess, which is thoroughly disgusting to many of us now.

A single movie may move you once and stay with you for years. Standout film moments inspire us our whole lives. I remember the first time I saw Lasse Hallstrom's *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* (1993) and can't resist it whenever

I find it on TV. The story centers on Gilbert (Johnny Depp), a young man frustrated by his run-of-the-mill life in a non-descript Midwestern town, who is not sure about his life direction but wants to take care of his family: two sisters and a mentally handicapped younger brother Arnie (Leonardo DiCaprio in one of his first film roles) who frequently climbs the town water tower, and mother Bonnie (Darlene Cates), a morbidly obese woman who has not been able to leave her house for several years partly due to depression over her husband's suicide. Gilbert works in a local supermarket steadily losing business to the giant Food Land that only recently opened, and he is having an affair with Betty (Mary Steenburgen), the unhappy wife of a local insurance agent. Gilbert's life becomes more complicated when Becky (Juliette Lewis), a young woman traveling in an Airstream truck-and-trailer with her grandmother, stops in town. He is instantly smitten with her, and the two feel an easy connection.

Betty's husband dies of sudden heart attack, and she leaves with her children to St. Louis. Events climax on Arnie's eighteenth birthday, when the Grapes have planned a birthday party. The movie is neither powerful nor especially unique, but the audience feels for Gilbert's struggles to balance his desire to escape his life and to be "a good person." As in many of Hallstrom's movies, these are slices of ordinary life with which we can all identify. The struggles are not of great people, but people we know living next door, or in this case down a road outside town. While not specifically political, *Gilbert Grape* touches on a number of socio-political and socio-economic concerns: marginalization of overweight and mentally handicapped people—and lack of services to assist them, economic destruction of traditional businesses by large retail and fast food chains, and lack of economic opportunities for young people in small Midwestern towns.

Movies have always separated into genres. The best genre movies touch us deeply, while connecting to the stock characters and well-worn tropes that inform genre stories. Iconic scenes stay with us and haunt our dreams: the discussion of the meaning of the word Rosebud at the end of *Citizen Kane* before the closeup of the sled in the incinerator, Michael Corleone's murder of Sollozzo and McCluskey in *The Godfather*, Jim Garrison's case summation to the jury in *JFK*, the shaking hands of Captain Miller as he rides the Higgins Boat to the horror of Omaha Beach in *Saving Private Ryan*, the Sad Hill standoff at the end of *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, and the sick, menacing appearance of Heath Ledger's Joker in *The Dark Knight*.

AUDIENCE AND PURPOSES

This book's intended audience is political science, international relations, and film studies instructors and students. The book will also appeal to lay film lovers who want to gain a better understanding of the political, social, and historical context which has shaped the major films in key film genres. As popular culture products such as movies are among the best ways to gain an understanding of the times through which we live, they both reflect and influence the political and social development of societies.

The book's purpose is to explain the ongoing relationship between films and politics. Unlike more abstract art forms, filmic stories have always shown filmmakers' views of a society, including its political struggles and contested social issues. Films have also directly or indirectly influenced political and social events. I look primarily at feature fiction stories, or dramatizations of recent and historical events with actors. I include a few relevant documentaries which relate to or amplify ideas in the key movies discussed.

CONSTRUCTIVISM AND FILM

The book uses the political theory of constructivism to better understand the relationships of politics and international relations to film. In this study, I primarily examine American movies, but I include relevant films from other countries. Thus, the context is mostly American, but I discuss a few related British, French, Italian, Russian, and Hong Kong movies. I will leave comprehensive discussion of world films to a later study. As discussed in this book, films thus reflect the social values and political norms of America. Occasionally, films also play roles in constructing social values or shaping political development. The latter effects are noted where they have happened.

Constructivism is a broad theoretical approach that includes a variety of elements but, for the purposes of this study, it focuses on a few aspects of constructivist thought. First is the ongoing construction of social structures. Movies and television both reflect and influence the development of social structural elements. Second, constructivism implies an intersubjective acceptance of entertainment media. This means that members of society not only consume and readily embrace filmed images and storylines, but also share common understanding of stories, genre tropes, and characters. Third, state identities and interests are key to understanding both domestic politics and international relations. Such identities are either reinforced or undermined by images and stories found in movies and on television. States seek to influence movie content to support their security and law enforcement interests, and

they are most successful doing so when states are powerful vis-à-vis society and public support for government remains high.

Fourth, socialization is key to perpetuation and acceptance of political structures and patterns of behavior. Movies and TV are two notable conduits by which Hollywood has lent itself to socialization of Americans and audiences abroad. During a decade of experimentation and challenge to American institutions, 1966–1977, viewers received a form of negative socialization about the role of government in society, and this contributed to declining public support for government. Finally, constructivism's emphasis on identities shows how they diverge and change. American ethnic minorities, for instance, received more positive treatment during and shortly after the civil rights era of the mid-1950s to early 1970s. Over time, black representation has gradually improved, but protests against the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (or #OscarSoWhite) indicate that the movie industry still has a long way to go. Women activists have taken on endemic sexual harassment in the industry (the #MeToo Movement began in Hollywood) along with inequalities in pay and employment of women both in front of and behind the camera.

FINDING POLITICS IN FILM

Movies have always contained political elements, even if they were passive or subtle. Unlike some political scientists, I take a wide view of politics and feel that politics can be glimpsed in every human institution or interaction. But how useful is it to say that politics is in every movie? Surely, comedies such as John Landis's *Coming to America* (1988), the Farrelly Brothers' *There's Something About Mary* (1998), or *Zookeeper* (2011) are not political, right? Well, maybe . . . but *Coming to America* might be viewed as an African American statement of pride in African heritage thirty years before the powerful superhero movie, *Black Panther*. Prince Akeem Joffer (Eddie Murphy) goes to New York to find a woman that he can truly love, accompanied by his servant/friend Semmi (Arsenio Hall). He chooses Queens because that is where he hopes to find his queen, and he interacts with an assortment of colorful New York characters. He falls for Lisa McDowell (Shari Headley), daughter of a hamburger shop owner. A long-planned sequel, *Coming 2 America* (2021) takes now-King Akeem back to America to find an illegitimate son that he did not know that he fathered on the previous trip.

Mary could be taken as feminist rumination on the nature of male objectification of and stalking of women. Mary (Cameron Diaz), a young woman dedicated to doing good in the world, becomes the object of irrational obsession by several men. She rejects them all, settling on her old high school

acquaintance Ted (Ben Stiller), the one guy among them who decides to leave so that she can be with whoever she wants. *Zookeeper* can be viewed as an examination of psychological pathologies within the American economy, as the protagonist Griffin (Kevin James) must demonstrate to the woman he wants to marry that he is successful by taking a “real” job as a car salesman, though caring for zoo animals is his true calling. The movie also positively presents an interracial relationship, as we see Griffin at last reject his materialistic girlfriend and fall in love with fellow zoo worker Kate (Rosario Dawson).

Can we classify a film like *Monster* (2004), a crime drama and biography starring Charlize Theron and Christina Ricci, as a political movie? Patty Jenkins’ directorial debut, it relates the horrific story of Aileen (Lee) Wuornos, a prostitute and serial killer who in 1992 was sentenced to death in the murders of seven Florida men. Theron, who won an Academy Award for her performance, gained thirty pounds, shaved her eyebrows and wore dental prosthetics to become Wuornos. Many viewers were shocked to see the glamorous Theron channeling such a despicable character. But awful as the screen version of Wuornos is, she ends with a bit of our sympathy. We learn that she was sexually abused as a child, became a sex worker at age thirteen, was raped and beaten by johns, and has never been able to hold down a regular job.

Lee’s love of teenager Selby (Ricci) is touching, though this relationship with a minor is troubling. The impossibility of their dreams for a normal life together is heart-rending. Wuornos’s actual companion, Tyria Moore, was an adult, not a teenager, and may have had more knowledge of Lee’s crimes than does Selby. Critic Roger Ebert noted that Theron skillfully uses eyes, facial expressions and body movements to sketch a woman who tries to look tough but is uncomfortable in her own skin (Ebert, 2004: 1–5). If we were members of the jury, we probably would vote to convict her, but at least we could feel something for her.

Monster raises vital political issues. Should prostitution be legalized, so that sex workers can be protected and attain a higher quality of life? Why do we not assist sex workers to integrate into society? In the movie, Wuornos seeks regular employment but, possessing no skills and unable to control her emotions, she cannot find a job. Are we doing enough to combat child sexual abuse visited on either girls or boys? Wuornos life path was in part determined by the abuse she suffered as a minor. Should the death penalty be applied when issues of mental illness have been demonstrated or asserted in court? Wuornos received multiple death sentences for her murders, despite testimony that she may have been a sociopath and suffered from borderline mental illness.

Spike Lee's *BlackkKlansman* (2018) is a more explicitly political movie. Based on a police detective's experiences investigating the Ku Klux Klan in Colorado Springs in the 1970s, it outlines how Ron Stallworth (John David Washington) and other cops created a false identity for a white "Ron Stallworth" who would pose as a KKK recruit while collecting information on Klan activities. The story greatly dramatizes the events and moves them from 1978–1979 back to 1972, when black radicalism was more in vogue. Lee specifically links that investigation to recent political events, as we see KKK Grand Wizard David Duke emerge as a major figure in right-wing politics. Stallworth questions whether a KKK leader could ever achieve high office, though over a decade later Duke runs for Senator and Governor of Louisiana, losing the latter race in a runoff. As the film's coda, Lee shows the events of the Charlottesville Unite the Right march of white supremacists, Neo-Nazis and the KKK in 2017, including Donald Trump's infamous statement that there were "good people, on both sides" in Charlottesville.

Two movies of 2019 highlight women's issues. *Hustlers* focuses on a group of strippers who concoct a scheme to entice men into gambling large sums, while they drug them and steal their money. Everything goes well while they prey on rich men who won't miss the money, until they push it a bit too far, and some innocent men—and women—get hurt by their actions. The film highlights the difficulties many undereducated women face in achieving gainful employment, and how gambling or prostitution may be their only options to make sufficient money to pay their bills. Greta Gerwig's version of the classic Louisa May Alcott novel, *Little Women*, spotlights feminist aspects of the story often neglected in previous versions. The four sisters, their mother, and their aunt discuss the economic constraints and limited choices that faced young women in the nineteenth century. While each sister wants to find love, they know that it will be difficult to live independently and so they must consider their options carefully.

BOOK OVERVIEW

This book examines how movie genres have illustrated political or socio-political ideas. It focuses on five key genres. The first is gangster films, one of the oldest genres. Gangster films have evolved with social and political insights into organized crime, from the attempts at understanding of it during Prohibition to suppression of its depiction during the Film Production Code era (1930s to 1960s). Crime films of the 1940s to 1950s went in three directions: presenting gangs as new types of business enterprises, looking back nostalgically at gangsters of the 1920s and 1930s, and the murky film noir, which showed gangsters as morally compromised people that fit in with

the other misfits of the sub-genre. The genre revived with the success of *Bonnie and Clyde*, highlighting the eponymous bank robbers as folk heroes for the youth market of the 1960s. *The Godfather* films trilogy gave audiences Mafiosos as noble and even operatic characters, while Martin Scorsese's gangland trilogy showed gangsters as normal working men. More recent films have illustrated the ethnic broadening of gangster activity, as Irish, black, Latino, and Russian hoodlums have their own movies.

Political thrillers and action movies have always been cousins. Thrillers are the more explicitly political of the two, sketching out-of-touch and corrupt governments mired in dark conspiracies to thwart the will of the people, garner more power, or assassinate good leaders. Action movies are inherently more conservative, as male action heroes seek to restore order and stop bad actors who represent the negative external and internal forces that Americans fear lurk all around them.

Superhero films, especially Marvel films, have become a dominating cinema presence in the past two decades. Derived from comics source material, superheroes are the characters most dependent on established tropes and audience intersubjective understanding. Most viewers know the basic backstories of key DC or Marvel characters. Often emotionally wounded and psychically damaged people, or young people on the margins of society, superheroes take to their roles as ways to compensate for their weaknesses or find satisfaction in their lives. Superheroes are often loners, but occasionally function as parts of larger collectives, such as the Justice League, the Avengers, or X-Men.

War movies constitute the genre most directly linked to state interests, as they comment on states' security and war making functions. During war, states want movies to become propaganda supporting state war actions, while after wars states desire positive retrospectives on recent conflicts. Prowar movies tend to present wars in positive terms. While people may have died in war, the cause was noble and the objectives were just. Ambiguous films acknowledge the just cause of war, but note the damage caused to individuals or groups of servicemen or civilians caught up in war. Antiwar films do not recognize the nobility of the cause and demonstrate how war destroys almost anyone who participates in armed conflict, including the scarred and battered veterans. Movies about the Vietnam War gave audiences the most robustly antiwar American stories.

Westerns used to be among the most popular genres, generating hundreds of films during both the 1940s and 1950s. The genre waned in popularity by the 1970s but made a small comeback in the 1980s and 1990s. Westerns use the American frontier to comment on contemporary political and social issues in America. Westerns tend to be conservative, as they underline the importance of law and order and establishment of civilization in the wilderness. The Spaghetti Westerns of the 1960s and 1970s employed stories set in

the Southwestern United States and northern Mexico as stand-ins for Italy and, more broadly, Europe. Leftist directors set their radical visions during the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

The book also examines how women have fared in each of these genres and, saving the best for last, I end most chapters with this discussion. Women have not been well represented, in either numbers of leading characters or as autonomous heroic characters expressing agency and abilities roughly equal to that of male counterparts. Women characters have made the most progress in superhero stories, but in part that has to do with the sheer number of such movies being turned out. Even here, male superheroes greatly outnumber female characters, and heroines often get objectified in a way that has nothing to do with being a heroic figure.

Finally, I have asked a few of my colleagues to write short essays about genre pictures that they find particularly useful for understanding politics. Their insights—and coverage of other important films—aid our examination of political film. Barry Pollick, adjunct English instructor at Okinawa University, describes the post-modern gangster properties *Pulp Fiction* and *The Sopranos*. Michael Mulvey, history professor for the University of Maryland Global Campus (UMGC), assesses identity shifts in James Bond novels and films. Cord A. Scott, history, government, and film professor for UMGC, looks at the post-modern *Watchmen* movie and television series, while Daryl Bockett, adjunct international relations professor at Yonsei University in Korea, examines the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) as an example of American soft power. Finally, Damien Horigan, also a professor for UMGC, uses the film *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* to dissect America's long war in Afghanistan. I add an essay on the cattle and range wars of the Old West. These essays are located at the ends of chapters.

Enjoy reading, and enjoy viewing. Let's hope that all of us—no matter where we are in the world and no matter how we view movies—can get back into movie theaters soon. Or maybe we will stream a film curled up in a comfy chair with our trusty iPhone or android device. I can see the curtains opening and notice the lights dimming. I can smell the popcorn. Preview of coming attractions coming up!

Chapter 1

Politics Go Hollywood

Making Sense of Movies and Politics

“FORGET IT, JAKE. IT’S CHINATOWN”: THE DARK SIDE OF 1970S POLITICS

Politics has been a constant theme of so many films that one would be hard-pressed to pick one with which to start a book. So, let’s begin by looking at three influential films from the 1970s, all confronting then-current politics. The first is one of the best-ever takes on political campaigns: *The Candidate* (1972), directed by Michael Ritchie and starring Robert Redford. Marvin Lucas (Peter Boyle), a high-powered political manager, cannot find any California Democrat to take on a popular Republican incumbent senator. He asks Bill McKay (Redford), an attractive young activist and son of a former governor (Melvyn Douglas). McKay becomes intrigued when Lucas tells him that he probably will not win, so he can speak freely in the campaign.

Facing little opposition, the young candidate cruises to the Democratic nomination, but appears to be in for a humiliating loss in the general election. Taking Lucas’s advice, he moderates his positions and gives bland speeches, and he rises in the polls. The two candidates hold a lackluster debate, which at the end a frustrated McKay upends by declaring that the real issues, such as race and poverty, have not been touched. Lucas is aghast but, instead of asking the candidate about it backstage, news reporters focus on the human drama of the previously distant elder McKay warmly greeting his son. McKay receives a key union endorsement, despite his coolness to its leader, and this lifts him to a slim victory. On election night, an uncertain McKay asks Lucas “what do we do now?” Before the senator-elect gets an answer, he is swept away by a throng of reporters and the victory party crowd.

The Candidate wowed the critics with its blend of serious message and satirical sensibility. Based on real personalities in 1970s California politics, especially young senator John Tunney, it resonated with actual events. The story reminds one of Jerry Brown, son of a former governor, who presented unconventional issues in his successful 1974 and 1978 gubernatorial campaigns and unsuccessful 1976 and 1980 presidential efforts. This was one of the first movies to present the cynical world of campaign managers and media messaging. A realistic portrayal of a fictional campaign, the story provides a believable view of how a senatorial campaign could actually be won. The film became a model for several dramatic or docudrama-style campaign stories over the last thirty years, most notably such films as *Bob Roberts* (1992), *Primary Colors* (1998), *Ides of March* (2011), HBO's *Game Change* (2012), and *The Front Runner* (2018). While being entertained, we can learn much from such films about how political campaigns play out. Campaigns also have figured in comedies or satires such as *The Distinguished Gentleman* (1992), *Election* (1999), *Head of State* (2003), *Man of the Year* (2006), and *The Campaign* (2012).

1972 was a year in which politics seemed to be everywhere and could not be avoided, while various movies took on political and especially sociopolitical themes. These included *The Godfather*, to which I devote much space in chapter 2, *Cabaret*, *Deliverance*, *Lady Sings the Blues*, and *Slaughterhouse 5*. As in 1968, the Vietnam War was the big campaign issue, and young people were protesting to stop the war. The Democratic Party tore itself apart before nominating George McGovern for president, who was defeated in an epic landslide by incumbent president Richard Nixon in November. The even more epic Watergate scandal began with a burglary of the Democratic National Committee headquarters in June but was just boiling under the surface before the election. Nixon negotiated an end to U.S. military participation in the war but was dragged down by the scandal and resigned less than two years later.

No movie better describes the origins and import of the Watergate scandal better than our second film, Alan J. Pakula's *All the President's Men* (1976), based on the book by journalists Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward. Starring Dustin Hoffman as Bernstein, Redford as Woodward, and Jason Robards as editor Ben Bradlee, the film follows the *Washington Post* investigation of the early stage of the scandal. The two reporters begin digging into backgrounds of the five Watergate burglars, and find that they received money from Nixon's Committee to Re-elect the President (ironically dubbed CREEP). "Follow the money" becomes the movie's watch phrase, though it never appeared in the book or any other Watergate accounts.

Woodward and Bernstein discover that five key actors control a committee slush fund, including former attorney general John Mitchell and, most damnably for Nixon, White House Chief of Staff H. R. “Bob” Haldeman. The committee also funded a dirty tricks team to damage Democratic presidential candidacies. In the movie’s climax, a high-level source known as Deep Throat¹ reveals that the scandal’s coverup is to protect Haldeman-directed covert operations that began early in the Nixon administration and encompass the whole intelligence community, the FBI and the Justice Department. In the final montage, a TV shows Nixon’s second inauguration, as Bernstein and Woodward type news articles in the newsroom and the teletype announces guilty pleas or convictions for most of the major Watergate figures and Nixon’s resignation as president.

Not only a great political thriller, *All the President’s Men* is one of the best on-screen presentations of journalists’ work as tribunes of the people or watchdogs of democracy. Ironically, the 1970s may have been the high-water mark for traditional journalism. The twenty-first century so far has not been kind to old-line news media outlets. Newspapers have suffered under relentless assault from online publications, declining advertising revenues, and consolidation of chain newspapers controlled by large corporations. Less professional competitors on the internet or TV undermined old-style television news divisions, and NPR is the only major news source in most U.S. radio markets. Even so, the Trump years have seen a journalistic renaissance as subscribership for the *New York Times* is up and Amazon chief Jeff Bezos bought the *Post*. News networks CNN and MSNBC saw their viewership surge with critical coverage of Trump and detailed explanation of the COVID-19 pandemic, even while the less journalistic Fox News has maintained higher viewer numbers. Hollywood still turns out great journalistic political thrillers, such as *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005), *Spotlight* (2015), *Truth* (2015), *The Post* (2017), and *Official Secrets* (2019).

The news media often miss the darkest corners of American life. The third movie is one of Roman Polanski’s most highly praised films, *Chinatown* (1974), starring Jack Nicholson and Faye Dunaway. This is a neo-noir story set in 1930s Los Angeles, and so the politics are more subtle. As with many noir films, the story is complex and full of shades of gray. At its core is an investigation by private detective Jake Gittes (Nicholson) of the murder of Los Angeles water department chief engineer Hollis Mulwray, a character very loosely based on LA aqueduct builder William Mulholland (1855–1935).

The story outlines a power struggle that Mulwray loses to his father-in-law, power broker Noah Cross (John Huston) over diversion of water from rural areas near the city, so that Cross and his cronies could buy up the land cheaply. Unlike Mulholland, Mulwray strongly opposes a major dam and waterway project. Gittes is not a self-controlled private eye from old noir

films, but a trash-talking cynic and self-promoter who frequently gets himself into trouble, while he is haunted by his experiences working as a policeman in the eponymous LA Chinatown, where corruption was rife and a woman he liked was killed, though we never learn the circumstances of her death. Chinatown becomes a metaphor for the “inscrutable nature of reality,” where “nothing was as it seemed” (Corbett, 2013: 16–17). Dunaway as Cross’s daughter plays the classic dark lady or black widow character seen in many film noir but, in a twist, she is the most positive of all the key characters: though damaged by an incestuous tie with her father, she reveres her husband and tries to save both her daughter and Gittes.

The movie’s dark depiction of Los Angeles politics resonated with an American audience weary from Watergate. Corruption and official dishonesty permeate the film, as the police protect Cross and others with power, and even low-level functionaries cannot be trusted and are personally loathsome. Thugs appear everywhere, including Polanski popping up a cameo as a knife-wielder who slices Gittes’s nose (Nicholson wears a large nose bandage for about a third of the movie). The apparent willingness of powerful people to sanction killings of innocents or officials warning against disaster is chilling. Cross admits that he killed Mulwray, offering a matter-of-fact explanation, “you see, Mister Gittes, most men never have to face the fact that, at the right time, they’re capable of [voice falling to a whisper] anything.” It sounds a bit like Nixon, who insisted in his post-presidential interviews with David Frost that “when the president does it it’s not illegal.” The film so forcefully recreated the past that many people believed that it was an accurate rendering of Los Angeles history, when in fact it was purely fiction. The most power-packed movies paint the dark contours of politics without laying them out explicitly. It is the audience’s task to connect the dots and derive political lessons from the story.

Chinatown’s focus on dismal political conspiracies and alternative history has influenced various neo-noir or noir-like films since the 1970s, including three more on darkest Los Angeles. *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995), involves a black neophyte detective (Denzel Washington) searching for a missing woman (Jennifer Beals) and finding official deceit and coverup of her biracial identity and relationship with a white LA mayoral candidate. *L.A. Confidential* (1997) often has been called a successor to Polanski’s film. The story centers on a conspiracy at the top of the Los Angeles police. Unlike *Chinatown*, regular cops (especially characters played by Russell Crowe and Guy Pearce) are the good guys. More recently, Quentin Tarantino’s drama/comedy *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* (2019) uses the 1969 Tate-LaBianca murders to paint a positive albeit violent alternative history in which actress Sharon Tate (Margot Robbie) and her friends get to live, while a down-on-his-luck fictional actor Rick Dalton (Leonardo DiCaprio) sees the promise of revived

career. Since we know what really happened in 1969, this alternative is even more bittersweet.

DISCOVERING THE POLITICAL IN MOVIES

Taking those three movies as our guides, we immediately find four universal political themes and attendant concepts. First, attainment or maintenance of power is key to understanding political leadership. In democracies, this centers on political campaigns and their mechanics. Second, politicians' relationships with society and individuals are key to maintaining power. The news media are among the most important actors linking the political world with society. Third, the personal is also political, as both individuals and political actors struggle with their decisions and whether to do the right thing. Decay of political institutions or social norms makes doing the right thing more difficult, while corruption and dishonesty become easy ways out. Thus, fourth, glimpsing alternative histories or fictional realities helps audiences better understand both the present and the nature of political development. It is a convenient way to shine light into the gloomy corners of the American, European or Asian experiences.

These four ideas also are key to understanding the genres presented here. Gangster stories show how individual gang members rise and fall. Gang bosses hold onto power to survive but staying at the top of organizations built on violence is never easy, and their falls seem inevitable in traditional gangster stories. Screenwriter Dalton Trumbo in *Trumbo* (2015) notes that the rise and fall of the gangster is done so often in the movies "because it always makes money." Gangsters' relations with society are ever thorny. Often viewed as Robin Hood characters that steal from the rich and give to the poor, Pablo Escobar and other drug lords supported sports teams and health clinics. That he was a vicious killer of numerous police, judges and politicians, and so destabilized Colombian politics for years, can easily get forgotten.

More often, gangs get their money through protection rackets aimed at small businesses and selling drugs to the poor and ethnic minorities. Gangs flourish best in societies under stress when opportunities for illegal profit-making and corruption became rife. The success of the American Mafia would not have been possible without the disastrous political experiment of Prohibition. This allowed them to become principal providers of a product—alcoholic beverages—that most people wanted. Tell people that they cannot get legal alcoholic beverages, and illegal providers instantly arise. Gang stories based on real events, such as *Goodfellas* and *Donnie Brasco* dissect personal struggles of both Mafiosos and police or prosecutors. *The Godfather*, *Scarface* (1983)

and *Pulp Fiction* are alternative histories of postwar American political development, illuminating hidden corners of the past century.

Political thrillers and action movies often deal directly with politics. Political thrillers consider direct political threats to democracy or to individuals, and reveal that corruption and conspiracies are endemic features of governance. Action movies, including some police procedurals, often take cynical stances against local or national political figures, police authorities and judges. More often, recent action films have taken conservative stances and implicitly have questioned the social progress of racial or ethnic minorities and women in the past half century.

Superhero stories often present the fall and redemption of a character through actualization of her/his superpowers. Supervillains in their plotting and efforts to control urban landscapes may look like gangsters, as they rise to the pinnacle, and then superheroes destroy them (in comics, they do so over and over). Superheroes face thorny relations with civil or military authorities, along with the public they represent. To become a superhero usually means to confront personal demons and horrible formative experiences. For DC heroes, the struggle means becoming what one was meant to be, while Marvel heroes include troubled teenagers who do not fit in with their classmates, scientists who are not accepted by their colleagues, or young mutants who are shunned by society. Superheroes occasionally spin alternative histories, in which heroic intervention cleans up crime-ridden cities or defeats foreign foes.

War sagas address the breakdown of international political order, as countries fight each other or societies dissolve into chaos. Positive war movies present a good society (such as the Western Allies) triumphing over a bad society (Nazi Germany or militarist Japan). Negative war stories frequently show dysfunctional societies in which war accelerates social decay and destroys those who participate in war. Ambiguous films affirm the justice of the cause being fought but question the methods or the amount of destruction. Carl Von Clausewitz refers to the Trinity of factors critical to success in war (government, military, and the people). The success of the Allies in World War II was due in no small part to nearly universal support for the war effort, along with the citizen armed forces that fought the war and generally effective leadership that learned from its mistakes. The collapse of the U.S. effort in Vietnam accelerated as public acceptance of the war sank and mass demonstrations frequently shut down Washington. The Johnson administration presided over political chaos that allowed strategy to drift. The successor Nixon administration pursued a more coherent strategy, but by then the public had wearied of the war and just wanted it to be over. Antiwar tropes came back in movies about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Westerns describe the establishment of law and order, as well as the apparatus of civilization, on the nineteenth and early twentieth century frontier. Sheriffs or marshals battle against outlaws or powerful cattlemen and mining executives who seek to control towns. The lone sheriff stands against the forces of disorder. Such agents of the law may be assisted by ordinary citizens or good gunmen (who also are loners but cannot settle down in a community and must move on at the end of the story). In the absence of law officers, townspeople or farmers must establish order themselves. As in gangster movies, many stories present the rise and fall of outlaws or bad gunfighters. Settlers also fight with Indians (Native Americans or indigenous people), but images of Natives have markedly changed since the 1950s. Personal struggles populate most Westerns, as key characters cope with horrific challenges, recall awful memories, or seek to remake themselves by starting over again.

Westerns based on actual events have at least grains of reality to them yet include heavy ladling of hagiography or reimagining of the Old West. Billy the Kid's story has been told so many ways onscreen that it is difficult to know the truth of his short life. Fictional Westerns are by nature myth-making or myth-affirming narratives, and so present alternative histories. Westerns of the 1940s and 1950s looked much like America of those decades, with robust or taciturn men and supportive women in lead roles (*My Darling Clementine*), but Westerns of the 1960s and 1970s illustrated social dysfunction at work (*McCabe and Mrs. Miller*). By the 1990s, the West was depicted as diverse as contemporary American society. On TV women, native Americans and blacks are Pony Express couriers in *The Young Riders* (1989–1992) and an ahead-of-her-time woman doctor cures what ails the frontier in *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* (1993–1998).

CONSTRUCTIVISM AT THE MOVIES

Among political theories, one of the most applicable to film study is constructivism. Constructivism's basic concepts can help political scientists explain both domestic politics and international relations. A bedrock concept that political science constructivism shares with other variants of constructivism is social construction, that is, that political dynamics and institutions are constantly shaped and reshaped by society as it changes. Many constructivists discuss the concepts of agency and structure, or a political actor's ability or freedom to take action vs. the political apparatus of any society. Agency and structure are mutually constituted, meaning they continually influence and shape each other through time. IR constructivists note that the concept of anarchy does not determine the content of international relations (as realists and liberals often suggest). A state's identity, such as major power, middle

power, or small state, partially represents that entity's understanding of what they are within the international system, and that may signal the state's interests. Actions taken by states usually are in line with their identities. Social and political norms may influence the degree or types of state control within a society.

Constructivism suggests that the key factors shaping international politics and international relations are values, institutions, and identities. Constructivism has always been about the norms, values, institutions, and social arrangements that shape politics in given societies, and then how these factors change over time. I focus on six specific factors emphasized in constructivist theory. First is the importance of social structures, which are built up and shaped through myriad ongoing social interactions. Movies and television help underline conservative values that bolster social structures, but they can also attack and undermine those structures through their explicit or implicit critiques. Most politically themed movies and many other filmed stories from the 1930s to mid-1960s present American democracy in positive terms. Films often suggest that, though America's political system was far from perfect, it was far ahead of most countries in ensuring freedom and rights for ordinary people.

Second, creative of societal and political norms and values is a continuing process that is intersubjective, that is, shared among social and political actors. Movies and television are forms of popular culture, that is, mass culture shared by ordinary people. They are both products of the film industry and entertainment experiences for millions of people. Third, state identity and interests are fostered in an ongoing interactive process, as they relate to other states and their own societies. States are concerned about the content of movies, especially as it affects state objectives in security and foreign policy. Thus, states seek positive portrayals of the state and the military, most notably in action and war films. Most war films during World War II included varying degrees of prowar propaganda. During and after the Vietnam War, war films contained either negative or ambiguous messages about America's wars. States also pay attention to filmic depiction of such issues as human rights, criminal justice, and operation of bureaucratic agencies. Citizens often pressure governments to regulate filmed presentation of violence, sexual activity, race or ethnic relations, perceived sexism or misogyny, respect or lack of respect for religion, and even the amount of smoking or illegal drug use on screen.

Fourth, socialization of individuals is a vital way that states relate to society. Movies and TV shows educate not only young people, but also adults, about acceptable or unacceptable behavior, norms, and values. They can erode support for those very institutions through negative images and storylines. In the 1950s, most movies and television presented positive images

of American politics and society, and this bolstered the social stability of the era. TV programs such as *The Adventures of Superman* taught children to respect and cooperate with the police, and that news media organizations such as newspapers played vital roles in society. By the 2000s, Superman movies and television programs questioned all of that, though the recent popular *Supergirl* series sees a Spunky Kid archetypical female character who gradually summons her courage, collaborates with friends, and cooperates with the police and the government.

Fifth, political and social identities always diverge. Identity politics have become a centerpiece of American politics over the past twenty-five years. Among the most important identities are gender, racial/ethnic, class, and religion. In each chapter, we look at how women have been depicted by the various film genres. Women have fared best in the superhero genre, since a number of prominent characters are female, but even here male characters predominate. Women may fare worst in gangster films, where until recently women have been little more than side characters such as girlfriends (or molls), wives, mothers, and crime victims. Still, some strong female characters helped make those films into great art. The film noir era of the 1940s–1950s was a rare moment when crime-related films put women front and center, but even here women often were stereotypically depicted as man-destroying femmes fatale or good girls who try to help doomed men.

Sixth, constructivism discusses security issues in terms of the security culture within given countries. Nearly any genre can affect security issues, but security concerns are most notable in action, superhero, and war films. As America boasts the world's largest military budget and the second biggest number of military personnel, security culture is heavily military-centered. This is reflected in both movies' frequent resort to violence and their plots suggesting that the international realm is inherently dangerous and full of threats aimed at America from terrorists, despotic leaders, and drug cartels. Action movies in particular present a cornucopia of dangerous states and societies from which spring existential dangers that can only be put down through immediate, violent action.

Additionally, conventional and critical constructivists approach political and international study differently. Conventional constructivists, like other key IR theorists, seeks to explain key international phenomena, as noted above: mutual constitution of actors and structures, anarchy as an imagined state, identities and the formation of state interests, power as constituted by both material and ideational resources, and change as brought about by shifts in intersubjective structures. Critical constructivism challenges both traditional realist and liberal conceptions, as well as conventional constructivism's emphasis on "minimal foundationalism," that is, setting basic conditions for formation and operation of identities and norms. It suggests that there is no

“single version” of “naturalized truth,” or no essential and irreducible reality that can be derived from study of international politics. Critical theorists also specify the nature of power, most often as determined by relations based on “hierarchy, subordination, or domination” (Hopf, 1998: 27–34).

FEMINISM AT THE MOVIES

Feminist analysis is useful in unpacking key factors in film analysis and, for our purposes, is a logical follow-on to constructivism. Feminism, as a constitutive theory that looks at the way politics is put together (or constituted), is a cousin of constructivism. First, sex and gender are socially constructed concepts that have undergone considerable change since the 1960s. The notion of sex as biologically determined contrasts with the idea of gender, which means not only the traditional female/male and femininity/masculinity binary divisions, but a variety of other gender identities that have become widely accepted over the past fifty years. Second is the positions of subjects, that is, their place in the society due to the gendered nature of politics and societal relations. For instance, women are usually depicted in films as subsidiary characters in lower status than dominant male characters, most often as supporting characters such as victims and support staff (Barker and Jane, 2016: 357–358, 387–388).

Third, images of marginalized groups, in this case images of women and girls presented in film and on television, most often conform to stereotypical descriptions of women, specifying femininity in terms of women’s objectified or marginalized status. Acceptable women often have slender bodies and their gender expression is sexualized. They serve roles usually associated with women’s subordinate positions: wives, mothers, girlfriends, nurses or other caregivers, waitresses, and teachers most often appear (Barker and Jane, 2016: 378–386). Fourth, issues of representation occur on two levels: the number of women depicted in movies or on TV compared to men, and the types of characters played compared to actual jobs that women perform or compared to the roles that male characters hold (Cocca, 2019: 1–16).

Various schools of feminism emphasize different aspects of female experience, and this affects analysis of women in film or on television. Liberal feminists seek sexual or gender equality and often downplay biological differences, while socialist feminists emphasize the economic structure as reproducing patriarchal relations that hold women down. Black and post-colonial feminists examine the specific experience of minority women and women in developing countries, while post-feminists are willing to accept a variety of female lifestyles, gender expressions, and approaches to political action to benefit women, other gender minorities, or other marginalized peoples. So,

a liberal feminist is likely to make a film promoting equality and freedom, a socialist feminist could focus on women's economic oppression, and a black feminist would tell a story of women within the overall suppression of African Americans. Major controversies concern the extent of biological difference between women and men, and whether women communicate in ways that are appreciably different from those of men (Barker and Jane, 2016: 342–349, 357).

An intriguing strain of recent literature examines the differing paths that heroes and heroines take in both literature and filmed stories. The notion of hero and heroine is gender-neutral here, as movies have female heroes like Wonder Woman and male heroines such as Harry Potter. The hero story is based in part on Joseph Campbell's monomyth of the hero who receives a call to adventure, which he at first rejects. Guided by mentors, he then goes on a solitary journey to gain a great "boon" or benefit for his people. The heroine, by contrast, gets spurred to action by the killing or abduction of a family member or hurt to another close loved one. She at first is reluctant to undertake the task, but eventually uses her special skills to convince an adversary to return her family member or loved one. She tends to collaborate with groups of supporters and other helpers (Carriger, 2020: 85–99). Tatar notes that the heroine's motives tend to be attentive care for others, driven by openness to the world, curiosity about life beyond her limited experience, and concern for those who live in that world (Tatar, 2021; xvii–xxiii).

Men's representation in entertainment media has changed, but this has differed by film or TV genre. Observers such as Tasker note the prevalence of hyper-masculine, over-muscled male characters in action movies since the 1980s (Tasker, 2013: 1–13). The rise of such characters in part has been a reaction to the successes of the women's movement and the perceived downgrading of male status. Women's roles in gangster, war, and western movies have changed only marginally since the 1970s, and these remain male-dominated genres. But women superheroes have proliferated and have gradually moved away from the sexualized images of 1990s comics and graphic novels. Female action figures are in the middle: while there are many more of them now than in the 1970s, they tend to be more objectified and sexualized than their male counterparts.

Gender is a factor in most films. Most movies are gendered, in that they express unstated views on acceptable or unacceptable gender roles. Movies traditionally presented masculine but approachable heroes. Weak or flawed men were villains or characters that personified dangers to the heroes. Women were either Madonnas (admirable mothers and good wives) or bad girls (bad women who resort to crime or lure good men to bad ends). Women could be leaders, but usually as subordinates to men or as saintly inspirational figures. Only rare movies, such as *His Girl Friday* (1940) starring

Rosalind Russell and Cary Grant, *Woman of the Year* (1942), the first pairing of Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy, or *Mildred Pierce* (1945) with Joan Crawford, showed women as nearly equal to men. Even so, Hollywood's golden age was notable for its "women's films," meaty women's parts and unmatched actresses: Bette Davis, Barbara Stanwyck, Ingrid Bergman, Olivia de Havilland, Jane Wyman, and Hepburn, to name only a few.

Feminists assert that the hyper-gendered nature of most films is due to the "male gaze," described by Zeisler as presenting art as a man would see it, with women as objects to be viewed or consumed by men. The images of women as stereotyped, and major characters as sexualized and objectified, are also consumed by women and thus affect women's self-images. Some feminists apply Freudian analysis to suggest that such objectification is intended to eliminate women as possible "castration" threats to men. If women are nothing more than objects to be looked upon, the threat gets removed. There may a corresponding "female gaze" but, given that women-led movie products are still relatively rare, it is far less common (Zeisler, 2008: 7–9). "Women's films" often focus on women characters and do not apply the female gaze to men as directly as in male-dominated genres. This does not suggest that all men share objectified and sexualized views of women. It does mean that those who make movies and other popular culture products do tend to propagate such images.

Images and roles for women began to change in the 1960s. Women were still categorized as saints or girls gone bad, but they could also be real people and even occasionally important. By the 1980s and 1990s, things had improved, but female actors and feminists complained about the dearth of good parts for leading actresses (mostly wives, mothers and hookers). Male actors still commanded the highest salaries, and there were few A-list women directors. Many lamented that good parts dried up when female actors reached the far side of age forty. The #MeToo Movement that began in 2017 shown a spotlight on women as sexual victims in Hollywood. More efforts to put forth women-centered projects have been noteworthy, and there are now a larger cadre of female directors and producers.

The basic problem from the advent of cinema, notes Cocca, is a lack of adequate "representation" for women in such genres as action movies. Women and ethnic minorities are forced to "cross-identify" with white male characters. This is unfair, as white males do not have to do this, and it this tends to "curtail imagination" among those groups. Women are more than half of the population, but they are not represented adequately in studio boardrooms or behind the camera. Women tend to be cast as fearful, supportive, romantically interested, and much more sexualized. An objectified group such as women does not get its stories told as often, women and girls are not

presented as leaders, and are not seen as free agents. The images portrayed tend to undervalue them as members of society (Cocca, 2019: 3–6).

Not only are there few female heroic characters, Tasker insists, but women who get roles are characters who support males. Male actors grab the most parts, and their movies get the biggest budgets. A few female action movies have been made, but they are often one-off stories and heroines are treated very differently than heroes. Action movies from the 1980s onward were obsessed with muscled male bodies, and the stories expressed male anxieties about social changes—including the successes of the women’s movement—and the need for heroes to restore order (Tasker, 2013: 1–13). O’Day adds that while most male action heroes are onscreen primarily to take action, female action heroines are there as much to be looked at as to be active (O’Day, 2004: 201–216). One can see similar things in other genres, as women usually get stuck in stereotypical or secondary parts, as noted above.

Giglio feels that Hollywood has wavered between “getting women right” and “getting women wrong.” Early-on, despite the stereotypes, films starring such leading actors as Katherine Hepburn and Bette Davis strove to present fully formed female characters. A few recent movies attempted realistic portrayals of women. These include *North Country* (2005), which depicted an actual labor struggle led by a single mother played by Charlize Theron, *The Kids Are All Right* (2010) that gave audiences a nuanced portrait of a lesbian married couple played by Annette Bening and Julianne Moore, and *Winter’s Bone* (also 2010), which showed the struggles of a seventeen-year-old girl played by Jennifer Lawrence to save her Ozark Mountains family. Giglio asserts that movies that get women wrong include *The Accused* (1988) that distorts a real rape case to titillate the audience, *Thelma and Louise* (1991), which turns aggrieved women into female equivalents of “macho men” and so was “a step away from women’s liberation,” and *The Contender* (2000) that presents a woman nominated for a vice-presidential vacancy as unable to defend herself from a false political charge (Giglio, 2014: 297–302). Assessment of such films is always complicated, and one should note that all three of the latter films were also viewed by other observers as advancing women’s storytelling in movies.

Each major film genre has struggled with how to present women in film. We discuss genre depiction of women in each chapter. Gangster movies almost have always presented women as either victims or ancillary characters (molls, wives, bookkeepers, or messengers). This began to change with *The Godfather*’s more nuanced look at female characters, and recent movies even have presented female gangsters. Superhero stories began as a comic book genre. During World War II, both girls and boys read comics, and every week they could see various strong female characters. By the 1950s, the Comics Code enforced traditional gender roles, making female superheroes

secondary. In the 1950s and 1960s, comics were aimed mostly at boys. More recently, the revival of Wonder Woman and the advent of various Marvel projects meant that female superheroes gradually evened the score with male counterparts. Even so, 1990s comics presented heavily sexualized female images to fan boys.

Like superhero stories, war movies traditionally concentrated on stories of male heroism or destruction of men in violent conflict. As with gangster films, women in war movies were side characters (wives, girlfriends, nurses, or staffers). Exceptions were made for historical women warriors, such as Joan of Arc. With the increased entry of women into frontline units, from the 1990s onward more stories focused on women in the military. Westerns included many women, but usually as settlers, prostitutes (euphemistically called saloon girls) and priggish townspeople. Only occasionally were women allowed to be outlaws or business owners. As with war films, this began to change in the 1990s.

POLITICS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF FILM

Movies are Janus-faced: on one side parables of nostalgia, redemption, bridging of class and happy endings; on the other, detailed examinations of social decay, personal destruction, class domination and tragic ends. Movies reflect and influence their times, and so can serve as time capsules for their eras. Watch a movie from the 1930s and early 1940s, and it is an education on the way people lived during the Great Depression and World War II. Some of this is in what you see, but much of it is in what you will not see or is assumed. Note the period cars, women's dresses and hairdos, men's suits and ties, the products consumed, or the food eaten. The early part of the 1930s sees innovative storytelling and daring topics, such as *I was a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) or *King Kong* (1933), and much later came *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), based on John Steinbeck's towering novel, which presents the hardships of farmers who lost everything in the Dust Bowl and went west to California. But also notice, amid the extreme economic suffering, how many of the stories deal with ordinary characters marrying rich or affluent people (Frank Capra's brilliant screwball comedies), insouciant folks singing and dancing away their problems (the uplifting films of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers) or happy endings in which everyone gets married (sparklingly in *The Philadelphia Story*, 1940).

View a film from the 1950s, and it often is either a tutorial on middle class stability and complacency, or a dissertation on social conflict just emerging through cracks in the façade. Movies such as *On the Waterfront* (1954) peek at the dark underside of blue-collar life and organized crime's infiltration

of labor unions, while *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Blackboard Jungle* (both 1955) examine bubbling youth discontent. Morally ambiguous film noir reaches its peak and then declines. By the 1950s, many directors and some studios specialize in low-budget genre films, by which a small investment could earn a hefty return. Cheap films aim at capturing the youth market, especially horror and science fiction, proliferate. These two genres do amazing things with small budgets, and the 1950s is a fruitful age of cheap space and monster movies beloved of film buffs. One of the most successful independent studios is Britain's Hammer Film Productions, which dominates the horror genre from the late 1950s to mid-1970s. Hammer revives such key 1930s properties as *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, and *The Mummy* by filming them in color for the first time. They also produce film noir, science fiction, and other movies.

More mainstream are solid family-affirming tales such as *Desperate Hours* (1955) and *Father of the Bride* (1950). The former shows an ordinary middle-class family defeat a home invasion by escaped criminals, while the latter has a couple adjust to the marriage of their daughter. Romantic comedies, such as those starring Doris Day and Rock Hudson, underline the value of traditional marriage—ironic, considering that Hudson was a closeted gay man.

As noted above, the mid-1960s to mid-1970s was a pivotal decade in American and world cinema. The New Cinema of that era incorporated innovations in storytelling developed in the previous decade and took on character-driven stories, serious content, and challenges to authority and power structures. Most of the major genres incorporated these approaches, making those years some of the best for film since World War II. But this semi-golden age is only a brief moment, as the arrival of the blockbuster in the form of a relentless people-eating shark (*Jaws*, 1975) and a mythic tale of a young farm boy in a galaxy far, far away (*Star Wars*, 1977) shift the movie industry to a primary focus on profitable mega-franchises and endless sequels. By the 1980s, serious character-driven stories became rarer and conservative political themes more common.

Kirshner notes several influences that came together to make the New Hollywood films of the 1970s unique. The civil rights and Vietnam anti-war movements powerfully shape thinking about both politics and violence. Meanwhile, the women's movement focuses on more individual and intimate political struggles ("the personal is political," in a popular phrase of the time), as the youthful demographic bulge associated with the Baby Boomers recoil at the materialism of the World War II generation. A greater concentration on "sex, drugs, and rock and roll" contrasts with a heightened sense of insecurity due to rising crime and the lingering Cold War. The Nixon era

(1969–1974) brings an intensified concern for official corruption, deception, and paranoia. Filmmakers go back to film noir of the 1940s–1950s and the French New Wave for inspiration, adapting a tone that is at once grittier and more realistic than pre-1970s film. Film of the 1970s thus tend to be more character-centered with “open” endings, involved a political “text of some kind, and a more basic, natural style using natural lighting and jerky camera work” (Kirshner, 2012: 13–22).

An edited volume by Kirshner and Lewis broadens the era of New Hollywood from 1966 to 1977. The New Hollywood emerges as rock and pop music take a turn to the experimental and the Production Code gets set aside. Now, filmmakers can take on almost any subject. *Bonnie and Clyde* becomes a milestone picture that expands the boundaries of sex and violence onscreen. Films such as *The Graduate* incorporate the New Wave while concentrating on personal struggles. Stories featuring race, women’s issues, and gay themes, receive much attention, while African American filmmakers introduce powerful black heroes in Blaxploitation films (Kirshner and Lewis, 2019: 2–12).

Movies have always sorted into different genres. Even in the earliest silent shorts in the first decade of the twentieth century, there were slapstick comedies, melodramas, Westerns, and historical stories. By the 1920s, the height of the silent era, almost all of the major genres had emerged: gangster films, romances, horror, Westerns, historical epics, and the first stirrings of science fiction. With the advent of sound from 1927 onward (popular singer Al Jolson belts out six songs in *The Jazz Singer*), along with better film stock and special effects in the 1930s, these genres flourish and broaden. Hollywood’s Motion Picture Production Code (or the Code), enforced from 1934 to the mid-1960s, limited explicit language, sexual activity and violence, and so forced filmmakers to play up fantasy elements, staged fights, and romantic suggestion over direct expression. Unless politics was explicit, in films such as *All the King’s Men* (1949) or *State of the Union* (1948), political themes were sublimated to drama.

Each of the genres presented in this book has had a storied history but has developed in different directions. Gangster movies have had two heydays: from the end of Prohibition in the early 1930s until America’s entry into World War II, and from the release of the first two *Godfather* films in 1972–1974. Several major gangster movies have made it to the silver screen or small screen every decade since. Action movies had their roots in police procedurals of the 1950s to 1970s and the car chase movies of the 1960s–1970s but took off from the mid-1980s. The superhero genre made only slight impact until the late 1970s, when Hollywood began to make big-budget Superman films. DC characters had a near monopoly from the 1970s until 2000, and since then Marvel franchises have dominated. Now, superhero stories have

become the most profitable properties and most produced movies, especially popular in large Asian cinema markets.

War movies and Westerns have waxed and waned, as public tastes and storytelling modes have changed over time. Every time America enters a war, a new round of war films seizes popular imagination, and the ever-popular World War II films usually have a built-in market. The Western genre similarly has come and gone. Perhaps the most filmed movie genre and most prominent TV genre in the 1950s, Westerns began to fade from the late 1960s as tastes changed and audiences lost interest in character-driven stories, while anti-Westerns and spaghetti Westerns undermined the genre. This genre almost disappeared by the late 1970s. They have made a comeback since the 1980s, led by notably conservative movies, but have not regained the dominance they once had.

POLITICS AND SOCIETY IN THE MOVIES

There are few movies that contain no political or social content. Most films take at least an implicit stance on major social categories, most notably race, ethnicity, immigration, gender, sexuality, nationalism, or patriotism, and religious identity. As post-modernists would note, films are political “texts” that present socio-political content throughout. Without getting into full-blown post-modernist theory, this book suggests that debates about social issues are quite common in film. When we watch a movie, we often just want to be entertained, or to enjoy a great story. We may not consider how important this social content is to both the story and how society sees itself unless we are interested in those socio-political issues. Even so, films frequently approach social concerns such as race and class differences.

Race and ethnicity in film conforms to commonly accepted images of groups of people. Until the 1960s, people from Africa often were pictured as exotic, volatile, emotional, and servile. African Americans were restricted to servant roles, such as maids, railroad porters or janitors. Low budget movies aimed at black urban audiences provided at least some work for African American actors and crew. Hattie McDaniel was the first black to win an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), but she had to enter the rear door of the theater to collect her Oscar. When Sidney Poitier won the Best Actor statuette for *Lilies of the Field* (1963), incremental change had set in, and by the end of the century Denzel Washington and Halle Berry became superstars. Still, as late as 2015, most of the honors went to white personnel. This sparked the #OscarSoWhite

Movement to bring more attention to black-themed films. Things got marginally better, with the black coming-of-age story *Moonlight* winning the Best Picture prize the next year.

A thriving market for black films supported small African American productions from the 1920s to 1960s. Early civil rights movies often focused on the struggles of individuals or families, such as *Raisin in the Sun* (1959) or *Lilies of the Field*. The African American struggle received more attention from the 1980s onward, through such directors as Spike Lee, John Singleton, and Albert and Allen Hughes. The last several years has seen a golden age of black-led films helmed by directors such as Tyler Perry, Jordan Peele, and Ava DuVernay.

Until *Black Panther* (2018), superheroes were most often white, though a few black supporting characters appeared. It remains to be seen whether the box office success of *Black Panther* will lead to more genuine diversity. World Wars I and II stories focused almost exclusively on white casts, but many black and Latino characters appeared in Vietnam era films. That makes sense, since they were drafted in proportions higher than their population shares. Westerns of Hollywood's golden age were very white, though diversity began to appear in the anti-Westerns of the 1960s and 1970s. Blacks and Latinos showed up more frequently from the 1980s onward.

Other ethnicities struggled for acceptance in American and European film. Asians and Asian Americans faced one of the longest fights for inclusion. Until recently, most of their acting parts were stereotyped Asian characters, with the same limited set of Asian ethnic actors playing Chinese, Japanese, Korean, or Southeast Asian parts. Roles included stock martial artists, dragon ladies, inscrutable philosophers, shopkeepers, devious villains, Triad leaders, and Asian Communists. Note that most of the Asian characters in *Chinatown* are stereotyped. Actors such as James Hong, who appears in *Chinatown*, built considerable careers playing such parts. One wonders what they would have been able to accomplish if given roles normally performed by whites. Today's Awkwafina, Daniel Dae Kim, Constance Wu, and Henry Golding are among the first multifaceted Asian leading actors.

Living in Asia, I am often struck by how different Hollywood's portrayal of Asia and Asians is from reality. The movies would have one believe that East Asia is a crime-ridden region dominated by underworld organizations, prostitution is rampant, and vast numbers of people are continuously practicing martial arts. Bruce Lee's exciting films of the 1970s—and all of Lee's subsequent imitators—may have had much to do with Western acceptance of these images. This goofy perception is an easy fix: most East Asian countries enjoy relatively low crime rates, organized crime has been marginalized by effective policing, prostitution now is less common than in Western countries, and only a tiny segment of the population engages in martial arts.

Italian American and Jewish American actors had somewhat easier paths than Asians, as they could pass as Anglo-white actors for many roles. Many Jewish stars felt compelled to change their names, such as Emanuel Goldenberg (Edward G. Robinson), Issur Danielovitch (Kirk Douglas), Bernard Schwartz (Tony Curtis), and Melvin Kaminsky (Mel Brooks). Latino actors fought with stereotypes, but occasionally found more rewarding film work. For decades, Latino characters were stuck as Latin lovers, dancers, banditos, comic relief characters, or menial laborers. Even so, Gilbert Roland and Cesar Romero were major character actors of Hollywood's Golden Age, while Rita Hayworth and Anthony Quinn became big stars. By the 1980s to 1990s, a new generation of Latino actors gained choice parts. Their ranks included Andy Garcia, Jimmy Smits, Raul Julia, and Edward James Olmos.

How to handle ethnic politics has bedeviled all genres. Initially, most gangster movies were about Irish or Italian gangs, though the ethnic aspect was partially downplayed. The word Mafia was rarely used until the 1970s. With the arrival of *The Godfather*, the Sicilian connection was front-and-center, though Al Pacino was the only Italian American in one of the starring roles. Since that groundbreaking film, gangster films have encompassed several other major American ethnic groups: Irish, Latino, African American, German, Russian, and Asian. Generally, Asian, Latino, and African Americans have played appropriate ethnic parts, though casting for white Irish, German and Russian mobsters has been more flexible.

Filmmakers have also struggled in dealing with major societal issues, especially economic inequality, labor struggles, and hot-button issues such as gun violence, abortion, and institutional child abuse. Film studios often believe that such stories will be unpopular with audiences, though the occasional film that takes them on usually gets good reviews and decent box office earnings. Perhaps they should not be so reticent, since such tales make compelling drama. Three British directors can show the way. Nigel Cole's *Made in Dagenham* (2010) examines a 1960s women's strike at a British Ford plant. The movie is entertaining yet forces one to think about women's roles in industry. I found it curious that, when comparing the film to historic photographs of the strike, women in the film were wearing much shorter skirts and dresses. Oh, well . . .

British director Ken Loach has found much critical success in presenting difficult social issues on both the silver screen and television. *Bread and Roses* (2000) takes on a strike by poorly paid janitorial workers. *I, Daniel Blake* (2016) deals with the difficulties of ordinary people confronting unsympathetic bureaucrats, as the title character gets rejected for unemployment benefits, even though a doctor has certified him as unfit to work. Director Steve McQueen has made several politics-infused movies, such as *Hunger* (2008) about IRA fighter Bobby Sands' fatal hunger strike and

Twelve Years a Slave (2013), the wrenching true story of Solomon Northup, a pre-Civil War free black who was captured and sold into slavery in Louisiana.

American films only deal with social issues occasionally, often in conjunction with a court room drama, such as John Travolta's lawyer in *A Civil Action* (1998) or John Cusack as a man intentionally placed on a jury to sway a gun-control case in *Runaway Jury* (2003). Occasionally, Hollywood mega-stars lead socially conscious movies to boost their seriousness quotient, such as Sally Field in *Places in the Heart* (1984) or Julia Roberts in *Erin Brockovich* (2000). Both actors won Academy Awards for their performances.

PEDAGOGY OF FILM: USING MOVIES IN THE CLASSROOM

Various observers have noted the usefulness of film for conveying political science and international relations lessons. Gregg feels that movies help make IR concepts come alive and help students understand historical developments because films present such events in lively ways that make them seem real. Films also stimulate debate on and further study of vital IR issues (Gregg, 1998: 1–25). Giroux considers several applications of film: examination of “subject positions” of groups within society, looking at the construction of the “landscape” of cultures, and presentation of “alternative views of the world.” He notes that by combining politics and entertainment, films become part of the “public memory” of political events (Giroux, 2011: 583–598).

Gokcek employs “millennial blockbusters” to make theories and concepts applied to the post-World War II world more accessible to students. For Cold War lessons, she designs lessons around *Crimson Tide* (1995) and *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* (1991) (Gokcek, 2013: 436–452). In other courses, while using conventional choices such as *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) or *Thirteen Days* (2000), she also employs films not specifically about international relations. These include Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* in a course on Middle East, since the chaos of Gotham City mirrors the violence often reported in the conflicted region. She assigns a worksheet for students to identify characters or scenes that best illustrate course concepts (Gokcek, 2016: 1–3).

Sohn tries to establish a course theme with the movies she presents. In a comparative politics class, the theme is about how politics affects individual actors. She starts with *Midaq Alley* (1995), an Egyptian film about class differences and the end of British colonial rule. She moves on to the escapist action film, *London has Fallen* (2016), which on one level is a nationalist-patriotic piece, but also contains a terrorist adversary which has created mayhem in

London. The terrorists harbor murky and apparently non-religious motives. Sohn next uses the French film, *Le Grand Voyage* (2004), an intergenerational story about a middle-aged Moroccan French man and his son who take a road trip from France to Mecca. She concludes the course with *Inescapable* (2012), a movie about Syrian politics which is midway between the quiet personal drama of *Midaq Alley* and the hyper-kinetic action of *London has Fallen*. It also includes a love story and an intergenerational subplot.

Scholars list recommended applications of specific films to courses. Engert and Spencer put forth four general uses of film in IR: describing major historical events, such as the Cold War; debating contentious issues, including terrorism and genocide; dissecting “cultural narratives,” such as anti-Americanism in Turkey and other countries; and presenting and critiquing IR theories, such as looking at post-modernism through a movie like *Pulp Fiction* (Engert and Spencer, 2009: 83–103). A volume edited by Marciniak and Bennett considers such issues as economic and social inequality, immigration, transnational relations, and understanding other cultures via movies (Marciniak and Bennett, 2017: 1–35). Valeriano uses film in lessons about conflict and peace theories. He believes film is particularly helpful for students who are not familiar with international events (Valeriano, 2013: 52–73). Iommi dives into three applications: nuclear deterrence, uses of constructivist theory, and study of Gramsci’s notion of hegemony (Iommi, 2011: 1–25).

In the end, best uses of film in the classroom depend on the instructor. A widely circulated advice sheet suggests, first, teachers should think about what they are trying to achieve by using film. What concepts and ideas does the teacher try to impart and what are the goals they want to achieve? Second, students then need to be prepared for the lesson. The instructor should ask if students know anything about the movie, and then explain why he is showing the film. He may have to discuss the story’s history and background in depth. *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), for instance, should be introduced in the context of the Algerian anti-colonial rebellion against France. Third, instructors may need to distribute a handout and give students learning tasks to complete after watching the movie. Finally, there ought to be a debriefing, in which the instructor asks students to discuss their impressions and ideas about the film. This may lead to a general class discussion on themes and perhaps a written reaction paper (World Politics, 2012: 1–3).

IR AT THE MOVIES

Political concerns are usually up front in international relations-themed movies. That is certainly true when looking at the most dangerous moment of the Cold War and one of America’s most charismatic leaders, John F. Kennedy.

Thirteen Days (2000) is the most true-to-life rendering of the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962), and stars Bruce Greenwood, Kevin Costner and Steven Culp. Based on taped conversations released since the 1960s and recollections of participants, the film follows the efforts of the Kennedy administration to respond to the discovery of Soviet offensive nuclear missiles in Cuba, seen as a direct threat to the American homeland. Kennedy (Greenwood) wants to avoid a hasty invasion of the island, which could end in nuclear war. He tasks a group of administration figures, including JFK's brother Attorney General Robert F. (Bobby) Kennedy (Culp) and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara (Dylan Baker), to reach an action consensus.² They come up with the idea of a naval blockade of Cuba, which they refer to as a "quarantine" to avoid endorsing an act of war which a blockade would be, and this gives the Soviets a chance to rethink their actions and pull back. The blockade seems to work when Soviet ships halt and turn around.

Meanwhile, diplomacy proceeds in fits and starts. The administration gets unanimous backing at the Organization of American States (OAS), and outmaneuvers the Soviets at the U.N. Security Council when it presents photographic evidence of the Soviet missiles, but back-channel negotiations take a detour when Soviet master spy Alexander Fomin appears an unreliable connection to Soviet leadership (this assessment changes later). Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev confuses the situation by sending two letters to Kennedy, one conciliatory and another threatening. The U.S. military is planning for air strikes and invasion within two days. Kennedy's people decide to accept the first letter and not respond to the latter. Bobby meets Soviet ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin to lay out U.S. terms: Soviet withdrawal of the missiles in exchange for an American pledge not to invade Cuba or aid others to do so. A secret side agreement, to be carried out six months later, involves withdrawal of obsolete U.S. Jupiter missiles from Turkey.

The movie is an excellent dissection of crisis decision making, showing audiences the mounting pressures to go to war, compressed time scale of decision making, and increasing desperation to find a way out. The film helps viewers understand the dangers inherent in the Cold War, and the ways that Soviet-American bipolar politics played out. The well-done TV docudrama *The Missiles of October* (1974) covered similar ground but with less available information. Critics praised *Thirteen Days*, though several questioned the inflated role given to Kenny O'Donnell (Costner) as political adviser to JFK. The real Kenny O'Donnell was Kennedy's appointments secretary and played only a small role in the crisis. More central to administration decision making were White House Counsel/speech writer Ted Sorensen and National Security Adviser McGeorge Bundy, who only appear sporadically in the movie. Others took issue with the bellicose portrayal of American military

leaders, civilian political leaders' questioning of Kennedy's competence, and characterization of key figures such as Secretary of State Dean Rusk and U.N. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson as weak.

Hotel Rwanda (2004) is one of the most wrenching political movies ever produced. It tells the horrific story of the 1994 Rwandan civil war and genocide from the perspective of Paul Rusesabagina (Don Cheadle), a hotel manager who saved over 1,200 people from the massacres. He creates a safe zone at the hotel for the Tutsis, while negotiating with and bribing Hutu militias to prevent them from entering the hotel grounds. An escape attempt fails, but Paul manages to convince one of the militia generals that he may be tried for war crimes if he does not let the refugees go. The refugees finally join a U.N. convoy leaving the country. As actually happened in Rwanda, the U.N. peacekeeping force is able to do only a little to help the Rwandan people, and its leader Oliver (a fictionalized version of Romeo Dallaire, the Canadian chief played by Nick Nolte) is tortured by his limited capabilities and inability to act.

The film superbly examines ethno-national civil wars, violent conflict in developing countries, and genocide. Taking the story down to the level of the hotel manager and his family, it makes the unimaginable nightmare of Rwanda approachable for audiences. Ideally, viewers should also watch a documentary on the genocide to get an overall perspective. The film is sometimes compared to *The Killing Fields* (1984) about an American reporter's assistant who was not able to leave Cambodia in 1975 and suffered through the 1970s Khmer Rouge reign of terror, and *Schindler's List* (1993) focusing on the true story of German industrialist and Nazi Party member Oskar Schindler's struggle to save over a thousand Jewish people during the Holocaust.

Steven Spielberg's *Munich* (2005) illustrates how foreign policy decision making powerfully impacts individuals, in this case a team of Israeli secret agents/hitmen tasked with taking out the Palestinian Black September plotters who murdered Israel's athletes at the Munich Olympics in 1972. The film suggests that one small team headed by fictional character Avner Kaufman (Eric Bana) killed or attempted to kill most of the key Black September personnel. Actually, there was a larger team that operated more widely. They did not depend on only one key French source of information, as depicted in the film. The Israeli team is depicted as having doubts about what they are doing. This makes effective drama but does not seem to have been the case.

Syriana (also 2005) is one of the bravest movies to take on the political complexities of America's involvement in the Middle East. Released four years after the 9/11 attacks, the story is an unflinching look at the murky politics and oil economy of the region. Many critics and viewers were confused by the overlapping plot lines, though the central plot had to do with CIA

agent Bob Barnes (George Clooney) and his assigned job of undermining the foreign minister of a fictional oil-rich Persian Gulf state. *Syriana* became especially relevant to audiences as the Iraq War became more muddled and America's supposed allies in the Persian Gulf provided only limited assistance to stabilize the situation or curb the spread of Salafist and other radical Muslim ideas. *Body of Lies* (2008), starring Leonardo di Caprio as CIA Field Officer Roger Ferris and Russell Crowe as Ed Hoffman, head of the CIA's Near East Office, was more accessible but overly simplified the politics of terrorism in Iraq and Jordan.

IR theory is immediately applicable to these films. For instance, the notion of levels of analysis producing different research questions and outcomes is readily apparent. Most commonly, this is characterized by such scholars as Kenneth Waltz as global, national, and individual levels. Graham Allison's classic study of the Cuban Missile Crisis, *Essence of Decision*, uses three lenses, equating to national level analysis, bureaucratic politics, and political process. He suggests that political process makes the most sense as an explanation of what happened in the crisis. *Thirteen Days* is an excellent vehicle for understanding these different levels, from the global and national to the interaction of political actors within the Kennedy administration. *Hotel Rwanda* operates mostly at the individual level, though it deals with the national-level civil war and international level via the U.N. *Munich* and *Syriana* are situated at both national and individual level, showing how Israel retaliated against the terrorist attack at the 1972 Olympics or American representatives frequently intervene in the Middle East, respectively.

POLITICAL HISTORY AT THE MOVIES: WHAT FILM GETS RIGHT AND WRONG

Films illustrate the interaction of history and politics in various ways. In most cases, political history gets at least partially distorted. Prominent films include presentation of fact-based approximation of actual events, such as *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970) about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, or made-up stories only loosely based on history, for example *Gladiator* (2000) about a fictional Roman general Maximus (Russell Crowe) forced to become a gladiator. Stories based on real people may stay fairly close to reality, like *Malcolm X* (1992); they can get the basics right but recast key personal issues, as in *The Theory of Everything* (2014), focusing on British theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking (Eddie Redmayne); or they may be wrong on some facts but get the tone right, as in *Dallas Buyers Club* (2013) about AIDS activist Ron Woodroof (Matthew McConaughey).

Biographies may simplify or reinterpret their subjects, such as *Elizabeth* (Cate Blanchett as the great British queen, 1998), or give us powerful paths but stray from the facts, such as *The Imitation Game* (2014) about computer pioneer Alan Turing (Benedict Cumberbatch). Some biographies substantially change their subjects' stories, blatantly so for George Armstrong Custer (Errol Flynn) in *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941) or more subtly for Russia's Czar Nicholas II and his family in *Nicholas and Alexandra* (1971); the czar comes across as a warm family man, but the story glosses over his disdain for reform in the run-up to the Russian Revolution of 1917. Fictional stories also can employ broad historical events as backdrops, such as Paul Thomas Anderson's *There Will Be Blood* (2006), in which Daniel Day-Lewis won his second Oscar for a fascinating characterization of a cold, manipulative California oil man, Daniel Plainview. The story was very loosely based on the Sinclair Lewis novel, *Oil!*

Here are some of the best—and most controversial—historical movies of the past sixty years. While they may be lacking in historical accuracy, most of them are great entertainment.

The Sand Pebbles (1966), directed by Robert Wise and perhaps actor Steve McQueen's finest performance, was also Candice Bergen's impressive film debut. Taken from a popular novel by Richard McKenna, it tells the entirely fictional story of an American gunboat (*San Pablo*) on China's Yangtze River in 1926–1927 before and during Chiang Kai-shek's Northern Expedition to unite the country. McQueen's Jake Holman is the can-do Chief Machinist's Mate, loves his work running the engines but disdains the military. He helps his friend Frenchy (Richard Attenborough) free and informally marry a young bar girl, Mai-ly. Jake becomes close to Shirley Eckert (Bergen), a young missionary, but tells her that they have no future together. "I told you not to talk to sailors," he advises. Lieutenant Collins, the ship's captain (Richard Crenna), puts duty and the honor of the gunboat above the crew's safety. Most of the crew want to continue using Chinese coolies to lighten workloads on the boat. Jake trains one of them, Po-Han (played by Mako), to be his assistant, but Nationalist militants torture him on the shore, leading Jake to shoot him from the ship to put him out of his misery. After Frenchy dies of a fever in Mai-ly's bed, a block committee apparently kills Mai-ly, but accuses Jake of the murder.

Nothing like the major incidents the movie depicts took place: an American gunboat trapped at Changsha by local militants for an entire winter, a U.S. sailor falsely accused of murder, a major battle on the river to overcome a rope-boom barrier, and a captain killed by nationalist militiamen. Some critics saw the movie as a veiled critique of America's growing involvement in another Asian civil war in Vietnam. The movie's ending was symbolic of U.S. clueless intervention in two wars that it did not understand. Collins

intends to evacuate the staff of the China Light Mission. The head missionary, Jameson, declares his statelessness and walks forward to talk peace with the militants but immediately gets shot. The by-the-book but self-destructive Collins sacrifices himself to allow the others to escape the mission. Jake takes his place, and seems poised to make a run to safety, but takes a shot to the chest. Incredulous, he says, "I was home. What happened? What the hell happened?" Americans in 1966 were beginning to ask the same questions about Vietnam. A second shot kills him. The camera pulls upward to reveal all three men's bodies lying in the mission courtyard. Two sailors and Shirley make their way to the gunboat and safety.

The Hindenburg (1975), also directed by Wise, purports to tell the truth about what happened in the German zeppelin crash in New Jersey in 1937, but it is mostly a formulaic 1970s disaster movie. Like any disaster movie, it wastes an inordinate amount of time setting up several fictional cardboard characters with varying degrees of interpersonal conflicts and personal problems. George C. Scott stars as Col. Franz Ritter, tasked with investigating a bomb threat to the airship. He is assisted by Gestapo officer Hans Vogel (Roy Thinnes), posing as a photographer, a dedicated Nazi and the movie's heavy. Ritter has to determine which passenger or crewman may be a bomber. He finds the bomb but dies as it explodes. Various causes of the disaster have been suggested over the years, but there is no definitive proof of a bomb plot. Some of the characters' escapes are similar to those of actual *Hindenburg* passengers, though the thirty-second crash as depicted here seems to go on forever.

Glory (1989) is one of the standout historical movies of the 1980s. Directed by Edward Zwick, it tells the story of the 54th Massachusetts Infantry Regiment, one of the first black units in the American Civil War. Led by a white officer, Colonel Robert Gould Shaw (Matthew Broderick), whose actual letters make up part of the narrative, the unit struggles through basic training with low supplies and discriminatory pay. Shaw clashes with fictional soldier Trip (Denzel Washington, in the movie that made him a star). Trip gets caught absent without leave and Shaw orders him to be flogged. When he is stripped, we see a back scarred from many slave whippings. Trip spits and glares at Shaw with rage as a tear rolls down his cheek. The problem with this scene is: Congress banned military flogging in 1861, and the Army usually punished soldiers by bound crouching or hanging by the thumbs. Zwick is making an ironic statement about the abolitionist Shaw replacing the slave master in the eyes of the recruits (Carnes and Garrity, 2006: 124–125). Later, the men gain respect for Shaw as he refuses pay when blacks receive less money than white soldiers. He later promotes fictional soldier/father figure Rawlins (Morgan Freeman) to sergeant, and then asks Trip to be the color bearer. Trip politely

refuses, but the two share their feelings about whether the unit's success can help improve conditions for blacks.

The recruits form into an effective fighting unit that in 1863 storms Confederate Fort Wagner in South Carolina, incurring high casualties. This is a compellingly emotional story. My favorite scene shows a tearful Shaw anticipating his own death, looking out to sea and remembering home as the unit prepares for the attack. The symbolic moment of Trip's lifeless body thrown onto the side of Shaw's corpse is bittersweet. The film nonetheless contains several inaccuracies. Most of the soldiers were free blacks, not former slaves as depicted in the movie. Since a majority of the blacks who served in the Army were former slaves, the film is trying to make a larger point about black service in the war. Also, the unit apparently had sufficient uniforms and shoes during training. Shaw was not reluctant to take on the job and did not get the position due to his family connections (Carnes and Garraty, 2006: 124–125; Rosenstone, 2013: 45–54).

One of the silliest history movies was the wildly popular *Braveheart* (1995), directed by Mel Gibson and earning the Best Picture Oscar. It resonated with audiences by reshaping the story of rebel William Wallace (Gibson), who united the Scots to take on England in the Middle Ages, but who was eventually handed over to the English to be brutally executed. Wallace becomes a modern peasant freedom fighter. Patrick McGoohan, in one of his strongest performances, is a deliciously villainous King Edward I of England. I loved the movie—until I read more about real Scottish history. Great dramatically, it gets the history completely wrong. Gibson based his script on the epic poem of Blind Harry that, like Robin Hood stories, contained much legend and romance but few facts.

Little details are laughable: Scots wearing belted plaids and kilts hundreds of years before they were introduced, Scottish warriors' faces painted with woad at least eight-hundred years after the practice stopped, those same warriors dropping their drawers and mooning English troops, and English overseers casually invoking the practice of *Prima Nocte*, whereby they could sleep with local brides on their wedding nights. More importantly, Wallace was a lowlander nobleman, not the highlander peasant leader depicted in the story, and so was fighting for the rights of Scottish nobility. He thus was not the modern freedom fighter depicted and is unlikely to have shouted "Freedom!" as he was about to be drawn and quartered. And he did not have a romantic liaison with Princess Isabella (Sophie Marceau), wife of the crown prince.

The Patriot (2000) is Roland Emmerich's magnum opus on the American Revolution. While promising to be the definitive take on that formative American conflict, the film devolves into a simple revenge story. Benjamin Martin (Gibson again), *paterfamilias* of a South Carolina plantation, seeks to put behind him war crimes he committed in the French and Indian War, and

he tries to keep his family out of the war. But Colonel William Tavington (Jason Isaacs), an evil British dragoon commander, arrests Martin's oldest son Gabriel (Heath Ledger) and senselessly kills his adolescent son. When Tavington sends Gabriel to the rear for likely execution, Martin acts. With his two other sons, he kills twenty British soldiers to free Gabriel. Martin is an avenging maniac, brandishing a tomahawk and drenched in British blood. The reluctant warrior now morphs into a guerrilla leader, harassing the British along the Santee River. Successful at first, Martin's band suffers several deaths, most notably Gabriel at the hands of Tavington. Martin and Tavington finally meet on the battlefield (unnamed, but looking like the Battle of Cowpens), with the rebel outwitting and dispatching the arrogant British officer.

The movie treats American history as a canvas for fanciful storytelling. British viewers were understandably taken aback by the depiction of their army officers as war criminals. In the most striking instance, Tavington orders residents of a village locked into their church and burned alive. This sort of thing was done frequently by the German SS and *einsatzgruppen* (special action detachments) in Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine during World War II, but apparently never happened in the American Revolution. Tavington is based on Banastre Tarleton, who was neither psychopath nor war criminal—and was not killed in the war. His sin was not controlling his troops, who were accused of murder of rebel prisoners and raping local women. Models for Martin include Francis Marion and other South Carolina irregular commanders. While important to the overall campaign in the South, they did not devise the tactics used at the Battle of Cowpens (Craig and Garraty, 2006: 124–125).

Other errors are less egregious, but no less silly to history buffs. Martin has no slaves, something almost unheard of among large Southern plantation owners. The producers probably thought that a slave-holding Martin would be problematic for the audience. Only a few blacks served in Southern units. An ambivalent Martin quotes from a pro-British legislator in his speech to the South Carolina assembly. Tarleton's men wore green, not red (which is why they were called Green Dragoons). In the end, the film stirred patriotic feelings among the audience, while teaching them very little about the actual Revolution (Craig and Garraty, 2006: 124–125).

Chicago (2002), a popular Academy Award Best Picture winner directed by Rob Marshall, has a fascinating pedigree. Based on Maurine Dallas Watkins's play about two accused women murderers that she covered in 1920s Chicago (Belva Gaertner and Beulah Annan), it was transformed into a musical by John Kander, Fred Ebb, and Bob Fosse in the 1970s. Showgirl Velma Kelly (Catherine Zeta-Jones) kills her lover in her car, and Roxie Hart (Renee Zellweger) murders a man who was about to dump her. We are encouraged to believe that the men "had it coming," as massed women in

lockup sing. Hotshot lawyer Billy Flynn (Richard Gere), a composite of two attorneys who worked for the accused, employs an array of public relations ploys to get the two women acquitted.

The play/musical overstates Flynn's "razzle-dazzle" tactics, downplays the tawdriness of the two cases, and ignores the sordidness of the actual women (Annan carried on multiple affairs, had a nervous breakdown and died of tuberculosis, while Gaertner had a serious drinking problem, suffered a drunken traffic accident, and threatened her husband because of an affair). The dance finale is wonderful, but the two women did not form a cabaret act after their respective trials (Carnes and Garraty, 2006: 662–663). Well, it is a musical, not a serious examination of 1920s history.

The Last Samurai (2003), also directed by Zwick, is one of the goofiest movies ever made about Japan. I was surprised that Japanese people were not outraged by the film's trashing of the Meiji Era leaders who built modern Japan. This is a Tom Cruise vehicle, in which the mega-actor plays Nathan Algren, a fictional American officer who takes a job in 1870s Japan as adviser/trainer for Japan's nascent army. He gets captured by a group of samurai and, while staying as their prisoner/guest in a mountain village, comes to identify with them. Samurai leader Katsumoto (Ken Watanabe) impresses Algren with his values and nobility. Like Meiji leader Saigo Takamori, Katsumoto leaves the imperial council and leads a doomed rebellion against the Japanese government. Algren aids Katsumoto in his rebellion and, when surrounded, helps him commit *seppuku*. Algren addresses the imperial council, giving Katsumoto's sword to Emperor Meiji, who then rejects a trade treaty with the Americans.

This is all quite fun, but it is ridiculous. There was no American officer like Algren who was captured by rebelling samurai, and the Japanese relied on French officers to train their army. A foreign military officer would not have been allowed into the imperial council. The samurai were not a tribe living in the remote mountains (Algren compares them to Native Americans, whom he had fought); they were a class akin to Europe's Medieval knights that dominated Japan for nearly a thousand years. Saigo rebelled not to protect the rights of ordinary people, but to preserve the status of that samurai class. The Meiji leaders, such as fictitious Minister Omura, appear as corrupt and disdainful of samurai. In fact, they were former samurai themselves, and they became perhaps Japan's most public-spirited and incorruptible leadership cadre. They were Japan's Greatest Generation. The movie also has been lambasted as a "white savior" narrative, in which a former Union officer saves a non-white people.

Lincoln (2012) is Steven Spielberg's homage to America's greatest president. Daniel Day-Lewis deservedly won another Academy Award in the title role. His characterization, including the president's reportedly high-pitched

voice, wide gestures, frontier accent, and loping walk may be the closest we may ever get to seeing film of Mr. Lincoln. I was particularly struck by Spielberg's staging of a portion of Lincoln's second inaugural address as the movie's coda. Spielberg and company cleverly focus on one key episode in the Lincoln presidency, as outlined in a few pages of Doris Kearns Goodwin's massive study of Lincoln and his cabinet, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*—the campaign to get the House of Representatives to pass the Thirteenth Amendment to the constitution, outlawing slavery (the Senate had already voted it out months before). The film colorfully speculates about the backroom deals made to secure votes of wavering Republicans and enough Democrats to reach a two-thirds supermajority. I loved the inclusion of supporting players who are relatively unknown to the public, such as Radical Republican Thaddeus Stevens (Tommy Lee Jones), Republican arm-twister and deal maker William N. Bilbo (James Spader), Republican conservative leader Francis Blair (Hal Holbrook), and former slave and dressmaker Elizabeth Keckley (Gloria Reuben).

The movie's problem is the accumulation of small details that fly in the face of what we know of Lincoln. While the president struggled to cope with first lady Mary Todd Lincoln's fragile emotional state, she is unlikely to have referred to herself as "crazy." Sally Fields' portrayal nonetheless is one of the best versions of Mary Todd ever filmed. Lincoln probably would not have slapped his oldest son, Robert. He famously did not use the profanities we hear on film, and he probably would not have yelled and accusingly pointed at each of his cabinet members. Finally, because of his height, Lincoln on the night of his assassination was placed diagonally on his death bed, not with his legs folded. Even so, the powerful narrative and sympathetic portrait of the Great Emancipator may help us overlook such details. In the year of Barack Obama's reelection, audiences may have seen resonances between the two presidents from Illinois.

12 Years a Slave (2013) is British director Steve McQueen's masterpiece. Derived from free black Solomon Northup's account of being kidnapped and sold into slavery in Louisiana in the 1840s, this may be the most accurate filmic rendering of the antebellum slave system. The sick psychology undergirding the slave system gets forcefully presented. Northup (Chiwetel Ejiofor)—given the slave name Platt—daily must make life-and-death decisions about whether to oppose a tyrannical work overseer, whether escape is possible, and how to attempt to contact his friends and family in New York.

The slaveowners, dependent on slavery for their livelihood and wealth, develop elaborate social and religious justifications for slavery as an institution—or their own cruelty. Northup's first master, William Ford (Benedict Cumberbatch), is a good man who treats his slaves relatively well. But when Northup snaps and beats overseer John Tibeats (Paul Dano),

leading to an attempt to hang Solomon, Ford refuses to hear that Solomon is a free black and sells him to another plantation owner, the pathologically cruel Edwin Epps (Michael Fassbender). Epps frequently rapes his prize field hand Patsey (Lupita Nyong'o), sparking jealous rage from his wife Mary (Sarah Paulson). While widely praised and honored, the film was criticized for its focus on a single hero figure instead of the overall institution of slavery, and for its presentation of a white savior narrative, as Canadian Samuel Bass (Brad Pitt) manages to get word to Northup's white New York friends. The former slave then tearfully returns to his wife and now-grown children.

American Hustle (2013) is David O. Russell's fanciful and fun reworking of the FBI sting operation Abscam of the late 1970s. It is an absorbing story and appealingly dark comedy/drama, but it should not be taken seriously as history. The four leads are incredible: Christian Bale and Amy Adams as confidence game couple Irving Rosenfeld and Sydney Prosser/Edith Greensly, Bradley Cooper as FBI agent Richie DiMaso, and Jennifer Lawrence as Irving's wife Rosalyn Rosenfeld. I was particularly impressed with Lawrence as a needy, lusty housewife with no filter who employs "passive-aggressive jujitsu," in Irving's words, to get what she wants. Scenes in which Rosalyn boldly approaches several Mafiosos at a casino bar, and then confronts rival Prosser in the restroom, are stunning acting. DiMaso pressures Rosenfeld and Prosser to help him arrange an elaborate sting to bring down several Congressmen, a U.S. Senator, the Camden, New Jersey mayor Carmine Polito (Jeremy Renner), and mob boss Victor Tellegio (Robert De Niro, uncredited). Fearing retribution by the Mafia, Rosenfeld and Prosser use their con skills to turn the tables on DiMaso, getting him fired, along with immunity from prosecution for themselves and a reduced sentence for Polito. Tellegio receives no money, so cannot be charged with a crime.

The story inflates the importance of the two con people (who in reality were Mel Weinberg and Evelyn Knight), and the real FBI agents were not self-absorbed schemers like DiMaso, who gets into a physical fight with his supervisor. Knight was English, not an American posing as an English woman, and had almost no part in Abscam. Weinberg's wife was depressed by his activities and committed suicide in 1984. The actual mayor (Angelo Erichetti) was not an innocent caught up in the case, but was suspected of corruption, and Weinberg did not try to get him a reduced sentence. The movie does capture the unease later expressed by many political and news media observers, who felt that the members of Congress were unfairly entrapped.

Looking at the movies discussed above, and including a few that are discussed in subsequent chapters, we can categorize political history in the movies as follows:

Mostly true: *All the President's Men*, *North Country*, *Thirteen Days*, *Lincoln*, *12 Years a Slave*

Partly true: *Goodfellas*, *Hotel Rwanda*, *Salvador*, *Glory*

Half true and half invented: *The Accused*, *Darkest Hour*

Reworking history: *On the Waterfront*, *Gone with the Wind*, *Munich*, *The Patriot* (2000)

Historical fantasy: *Syriana*, *Chicago*, *Forrest Gump*

Mostly fiction: *Chinatown*, *American Hustle*, *The Last Samurai*

Historical propaganda: *Jesse James* (1939), *My Darling Clementine*, *The Alamo* (1960)

Completely fiction: *The Candidate*, *The Sand Pebbles*, *There Will Be Blood*

ADAPTING THEORY ABOUT POLITICS IN FILM

If politics is in every movie and all movies are political, how can we create theory about it? And what would be the point? Clearly, the degree and kinds of political content varies tremendously among films. The movies deal both explicitly and implicitly with political and socio-political content. Many films seemingly have nothing to do with politics yet speak volumes about the sociopolitical realities of a society, especially in how they present various categories of people. Romances and romantic comedies, for instance, on the surface are not concerned with political processes or politicians, but they do indicate accepted images of men, women and minorities. These change over time. For instance, a romantic comedy from the 1950s such as *Three Coins in the Fountain* (1954) portrays American women vacationing in Italy who seek marriage, but who may be unlikely to pursue careers after marriage. A generation later, a movie such as *Working Girl* (1988) puts women's careers and empowerment front and center in the story. Is the latter film more socially conscious or political than the former because it addresses issues of women's careers?

Franklin presents the politics of film, which he means as controversies and issues sparked by movies. For instance, *The Interview* (2014) is a comedy that created an international incident when North Korean hackers attacked Sony Pictures, the film's distributor. It depicts North Korea's Kim Jong Un as an unpopular dictator who gets assassinated by an American talk show host and his producer. Voices on both the Right and Left frequently criticize movies. Franklin recommends using post-modernist deconstruction to get at the underlying meanings of movies by looking at such aspects as the context of a film. That context is usually shaped by the political culture of the time. Times change, tastes change, and what is politically acceptable shifts (Franklin, 2017: 1–9).

Franklin also notes that films can be explicitly political or have no apparent political content, but all can be subjected to deconstruction. Disagreements over whether to control the content of films depend on whether one believes they are works of art to be protected or products made for consumption that can be regulated by government. Films may have subliminal messages that are difficult to detect or not central to their plots. Some critics were upset that the popular film *Selma* (2014), about a key moment in the civil rights movement, painted Lyndon Johnson as not sympathetic to the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965. Watching a movie is a personal experience, and what viewers gain from films varies from person to person. Some movies only appeal to niche audiences, such as most art house or some genre stories, while others attract mass audiences (Franklin, 2017: 9–16).

Haas et al. agree that movies effects vary tremendously. Films generally handle political controversies by balancing audience appeal with challenges to current tastes. Using the example of *Philadelphia* (1993), they note that the filmmakers were successful in confronting very controversial material in the early 1990s—a gay man with AIDS—by having him played by Tom Hanks, then America’s most popular actor, and defended by a lawyer played by the country’s most popular black actor, Denzel Washington. Films dubbed “political” are rare, as producers eschew that category for other labels, such as biography, thriller, or historical work. They also agree that it is difficult to speak coherently of a political film—or a political genre—because political films cover so much ground. Finally, they add that political messages received depend on the ideologies of the audience and may not be consciously planned by filmmakers. A romantic comedy/drama like *Silver Linings Playbook* (2012) presents the mental illness of its protagonist, but it is not necessarily a commentary on mental health policy (Haas et al., 2015: 3–9).

Haas et al. suggest that films should be understood as “potential vehicles of political theory,” viz., for most people it provides a window to consider political issues or processes. They present a useful matrix for examining political content of film. The horizontal axis is, right to left, between low and high political intent, while the vertical axis goes, top to bottom, between high and low political content. In the top-left are politically reflective film, in the bottom-left socially reflective movies. At the top-right are “pure” political movies showing clear ideological leanings, while at the bottom-right are “auteur” political movies that reflect the artistic and political point of view of film directors (Haas et al., 2015: 9–14).

Giglio believes that, to understand movies’ role in politics, one must look not only at the messages the film may send, but also the reciprocal relationship between the film business and government. A film like *Wag the Dog* (1997) was widely perceived as comment on the Monica Lewinsky scandal of Bill Clinton’s second term, as a political consultant and Hollywood producer

seek to create a phony war in the Balkans to distract the public from a presidential sex scandal. The movie suggested to many that the political and entertainment worlds work together to easily hoodwink the public. Often, political influence goes two ways. Hollywood seeks to influence politicians through campaign contributions, especially to Democrats, but gives campaign funding to both major parties. Movie producers cooperate with government at times but challenge them on other occasions. They know that making a war or space movie depends on help from, respectively, the Defense Department and NASA (Giglio, 2014: 1–12).

Giglio agrees with Haas et al. that ideology is a key factor in audience acceptance of a movie, but he believes that ideology is often flexible or muted. For instance, Steven Soderbergh's two-part biopic epic on Che Guevara, *Che* (2008) omitted discussion of how Guevara became radicalized. Warren Beatty's presentation of John Reed's experience observing and participating in the Russian Revolution of 1917, *Reds* (1981), got diluted with a "sappy" love story between Reed and his girlfriend and later wife, Louise Bryant. Giglio outlines four types of propaganda films: overt propaganda where the message is usually clear, propaganda inserted into otherwise commercial films, such as Michael Moore's documentaries, covert propaganda that plays an important role in commercial films (such as *High Noon*), and movies with a "slight indoctrination veneer." In the end, Giglio concludes that the most significant political role played by movies may be as a "politicizing agent" that subtly shapes audience views of politics and government (Giglio, 2014: 13–16, 20–21).

Giglio also discusses the problems of presenting history in film. Most filmmakers change or omit key events in order to boost the dramatic appeal of the story. This may be acceptable if the changes are minor but can be dangerous when it distorts perceptions of history. Ben Affleck's well-received *Argo* (2012) over-dramatizes the escape of several State Department personnel at the Tehran Airport during the Iran Hostage Crisis in 1980, but much of the story is correct. Was Oliver Stone's biopic *Nixon* (1995) too sympathetic to the thirty-seventh president, turning him from a criminal leader into a victim? Did *Pearl Harbor* (2001) make it seem that Japan was forced to launch its attack on Hawaii in 1941? Did *U-571* (2000) give sufficient credit to the British for securing the Enigma decoding machines from German submarines in World War II (Giglio, 2014: 16–20)? I will have more to say about history later in the book.

The ideas of Franklin, Haas et al., and Giglio are very helpful in grasping the relationship of movies and politics. Let me give you my addition to this literature. I suggest a simple way to think of political content of films. It is a ten-level typology for political movies.

Type 1, Propaganda Films: are intended to convince the public to support a government, a political movement, or a government policy. They may or may not include conventional film elements, such as plot and characterization, and often use a didactic approach. Obvious examples are Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). During World War II, many Hollywood films included at least some propaganda elements, especially war movies. This propaganda continued in watered-down form in the prowar movies of the late 1940s to late 1960s.

Type 2, Radical Films: are designed to excite the public to join a political movement or pressure governments to initiate change. Costa-Gavras's films and much of the New Left cinema of the 1960s were designed to educate the public about corruption and oppressive government. They can come from any point on the political spectrum. They also can include documentaries, such as Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), and *Fahrenheit 11/9* (2018).

Type 3, Political Films: focus on political or governmental processes and politicians. They can be either fictional or historical. They can be descriptive, evaluative or call for change. Though their ideologies can fall at any point on the political spectrum, they tend to be politically moderate or reformist in outlook, especially as presented by Hollywood. Many of the Spaghetti Westerns of the 1960s–1970s had clear political agendas that suffused the movies from start to finish.

Type 4, Political Issue Films: stories ostensibly presented in a movie genre that is not explicitly political but deals at length with political issues. Several Westerns of the 1950s were allegories of contemporary issues such as Hollywood's Blacklist and the Cold War. Political thriller movies from the 1960s to 1990s were great entertainment, but also fostered skepticism about government-centered conspiracies and corruption.

Type 5, Political Background Films: stories ostensibly presented in a movie genre that is not explicitly political, but contains a political background or backdrop, which may be contemporary or historical. *The Godfather, Part II* makes extensive use of the Mafia's involvement in Cuba prior to the Cuban Revolution, as well as Senate hearings that mirror the Kefauver committee sessions in the early 1950s.

Type 6, Social Issue Films: stories ostensibly presented in a genre that is not explicitly political but deals with important socio-political or socio-economic issues. *The Kids Are All Right* (2010) is primarily a story about a middle-aged couple struggling with their marriage. As the couple are lesbians in a legal marriage, it became a landmark discussion of gay marriage in the years before the Supreme Court recognized marriage equality in 2015.

Type 7, Sublimated Political Issue Films: movies that do not take on political issues directly, but these can be glimpsed by audiences. Many Westerns

from the 1930s to 1960s implicitly discussed the nature of democracy and governance. These include John Ford's various Westerns.

Type 8, Sublimated Social Issue Films: movies that do not take on social issues directly, but these can be perceived by audiences. Many film noir movies were perceived as merely thrillers but included critiques of American society in the 1940s–1950s. Female directors of noir films used the genre to critique women's status during that era.

Type 9, Political Message Films: films perceived to contain particular messages about the nature of politics, political or socio-political issues, or hidden political realities. On the surface, the plot may have little political content, but audience and critics perceive political messages embedded in the story. *Chinatown* is one of the best examples of this kind of film. Its fictional story had little to do with the actual development of Southern California in the 1930s, but many observers saw it as a parable about government corruption in the Watergate era. The line between sublimated political or social films and political message films is often blurred.

Type 10, Social Content/Little Political Message Films: movies that deal with social issues, but generally stay away from politics. *The Help* (2011) deals forthrightly with conditions facing black maids in southern white homes of the early 1960s, though most of the film does not address the civil rights movement directly.

Type 11, Non-political Films: have almost no explicit political or socio-political content but show social customs or realities which may indirectly affect politics. They present easily understood images of race, ethnicity, religion, and gender, and often underline the social or economic status quo, implicitly suggesting that the contemporary society is not in need of change. They thus are unintentionally gendered or racialized. Many films produced from the 1930s to 1960s on the surface deal with family issues or romance, but blacks and Latinos are in socially inferior positions. Women's roles are completely gendered.

CONCLUSION: THE INDIVIDUAL AND POLITICS

The decade of the mid-1960s to mid-1970s produced among the most politically and socially adventurous American movies. That spirit of adventure may be tempered, but it is far from dead today. Twenty-first century films continue to highlight relationships between society and political actors. *V for Vendetta* (2005), taken from a graphic novel of the same name, considers the role of individuals in standing up to authoritarian regimes or bad governments, along with the moral concessions made by those who work for those regimes. It is a Type 2 radical film, calling for viewers to consider revolution against

oppressive regimes, and perhaps more forcefully take on unaccountable democratic governments, too. The story concerns a future United Kingdom under a fascist-like regime. High Chancellor Adam Sutler (John Hurt) is a bombastic authoritarian combining aspects of Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco. A mysterious man wearing a Guy Fawkes mask who goes only by V (Hugo Weaving) kidnaps a young woman, Evey (Natalie Portman), subjecting her to a variety of shocking experiences to educate her about the nature of repression and the importance of her rebellion. While she never sees his masked face, she comes to appreciate him as the embodiment of the revolution.

On Guy Fawkes Night, V kills several key figures, but is mortally wounded. Sutler's government falls from within and is unable to respond to massed protesters, who march through the lines of anti-riot troops wearing Fawkes masks. Meanwhile, Evey sets an underground train with high explosives to detonate under the Houses of Parliament. The Chief Inspector (Stephen Rea), realizing that the government has collapsed, does nothing to stop her. The train leaves with V's body. The Inspector asks Evey who he was. She tells him that he was "you and me, he was all of us."

While the movie may be a bit naïve about the possibilities of popular overthrow of an authoritarian regime, it highlights the vital roles of individuals who need the courage to make an effort, change toxic politics and bring about change. Usually, it takes much more work and plenty of time than depicted in the movie. But every now and then, sudden change is possible if circumstances are favorable, so ordinary people should keep working, no matter how difficult the challenges they face. Oppressive governments in Serbia and Libya fell rapidly, as disgusted ordinary people arose to oppose them. The movie resonated with audiences upset about the George W. Bush administration as it cut democratic corners to pursue its Global War on Terror.

Vice (2018) is a loose biographical picture about U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney. It is a Type 3 film, with some Type 2 elements. It examines his career and family life, employing irony and fantasy scenes to suggest the monstrosity of what the Bush administration did in Iraq. It is both a bittersweet personal story and comic meditation on Cheney's career. The audience sees Cheney (Christian Bale) emerge from an apolitical background as a nearly failed student, who becomes a devotee of up-and-coming Republican politician Donald Rumsfeld (Steve Carell). The two forge a lifelong bond that takes them to the height of power in the Ford Administration, and then again by Cheney's manipulating himself into the vice presidency under George W. Bush (Sam Rockwell). Cheney is propelled by his politically ambitious wife Lynne (Amy Adams), but constant political struggles cause personal pain for gay daughter Mary (Allison Pill) and political daughter Liz (Lily Rabe). Cheney and Rumsfeld forge the dodgy strategy of attacking Iraq to

prevent the country from employing weapons of mass destruction, which were non-existent.

Vice shows us that the worst political instincts within us often come to the surface, and the worst political actors gain power by being in the right place at the right time. It does not have to be this way, and democracy can do better than Cheney and Rumsfeld. What does it say about the nature of American government that it constantly thrusts up power-hungry characters with little regard for public opinion or democratic procedures? Politics rolls on, and there will always be political or politically charged films to inspire us to take on the worst and achieve something better.

THE BEST POLITICAL MOVIES

Here are some of the best political movies ever made:

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (1939): For many, Frank Capra's tale is *the* classic political movie of mid-twentieth century America. It centers on Jefferson Smith (James Stewart), an idealistic appointed Senator whose legislative proposals for a boys' camp get thwarted by a state political machine that wants to build a dam on the potential camp site. The machine smears Smith and he prepares to go home, but his assistant Clarissa Saunders (just called Saunders, and played as a Spunky Kid character by Jean Arthur) encourages him to fight. She designs a strategy to use a Senate filibuster to take on and defeat the machine.

Citizen Kane (1941): Orson Welles's magnum opus, this is the towering rise-and-fall story of mega-newspaper publisher Charles Foster Kane (Welles, basing his performance on William Randolph Hearst), a dictatorial editor who treats both his wives and friends as commodities to be used or shaped as he sees fit. Everything he does, from running a newspaper to running for Governor to promoting his wife as an opera singer, must be spectacular. It turns out that he is just a traumatized little boy who misses his simple childhood in the Midwest and takes out his frustration on the world.

State of the Union (1948): Another Capra triumph, this is a rarity among political films in that the protagonist, Grant Matthews (Spencer Tracy), determines that his political ambitions are not as important as his family. His dalliance with a manipulative publisher, Kay Thorndyke (Angela Lansbury) has injured his family, especially his wife Mary (Katherine Hepburn), and he decides to do the right thing and drop out of the race.

All the King's Men (1949): Robert Rossen's masterful telling of a popular Roman a clef about Louisiana Governor and later Senator Huey Long details the toxic relations swirling around a populist southern politician. Broderick Crawford plays Governor Willie Stark, with John Ireland as compromised

reporter Jack Burden, Joanne Dru as Anne Stanton, Burden's girlfriend taken by Stark, and Mercedes McCambridge as Sadie Burke, Stark's assistant with an unrequited love for Willie. Willie longs to clean up state politics, but he becomes as corrupt as those he attacks, and this leads to his downfall.

A Face in the Crowd (1957): Elia Kazan's little gem is a cautionary tale about a homespun television messiah, Larry "Lonesome" Rhodes (Andy Griffith), who rides his cornpone humor to national fame. Though made in the 1950s, it predicted all the dangerously manipulative media figures or demagogues who have haunted the airwaves ever since, from Rush Limbaugh to Tucker Carlson. Media-savvy assistant Marcia Jeffries (Patricia Neal) helps him rise and then, when she realizes what a monster he is, brings him down.

Advise and Consent (1962): Allen Drury's political thriller, directed by Otto Preminger, centers on scandal rocking the nomination of Robert Leffingwell (Henry Fonda) to be secretary of state. Charges swirl that Leffingwell may have been a Communist in the past, while a troubled Utah senator (Don Murray), faced with charges of homosexuality, commits suicide (remember, this is before the modern gay rights movement launched in the mid-1960s). It looks like the Senate vote for confirmation will be close, and the vice president may have to break the tie. Just then, the vice president receives as message from the White House.

Malcolm X (1992): Spike Lee's masterpiece, this film is a faithful rendering of the eponymous Black Muslim leader, played by Denzel Washington. Malcolm rose to be one of the key figures in the Nation of Islam before breaking with its founder Elijah Muhammed and getting assassinated later. Along the way, Malcolm broadened his view of humanity and, in his final months, spoke for unity and understanding. Some observers think that *Do the Right Thing* (1989) is Lee's masterpiece.

Wag the Dog (1997): Barry Levinson's satire of diversionary politics came out just as Bill Clinton became embroiled in the Monica Lewinsky Affair—and two years before the Kosovo War, which many observers felt was . . . a diversionary war. In the novel and movie, a presidential spin doctor Conrad Bean (Robert De Niro) hires a Hollywood producer Stanley Motss (Dustin Hoffman) to manufacture a phony war in the Balkans. The president gets reelected, but Motss is upset that his faux war didn't get enough credit.

The Contender (2000): Ron Lurie's morality tale about a vice presidential nominee unjustly accused of youthful indiscretion was another response to the Lewinsky scandal. The vice presidency is vacant and, under the Twenty-fifth Amendment, President Jackson Evans (Jeff Bridges) must choose a replacement. He decides to break the glass ceiling by nominating a woman, Ohio Senator Laine Hanson (Joan Allen). At committee hearings, senior Republican Representative Sheldon Runyon (Gary Oldman) brings up photos of Hanson allegedly participating in an orgy as a college student.

She refuses to dignify the charges with a response, putting her nomination in jeopardy.

The Lives of Others (2006): This is an insightful story of surveillance of ordinary citizens by the East German internal security agency Stasi. The story centers on both those who worked in the agency and were troubled by their work, as well as their subjects of surveillance. It is one of the best movies about the crushing costs on individuals living under totalitarian regimes.

Milk (2008): Gus Van Sant's biopic of gay activist and politician Harvey Milk, played by Sean Penn, confronts a difficult moment in recent California history. A member of San Francisco's board of supervisors, Milk is one of America's first openly gay elected officials, but clashes with conservative Dan White (Josh Brolin), who resents Milk for opposing several of his initiatives. Upset when the mayor rejects his request to be reinstated to a seat that he has resigned, White shoots both Milk and Mayor George Moscone (Victor Garber).

Selma (2014): Ava DuVernay's historical drama is one of the best on the Black civil rights movement. It describes events leading up to the voting rights march across the Edmund Pettis bridge in Selma, Alabama, in 1965. Martin Luther King (David Oyelowo) is uncertain whether to pursue the march but is convinced by other civil rights leaders to go ahead. The Alabama state police proceed to beat up protesters. National news media coverage gains support for the movement, and a second march goes ahead peacefully.

NOTES

1. The moniker meant that he was on deep background but jokingly referenced a popular pornographic movie with the same name. Woodward kept Deep Throat's identity secret for many years, until the source revealed himself in 2005. He was Mark Felt, who in 1972 was FBI associate director. Woodward had met Felt months before the Watergate scandal erupted. Hal Holbrook played Deep Throat in *All the President's Men*. A biopic, *Mark Felt: The Man Who Brought Down the White House* (2017), starred Liam Neeson as Felt. A postscript describes Felt as one of the greatest whistleblowers in American history.

2. Robert Kennedy wrote a memoir of the crisis, entitled *Thirteen Days* (1969), published posthumously after his assassination. It apparently was not used as source material for the movie of the same name. The ad hoc committee was called the ExComm, short for Executive Committee of the National Security Council.

Chapter 2

Gangsters Give Films and TV an Offer They Can't Refuse

"I HEARD YOU PAINT HOUSES": *THE IRISHMAN* REMODS THE GANGSTER STORY¹

Director Martin Scorsese directed *The Irishman* (2019), the most ambitious and expensive of his six gangster films, for the media streaming company Netflix. It also had a limited theatrical release, in order to qualify for awards season. It is the epic story of Frank Sheeran (Robert De Niro), ex-truck driver turned underworld hitman for Philadelphia mobster Russell Bufalino (Joe Pesci), who goes to work as bodyguard for Teamsters Union head Jimmy Hoffa (Al Pacino). Hoffa becomes close to Sheeran's family, especially to his daughter Peggy (Anna Paquin as the adult Peggy). Attorney General Robert Kennedy (Jack Huston) goes after Hoffa, who is convicted of jury tampering.

In prison, Hoffa plans to get back leadership of the union, but the mob wants to stick with his replacement, Frank "Fitz" Fitzsimmons (Gary Basaraba). Released from prison as part of a deal to swing Teamsters support to President Nixon in the 1972 election, Hoffa prepares for the next leadership contest. The mob become upset with him for disrespecting other union leaders and for suggesting he will separate the union from gangster influence. Russell asks Frank to warn Hoffa to back off, but Hoffa tells his friend that he is untouchable because of his knowledge of Mafia activities. Russell then tasks Frank with killing Hoffa. The union leader is to meet two gangster leaders at a suburban Detroit house. No one is there, and Hoffa turns to leave, but Frank shoots him at point-blank range. Russell and Frank get investigated for Hoffa's disappearance but refuse to say anything to a grand jury. They and other mobsters are then convicted on other charges. Released from prison, an elderly Frank ends up in a nursing home. Peggy suspects him of killing Hoffa

and refuses to visit him. A priest absolves him of his sins, and Frank asks him to leave the door open slightly, one of Hoffa's personal habits.

This movie presents only one of several speculative versions of the Hoffa disappearance, one of the grandest mysteries in American history. While plausible, this story could be little more than Frank's fevered fiction. Scorsese claims that he does not know if Sheeran's story, revealed in his dotage, is true. Apparently, he just thinks it's a great tale. Scorsese left out one of Sheeran's more shocking claims: that he delivered rifles to the shooters who killed John F. Kennedy in Dallas. This probably would have been one too many conspiracies for the film (Erbland, 2019: 1–4). One reviewer notes that, in the end, it is hard to know what to make of Sheeran: is he a sociopath, or an ordinary working class guy? Are his emotions genuine, and can he be taken as an authentic family man? (Seitz, 2019: 1–7)

The Irishman is less the "adrenaline rush" of Scorsese's *Goodfellas* or relentless history of *Casino* than a contemplative examination of a little-known character at the edge of Mafia life. Excellent editing and long running time (almost three and half hours) allow a slow examination of decades of mob and union experience. Unlike many of his previous roles, the semi-retired Pesci plays Russell in an understated and wistful manner that seems almost out-of-place in a Mafia movie (Kermode, 2019: 1–6).

Frank and Russell come across not as pathological monsters, but ordinary middle-aged guys who discuss their children and road trips with their wives—even if the road trip ends in Frank leaving to kill Hoffa. As is often said in gangland stories, the killing is "just business" and not personal. Critic Richard Brody suggests that the film is a disturbing dissection of American politics, as it outlines an ongoing corrupt connection among the mob, the union, and politicians. All three are willing to cooperate when it is in their mutual interest, but just as likely to eliminate anyone who decides not to play along with this sick system. Brody notes Scorsese's use of silence, as the refusal to challenge the Mafia code or to reveal one's true self are key to the gangster's world. Peggy is a key character, as she is forced to witness mob horrors throughout her young life but cannot say anything. Her final break with her father because she believes he is responsible for Hoffa's disappearance is yet another form of silence (Brody, 2019: 1–7). Thus, by saying little, Peggy may be one of the most evocative women in gangster movies.

The 2019 film is just the latest to examine Irish mobsters. In the 1930s, films starring James Cagney (discussed below) commonly focused on Irish gangs. As Irish Americans became more upwardly mobile, there were not as many noticeable stories of Irish criminals. From the 1950s to 1990s, Irish often served as secondary characters in Mafia films. For instance, family *consigliere* Tom Hagen in *The Godfather* films notes that he is half Irish and half German.

Irish gangs onscreen made a comeback after the turn of the millennium. Sam Mendes's *The Road to Perdition* (2002), taken from a graphic novel, is a revenge story set at the height of the Depression. Michael Sullivan (Tom Hanks), a mob enforcer for suburban Chicago mob boss John Rooney (Paul Newman, in one of his last roles), is targeted for death by Rooney's son Connor (Daniel Craig) because of jealousy, as his father loves Michael more than his own son. Connor kills Sullivan's wife Annie and young son, but his older son Michael, Jr. is not home and survives to accompany his father.

Rooney goes along with a scheme to kill Sullivan, and unleashes a relentless hitman posing as a photographer, Harlen Maguire (Jude Law). Sullivan decides to kill Rooney. In a dramatic scene at night in the rain, he dispatches all of Rooney's bodyguards and walks up to the old man, who says, "I'm glad it's you" before Michael shoots him. Frank Nitti of the Chicago Outfit reveals Connor's hideout room, as the young man no longer has his father's protection, and Michael kills him in the bathtub. Sullivan and his son escape to a Lake Michigan house, but Maguire finds them and shoots Sullivan. Michael, Jr. prepares to shoot Maguire, but cannot do so. A mortally wounded Sullivan then kills Maguire to spare his son the psychological burden of murder.

As with many mob films set in the 1930s, the underworld rules the streets of Chicago and surrounding towns, corruption reigns unchallenged, and the police are thus ineffective or absent. The only way to solve interpersonal conflicts that turn violent is to take them to the limit. Sullivan must kill Connor—and by extension his father, who partly raised Michael—to survive and save his son.

The Departed (2006), another Scorsese effort, is a remake of a Hong Kong movie, *Infernal Affairs* (2002). The complicated double-cross story has undercover cop Billy Costigan (Leonardo di Caprio) infiltrating the Boston gang of Frank Costello (Jack Nicholson), while another cop Colin Sullivan (Matt Damon) provides tip-offs to Costello. Costello is broadly similar to Ray "Whitey" Bulger, long-time Boston hoodlum. The story mirrors reality in that an informer within the FBI kept Bulger informed about possible legal jeopardy. The title is taken from the funeral services that bookend the film, when the priest invokes the "faithful departed."

Betrayal of ethnic heritage is a recurrent theme throughout the film, as Colin is shot from low camera angles, indicating his low status, while Billy often is shot from above. Costello, using the pseudonym of a famous Italian mobster, gets depicted as more interested in material success than in serving his community, and is killed by Colin in a double betrayal. The real Bulger was known for betrayal of colleagues throughout his career. Modolyn Madden (Vera Farmiga), the state police psychologist who becomes romantically involved with both cops, feels great betrayal by Colin when she comes to believe Billy's story about police-mob connections. Billy and Colin both

meet violent deaths but, while Billy gets honored by a state police funeral, Colin dies unmourned in his apartment as a symbolic rat crawls along the balcony (Heyer-Caput, 2019: 138–143).

Bulger's actual story came to the screen in *Black Mass* (2015), in which Johnny Depp plays Bulger as a sociopathic killer and psychologically manipulative gang boss. Along with the various killings Bulger ordered or did himself, the film details the corrupt relations that developed between the Boston FBI office and Bulger, who was supposedly an informer, but gave very little information to the Feds. FBI agent John Connolly (Joel Edgerton), Bulger's close friend, works to protect him, and Bulger's brother Billy Bulger (Benedict Cumberbatch) is the Massachusetts Senate president and frequently talks to Whitey. New federal prosecutor Fred Wyshak (Corey Stoll) forces the FBI to take action against Bulger's gang. Most of them—and Connolly—are arrested, but Whitey skips town and is on the run for several years before being caught on the west coast.

One of the more intriguing Irish underworld movies is *Kill the Irishman* (2011) which, like many of the great Mafia movies, outlines the rise and fall of a gangster who just wants to achieve his version of the American Dream. Ray Stevenson plays Danny Greene, whose rise to prominence sparked a bloody mob turf war in Cleveland in the 1970s. Greene starts out in the Longshoreman's Union, taking over the local chapter from the corrupt president, but then gets forced out for his own corruption. He becomes an enforcer for Jewish loan shark and racketeer Shondor Birns (Christopher Walken). On behalf of the Cleveland mob, he terrorizes garbage haulers to join a union, and then he kills a rival local mobster. He turns on Birns and kills him, too.

As a succession war for the Cleveland mob heats up, Greene sides with his old friend John Nardi (Vincent D'Onofrio) against James "Jack White" Licavoli (Tony Lo Bianco). The latter tries to impose a 30 percent "tax" on loans to Greene, who angrily rejects paying it. Greene escapes several attempts on his life. He asks the New York mob for a truce, offering that, in return for giving in to Licavoli, he will go to Texas to start a ranch to make money for the mob. Mob boss Tony Salerno (Paul Sorvino) decides to get rid of Nardi and Greene, and dispatches hitman Ray Ferrito to get Greene. Knowing that Greene always checks his car for explosives, Ferrito plants a bomb in the car next to Greene's, killing him instantly.

In this movie, the mob is unable to rule its own house, and the audience finds themselves in the middle of a gangland war. The police and prosecutors are only partially effective, as they manage to remove Greene from his union job but cannot curb his enforcement or other illicit activities. For its part, the union also comes out worse for the underworld activity that directly affects it. Cleveland was not the only American city to witness a gang war in the 1970s, but it was one of the most destructive.

CONSTRUCTIVISM TAKES ON THE MOB

Gangster films have reflected the evolving social structures of America and other countries throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the Jazz Age and early 1930s, Americans were relatively tolerant of the mob because the Prohibition experiment was so unpopular and illegal gangsters supplied alcoholic beverages that most people wanted. As America recovered from the Depression, gangsters were less acceptable, and the focus shifted to other genres. Postwar prosperity meant gangsters were even less popular, until anti-government sentiments in the 1970s forced reappraisal of the mob. Intersubjective understanding of gangster tropes, left over from the gangster heyday of the 1930s meant that audiences could easily understand both traditional rise-and-fall and revisionist (gangsters upend society) stories. Audiences were socialized to dislike crime, but they may have secretly rooted for gangsters, anyway. State interests changed from managing or ignoring organized crime in the 1940s–1950s to the Racketeer-Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) Act (1970), which allowed extensive wiretapping and encouraged active prosecution and gradual destruction of Mafia organizations. Films approaching gangs of differing ethnicities from the 1980s onward showed the divergence of Irish, Latino, and Russian gangsters from traditional Italian Mafia mobsters.

Gangster films are dark American myths. I remember the moment I fell in love with gangster movies. In 1995, I saw a new Martin Scorsese movie, *Casino*. For three hours, I was mesmerized by a forbidden world and captivated by the rise-and-fall story detailing how the mob blew a sure thing in Las Vegas. I was enthralled by the based-on-reality recreation of the mob-controlled casinos of the 1970s. As with other gangland stories, the story concentrates on individual gang figurers, in this case a casino manager, his hustler wife and his Mafia friend. It is also a case study of desire for both social acceptance and materialistic excess that drives mob leaders to overreach and leads to the ultimate dismantling of their Las Vegas operations. The characters pursue their version of material success and build commercial empires. Filmic gangsters are bad guys, for sure, but you find yourself rooting for them. It's a guilty pleasure, and for a moment—only a moment, if you have a conscience—you want to join them onscreen and share their lives unburdened by material or career limits.

Gangster movies show us not only the rise and fall of gang leaders and soldiers, but the toxic politics and corruption that make organized crime both an accepted part of the urban landscape and even a necessary component of modern life. Tony Soprano, one of the latest in a long line of proud Mafiosos,

often describes himself as a businessman. He runs both a strip club (Bada Bing!) and a “waste management” company, along with his illegal activities.

Gangster films have reflected and echoed changing norms and values as they relate to the Mafia and other underworld organizations. The initial fascination with mobsters in the Prohibition era quickly gave way to more conservative Production Code values that did not allow criminals to succeed in any way. Where women characters had been attracted to the charm and charisma of screen gangsters, romantic involvement of any kind with gangsters was to be seen as aberrant and sick. The film noir movies sublimated the gangster figure, even though film noir techniques and story tropes borrowed heavily from gangster stories. By the 1950s, gangsters were presented three ways: as warped film noir characters, as twisted capitalist businessmen in a vaguely capitalist “syndicate,” and as period outlaws in retrospective looks at the mobsters of the 1920s–1930s.

The basic normative ideology of gangster films is a prosocial stance that underlines an anti-crime status quo. This means that law and government administrative hierarchy must be maintained, while challenges to it from organized crime must be suppressed. Usually an ethnic American rises to pre-eminence in the underworld through illegal and violent means. The gangster appeals to the audience because he is attractive and charismatic, in both his “animal magnetism” and his temporary economic riches. After all, economic achievement is the sine qua non of American success. He succeeds for a time but is brought down to the lowly conditions from which he can never escape, or he is killed by the police or rival gangsters. Thus, there is always a tension between the prosocial and subversive elements of gangster films. Our reptilian brains want the gangster to succeed, while our consciences need him to fail. The early 1930s classic gangster films encapsulated this tension, but it was then sublimated until *Bonnie and Clyde* brought back the subversive elements in a big way (Man, 2000: 109–113).

The *Godfather* films are subtly subversive in various other ways. First, the series is an indictment of the capitalist system, as outlined above. The family builds an illegal empire, but they are more straight-forward than the conventional economy. The first movie’s critique is implicit, while Part II draws the most explicit attack on the status quo and compares the family “business” to the legal economy. Hyman Roth outlines the breadth of the empire to Michael Corleone and adds, “we’re bigger than U.S. Steel.” Part III then demonstrates that legitimate business is just as corrupt as the underworld economy. Second, the movies recast the prosocial myth by playing up the honorable albeit violent actions of the family, and positioning Vito and Michael as tribal leaders who dispense justice and provide necessary services to their community. Part III shows the “secularization” of the Corleone family, in which they strive for legitimate status (Man, 2000: 113–114, 123–125).

In the 1980s, most gangster films returned to the prosocial and rise-and-fall pattern. All of Scorsese's gangster films, as dazzling and innovative as they have been, are variations on this same ideological approach. All the recent Irish and other ethnic stories have done the same thing. The only difference between underworld films since 1980 and conventional films of the 1950s was the focus on the minutiae of Mafia life in films such as *Goodfellas* and *Donnie Brasco*.

Gangster films have always reflected immigration patterns and relative assimilation of ethnic groups into American society. Italian mobsters figured prominently in gangster films from pre-World War I one-reel films to the early 1930s. Irish gangsters, especially those depicted by Cagney, competed with them for screen time. Movies made under the Production Code downplayed ethnicity of gangsters, and so they often were of diffuse Eastern or Southern European background. From *The Godfather* onward, the Italian or Mafia gangster once again dominated film versions, while Irish gangsters made a later comeback. Audiences were also treated to "Gangsta" and black underworld movies.

The gangster genre declined in the 1950s–1960s and did not revive until the success of *Bonnie and Clyde*, which gave us the eponymous couple as attractive Depression era folk heroes that resonated with young people who were protesting the Vietnam War and embracing the counter-culture of illicit drugs and casual sex. A full-blown revival of Mafia movies did not come until the success of *The Godfather*, which gave audiences an epic story of Mafia figures who dispense measured, old fashion forms of justice. The family, in both biological and crime terms, is everything, but betrayal must be ruthlessly punished. This is a top-down look at organized crime. *Goodfellas* and later *Donnie Brasco*, by contrast, give us the inner workings of the mob and the daily lives of low-level gangsters. It is a decidedly bottom-up approach, in which gangster leadership only rarely appears. *Casino* illustrates the industrial reality of modern criminal organizations in entertainment-oriented cities such as Las Vegas, along with the ways that the mob was unsuited to this new reality.

ONCE UPON A TIME IN AMERICA: ETHNIC MYTHS AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

The American gangster movie usually addresses three main concerns: ethnic assimilation into U.S. society, the search for perceived material success of individual gang members, and the rise and fall of a gangster or group of gangsters. The passage of immigrants from marginalization to assimilation has usually included a stage involving heightened participation in organized

crime. To be sure, most immigrants are both hard-working and law-abiding, but the lure of quick riches through illicit activity attracts some immigrants who lack education or skills and cannot find gainful employment.

Sergio Leone's fictional *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984) is the story of two young Jewish gangsters in the 1920s to early 1930s, two other gang member friends, their tragic parting and a possible meeting thirty-five years later. The story is the semi-autobiographical tale of Harry Grey (aka Herschel Goldberg), whose crime career mirrors David "Noodles" Aaronson (Robert DeNiro, with Scott Tiler as a teenager). Noodles forms a small crew working for a local criminal Bugsy; they rob people on New York's Lower East Side. They meet an older thief, Maximillian "Max" Bercovicz (James Woods, and Rusty Jacobs as the younger Max), who forms them into a new gang not working for Bugsy. They become prosperous carrying out various heists for the mob. They later make a fortune in liquor bootlegging.

Max's girlfriend Carol (Tuesday Weld) worries that he will not succeed in a plan to raid the Federal Reserve Bank, and she convinces Noodles to inform on him to the police. Noodles calls Max crazy, leading Max to knock him out, and so Noodles does not join the attempted job. The heist goes wrong, their two friends are killed, and Max gets help from corrupt policemen to fake his own death.

A subplot involving Noodles' infatuation with childhood friend Deborah (Jennifer Connolly as an adolescent and Elizabeth McGovern as an adult) plays out over several decades and indicates his inability to relate to women normally. After many years pursuing her, he takes her on a date. He asks her to marry him, but she declines, telling him that she is going to Hollywood to pursue an acting career. He responds by raping her. He later sees her boarding a train, and she pulls the blinds so that she does not have to look at him. Over thirty years later, she is still an actress and has not aged at all (!). One wonders if she is like Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray character and that her eternal youth hides an ugliness that lurks within. Noodles discovers that she has been Max's mistress and bore a child with him who is named David but looks like the young Max.

Noodles meets Max at his residence. Max has built a career on a false identity, rising to become a cabinet member, Secretary Christopher Bailey. Fearing a soon-to-explode financial scandal, Max asks his former friend to kill him, which Noodles declines, citing his past love of a good friend. Clearly, the U.S. government in 1968 is as corrupt and unreliable as local government during the 1920s and 1930s. Max may have hidden his identity and graduated to a more elite club, but he is still motivated by the same acquisitive, material drives as his younger self. Some critics suggest that this may have been Noodles' opium-induced lucid dream thirty-odd years earlier, as the movie ends with a younger Noodles inhaling the drug and smiling broadly. This may

make sense of Deborah's agelessness, but it does not explain how a gangster from the 1930s would be able to predict 1960s car models and hairstyles, not to mention the Beatles song, "Yesterday."

Once Upon a Time in America includes many of the basic plot lines of classic gangster movies. Centered on a marginalized ethnic group, in this case Jewish people, its story includes the career arc of several gang members, who seek ways to make riches quickly while gaining entry to respectable American society: Max by faking a new identity and becoming a key political figure, Noodles by becoming a key gangland figure and then opting for a quiet life in Buffalo.

As in many gangster films, government and police are either absent, ineffective, or corrupt. Noodles gets arrested and sent to prison in 1930, but this experience does not change him or curb his criminal activities. The film illustrates how police were unable to control the various lucrative mob activities during the Depression, especially bootlegging and hijacking during Prohibition. Max and Noodles also provide muscle to labor union boss Jimmy O'Donnell (Treat Williams), demonstrating the beginning of yet another significant corrupt relationship.

FUHGEDABOUDIT²: THE GANGSTER EXPERIENCE

Gangsters are as integral to the American historical experience as cowboys, pioneers, and soldiers. Gang life has been a stage in the integration of most major ethnic groups into American society. Life in nineteenth and twentieth century big cities was difficult for newly arrived immigrants, and there were few opportunities to get rich. Crime and ethnic solidarity went together, as criminals worked together for each other and—occasionally—for their ethnic communities. Poor Irish immigrants fleeing famine and destitution formed the first major gangs in New York and other eastern cities. Some Germans also could be found among early gangs. Irish politicians and gangs worked with established but corrupt WASP political machines, gaining a large degree of urban influence. By the early twentieth century, Irish Americans were more socially accepted and gradually their gang connections ebbed (Potter, 2007: 84–90).

Scorsese's historical look at the civil war era, *Gangs of New York* (2002), creates an imagined origin story for Irish and native-born gangs in Manhattan's Five Points neighborhood. Essentially a revenge tale, it focuses on Amsterdam Vallon (Leonardo DiCaprio), who seeks to avenge the killing of his father Priest Vallon (Liam Neeson) by rival gang leader Bill "The Butcher" Cutting (Daniel Day-Lewis) in 1846. By 1862, Amsterdam has grown up and ingratiates himself with The Butcher. Bill takes the young

man under his wing and tutors him in criminality, including the best ways to kill with a knife. Amsterdam loses his father's locket to Jenny Everdeane (Cameron Diaz), a pickpocket and "turtledove," who poses as a maid to rob houses of the rich. He retrieves the locket, and the two become more friendly. Initially attracted to her, he rejects her because she had a long-term sexual relationship with Bill—until they suddenly become lovers. Some critics lambasted Diaz's inclusion in the film, but I think it is entirely plausible that a compelling young woman such as her could have lived in the 1860s. Just look at Civil War era photos of young working-class women.

Jealous of Amsterdam's relationship with Jenny, his friend Johnny Sirocco (Henry Thomas) reveals young Vallon's real identity to Bill. At a knife-throwing event, Bill goads his young apprentice with a scathing toast to his father. When Amsterdam reacts, Bill wounds and beats him, and then burns his face. Jenny nurses him back to health, and Amsterdam re-forms his father's old gang, the Dead Rabbits. Amsterdam agrees with "Boss" William Tweed (Jim Broadbent), a real historical figure who was leader of the Tammany Hall Democratic Party organization, to organize the Irish vote on behalf of Walter "Monk" McGinn (Brendan Gleeson) for Five Points sheriff. Having just won, Monk invites Bill to talk, but gets clubbed to death. Bill later agrees to Amsterdam's "challenge" (or proposal for a large gang rumble), which begins just as the 1863 New York draft riots get under way. Running at Amsterdam, Bill gets wounded by cannon fire from a ship attempting to quell the riots. Covered in soot and dust, Amsterdam hesitates for a moment before killing Bill with Priest's knife. He and Jenny prepare to leave for San Francisco, but first bury Bill next to Priest in Brooklyn. As Jenny and Amsterdam fade from view, the New York City skyline morphs from 1863 to 2001.

An exciting multi-level tale, the movie is more historical fantasy than true rendering of early New York gangs. Scorsese based the script on Herbert Asbury's book, *The Gangs of New York* (1927), which presented the groups as direct ancestors to organized crime during the Prohibition era. The actual nineteenth century gangs were more like political clubs that promoted candidates for local office than criminal organizations. They did get into fights with other gangs, but the fights were less violent than depicted, and gangs did not employ the swords or axes shown in the film. The movie suggests frequent Catholic-Protestant clashes, but most fighting took place between rival Catholic groups. The real New York Five Points neighborhood, rather than a hotbed of criminality, was a hive of hard-working immigrants seeking to improve their lot. Prostitution was common there, but that was true of other urban neighborhoods. Bill Cutting was based on gang leader Bill Poole, who was an actual butcher and proponent of the anti-immigrant American (or Know-Nothing) Party, but who was murdered in 1855, six years before

the Civil War (Chamberlain, 2003: 1–6; Snider, 2017: 1–6). The Draft Riots of 1863 were unusually destructive but did not overlap a large gang rumble.

Modern organized crime in New York, Chicago and other large northern cities dates from the years before World War I. Operations were relatively small, and activities centered on petty kidnapping, gambling, and prostitution. Prohibition was the shot in the arm mobsters needed to form larger organizations. The Volstead Act (1920) to implement the Eighteenth Amendment outlawed manufacture, transportation, and sale of liquor. By the mid-1920s, liquor manufacture and sale, along with bootlegging of foreign alcoholic beverages, became the largest illegal business in America. Enforcement of the Volstead Act was spotty, at best, and the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover was more interested in hunting down leftist radicals, small criminal bands that carried out bank robberies and other heists, or small-time bootleggers—these included the infamous “public enemies” John Dillinger, Machine Gun Kelly, and Pretty Boy Floyd. The legendary Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow were pursued and killed by state police officers. By 1933, Congress weakened Prohibition by allowing beer and wine production and sale, and the Twenty-first Amendment repealed Prohibition later that year.

Jewish immigrants were often excluded from American society and housing discrimination restricted them to Jewish neighborhoods. Jewish gangsters such as Arnold Rothstein (1882–1928) and Meyer Lansky (1902–1983) became mob leaders in the pre-World War II years. As educational and professional opportunities improved after the war, Jewish influence in the mob declined. The longest ethnic association with organized crime has been Italian Americans, especially those from Sicily. Some Sicilian immigrants already were associated with the Mafia, a word variously meaning “swagger,” “boldness,” or “bravado” in the Sicilian dialect (ET Bureau, 2018: 1–2). Some Italians and Italian American gangsters used the term *Cosa Nostra*, which means “our affair.” American polite society disdained the term *Mafia*, and so they were referred to in news media as the mob, underworld or organized crime. Movies and television shows often have used the innocuous word “syndicate.”

By the 1980s, the Italian Mafia faced a major crisis, as the U.S. Justice Department got serious about fighting their operations. The quality of mob leadership, which had been effective from the 1930s to 1960s, rapidly declined. More on that later in the chapter.

Beyond simple monikers like *Mafia*, it is difficult to define organized crime. There usually is no central organization, and Italian Americans constitute only one major ethnic grouping. Organized crime activities occur on a “spectrum of legitimacy,” from completely illegal operations to respected businesses. Experts often rely exclusively on government data or journalistic reports of mob activity, such as murders and arrests. Globalization has

complicated defining organized activity, as traditional hierarchical outfits have gradually given way to smaller, more networked setups. Britain's National Criminal Intelligence Service (NCIS) thus considers organized crime to involve at least three people, operates in a "continuous criminal enterprise," seeks profit or access to power, and engages in serious criminal offenses (Potter, 2007: 3–7). This definition excludes most crime or heist films, which often focus on small bands organized to take on a single job, or string of jobs, and so are not continuous criminal enterprises.

Most movies and TV depictions of organized crime employ traditional crime organizations. These include defined roles, a clear chain of command, internal discipline, frequent resort to violence, and a focused ethnic identity, especially Italians, Irish, Russians, or Hong Kong Chinese. Hierarchical structures are headed by bosses who act as something like corporate CEOs, a commission, which functions somewhat like a company board of directors, capos who are the equivalent of middle managers, and soldiers, or workers who actually do illegal activity. Regionally organized groups, such as the Hell's Angels in the U.S. and Canada, have local chapters and differentiation of degrees of membership. Clustered hierarchies involve several small organizations that coordinate activities, such as the Arellano-Felix Organization in Mexico. Core groups involve a non-structured group at the center of a larger criminal network. Some Colombian drug cartels operate this way. A criminal network is much looser and includes various people to do different tasks on an ad hoc basis. They tend not to be ethnically based (Potter, 2007: 9–14).

The Sicilian Mafia, as the criminal organization most often depicted in American cinema and TV, implies an attitude of confidence and strong-arm tactics. As most key members are Italian, there is an expectation that acceptance as a soldier (to become a made man) requires Sicilian or at least Italian ethnicity and Roman Catholic faith. Made men are initiated by pricking their fingers to draw blood, and then holding a saint's picture in their hands as it burns, reciting that if they betray their colleagues, may they burn like the picture. This is the *omerta*, or pledge to never reveal details of their organization, or to "rat" on other Mafia members (Mafia's Ritual, undated: 1–2).

SLEEPING WITH THE FISHES: GANGS IN FILM HISTORY

Gangster films were one of the first genres. Wallace McCutcheon turned in perhaps the earliest gangster short film, *The Black Hand* (1906), about a gang of extortionists who kidnap a butcher's daughter, who is later rescued by the police. It also was the first film to feature Italian American gangsters. Legendary director D. W. Griffith made one of the first notable gangster

flicks, *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912), which tells a simple tale about the first sympathetic gangster. Starring Lillian Gish in one of her first efforts with Griffith, it features a couple and a gangster (Snapper Kid) who stole the husband's wallet. The wife (the Little Lady) goes to a dance where Snapper prevents another gangster from drugging her. The two men fight, and the husband manages to recover his wallet. The police track the Kid to the couple's apartment, but out of gratitude the wife gives the police an alibi for the Kid (IMDb, undated: 1–2).

Various critics have noted at least four cycles to gangster films since the beginning of the depression: the "classic" cycle of the early 1930s, the shift away from gangsters to cops in the late 1930s and 1940s, the film noir cycle of the mid-1940s to late 1950s, gangland stories that supported the Establishment from the late 1950s to mid-1960s, the grand, big budget films and broadening of story-telling to other non-Italian ethnic groups from the 1970s to the 1990s (Fordham, 2007: 168–171). The gangster genre became both big box office and a political issue with three pre-Production Code movies in the early 1930s. Directors knew that censorship was on its way, but still tried to produce great drama. *Little Caesar* (1931) establishes most of the plot devices and tropes that inform the best of the genre. Its rise-and-fall narrative, focus on Italian mobsters, use of street lingo (e.g., molls and bulls), and gangsters' hyper-materialism set the standard for all that would come. The movie made Edward G. Robinson a star with his powerful performance as Caesar Enrico (Rico) Bandello. Audiences may have been by turns attracted and repelled, but they wanted him to succeed, and mourned him with his death cry, "Mother of Mercy! Is this the end of Rico?" (Schneider, 2009: 29–30).

James Cagney became an equally big star that same year with *The Public Enemy*. From his first entrance, Irish gangster Tom Powers is charismatic, and his direct talk to the camera invites us to identify with him. He is likeable, but also prone to flashes of violence, as when he shoots a horse for throwing his friend or shoves a grapefruit into his girlfriend's face, just for suggesting that he should not get drunk in the morning. Like Rico, Tom meets a violent end, as his bullet-riddled body gets dumped on his mother's doorstep (Schneider, 2009: 37–38).

Paul Muni was a more technically adept actor and starred in several great 1930s movies. His Tony Camonte in *Scarface: The Shame of a Nation* (1932) is the most repellent and most compelling performance of the three. He is the most violent yet most restrained in this film, perhaps due to the dynamic partnership of director Howard Hawks and screenwriter Ben Hecht, who knew urban street vernacular better than anyone. Tony methodically kills his way to the top, navigating an amoral and exciting world dominated by jazz and sex, and where everyone is dishonest. Tony wants to succeed in America,

and so disdains his mother's old country values. He has seemingly incestuous thoughts about his sister. To please censors, Hawks tacked on a subtitle "Shame of the Nation" and a little sermonette about the evils of crime, but audiences probably disregarded it. Camonte was more compelling than the cops, anyway (Schneider, 2009: 41–42).

The politics of the early gang movies are fairly simple. In most cases, the gangster protagonists, though charismatic and sympathetic, are not allowed to win for long. They get along with the cops, or the cops look the other way—temporarily. Gangsters attract both women and men by their animal charm, materialism, and life without limits. They thrive for a time, but their ultimate fate is destruction. Eventually, they create enemies both within the underworld and among police or prosecutors, and their falls are Greek tragedies on an epic scale

Gangster movies fell on hard times as the Production Code was accepted by all the major studios. The Hays Office that administered the Code decreed that no film could depict a criminal in a positive light, and no criminals were allowed to get away with crimes. A brief moratorium meant that no gang-themed movies were made for a year. Directors shifted to presenting gang stories from the perspective of law enforcement. Cagney now played a former gangster who became an FBI agent in *G-Men* (1935). Robinson worked as an undercover policeman pretending to be a gangster in *Bullets or Ballots* (1936).

Gangsters were doomed to failure from now on, but movies still presented fascinating gang characters, especially those played by Cagney and Humphrey Bogart. These two played off each other a few times in such fare as *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938) and *The Roaring Twenties* (1939). Bogie turned in one of the best performances as Roy Earle, a once legendary bank robber who must take any job he can find to survive in Raoul Walsh's *High Sierra* (1941). A hardened criminal just released from prison, he is recruited by a local mobster. Roy has a soft spot for a family he meets on the road and arranges a doctor to help their young daughter to get surgery on her club foot. In a reversal for crime movies or film noir, the supposedly good girl with the club foot goes bad, and the putative femme fatale, Marie Garson, played with gusto by Ida Lupino, cares for and tries to help Roy. Forced to work with young criminals with no experience or self-control, Roy's one last heist goes bad, and he must take it on the lam. Unlike the urban mobsters of a decade before, Roy yearns for the country life he knew on his father's farm. Ultimately, he is tracked like a wild animal to a mountain where he gets killed by a police sniper (Schneider, 2000: 89–90).

High Sierra set the tone for most gang-member and film noir movies over the next twenty years. Stories focused on individual mobsters terrorizing protagonists, undergoing personal crises or becoming trapped in their

worlds. These movies had little to say about gangsters as part of continuing criminal operations, or the organizations they served. Frequently, gang connections became part of the backstory of film noir, discussed below. Perhaps the best gangster movie of the era is another Cagney effort, as the psychopathic, mother-obsessed Cody Jarrett in *White Heat* (1949) (Schneider, 2009: 137–138). Not until the late 1950s did Hollywood return to crime in its fully organized form. These latter films mainly were nostalgic looks backward at the Prohibition era and the 1930s. Rod Steiger in *Al Capone* (1959), Ray Danton in *The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond* (1960), Cliff Robertson in *Underworld U.S.A.* (1961), and Jason Robards in *The St. Valentine's Day Massacre* (1967) headlined big-ticket efforts, but these movies did not garner big box office business.

The film that single-handedly revived the genre, ironically, was not about the mob. Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) instead depicted the Barrow Gang, a small family-centered gang of bank robbers in the Depression era. Though not an ongoing criminal enterprise, the Barrow Gang were methodical bank robbers who worked from Texas up to Iowa. A luminous, statuesque Faye Dunaway and hunky Warren Beatty make appealing outlaws. That becomes a huge selling point for the film: these are two very attractive people, more beautiful than the cops, and the young audience enthusiastically identifies with them (Fordham, 2007: 166). The real Bonnie was under five feet tall and unremarkable in appearance, while Clyde was slight and had a receding chin. With the Production Code being phased out, sexually charged scenes permeate the film, most notably Dunaway's semi-naked entry when she first sees Clyde, and a few minutes later her stroking his gun, an oh-so-obvious phallic symbol. Unusually for a crime story, Clyde is sexually dysfunctional until late in the movie. The real Barrow apparently was bisexual from his days in a Texas penitentiary.

Penn's project also was one of the first to use extreme, but artfully produced violence. Early-on, we witness Clyde shoot a bank manager in the face as he jumps on the running board of a getaway car. The gang members are young robbers on a lark in the movie's first half, accompanied by Flatt and Scruggs' blue grass music, then one by one they get shot or killed. The shocking climax has the title characters driving down a country road sharing a pear. They stop to help a farmer they know with his tire, but he jumps under his truck. A posse machine-guns Bonnie and Clyde in slow motion, followed by silence as the posse examines their car. There's no moral about crime not paying, no cops summing up their crime careers, just silence and a cut to black (Buckmaster, 2017: 1–8; Mazzucco, undated: 1–2).

Penn keeps the viewer off-balance with a deft blend of action, drama, and comedy. The audience is never sure what to expect next (Buckmaster, 2017: 1–8). *Bonnie and Clyde*'s biggest appeal in 1967 was to young people.

Already protesting for civil rights and against the Vietnam War, they saw the crime duo as folk heroes standing up for working people. In one scene, Clyde enters an apparently abandoned farmhouse hoping to loot it, but encounters the former owners about to leave, as the bank has repossessed the farm. He then offers the man of the house his gun to shoot at the “bank’s house,” and the man gleefully shoots out a window. While robbing a bank, Clyde notices an old farmer with some cash on the counter. He asks the farmer whether the money is his or the bank’s. The farmer says it is his, and Clyde tells him to keep it. Later, a newsreel crew films the man proclaiming that he is grateful, and he will bring “a mess of flowers” to the robbers’ funerals. The ambiguity of the two anti-establishment anti-heroes, combined with the part-fantasy/part-reality story, bluegrass music and Burnett Guffey’s lush cinematography that evokes 1930s rural America creates a fable that appealed to 1960s audiences (Schneider, 2009: 205–206).

Several other films since then have celebrated the “public enemies” of the early 1930s. One of the best is John Milius’s *Dillinger* (1973), a spare film examining the career of bank robber and folk hero John Dillinger. Played with brio by Warren Oates, who looks like the bank robber, Dillinger is both “gentleman-robber” and man of the people, though also capable of cruelty and great violence. Michelle Phillips costars as Billie Frechette, Dillinger’s girlfriend. Dillinger’s nemesis, FBI agent Melvin Purvis (Ben Johnson), comes across as both heroic and chivalric. This movie is much better than Michael Mann’s *Public Enemies* (2008), starring a too-pretty Johnny Depp as Dillinger, Marion Cotillard as Billie, and Christian Bale as Purvis (Schneider, 2009: 241–242; Anastasia and Macnow, 2011: 98–101).

MODERN URBAN NIGHTMARES: THE FILM NOIR DETOUR

The decline of the classic gangster flick coincided with the advent of film noir (or black films), a category invented by critics, not studios. The heyday of film noir was the 1940s and 1950s, but the form began a slow revival in the 1970s and 1980s as neo-noir. Film noir borrowed many of its film techniques from gangster movies of the 1930s–1940s, such as use of night scenes, scenes set in diners or gasoline stations, frequent use of conversations in cars and trucks (especially at night), and lots of resort to mirrors, clocks, and jail bars to frame scenes. Characters traits are also very similar: the protagonist who cannot escape his past, the inability to leave a criminal life, the “sexual avarice” of leading male characters, the morally compromised women, and the borderline sociopathy of career criminals (Silver, 2007, 295–322).

While often dealing with crime and occasionally organized crime, noir films were as much about an atmosphere of psychic darkness, claustrophobia, dread, paranoia and no escape. The genre also drew from the German Expressionist films of the 1920s with its chiaroscuro lighting, odd camera angles and use of symbolism. Several European emigre directors, well acquainted with that movement, brought their ideas to Hollywood. These included Fritz Lang, Otto Preminger, Robert Siodmak, and Billy Wilder. Stories also draw from the hard-boiled style of American detective novels, French existential philosophy and its concentration on life's absurdity, popular psychology of the era, and the drabness of everyday life during the Great Depression (Duncan and Muller, 2017: 11–12, 19, 23).

Common story themes include a “haunted past,” in which protagonists struggle with traumatic events, crimes of passion, and personal demons. This past is ever present and powerfully linked to the present. The “fatalistic nightmare” involves portents of doom for major characters as fate often is predetermined. Other common plot elements in classic film noir stories include dark or hopeless realities, endemic corruption, the supposedly perfect crime, heists, or capers gone wrong and Cold War parables heightened by McCarthy era paranoia. Key archetypal characters are “the truth teller,” who seeks to make sense of a relentless destiny, often in a voice-over throughout the film, “the hunted,” a character on the run throughout the story, and “the femme fatale,” a dangerously appealing woman who lures male characters to their doom (also called the Spider Woman or Dark Lady). The “good girl” tries to redeem the protagonist and turn him to a normal life, but often fails. Feminist writers have tried to redefine these characters as women trapped in male-dominated systems who use their circumstances to their advantage (Duncan and Muller, 2017: 19–23).

Noir films make oblique references to the mob, as frequently there is a gangster figure who holds sway over the troubled protagonist. One of the best examples of this is Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past* (1947), starring Robert Mitchum as Jeff Bailey and Kirk Douglas as Whit Sterling (characterized as a “gambler”) as putative friends and sometimes antagonists, with Jane Greer as Kathie Moffat, a particularly lethal femme fatale. Other films have explicit gangster angles, though the stories usually focus on trapped men and women who are trying to escape the mob. Robert Siodmak's *The Killers* (1946), loosely based on a short story by Ernest Hemingway, centers on Ole Anderson (the Swede) in Burt Lancaster's film debut. A boxer whose career is ended by injury, he gets involved in a payroll heist organized by a mob boss and makes off with the loot, which is then stolen by femme fatale Kitty Collins (Ava Gardner). An insurance investigator (Edmond O'Brien) spends the movie trying to find out why Swede chose death at the hands of

two hitmen. Swede betrays his mob boss because he believes Kitty loves him, and this provides the impetus for the hit (Schneider, 2009: 102).

Force of Evil (1948) finds Joe Morse (John Garfield) ensnared in mob number rackets, as he tries to protect his brother's small gambling operation. James Cagney returns to over-the-top gangster form in Raoul Walsh's *White Heat* (1949), as his character falls into increasing neurosis and self-destruction. John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950) is a caper movie in which career schemer "Doc" Riedenschneider (Sam Jaffe) organizes one last heist for a mob leader, and his muscle is Dix Handley (Sterling Hayden), who is also looking for a last big score. Naturally, chance events lead everything astray (Duncan and Muller, 2017: 369–372, 429–435, 447–451, 479–484).

Most film noir were set firmly in middle class America. One of the most celebrated early noir movies is Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), perhaps the darkest of all noir films. What makes the film so jolting even now is its total dispensing of morality. This was particularly shocking during the Production Code era. Insurance salesman Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) falls for housewife-femme fatale Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck), who agrees to become Neff's mistress if he helps kill her husband. We hear the story from Neff's point of view, as he relates his scheme-gone-wrong into the Dictaphone of his friend and insurance colleague Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson). Walter and Phyllis are neither doomed lovers nor trapped by their circumstances. Instead, they coolly plot their crime merely to escape the dull suburban routines in which they live. Once the plan starts to go awry, Neff suspects that Phyllis intends to kill him, and ends up shooting her after she wounds him in the shoulder. Keyes hears Neff's confession unseen, then confronts Neff who intends to flee but is too weakened. The two then await the arrival of the police and an ambulance (Duncan and Muller, 2017: 273–275).

Ostensibly an apolitical genre, film noir pictures contained ample political storylines and conflict. The politics of film noir center on hopelessly corrupt political systems and individuals trapped in them. Films such as *The Third Man* (1949) take the all-too-current disrupted world of early Cold War Europe. Director Carol Reed and camera man Robert Krasker use light and shadow to evoke the atmosphere of crime and decay in occupation era Vienna. The central character, though he appears on-screen for only about fifteen minutes, is Orson Welles's Harry Lime, smuggler and black marketeer. Though despicable for selling tainted penicillin that kills children, Harry's charm and charisma captivate us. His friend Holly Martins (Joseph Cotton) spends much of the film trying to find out what happened to the supposedly dead Harry while on the run from various calamities, only to see a slyly grinning Harry in the dim light. Eventually, Harry gets trapped in Vienna's sewers, given up by Holly, and killed by police. The final unforgettable scene shows Harry's

girlfriend leave his funeral and walk by Holly without acknowledging him (Duncan and Muller, 2017: 439–443).

The darkness of noir movies fit a generally jaundiced view of political actors. Welles, whose classic *Citizen Kane* (1941) was itself full of off-kilter angles and dark lighting, gives us one of the finest examples of political intrigue that for many drew a late line under noir in *Touch of Evil* (1958). As in his other directorial efforts, Welles effectively uses black-and-white film stock, deep focus, and unusual camera angles. The long tracking take that opens the film is a bravura sketch of the darkness, fear, and dread gripping the border town of Los Robles. The story centers on the bloated, corrupt border-town sheriff, Hank Quinlan (Welles) and an honest Mexican narcotics agent Ramon Vargas who has just married, played by Charlton Heston. Vargas is bound for frustration, as his bride played by Janet Leigh is terrorized, drugged and made to appear as a drug addict, and Vargas has been unjustly arrested for a murder. He persists anyway, finding a web of corruption and malfeasance surrounding the sheriff. From the film's outset, Quinlan is fated for a bad end, foretold by a brothel owner and former flame, Tanya, played by Marlene Dietrich. "Your future's all used up," she tells him. Quinlan betrays his former partner, shooting him but then getting shot in return. The chief falls backward dead into a pool of filthy water near a drainage pipe.

"LEAVE THE GUN. TAKE THE CANNOLI": THE BIG MOBSTER FILMS

Martin Ritt's *The Brotherhood* (1968) is a little-remembered mob movie that performed poorly at the box office, but it was a turning point of sorts. By focusing on a fictional Italian gang family, it set the stage for gang epics to come. The story examines an old-school mobster, Frank Ginella, played by Kirk Douglas, who resists changing gangster ways to fit the modern world. His brother Vince (Alex Cord) returns from service in Vietnam and wants to align with an international crime syndicate. The two ultimately come into conflict when Frank kills Vinnie's father-in-law and mob boss to avenge the killing of Frank's father several years before. Like Michael Corleone, Frank escapes to Sicily for a time, but Vince tracks him there. Frank has gathered old-style gangsters around him, who do not welcome Vinnie. In the end, Frank realizes that his days are numbered. He willingly gives up his life to protect his brother and hands Vinnie their father's shotgun to do the deed (Schneider, 2009: 217–218).

The Godfather Trilogy

One cannot discuss the gangster genre without focusing on Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* trilogy. It has become the standard by which all other gangster movies are measured. The first movie was *the* movie of 1972, and in the eyes of both critics and movie lovers is one of the greatest American films. The best-selling Mario Puzo novel led Hollywood to a movie version, but several directors turned it down before it was offered to neophyte Coppola. The new director envisioned a period epic, and fought to cast his leads, especially Marlon Brando as Vito and Al Pacino as Michael. This first film centers on the declining years of the old godfather Vito and the rise of his son Michael as the new godfather. The movie won Oscars for Best Picture, Best Adapted Screenplay (by Coppola and Puzo), and Best Actor for Marlon Brando (which he declined). The movie's iconic scenes, catch phrases and characters have been referenced in other films and other media so often that it is futile to try listing them (Anastasia and Macnow, 2011: 14–18).

The Godfather, Part II is equally grand, but its use of family memories and comparison of time periods gives it a more nostalgic and somber tone. This second film employs family memories and a fairly simple narrative for the continuation of Michael's story to the late 1950s. Despite his continual invocation of family and loyalty, Michael in the end becomes isolated from both family and colleagues, sitting alone in the dying light at his lakeside estate. This was the only sequel to win an Academy Award for Best Picture and took home a Best Director prize for Coppola. The third movie moves the action to Italy and the timeline closer to the present (Anastasia and Macnow, 2011: 14–24, 265–267).

Coppola thus gives us a sixty-year story arc of a New York Mafia family, the Corleones. Critics use the word *operatic* to describe the films, as they integrate dramatic lighting, staging, and music, while using opera tropes such as familial ceremonies, grand betrayal, and towering revenge (Greene, 2000: 133–136). The family's Sicilian values of maintaining honor and putting family first dominate the story. The first two movies use conventions of American crime dramas and the immigrant experience, effectively employing cinematography and excellent performances to craft a powerful experience. Both films effectively deploy *mise-en-scene* or *set-pieces*, especially key rites of passage such as weddings, a baptism, and a first communion that set up the family dynamics—in both blood relative and Mafia senses of the word—and key character interactions (Greene, 2000: 136–154).

Unlike many gangster films, various critics see the first two *Godfather* movies as a powerful indictment of American capitalism and materialism. These movies set up the contrast of Vito, who pursues a humane form of economic exchange based on Old World and Italian American community

values, and Michael, who employs modern management techniques and takes his operations to Las Vegas and Cuba. He is an icily cold operator without empathy or connections to the community. The second movie also reflects real battles for mob control in those two new arenas during the 1950s (Clarens, 2007: 109–111).

Curiously, the family's major illegal businesses are never fully explained: gambling is discussed a couple of times and prostitution is implied, but other likely ventures would be numbers rackets, control of union activities, and truck hijacking. The family's contradictions are staggering. The Corleones claim to be just businessmen, though they create a huge financial empire based on illegal activity and illicit money. They assert that they are patriotic Americans and respecters of official hierarchy, even though they subvert policing and corrupt politicians whenever possible. This illegal-but-traditional family stance creates an ambiguity and tension throughout the series (Fordham, 2007: 171–177).

The politics of *The Godfather* world revolves around five realities. First, the Mafia world depicted is governed by a political system outside of and parallel to secular government. Here, citizens cannot obtain effective help from the police or the courts, and just action can only be gained from mob bosses. The first two Godfather movies establish the crime family as an alternative form of governance, parallel to civil government and police. In the Godfather's universe, police are either absent or corrupt, so only the Corleone family can make policy or make just rulings. Vito Corleone (Marlon Brando) is like a tribal chief or elder who provides key services to loyal subjects, and the opening wedding tableau shows him dispensing justice for several people. As he parcels out just rulings based on a code that all understand, he acts within a kind of traditional-informal law from the Old Country. It may be outside the law, but it is justice that the community understands. Though violence may be frequent, it is rational and even righteous within the Sicilian code that governs Mafia affairs (Clarens, 2007: 109–110). At the heart of it is the value of family. Vito and sons Sonny (James Caan) and Michael (Pacino) frequently invoke family over all other values. "A man who doesn't spend time with his family can never be a real man," Vito insists.

Second, real battles between crime families in New York or Cuba mirror action in the films. This played out on New York streets when mob leader Joe Colombo was shot at an Italian American pride rally just months before the movie was released. Colombo lingered in a coma for several years (Clarens, 2007: 110–112). Third, all three films invoke the authority of the Catholic Church, as Michael seeks religious authority's stamp of approval. As in Southern Europe for centuries, the Catholic Church stands apart from normal governance as the most important arbiter of morality and sin.

Fourth, key characters in the stories behave like political actors in international affairs, as realists, liberals, constructivists or even neo-conservatives. Hulsman and Mitchell use these characters to illustrate basic international relations theories. Tom Hagen (Robert Duvall), the *consigliere* and adopted son, is a liberal institutionalist who wants to make peace with the other crime families via normal mechanisms such as the crime commission. Sonny, the elder son and family hot-head, is a neoconservative who lashes out at his opponents, either within the family or among the family's enemies. Michael is the careful realist, who will use whatever methods are necessary at the moment. If he can gain by making peace, he will do so, though that peace is often temporary. If he has an opportunity to destroy his enemies wholesale, as in both the first and second movies, he does so. He professes to put family above all, but kills his brother and brother-in-law for betrayals, and banishes his wife, Kay, for getting an abortion (Hulsman and Mitchell, 2009: 21–60).

Fifth, the story arc reflects both a generational power transfer and the Italian immigrant experience, as shown semiotically throughout the story. Vito dresses like an Italian grandfather, such as his when he meets Sollazzo wearing a brownish suit with green stripes, olive-green shirt, and red tie sporting various designs. The garden scene, in which Vito plays with his grandson Anthony marks him as an Italian grandfather. The garden reflects Italian food culture of vegetables and tomato sauce. It is also instructive that his legitimate cover business is manufacturing olive oil. Michael, by contrast, wears conventional suits, and his ties are conservative, his favorite appearing to be a gray, white, and black striped tie favored by undertakers. Vito uses the mixed Italian-English patois of first-generation immigrants, while Michael initially disdains using Italian, except during his sojourn in Sicily. The infamous baptism scene, in which Michael renounces original sin while his enforcers take out all of Michael's enemies, is both the final seal on Michael's ascension as the new godfather and a twisted usage of Roman Catholicism (Tamburri, 2019: 70–74).

The epic begins in 1945. The sweeping wedding of Don Vito Corleone's daughter Connie (Talia Shire) that opens the first movie sketches out major characters and illustrates Corleone family values. Sonny demonstrates his hothead nature by destroying the camera of an FBI photographer and spits on an FBI agent's ID. Later, he has fully clothed sex with a bridesmaid in an upstairs bedroom. Michael, a Marine captain just back from World War II, attends with girlfriend Kay (Diane Keaton), assuring her that he is not part of the family business. Temporarily, both are outsiders. According to Sicilian tradition, the father of the bride cannot refuse requests on her wedding day. The tableau begins with the words of a local undertaker, Amerigo Bonasera—a symbolic name if there ever was one. "I am an American," he affirms, but clearly the American system has failed him. He asks Vito to

punish a man who tried to rape and then beat and disfigured his daughter. The don reminds him that he has avoided dealings with Vito in the past and has not called him "godfather." Bonasera kneels, kisses Vito's hand and acknowledges him as godfather. Vito agrees to help, but not to murder the man who hurt his daughter. This is justice, not retribution. He adds that he may call upon the man to help him in the future (Lynch, 2017:1-5).

Nazorine, a baker who has prepared the wedding cake, asks for Vito to help his prospective son-in-law, who is about to be deported, to become a U.S. citizen. Knowing how the baker has helped his family, he readily agrees. Family enforcer Luca Brasi visits the don, and haltingly delivers a statement of fealty: "Don Corleone, I am honored and grateful that you have invited me to your daughter's wedding . . . on the day of your daughter's wedding. And I hope their first child be a masculine child. I pledge my ever-ending loyalty." The tough guy fears only Vito, and the don gratefully embraces Luca.

Vito's godson, popular singer Johnny Fontane, is despondent about his flagging movie career and cries that he doesn't know what to do. Vito slaps him, yelling at him to "act like a man." The godfather tells Johnny that he will take care of it and that, in the movie's most famous line, he is "gonna make him [the movie's producer Jack Woltz] an offer he can't refuse." Vito sends family *consigliere* and adopted son Tom Hagen to Hollywood to get Woltz to cast Fontane in his latest big picture. The producer refuses, citing Fontane's seduction of a young starlet that Woltz wanted for himself. That night, the head of Woltz's prize horse appears in his bed. The producer soon relents. The character Fontane was supposedly based on Frank Sinatra, who as Hollywood A-lister was friendly with both politicians and various mobsters. His faltering career revived with his casting in *From Here to Eternity* in 1953. Hollywood legend suggests that producer Harry Cohn's prize horse was killed and the head placed in his bed, though director Fred Zinneman and others denied the story.

The Corleone family straddles the line between legitimate business (olive oil) and illegal money-making, and seeks to maintain ties with legitimate government actors. Virgil "The Turk" Sollozzo (Al Lettieri), who is backed by the rival Tattaglia family, requests a meeting with the don. He proposes that Vito offer financing and political protection to his narcotics business, in return for a share of the profits. Vito politely refuses, citing that damage that association with narcotics would do his relationships with politicians and judges. This expresses the ambivalence that many old school mobsters felt about narcotics. Vito dispatches Luca to observe and report on Sollozzo's operations by pretending to defect to the Tattaglias. Sollozzo welcomes him, but then stabs Luca in the hand as an associate garrots him. Soon after, Vito gets shot in the street and left for dead. His son Fredo fails to act, and driver/bodyguard Paulie has called in sick. Sollozzo abducts Tom but releases him

with a demand for Sonny to negotiate with the Tattaglias. *Caporegime* Peter Clemenza (Richard Castellano) does away with Paulie across the river in New Jersey.

Michael Corleone had sought to stay out of the mob but begins to take an interest in the family business. He visits his father in the hospital but is shocked that there are no bodyguards. He orders a nurse to help him move his father to another room. When Enzo the baker comes to pay respects to the don, Michael asks the frightened young man to stand with him outside the hospital, pretending to be armed guards. Tattaglia hitmen drive by but, seeing the two men, drive on. Police have been reduced to irrelevancy. Corrupt captain McCluskey appears, and socks Michael, breaking his jaw. Tom arrives with licensed bodyguards and takes Michael home. Sollozzo requests a meeting to iron out the conflict, with McCluskey as guard. Michael volunteers to meet and kill them. Sonny at first laughs it off, but Michael makes him see that the younger man as a “civilian” will not be suspected. Clemenza arranges for an untraceable pistol to be placed in the restroom of the restaurant where the meeting takes place. In a pivotal scene, Michael kills both men, dropping the gun and fleeing to Sicily. This starts a gang war, as Sonny wants to “go to the mattresses” with the Tattaglias.

Family betrayal is a key theme throughout the film. Connie’s husband Carlo Rizzi abuses her, causing the volatile Sonny to beat him up on a Brooklyn street. Carlo seeks revenge by plotting with Tattaglia and Don Barzini to kill Sonny. Carlo then beats a pregnant Connie, luring an unprotected Sonny to come after him. At a toll booth on the Long Island Expressway, several hitmen machine gun Sonny. The recovered Vito meets with the heads of the other Five Families to make peace. He now feels that Barzini was responsible for the gang war and Sonny’s death. Vito’s plea for peace may have resonated with audiences who in 1972 wanted peace in Vietnam. Meanwhile, Michael in Sicily has fallen in love with and married a local girl, Apollonia. The Corleones’ enemies have found Michael, and one of his bodyguards rigs his car with a bomb, which by mistake kills Apollonia. Michael sees his bodyguard leave suspiciously and witnesses the car explode.

Michael’s ascendance as the new don is now inevitable. With Sonny dead, his father stepping back and Fredo deemed incapable of leadership, Michael takes over family business. Kay marries him, even though he has not contacted her since returning from Italy. He intends to move operations out to Las Vegas, and dispatches Carlo and Fredo to oversee casino businesses run by local manager Moe Greene. Michael tries to buy out Greene, but gets into a heated argument with him, with Fredo supporting Greene. Michael meets with his aging father, who warns him that someone he trusts may try to kill him. He adds that he never wanted this life for Michael, but the young man

accepts his role. "We'll get there, Pop," Michael assures. Sometime later, Vito is playing with his grandson, collapses and dies in his garden. At Vito's funeral, Corleone *caporegime* Tessio tells Michael of a proposed meeting with Barzini, so Michael knows that Tessio is the betrayer his father suspected.

Michael arranges for all of the family's enemies to be killed at once. One of the movie's most striking sequences intercuts the baptismal ceremony for Michael's nephew and godson with the killing of Greene, Barzini, Tattaglia, and others. In the ceremony, the priest asks Michael if he renounces Satan and evil, to which Michael replies that he does. Afterward, Tom has Tessio taken away to be killed, while Michael forces Carlo to admit his guilt and finger Barzini. He gives Carlo a plane ticket to exile in Las Vegas but, as soon as he gets into the car to take him to the airport, Clemenza garrots him. A hysterical Connie accuses Michael of Carlo's death, but Michael says nothing. Kay confronts him about it, though he told her never to ask about his business. He lies to her that he did not kill Carlo. She sees Clemenza and two other lieutenants acknowledge Michael as "Don Corleone," before closing the office door.

The Godfather, Part II is a more complex story, contrasting Michael's growth as don with the young Vito's beginnings as Sicilian mob boss from 1917 to 1925. Where Vito lives the immigrant experience and earns respect in his community, Michael becomes increasingly isolated from his associates and family. Vito forms friendships with the young Clemenza and Tessio, and carries out his first crime, the theft of an expensive rug. He chafes at the control of local leader Don Fanucci, who claims to be part of the infamous "Black Hand" operation. Fanucci demands Vito share his earnings, and Vito gets him to accept less than he demanded. During a local festival, he shoots Fanucci outside his apartment. Later, Vito opens his olive oil business and is looked up to in his neighborhood. He intimidates a landlord to not evict a female tenant who is friend of his wife. Frightened, the landlord agrees and even lowers her rent. Vito later travels back to Sicily, killing the man who murdered his father, mother, and brother. Once more, he has enacted justice for the community.

In 1958, Michael has moved most of his operations to Las Vegas. The sequel opens with a big party as in the first movie, this time at Lake Tahoe for his nephew's first communion. Like his father, he has several meetings during the party. He tries to get a Nevada senator to smooth the way for his gaming licenses, but the man disdains Michael and refuses. Later, the senator cooperates after Tom helps him avoid arrest when a prostitute turns up dead in his hotel room. Michael also meets Frank Pentangeli, who has taken over Clemenza's territory in New York after the latter's death. Pentangeli warns him not to trust Jewish mobster Hyman Roth (based in part on Meyer Lansky). That night, a hit on Michael's house nearly kills him and Kay. He suspects either Pentangeli or Roth, but later decides it was Roth.

The film weaves political events of the 1950s into the story. Cuba was America's playground in that decade, and the Mafia owned most of the Havana casinos. Michael wants to secure Corleone interests in Cuba, and in so dealing with history the film is more "serious" than the first installment (Schneider, 2009: 254). Meeting Roth in Cuba, Michael does not get an answer about whether the aging mobster was behind the assassination attempt. Fredo denies knowing Johnny Ola, a Roth associate, but later blurts out that he showed him the best shows in Havana. Michael now knows that Fredo betrayed him. A Senate Committee holds hearings on mob activities. It is similar to the actual Kefauver committee in 1950–1951 that brought the Mafia to the attention of most Americans, or the McClellan committee in the late 1950s that made John and Robert Kennedy national figures. The committee learns that Pentangeli, now in FBI custody, has implicated Michael. Michael has Pentangeli's brother brought from Italy, and his presence intimidates Pentangeli to alter his testimony, saying that he was just telling investigators what they wanted to hear. The hearings dissolve with no recommendations of charges against Michael. Tom later meets with Pentangeli and suggests that he commit suicide as the Romans did: by opening his veins in a hot bath.

The film's conclusion mirrors the ending of the first movie. Michael has all of his major rivals, especially Roth, eliminated. He then takes over Roth's Cuba casino business. He forces Kay to leave when she tells him that she aborted a fetus, so that Michael will not have more than one son to bring into the family business. He holds off killing Fredo as long as their mother lives. But as soon as she dies, Michael pretends to forgive his brother, but has him killed while he is fishing on Lake Tahoe. Unlike in the first movie, Michael ends up alone, friendless with no family or associates near him.

This second film tracks revelations about the mob made in the 1970s and points the way to mob conspiracies involving the John F. Kennedy assassination. Michael says when ordering the hit on Roth at the airport that it is possible to get to and kill anyone. The Senate's Church Committee hearings and the Rockefeller Commission revealed the degree to which the CIA and other government agencies were working with underworld bosses in Cuba. The House Select Committee on Assassinations added to this by outlining Mafia cooperation with government agencies in the years leading up to the John F. Kennedy assassination.

Michael's journey goes international in *The Godfather, Part III*. It is now 1978. Michael hopes to gain Church approval and legitimization of his business activities (Fordham, 2007: 176–177). Seeking to leave the underworld and find respectability in Europe, he seeks to form a partnership with a Vatican bank and become a philanthropist. Michael sets up the non-profit Vito Corleone Foundation and buys stocks in the Vatican-run

company, Immobiliare. The film tracks several international events of the mid-1970s to early 1980s. Immobiliare is similar to the Banco Ambrosiano, which was at the center of a major Vatican scandal. Michael approaches a fictionalized version of the Italian Cardinal who would become Pope John Paul I (Raf Vallone), who takes Michael's confession of his various crimes, including the murder of his brother Fredo. The future pope's words are shattering: "Your sins are terrible, and it is just that you suffer. Your life could be redeemed, but I know that you don't believe that. You will not change" (Russo, 2019: 111–112).

The cardinal nonetheless grants him absolution. The movie implies that the Banco Ambrosiano scandal, notable for the possible murder-by-hanging of a banker in London, was linked to the posited murder of the new pope (the Vatican has always maintained that John Paul I died of a sudden heart attack in bed, after only one month as pope). New godfather Vincent Mancini (Andy Garcia), Michael's nephew, is unable to save the pope.

Just as the first movie is the story of the Vito-to-Michael transition, this film is about the rise of Vince as Michael's successor. Michael considers him too much of a hothead like his father Sonny, and so tries to tutor the young man. Perhaps the film would have been more effective if it had played up Vince's rise, not Michael's decline. Instead, we see a near repetition of several scenes from the first two movies: the party to honor Michael's receipt of a papal award echoes the first movie's wedding scene, the killing of rival mobster Joey Zasa (Joe Mantegna) during a Little Italy festa is reminiscent of Vito's shooting of Fanucci in the Part II, and the intercutting of killings ordered by Vince with staging of the opera in the Palermo Opera House looks much like the baptism scene at the end of the first film (Anastasia and Macnow, 2011: 265–267).

Coppola's daughter Sofia received harsh criticism for her portrayal of Michael's daughter Mary. I have always thought that this is terribly unfair to her. She is not a professional actor, and she just took the gig to help her dad. Her unpolished acting helps underline the innocence of the character, who does not really understand her father's position as an underworld godfather, and she naively thinks that she can pursue a romantic relationship with Vince, her first cousin. Mary's death at the hands of a hitman aiming at Michael is made more poignant by that innocence. She is the only truly good person to die in the film. In the end, Sofia got the last word, as she became a celebrated director of several award-winning films.

Martin Scorsese's Mafia Trilogy

Mean Streets (1973) is Martin Scorsese's first look at Mafia life. Critics highly praised the film, despite an uneven script, confusing motives for

characters and frequent pointless bar fights. Unlike *The Godfather*, underworld leaders are less tribal elders dispensing justice and more unhelpful figures who make arbitrary decisions. What we see are rough and immature young adults who are trying to find their way through the “mean streets” of New York with no reliable guidebook or mentors. As usual in gangster films, policing is spotty, at best.

The story centers on Charlie Coppa (Harvey Keitel), in whom a conflict between Catholic faith and mob life remains unresolved. He feels responsible for his younger friend, “Johnny Boy” Civello (De Niro), a hothead who continually gets into trouble. Charlie also helps his girlfriend and Johnny’s cousin, Teresa Ronchelli (Amy Robinson), who is epileptic and so disdained as “sick in the head” by her relatives. Neither Charlie nor Johnny is a potential leader or able to accomplish much. Johnny fails to repay loan shark Michael Longo (Richard Romanus), and the two fight. Charlie, Johnny, and Teresa decide to leave town temporarily, but Michael catches up with them, shooting Johnny in the neck and Charlie in the hand. Their car crashes into a hydrant. Charlie and Teresa get taken to the hospital, while the wounded Johnny walks into the night.

Scorsese’s *Goodfellas* (1990) takes an idiosyncratic approach to the mob. Instead of the family-oriented examination of *The Godfather* movies, the film ignores Mafia leaders and looks at low-level Lucchese crime family members. There is no operatic grand epic as in *The Godfather*, and crime lords are not tribal leaders handing out justice. Instead, this is a “grittier” bottom-up story. At first, as the mob flourishes and scenes flow seamlessly but, as Henry Hill’s world spins out of control, Scorsese employs more quick cuts and jumps to illustrate the mobsters’ frenetic lives. Mafiosos’ primary motive is stealing as much money as possible, and they have little commitment to their community. As the movie is based on real events, it has an authenticity absent in *The Godfather*. Scorsese effectively uses documentary techniques, especially voiceovers by Henry and wife Karen, captions, and intertitles (Orsitto, 2019: 103–107; Verevis, 2007: 209–212).

The film outlines the transition between Old World values of cooperation and community embodied in Mafia made men to New World values of capitalism and individualism that we find in Henry and other young Mafia soldiers (Orsitto, 2019: 107). But as in *The Godfather*, police and courts are largely absent, except as political units to be corrupted by Mafia men. Gangsters even control life behind bars, living in their own rooms and cooking luscious Italian food every day (don’t forget Paulie’s technique of slicing garlic with a razor blade to make it melt in olive oil), dealing drugs and paying off guards. Critics have questioned whether mobsters had this degree of separation from

the normal prison population, but I remember hearing such stories from kids whose fathers worked in federal prisons when I was growing up.

From the beginning, low level gangster Henry (Ray Liotta) relates his life story in voice-over. "As far back as I can remember," he recounts, "I always wanted to be a gangster." He begins his life of crime as a teenager, working for Irish mobster Jimmy Conway (based on Jimmy Burke, acted by De Niro) and good friend Tommy DeVito (changed from Tommy DeSimone, played by Pesci). Henry cannot become a made man because he is only half Sicilian, but he nonetheless excels at truck hijacking and airport theft. The movie thus is much more explicit about illegal mob activities than *The Godfather*. Henry enjoys a charmed life as a handsome young man on the make. He excites girlfriend Karen (Lorraine Bracco) when he defends her honor by beating a neighbor pest and asks her to hide his gun. One of the film's best sequences is a continuous Steadi-cam tracking shot of Henry taking Karen to the Copacabana Club where the staff all know him, allow him to avoid the crowd by going through the kitchen, and seat the couple near the stage. He gives them all big tips. The tableau is underscored by the Crystals' "And Then He Kissed Me." This scene not only seduces young Karen, but the audience, as well. We vicariously join Henry's world and its magic. Karen marries Henry but quickly becomes disillusioned with the tawdry Mafia lifestyle, especially when he takes a mistress.

Jimmy, Tommy, and Henry work closely together during the 1960s, under *caporegime* Paulie Cicero (based on Paul Vario, embodied by Paul Sorvino). Henry's golden life gradually deteriorates: he sells drugs in prison and continues on the outside, though Paulie had forbidden him to do so. Tommy gets whacked for killing a made man, Billy Batts (Frank Vincent). Henry becomes addicted to cocaine and becomes increasingly dependent on selling drugs from his Pittsburgh supplier. On one manic day in 1980, his last day as a gangster, a frazzled Henry juggles delivering guns to Jimmy, taking care of his handicapped brother, cooking Italian food for his family, and preparing his drug mule Lois (the family babysitter) for a flight. Scorsese's quick cuts and tight editing, along with sudden jumps among various pop and rock songs, highlights Henry's high-strung state of mind. It also illustrates the deterioration of the Mafia, as the organization is increasingly unable to control crew soldiers such as Jimmy and Henry.

New York cops arrest Henry on drug charges and Karen bails him out. He needs to pay off his Pittsburgh suppliers, but Karen has flushed his cocaine down the toilet when cops raided their house. Paulie spurns him for selling drugs, handing him a wad of \$3,200. Jimmy suggests that Henry accompany him for a hit in Florida, something he has never asked before, and Henry realizes that this means that he would be killed. He quickly becomes an FBI informant and enters the witness protection program with Karen. Henry

laments his lost life in the mob and hates the ordinariness in which he is now stuck. "I'm an average nobody. I get to live the rest of my life like a schnook." This is the ultimate breakdown of "the life," as the mob turns on itself and its members pursue self-interest in deals with the Feds under the RICO Act.

Goodfellas is a combination of crime biography, buddy film, family story, and "cautionary tale" of materialism and ambition (Schneider, 2009: 293–294). The movie is a powerful examination of the "day-to-day life" of gangsters, in Scorsese's words. It also is a fairly faithful adaption of Nicholas Pileggi's *Wiseguys*, Henry's biography, but it injects an expressive realism into the traditional rise-and-fall biography of a gangster. The audience learns the Mafia lifestyle through introduction of characters and their nicknames, along with all the little details of life, including dress, food, and entertainment. Karen's experience as Henry's partner shows both the attraction of Mafia life at the beginning and the disillusionment and lack of security by the end. Henry's last-day 1980 sequence, along with his arrest and joining the FBI witness protection program bring the mob lifestyle to a crashing end. Henry ends the film not sorry for what he has done, but annoyed that his Mafia life has come to a halt (Verevis, 2007: 209–216).

Casino (1995) is the third volume in Scorsese's informal mob trilogy. Like *Goodfellas*, it is based on actual events, though many of the names are changed. As in *Goodfellas*, the focus is on individuals surrounding the mob-controlled Tangiers casino in Las Vegas, and it outlines the Mafia's early success and gradual loss of control. State and local political figures at first benefit from the casinos, turning a blind eye to their illegal skimming, but then turn against the mob when they stop providing benefits such as jobs for politicians' relatives. Though the FBI and local police constantly monitor the mobsters, all the main characters are done in by their own weaknesses and petty conflicts. The tale thus is a multiple Greek tragedy.

Casino is less a story of individual gangsters than, in Pileggi's words, an examination of an industry in the form of Las Vegas gaming. Like *Goodfellas*, it also is a traditional rise-and-fall gangster tale. The movie's style is flashy, which perfectly matches the milieu of 1970s Las Vegas. The fictional Tangiers casino operates as a "perfect system," in which the protagonist Ace can project an image of professionalism and legitimacy, while the Mafia bosses in Kansas City get their cut of the casino's count room every month. Also, like *Goodfellas*, this film provides the audience myriad details of a way of life. The main characters pursue a glitzy, acquisitive lifestyle including swank suburban homes and fancy luxury cars, not urban apartments and run-of-the-mill Cadillacs usually associated with New York mobsters. In the end, all of the characters have been killed, have died or been sidelined, and Ace laments the passing of mob-controlled Las Vegas and corporate takeover of the casinos (Verevis, 2007: 217–221).

The story focuses on three characters: Sam "Ace" Rothstein (De Niro), professional odds maker and manager of the Tangiers, his mobster friend from back east, Nicky Santoro (Pesci), and Ace's wife and casino hustler Ginger McKenna (Sharon Stone). The three characters real-life counterparts were Frank "Lefty" Rosenthal, Anthony "The Ant" Spilotro, and Geri McGee. Kansas City mobsters send Ace to run the casino in the early 1970s, and he brings in a strong management competence. The Teamsters Union pension fund finances the Tangiers, and a "clean" president is put up as figurehead. An obsessive micro-manager, Ace frequently checks slot machines, violently roots out cheating at gambling tables, and even makes sure all muffins have the same number of blueberries.

The most important operation to the Chicago/Kansas City Outfit is the skim, which functions with precision, each month sending the proper amount to the Midwest bosses. This is cleverly depicted in a long tracking shot. The bosses want to protect Ace, so they send his friend and enforcer Nicky to protect the casino operations. Ace is concerned that the volatile Nicky will cause problems and warns him that Las Vegas is different than the Midwest. At first, Nicky chases away rival crime family crews, but starts shaking down small gambling operations and burglarizing wealthy homes. Ace falls for casino hustler Ginger and asks her to marry him. At first reluctant, she agrees when he guarantees that, if the marriage fails, she can have the millions stored in a safety deposit box.

As in *Goodfellas*, voiceovers traded between Ace and Nicky shape the narrative, while providing two very different perspectives. Ace is concerned about professionalism, even as he gradually loses control of his personal life. Nicky increasingly resorts to violence and burglary that endanger the mob's presence in Las Vegas. The two men represent different kinds of masculinity: Ace rarely resorts to violence himself, though he sanctions violence and is protected by the more violent Nicky. Ace is like Henry in *Goodfellas*, in that he is an in-between person not part of an Italian family. This in part saves him, so that he survives an attempted bombing of his car. For his part, Nicky is the old-style mobster who resorts to violence to get whatever he wants. In the end, the mob constitute the real outsiders in Las Vegas, and they easily lose their place at the Sin City trough when they no longer serve the needs of local politicians and law enforcement (Bisoni, 2019: 114–118)

Just when all seems to be well, it begins falling apart. Ginger is still emotionally attached to her former lover and sometime pimp, Lester Diamond (James Woods). Ace has Nicky's crew beat up Lester, which alienates Ginger and drives her to seek revenge. The marriage spirals out of control, as Ginger leaves town with Lester and the Rothsteins' daughter. After reconciliation fails, Ginger finally leaves Ace and their daughter. Ace fires the brother-in-law of a powerful county commissioner, Pat Webb (L. Q. Jones),

and refuses to rehire him on grounds of incompetence. In retaliation, Webb launches an investigation that reveals Ace's mob ties and his gaming license gets denied. Ace starts a TV talk show to pressure the gaming board to approve the license, but this high profile move upsets the Midwest bosses. Meanwhile, Nicky's illegal activities attract attention of the FBI and local police. Wiretaps on Kansas City underboss Artie Piscano reveal the Chicago Outfit's connections to the skim, which Piscano carelessly documents in a seized notebook.

Nicky and Ginger start an affair, which is extremely dangerous considering mob bosses' insistence that made men must leave Mafia wives alone. Nicky splits with her when she suggests killing Ace. Several mob bosses get arrested and so decide to whack anyone who could provide the FBI information about them. Ginger flees to L.A. and later dies of a drug overdose. Ace's car is bombed, but he escapes with minor injuries. The bombing is amateurish, but he suspects Nicky. Nicky and his brother, lured to a mob meet-up in an Indiana cornfield, are beaten nearly to death and then buried alive. The bosses end Ace's tenure at the Tangiers, sending him to San Diego to return to odds making, while big corporate interests take over the Las Vegas strip.

Casino is not the first film to present the mob's Las Vegas experience. Barry Levinson's *Bugsy* (1991) is a high-gloss, beautifully photographed origin story of the Mafia's move into Sin City. It centers on Benjamin Siegel (Warren Beatty), notoriously hot-headed East Coast gangster who was sent out to take care of mob business in L.A. He did not like being called Bugsy, by the way. Ben is a bundle of contradictions: a family man who has numerous affairs, a maven of culture and a would-be sophisticate who is a ruthless killer (Schneider, 2009: 317–318).

On a brief trip to Vegas, he has a vision of the city as a gambling paradise and asks Meyer Lansky (Ben Kingsley) to fund the construction of his Flamingo casino. The mobsters agree, and Siegel determines to build a world-class facility. Unfortunately for him, his contradictory visionary and perfectionist tendencies prove his undoing. The project goes way over budget and behind schedule, and the gangsters back east suspect that Siegel is ripping them off. It gets worse when Siegel's girlfriend Virginia Hill (Annette Bening), a bit-part movie actress, is also thought to be stealing from the construction fund. As in real life, hitmen shoot Siegel through the left eye as he sits in his L.A. living room reading the newspaper (Anastasia and Macnow, 2011: 223–225).

The movie gets a few facts wrong. Siegel's casino was not the first in Vegas, and the Flamingo was less a visionary move than the takeover of a failed venture. What Siegel did imagine was Sin City as the glitzy fleshpot and vice capital that it would become. The story is epic Greek tragedy, as Siegel's monumental personality flaws doom him. State authorities are

almost completely absent, indicating how wide-open Las Vegas was in the beginning. Siegel becomes the model for *The Godfather's* Moe Greene, who also gets shot through the eye (Anastasia and Macnow, 2011: 224).

Hulsman and Mitchell's scheme to define *Godfather* characters in terms of international relations theories that they embody can be applied to Scorsese's characters, too. In *Goodfellas*, Paulie is a liberal who wants to play by the rules and is accepting of his underlings' behavior as long as they do not violate the most important norms of mob life. He shuns Henry because the younger man has gone against his dictum not to sell illegal drugs. Tommy, like Sonny, is a hot-headed neocon, who acts without thinking. His rage-filled killing of a made man ultimately ends in his being whacked. Jimmy is a traditional realist for whom self-interest determines behavior. When his crew goes against his orders not to make any major purchases after the Lufthansa job, he has them all whacked to prevent any of them being picked up by the police. Henry is neo-realist who is guided by the system, as much as by self-interest. His opportunities come from the institutional dynamics he faces. He attaches himself to Jimmy at an early age and learns about cigarette smuggling and truck hijacking. He starts selling drugs in prison, to cope with life behind bars, and then uses his "Pittsburgh connection" to enrich himself on the outside.

Casino similarly presents very different characters. Ace is an institutional liberal who wants to uphold professional standards and modern casino management. The Kansas City bosses are traditional realists, who want to maintain the traditional skim that has benefited everyone and keep everything quiet in Las Vegas. Nicky is another hot-headed neocon who always uses force to get what he wants, even if it alienates other mobsters and creates problems for the casino. In the end, the bosses cannot stomach him anymore, and he gets whacked. Ginger at first appears to be an offensive realist who smartly takes action to protect her interests, but her increasing instability means that she ends up behaving like a neocon (Hulsman and Mitchell, 2009: 1–19).

De Palma's Gangster Trilogy

Scarface centers on a number of political issues current in the early 1980s: the advent of cocaine as the most popular narcotic drug in America, the rise of South American drug lords and their ties with local governments and businesses, Florida as a key drug distribution hub, rampant money laundering through ostensibly legitimate banks, and the material excess of drug distributors. The story is Brian De Palma's stylish remake of the 1932 classic (discussed above). Tony Montana (Pacino) is a Cuban petty criminal who makes his way to Miami during the Mariel Boatlift in 1980. Cuban dictator Fidel Castro let 125,000 people leave Cuba, ostensibly to join their relatives

in the United States, but he cleaned out his jails by including 25,000 people with criminal records (Mariel Boatlift, 2019: 1–3). Tony declares his disdain for Cuba’s Communist system several times in the movie, as he sees it as a barrier to his material success. Tony joins his friend Manny Ray (Steven Bauer), who contacts local drug lord Frank Lopez (Robert Loggia). Tony kills a former Communist general among the refugees as a favor to Lopez, who arranges green cards for both Manny and Tony. Lopez’s lieutenant Omar Suarez (F. Murray Abraham) recruits Tony to buy some cocaine from a Colombian crew. They kill one of Tony’s friends, but Manny breaks in, saving Tony and killing the Colombians.

Tony believes that Omar set him up, and demands to take the cocaine to Omar’s boss, Frank, who straddles the line between criminality and legitimate business, as he runs a car dealership. Frank is impressed with Tony and wants to work together. Tony agrees but is more interested in Frank’s girlfriend Elvira (Michelle Pfeiffer). Frank sends Tony with Omar to meet Alejandro Sosa (Paul Shenar), a Bolivian drug lord. Tony dismays Omar by negotiating directly with Sosa. Sosa’s assistant calls him over with the pretense of taking a phone call, informing him that Omar is a police informer. Omar says he needs to talk to Frank and leaves to take a helicopter ride to the airport. Sosa asks Tony to stay, and tells him, “I like you, Tony. There is no lying in you.” Sosa’s men hang Omar out of the helicopter. Sosa and Tony agree to do business directly, but Sosa warns him, “I only tell you one time: don’t ever f—me.” Back in Miami, Frank is suspicious of Sosa, calling him a “snake,” but Tony says that they need to think big.

Tony asks Elvira to marry him, telling her that she is a “tiger,” with her he can succeed, and that Frank is “finished.” Meanwhile, he becomes violently jealous of his sister Gina (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio), who makes out with her date in a club restroom. She tells him, “you can’t tell me what to do,” and he slaps her across the room. Manny comforts her, and this is the beginning of their feelings for each other. A Miami cop, Mel Bernstein (Harris Yulin), pressures Tony for payoffs. Tony refuses, telling Manny that Frank put Bernstein onto him. Hitmen try to kill Tony in the club; he shoots one and escapes. Tony sets up a meeting with Frank and Mel, at which he humiliates and kills Frank and then shoots Mel.

Now unhindered, Tony’s Bolivian connection pays off handsomely. He is making \$10–15 million a year, and he and Elvira marry in a lavish ceremony. Tony’s banker finds it difficult to launder so much money and asks for a higher fee. Tony’s success is brief. His cocaine habit snowballs, his moods get more violent, and Elvira becomes bored with him. As a result of a federal sting operation, Tony gets arrested and charged with tax evasion. Sosa agrees to use his connections to help Tony get off with a fine and reduced sentence, but he must assist Sosa’s men assassinate a journalist who has revealed the

drug lord's relations with Bolivian politicians. Elvira leaves Tony when he insults her as a cocaine addict who is unable to bear a child. Sosa's man Shadow plants a bomb beneath the journalist's car. When the man's family joins him, Tony calls off the hit and kills Shadow as he is about to detonate the bomb. An enraged Sosa calls Tony and tells him he will kill him.

A coked-up Tony finds Manny and Gina together. He kills Manny in a jealous rage, though the couple married just the day before. Back at home, a large hit-team invade Tony's estate. A distraught Gina tries to shoot Tony, but the hit-men kill her, instead. Tony kills about twenty of the team, dispatching several of them with his machine gun/grenade launcher. Tony's use of it occasions Tony yelling the movie's most famous line, "say hello to my little friend." As a wounded Tony taunts the remaining hitmen, their leader shoots Tony from behind, sending him into his tub/pool below, a sign on a statue at one end reading "The World is Yours." As in most traditional gangster flicks, the world may have been Tony's for a time, but he was destined to lose it in a paroxysm of violence.

Tony's story is a distorted version of the American Dream. A Cuban immigrant, Tony "wants it all," including Lopez's drug business, his girl, and his lifestyle. It is the Horatio Alger rags-to-riches American myth, but one that ends up hollow and unsatisfying. The more flamboyant his life, the less satisfying it is for the increasingly isolated Tony (Schneider, 2009: 269–270). Cuban Americans generally hated Pacino's "cartoonish" characterization and stereotypical Latin thug accent (Castillo, 2018: 1–6). But the movie may have been ahead of its time in predicting the financial and personal excesses of the past three-plus decades (Powers, 2011: 1–3). With his dayglo colors and Miami flash, De Palma blurs the line between reality and fantasy, showing a penchant for pastiche of other filmmakers. He mixes a goulash of gang movie images, including from the original *Scarface*, but makes the film a commentary on American capitalism. Unlike most gangland films, this one clearly focuses on the gangster's product, that is, cocaine. Cocaine becomes an "amalgam of power, consumption, pleasure, and insatiable desire." As Tony finds success, there is neither an anchor to his skyrocketing success nor any self-control over his world. Success does not bring happiness but makes him sullen, abusive, and increasingly isolated. Tony also is untethered to the Cuban community and does not find common ground with his Latin American drug suppliers (Bogue, 2007: 183–192).

The Untouchables (1987) is a much different movie, though it shares the bright lighting common to several of De Palma's movies. Its story derives from the operations of Treasury Agent Eliot Ness, who was sent to Chicago to battle Al Capone's (De Niro) bootlegging operations (the Outfit) in the waning days of Prohibition. It also took inspiration from the controversial television series of the same name that had aired from 1959 to 1963, just a few years

after Ness published his autobiography. It was controversial for its heavy use of violence and for not shying away from stories about Italian American gangsters. Kevin Costner's earnest portrayal of the incorruptible agent, along with supporting team members, resonated with the public. Audiences may have drawn a connection between the waning days of Prohibition and Nancy Reagan's "Just Say No" campaign and the stepped-up war on drugs.

Ness tries to make a splash raiding a warehouse containing illegal booze, but it turns into a public relations disaster when he finds nothing. Ness then has a chance meeting with an Irish cop, Jimmy Malone (Sean Connery), who he later asks to join him. Malone tells Ness to get tougher than the gangsters. "You wanna know how to get Capone? They pull a knife, you pull a gun. He sends one of yours to the hospital, you send one of his to the morgue. That's the Chicago way. And that's how you get Capone. Now do you want to do that? Are you ready to do that?" This also resonated with the public, who were demanding that politicians get tough on criminals. Ness then recruits George Stone (Andy Garcia), the best pistol shot in the Chicago P.D. and Oscar Wallace (Charles Martin Smith), a Treasury accountant, who suggests that the team can put Capone in jail for tax evasion.

The Untouchables intercept a major liquor shipment at the Canadian border and begin to affect mob bootlegging operations. After an angry hotel confrontation with Ness, an enraged Capone orders hits on the Untouchables. Capone's lieutenant Frank Nitti, disguised as a policeman, kills Wallace in an elevator and Malone in his apartment. Ness and Stone intercept Capone's bookkeeper, and they want him to testify at the gangster's trial. De Palma's staging of a pivotal train station shootout channels the Odessa Steps scene from Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925). During the trial, Ness sees that Nitti has Malone's address on a matchbook, indicating that he is the killer. The two fight and Ness throws him off the courthouse roof. Hearing that Nitti tampered with the jury, Ness persuades the judge to switch to a neutral jury. Capone is convicted. Ness closes the Untouchables unit and gives Malone's St. Jude chain to Stone.

This is all exciting fun, but most of it is fiction. Ness led a team of several agents (at least nine, with seven others occasionally participating), not three. They raided and shut down warehouses and breweries around the Chicago area, while collecting evidence against the Outfit's operations. None of the Untouchables was killed, but one of Ness's friends was murdered. A separate investigation by the IRS (not Untouchables) discovered Capone's unreported income, which led to his trial in 1931. Ness apparently never met Capone, though he did call him once on the phone. Ness did not participate in the trial, but did attend trial sessions, and he definitely did not kill Nitti. He continued as chief investigator of the Chicago office of the Prohibition Bureau for about

two years after Capone's conviction and went on to a controversial tenure as Cleveland's public safety director ("Eliot Ness," 2020: 1–6).

De Palma is not aiming for historical verisimilitude but returns the gangster genre to its roots in the 1930s. First, De Niro's Capone is presented as a loathsome character that will not garner audience sympathy. He is responsible for the death of a little girl at the film's outset, and then wields a baseball bat to beat to death one of his underlings at dinner. Second, Ness is the honest cop who brings Capone's career to a close when, as noted above, the real Ness did not. Third, De Palma includes the G-Man movie tropes of the late 1930s, in which the cops operate almost as gangsters themselves. They thus throw gangsters off buildings, smash up warehouses, and torture suspects. This creates a moral blurring of the line between cops and gangsters. De Palma also borrows from other genres, especially the border sequence which has a Western flair, and the train station steps that echoes Sergei Eisenstein's revolutionary propaganda (Bouchard, 2019: 93–96). By returning to the genre's origins, De Palma is underlining a neo-conservative approach to law enforcement predominant in movies and television of the 1980s and 1990s.

Carlito's Way (1993) is one of the strongest character studies for both De Palma and star Pacino. Based on two novels by Edwin Torres, it relates the story of Carlito Brigante (Pacino), a Puerto Rican gang killer and drug dealer, who decides to turn his life around. Pacino's voice-over throughout the film shows the audience his desire to do good, and his slight lisp indicates some of the character's vulnerability. Carlito's lawyer, Davy Kleinfeld (Sean Penn), gets his twenty-year sentence reduced to five years. Carlito wants to make enough money to invest in a rental car business and move far away from New York. Meanwhile, he opens a swank club that plays host to various mobsters. He reconnects with his old girlfriend, Gail (Penelope Ann Miller), a professional dancer who must do strip-dance to make money, and the two share dreams of living in the Bahamas.

Despite his good intentions, things start to go badly for Carlito. Kleinfeld tries to steal the girlfriend of Benny Blanco (John Leguizamo), an upstart young hood from the Bronx. Carlito defends his friend, throwing Blanco out of the club and having him beat up. Carlito realizes his mistake in leaving Benny alive, and the younger man begins plotting revenge. Davy has angered Tony Tagliabucci (or Tony T, played by Joseph Siravo), a Mafioso being held at Riker's Island, because he failed to pay off a guy to not testify against Tony's T's son. He demands that Kleinfeld use a boat to pick him up when he escapes into the harbor. Davy recruits a reluctant Carlito but, on the night of the escape, the lawyer kills both Tagliabucci and his son. Tagliabucci's crew now is after Davy, stabbing him near an elevator, and they suspect that Carlito was involved. Carlito visits a paranoid Davy in the hospital, removing bullets

from his gun as punishment for getting him in hot water with the mob. Tony T's other son Vincent sees Carlito leaving the hospital, and then kills Davy.

Carlito asks Gail to leave with him on the train to Miami. He has five hours to set his affairs right. He meets the Mafiosos at his club, realizing that they suspect him. One of them tells Tony T's son to be patient: "we'll get him." Carlito retrieves his saved money and makes his way to Grand Central Station. He avoids the team looking for him, until spotted lying down on the escalator. He shoots some of them and runs to meet Gail on the train platform. Just as they are about to board the departing train, Blanco approaches and shoots Carlito at point-blank range. Carlito has been betrayed by his associate, Pachanga. As the dying Carlito is wheeled to the ambulance, he imagines a travel poster coming to life, with Gail dancing on the beach with a group of children.

The movie's flashback structure may dictate that Carlito's fate is sealed, while his frequent lapses into poetic voice-over could indicate acceptance of his destiny (Schneider, 2009: 345–346). While the film's ending is usually interpreted as Carlito's dying moments, the romantic in me wants him to survive and join Gail in the Bahamas. The audience does not see him die, so maybe the paramedics and emergency room doctors are able to save him. Who knows? I think Carlito deserves a second (or perhaps third) chance.

Like other gangster films of the 1980s–1990s, audiences witness the breakdown and decline of the Italian Mafia, along with the rise of other ethnic crime organizations. Taglialucci must rely on his unreliable lawyer for escape, and his minions are indecisive about how best to get Carlito. The Puerto Rican hot heads that Carlito fights early in the film tip into violence with the slightest provocation, and young hoods such as Blanco do not take direction from anyone.

How does the Hulsman-Mitchell IR theory approach apply to De Palma's characters? Tony Montana starts out as a traditional realist who carefully maneuvers to protect his self-interest and become indispensable to Frank, and then to make his bold move to take over Frank's business. As he becomes cocaine-addicted and monomaniacal, he loses his perspective, antagonizes Sosa, and loses a firefight with Sosa's men. De Palma's Al Capone is less the competent gangland boss (or traditional realist) we know from history and more like a hot-headed neocon. Eliot Ness is an institutional liberal who wants law and order to rule, but he gives in to Jimmy Malone's offensive realism by taking the fight directly to Capone. Carlito seems like a traditional realist who is taking care of his interests by arranging to leave a life of crime, but his liberal commitment to his lawyer leads him to make decisions that prove fatal to him (Hulsman and Mitchell, 2009: 1–19).

Newell's *Donnie Brasco*

Mike Newell's *Donnie Brasco* (1997) also examines individual gangsters, but from the standpoint of a real undercover FBI agent, Joe Pistone (Johnny Depp), who infiltrates Brooklyn Bonanno family gangsters, pretending to become one of them. The story covers the late 1970s to early 1980s and is one of the most realistic portrayals of life in the mob. By the time of the story, the Mafia has been hit hard by the RICO Act and extensive FBI surveillance. Posing as jewelry dealer Donnie Brasco, Pistone befriends Lefty Ruggiero (Pacino), an aging Mafia soldier who has been passed over for leadership but now vouches for Donnie as a neophyte Mafia soldier. Donnie impresses Lefty by recognizing that supposed diamond rings are zirconium fakes (or *fugazi*), and then threatens the jewel dealer. Lefty begins to instruct Donnie in Mafia norms and introduces him to *caporegime* Sonny Black (or Dominick Napolitano, played by Michael Madsen).

Donnie ingratiates himself into Sonny's crew and records their meetings for the FBI. Sonny Black chafes under another *caporegime* (Sonny Red), who is "upped" to control criminal operations in most of New York City, while Sonny Black is left to control Brooklyn. The FBI get Donnie to suggest that they use another undercover cop to set up an illegal casino in Florida. Donnie and Lefty hold a yacht party to get permission of Florida boss Santos Trafficante, who ignores Lefty and wants to talk to Sonny. Black tells Donnie that "you belong to me now," angering Lefty. Lefty and Donnie are tasked with operating the casino, but police raid and destroy it on the first night. Sonny Black suspects that Sonny Red betrayed him. Back in New York, Sonny Red invites Sonny Black to a meeting. Arriving first, Sonny Black and his crew kill Sonny Red and some rival *caporegimes*. Donnie is forced to help them cut up the bodies for disposal.

Pistone's marriage to Maggie (Anne Heche) deteriorates due to his long absences and perceived neglect of his roles as husband and father. He explains to his wife that he has to stay undercover or Lefty will be killed and that he now identifies with his mob friends. "I am them," he adds. The FBI are afraid that Pistone will be killed in the gang war initiated by Sonny, and they want to pull him out. Lefty and Donnie are given a contract to kill Sonny Red's son, Bruno. Just as they are about to shoot the young man, the FBI swoop in and spirit Donnie/Pistone away. Days later, FBI agents tell Sonny that Donnie is in fact an undercover FBI agent, but Sonny and Lefty do not believe it. Lefty gets a call that he has been "sent for"; he tells his girlfriend Annette not to wait up for him and arranges his personal effects, expecting to be whacked. This is an emotional scene, but the real Ruggiero died after serving several years in prison. Pistone gets perfunctory commendation and a \$500 check from the FBI director, who mispronounces his name.

The movie changes key facts to heighten the drama. These include creating tension between FBI supervisors and Pistone, when they functioned well together; Pistone coming to identify with the Mafios culturally, even though he was a thoroughly assimilated Italian American and disdained the mob leaders; presenting Sonny Black as a killer who treated underlings badly, though he was a well-respected Mafia capo that Pistone preferred to Ruggiero; and the FBI downplaying Pistone's work, when he was widely lauded for his efforts. Perhaps the movie's greatest asset is detailing the life of mobsters. Lefty instructs Donnie on the details of being a wiseguy, such as shaving off his mustache, carrying his money in a money clip, not a wallet, and wearing dress trousers, not casual slacks (Casillo, 2019: 126–128).

The film also excels in presenting Mafia families as quasi-governments. Like any government, they give authority to leaders, who are spatially separate from ordinary members. As in *The Godfather*, they provide services to citizens, tax citizens for services rendered, and settle disputes among citizens and among Mafiosos. While there is an informal hierarchy to Mafia governance, each Mafia member is expected to operate as a “largely independent entrepreneur reliant on his own ingenuity and discretion.” It is a flexible organization that Ruggiero describes as both largely unseen leadership that rarely appears and is “kind of like an army.” The Mafia differs from government in being more personal, yet Lefty is coldly passed over local leadership, which passes to Sonny Black. Lefty, despite all his hard work, must live in a small apartment with his girlfriend and son, and is chronically short of money. Lefty seeks out a surrogate son in Donnie, and retains conflicted thoughts about his superiors (Casillo, 2019: 126–130).

The Hulsman-Mitchell IR theory schema is a bit harder to apply to this movie, as we know that the characters differ from the real persons on whom they are based. So, let's mostly stick to the movie characters. In this film, Sonny Black is most like an impulsive neocon, though many of actions seem closer to traditional realism. Even though he did not get upped to become one of the key mob bosses of New York, he is using his control of Brooklyn to his advantage. Lefty is a traditional liberal, who believes that the Mafia's unspoken rules are vital to uphold, but he chafes at his being passed over for leadership. While the Joe Pistone of history is an old-fashioned liberal who believes in upholding law and order, the film's Donnie/Joe is not so sure about the job he is doing for the FBI. More traditional realist than liberal, he wants to do his undercover task while helping his friend Lefty, so that he will not be whacked for vouching for Donnie (Hulsman and Mitchell, 2009: 1–19).

"Now, you's can't leave": A Bronx Tale and Analyze This

As Mafia operational effectiveness declined in the 1990s, the Mafia may have seemed to average Americans like less of a threat and more a throwback to early times. To film makers, the Mafia became a source of nostalgia or even comedy. The nostalgia is evident in *A Bronx Tale* (1993), the brainchild of actor and writer Chazz Palminteri, who wrote a play based on his childhood experiences in New York. A meeting with Robert De Niro led to a handshake agreement for Palminteri to write and star, and for De Niro to direct and play a supporting role. The story centers on Calogero (Francis Capra as a young boy, Lillo Brancato as a teen), a teenage boy who idolizes a local mob figure, Sonny (Palminteri) who mentors the boy but tries to dissuade the young man from entering the life (Anastasia and Macnow, 2011: 92–97). Calogero's father Lorenzo Anello (De Niro) wants his son to have nothing to do with the mobster and tries to teach him that hard work and dedication to family are more important than quick money.

The story is most impressive in outlining key life lessons Calogero (later called "C" by his mob friends) learns from his father and Sonny. Lorenzo tells his son not to look up to mobsters: "You want to see a real hero? Look at a guy who gets up in the morning and goes off to work and supports his family. That's heroism." Sonny teaches the Yankees-worshipping C not to believe in idols: "Mickey Mantle don't care about you. So why care about him? Nobody cares." Sonny says he read Machiavelli in prison. C asks Sonny, "Is it better to be loved or feared?" The mobster answers, "If I had my choice I would rather be feared. Fear lasts longer than love."

A group of bikers enters Sonny's bar. He allows them to have one drink, but they disrespect the bartender and spray beer on him. Sonny asks them to apologize, but they refuse. He then locks the door and says, "now, you's can't leave." The bikers realize they just made the worst mistake of their lives, as Sonny and his men proceed to give them the most thorough beatings of their lives. C wants to help his mentor, but in the end Sonny gets killed at a party by a young man with a long-standing grudge. C attends the funeral, noticing Sonny's mobster friends laughing and joking during the ceremony, and he concludes that Sonny was right that "Nobody cares" (Anastasia and Macnow, 2011: 92–94).

A Bronx Tale gives us local Mafia figures when the underworld was at its height in the 1960s. During J. Edgar Hoover's tenure as FBI director, the mob generally was left alone. The film's Italian American community is still tight, and its members respect and fear the power of gangsters. De Niro's and Palminteri's careful depiction of life in the Italian American community of the 1960s Bronx is one of the film's highlights. We see emerging racial tension in New York, as African Americans and Italian clash on the street. C, at

some risk to his reputation in his community, begins dating a black girl, Jane (Taral Hicks). The film handles this interracial romance with great sensitivity (Schneider, 2009: 341–342).

Before C goes on his first date, Sonny recommends: “Give her the Test.” C should lock both driver and passenger car doors, then place her in the passenger seat. Walking around the back of the car, he should notice if she unlocks the driver’s door for him. If she does, she is worth dating; if she does not, he adds, “dump her. She’s a selfish broad and all you’re seeing is the tip of the iceberg. Dump her fast.” This test could be done in 1960s cars but will not work on contemporary vehicles. Still, it is a poignant scene and, by the way, Jane passes the test (Anastasia and Macnow, 2011: 92–95).

Analyze This (1999) and *Analyze That* (2002) take the comedic route, as a Mafioso played by De Niro seeks out a psychiatrist played by Billy Crystal. The gangster has trouble confronting his demons, including witnessing his father’s murder. The psychiatrist helps him deal with his emotions, and in return the gangster interferes with the doctor’s love life. One of the funniest moments is when Crystal has to stand in for his patient at a summit meeting of crime families. “My name is Ben Sobel . . . -lioni. Ben Sobellioni. I’m also known as, uh, Benny the Groin, Sammy the Schnozz, Elmer the Fudd, Tubby the Tuba, and once as Miss Phyllis Levine.” The movie paralleled *The Sopranos*, in which Tony Soprano loses his confidence and spends time in most episodes talking to a female psychiatrist. The *Analyze* movies present a Mafia that is on the decline and pressured by the police and FBI.

THE BLACK GANGSTER AND GANGSTA, AND LATINO GANGS

African American gangsters have been portrayed two ways. The first is as participants in the Mafia-organized underworld, i.e., as traditional gangsters. *Hoodlum* (1997) is a tepid biography of Ellsworth “Bumpy” Johnson (Laurence Fishburne), the long-time gang kingpin of Harlem. The movie outlines how Johnson has to fight Dutch Schultz (Tim Roth) for control of Harlem, and finally makes a deal with “Lucky” Luciano (Garcia) for the mob to stay out of the black neighborhoods. Ridley Scott’s *American Gangster* (2007) is a traditional rise-and-fall story about Frank Lucas (Denzel Washington), who was Bumpy’s disciple and took over the Harlem drug trade on Johnson’s death. Lucas gets control of much of the New York heroin market by going directly to Southeast Asian suppliers, and then sending the “Blue Magic” product back to America in coffins of servicemen killed in Vietnam. Richie Roberts (Russell Crowe) heads a special investigation unit of the New Jersey state police who doggedly pursues Lucas, finally bringing

him and a host of corrupt New York cops down (Anastasia and Macnow, 2011: 144–145).

Lucas was unusual in that he was able to corner much of the New York heroin market in the 1970s. Most traditional black mobsters were restricted to black neighborhoods in large cities and, as in legitimate businesses, were often not able to extend their operations regionally or nationally. Blacks often worked in partnership with or as subcontractors for Italian or Irish gangsters. The drugs trade from the 1970s onward, especially the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s–1990s, gave black gangs some degree of independence, as drug use became so prevalent that the Mafia could not satisfy demand. *American Gangster*'s major fault is in making the notoriously vicious Lucas appear calm, rational, and even dapper.

The second way includes portrayals of urban gangs in cities such as Los Angeles. John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) focuses on three young men in South Central L.A. who get sucked into the battle between the Crips and Bloods gangs during the early 1990s. The movie is as much a coming-of-age yarn as it is a gangsta film. It centers on Tre Styles (Cuba Gooding, Jr.), a young man who plans to go to college. Tre's father, Furious (Fishburne), tries to teach his son life lessons that will keep out of gangs. The drive-by shooting of his friend Ricky (Morris Chestnut) provides the film's tragedy (Schneider, 2009: 313–314). The movie became a cultural touchstone and engendered much discussion in the early 1990s about the prevalence of gangs in black neighborhoods.

By contrast, Mario Van Peebles's *New Jack City* (1991) is about the crack epidemic in New York. Nino Brown (Wesley Snipes) is a bling-wearing entrepreneurial genius who corners the crack market. Pookie (Chris Rock), a former cocaine addict, becomes an informer for the police, while two misfit cops (Ice-T and Judd Nelson) go after Brown. Nino becomes increasingly paranoia and arrogant, and this proves his undoing. Like other movies from the period, *New Jack City* suggests that black people in inner city neighborhoods often have little choice but to participate in the drug trade (Anastasia and Macnow, 2011: 318–319; Schneider, 2009: 309–310). The same pessimistic point is made later by L. D. (Don Cheadle), the local drug lord in Warren Beatty's *Bullworth* (1998), and by Juan (Mahershala Ali), the kindly mentor and drug dealer in *Moonlight* (2016).

The 1990s became a golden age for Gangsta movies, and most of the best examples come from that decade or a few years thereafter. The Hughes Brothers' *Menace II Society* (1993) centers on Kaydee "Caine" Lawson (Tyron Turner), a young man in Los Angeles. He does not like his life on the street and is encouraged by his friends to leave for a better life in Kansas City. He keeps getting drawn into illegal activities, especially when his best friend kills a Korean storeowner and his wife. Caine impregnates a local woman,

and his refusal to support her gets him deeper into trouble. Her relatives are angered by his failure to acknowledge his paternity and, in a drive-by shooting, kill Caine and some of his friends (Schneider, 2009: 333–334).

Hollywood has not made as many movies about Latino gangs. One of the best is *American Me* (1992), a passion project for star Edward James Olmos, who plays Montoya Santana, based on Rodolfo “Cheyenne” Cadena, one of the founders of the La Eme gang in Los Angeles. A clear rise-and-fall story, it includes Santana’s failed attempt to go straight. The story follows Santana’s life, as he is raped in reform school and then kills his attacker, landing him in prison for close to twenty years. Behind bars, he prospers in the drug trade out on the streets. Finally out of prison, Santana finds it difficult to romance a woman because of the sexual trauma he suffered. When he decides to leave the drugs business, his friends turn against him. Returned to prison for a parole violation, Santana is murdered by other members of his gang (Anastasia and Macnow, 2011: 257–259).

This bleak examination of Latino gangs was made more poignant when La Eme members violently reacted against the film. They were upset by its blending of fact and fiction, which is common in these kinds of movies, and they saw the final product as disrespectful. They were also angry about depictions of prison rape, a sensitive topic in their macho culture. Two consultants for the picture, including a woman who had a small role in the movie, were murdered. There was also an active contract on Olmos’s life for several years. This is too bad, because Olmos has always been committed to bettering California’s Latino community, and he wished to use the film to shine a light on the corrosive Mexican American gang culture (Anastasia and Macnow, 2011: 257–258).

WOMEN AND THE MOB: HOW DO FEMALES FIT IN WITH GANGSTERS?

When I told one of my female colleagues that I was going to do a conference presentation on *The Godfather*, she sniffed that the franchise was gendered, as if to say that any film genre dealing primarily with male experience was somehow less valid than other artistic expressions. While I sympathize with her thinking, the heavy maleness of gangster movies does not make them less valuable as examinations of the human experience. Seitz, for instance, notes the “overwhelming maleness” of *The Irishman*, as the only major female characters are Russell’s and Frank’s wives, along with Frank’s mostly silent daughter, Peggy (Seitz, 2019: 1–7). This is quite common for contemporary gangster films, as women are marginalized or appear only as victims, wives, or girlfriends.

This was not always so. Classic gangster films of the 1930s almost always contained the “moll,” or gangster’s girlfriend (derived from Molly, a common term for prostitutes), who often was a smart-mouthed or street-wise young woman trying to make her way in the world. While treated appallingly by their gangster boyfriends, these women often landed on their feet while their boyfriends went down in a hail of bullets. Early movie gangster girlfriends were usually acquired when the gangster rose in the organization and was shown buying a new suit. Several 1930s films include a socialite who is attracted to a mobster, not so much sexually, but for the erotic thrill of being with someone on the wrong side of the law, such as Jan Ashe (Norma Shearer) and her dalliance with “Ace” Wilfong (Clark Gable) in *A Free Soul* (1931). Jan is sexually adventurous, apparently encouraged by her informal relationship with her defense attorney father (Lionel Barrymore). She sees Ace in an objectified manner, and looks at him directly, almost like the traditional “male gaze.” Typically for films of that era, this independent woman must be publicly humiliated and returned to her conventional fiancé (Mainon, 2007: 278–280).

A few critics have contrasted the female “dancer” character with the male “gangster” in 1930s dramas. Both are ruthlessly climbing their way up to the top and so come into conflict with their colleagues on the bottom rungs. Both are often stopped before they can reach the top, in contrast with stories about success through hard work in more socially acceptable professions. For 1930s and 1940s film gangsters, women are not sexual partners, but acquisitions “to be displayed but not trusted.” For instance, Rocco (Robinson) in *Key Largo* (1948) calls out his girlfriend Gay Dawn (Claire Trevor) to show off to his associate Ziggy, then quickly dismisses her. According to this calculus, Sonny in *The Godfather* is clearly unsuited to be godfather because of his powerful sex drive (Kaminsky, 2007: 52–55). Molls are clearly damaged goods beyond polite society, and ordinary women who consort with gangsters in the Production Code era get presented as “fallen women” or women who could not control their impulses and gave themselves over to animalistic mobsters (Mainon, 2007: 277–289).

Only rare women challenged the Mafia. Bette Davis stars in *Marked Woman* (1937), a movie aimed at the women’s picture audience and based in part on prosecutor Thomas Dewey’s trial of New York mobster Charles “Lucky” Luciano. Davis plays clip-joint “hostess” Mary Strauber, whose job is to lure young men to gamble their money away. Along with other hostesses, she is frequently abused by club owner Johnny Venning (Eduardo Ciannelli), the fictional equivalent of Luciano. Mary refuses to testify against Venning for the murder of a club patron who could not pay his gambling debts. When Venning pushes Mary’s sister down a staircase to her death, Mary threatens to testify. Mob enforcers retaliate by beating Mary and cutting a cross into her

cheek—thus, she becomes the marked woman. This only stiffens her determination to testify, and she gets the other women to speak publicly. They realize that the only way to get away from the gangsters is to testify. Prosecutor David Graham (Bogart, in one of his first non-gangster roles) gets a conviction, and the women walk away free into the night (Schneider, 2009: 69–70).

While Hollywood's Production Code sidelined most molls, film noir pictures present more morally complex female characters. Relationships between gangsters and their girlfriends often are transactional: the gangster thinks that he can buy the young woman's affection, while his lady only sticks around if she gains something that she wants. This is clear in *The Gangster* (1947), in which Shubunka (Barry Sullivan) only seems to be able to relate to Nancy Starr (Belita) if he is lavishing gifts on her. She wants love, but he cannot separate economic exchange from affection. She leaves him for a show biz career, but it becomes an economic trap for her as her agent and show producers now control her life (Humphries, 2007: 119–124).

One of the most blatant exchanges is between Bart Tare (John Dall) and Annie Laurie Starr (Peggy Cummins), two petty criminals in *Gun Crazy* (1950), who bond over a shoot off at a carnival sideshow. Laurie is an expert sharpshooter, but Bart wins the competition, and this turns her on. Fired from the carnival, the couple go on a wild robbing spree. After a few jobs, he wants to stop, but she has become addicted to and perhaps sexually aroused by violence and kills two people during a robbery. Chased to a swamp, he kills her as she prepares to shoot police, who promptly shoot him (Duncan and Muller, 2017: 125–126).

Film noir is famous for its contrasting femme fatale and good girl characters. Women gained a degree of independence during World War II, but Munby suggests that "independent womanhood" became an "obstacle" to a widely perceived need to return to bourgeois home values in the post-war years. Demonization of female independence in the form of the femme fatale—"homebreaking, avaricious, a sexual predator, and user of men"—allowed reestablishment of "patriarchal priorities." Robert Siodmak's *The Killers* (1945) presents Lancaster's boxer-wanted-by-the-mob Swede as fundamentally weakened under the influence and betrayal of "bad" woman Kitty (Gardner). This, Munby says, is in line with the "discourse of castration" seen in many German Expressionist films (Munby, 1999: 193–198).

In Fritz Lang's *The Big Heat* (1953), police investigator Dave Bannion (Glenn Ford) gets put on leave from his job for opposing his colleagues' corrupt collaboration with gangsters. His dogged efforts to expose the truth leads to the misogynistic destruction of four women, including the death of his wife by car bomb, the murder of a hapless clip-joint singer who tries to give him key information, and the scalding and later shooting of a gangster's girlfriend. Munby suggests that these women become "expendable" assets in Bannion's

crusade (Munby, 1999: 193–198). Another way to think of this story is as an inversion of the femme fatale, as a man leads several women to their dooms (Anastasia and Macnow, 2011: 191–192). So, why do we not use the term *homme fatale*, the deadly man? Why are people threatened by clever women, while they never mention ubiquitous male monsters?

Osteen suggests that focus on the femme fatale is an unfair assessment of noir female characters, as women presented in such movies reflect the diversity of women's occupations in the 1940s and 1950s. These include not only wives, mothers, and nurses, but also "businesswomen and writers; secretaries, singers, sleuths, and social workers; psychologists, physicians, prison guards, wardens—and even professors" (Osteen, 2013: 185). He notes that most women in film noir stories have real occupations. Osteen adds that many women worked behind the camera in these films, including as directors. Accordingly, several films during the period deal with women's concerns, such as systemic sexism, conflicts between traditional and modern female roles, and "anxieties and possibilities" suggested by shifting gender roles in postwar America (Osteen, 2013: 185–219).

Traditional Mafiosos have clearly defined notions of sexuality and marriage, and they uphold an "understated machismo." A Mafia man is required to be monogamous, honors his wife and family, and keeps his wife out of his "business." In return, she is to keep in the "backstage," is not to challenge her husband publicly, and turns a blind eye to his girlfriends. The *Godfather* movies show a range of male-female relationships. Vito is a devoted husband and father whose wife always stays in the background. He expresses a patriarchal view of women when he states, "Women and children can be careless, but not men." Sonny's relationship with his wife, along with Connie's marriage, are troubled and conflictual. Michael's relationship with Kay initially is open and honest, but gradually becomes closed, cold, and restricted (Camon, 2000: 67–69). Hyman Roth's wife in *The Godfather Part II* serves sandwiches to the mafiosos, but tellingly the audience never sees her above the neck, and she departs once serious discussions with Michael begin (Fordham, 2007: 173).

Women as direct participants in movie organized crime were rare before the 1960s. Bonnie Parker's portrayal by Faye Dunaway in *Bonnie and Clyde* is iconic, though technically Bonnie and Clyde were not part of an ongoing criminal enterprise, but only leaders of a small band of bank robbers. In the 1970s, such figures as Ma Barker from the early 1930s were given sensational presentations, such as by Shelley Winters in *Bloody Mama* (1970). Other than these few examples of female criminals, women continued to fill mostly traditional roles of wives, girlfriends, daughters, and victims. *Goodfellas* presents a pattern of honoring one's marriage publicly, but then taking mistresses on the side. These latter are essentially kept women who are set up in apartments and brought into the drugs trade.

Two Mafia wives deserve particular attention. Kay Adams (Keaton) marries Michael Corleone, despite multiple misgivings about him and his family. He does not even contact her for a year after he returns from his enforced sojourn in Sicily. As a WASP, she is the ultimate outsider in the Corleone household, and Michael repeatedly lies to her about his “business.” The ending of the first movie encapsulates her isolation, as she watches the Mafia capos kiss his hand and call him “godfather,” and then the door closes on her. To preserve her outsider status, Coppola needs to present her as clueless about her husband’s Mafia activities and ask questions that no Mafia wife would ask—because she would know the answers. I always wondered why a smart woman like Kay, seeing all the signs from Connie’s wedding onward, married Michael in the first place. The second film sees her kicked out of the Corleone household when she reveals that she aborted Michael’s male child. In the heavily Catholic world of the Corleones, abortion is a great sin and so her expulsion may seem a just sanction (Clarens, 2007: 113–114). The third film sees the exes reconcile, though she does not want to revive the dead marriage.

Goodfellas’ Karen Hill (Bracco) has a central role as Karen, Henry Hill’s wife, and shares the voice-over with him at several points in the film. As a Jew, she also is an outsider, but she initially loves the charismatic Henry. She stays with him, despite her dismay over the trashy Mafia lifestyle and anger at his infidelity. She inadvertently forces him to make a deal with the feds when she flushes his stash of illegal drugs down the toilet as local cops raid their house. No longer able to pay off his suppliers, he knows Paulie will find out about his drug dealing and he will not be able to meet his obligations. Paulie rejects him, and so he turns to the FBI.

John Cassavetes’s *Gloria* (1980) is a unique gang film told from a woman’s point of view. Cassavetes made the film as a favor to his wife, Gena Rowlands, who plays the title character. He envisioned Gloria as a “sexy but tough woman who doesn’t need a man.” A former Mafia moll, she rescues a precocious boy Phil Dawn (John Adames), who is carrying a ledger of mob accounts given him by his father, Jack Dawn (Buck Henry), who has been murdered by hitmen. Gloria moves just one step ahead of the bad guys, as the pair make their way from New York to Pittsburgh (Anastasia and Macnow, 2011: 312–313). Gloria, who has no interest in children, gradually bonds with the boy. Cassavetes notes,

“I wanted to tell women that they don’t have to like children—but there’s still something deep in them that relates to children, and this separates them from men in a good way. This inner understanding of kids is something very deep and instinctive, in a way, it’s the other side of insanity” (Anastasia and Macnow, 2011: 312–313).

One of the first films to present a female mob hitman (or hitwoman, perhaps) is *Prizzi's Honor* (1985), a complicated look at women in a Mafia family. A story about a female hitman could be disturbing to some audience members, so the story is framed as a screwball comedy, in which an ex-spouse tries to get back her/his former partner (Welsch, 2007: 202–205). Irene Walker (Kathleen Turner) is doubly an outsider in the Mafia world: a woman in a man's profession, and a non-Italian in an Italo-centric organization (she is a Pole who had married a Jew). Charley Partanna (Nicholson) is also a hitman but has been rising within the Prizzi family organization. At a Mafia wedding (shades of *The Godfather*), he sees Irene in the balcony hovering like an angel and is instantly smitten. Charley asks former girlfriend Maerose Prizzi (Anjelica Huston) who she is. Maerose has fallen into disfavor with her mob boss father because she abandoned Charley and ran off with another man (Bauman, 2019: 87–91). Maerose functions partly as a noir-like femme fatale, who uses sexual manipulation to get what she wants, while Irene is put in the position of the “beleaguered male protagonist” in noir movies (Welsch, 2007: 200–202).

Later, Charley is fulfilling a contract on Irene's former husband for robbing a casino. He meets Irene again, they fall in love and run off to Mexico to get married. She finds out that Irene has double-crossed the Mafia, thereby gaining attention of her father. One of Prizzi's sons puts out a contract on Charley and gives it to Irene. Meanwhile, Don Prizzi tells Charley that his new wife must go, and Charley agrees to kill her to restore the status quo in the family. The newlyweds seem to enjoy marital bliss but pull weapons at the same time. Charley throws his knife, which nails Irene in the neck. Charley retreats to New York, where he is consoled by Maerose, now back in her father's good graces. Maerose, representing the more acceptably Italian and organization values, has triumphed over the outsider (Bauman, 2019: 87–91; Schneider, 2009: 278).

Luc Besson's *Leon: The Professional* (1994) gives the audience not just a female perspective, but that of an adolescent girl. Natalie Portman, in her stunning film debut, plays Mathilda Lando, whose entire dysfunctional family has just been murdered by rogue DEA agent Norman Stansfield (Gary Oldman, in a scenery-chewing performance) and his men. In desperation, she knocks on the door of Leon (Jean Reno), a French hitman who lives down the hall. He knows that if he does not let her in, she will be killed, and so he opens the door. Leon has been working for a local Mafioso known simply as Tony (Danny Aiello), who is “holding” Leon's earnings for him. A fascinating relationship akin to a surrogate father and the daughter he never had now develops. Leon teaches her about his life as a “cleaner” (hitman). She plans revenge on those who killed her little brother, the only one in her family that she cared about. A violent showdown between Leon and Norman leads to

the death of all the DEA people, and only Mathilda walks away unscathed (Anastasia and Macnow, 2011: 72–74). DiPaolo suggests that Mathilda is one of Besson’s “idealized female warriors” who is at once male fantasy, the female counterpart for the protagonist, and the male viewer himself (DiPaolo, 2011: 44). While that may be true of Besson’s other lead female characters, Mathilda’s young age may make that less applicable.

The Sopranos presents an unusual take on mob women. Tony Soprano’s mother Livia (Nancy Lou Marchand), wife Carmela (Edie Falco) and daughter Meadow (Jamie-Lynn Sigler) are not the passive women of Mafia movies. They frequently argue with Tony, question his mob lifestyle, and pursue their own agendas. The show implicitly suggests that one of Tony’s motivations for seeking psychiatric counseling is that he feels emasculated.

Dr. Jennifer Melfi (Bracco), the psychiatrist who treats Tony throughout the series, is both fascinated and repelled by Tony and his world. She is dark and Mediterranean, and so conforms to his idea of Italian femininity. She is proud of her Italian heritage and shares this with Tony, but she feels that he is corrupting that shared legacy. Tony’s panic attacks are caused in part by his loss of control of the spoken language, while Melfi relies on the written language of her profession, which is “linear, rational, and canonical.” She feels that Tony’s account of his actions is unreliable and he is a “malevolent” character. She is righted in her course by returning to the psychiatric texts. She realizes that the sessions are not helping him and may be strengthening his sociopathic tendencies, and so she terminates the meetings. Tony may be partially restored to some degree of psychological wholeness by the series’ end, though the enigmatic last episode ending does not make this clear (Ricci, 2019: 145–150; Lombardi, 2019: 151–156).

Recent movies have depicted actual women who entered underworld businesses. *The Kitchen* (2019) is about three women married to Irish mobsters. When their husbands get arrested and sentenced to three years in prison, the women decide that they must step into the role as mob breadwinners for their families. Two of the women are Irish: Kathy Brennan (Melissa McCarthy) and Claire Walsh (Elisabeth Moss); the third, Ruby O’Carroll (Tiffany Haddish), is black and thus an outsider in the Irish community. Kathy makes a deal with the Italian mob to split protection rackets in Hell’s Kitchen, in return for the Mafia getting more control of construction jobs there. Ruby turns on her friends, just as Claire gets murdered. Kathy manages to make a deal with the Irish families, and she reconciles with Ruby. The two women decide to extend their area of operations to Uptown Manhattan.

THE POST-MODERN GANGSTER: *PULP FICTION* AND *THE SOPRANOS*

By Barry Pollick

Pulp Fiction made Quentin Tarantino a directorial star. Already known from the groundbreaking caper-gone-wrong film *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), and for the script for *True Romance* (1993), Tarantino wowed the Cannes film festival in 1994. He reached the next level with his dissection of crime and gangster films. Tarantino cleverly employed John Travolta, whose career was then on the skids, teaming him up with rising star Samuel L. Jackson. Action mega-star Bruce Willis was cast against type as a loser who wants to start over, and Uma Thurman brought a breezy, quirky take to the traditional role of the gangster's wife. Three intersecting stories came together in non-linear time: a down-on-his-luck fighter Butch Coolidge (Willis) who has been ordered to throw a fight but has other ideas, a loyal gang underling Vincent Vega (Travolta) who must show his boss's wife Mia Wallace (Thurman) a good time while the big guy is out of town, and a pair of hitmen, Jules Winnfield (Jackson) and Vincent again, who must recover a treasure—perhaps gold or Krugerrands—stolen from the boss by young drug dealers. Ving Rhames plays Marsellus Wallace, the LA mob boss, who figures in all three stories.

While *Pulp Fiction* does not present the traditional gangster rise-and-fall narrative or deal in tropes of ethnic assimilation/acceptance and the materialistic American Dream, it does include the gangster's needs to be respected and not to be ripped off. Its violence, in Tarantino style, is more graphic than in almost any traditional gangster film, but it does not seem gratuitous. Like *The Godfather*, it gives the audience gangsters adhering to a code of honor, however warped it may be. Like *Goodfellas* and *Donnie Brasco*, it examines the mob from the ground up, focusing on individuals and their decisions in the moment. Like *The Departed*, its gangsters are not Italian or Sicilian, but in this case Black and Latino. The politics of *Pulp Fiction* mirror these other films: police and government are absent, the law of the street rules, and decision making is left in the hands of Wallace or delegated to the two hitmen or professionals who "solve problems" such as Winston Wolfe (Harvey Keitel). If one crosses the mob boss, as Butch does, he must run or make a deal, which he finally does.

The movie became the "arbiter of cool" for Gen-Xers. As Anastasia and Macnow note, the story "draws you into the world of fundamentally

dislikeable characters,” but you are willing to put aside your judgment because they are “sympathetic figures,” and the recurrent comedy makes you “delight at the most inappropriate moments” (Anastasia and Macnow, 2011: 37–41). We often do not know who the good guys really are, and the three overlapping but unoriginal plots get put forward in a way that does not resolve itself until the end. The characters react to unusual situations by engaging in informed discussions of everything from gourmet coffee to which is cleaner—a dog or a pig. Jackson steals the show, but the movie’s big surprise is how cool a gangster Travolta could be (Anastasia and Macnow, 2011: 37–41).

The Sopranos (1999–2007) is the most high-profile mobster television property since *The Untouchables* (1959–1963). My wife and I would get chills, Pavlov-style, upon hearing the theme music that began each episode. It is a highly syncopated instrumental, set in the gritty parts of New Jersey, that sets the tone for violence. That’s the first thing you hear. The violence is often sudden and unpredictable—Tony Soprano’s mood can suddenly turn dark and he might bludgeon someone to death a second after gently chiding him. This is the second key element of the show—Tony (James Gandolfini in a career-making performance) is a psychopath but one that we cannot help but root for because he is so darned charismatic and has a warm, fuzzy side, as well a touching vulnerability. He sees a psychiatrist—with whom he gradually falls in love. The psychiatrist (Lorraine Bracco) is, ironically, Henry’s wife in *Goodfellas* and she plays the shrink role brilliantly.

The tension in his personality—between his need to establish dominance and his vulnerability and desire to be a loving father and (mostly) loving husband is largely what makes the show so fascinating—he’s a richly multifaceted character. Imagine a Mafia don who surreptitiously sees a psychiatrist for temperamental issues (can you imagine Brando in *The Godfather* in such a situation?). Fat chance! Soprano is the first self-aware Mafia don. He always seems on the verge of great psychological insight and being able to channel those insights into more pro-social behavior, when bam—he says “F—it!” and commits another murder or three . . . or four.

Another fascinating aspect of the show is Tony’s double life—on the one hand, he is a ruthless Mafia don and on the other he is an Archie Bunker-like family man, whose wife almost always gets the better of him and whose kids—well, mostly his daughter Meadow (Jamie-Lynn Sigler)—are easily able to manipulate him. We are always in an uneasy relationship with him—rooting for him as he tries to reason with his son or romance his wife and being terrified by him as he loses his temper—yet again—and murders an associate or even a friend. He is all too human—neither a purely evil killer nor a model citizen.

Often, Mafia wives in movies or on TV are nonentities but Tony's wife Carmela is powerful, brilliant, and somewhat moral (though she is willing to look the other way when morality conflicts with Tony's lucrative income). Edie Falco won several awards for the role, and Carmela is utterly fearless in standing up to Tony. She is the character we most fully identify with and cheer for, since she's the only one who can challenge Tony—who constantly cheats on her nonetheless.

Tony also possesses charming neuroses. For example, he goes to the front door every morning at the crack of dawn to pick up his morning paper and invariably "sees" a dove in his yard. At some level, he seems to realize that the sight is a mirage. This—along with blackouts and anxiety attacks—is what initially impels him to see the psychiatrist. I think you can imagine the symbolism of the dove, in this context.

In addition to these unique features, there are many cinematic allusions, especially gangster movie references, and you can find them in any given episode. For example, in the twelfth episode of season 1, just before a nearly fatal attempt on Tony's life, he goes out and buys a bottle of Tropicana orange juice. This is an homage to *The Godfather's* orange motif; there too oranges foretell doom, such as when Vito Corleone is hit while holding a bag of oranges (Sherman, 2021: 1–7). There are also bit characters played by the likes of Steve Buscemi who absolutely nail their parts.

Finally, the show has a devilish sense of humor. It is alternately funny and terrifying. For instance, Tony's nephew accidentally sits on his fiancée's poodle and squashes the poor dog. It sounds gruesome but is oddly hilarious. I cannot recall any bad episodes, though the show ran out of creative steam near the end. Start by watching the first three seasons, to get a good sense of the program's dramatic development.

Litt feels that *The Sopranos* can explain the toxic politics of the Trump era: the "blend of power, insecurity, and resentment that lies at the core of Trumpism." Tony is living the American Dream, but he is distinctly unhappy. Despite his wealth, he dreams of a bygone era in which the mob was unchallenged. Tony resents the elite and the professional class who will always look down on him. His anger feeds into racism, particularly toward African Americans. He becomes incensed when he finds that daughter Meadow is dating a biracial boy. Like Trump, he views life as a zero-sum game, in which Italian Americans are losing out. As with Trump, *Sopranos* characters assume that everyone is corrupt, and that everything is defined by self-interest (Litt, 2019: 1–3).

Gandolfini's portrayal of Tony ropes us in and, as with Trump, some of us are drawn to him. It is only with later reflection that we realize we have been taken in by a con man. Not everyone accepts Tony, and those who reject him do so for coldly realist reasons. For instance, the Russian nurse Svetlana who

takes care of Tony's mother grew up in the Soviet Union and has no patience with American insecurity and nonsense. She sleeps with Tony one time, but then refuses any further sex because "I don't want to prop you up." The only way to defeat mobsters, Litt concludes, is to have this kind of self-awareness that makes gangsters look "pathetic" (Litt, 2019: 1–3).

NOTES

1. The expression "I heard you paint houses" refers to the work of a hitman, who paints rooms of houses red with the blood of his or her contract victims. According to Sheeran, Hoffa used the phrase when he recruited the Irishman. It's the first thing we hear Hoffa say in the film.

2. The phrase forget about it is used frequently by New York gangsters in the movie *Donnie Brasco*. Depending on the context, the phrase can mean approval, admiration, dismissal, disdain, or as Johnny Depp's character notes, sometimes it just means forget about it.

Chapter 3

Politics of Paranoia and Anger

Thriller and Action Movies

POLITICAL THRILLERS: SOMETHING IS ROTTEN IN THE STATE

Let's get right to it. The most exciting movies about politics are political thrillers. The political thriller puts the viewer into an unstable situation in which shadowy intrigue, manipulation of innocents, violence, and murder shape politics at the highest levels. Conspiracies encompassing government officials or outside actors seeking to change political outcomes feature prominently. Thrillers are second cousins of film noir: like their black-and-white predecessors, they posit worlds in which things are out of kilter, corruption and mendacity rule, and something is rotten in the state of Denmark. But they go further than noir films in directly attacking authoritarian regimes and corrupted democratic politicians or bureaucrats.

The baseline for all modern political thrillers is Costa-Gavras's *Z* (1969), which outlines the murder of an opposition party legislative "Deputy" (Yves Montand), and the subsequent investigation and disposition of cases, in an unnamed country that everyone knew was Greece. At the end of the opening credits is the giveaway: "Any similarity to real persons and events is not coincidental. It is intentional." Just as in the movie, popular Greek National Assembly member and opposition leader Grigoris Lambrakis was clubbed in the head by a man riding on a three-wheeled vehicle after speaking at a 1963 peace rally. He died in hospital five days later. The film shows right-wing politicians and police attempting to thwart the investigation, insisting that the Deputy was hit by a drunk driver.

The story continues: a hospital autopsy reveals the truth, and a magistrate charges two right-wingers for the assassination and several high-ranking

police officers for complicity. One of the Deputy's allies excitedly tells his grieving widow (Irene Pappas) about the indictments but, by her expressions, we see that she is skeptical that anything will come of it. The epilogue explains that government officials fire the magistrate, the assassins get only light punishment, and police officials just receive reprimands. The "colonels" junta that takes power in 1967 exonerates everyone involved, while internally exiling both the magistrate and a journalist who broke the story. The colonels ban almost all modern thought, as well as the roman letter Z, which protesters have adopted, as it as an abbreviation for the ancient Greek word Zei, or "He lives."

These plot points provide key themes for subsequent political thrillers. First, it presents government officials that do not care about the death of a good man because he opposed the government, but they make assassination possible by encouraging lowlifes to act against perceived enemies. Second, the death of this good man and the throttling of the investigation set the stage for an authoritarian takeover and the dismantling of democracy. Third, though the investigation goes ahead and produces indictments, justice is not served. Only low-level perpetrators serve any time, and even their sentences get commuted.

The film also resonates well with events of the 1960s. The tumultuous decade saw frequent military coups d'état and political killings throughout the developing world. In America, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Robert F. Kennedy, and Fred Hampton were greeted with shock and dismay. In the JFK, MLK, and RFK killings, public opinion polls showed large majorities did not accept official verdicts that no conspiracies were involved. Costa-Gavras was an avatar of the radical film movement of that decade, which optimistically promoted film as a vehicle to change politics. His formative years in Greece shaped his thinking: occupied by the Axis, plunged into a brutal post-World War II civil war, and then dominated by right-wing parties. His father's leftist activism meant that the young Costa-Gavras could not study in America, so instead he went to Paris, where he absorbed French radical thinking and innovative cinema. Where Costa-Gavras differed from his radical colleagues was his belief that serious movies should also be entertaining. Thus, *Z* is full of action, car chases, and fast-paced dialogue (Sharpe, 2018: 1–10).

This was just the beginning of Costa-Gavras' dissection of reality-based cases. *The Confession* (1970) takes another thinly veiled look at an actual case, the trial of a Czech vice foreign minister convicted of a host of trumped-up charges. The director said that he did not intend the film as anti-communist, but as an anti-totalitarian work. *State of Siege* (1972) examines the kidnapping and murder of a USAID official by Tupamaro urban guerrillas in Uruguay. The movie generated controversy for its depiction of

U.S. efforts to support oppressive Latin American governments. Both movies star Montand. Costa-Gavras' first Hollywood project, *Missing* (1982), describes efforts by Ed Horman (Jack Lemmon), a non-political father, to locate his missing journalist son Charlie in Chile after the 1973 military coup. He finds U.S. embassy staff unhelpful and learns of U.S. involvement in the coup. He returns to America empty-handed but angry, vowing to sue the U.S. government. We learn in a postscript that his son's body was returned to America seven months later, and so could not be autopsied. Horman's legal suit was dismissed.

Costa-Gavras has taken on a variety of other political and economic issues in recent decades, including a deep-dive into American right-wing extremism (*Betrayed*, 1988), the uncomfortable relationship between the Vatican and Nazi Germany during World War II (*Amen*, 2002), and the world of high finance after the Global Finance Crisis (*Capital*, 2012). One of his more commercial attempts was *Mad City* (1997), in which a sacked museum security guard, Sam Baily (John Travolta), takes the museum director (Blythe Danner) and several children hostage. A local newsman, Max Brackett (Dustin Hoffman) happens to be in the museum using the restroom. He sees this as a golden opportunity to advance his career and he manipulates Baily, telling him that he will help him get his story out to the world. But Brackett is unable to control his subject. After letting the hostages and Brackett go, Baily decides he cannot face life as a prisoner and cause humiliation for his wife, and so commits suicide by setting off his explosives. Brackett tells the other reporters outside, "we killed him," meaning news media exploitation led to Baily's death.

Z and Costa-Gavras's other films powerfully affected audiences and influenced various directors over the years. Alan Pakula's *The Parallax View* and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation*, both in 1974, were first out of the box. *The Parallax View* flawlessly channels the paranoia and sense of individual powerlessness that permeated many 1970s serious movies and takes an indirect approach to the still raw issues of the Kennedy assassinations. Star Warren Beatty is newspaper reporter Joe Frady who investigates mysterious deaths of witnesses to the assassination of a presidential candidate and senator, after his former girlfriend/reporter (Paula Prentiss) mysteriously dies. She had witnessed two "waiters" who killed the senator (one fell to his death, while the other escaped). Frady discovers that a Parallax Corporation recruits assassins, uses specially designed exams to identify useful sociopaths, and then conditions them with videos blurring the line between good and bad. Frady applies for and is accepted to work as a Parallax assassin.

Attempting to head off the assassination of another presidential candidate, he follows one of the assassins to a Los Angeles convention center. Trapped on the catwalk above a convention center just after the senator has been shot,

he realizes too late that he has been set up. Running toward an exit, he is shot by a Parallax killer. The assassins have left a second rifle that will be tied to Frady. A Congressional committee concludes that Frady's obsession with the earlier assassination led him to shoot the second senator. The movie echoes elements of 1960s assassinations: a whitewash committee that insists there is no conspiracy, a scapegoat/patsy set up to take the blame for the assassination, and mysterious deaths of witnesses after the assassination. To viewers, no doubt this sounded very much like the Warren Commission's findings in 1964.

Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* deals with the hot 1970s topic of electronic eavesdropping. Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) is a loner surveillance expert hired by a client ("The Director," played by Robert Duvall) to spy on his wife and a supposed boyfriend. Harry records them in a San Francisco square, and thinks they suspect that the client would kill them (he hears "he'd kill us if he got the chance"). Caul goes to the hotel room where the two were to rendezvous and thinks that he hears the client murder his wife. He later sees her alive and realizes that she has killed her husband. Using audio enhancement, he perceives that the couple actually said, "he'd kill *us* if he got the chance." Caul believes that he has an advantage in the surveillance game but when corporate representatives warn him that he is being monitored and not to pursue the matter further, he cannot find the company's bugging devices in his room. Like his surveillance targets, he is easily bested by shadowy sinister forces.

Sydney Pollack's *Three Days of the Condor* (1975) plays with contemporary themes of intelligence paranoia and American dependence on Middle Eastern oil. Joseph Turner (Robert Redford) works for a literary organization, which is a front for intelligence research. When he steps out to get lunches for himself and other staff members, a hit team led by contract assassin Joubert (Max Von Sydow) kills everyone in the organization. Turner calls his intelligence contact but, at an arranged meeting, is nearly killed, too. He uses his wits to evade Joubert while gathering information about secret CIA plans for securing oil resources. He questions at gunpoint the CIA Middle East deputy director, learning that one of Turner's reports included coded information that revealed an operation to seize control of Middle East oil fields.

Joubert gets a new contract to assassinate the deputy director, which cancels his contract on Turner. The hitman tells Turner that the CIA will try to kill him to remove an embarrassment. Turner finally meets Higgins (Cliff Robertson), the head of the New York CIA office, who has been pursuing him. Higgins reveals that the CIA has been playing contingency games about the Middle East and does not want them revealed. Turner tells him that he has just given all his information to *The New York Times*. After Watergate, the news media often appeared as filmic political saviors. Higgins is shocked

but does not think the *Times* will print it. Turner confidently replies, “They’ll print it,” to which Higgins answers, “how do you know?”

Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976) approaches the thriller from the standpoint of an alienated loner, and adds various film noir-like elements, such as light and shadow, steam rising from manholes, odd camera angles and the main character’s obsession/mental illness. The eponymous taxi driver is Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro). A confused young man who hates the filth and decay of 1970s New York City, he is unable to decide the direction of his life. He narrates his own descent into madness in voice-over, based in part on the diary of Arthur Bremer, who attempted to assassinate and seriously wounded Alabama Governor George Wallace in 1972.

Travis fails in courting Betsy (Cybill Shepherd), a campaign worker for Senator and presidential candidate Charles Palantine. He takes her to see a pornographic movie, greatly upsetting her. He asks a more experienced taxi driver, Wizard (Peter Boyle) what he should do, adding “I got some bad ideas in my head.” He vacillates between attempting to rescue Iris, an adolescent prostitute (Jodie Foster), and shooting Palantine. Thwarted in an assassination attempt by Secret Service agents, Travis kills Iris’s pimp Sport (Harvey Keitel) and two others in the building where Iris serves her johns. He ends by symbolically shooting himself with his bloody finger.

Scorsese has noted the religious imagery in the film, as Travis tries to be a “saint” who cleanses his mind and body, and then tries to rid New York of its evil. His killing of the pimp and his associates is the Good Friday before the Easter Sunday of his resurrection as hero who has saved the young girl. Some interpret the ending, in which Travis becomes a hero and returns to driving his taxi, picking up Betsy but not charging for her ride, as a dream-fantasy. The newspaper articles and letter from Iris’s parents do not seem genuine. Critics savaged the film’s apparent “happy ending,” though Scorsese had a more ironic agenda. A brief flash and discordant chord interrupts Bernard Hermann’s romantic end-credits theme while Travis drives away, as if to indicate Travis’s continued mental illness (Caron, 1997: 1–16).

The movie took a dark turn with one disturbed audience member, John Hinckley. In 1980, the loner obsessed over the story and concocted a plot to assassinate Ronald Reagan and thereby impress Foster. On March 30, 1981, Hinckley seriously wounded Reagan and four others. In a controversial verdict, he was found not guilty by reason of insanity. Congress changed the rules about use of the insanity plea in federal trials in 1984. In 2016, Hinckley was conditionally released from St. Elizabeth’s psychiatric hospital. Hinckley’s attempted assassination also revived controversies about whether films such as *Taxi Driver* encourage unstable young men to commit violent acts.

Brian de Palma's *Blow Out* (1981) also echoes the 1960s assassinations, though any political impact becomes muted by an overlay of forced thriller elements: a labyrinthian plot, an obsessed truth seeker, cynical reporters, mysterious (and barely believable) killings, and an over-the-top for-hire killer who enjoys his work a little too much and has an agenda of his own. The story centers on movie sound man Jack Terry (Travolta), who inadvertently records a car crashing into a river, which kills the Governor, a presidential hopeful. Jack rescues a young female escort Sally (Nancy Allen) from the river, who is the only witness to the accident. The Governor's aide tells Terry to forget about Sally but, while watching over her, he notices on the tape a shot just before the car plunges into a river. A rival politician had hired an operative named Burke (John Lithgow) to snare the Governor with compromising pictures, but instead he shot out the Governor's tire, causing the crash. Burke then tries to clean up the mess by killing Sally, but he has to make it look like a serial killer and so kills several other people in the process. In the end, Terry kills Burke, and then uses Sally's scream in a low-budget horror movie.

Salvador (1986), Oliver Stone's first major directorial effort, is loosely based on events in El Salvador and the career of photojournalist Richard Boyle during the early 1980s. Boyle cowrote the screenplay with Stone. In one of his defining performances, James Woods plays Boyle, down on his luck and virtually untouchable in the profession due to his arrogance, who thinks he can get great freelance work as the Salvadorean civil war heats up. He travels to the troubled country with his friend Doctor Rock (Jim Belushi), an unemployed disc jockey. Boyle reconnects with his old girlfriend Maria (Elpidia Carrillo), with whom he had a child. Boyle and Rock quickly learn that the United States is giving supplies to the Army.

Boyle witnesses the killing of Archbishop Oscar Romero during a mass, after which the Army opens fires on parishioners. Boyle meets with U.S. ambassador Thomas Kelly (Michael Murphy) to ask him to cut off aid to the regime but is quickly rebuffed and advised to leave the country. Boyle's friend, photographer John Cassady (John Savage), gets killed when the Salvadorean Army uses U.S. vehicles and aircraft to suppress rebels in the town of Santa Ana. Boyle manages to get Maria out of the country, but immigration officials pull her off a bus on a Southwestern U.S. highway. Boyle argues with them and gets arrested for obstructing their work. Maria agrees to deportation back to her country and later ends up in Guatemala.

Salvador came out at the height of the Reagan administration's interventions in Central America. It skewers U.S. support for the brutal Salvadorean regime, indicating a breathtaking lack of concern for how U.S. policies affected people on the ground but, curiously, it pulls its punches. Many of the more horrific incidents in the war are not mentioned. It also gets a few details

about the Salvadorean civil war wrong, such as conflating the assassination of Romero and the Army firing on worshippers.

Where Stone confronts American foreign policy from the Left, Tom Clancy novels and movies based on his characters take a more center-right conventional foreign policy approach and track changes since the 1980s. *The Hunt for Red October* (1990) came at the tail end of the Cold War era, as CIA analyst Jack Ryan (Alec Baldwin) sought a way for a Soviet submarine captain Marko Ramius (Sean Connery) to defect with his boat and crew to North America. While it is improbable that a Soviet sub would ever have defected, this is an exciting story. *Patriot Games* (1992) replaces Baldwin with Harrison Ford as Ryan. He thwarts IRA terrorists who are threatening London and saves his family in the process. “The Troubles” in Northern Ireland still were quite current, though no Americans had been killed in the IRA’s terror campaign.

Clear and Present Danger (1994) takes Ryan to Colombia to battle drug cartels. The cartels clearly constituted a present danger to both the Colombian government and U.S. Latin American policy, and uber-drug lord Pablo Escobar was on the run in the early 1990s. Ryan confronts the President about a conspiracy to make a deal with Escobedo (read Escobar), and then reveals the deal and its devastating effects on U.S. personnel in testimony to a Congressional oversight committee.

By 2002, Ben Affleck is the third Ryan in *The Sum of All Fears*. Now, the baddies are European neo-fascists who hope to start a war between Russia and America. They smuggle a small nuclear weapon into Baltimore to make it look like a Russian attack. Ryan finds out that the bomb could not have originated in Russia, and he works his contacts to prevent Russian forces from going on alert, as the U.S. president (Morgan Freeman) does the same. Fear of terrorists exploding a crude nuclear device or radiological “dirty bomb” in an American city has been a constant of the post-Cold War era, especially after the 9/11 Incident.

Twelve years later, Chris Pine is the fourth Ryan and is back to battling Russia in *Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit*. This came out at about the time that Putin’s government starting meddling in Ukraine and the Crimea. Kevin Costner plays Ryan’s handler, and Kenneth Branagh is Russian financier Victor Cherevin, who is trying to steal billions from Wall Street. The best role is reserved for Keira Knightley, playing Cathy Muller, Ryan’s new fiancé who takes an active part in the Moscow derring-do. *Without Remorse* (2021) is a backstory for one of Clancy’s major characters, John Clark (Michael B. Jordan). The story concerns, among other things, tracking down how SEAL team members were revealed and killed by Russian FSB operatives.

The Pelican Brief (1993) is a political thriller based on a John Grisham novel, and Alan J. Pakula directs. Darby Shaw (Julia Roberts), a law student,

has written a legal brief suggesting that two Supreme Court justices have been murdered so that oilman Victor Mattiece can drill in Louisiana land set aside to protect rare brown pelicans. An appeal will soon reach the Supreme Court, and the tycoon has pressured the President (Robert Culp) to appoint favorable justices. Shaw's law professor and lover gives the brief to the FBI before being killed.

No one knows the identity of the "law student" who wrote the brief. Shaw works with *Washington Post* journalist Gray Grantham (Denzel Washington) to discover other documents that confirm Shaw's speculations. The FBI director confirms to Grantham that the Pelican Brief was delivered to the White House, and that the president ordered the FBI to back off investigations. Mattiece and four of his Washington lawyers are indicted, and the President announces that he will not run for reelection. Talking to the press, Grantham does not confirm whether Shaw is a real person.

The story may have reflected then-current concerns about the state of the Supreme Court after the rocky confirmation fight for Justice Clarence Thomas in 1991, as well as the failed appointment of Robert Bork in the 1980s. The movie also shows the importance of young people in fighting corruption, as the protagonist (a young Roberts) takes up the struggle, not a senator or even the FBI director. As in real life during the Nixon or Trump years, the importance of independent news media is never clearer than in this story. The story suggests that it takes dedicated journalists such as Grantham to reveal serious rot at the core of government (Hagen, 2018: 1–3).

Newspapers came under tremendous financial stress as circulation and advertising revenues declined after the millennium. One film that promoted the continuing power of the press in this new era is *State of Play* (2009). It stars Russell Crowe as veteran journalist Cal McAffrey and Rachel McAdams as online reporter and blogger Della Frye. They are investigating the apparent suicide of a congressional researcher, Sonia Baker, in the Washington Metro. The case seems to be linked to killings of a thief and a homeless girl. Congressman Stephen Collins (Ben Affleck) claims to be distraught over Sonia's death, and is investigating PointCorp, a mercenary contractor for the U.S. military.

A PointCorp executive, Dominic Foy (Jason Bateman), on tape reveals to Cal that Sonia was supposed to keep tabs on Collins but fell in love with him and became pregnant. We learn that Collins has deep ties to PointCorp, and has apparently hired an assassin, a former soldier who served with him, to kill anyone challenging PointCorp. Police kill the assassin before he can shoot Cal. Cal writes a story about Collins's arrest on charges relating to the killings and gives Frye her first byline. The movie shows that the press still has power, despite its challenges, and news media outlets still serve as the people's sentinels.

CONSTRUCTIVISM, THRILLERS, AND ACTION MOVIES

Political thrillers show societies under stress, as political systems seek to maintain power via corruption and assassinations. Action films illustrate societies that are challenged by either internal or external forces that put pressure on the political system. Thrillers and action movies thrive on an intersubjective understanding of various film tropes. Paranoia and a fear of dark forces controlling politics shape audience perceptions of thrillers, while tropes about male loners seeking to save their country or community from insidious threats drive action stories. States and their national interests are directly challenged in many action films, and it is only the action hero and his (and occasionally her) associates who can preserve the state from being damaged or destroyed. Action heroes generally support state interests and so are inherently conservative, whereas thriller heroes often must take on the state to destroy corruption or a conspiracy lodged at the heart of politics. Action heroes tend to represent the dominant ethnic and gender identity of their countries; in America that means white male U.S. citizens. Thrillers focus on investigations led by white males, with women playing supporting roles and minorities becoming invisible.

Political thrillers and action movies illustrate changing norms in depiction of film political themes. The heyday of heavy political thrillers was the 1960s–1970s, when filmmakers were emboldened to challenge the official stories of major political crimes, such as the Lambrakis murder in Greece or the John F. Kennedy assassination in America. The killing of JFK still casts a long shadow over political thrillers on both sides of the Atlantic. Directors such as Costa-Gavras established the template for the classic political thriller, in which dark government forces manage to thwart sincere efforts to find the truth. Action movies, by contrast, arose out of earlier international intrigue films and police procedurals.

The 1980s saw the decline of the classic paranoid political thriller, replaced by hyperventilating thrillers centered on barely believable plots about corruption and foreign or domestic intrigue in high places. Though these stories are hardly credible, fifty years of undermined trust in government has allowed audiences to embrace such political fantasies. The 1980s also witnessed the rise of blockbuster conservative action movie. Body-building stars such as Sylvester Stallone or Arnold Schwarzenegger or buff new actors like Bruce Willis and Mel Gibson presented a bulked-up manhood far different from the non-working-out leading men of Hollywood's Golden Age. Feminists saw the advent of such films as a backlash against empowerment of African Americans and women.

As Cold War verities that had driven American foreign policy for decades withered in the early 1990s, action heroes faced more dangerous environments at home and abroad. Stories became filled with terrorists, drug lords, and corrupt high officials or military officers. Tom Clancy heroes went from fighting the Soviet Union to taking on Northern Ireland terrorists, Colombian drug cartels, European neo-fascists, and Russian oligarchs and gangsters. The relative weight of institutions shifted, as lone actors became more important than either police departments or the state security apparatus. Such lone wolves often were at odds with police authority or did not fully trust the police to arrest or prosecute criminals.

Women have made some progress in other genres, but they have found it hard to score decent roles as thriller or action heroes. The Kick-Ass Babe is a niche character that is a gender trap, in which a woman may be capable and ferocious, but she is largely there to serve as a visual spectacle for the audience, as much as to succeed as a heroine. That probably is why few women action hero movies produce sequels. Neither audiences nor movie studios take these ladies as seriously as they do their male counterparts. Women succeed much better as cross-genre movie heroines, such as in the science fiction/dystopia/action roles of Ellen Ripley, Katnis Everdeen, or Michelle in *10 Cloverfield Lane*. Ethnic minorities also do not fare so well in action roles, except for characters played by Wesley Snipes, who has been a consistent black action hero niche player. One might add Samuel L. Jackson, who has also appeared in several action films, though he does not specialize in them. The Blaxploitation films of the 1970s pointed the way to taking African Americans seriously in action and adventure, but the phenomenon was short-lived.

Can the Hulsman-Mitchell scheme that applies IR theories to characters from *The Godfather* work in thrillers or action films? In a general sense it can, though there is a sameness to plotlines in both kinds of films that makes singling out individuals more difficult. Thriller movie protagonists, for instance, are usually unabashed traditional liberals who seek to reveal corruption and conspiracies within government or business. Think the Magistrate in *Z* or Garrison in *JFK*. Their antagonists in government and the corporate world are usually shadowy and most likely offensive realists who take aggressive action to protect their interests. Take General Y in *JFK*. We barely get to know him, and he is just a cog in the wheel of conspiracy. Action heroes are more like neo-conservatives who directly confront their enemies, and action leads to a big fight at the movie's climax. Matrix in *Commando* or McClane in *Die Hard* are typical of these characters. They face off against foes that, as in thrillers, are usually offensive realists. Action movie villains often have bad guy muscle men who behave like neocons, too. Their hubris and recklessness

is usually their downfall, and they end up impaled in an industrial setting (Hulsman and Mitchell, 2009: 1–19).

Political Thrillers and Assassination: JFK and Political Conspiracy

Films about assassination plots like *Z* are the ultimate thrillers. The idea that one person or group could take out a key leader is both audacious and shocking. If it is a beloved leader, we hope that the assassin can be thwarted. If the plot succeeds, we feel outraged that an assassination could be allowed to happen, or we may think that a conspiracy was responsible. This is particularly true if the official story is incredible or makes no sense. If the leader is bad or the assassin clever or charismatic, we take a guilty pleasure in rooting for the killer. Classic movies take on our mixed feelings about assassins and their deadly work.

Movies from Hollywood's Golden Age express these mixed feelings about assassins and their deadly work. *All the King's Men* (1949), directed by Robert Rossen, is the best filmed version of a novel by Robert Penn Warren. It loosely mirrors the meteoric rise and spectacular demise of 1930s populist Huey Long, Louisiana governor and then senator before his assassination in 1935. Broderick Crawford won an Academy Award for his portrayal of Governor Willie Stark. Stark bullies his way to the top, buying off anyone who is a potential threat. When he defames a judge who gets in his way, causing the man to commit suicide, the judge's surgeon son cannot forgive the governor, shooting him and then being killed by the governor's assistant. An elephantine remake of the movie in 2006 starred Sean Penn as Stark. His fiery populist performance was the film's bright spot, while the other performers did their best with a limp script.

Suddenly (1954) shocked the public with a brazen plot by a hired rifleman to kill the president when his train stops in small California town. Frank Sinatra, in one of his most chilling roles, is John Baron, who takes a family and the local sheriff (Sterling Hayden) hostage so that he can gain a favorable vantage point and sniper's nest above the train station. Baron reveals that he is not concerned about the money, but the thrill of killing the president. Baron's two henchmen get killed, the last one attracting the attention of the president's security detail at the station. The president's train speeds through the station without stopping, leaving Baron incredulous. "It didn't stop," he cries. One of the hostages shoots Baron, and the sheriff picks up a gun and seriously wounds him. Baron begs for his life before succumbing to his wounds. After the Kennedy assassination, Sinatra reportedly asked United Artists studio to withdraw the film from circulation.

Sinatra also starred in one of the greatest Cold War thrillers, *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), directed by John Frankenheimer. This time, Sinatra plays

Army Major Bennett Marco, who seeks the truth about a Chinese-Soviet operation to brainwash American veterans to become sleeper assassins. Marco and a small unit are captured during the Korean War and subjected to mind control. The unit includes Raymond Shaw (Laurence Harvey), son of Eleanor Iselin (Angela Lansbury), who is married to anti-Communist politician John Iselin (James Gregory). Eleanor is Raymond's control, and she uses a game of solitaire to give instructions to Raymond. Raymond meanwhile falls in love with Jocelyn Jordan (Leslie Parrish), daughter of Senator Thomas Jordan (John McGiver), who strongly opposes Iselin. When Senator Jordan vows to block Iselin as vice-presidential candidate, Eleanor programs Raymond to kill him. In a trance, he shoots both the senator and Jocelyn.

Marco discovers that solitaire is the key and uses a special forced card deck to deprogram Raymond. Sent by his mother to shoot the presidential candidate at the national party convention, Raymond awaits in a high lighting booth. As Marco searches for him, Raymond shifts his telescopic sight away from the presidential candidate and instead shoots Iselin and then Eleanor. As Marco barges in on him, Raymond says, "You couldn't have stopped them, the army couldn't have stopped them. So I had to." He turns the rifle on himself, ending his tortured life. Marco and his girlfriend (Janet Leigh) later lament Raymond's death as Marco ponders an appropriate military citation for him: "Made to commit acts too unspeakable to be cited here by an enemy who had captured his mind and his soul, he freed himself at last and in the end, heroically and unhesitatingly gave his life to save his country. Raymond Shaw . . . Hell . . . Hell."

The Manchurian Candidate was well-received by both critics and audiences. Lansbury, who often played ostensibly "nice" characters, embodied one of the vilest female film villains. Her twisted relationship with Raymond contains hard-to-miss incestuous overtones as she manipulates and grooms him. After the Kennedy assassination, the film was not seen for several years, though United Artists claimed that this had nothing to do with the assassination. But an assassin firing a rifle mounted with a telescopic sight from a high perch may have been too uncomfortable for audiences, considering what happened in Dallas the year after the film was released. The movie also reflected then-recent revelations that Korean War POWs indeed had been subject to mental conditioning while in Chinese custody, and that sleeper agents could be trained for assassinations. John Iselin was based loosely on Senator Joseph McCarthy, who had led anti-Communist witch hunts in the early 1950s. The Communists' manipulation of the ultimate Anti-Communist is one of the film's juicy ironies.

Chapman asserts that the most potent messages sent by the movie were not about Communist brainwashing, but the "threats to democracy in the form of deception and false prophets" (Chapman, 2020: 221). The movie

does not call for slackening the anti-communist crusade, but to “broaden the scope” of the dangers facing Americans and, in doing so, implicitly excuses anti-communism (Chapman, 2020: 221). Television makes possible mass brainwashing by demagogues like Iselin far beyond anything that the Soviets or Chinese could devise. Eleanor’s bizarre relationship with her son reflects a common Cold War concern that moral degeneracy was undermining the institutions of society. J. Edgar Hoover and others urged women to take their motherly roles seriously. Many feared that over-mothering would weaken men, while women working outside the home would forsake their vital traditional job. Eleanor’s handling of Raymond makes him unable to engage in normal human relationships. He finds temporary solace in his love for Josie, but his mother destroys even that (Chapman, 2020: 222–223).

Like *All the King’s Men*, this film suffered a lackluster remake (2004). As the Cold War had ended, the entity brainwashing soldiers morphed into a huge corporation, and the soldiers were manipulated during capture in the Gulf War. While Denzel Washington channeled Marco’s manic craziness, the other actors seemed to be waiting for the screenplay to arrive. Meryl Streep was excellent as always as the mother, renamed Eleanor Prentiss Shaw, though she could not achieve Lansbury’s intensity.

The assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963 was one of the most terrible moments in American history. The nation was so traumatized by the event that Hollywood was reluctant to deal directly with the assassination for a decade after the events in Dallas. TV movies took on aspects of the assassination, such as *The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald* (1977), posing an alternative history involving trial of the alleged assassin, who was killed by strip club owner Jack Ruby two days after Kennedy was shot. This TV effort presented various evidence questioning Oswald’s role in the assassination but left the verdict up to the viewers. *Ruby and Oswald* (1978) attempted to show Ruby’s motivations for shooting Oswald. Both TV films pull their punches and neither comes to any startling conclusions.

Only one feature film took on conspiracies surrounding the incident in the years immediately after Dallas. *Executive Action* (1973) advances the thesis that a cabal of conservative businessmen (Will Geer, Robert Ryan and others) arrange the assassination via a black operations (black ops) expert James Farrington (Burt Lancaster), who hires three shooters and sets up Oswald as the patsy. Farrington in turn gets killed to protect the conspirators from any connection to the shooters. The movie was neither well-made nor popular, but it came out at a time of renewed public interest in the assassination. The motives of the conspirators are fuzzy, as they are upset about civil rights at home and appeasement abroad. Would those have been sufficient reasons to assassinate a president, when many right-wingers felt that those same issues were not handled much better during the Eisenhower administration?

The story does not explain key aspects of possible conspiracies, such as the viper's nests of New Orleans and Dallas plotting, the supposed assassination coverup, the president's botched autopsy, and the Warren Commission's rush to conclude that no conspiracy happened.

JFK (1991) is Oliver Stone's masterpiece, both as film art and *j'accuse* on the assassination. He listed Costa-Gavras's *Z* and Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), which looks at a crime from the perspectives of several witnesses, as key influences. Critics noted similarities to both *The Parallax View* and *All the President's Men*. The film blends staged scenes, simulated newsreels, and archival news footage so that audiences may not be able to distinguish truth from artifice. Stone presents Kennedy as a heroic figure, based on two sequences. The first is the prologue during the opening credits, narrated by Martin Sheen, in which JFK appears as a dedicated family man and genuine seeker of peace with the Soviet Union and in Vietnam. We know that the real Kennedy was a philanderer who frequently cheated on his wife Jackie, and he was a dedicated Cold Warrior. In the second scene, an anonymous government source, "X," based on Colonel Fletcher Prouty, former chief of special operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff and played by Donald Sutherland, explains the rationale for the conspiracy to Garrison on the Washington Mall. X suggests that Kennedy was set to remove U.S. forces from Vietnam and had already decided to withdraw a thousand advisers in 1963, but that the Military Industrial Complex wanted to keep the war going because it was good for defense contracting. The record is not as clear as Stone suggests, and historians continue to debate JFK's intentions in Vietnam (Stokes, 2013: 221–223, 227).

Some critics and historians castigated the movie's embrace of assassination conspiracies and support for New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison's controversial investigation and trial of Clay Shaw—the only indictment ever handed down relating to the assassination. Casting Kevin Costner as Garrison is a master stroke, as the actor brings to the role the credibility and honesty of his performances in then-recent films *The Untouchables*, *Field of Dreams*, and *Dances with Wolves*. Stone felt that Garrison was essential to the film as someone taking on the system, and he called his work a "counter-myth" to the flawed official investigations of the Warren Commission, the FBI and the Justice Department during the 1960s (Stokes, 2018: 224–225). According to polls, upwards of eighty percent of Americans have never accepted the official story that Oswald, a lone gunman, murdered the president, and that he was in turn killed by Ruby, also acting alone. The less flawed and more extensive U.S. House Select Committee on Assassinations investigation concluded in 1978 that the assassination was the result of a "probable conspiracy" involving at least two gunmen: one in the School Book Depository building and another on the "grassy knoll" overlooking the motorcade route. Faced

with two contradictory verdicts on the assassination, the public remained skeptical and confused.

Other critics attacked the vagueness of the purported conspiracy, as outlined by X. He suggests that the assassination plot began as discussions among military brass and military contractors. Then, a few months before the assassination, a call was made to “General Y,” who may have been legendary counter-intelligence/counter-insurgency boss General Edward Lansdale, X’s superior, to put together a hit that would take place somewhere in the South. The assassins are flown in from outside the United States and are placed at three or more locations in Dealey Plaza in downtown Dallas. Stone spends much more time and provides more detail on a second alleged conspiracy, that is, to thwart Garrison’s investigation and make it difficult to get a conviction. We see FBI agents pressuring a member of Garrison’s staff, we learn that Garrison’s offices were bugged, and we witness a determined effort in the news media to discredit Garrison’s character and honesty (Stokes, 2013: 224–227).

Despite all the criticism, the film is mesmerizing. Stone bombards the viewer with detail that both demolishes official deception and paints a picture of an unfolding coup d’etat. Joe Pesci is riveting as the tortured witness David Ferrie, a CIA asset and former commercial pilot who worked with anti-Castro Cubans. Garrison shows that Ferrie knew Oswald, and possibly Shaw and Ruby, as well. One of the most powerful scenes shows Garrison’s presentation of the conspiracy at the Shaw trial, intercut with footage of the shooters and the motorcade in Dealey Plaza and underlined by John Williams’s propulsive score. Garrison deftly demolishes the Single Bullet Theory, the key to the Warren Commission’s assertion that Oswald was the lone assassin (Stokes, 2013: 226–227). The jury acquits Shaw (Tommy Lee Jones), but jury members state that Garrison made a strong case for the conspiracy.

Stone’s film also demonstrates that film can change politics and policy. The film was both popular and engendered much discussion. It had an immediate affect that most historical movies seldom do. Running for President, Bill Clinton suggested that he wanted to know the truth about the assassination. There was an overwhelming public clamor for all remaining classified documents relating to the assassination to be released. Congress responded by passing the Kennedy Assassination Records Collection Act in 1992, which moved all relevant materials to the National Archives and set up a records review board to examine existing documents and release as many of them as possible. Between 1994 and 1998, roughly four million pages of documents came out. Most of the remaining documents were released by 2017, though the government kept classified status for a selection of documents (Harper, 2015: 1–4).

Later movies have dealt with selected aspects of the JFK murder. *Parkland* (2013) shows some of what happened in Dallas the day of the assassination, focusing on key people in and around the event. These include Abraham Zapruder (Paul Giamatti) whose film of the killing is the most complete record of the assassination, senior Secret Service Agent Forrest Sorrels (Billy Bob Thornton), Robert Oswald (James Badge Dale), brother of Lee Oswald, and FBI Agent James Hosty (Ron Livingston), who was in contact with Lee Oswald before the assassination. The movie's high point is the depiction of the Parkland Hospital staff's frantic but futile efforts to save Kennedy at Parkland Hospital, but the film adds little to common knowledge of the assassination.

Parkland neither strongly affirms the official story nor discusses any conspiracies. The movie omits the Parkland doctors' press conference, at which they described JFK's injuries: an entry wound in the neck and a blown-out occipital-parietal region; both injuries suggest that the shots came from the front, not the rear where Oswald would have been. The movie also falsely implies that Zapruder wanted *Life* magazine to suppress release of his film to the public, when the decision to publish only a few frames of the film was the magazine editor's alone (Ling, 2013: 1–4). A bootlegged copy of the entire Zapruder film was first shown to a shocked live ABC TV audience in 1975.

More recently, *Jackie* (2016) presents that assassination from the point of view of First Lady Jackie Kennedy (Natalie Portman), who was seated next to the president in the limousine when he was shot. The audience learns how events in Dallas affected Mrs. Kennedy. *Jackie* uses the framing device of Jackie's interviews with "the journalist" (a composite that includes journalist/historian Teddy White, and played by Billy Crudup), in which she recalled the assassination in gory detail and first referred to the Kennedy years as "Camelot." Robert Kennedy (Peter Sarsgaard), then Attorney General, tries to support Jackie as he grieves for his brother. The film falsely suggests that President Lyndon Johnson (John Carroll Lynch) and his wife Lady Bird (Beth Grant) were not very helpful to Mrs. Kennedy at that terrible moment. Jackie seeks the counsel of a priest (John Hurt) and reveals that she thought about suicide after the assassination. The movie does not include any major revelations about the events of November, 1963, nor does it discuss conspiracies surrounding them.

Also playing with assassination lore is *In the Line of Fire* (1993), a Wolfgang Petersen film starring Clint Eastwood as Frank Horrigan, an aging secret service agent who feels guilty for having not prevented the JFK assassination. Petersen even uses a young photo of Eastwood made to look like he was on the presidential protection team in November 1963. Thirty years later, Frank is determined to prevent a disgruntled former intelligence operative, Mitch Leary (John Malkovich) from killing the president as he runs for

reelection. Chased across Washington buildings, Leary kills Frank's partner (Dylan McDermot) but saves Frank. Frank gets booted off the presidential detail twice, but he saves the president by taking Leary's bullet in his bullet-proof vest. He chases Leary to a hotel glass elevator. Dangling over the edge, Leary lets go and commits suicide rather than be captured.

Attempted presidential assassinations have become a perennial plot device for action movies. For instance, the *Has Fallen* series plays up a succession of bad guys trying unsuccessfully to take out the president. The movies may be fun to some, but the over-the-top plots (and acting), hyper-violence and over-reliance on computer graphics do not allow the audience to take these stories seriously. *Olympus Has Fallen* (2013) presents an attack on the White House by North Korean terrorists. Of course, choosing North Korea makes sense: nobody likes North Korea, and a Russian or Chinese attack might spark a wee bit of criticism from those major powers. Secret Service Agent Mike Banning (Gerard Butler) has been moved off the presidential protection detail because he could not save the First Lady when the presidential limousine crashed. Though much of the White House is destroyed, while most of the president's staff and the South Korean president get killed off, Banning redeems himself by saving President Ben Asher (Aaron Eckhart) and subduing the North Koreans.

London Has Fallen (2016) is even more over the top, as Muslim terrorists linked to a Moroccan arms dealer destroy most of the major landmarks of central London, along with most of the G-7 (G-8 in the film) leaders. Banning spirits Asher away from the area, though escort helicopters are taken out by Stinger missiles, but the president gets captured, anyway. Banning manages to rescue him and with British and American security people kill dozens of terrorists. Most terrorist cells in Western countries have at most twenty or so active members, but this group manages to field hundreds of people, many of whom infiltrate London's famously honest police. Vice President Allan Trumbull (Morgan Freeman) handles things from Washington, sending in a special forces unit to kill the arms dealer. It's amazing that they were able to track him so quickly.

By the time of *Angel Has Fallen* (2019), Trumbull has become president, is on a lake fishing trip, and a tired and medicated Banning considers whether to accept an offer to become Secret Service director. Just then, a swarm of drones swoops in, killing all of the president's protection detail. Banning just barely saves the president, whose injuries put him in a coma (it's odd that he can swim under water before becoming comatose). The FBI suspect Banning as the culprit because they find evidence linking him to the crime in a van and at his house, and \$10 million has been transferred to an account in his name. Banning escapes his captivity and, while on the run, seeks to prove his innocence (a common action movie trope). We learn that Wade Jennings

(Danny Huston), Banning's old Army Ranger commander, heads a shadowy security firm, Salient Global. Jennings has made a deal with Vice President Martin Kirby (Tim Blake Nelson), now acting president, to make it appear that Russia was responsible and so spark a new Cold War. The FBI begins to believe Banning, who reaches a recovering Trumbull and puts him in a safe room in the hospital. He proceeds to kill most of Jennings's men, and finally takes out Jennings in a knife fight. Trumbull returns to office and has Kirby arrested. Banning decides to accept the Secret Service director's job.

FEAR AND CRIME IN URBAN AMERICA: *DIRTY HARRY AND DEATH WISH* MOVIES

American urban crime skyrocketed from the late 1960s to early 1990s. By the end of the 1970s, frequent stories of both run-of-the-mill muggings and robberies and horrific random violence spooked many Americans. Neither the federal nor local city governments seemed able to stop the crime wave, which worsened due to drug-related crime in the 1980s and 1990s. Americans wanted politicians to do something about violent crime, and politicians promised laws to strengthen law enforcement and impose tougher sentences for serious crimes. At the movies, people wanted heroes to vanquish the criminal crazies and restore order to America's streets.

Police procedurals constitute one of the oldest genres and have simple formulae. First, a terrible crime, most often murder, is committed. Other frequently depicted movie crimes are rape, bank robbery, and embezzlement. Second, police are stumped at first, but a resourceful investigator or team of investigators discover vital clues or witnesses that break the case open. Third, the investigator or team may go against police department procedures or orders, but this is necessary to solve the case. Fourth, the suspect or suspects often shoot it out with the police or FBI, and they may or may not be killed by police. Fifth, if arrested, the suspects are tried and sentenced. Justice must be seen to be done. Alternatively, justice was not done properly the first time, and the police need to make sure the second time that they can put away (or kill) the criminals. Procedurals became less popular by the 1970s, and audiences were ripe for police movies that pushed the boundaries of what police could do—or would allow private citizens to do. Meanwhile, police procedurals became the most popular TV genre in that decade.

Clint Eastwood found the perfect escape from typecasting as a Western movie antihero, teaming up with director Don Siegel in *Dirty Harry* (1971). Lichtenfeld notes that the character draws on Eastwood's Spaghetti Western Man with No Name: laconic, a man with a past, a man *of* the past, using police methods that cannot be condoned by modern civilized government,

and willingness to take violent action to protect the community (Lichtenfeld, 2007: 23–24). Harry Callahan is a tough and unorthodox San Francisco police detective who is tracking a serial killer called Scorpio (Andrew Robinson), based in part on the Zodiac killer of the late 1960s to mid-1970s. Callahan becomes increasingly frustrated by the police higher-ups and courts releasing hardened criminals on technicalities. In an iconic scene, while eating lunch he single-handedly confronts bank robbers, challenging one lying on the ground to go for his gun (saying he forgot how many shots he fired). Scorpio tries one crime too many, hijacking a bus with children. Harry jumps on top of the bus, and Scorpio flees to a quarry with a boy as hostage. Harry repeats his challenge and suggestion that he doesn't remember how many bullets he fired. This time, he has one bullet left and shoots Scorpio dead.

This first movie channeled public anger about police inability to take serious criminals off the street, plea bargains that allowed convicted criminals to serve light sentences, and courts letting off suspects on technicalities. President Richard Nixon had been elected in 1968 with promises to restore "law and order," though crime rates climbed throughout his presidency. Callahan was exactly the tough cop that ordinary Americans wanted, and they shared his anger at a criminal justice system that too often freed hardened criminals. The fact that such instances were rare and ethnic minority males accused of petty crime or drug offences were often unjustly jailed for long sentences did not seem to matter. People demanded action against the crime wave and politicians pandered to these feelings. We saw the same kind of reaction to crime in the 1990s, when Congress decided to get tough on crime by passing the Omnibus Crime bill that heavily criminalized drug offenses and resulted in disproportionate jailing of African Americans and Latinos.

Many commentators and critics have noted the essential conservatism of the piece, though Lichtenfeld feels that it is as much a paean to individualism and libertarianism. Callahan's frequent rebellions against authority in this movie and its sequels is more an assertion of his prerogative to act against criminals as he sees fit than it is a specific ideological agenda. In that sense, the franchise again harks back to Westerns, in which the law of the frontier often requires the sheriff to dispense justice in the most brutal ways available. Callahan makes snide remarks about police higher-ups and liberal judges, but he reserves his violence for Scorpio and other criminals. Like Marshal Kane in *High Noon*, he throws away his badge at the conclusion of the first film. In the end, Callahan's brand of justice may end in Scorpio's death, but it has not made the community safer or policing more effective (Lichtenfeld, 2007: 23–29).

The movie's success led to four sequels, which continued the conservative law and order direction set out in the first movie. Only the second movie, *Magnum Force* (1973) takes a mildly anti-police stance, as Callahan foils

a vigilante death squad of motorcycle cops set up within the police department. While Callahan wants to get tough on criminals, killing without legal sanction is too much for him. In the end, he must confront Homicide Lt. Neil Briggs (Hal Holbrook), who turns out to be leader of the group. Briggs tries to frame Callahan, who tosses a small bomb in Briggs's car at the port area where Harry has done away with the bad cops. As Briggs backs away, Callahan detonates the bomb. Callahan wryly notes, "A man's got to know his limitations."

The third film, *The Enforcer* (1976) shows the ever-conservative Callahan resistant to taking on a female partner, Inspector Kate Moore (Tyne Daly), but comes to respect her tenaciousness and support. They investigate a radical leftist organization, the People's Revolutionary Strike Force, that has killed several people, headed by Bobby Maxwell (DeVeren Bookwalter). This may have resonated with audiences, due to continuous news media attention to radical groups over the previous decade. The infamous Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) kidnapping of heiress Patty Hearst was only a couple of years in the past. The PRSF kidnaps the mayor at a Giants baseball game, taking him to Alcatraz Island and making demands that the city is about to grant. Moore frees the mayor but Maxwell mortally wounds her as she protects Harry. Callahan later uses an antitank weapon to kill Maxwell. Angry at the city government, he ignores the mayor's thanks and returns to Moore's corpse.

The next movie, *Sudden Impact* (1983) goes in a slightly feminist direction, as it focuses on Jennifer Spencer, a rape victim seeking revenge on the men who attacked her and her sister. Played by Eastwood's long-time girlfriend Sondra Locke, Jennifer makes us sympathize with her mental struggles and frustration that the justice system has failed her. Ironically, Locke later complained about her poor treatment by Eastwood, claiming that he pressured her to get two abortions and defrauded her as she sought to direct films. Eastwood denied these assertions. Locke went on to direct two films (Desta, 2018: 1-3).

The last and least successful Dirty Harry movie is *The Dead Pool* (1988). The film could be taken as negative comment on celebrity, news media coverage of the police, and obsessive fandom. Harry starts out angry at both the mob and the news media. Callahan is becoming famous for cases involving organized crime, and a jailed crime boss orders a hit on him. Harry threatens the mobster, who calls off the hit. Celebrities are being killed in the Bay Area, and it appears that there is a "dead pool" game, wherein participants bet on the deaths of important people. Harry destroys a television camera tailing him. As part of a settlement, he must work with reporter Samantha Walker (Patricia Clarkson). Callahan discovers that a crazed fan has committed all the murders. The fan kidnaps Walker, but Harry evades him, eventually impaling him with a harpoon gun and freeing Walker.

Charles Bronson became another kind of antihero in the *Death Wish* movies. Directed by Michael Winner, the first movie in 1974 touched a nerve with audiences. Bronson plays Paul Kersey, a New York architect. One day, three thugs invade his house, brutally raping his daughter Carol and viciously beating his wife Joanna, who dies at the hospital. A few days later, a grieving Paul fights back against a mugger, feeling energized. Traumatized by her experience, Carol turns catatonic and must be sent to a mental hospital. At night, Paul confronts another mugger, shooting him but feeling sick. On subsequent nights, Paul shoots several other thugs.

Police inspector Frank Ochoa (Vincent Gardenia) narrows vigilante suspects down to relatives of recent crime victims and veterans. He is about to arrest Kersey when the district attorney suggests that Paul be left alone. Because of the recent killings, violent crime rates have dipped, but the prosecutor is worried that exposing Paul could cause a wave of vigilantism. Ochoa does not like the idea but agrees to scare off Paul instead. Ochoa follows Kersey as he confronts three muggers, killing two of them, but being wounded in the leg by the third. Kersey challenges the mugger to a Western-style shootout, but collapses from loss of blood. The mugger escapes, and a policeman gives Kersey's gun to Ochoa. In the hospital, Ochoa offers to lose the gun if Paul leaves New York. In the last scene, we see Paul being greeted by a company representative as he arrives at Chicago's Union Station. Paul sees a young woman being harassed by thugs. He tries to help her as the men run away, making obscene gestures. Paul smiles and points a finger gun at them.

Death Wish II (1982) returned to the home invasion and reaction motif, as Kersey now lives in Los Angeles with his catatonic daughter and new girlfriend, Geri Nichols (Bronson's wife Jill Ireland). Thugs break into his house, raping and killing his housekeeper. When Kersey returns, they beat him, and then kidnap and rape his daughter. She wakes up from her coma, tries to escape but falls and gets impaled on a fence. Kersey goes after the criminals, while Ochoa visits LA to try to quietly stop him.

The decline of the franchise can be seen in the remaining films. *Death Wish III* (1985) finds Kersey returning to New York, and happening upon one of his best friends, a Korean War veteran, dying from a gang attack. Kersey buys a hunting-style pistol and hunts down all the gang members. *Death Wish 4: The Crackdown* (1987) has Kersey back in LA. The movie starts with death of his girlfriend's daughter. A wealthy tabloid publisher Nathan White, who also lost a daughter to drugs, assists Kersey to track down two drug gangs. After much mayhem, Kersey dispatches all the major drug figures, along with a man posing as White. *Death Wish 5* (1994), the most negatively reviewed of the series, has Kersey going after mob figures who have killed his new girlfriend (who formerly was a mobster's girlfriend). The series was rebooted

in 2018 as *Death Wish*, a tepid film about a doctor played by Bruce Willis. He lives a double life as a surgeon and vicious avenger.

Paul Kersey is a vigilante, plain and simple, but one with whom audiences sympathize. The movies play on legitimate fears of home invasion, which thankfully is a rare crime in America (or most developed countries). By the 1980s, real vigilantes were attracting new media attention. The most famous was Bernard Goetz, who in 1984 shot four youths that were demanding money from him on a New York subway train. He was charged with attempted murder, criminal physical assault, and possession of an illegal weapon. His attorney was able to successfully argue self-defense. A jury convicted him only of the gun charge, and Goetz served just eight months in prison. He became a minor celebrity, and even acted on two television programs. In 1996, he lost a civil suit to one of the youths he shot, who was awarded \$43 million (Smail, 2020: 1–3).

Lichtenfeld feels that Kersey's tale is more profoundly conservative than Callahan's because it involves a powerful origin story: the brutal killing of his wife and rape of his daughter. The audience reacts in horror along with him, and they want vengeance, too. Ochoa and other police investigators are more his adversaries than the thugs he chases at night. But Ochoa is constrained by New York politicians and so cannot arrest or prosecute Kersey. For his part, Kersey often seems less interested than Callahan is condemning liberals, and more determined to convert them to his point of view. His girlfriend in *Death Wish III*, a criminal defense attorney, basically agrees with him, noting "sometimes I feel like I'm on the wrong side, defending creeps." The franchise's conservatism is also blunted by making many of the thugs white, so that the films cannot be accused of being anti-minority (Lichtenfeld, 2007: 33–37).

RUNNING FROM EXPLODING BUILDINGS: ACTION MOVIES TAKE OFF

Action movies usually draw from a concoction of elements, as Lichtenfeld lists them. These include a loner hero; battling for justice or the law; a murdered best friend or love interest; vengeance for crimes done to him; a "burden he must live with," such as his being best at something; a past that the hero wants to live down; and dealing with government bureaucracy that has betrayed or sacrificed him. Some of the stock film elements we see over and over include: industrial locales for climactic action, "visually exotic killings," use of impressive weaponry, resort to one-liners and tag lines, destructive car chases, and, of course, a "depraved enemy." And we must not forget frequent

explosions, often of buildings which the hero runs from just as they are about to go up. Action films also draw on tropes from Westerns, film noir, and gangster movies (Lichtenfeld, 2007: 1–6). The industrial settings are particularly noteworthy, as they appear in most action movies of the 1980s and 1990s.

The 1980s and 1990s were the first heyday of action films. Most of the movies contained quite simple plots, black-and-white morals, and good guys versus bad guys. They were routinely popular and made stars of such actors as Bruce Willis and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Arguably the big-budget action films begins with a period story, Steven Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), in which fortune hunter and professor Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) tracks down the lost Ark of the Covenant, which French archeologist and Jones's rival Rene Belloq (Paul Freeman) is excavating for the Nazis. The Nazis retrieve the artifact from Egypt, but apparently have not listened to Ark lore. Belloq tries to open the Ark and gain its powers, but it sends out energy beams that kill him along with all the Nazis—and melt the face of a vile Gestapo agent—while leaving Jones and his on-again, off-again paramour Marion Ravenwood (Karen Allen) untouched because of their purer motives (and because they close their eyes). Spielberg directed three sequels through 2008, which take Indy to China, India, and the Middle East before World War II, and South America during the Cold War.

Sylvester Stallone was one of the most active action heroes in the 1980s. His Rambo franchise (discussed in chapter 5) produced three mega-hits during the decade. He also starred in George Cosmatos's *Cobra* (1986), a very stylized police procedural/actioner in which virtually everything becomes a fashion statement for Stallone, from the matchstick in his mouth, aviator sunglasses, and black leather jacket to the “cool” 1950 Mercury car that he drives and—appropriately—crashes in the film. The car actually belonged to Stallone (Tasker, 2013: 124–125). His stylized costuming hides the Cobra character, and so he seems almost machine-like: barely articulate, faster on the draw (an obvious reference to Westerns), and able to get rid of the worst of the bad guys by pushing him into an industrial furnace (Lichtenfeld, 2007: 71–75).

Schwarzenegger became a star as he made several action or action/sci-fi films. One of his most famous is *Commando* (1985), in which the Austrian plays John Matrix, a former U.S. Special Forces colonel. All the former members of his group have been killed. He and his daughter Jenny (Alyssa Milano) are kidnapped and brought before Arius, a former South American strongman who wants to get back into power. If Matrix will assassinate a rival, Arius will return his daughter to him. Matrix turns on his attackers. With the assistance of Cindy (Rae Dawn Chong), a young woman he forces to help him at the airport, he goes to Arius's island compound to rescue Jenny. He kills Arius and most of his men, then has a lengthy fight with Bennett, an

Australian who left Matrix's unit and betrayed his fellows. Matrix impales him on a steampipe. As U.S. forces arrive on the island, Matrix leaves with Jenny and Cindy. Of course, how can Cindy resist Matrix? His physique, weaponry, and skills are far beyond any other mortal human.

This is not exactly subtle stuff, and it clearly presents Latin America as a region of dangerous, treacherous thugs who cannot be trusted and will kidnap or kill anyone who gets in their way. The bad guys are one-dimensional cardboard characters, and the henchman that Matrix kills are too stupid to take cover as Matrix wields an M-60 machine gun. Schwarzenegger made several other action or science fiction/action movies through the beginning of the millennium, when he got elected Governor of California. *Commando* set the template for his character: mono-dimensional, bigger-than-life, tough but slightly sweet, always popping off tag lines. John McTiernan's *The Last Action Hero* (1993) even tried (unsuccessfully), a tongue-in-cheek, ironic, self-referential examination of his whole subgenre.

Lichtenfeld notes that Schwarzenegger's roles in the 1980s–1990s tended to present him (like Stallone) as a kind of machine. The various Terminators that Arnold plays are cyborgs, so do not count as humans. This was one of the first sci-fi franchises to pit humans against relentless androids bent on destruction of humanity. The franchise may reflect conservative fear of economic decline in the 1980s, and it posits uncontrollable technology as the enemy which will destroy human civilization. The Terminator's inarticulateness, reticence to communicate, resort to a vast array of weapons, and overwhelming physique mark it as an Other that cannot be comprehended or reached. The second Terminator movie turns this on its head with another Terminator sent back to help Sarah Connor and her son (Lichtenfeld, 2007: 78–81).

Much more human-centered than Schwarzenegger's tales is the *Die Hard* series that has stretched across four decades. Part of its success has been its Everyman with family issues who takes no baloney off anyone, including his bosses. He is "vulnerable, regretful, wisecracking," from exasperation, not due to any sense of irony (Lichtenfeld, 2007: 165). The series reflects contemporary public concerns about foreign terrorists and criminals using the vulnerabilities of the system and ripping off America. The movies' central character, John McClane (Bruce Willis), is a hardened, trash-talking cop who often takes on his own bosses and struggles with his marriage to Holly (Bonnie Bedella). McClane works in confined spaces, industrial settings are prominent in all of these films, and he gradually strips down as the story goes on, as if to emphasize his growing savagery (Lichtenfeld, 2007: 161–166).

The first movie, *Die Hard* (1988), made Willis a star. It is a simple story of a group of East German terrorists, led by Hans Gruber (Alan Rickman) taking over a high-rise business center during a company Christmas Eve party. McClane has come to LA to reconcile with his wife but gets separated from

her as the celebrants are taken hostage, and he takes refuge in the building. He wages a one-man battle against the terrorists, finally dispatching Gruber by shooting him and sending him falling off the building to his death. The battered McClane reunites with Bonnie as he leaves the building.

Die Hard 2 (1990) is about a plot by rogue former Special Forces members to take over Dulles Airport. McClane spends much of the movie unable to convince authorities about the seriousness of the threat against the airport. The terrorists disable air traffic control and turn off night lights, so that planes cannot land. They intend to smuggle drug lord and former dictator of Val Verde, Ramon Esperanza (Franco Nero), out of the country. McClane thwarts most of their plans. As they try to escape in a 747 cargo plane, McClane ignites a trail of fuel to the plane, blowing it up. The circling commercial airliners then use the fire as a beacon to land. McClane again rejoins Holly, who is on one of the planes.

Die Hard with a Vengeance (1995) shifts back to New York City. Another German terrorist, this time Jeremy Irons as Peter Gruber, begins toying with police. He claims to be “Simon,” playing a game of Simon Says and requiring McClane to search for clues throughout Manhattan. McClane teams up with a reluctant Zeus Carver (Samuel L. Jackson) from Harlem as they try to prevent other bombings. McClane discovers that Gruber is using the game as a ruse and seeks to steal the gold from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. He and Carver thwart Gruber’s apparent plans to place the gold onboard a ship, but then realize that the gold is being taken to Canada to distribute to gang members. They stop the gang and kill Gruber as they destroy his helicopter.

Live Free or Die Hard (2007) was the highest-earning movie of the series. Now, the villains are computer hackers who try a mass attack on government and corporate computers, to provoke a “fire sale” of chaos across America. The FBI asks McClane for help in locating a major hacker, Matt Ferrell (Justin Long), who can assist their fight. Thomas Gabriel (Timothy Olyphant) is a former Defense Department analyst who has put together a team of cyber-terrorists. Gabriel kidnaps Ferrell and McClane’s estranged daughter Lucy (Mary Elizabeth Winstead). McClane nearly gets killed as he drives to find Gabriel, who gets wounded in the shoulder before he finally shoots Gabriel.

A Good Day to Die Hard (2013) was not well reviewed but did respectable box office business. Now, McClane is in Moscow, where his son Jack (Jai Courtney) has been accused of murder. Jack gets broken out of jail by supporters of a Russian oligarch, Yuri Komorov (Sebastian Koch). It turns out that Jack is a CIA operative who has been gathering information on Komorov. Father and son go after Komorov and his daughter, Irina. Jack throws Komorov off a building into helicopter rotors. The helicopter later crashes, killing Irina. Not a very happy ending, that.

A second major action franchise, the *Lethal Weapon* movies, was of shorter duration. It is closer to police procedural than other films discussed here. Police procedurals dominated the action genre before the 1980s, giving audiences heroes focused on police efforts to solve crimes or break up criminal conspiracies. *Lethal Weapon* is also a variation of buddy-cop sub-genre, where two squabbling cops come to respect and even love each other. In *Lethal Weapon* (1987), homicide detective Roger Murtaugh (Danny Glover) nears retirement, and gets paired with younger and borderline suicidal narcotics officer Martin Riggs (Mel Gibson). They investigate the apparent suicide of Amanda Hunsaker (Jackie Swanson) whose father served with Murtaugh in Vietnam. It turns out that Hunsaker fell in with a heroin smuggling ring led by a retired general (Mitchell Ryan). This is one of several 1980s films that presented Vietnam veterans as mentally unstable and potentially dangerous.

Next, in *Lethal Weapon 2* (1989), Murtaugh and Riggs probe a truckload of stolen krugerrands and immediately somebody targets them. They team up with a loud-mouthed informer, Leo Getz (Joe Pesci), and gradually discover that the South African consul, Arjen Rudd (Joss Ackland), operates a smuggling ring in America to funnel funds to South Africa. His chief henchman admits that he killed Riggs's wife some years before, and he murders Rudd's secretary, liberal South African Rika van den Haas (Patsy Kensit), with whom Riggs has started a romantic relationship. In the final confrontation at Rudd's ship, Riggs drops a cargo container on the henchman. Rudd tries to claim diplomatic immunity, but Murtaugh shoots him, anyway.

In the 1980s, the white South African regime was perhaps the world's most unpopular, due to its decades-long apartheid policy that suppressed the black majority. Audiences were likely to cheer on Murtaugh and Riggs for taking on this unusual villain. How often is a consul or ambassador a movie villain? Things were about to change, though. The next year, African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela was released from prison and began to negotiate with President F. W. de Klerk for the end of apartheid, which came about in national elections in 1994.

Lethal Weapon 3 (1992) finds Murtaugh about to retire. He and Riggs join with internal affairs investigator Lorna Cole (Rene Russo). After much sexual tension, Riggs and Cole begin an affair. A rogue cop, Jack Travis (Stuart Wilson), is smuggling guns on the black market. Murtaugh shoots one of the smugglers, not knowing he is a good friend of his son. In the big confrontation, Travis tries to run down Riggs with a bulldozer, hiding behind the blade, but Murtaugh throws Riggs a gun with armor-piercing rounds. He shoots Travis through the blade. Cole has been shot but was wearing a bullet-proof vest and is only wounded. Riggs confesses his love for her, and Murtaugh decides to stay with the force.

In *Lethal Weapon 4* (1998), Murtaugh and Riggs take on a Chinese illegal immigrant smuggling ring. A Chinatown crime boss Benny Chan (Kim Chan) and a Triad negotiator Wah Sing Ku (Jet Li) are their principal adversaries. Ku is negotiating for the release of underworld figures the Four Fathers, but he then kills Chan and other crime figures when he feels they are no longer useful. The big fight occurs in a warehouse in a fire, the police vs. the Triads and forces of a corrupt Chinese general. The Triads finish off the general, and then Riggs and Murtaugh kill Ku. Riggs races to the hospital, where he quickly marries Cole before she gives birth to their son. Nearby, Murtaugh's daughter gives birth to a daughter by police detective Lee Butters (Chris Rock).

The first movie is darker than the others, though the second one sees Riggs's girlfriend murdered. The latter movies are increasingly "cartoonish," playing up the humor. Riggs, as the central character, is unique in the degree of personal turmoil and suicidal tendencies he expresses from the beginning. He is the ultimate warrior, combining both martial arts and weapons skills, and a Vietnam vet who has been seriously scarred, a la Rambo. He even has a shoulder he can dislocate to get out of tight spots. Riggs's body expresses his vulnerability and uncertainty, as he is unsure what to do when he first visits Murtaugh's family. He also effectively uses humor at various times in the movies, helping underline the Buddy Movie aspect, in this case a growing trend for interracial buddy films. Riggs and Murtaugh frequently bicker but come to respect and love each other. Riggs gets softened by his marriage to Cole and subsequent fatherhood (Lichtenfeld, 2007: 116–122).

The 1990s saw a profusion of other action movies, all of which were immensely entertaining, though some of them were barely plausible. The audience's willing suspension of disbelief is a prerequisite for such films. An example is Michael Bay's *The Rock* (1996), which has a rogue general (Ed Harris) seizing chemical weapons, taking control of Alcatraz Island, and threatening to wipe out the population of San Francisco if his demands are not met: \$100 million to be paid to men who served under his command on clandestine missions, or families of the dead. FBI Special Agent Stanley Goodspeed (Nicholas Cage) teams up with an imprisoned former SAS captain John Mason (Sean Connery) to infiltrate the former prison and take out the weapons before a rapid reaction force kills everybody on the island. John Woo's *Face/Off* (1997), gives the audience a career criminal (Travolta) and his police investigator nemesis (Nicholas Cage), who have both had plastic surgery and now have, in effect, switched faces. The police believe that the bad guy is really the good guy, and vice versa. As in other Woo efforts, the action itself is the star, but is only slightly more believable than the premise.

Even more ridiculous was *Con Air* (1998), another Cage vehicle. Retired Army Ranger Cameron Poe (Cage) has been serving time for involuntary manslaughter and just wants to get home to his wife. He is paroled and given a ride on a prison transport plane, which is then seized by prisoners on their way to a maximum security prison. The smartest among them is Cyrus “The Virus” Grissom (John Malkovich), who intends to fly the plane to a country without an extradition treaty with the United States, Poe must play a double game of pretending to cooperate with the convicts while secretly leaving clues for the authorities so that he is not implicated in their crimes. Meanwhile, U.S. Marshal Vince Larkin (John Cusack) picks up Poe’s clues and tries to stop the government from shooting down the plane. The aircraft gets forced down on the Las Vegas strip, and there ensues a wild chase in which all but one of the remaining convicts get killed. Poe’s gets freed and he meets his daughter for the first time.

Stallone and Schwarzenegger have kept their brands going well into their Sunset years. Stallone revived his Rambo franchise (see war movies) and created a new series for aging action heroes back in the saddle again, *The Expendables* (2010–2012). Schwarzenegger appeared in these movies, and he has been in a string of his own post-gubernatorial action movies, usually involving dubious law enforcement methods. Now elderly, neither action icon commands a beautiful body anymore. Now, their action is a nostalgia tour, in which we root for powerful heroes from the past.

BETRAYAL AND HIDDEN IDENTITY: MISSION IMPOSSIBLE AND BOURNE FILMS

Mission: Impossible (1966–1973) is one of the best thriller-suspense television series of the Cold War era. Its stories are about an Impossible Mission Force (IMF) that undertakes technology-driven missions to manipulate or destroy key enemies of America. Led by Jim Phelps (Peter Graves) for all but the first season, the team possesses unique technical specialties and works with clockwork precision. Requests for missions are delivered by self-destructing tapes, noting that “the secretary will disavow” any activities if members are caught or killed (it never specifies which secretary this is—Defense or State; in the movies, it is a special secretary). In the first four seasons, adversaries were usually foreign entities or authoritarian leaders in the developing world. Those first four seasons contain a clear Cold War subtext, though actual Communist regimes are not mentioned. Developing countries are presented as inherently dangerous and unstable, and headed by mercurial leaders. In the last three seasons, targets are most often organized

crime figures (called “the Syndicate” or “underworld”), as these domestic stories were cheaper to film.

Hollywood took the IMF in completely different directions. So far, there have been six popular movies, with a seventh to be released in 2023. All have starred Tom Cruise as lead IMF agent Ethan Hunt. The first film, *Mission: Impossible* (1996), directed by Brian DePalma, upset cast and fans of the original TV series, as leader Phelps (Jon Voight) is now a traitor who set up the IMF team to be killed while on a signature technology-focused mission in Prague. At first, Hunt thinks that either a rogue CIA agent or the Russians were responsible, but finally realizes that the danger is within his own unit. He steals key information from a CIA computer while floating above the floor on ropes, in a scene borrowed from heist movie *Topkapi* (1964). On the TGV train, Hunt transmits video to CIA agent Kittridge implicating Phelps. A visually arresting sequence in the Channel Tunnel has Hunt foiling Phelps’s attempt to escape the train and board a helicopter. The helicopter crashes, killing Phelps and the pilot (Jean Reno), who had been working with Hunt to steal the CIA information.

Mission Impossible 2 (2000) is perhaps the weakest of the series. The story involves an IMF agent, Sean Ambrose (Dougray Scott), who goes rogue and steals a terrible bioweapon, the Chimera virus, that kills within thirty-six hours by destroying red blood cells; he also has its antidote, Bellerophon. Hunt assembles a team to go after Ambrose, and enlists Ambrose’s former girlfriend, Nyah Nordoff-Hall (Thandiwe Newton) to get information on him. Ambrose injects her with the disease, and she is about to commit suicide to prevent its terrible effects, when the team rescue her and give her the antidote. The story ends in a bravura motorcycle chase and hand-to-hand combat between Hunt and Ambrose, with Hunt shooting his opponent at the last moment. This movie reflects news media and public fears of bioweapons falling into the hands of terrorists. An anthrax scare after the 9/11 attacks heightened these fears.

Mission Impossible III, or *M.I. III* (2006) is dramatically much better. In the wake of 9/11 and various bio-threats, the story seems more relevant. Hunt has something to fight for, namely his new wife Julia Meade (Michelle Monaghan). Hunt and team go after Owen Davian (Philip Seymour Hoffman), who is trying to acquire a briefcase holding bioweapons secrets, called the Rabbit’s Foot. Davian works with a shadowy group of ex-intelligence operatives called the Syndicate to sell the Rabbit’s Foot to terrorists. The IMF capture Davian, who refuses to reveal anything about the Rabbit’s Foot and promises Hunt that he will kill his wife in front of him. The team find the Rabbit’s Foot in Shanghai, but Hunt is captured and an explosive device inserted into his head. It appears that Davian executes Julia, but it is actually Davian’s assistant masked. Hunt escapes and kills most of Davian’s

men before the villain is killed by an oncoming car. He finds Julia at another location. While he defibrillates himself to neutralize the device in his head, Julia uses a pistol to shoot Davian's remaining man and a CIA agent who has gone rogue. As CIA employees congratulate them, Hunt and his bride leave for their honeymoon.

Mission Impossible—Ghost Protocol (2011) is one of the series' strongest efforts. Hunt has faked his wife's death, so that she cannot be harmed by any enemies. Hunt and team search for a shadowy agent called Cobalt, who is Kurt Hendricks (Michael Nyqvist), a Swedish scientist working for Russia. He is trying to obtain Russian nuclear launch codes to provoke a nuclear war with the United States. They fail to find him in Moscow, where he detonates a bomb that destroys much of the Kremlin, in order to steal the codes. He plans to sell the information to a French assassin, Sabine Moreau (Lea Seydoux). The IMF team set up fake meetings for both Hendricks and Moreau. The assassin gets wise to it; captured, she falls out the hotel window to her death, but Hendricks escapes with the codes. The IMF team trace Hendricks to India, where he tries to do a deal with an Indian billionaire for control of a Russian satellite he can use to signal Russian missiles to launch. Hunt finds Hendricks, kills him, and manages to disable a missile fired from a Russian sub at San Francisco.

Mission Impossible—Rogue Nation (2015) continues the IMF's battle with the Syndicate. Neither the CIA nor British MI6 acknowledge the Syndicate's existence. A rogue British intel operative named Solomon Lane (Sean Harris) now turns into a terrorist to shake up the system he has come to despise. Hunt and crew trick the prime minister (Tom Hollander) and later the head of MI6 (Simon McBurney) to admit that the Syndicate was set up to allow sensitive missions to be performed without oversight. Hunt manages to steal data allowing access to the Syndicate's secret budget, and he gets team member Benji Dunn (Simon Pegg) released from Lane's custody. The film's requisite climatic chase ensues, and Lane is trapped by the IMF team in a bullet-proof glass box in which he is gassed. The CIA director Alan Hunley (Alec Baldwin) agrees to reinstate the IMF.

Mission Impossible—Fallout (2018) continues with Lane as principal adversary. This time, Hunt and crew track down a supply of plutonium seized by a terrorist group of Syndicate members called the Apostles. They fail to get the plutonium back in Eastern Europe, and turn to mysterious broker Alanna Mitsopolis, also called the White Widow (Vanessa Kirby) to trade the plutonium for Lane. Hunt and his team seize Lane first. A CIA operative August Walker (Henry Cavill) is sent along on the mission by CIA director Erika Sloane (Angela Bassett), but it turns out that Walker is actually working for Lane—and the White Widow is cooperating with the CIA. The villain plants two nuclear devices in Kashmir, where an explosion could destroy the

hydrological system for a third of humanity. The team, along with a remarried Julia, disarm the bombs. In the climatic chase sequence—this time across the rugged Kashmir landscape in helicopters—Hunt must fight Walker to obtain the detonator which, of course, he does before Walker falls to his death. Julia tells Hunt that she has no regrets, and that Hunt gave her the wonderful life she is leading.

One reviewer suggests that the MI movies are a robust statement in favor of the Anglo-American alliance. American and British intelligence operatives work hand-in-glove, albeit with some high-level tension. One of the villains is a British arms merchant called Max (Vanessa Redgrave), but she has no connection with the government. *MI2*'s villain is a former American insider, and the movie features fear of large pharmaceutical companies. Like many movies after the millennium, *Ghost Protocol* gives us Russian bad guys, and British techie Benji becomes part of the MI field team. *Rogue Nation* borrows liberally from British James Bond films, and the British villain is angry because he has been rejected by British intelligence. *Fallout*'s focus on a race to head off nuclear disaster may echo recent concerns about terrorists getting their hands on nukes, though director Christopher McQuarrie denies this (Murphy, 2018: 1–18; Kurtz, 2018: 1–3).

Robert Ludlum's Bourne novels proved sure-fire box office hits after the millennium. The novel series considers fears going back to the brainwashing issue of the 1950s: that the government might be secretly training agents who would commit crimes for the state without being fully aware of what they were doing. The first movie, *The Bourne Identity* (2002), directed by Doug Liman, stars Matt Damon as Jason Bourne, a man suffering amnesia and lacking an identity. He accesses a Swiss bank safe-deposit box and finds various passports and identity cards. Going to the U.S. consulate in Zurich, he is pursued by Marines and security people. He escapes and offers to pay a German woman, Marie Kreutz (Franka Potente) \$20,000 to drive him to Paris, where he apparently has an apartment. An assassin tries to kill him there. When Bourne subdues him, the man throws himself out the window. Bourne learns that both he and the hitman were part of an assassin mind-control and training program called Treadstone, and he was supposed to assassinate an African leader on his yacht. He escapes with Marie to the French countryside, where another Treadstone assassin called the Professor (Clive Owen) tries to kill him, but Bourne shoots him first. Bourne confront Treadstone head Alexander Conklin (Chris Cooper), who the CIA Deputy Director Ward Abbott (Brian Cox) orders to be killed. Bourne later joins Marie in southern France.

The Bourne Supremacy (2004) finds Bourne tracking down Kirill (Karl Urban), a Russian assassin who tried to do in Jason but instead killed Marie. Bourne discovers that CIA higher up Abbott stole millions from the CIA, and informs Pamela Landy (Joan Allen), who is tracking Bourne. Abbott

commits suicide, and Bourne finds and kills Kirill in Moscow. In *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007), the CIA hunt for Bourne is on again, as Treadstone has been reconstituted as Blackbriar. Landy and Nikki Parsons (Julia Stiles) aid Bourne because they are disgusted by what was done to Bourne. Jason uses a ruse to steal documents from Blackbriar director Noah Vosen (David Strathairn), which he gives to Landy. Vosen confronts her, and she suggests that he hire a good lawyer. Bourne escapes, while Vosen and others connected to Blackbriar get arrested.

The Bourne Legacy (2012) shifts focus away from Jason. The story is about Aaron Cross (Jeremy Renner), who works in Operation Outcome, another agent programming effort, this one using drugs. He escapes and seeks help to get off the drugs from government doctor Marta Shearing (Rachel Weisz). They find a cure in the Philippines and escape various people who are after them. Bourne is back in *Jason Bourne* (2016), in which Jason seeks to discover the origins of Treadstone and his father's role in it. CIA Cyber Ops Division Head Heather Lee (Alicia Vikander) is led to believe that she can bring Jason in from the cold, but her bosses merely intend to kill Bourne. There also is a subplot involving the CIA's effort to control a large social media platform, Deep Dream. This may have reflected concerns about Facebook's and Twitter's roles in the Brexit Campaign in Britain that year, as well as in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, in which the Trump campaign heavily used social media.

A reviewer believes that the Bourne stories are about existential-political questions that affect everyone's lives, and Jason is the stand-in for us all. *Identity* asks the entry question, "who am I?" Bourne only gradually finds out who he has been and what skills he possesses. *Supremacy* ponders, "what did I do?" Once Jason knows who he is, he must understand what he has done in the past, which is linked to the first question. *Ultimatum* then considers the more profound query, "how can I escape what I am?" To answer this, he must know what Treadstone truly was—and why the government had such a program. *Jason Bourne* finally takes Jason's search to a more personal level, as the former operative tries to find the father who launched Treadstone. Unlike the father figure bureaucrats who have guided him in the other movies, this is a primal Oedipal connection, but it also is a fundamental family betrayal (Russell, 2016: 1–7).

MYSTERIOUS EUROPEAN SECRETS: THE DAN BROWN/RON HOWARD TRILOGY

Dan Brown's suspense novel, *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) was the publishing sensation of the millennium's first decade. The 2006 movie, directed by Ron Howard, follows the book closely and stars Tom Hanks as art history professor and symbology expert Robert Langdon, Audrey Tautou as police cryptologist Sophie Neveu, and Ian McKellan as Leigh Teabing, Langdon's old friend and history maven. The story suggests that a shadowy organization called the Priory of Sion had protected a royal French bloodline that descended from Jesus Christ. Langdon is called in to advise Paris police in their investigation of a Louvre official's murder but immediately becomes a suspect. With Neveu, he seeks the truth of scattered signs of the Holy Grail in Paris, London, and Scotland. Teabing explains the Priory lore to Langdon and Neveu, but it turns out that the old man is making war on the Church, hoping to expose the truth about Mary Magdalene's supposed marriage to Jesus. Meanwhile, members of the Church's Opus Dei organization seek to protect Church orthodoxy.

The book was quite controversial, as critics savaged its presentation of bogus history as fact. They noted that no credible evidence exists for a Priory of Sion, key cultural figures in history serving as its grand masters, or Mary Magdalene's purported marriage to Jesus and a child borne with him. Brown presents ideas from two previous non-fiction books, giving credit to one while ignoring the other. While controversial, those preceding works attracted only a small fraction of the attention that Brown's novel garnered. Numerous news programs and documentaries from 2003 to 2006 examined the book's contentions. Most asserted that Brown's ideas, while entertaining, should not be taken seriously as history. In any case, international readership may have been ready for such a novel. It rode the bestseller lists as John Paul II's papacy came to its close and major pedophilia scandals rocked the Roman Catholic Church. After an initial glow around the Bush administration in the wake of 9/11, as the Iraq War went badly the public were becoming disenchanted with international leaders and traditional institutions.

Howard's next Brown adaptation came with *Angels and Demons* (2009), the novel of which had preceded publication of *The Da Vinci Code*. Once again, Brown is obsessed with the Catholic Church. This story contains far less wild historical speculation and focuses on a conspiracy to seize power in the Vatican. A priest working at the CERN atomic collider research facility in Switzerland gets killed and a container of antimatter is stolen. When the pope suddenly dies, a figure claiming to represent the centuries-old shadowy Illuminati kidnaps four leading candidates to replace him (or

preferiti). The Camerlengo, or papal administrative assistant, Father Patrick McKenna (Ewan McGregor) takes control of the Vatican. Langdon gets the call to advise the Church, accompanied by Dr. Vittoria Vetra (Ayelet Zurer) of CERN. Three *preferiti* get killed, but Langdon saves a fourth. We learn that McKenna has arranged the whole thing, so he can pose as a hero who saves the Vatican from an antimatter explosion, blame the Illuminati, and be named pope. Langdon and Vetra find Vatican security video implicating McKenna. When confronted by the College of Cardinals, the Camerlengo walks away and self-immolates.

Audiences may have found some of the same appeal as the first film. The Church had elected Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger) as pope in 2005. During his papacy, pedophilia and other scandals ballooned, and the Pontiff seemed unable to control the controversies or manage the church well. Feeling the effects of old age, he stepped down in 2013, the first pope in centuries to resign. He was succeeded by the more popular Pope Francis (Jorge Mario Bergoglio), who has initiated reform discussion. CERN had gained significant attention for its research into subatomic particles, and in 2012 announced the discovery of the Higgs Boson or “god particle” that facilitates action of other particles. CERN has also sparked popular worry that its Large Hadron nuclear collider could form small black holes that might consume the Earth. CERN spokespeople claim that any black hole-like objects would be miniscule and evaporate immediately. The Illuminati is a perennial of conspiracy theorists and, since the seventeenth century, has not existed as an actual organization.

The third movie keeps the Italian settings but switches from the Church to environmentalist radicals. *Inferno* (2016) opens with Langdon recovering in hospital from an apparent bullet wound to the head, cared for by Dr. Sienna Brooks (Felicity Jones). Langdon seems to require a female companion for each story, but this one is not what she seems. She is a born-again environmental zealot under the sway of a crazed radical who intends to release a bio-weapons attack in Istanbul that will reduce the human population by half. Meanwhile, a secretive security agency, the Consortium, tracks Langdon and works at cross-purposes with the World Health Organization (WHO), whose head is Langdon’s old flame. The Consortium eventually sees that stopping the environmentalist radicals is more important than their own interests. The bioweapon, about to be exploded in the famous underground Istanbul cistern, is contained just in time and returned to WHO headquarters in Geneva for destruction.

This story neatly melds the conservative fear of radical environmentalists with the widespread concern over use of bioweapons by terrorists. Why Brown dumps on environmentalists this way is unclear. While some environmentalists such as Greenpeace engage in direct action, attempting to stop

environmentally harmful activities, we know of no environmentalists who seek to use bioweapons or unleash world-wide destruction. The environmental group depicted in the story behaves more like a millennial religious cult, such as the Aum Shinrikyo Buddhist cult in Japan that carried out a sarin gas attack on the Tokyo Subway in 1995. The concern about bioweapons in the hands of terrorists is legitimate, given the clear interest by Al-Qaeda and other groups in acquiring weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), but their use is unlikely in the hands of groups with more conventionally political objectives, especially environmentalists. Even so, it is fascinating that the WHO, an international organization often despised on the right, gets presented in heroic terms in this movie.

THE AGGRIEVED FATHER: LIAM NEESON BECOMES ACTION HERO

Liam Neeson had a storied acting career up to the 2000s, and starred in many fine pictures, especially 1990s fare such as *Schindler's List* (1993) and *Michael Collins* (1996). In 2008, he shifted to action films and, over the 2010s, he became primarily associated with the genre. Viewers can easily identify with Neeson's Average Joe characters. More than an Everyman, he is Every Dad. He thus channels primal fears of child abduction and family destruction. As I note in the discussion of *The Searchers*, *The Missing*, and other Westerns presenting stories of white captives, white Americans have a deep-seated fear of abduction of women and children. Perhaps this derives from the long experience of the American frontier, but it also touches on notions of racial and sexual purity that go deep into the American experience. Neeson's action characters also differ from the straight-ahead Stallone-Schwarzenegger-Willis variety, in that he comes across as an aging loser who has been given one last chance at redemption (Mendelson, 2021: 1–10).

Taken (2008) finds former Green Beret and CIA officer Bryan Mills (Neeson) called to Paris to find his missing daughter, Kim (Maggie Grace) who has been abducted by sex traffickers servicing rich clients. Mills works his way up the food chain of trafficking, taking on assorted baddies: Albanian thugs who run the trafficking operation, Peter the trafficker who arranged the abductions of Kim and her friend Amanda, a corrupt Paris intel officer that Mills had known, and finally the organizer of white slavery auctions for high bidders. He tracks Kim to a sheikh's boat, where he kills his bodyguards and finally the sheikh himself. Kim is reunited with her mother, Lenore (Famke Janssen) and her father takes her to a concert of a singer she loves.

The second and third *Taken* movies live up to my dictum that most sequels should not be made. The second movie has Mills and his ex-wife kidnapped

by a man whose father Mills killed in the previous movie. His daughter is now the outside person trying to help him escape. That's a role reversal for you. The third film is, in a word, ridiculous. It has Lenore's second husband, Stuart (Dougray Scott), going crazy, kidnapping and then killing her—of course, trying to frame poor Bryan for the crime. The bad second hubby then kidnaps hapless Kim, too. Apparently, it is all related to a bad insurance deal for \$12 million of Russian money. Russians are the go-to bad guys in many action films since the millennium. Bryan is about to kill Stuart when Kim pleads with her dad to let step-dad live. The police arrive and arrest him, but Bryan warns him that he will be looking for him when he leaves prison.

Several of Neeson's other recent actioners are forgettable, but they trade on contemporary sociopolitical issues. *The Marksman* (2021) presents an odd story in which the aging loser gains an opportunity to protect an unaccompanied Mexican child coming across the border from drug cartels. That makes it a hot-button issue two-fer. *Honest Thief* (2020) finds Neeson as a career bank robber who wants to return the money and go straight, but bad FBI agents thwart his plans by stealing the money, instead. Naturally, they must face a reckoning with Neeson. *Unknown* (2011) is a Hitchcock-like film in which Neeson's character wakes up from a coma, nobody remembers him, and another person is using his name. *Non-Stop* (2014) plays on persistent public fears of plane hijackings and air terrorism. Neeson's air marshal character, in another Hitchcockian turn, receives strange text messages while on a flight, and he must figure out who the terrorist onboard may be. Passengers are skeptical of him, but he wins them over by acknowledging that he has not been a good man in his personal life but wants to save them (Mendelson, 2021: 1–10).

The most intriguing of these other films is *The Commuter* (2018), in which an enigmatic woman passenger named Joanna (Vera Farmiga) chats up police retiree/laid-off insurance salesman Michael MacCauley (Neeson) on a commuter train. She gives him a task with a big payoff to complete before the train comes to the end of the line: to find a passenger who may be hiding something. As he searches for the answer, the secret becomes bigger—and the person being hidden is more important—than he could have known. Naturally, corrupt police are in on it, too. The movie plays on multiple class and ethnic resentments, as Neeson's character becomes increasingly frantic and desperate to find the secret and prevent a disaster. Eventually, he finds a way to turn the tables on Joanna (Mendelson, 2021: 1–10).

**"YOU STOLE MY CAR, AND YOU KILLED
MY DOG!": RELENTLESS AVENGERS
WICK, REACHER, AND MCCALL**

John Wick (2014) is one of the oddest comeback vehicles for any star. The title character, played by Keanu Reeves, has exited the underworld assassination business and is trying to enjoy domesticity with his wife, who suddenly succumbs to an unspecified illness. As she dies, she arranges for a puppy to be delivered to hubby upon her demise. The ex-hitman bonds with the little pooch, and hope returns. One night, thugs led by Iosef Tarasov break into his house, beating him up and stealing his vintage Ford Mustang, and then murdering his dog. This unleashes Wick to find and kill Iosef and his associates. Iosef makes the mistake of taking the Mustang to a chop shop owned by Wick's friend, who tells both John and Iosef's father, Russian crime lord Viggo Tarasov.

Viggo tries to get John to give up his plan for revenge, but the hitman will not budge. Viggo sends a hit team to John's house, but John kills them all. John stays at the Continental Hotel, which is a haven for hitmen and is ostensibly off-limits to killing. Its manager Winston (Ian McShane) helps John locate Iosef. John almost kills Iosef at his club and is almost killed himself by a female hitman. John finally tracks Iosef to a safe house, where he kills him and his men. Winston informs John that Viggo is trying to leave New York by helicopter. John engages Viggo in a fierce knife fight. He takes one knife thrust before disarming and killing Viggo. John ends the movie by freeing a pit bull puppy that is about to be put down from a veterinarian clinic and walks home with it.

This is extremely violent stuff. One reviewer noted that John's body count was seventy-eight people. These men are not incapacitated with wounding shots. No, for each one, John shoots them in the chest, and then finishes them with one or two kill shots to the head. He toys with some victims momentarily with shots to the limbs before dispatching them (Gilbert, 2014: 1–4). This is more like a fast-paced, relentless video game than a movie. Those who worry that video games desensitize players to killing should be concerned about such stories. In the real world, all seventy-eight of those people would have wives, mothers, fathers, siblings, and friends who would be devastated by their deaths. Any potential abilities these men could contribute to society by doing something other than working as guards for crime bosses would be lost forever. Perhaps some of them are just working security for Viggo and Iosef to pay for their wives' medical bills or kids' education. Who knows? These are stick figures to be disposed of in seconds. This casual death-dealing should disturb all of us.

John Wick: Chapter 2 (2017) concocts a barely believable premise that John owes payment of a “marker” to Viggo’s brother, Abram. He must kill Gianna D’Antonio (Claudia Gerini), the sister of crime boss Santino D’Antonio (Riccardo Scamarcio), so that Santino can take over the underworld organization. He finds her, and she chooses to kill herself rather than be killed. John shoots her in the head as she dies, to keep the marker. So, the most interesting character in the whole franchise, a woman with some depth, gets killed off before we get to know her. There ensues much violence as John is pursued by both Santino’s men and Gianna’s bodyguard. John finds Santino at the Continental Hotel, where people like John are not allowed to kill. He kills Santino, anyway, the hotel manager declares him “excommunicado” to the underworld, and he ends the movie on the run.

John Wick: Chapter 3—Parabellum (2019) picks up where the previous movie left off. The plot becomes increasingly silly with talk of Adjudicators and the High Table. Is this a Medieval fantasy or an action movie? John travels to North Africa with Sofia (Halle Berry), another former assassin, to meet “the Elder,” who is the only one above the High Table of crime lords. The Elder agrees to forgive John for his violations of underworld rules, if he vows complete fealty to the High Table and kills Winston (Ian McShane), who has crossed too many lines in his work. John has to fight off hordes of crime enforcers and students of Japanese assassin Zero to get to Winston. Observing all of this, the Adjudicator (Asia Kate Dillon) revokes the hotel’s safe status, but Winston will not resign and John will not kill him. Finally, Winston decides to shoot and seriously wound John, thus restoring his position but not killing John, who he respects. Does any of that make sense to you, beyond post-modernist fantasy? Why should we care about any of this?

Interpretation of Wick movies is all over the map. One reviewer suggests that Wick’s odyssey mirrors the experience of many social media users when subjected to the toxic online environment (Wei, 2020: 1–14). Hmm. Another reviewer feels that the movies’ popularity is due to a relatively simple story layered over complex mythological symbolism: the gold coins, the neutral ground of The Continental, The High Table, and symbolic names of various characters. Added in are a number of Christian themes, such as Viggo presenting himself as the embodiment of God’s wrath, the suicide death of Gianna as a form of crucifixion as she stretches out her arms and dies for Wick’s sins and, in *Parabellum*, John’s obtaining a crucifix which burns his skin—and is the start of his journey to Christ-like temptation in the desert (Bunch, 2019: 1–5). Maybe so but pardon me: I’m still not convinced.

The Jack Reacher movies make a good deal more sense. Cruise plays Reacher, a former U.S. Army military police officer who defends the undefendable. *Jack Reacher* (2012) has him summoned by a military veteran,

James Barr, who has been accused of killing five people at random in downtown Pittsburgh. All evidence points to the soldier, but Reacher thinks that he may be innocent. He works with defense attorney Helen Rodin (Rosamund Pike) to discover that a shady construction company has arranged the killings in Pittsburgh to gain control of land holdings of one of the people who was killed. The company's thugs and a corrupt Pittsburgh cop kidnap Helen and take her to the company's offices in rural Ohio. Assisted by Martin Cash (Robert Duvall), a retired Marine Gunny who runs a shooting range and believes in Barr, Reacher attacks the facility, killing all of the thugs, the corrupt cop, and the Russian mastermind, known simply as Zec Chelovek, i.e., Prisoner Human Being (Werner Herzog).

This film plays on common American concerns about random public shootings, along with PTSD and other mental illnesses among Iraq War veterans. At first, it looks like another vet has become unstable and is shooting strangers along the river. In the wake of the Global Financial Crisis, a shadowy financial concern operating behind the front of a legitimate construction company and assisted by thug enforcers may have made sense to some viewers. Once again, Russians seem to be behind every nefarious undertaking, the more shadowy and unknowable the better.

Jack Reacher: Never Go Back (2016) has the hero taking on a complicated plot to frame both him and the female officer, Susan Turner (Cobie Smulders), who took over his Military Police command after he left the Army. Meanwhile, he has been hit with a paternity suit for fathering a daughter, Samantha (Danika Yarosh). Reacher escapes arrest and breaks Turner out of jail. The pair rescue Samantha, who has been targeted by assassins. It turns out that a General Harkness (Robert Knepper) has concocted the frameups to hide selling arms to Afghan insurgents, while importing illegal heroin into America. Harkness gets arrested, and Reacher and Turner kill a team of assassins who are after them. Turner gets restored to her command. Samantha realizes that Reacher is not her father when he fails to recognize her mother, but the girl texts him later, indicating that she wants to stay in touch.

Jack Reacher is the creation of novelist Lee Child, who has penned twenty-four Reacher books. His stories have been wildly popular, especially with prominent female authors. They like Reacher as a defender of the marginalized, and for his quasi-feminist respect for and enjoyment of working with independent, self-sufficient women. One reviewer suggests that women readers may not see Reacher as a potential lover but want to be him (Higgins, 2019: 1–7). Child may be playing with a bit of female gaze here. I'm not so sure. I think both women and men like well-told action stories, and that may be all there is to it for many women.

The Equalizer (2014) is an adaptation of a popular TV program of the 1980s. Denzel Washington plays Robert "Bob" McCall, retired DIA operative

who comes to the aid of the marginalized. Every night, the loner McCall visits a favorite coffee shop, where he meets a teenager, Alina (Chloe Grace Moretz), who is working as a call girl for Russian mobsters. She is viciously beaten by her pimp. McCall tries to buy her freedom, but his offer is rejected by the local Russian hood. McCall kills the mobster and all his henchmen in less than two minutes. A Russian enforcer, Teddy Rensen (Marton Czokas) comes to Boston to track McCall down, and the two circle each other for most of the movie. McCall kills him in a night shootout in the large Home Mart DIY retail store where McCall works, using only building materials and tools on stock in the store. A subplot deals with McCall's thwarting of corrupt cops who are working for the Russians and shaking down local small business people, including the mother of one of the store's employees. McCall goes to Moscow, killing Russian kingpin Vladimir Pushkin (Vladimir Kulich). Back in Boston, Alina tells the hero that she has begun a new life. Inspired, McCall sets up a service to help those who need and cannot find help, calling himself "the Equalizer."

This movie clearly resonates with fears of infiltration into American society by Russian criminal enterprises. In this movie, Russians have corrupted Boston businesses, the Boston mob, and the cops. These latter day gangsters have no regard for anyone, even those working for them, and will kill anyone—even lowly prostitutes—who become inconvenient. Russian mobsters have replaced the ubiquitous "syndicate" of former decades and, as foreigners apparently without conscience or morals, can be presented as both relentless and deserving of the most vengeful deaths imaginable.

The Equalizer 2 (2018) is a more conventional thriller, in which faithless government agents are undermining U.S. intelligence operations and endangering national security. When one of McCall's friends, CIA operative Susan Plummer (Melissa Leo), is killed, he springs into action. He finds that both her murder and the apparent murder-suicide she was investigating in Brussels are suspicious. We learn that McCall's ex-partner Dave York (Pedro Pascal) has turned mercenary and is working against the DIA. He has a team of hitmen who he introduces to McCall with the intent of killing him, but McCall promises he will kill all of them. In a beach confrontation while a hurricane approaches, McCall indeed kills the remaining team members and then dispatches York. In a subplot, he helps a young black man from the neighborhood turn his life around.

TOUGH BABES? WOMEN IN THRILLERS AND ACTION MOVIES

As with most key film genres, women in thrillers and action films traditionally have served in supporting roles, as sidekicks, reporters, medical staff and, of course, wives and girlfriends. Political thrillers focusing on the minutiae of conspiracies seem to need male characters to investigate and explain everything, and women providing little more than victims, wives, or other supporting roles. Feminist critic Laura Mulvey notes that in the action genre, a male hero is a “figure in the landscape,” who drives the story forward, while female characters are “to-be-looked-at-ness,” as passive objects to stop action and present a “visual spectacle” (O’Day, 2004: 203).

As thrillers deal with the murky underside of modern America, they owe more to film noir (discussed in chapter 2) than almost any other genre. Film noir movies would not have been possible without stock women characters, such as the femme fatale who leads a man to his doom and the “good girl” who often fails to redeem the damaged male protagonist. Similar female characters occasionally show up in thrillers. Major female characters in *Z* and *JFK* are a disillusioned widow and a long-suffering wife, respectively. Action movies usually are driven by male leads who confront the bad guys. But now and then, women take on “Kick-Ass Babe” role reversal, in effect creating a kind of gender swap.

Tasker notes that much of the action movie genre since the 1980s has focused on glorified male bodies. Stallone and Schwarzenegger were/are bodybuilders, while Willis was buff in the 1980s–1990s. The classic male form sparks allusions to conservative cultural values and even fascism, while harking back to classical Greek notions of the body. The classically toned male character then interacts with developing notions of “race, class, and sexuality.” An action hero enacts a kind of backlash against female and black empowerment, seeking to restore the former order in which powerful white males ruled, or at least underline a conservative foreign policy or policing approach in the present (Tasker, 2013: 1–13).

To become action heroes, notes Tasker, women must “masculinize” themselves. These include the macho Latina characters in *Alien 2* and *Predator 2* (Tasker, 1993: 149). It is curious that we never refer to male action heroes as “Kick-Ass Hunks.” We also see androgynous heroines who become complete Amazons. One of the first of these women was Brigitte Nielsen, whose tomboyish frame and pouty face made her an 1980s icon. But even here, expectations for male and female characters frequently differ (Tasker, 2013: 14, 29). It is hard to imagine almost any leading lady today playing a role analogous to one of the classic Stallone, Schwarzenegger, or Willis parts. Thriller action

films presenting women as roughly equal to men either find them operating in teams or using stories that straddle other genres.

Female action heroines start in very different places than their male counterparts. The eponymous heroines in *Thelma and Louise* (1991) launch into a cross-country crime road trip because of an attempted drunken rape of Thelma Dickinson (Geena Davis). Her friend Louise Sawyer (Susan Sarandon), a former rape victim herself, shoots and kills the man. Sure that their story will not be believed by the police, the two women flee westward. When Louise loses all her money to a drifter they pick up, JD (Brad Pitt), they begin robbing. Feminists were divided on whether to embrace the two women as heroes or decry them as female stereotypes. One critic went so far as to call the movie a “ruse,” in which all women are told that these women cannot win. Nonetheless, *Thelma and Louise* illustrate the movement of female characters from confinement, as they are constrained by their suburban lives before the story, to freedom, in this case the freedom of the open road. They clearly enjoy their journey, discuss their personal development, and decide how they will end it by powering their T-bird off a cliff (Tasker, 2013: 132–140). Just as it is hard to imagine a female Stallone, it is next-to-impossible to envision a male *Thelma* or *Louise*.

Several action films find muscular women in their leads. Rather than the female character being celebrated for her agency and talents, she is instead a mixture of traditional sexually attractiveness and a buff body, as O’Day states, “a ‘babe’ and, equally importantly, she is ‘fit.’” Where the male hero may look great, it is his action that propels the story, and until the 1980s he did not have to be particularly fit. But the female lead is not only active but is herself an object to be looked upon (O’Day, 2004: 205). One sees the same “babe” tropes repeating over and over in various genre, from the team in *Charlie’s Angels* and *Lara Croft* (Angelina Jolie) in the *Tomb Raider* movies (derived from a video game series), to superhero films (the X-Men franchise), and martial arts movies such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. The zombie/bioterror series *Resident Evil* presents Alice (Milla Jovovich) as a relentless but sexy zombie hunter who is going after the malevolent Umbrella Corporation (O’Day: 2004: 207–215).

Cross-genre heroines often have more agency than action babes. In *Alien* (1979), the first of a science fiction/horror series, Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) is only a lowly warrant officer on the supply ship *Nostromo*, but eventually she ends up as the last crew member not killed by the relentless alien creature—a science fiction equivalent of the Final Girl in slasher films. The last scene has her disrobed, as she is about to enter cryo-sleep, as if to emphasize her female vulnerability. Even partially clothed, she forces the alien out the airlock. In the second film, *Aliens* (1986), Ripley takes on a surrogate mother role when she cares for the little girl Newt, all the while

battling the aliens along with the space marines. The third movie, *Alien3* (1992), finds her an actual mother of an alien, as she has been impregnated with an alien fetus. But she must die before the alien can rip open her chest to be born. In the final film, *Alien Resurrection* (1997), a cloned Ripley with alien DNA becomes surrogate mother to a hybrid human-alien that in the end she must destroy. She looks on tearfully as the hybrid creature gets sucked out a hole she creates in the spacecraft window to depressurize the cabin. She also becomes surrogate sister for Annalee Call (Winona Ryder), an android (or “synthetic”) on the ship, and the two leave to explore a hellish ruined Earth at the end of the film (Tasker, 2003: 150–151).

The Terminator science fiction/action series, finds heroine Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) acting to save her son, the future leader of resistance to machines that will take over Earth. She thus is carrying out a traditional mother role, even though she takes on the weaponry and the pumped-up body of male action heroes to do so. Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) is a vulnerable FBI agent, the only woman in rooms filled with men. She must use her wits to gain information from infamous serial killer Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) and discover the motives and location of the movie’s serial killer (Tasker, 2013: 138, 147). The movie is both a police procedural and limited-action movie.

One of the most compelling recent science fiction/action heroines is Michelle (Mary Elizabeth Winstead) in *10 Cloverfield Lane* (2016). She is a believable Everywoman, lacking confidence and full of doubt, but even so persevering in her effort to break free from a guy she believes is mad. Though the movie concerns her involuntary confinement in an underground shelter by unstable survivalist Howard Stambler (John Goodman), the movie is hers. She learns as much as she can as quickly as possible, and then plans her escape from the shelter. She never believes it when Howard tells her that the outside is contaminated with fallout or other substances, but to be sure she fabricates and hides a do-it-yourself hazmat suit. Once outside, she finds that the atmosphere has not been contaminated, but that aliens have invaded Louisiana. She takes the car of a woman who died outside the shelter. Hearing radio reports calling for anyone with medical training to head west, she drives toward Houston. Winstead was also great in a 2011 remake of the sci-fi/horror classic *The Thing*, in which she takes the part that Kurt Russell filled in the 1982 remake, but her character is partly modeled on Ripley.

The Hunger Games, a dystopian science fiction series, presents a more authentic heroine than most action movies can muster. Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence) is a peerless archer who represents her home district of the state of Panem in a televised to-the-death struggle among young people, using various weapons. Everdeen survives the contest, but then faces new

challenges with each movie, until she finally leads a rebellion against the repressive government.

Female action protagonists may be fantastical. *Ghost in the Shell* (2015), based on a Japanese manga, is about a dystopian future in which a cybernetic shell body can be created to house a human brain. This allows the possibility of enhanced fighters or assassins that can be intelligently controlled. Mira Killian (Scarlett Johansson) has been given such a body after a cybernetic attack killed her family and left her near death. She is trained as a counter-terrorism agent. She wants to know about her past and discovers that she was the daughter (named Motoko) of a Japanese woman, and her former lover was an activist against the new cybernetic regime.

Only somewhat less fantastic is Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill, Vol. 1* (2003) and *Vol. 2* (2004), a mash-up of several sub-genres, including martial arts, blaxploitation movies of the 1970s, and Spaghetti Westerns. The story centers on The Bride (Uma Thurman), former member of an elite hit squad, who is out to avenge her near-fatal shooting as she was about to be married in a chapel in El Paso, Texas. After her former lover and leader of the assassins, Bill (David Carradine) shoots her in the head, her baby gets taken from her, and she is left in a coma for four years. She tracks those who tried to kill her to Tokyo, where she kills them and many of their associates.

In the second movie, we learn the Bride's real name: Beatrix Kiddo. She tracks Bill to Mexico, where he has kept their daughter, B.B. Under truth serum, she explains to Bill that she left him so that she could give her daughter a better life. He comes to appreciate her, and they share a brief interlude together. After an argument, she kills Bill with the largely unknown Five-Point Palm Exploding Heart Technique, which was taught to her by a Chinese martial arts master. Beatrix may be capable, but she is almost entirely a creature of revenge. She seems to have no effective second act.

Female heroes may work as police investigators or state law enforcement, for example, the FBI. *Sicario* (2015) centers on FBI agent Kate Macer (Emily Blunt), who gets assigned to a joint task force to arrest key members of the Sonoran drug cartel. Macer is conflicted about her work. Believing in traditional law enforcement values, she runs up against hidden bureaucratic agendas. She learns from CIA officer Matt Graves (Josh Brolin) that he intends to create a Mexican super-cartel that will be easier to manage. They have hired a former prosecutor who once worked for Colombian cartels, Alejandro Gillick (Benicio del Toro) to assassinate all the major Sonoran cartel personnel and their families. Macer tries to stop Gillick, but he shoots her in her bullet-proof vest and leaves. Later, he shows up at her apartment and forces her at gunpoint to sign a letter indicating that the killings were legal. She aims her pistol at him as he walks away in the street, but does not fire.

Sicario represents progress, when compared to earlier films such as *Blue Steel* (1990), Kathryn Bigelow's female cop thriller that questions the whole idea of women as police. Jamie Lee Curtis plays Megan Turner, a rookie who is suspended for shooting a robber who holds up a supermarket. A stockbroker bystander called Eugene Hunt (Ron Silver) steals the criminal's gun, and so it appears that she shot an unarmed man. Eugene uses the gun to commit crimes himself. Meanwhile, Megan and Eugene begin dating, but Eugene becomes obsessed by Megan, attacking her and shooting her friend. In the end, the two shoot it out on city streets before Megan kills him (Grant, 2004: 377–378).

The film suggests that Megan only has power to the extent that she is armed, thus taking on the phallic power of a gun. She is thus an interloper in a male domain. The opening credits show her donning her uniform, focusing on her revolver and, until we see her face, the only hint that she is a woman comes when we note a bit of her lace bra. Her role as a cop is questioned several times in the film, and she says that she became a cop because of "him," which could refer to her abusive father, to "the man," that is, the system, or men generally, meaning the patriarchy. The movie also employs horror/wolf-man movie tropes making Eugene hairy, animalistic, and a creature of the night. Megan appears like a "Final Girl" who survives a slasher movie, such as Curtis's own *Halloween* franchise. This is not a movie that would encourage most women to become cops, ironic considering that it comes from a ground-breaking woman director (Grant, 2004: 378–379). The thousands of women who have served as American police since 1990 thankfully did not take these messages to heart.

Female leads often appear in spy stories, especially those set in the Cold War or in the shadow of U.S.-Russian conflict. *Salt* (2010) is about an ostensible CIA operative, Evelyn Salt (Jolie), who we learn was trained by the Russians. Eluding escape from her employers, she intends to kill the Russians who destroyed her life and murdered her husband, and she wants to get her life back. *Atomic Blonde* (2017) has Charlize Theron as MI6 agent Lorraine Broughton, who is trying to obtain "The List" of all East and West agents in Berlin on the eve of the Berlin Wall collapse in 1989. She is also looking for a Soviet asset known as Satchel. All that is great, but in Berlin in 1989 she did not need to wear a skimpy-sexy outfit. The year after *Atomic Blonde* saw *Red Sparrow*, in which former ballerina Dominika Egerova (Lawrence) gets drafted into an elite spy training school where, among other things, she is trained in sexpionage tactics. She teams up with an American operative (Joel Edgerton) with whom she becomes romantically involved.

In the end, one is less likely to create realistic stories about women in action films than in almost any other genre. Smart and capable women do

appear in thriller movies, such as in the Dan Brown stories or *The Pelican Brief*, but even there a male knight like Robert Langdon or Gray Grantham usually rides to the rescue. I would like to see more female directors take shots at thriller or action movies. Perhaps they could start with female-led teams, in which male characters are supporting players such as researchers or administrative personnel. Presenting more realistic women, perhaps based on actual people, could help avoid the trap of creating “Kick-Ass Babes” that are as much eye candy as viable heroines.

THE IDENTITY POLITICS OF JAMES BOND NOVELS AND FILMS

By Michael Mulvey

In 1965, the French Salvation Army reported on youth organizing James Bond Clubs that constituted a perceived threat to British and French morality. The young men members of the James Bond Association of London drank vodka martinis excessively, raced cars at high speeds, and competed in seducing women. Cheap paperbacks led these men to consume Ian Fleming’s violent spy novels at an alarming rate thereby normalizing psychotic sadism. To the Salvation Army, Bond represented the antithesis of Christian values and risked replacing scripture with Fleming’s sacred texts and film. By 1966, a chief superintendent of France’s National Police also identified a “cult of James bond” across Western Europe that shared similarities to religious belief. The superintendent argued that the Bond cult psychologically reassured readers of human heroism and the righteousness of ethical murder for a good cause. The Salvation Army and the chief superintendent thus perceived audiences adopting Bond as a “Saint of Secret Service” who stood for the defense of Western values amidst decolonization and the encroaching specter of communism. Also in 1966, Italian novelist Umberto Eco concluded Bond was a reactionary whose enemies revealed Fleming’s personal prejudices. Seven decades after Fleming’s debut novel *Casino Royale* (1953) and despite Daniel Craig’s recent vulnerable recreation, the fictional character Bond cannot escape the tension between acting as a universal interventionist policeman and embodying a parochial misogynist imperialist.

Fleming was one figure in a British tradition of literary spies that included W. Somerset Maugham, Graham Greene, and John Le Carré. Fleming’s

protagonist traced lineage directly to Maugham's *Ashenden: Or the British Agent* (1927). Alfred Hitchcock adapted Maugham's novel for cinema as *Secret Agent* (1937) and BBC Radio dramatized chapters throughout the 1940s. Ashenden was the prototypic gentleman spy who delighted in Rousseau's *Confessions*, did his best reading German, and aloofly completed ambiguous missions. Agnostic and gay, Maugham described his political philosophy in *The Summing Up* (1938) as akin to Marxist materialism without a belief in the abolition of war and exploitation. Maugham's Ashenden betrayed the author's partiality to the use of intellectual acuity, irony, and humor to unmask crooked hypocrites without exoticizing enemies. Maugham's unprejudiced pragmatism concealed neither British domestic poverty nor idealized British colonialism.

In contrast, Fleming's novels unapologetically elevated British men as superior to African, Asian, Mediterranean, and Semitic peoples while divulging a virulent anticommunism. Bond represented a viral Anglo-Saxon purity contrasted with Fleming's villains whose deformities frequently shared racialized origins. In *Casino Royal* (1953), Fleming described Le Chiffre, a French trade unionist leader, as descending from mixed Mediterranean races, Prussian and Polish ancestors, and Jewish blood physically revealed by the villain's earlobes. In *Live and Let Die* (1954), Mister Big was a gigantic Black Haitian who conspired with Soviets. The novel's racist stereotypes aside, the tale manifested Fleming's deeper paranoia of a Jamaican communist threat and belief that international communism guided the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

With Hugo Drax from *Moonraker* (1955), Fleming portrayed the hidden threat of a German masquerading as English while linking Nazism with communism. Set in Istanbul, *From Russia, with Love* (1957) presented Soviets as robots, but far more disturbing was Fleming's Orientalist thoughts about Turks. The hairless and handless Dr. No's deformities and sadism reflected the villain's mixed Chinese and German heritage. Goldfinger was of Baltic origins with a Jewish heritage that left him with a small body appearing assembled from others. Blofeld had a Greek mother and Polish father and the imagined evil organization Blofeld operated, SPECTRE, united Slavic, Mediterranean, and German conspirators. Fleming's villains cannot be dismissed as benign given the cult of Bond contextually justified c/overt interventionism against "villains" from Iran (Mohammed Mossadegh) to the Congo (Patrice Lumumba). Fleming's narrative structure promised that deaths of faraway, incompetent, sadistic madmen bent on destroying Western civilization secured immediate peace (Saddam Hussein, Osama bin Laden, Muammar Gaddafi).

Through novels, films, games, and merchandise, Bond constituted a sustained British soft power extending a subtle global reach among likeminded.

The overlap of the Bond brand with British national identity reached an apex during the 2012 London Olympics. In the opening ceremony, Daniel Craig as Bond arrived at Buckingham Palace to escort Queen Elizabeth II to a helicopter from which Her Majesty jumped deploying a union jack parachute evoking Roger Moore in *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977). Well, it was the Queen's stunt double who jumped, but it was exciting, anyway. At the Olympics, Bond the protector helped to unify the British nation. Before the Brexit referendum, British tabloids captured Craig in public wearing a T-shirt stating: "No man is an island. No Country by itself. Vote remain on 23rd of June." The current Bond incarnation's message was at odds with Tory Brexiteers who championed Bond as a British symbol who put sinister European foes in their places. Bond therefore reentered British culture wars as an anti-PC figure synonymous with demands for blue passports and greater border enforcements.

British culture wars, however, cannot dictate a Hollywood funded cinematic franchise producing films for a global market dominated by Chinese audiences. Certainly, the cinematic Bond has diverged from Fleming's "Made in Britain" Cold War warrior who made imperialism sexy. *Quantum of Solace* (2008) placed Craig's Bond alongside anti-imperialists fighting the CIA and a multinational cooperation over environmental issues. To survive, a liberal Bond must strategically appropriate movements for LGBTQ equality, feminist equity, decolonization, anti-consumerism, and racial justice, empty those ideas of any radical subversive meaning, and re-integrate them into a globally consumable brand. Otherwise, Bond risks being co-opted by provincial nationalists and an alternative far-right. Fleming never drafted a coherent Bond biography, but consensus holds the fictional spy's father was Scottish. Ultimately, a digital Bond freed from Fleming's novels and British nationalism may join a different service in the case of a future affirmative Scottish Leave vote.

With the recent *No Time to Die* (2021), Craig bids farewell to the Bond series. He reportedly was exhausted by the long and quite physical film shoots. In five films over fifteen years, he has remade the suave spy for the twenty-first century. No longer the serial philanderer, sexual predator, and casual misogynist, this Bond honors female colleagues and has committed long-term romantic relationships with women. In fact, the newest carrier of the 007 identity is Nomi (Lashana Lynch), who is a black woman. Craig's Bond has dealt not only with supervillains out to take over the world, but with credible international threats to the British state. The films still feature exotic locations and barely plausible chases and escapes from disaster, but at least this hero is a more relatable and believable agent (Coyle, 2021b: 19–20; Walsh, 2021b: 21).

Chapter 4

Superheroes Save our Politics and International Relations

WHO IS THE GREATEST SUPERHERO?

Imagine the greatest superhero. Who could it be? What qualities would this person possess? Perhaps the following: unique parentage, a member of an old, well-established family and a race apart from surrounding nations. A person beyond an ordinary human, a demigod who can live indefinitely, yet haunted by nagging questions about origins. Dedicated to saving humanity and bringing peace to the world, while committed to vanquishing supervillains. Equally passionate and vulnerable, with both strong emotions and bracing confidence. Physically agile and stunningly attractive yet capable of using special weapons and tools to accomplish demanding tasks. Able to disguise identity, assume different identities, and work calmly within any organization while preparing for action. And all that is just a start.

Who did you guess? Parts of this profile could apply to any number of popular superheroes. Only one leading superhero fits the description completely. She is Wonder Woman, or more properly Diana, Princess of Themyscira, island of the Amazon warriors. Depending on which backstory you accept, she was sculpted from clay by Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons, and given life by Zeus, king of the Greek gods—or she was the natural offspring of Hippolyta and Zeus, thus making her daughter of a god and therefore a demigod. Trained by her aunts in defiance of her mother, she becomes the strongest Amazon. She wields the Lasso of Truth that compels anyone in its embrace to answer questions without lying, the Bracelets of Submission that can deflect bullets, along with a special sword and shield. In her comic book incarnation, she also used such tools as an invisible airplane and healing rays.

Introduced on the eve of U.S. entry into World War II, the comic book Wonder Woman fights Nazis for the duration, occasionally clashing with a variety of supervillains. When American intelligence officer Steve Trevor crash lands on Themyscira (or Paradise Island), Diana wins the right to return him to his country. The 2017 film has her entering World War I in its last weeks. After the second world war, she joins the Justice League with several other DC Comics characters, while gradually losing her powers in the 1960s. In the 1970s, she becomes a feminist icon, subject of cartoons, a TV movie and a television series. Comics versions from the 1980s onward retool her into a stronger, more confident superhero. Finally, amid the superhero boom of the twenty-first century, she gets her own films, helmed by Patty Jenkins.

The actual origins of the Diana character are located in the feminist imaginings of psychologist William Moulton Marston, one of the inventors of the polygraph. Marston lived in a *menage a trois* with his wife Elizabeth Holloway and girlfriend Olive Byrne, and partly under their tutelage developed progressive ideas about women. He was also influenced by Margaret Sanger, campaigner for birth control and founder of Planned Parenthood. He felt that women were more honest and smarter than men, and he looked forward to a world ruled by women. Marston wanted a superhero who could win through love, and his wife Elizabeth suggested that it should be a woman. He adapted Diana's bracelets from those worn by his lover, Olive. In 1940, Marston wrote an article about improving comics, and was contacted by Max Gaines, publisher at one of the companies that would later merge to form DC Comics (Lepore, 2015: 183–201; *The Man Behind*, 2014: 1–6).

Marston wrote most of the early Wonder Woman stories until his death in 1947, but the character developed through various incarnations. Up to the late 1950s, she mainly focused on fighting crime, foreign enemies, and super-villains, and tried 1950s-style domesticity with boyfriend Steve for a while. In the 1960s, her Hellenistic origins were explored, she gave up her special powers and costume, gained a kid sister named Wonder Girl, and fought villains using martial arts. By the late 1960s, she looked a bit like sleek Emma Peel (Diana Rigg) from the British television series, *The Avengers* (1961–1969). During the next decade, partly at the urging of *Ms.* Magazine founder and leading feminist Gloria Steinem, Diana's powers got restored and her classic superhero look came back. *Ms.* even used Wonder Woman on its first cover (Madrid, 2016: 187–221).

Steinem criticized Marston's getting "stuck in the subject/object, winner/loser paradigm of 'masculine' versus 'feminine,'" and suggested that "full humanity" for both women and men should have been Diana's aim, but still she thought that the character was positive (DiPaolo, 2011: 76). The 1980s–1990s saw a newly athletic Diana, her image got more sexualized, and she was Superman's lover for a while, and bore a child with him. The

twenty-first century gave readers an alternate timeline in which Diana was raised as an orphan in New York, and then later returned to her Hellenistic roots as a demigod daughter of Zeus and Hippolyta (Madrid, 2016: 187–221).

Like many superheroes, Wonder Woman's politics have unfolded over time. Early-on, she was a relative oddity as a feminist hero in a paternalistic age. Most adolescent comics readers probably did not think of her as a feminist, but she was unique in being an inspiration to girls and admirable to boys. If they were honest, many boys idolized her as much as did their sisters. As a woman stronger than many men, she played to gender fluidity of the war years, as many women took war industry jobs. Remember, World War II was the era of Rosie the Riveter, when many girls and women got a taste of independence for the first time. Of all the superheroes who took on the Axis in World War II, she may have been the most authentic: a genuine idealist committed to the defeat of evil and the establishment of peace. Her role in the Cold War was initially more ambiguous and, while she took that detour as Steve's significant other, she first teamed up with the Justice League (Cocca, 2016: 25–55).

The 1970s TV show came along just at the right time. For a time, Diana as played by former model Lynda Carter was the only superhero on American television, until *The Incredible Hulk*. The show's upbeat theme song would have made Marston proud, as it boasted Diana's combination of strength and femininity. "In your satin tights, Fighting for your rights, And the old Red, White and Blue."

The show's first season presents her as the supreme anti-fascist. Disguised as a Navy intelligence officer, she thwarts Nazi sabotage and infiltration on the home front and German military operations in Europe. Her strength comes from her belt, and she can imitate almost anyone's voice. Her twirling action as she changes into her costume becomes the show's signature. The second and third seasons changed networks and moved the action to the present. Diana becomes a conventional crime fighter along the lines of 1970s cop shows. Feminists were divided over the value of the show, but girls (and boys) and women loved it.

Ever since, feminists have debated whether Wonder Woman should be embraced as a woman's hero. Many girls in the 1940s–1950s saw Diana as a glamorous and powerful role model, while moderate feminists were fascinated by her power and independence. Common critiques were that, as a demigod and Amazon, she was too far removed from the experience of most women. She too often succumbs to male authority, is willing to be judged on her looks, is more often captured and bound than male counterparts, and is half-naked in her sexy outfit. Radical feminists felt that she constituted a step backward: the skimpy costume, heels, fantasy technology, Amazon backstory, and former beauty queen star playing her were more male fantasy than

liberating force. They were looking for realistic stories about women heroes. Some of them even attacked Steinem for championing the character (Lepore, 2015: 290–293; Rios, 2017: 1–7).

The 2017 movie, *Wonder Woman*, returns to a classic Wonder Woman, hinging on Diana's embodiment in Israeli actor/model Gal Gadot. Gadot portrays Diana as a confident fighter for peace, seeking to defeat Ares, the god of war, and bring peace to the world. "If no one else will defend the world, then I must," she declares. She finds the world of men dangerous and frequently disheartening, but gradually comes to appreciate the goodness in all people. Steve (Chris Pine) is trying to halt a scaled-up German chemical weapons program headed by Dr. Isabel Maru (or Dr. Poison) under the direction of General Erich Ludendorff (Danny Huston). Diana, Steve, and his small team break through German lines to the small town of Veld, from which they can reach Maru's lab. Diana has a brief romantic encounter with Steve but becomes angry with him when the town gets gassed and he questions her idealism about ending war.

Diana defeats and kills Ludendorff, who she thinks is Ares. By stealing and exploding a plane meant to deploy a new poison gas that could prevent Germany's impending defeat, Steve sacrifices his life. "I wish we had more time," he tells her as he leaves. "I love you. I can save today. You can save the world." The real Ares turns out to be Sir Patrick Morgan (David Thewlis), a member of the British Imperial War Council who poses as a peacemaker but wants to encourage perpetual war that will destroy humanity. Ares and Diana fight to the death since, as he notes, only a god can destroy a god. She tells Ares about humans, "they're everything you say they are, but they're capable of so much more." She finally defeats him by redirecting beams that he shoots at her.

This is a fanciful retelling of the end of World War I. Ludendorff did not directly oversee Germany's chemical weapons program, chemical labs were located in Berlin, not near the Western Front or in Turkey, and the Germans were not about to introduce a more destructive gas at the end of the conflict. Dr. Maru (Elena Anaya) is a fictional character, based in part on the Dr. Poison of the classic Wonder Woman comics. Dr. Fritz Haber, one of Germany's leading chemists, led the actual program (Fitzgerald, 2008: 611–625). Kaiser Wilhelm II accepted Ludendorff's resignation in September, 1918 after the failure of the major German offensives on the Western Front that culminated in the Second Battle of the Marne. Largely blamed for Germany's impending defeat, the general was in hiding at the end of the war, and he escaped to Sweden, where he stayed until early 1919. Obviously, he was not killed in the conflict. He became an early ally of Adolf Hitler, was later sidelined by the Nazi Party, and died in retirement in 1937 ("Erich Ludendorff," 2018: 1–5).

The movie works best as a liberal statement about the horrors of war, the drive for universal peace, and the need to accept imperfect humans as they are, not as we wish them to be. Diana is an IR idealist who might have agreed with Woodrow Wilson, who brought America into the “war to end all wars”—this slogan referenced once without explanation by Steve. It is not known whether Diana would have endorsed the President’s call for a system of collective security through the League of Nations to prevent future wars. It is also not known if she would have acted in the interwar period to prevent World War II, perhaps by working against the rise of European fascism and Japanese militarism. Beyond the world wars, it also is unclear if she could have done anything to curb the Cold War. Movies about Wonder Woman in World War II and the Cold War would have been helpful to develop her full story. Considering her origins in World War II, I have wondered why director Jenkins skipped over that era.

Many feminist viewers of the 2017 film were excited by Diana’s rejection of Steve’s authority over her and were thrilled by her determined run through No Man’s Land, leading Steve, his boys and the British Army through the German lines. Diana acts a true hero, exulting in her victories and not thinking twice about vanquishing foes. She takes women’s rights and feminism as birthrights and shows that women can be the true fighters for peace and freedom. This version of Wonder Woman thus becomes an inspiration to both women and men (Rios, 2017: 1–7). A few commentators also noted that it is no coincidence the movie came out the year after Hillary Clinton came within a whisker of getting elected the first woman U.S. president (Russo, 2019: 7–9).

Wonder Woman 1984 (2020) brings Diana up to the 1980s. It is a complicated story in which Diana holds an antiquities job at the Smithsonian Institution while working secretly to thwart crimes and villains. Coworker Barbara Ann Minerva (Kristen Wiig) envies Diana. The two examine a stolen artifact from a robbery that the Amazon had prevented. Called the Dreamstone, it is an object that can grant anyone holding it one wish. Minerva asks to be like Diana and gains her powers, while Diana inadvertently wishes for the return of Steve, whose spirit enters another man (only she can see him as he was in World War I). Failing oilman Maxwell Lorenzano (or Max Lord, played by Pedro Pascal) gains control of the stone, wishing to become the stone so that he can gain its power by manipulating others to wish for things for him. He becomes more wealthy and powerful, while bringing global instability as he grants more and more wishes.

Diana, Steve, and Barbara learn that the Dreamstone was created by the ancient Greek god of treachery and mischief. Those gaining wishes physically degenerate unless they give up their wishes. The president gives Lord access to a satellite link so he can grant people around the world their wishes,

thereby harvesting their energy and repairing his body that is gradually being destroyed. A tempted Barbara—gradually morphing into the “apex predator” Cheetah—aligns with Lord to defeat Diana and keep her powers. Steve tells Diana that she must give him up, so that she can regain her superpowers. She hesitates for a moment and then does so, and then battles Cheetah, defeating her in a lake. Diana finds Max and uses the Lasso of Truth to talk to the world’s people through him, convincing everyone to renounce their wishes. She asks Max to give up his wish and so save his small son Alistair who is wondering the chaotic streets in search of him. He reunites with his son, whose only wish was for his father to love him. All the bad wishes disappear, and normality returns.

Unlike the 2017 movie that obliquely confronted the nightmare of war, *WW84* deals tangentially with the oil politics of the Middle East and the nuclear standoff between America and the Soviet Union. Max manipulates Arab leaders to get control of their oil, and later upsets the nuclear balance by giving America one-hundred new weapons. More directly, the movie is an indictment of the predatory capitalism and predominance of the oil industry during that decade—and implicitly the 2010s. As Diana confronts Max at the movie’s climax, she asks him what he wants. He replies that he wants it all: endless wealth and power. This sounds much like the go-go capitalist mantras of the 1980s.

Critique of hyper-aggressive business has been a continuing theme of movies since that decade. Oliver Stone skewered the materialism and pursuit of financial gain of the time in his film, *Wall Street* (1987). Predatory stock Wall Street manipulator Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas) asserts at a stockholders’ meeting, “Greed . . . is good. Greed is right. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit.” He tries to buy a struggling airline just to break it up, angering his young acolyte Bud Fox (Charlie Sheen), whose father is a union representative who works there (Martin Sheen). Bud takes revenge by wearing a wire and getting Gekko to admit all his sleazy deals.

The Big Short (2015) examines the dodgy financial instruments (referred to as collateralized debt obligations or CDOs), lack of ethics, and absent government regulation that led to the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent Great Recession. Mark Baum (Steve Carell) is the conscience of the film, expressing anger and dismay at the damage caused by reckless investment in CDOs, but even he decides to sell his CDOs to save his company. The South Korean mega-hit and breakthrough Academy Award Best Picture winner *Parasite* (2019) deconstructs economic inequality as seen in the lives of two intertwined families, the Kims and Parks.

Wonder Woman has been the most enduring of the female superheroes that appeared in comics, movies, and on television. Female superheroes

often differ from their male counterparts. Stuller notes that they overlap with female heroes who are neither conventional superheroes nor action heroines. For instance, Buffy Summers (Sarah Michelle Gellar) from television's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) has a secret identity and superpowers, but she does not wear an iconic costume. Buffy is the first female super-like hero after Wonder Woman to headline her own show. Her character, the Slayer or Chosen One, saves her school and town from vampires and supernatural entities that enter Earth through the Hellmouth beneath her school. She also confronts teen issues of twenty years ago that still resonate today, such as high school cliques and slut shaming (Van Der Werff and Framke, 2017: 1–8).

Stuller suggests that three characteristics denote most female superheroes. First is collaboration with people around her, often with a created family or group of friends. Buffy, for instance, has her Scoobies, a group of friends that function as her sidekicks. There is to be only one Slayer per generation, but Buffy breaks her isolation by involving her friends and family in her work. Most male superheroes are loners, and so reach out or receive support only reluctantly, or become part of a mega-grouping such as the Justice League or Avengers (Stuller, 2013: 19–22).

Buffy subverts the conventional tropes placed on both superhero and horror protagonists. A typical male superhero story is all about how the man copes with his pain and channels it into his super deeds, whereas female characters are there to support him. Buffy's pain and suffering are front and center in the story, much like the best male heroes. In typical horror movies, the feminine blonde gets killed off early in the story, while the tomboy brunette survives the monster or slasher and tells the tale (called the Final Girl). Femininity thus is something to be erased in these stories. Buffy upends this by being a feminine blonde Slayer that loves cheerleading, fashion, and makeup, assisted by brunette sidekicks. Slasher movies kill off the girl who has sex, but Buffy suffers no serious consequences for having sex with her vampire boyfriend Angel. Instead, he undergoes a terrible transformation (Brady, 2017: 1–5).

Cocca shows that the original wartime Wonder Woman was a collaborative hero in this vein, often surrounded by other women, first on Paradise Island and then later with her group of young sorority women led by Etta Candy. The second sisterhood echoes the earlier Amazon sisterhood in various ways, as her new friends support her and even rescue her from time to time. Wonder Woman helps war era women protest for equal pay. Steve is sometimes weak, and he lets Diana carry him to safety in some comics. He is as interested in romance and love as any comics woman. After Marston's death, Wonder Woman turns briefly to crime fighting, but in the 1950s she loses her female gang, and stories focus on romance, horror, or science fiction. She only comes back to feminism in the 1970s, and she takes up feminist Second Wave issues of equality (Cocca, 2016: 26–37).

Second, most female superheroes act out of love, that is, “romantic, filial, platonic, or as an ethic.” For instance, Xena (Lucy Lawless) in TV’s *Xena, Warrior Princess* seeks to redeem her past misdeeds, and it is her transformative love for her companion and friend Gabrielle (Renee O’Connor), a peasant girl turned poet bard and warrior, that fuels her deeds. Are they lovers or just buddies? Does it matter? Lawless feels that they are indeed lovers. Xena, like Buffy, is a superhero in all aspects, except that she lacks a special costume beyond her ancient Greek garb. Like Buffy and Xena, Wonder Woman acts out of love for humanity and for her sister Amazons on Paradise Island (Stuller, 2013: 19–22).

Does this emphasis on love reinforce traditional female images, does her nurturing diminish her heroic qualities, and can love be considered heroic, asks Stuller? Yes and no. Marston certainly felt that women’s “maternal love and sexual allure” could save the world. While this may have been essentialist thinking, female superheroes have tended toward these traits more than their male counterparts. Stuller suggests that Buffy’s specialness is her “power to inspire,” which is both more subtle and egalitarian. Her willingness to sacrifice herself to save those around her inspires her friends to carry on her work (Stuller, 2013: 21–22).

Third, Stuller feels, women superheroes usually have been mentored by men. This suggests that the maternal aspect in their development is wanting and that, because comics heroism is considered a male value, “female knowledge” has no value in their formation (Stuller, 2013: 22). I do not agree with this, as various female superheroes have significant women friends who undoubtedly mentor and advise them. In Wonder Woman’s case, her whole life has been shaped by her upbringing by powerful Amazons. The mentoring also goes another direction, as female superheroes tend to guide their female sidekicks and ordinary women.

Stuller also asks whether the frequently sexualized images of female superheroes are an asset or hindrance to female superheroes. Since the first female superheroes took on underworld bosses in the late 1930s, feminists have questioned their scanty clothing, body-hugging costumes, and traditional feminine and hetero-normal behavior (Stuller, 2013: 23). Especially in 1980s–1990s comics, we see the male gaze at work here. I sympathize with anyone who wants to avoid objectification of fictional characters but, given the nature of comics and movie media, perhaps it is unavoidable. And, like Xena, Wonder Woman’s garb partly reflects ancient Greek military clothing.

In any case, women’s images and gender expression have always been complicated: both objectification and liberation. Take the mini skirt as worn in the 1960s, for example. While some feminists decried it, many women embraced it as a form of emancipation from girdles, garters, and other restrictive clothing. British women protested *in favor* of the mini when they heard

that London and Paris fashion houses were downplaying it. Some women even saw it as a badge of honor. And it was broadly popular with women across the world—at least until the pants suit came along a few years later.

Madrid relates how he viewed the *Watchmen* movie (2009) with a very educated female friend. When the character Silk Spectre (Malin Akerman) slowly descended a staircase wearing a “skintight latex costume and thigh high boots with garters,” his friend leaned over and said, “I want to be her.” Like it or not, he notes, these sexualized or objectified images are “inspiring and powerful” to many women (Madrid, 2016: vi). Some of these images are thrilling to men, as well, and I don’t mean as sexual turn-ons. They are excited by empowered women. As an old song states, “let the mystery be.” Perhaps we should put women superheroes’ costumes in the category of work-in-progress.

Stuller concludes that female superheroes’ greatest value may be to inspire girls and women to “stand up, be strong, support others, and, most important, believe in themselves” (Stuller, 2013: 23). The three qualities Stuller notes (with my stipulation that female mentoring *does* occur) make female superheroes more valuable than their male counterparts to a suffering world. A collaborative, loving, and mentoring leader contrasts nicely with psychically wounded, dark male loners who brood as they look out over the urban nightscape atop a high building or toil away as nebbish newspaper reporters. And Wonder Woman is the greatest female superhero. Et voila! That is why Wonder Woman must be considered the greatest superhero.

I would add three traditional qualities held by many—but not all—female superheroes: empathy, caring, and nurturing. Those should be strengths, right? Why would we ever conclude that an empathetic, caring, and nurturing woman would be a bad thing? Joe Biden presents himself as an empathetic and caring leader, and he gets praised for it. An empathetic, caring male hero would be good, too, wouldn’t he? Two other female superhero traits cannot be matched by any male counterpart: elegance and style. Is that a terrible thing? Many male heroes’ gender expression is, frankly, boring: too many chiseled torsos, broad shoulders, and rippling leg muscles. In any case, Batman’s chiseled torso is not real, it’s just his body armor.

As constructivism would suggest, women superheroes have undergone major changes since they appeared in comics in the 1930s. Superwomen’s abilities were often overshadowed by their hyper-sexualized images. Early female characters hid their real identities more completely than their male counterparts, often worked in relationship to male superheroes, and occasionally pursued other lives as society women. Madrid calls these women the Debutantes. My favorite of these is Miss Fury (aka Marla Drake), who was drawn by a woman (Tarpe Mills), only used a costume because of necessity, and lived life the way she wanted. She often fought criminals in her designer

best suits. As Nicholson puts it, Miss Fury's "sex appeal" is a big part of her success; she was "an incredibly well-drawn character who looked incredibly dashing, in or out of her stylish panther suit" (Nicholson, 2017: 37–39; Madrid, 2016: 8–11). Miss Fury got the graphic novel treatment in the 2010s, but why has no movie been made about Marla Drake?

The Debutantes were succeeded by the Victory Girls, wholesome red-blooded American women who joined up for the fight against the Axis, and the Glamour Girls, who came from working class backgrounds and had to make their way in the world. Phantom Lady (or Sandra Knight), for instance, was a tough crime fighter. In her postwar incarnation, she was both athletic and glamorous to a fault (Madrid, 2016: 1–31).

By the 1950s, the Comics Code Authority had banished most sex, crime and violence from the comics. Gone were debutantes and glamour girls; in came the Girlfriends. Females in comics now mostly served as significant others, to bring more gloss and to appeal to girl readers. For instance, Batman only reluctantly accepts Batwoman as a partner, suggesting she is not smart enough for the job of full-time crime-fighter. Lois Lane's role as Superman's potential mate gets played up. She engages in a decades-long effort to marry the Man of Steel, while spurning his Clark Kent doppelganger—thus virtually ensuring that she can never get together with Superman (Madrid, 2016: 57–81).

Supergirl is just as capable as Superman, but in the comics she plays second fiddle to the Son of Jor-El. She is there to represent the "ideal" teenage girl of the 1950s-1960s, and as such gets her own comics editions. She is very interested in boys and wants to find a man with whom she can settle down (Madrid, 2016: 83–93, 104–105). As DC's leading female character of the 1960s, by default she becomes the most popular female superhero for a time. In the *Supergirl* TV series (2015–2021), Kara Zor-El is an adolescent girl sent to Earth to take care of her cousin, the infant Kal-El, but she arrives after him and so the grown Superman places her with a family who raises her as Kara Danvers (Melissa Benoist). At first reluctant to use her superpowers and desiring to be a normal young woman, she grows to use her abilities. The story works well because Benoist's Kara is the archetypal female Spunky Kid character that both women and men find appealing. She makes many mistakes and sometimes struggles with confidence, but she keeps working hard to improve herself and help others (for such character archetypes, see Cowden, et al., 2013: 65–69).

Unlike her cousin, Kara begins as a traditional female character, the caregiver, sent to Earth to protect her cousin. Initially, she disdains her superhero identity. When she becomes Supergirl, she receives guidance from the government's Department of Extra-Normal Operations (DEO), where Danvers's adoptive sister Alex (Chyler Leigh) works. While she must rely on

government assistance and approval for her actions, as the series unfolds, she takes more initiative, challenges her DEO overseers, and becomes an autonomous woman. As with classic heroine arcs noted above, she employs cooperative methods that involve her friends and sister in her actions. Feminists might note that, unlike Clark/Superman, Kara is more deferential to authority and treated in a condescending manner because she is inexperienced and female. But this sets up her as a likeable young woman, more approachable and friendly than, say, Spiderman (discussed below).

Batgirl is even more resourceful than Supergirl and becomes a minor feminist icon in the 1970s when she calls for equal pay for women in a public service announcement. First introduced as Betty Kane, niece of Kathy Kane (aka Batwoman), she gets rebooted during the *Batman* TV series as Commissioner Gordon's daughter Barbara. In comics, she gets elected to Congress, an even better way to fight crime. Shot by Joker, she continues fighting crime from a wheelchair for a few years, but then gains back her legs and resumes her work as Batgirl (Nicholson, 2017: 70–71, 96–97).

During the 1960s-1970s, women gained more comics prominence, especially at Marvel, where they found something a little closer to equality than at DC, often as superhero team members. The Fantastic Four and X-Men included various fully developed female characters. The 1970s saw women fighting for black and women's rights (Madrid, 2016: 105–135, 149–185). In *The Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (2006), Susan Storm, also known as the Invisible Woman (Jessica Alba), plays a vital role in convincing the Silver Surfer, the harbinger of an alien civilization bent on subjugating Earth, to cooperate with the Fantastic Four. Susan Storm had long been a very popular comics character (DiPaolo, 2011: 205–207). Comics women in the 1980s took a turn toward darker material, but in the 1990s were treated as eye candy “babes” for the entertainment of young men. Finally, in the first years of the twenty-first century, women went in various directions: into retro-fantasies, as equals, or as mother figures fighting for all of humanity (Madrid, 2016: 223–247, 275–291, 292–323).

Captain Marvel (2019) is another recent major stand alone female movie superhero. The captain began as a male comics character during World War II. Now, an ex-Air Force pilot Carol Danvers (Brie Larson), *she* was exposed to the Tesseract, a powerful energy source in the Avengers series (below). This imbued her with superpowers, especially strength, use of energy beams, and ability to move quickly. Living with an emotionless alien military force the Kree, she has suppressed her human qualities. She learns to balance her human desires for justice with her alien training, but she also is quick-acting and impulsive. In this backstory to Marvel's Avengers tales, she assists SHIELD agent Nick Fury to defeat the Skrulls, but she assists them to

find a new planet. Fury gives her a special pager in case SHIELD needs to contact her.

The film encountered unusual opposition from Marvel fans, as some thought the movie too political, that is, politically correct in presenting a story focused on a female superhero. They pointed to star Larson, who is an outspoken feminist. Nevertheless, the movie performed well at the box office. Cromartie suggests that such comments have not been made about male-led films, such as the *Iron Man* series, which contained antiwar and anti-Military Industrial Complex themes throughout the movies. She notes that superheroes have always been political, going back to the anti-Nazi origins of Superman and Captain America, and so changes in the Captain Marvel character should not have been a big deal (Cromartie, 2019: 1–8). Fans often become unhinged when a beloved character undergoes a gender change. Similar things were said about gender changes in the reimaged *Battlestar Galactica* science fiction series (2004–2009). One could argue that it was not a gender change, but the takeover of the Captain Marvel character by the latter-day Ms. Marvel character. Personally, I think it is exciting to consider the possibilities that character gender changes open up.

Harley Quinn (or Harleen Quinzel) is about as far from Captain Marvel as you can get. She is a spinoff character—and Joker’s former girlfriend—from DC’s Extended Universe. While intriguingly played by Margot Robbie in two movies, *Suicide Squad* (2016) and *Birds of Prey (and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn)* (2020), Harley divides critics. Either she is a quirky breath of fresh air or a waste of time. I would rather call the films a missed opportunity. She could have been a fascinatingly drawn female superhero who uses her wits, unpredictability, and goofiness to slither out of difficult situations, but instead mostly she is a high camp character that cannot be taken very seriously. The best part of the second film is the formation of all-female superhero group who assist Harley and a young pickpocket Cassandra Jain (Ella Jay Basco) to recover a diamond to satisfy crime lord Roman Sionis (Ewan McGregor). In a confrontation on a pier, Cassandra and Harley toss Sionis over the side as a grenade explodes him. Most of the women formally band together as the *Birds of Prey*, while Harley and Cassandra sell the diamond and use the funds to start a business. A reboot of *Suicide Squad* (2021) got better reviews than the 2016 version.

Natasha Romanoff (Scarlett Johansson) of Avengers fame is the latest female superhero to get her standalone film, *Black Widow* (2021). The film is intended to kick off Marvel’s Phase Four, as there have not been many Marvel franchises on screen since 2017. Natasha gave her life for the cause at the end of *Avengers: Endgame*. This movie is a wrenching origins story, in which we learn that the family she grew up with in Ohio was not real, but a cobbled together Russian sleeper cell. The family fled their home to

Cuba, and Natasha returned to Russia to train as a Black Widow, in a super-assassin program headed by Dreykov (Ray Winstone). She reconnects with her not-real sister (Florence Pugh) and her not-real parents, and the two young women do battle with Dreykov. The film is as much about damaged pasts, sisterhood and “improvised families” as the action (Coyle, 2021: 20). This movie’s examination of Moscow’s perfidy may make sense to audiences who have been bombarded by recent stories about Russian hacking, election interference, and intelligence operations aimed at Western countries.

It is telling that Natasha is the only female Avenger, though Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow) plays the supportive role of CEO for Stark’s company, freeing Tony to pursue his superhero career. The Marvel folks did not include Ms. Marvel/Captain Marvel in the Avengers, though she has numerous connections to the other characters, at least in the comics (Lutes, 2019: 1–4). Going forward, one would expect to see DC and the Marvel Comics Universe give us more female heroes. But given how difficult has been the struggle to achieve representation for women, I would not hold my breath waiting for complete equality.

IDENTITIES, NORMS AND CHANGE: CONSTRUCTIVISM AND SUPERHEROES

The superhero phenomenon has shifted with each decade, and each iteration of major characters has reflected socio-political changes in American society—and influenced society, as well (Johnson, 2012: 1–5). The problem with superheroes always has been that they are essentially vigilantes whose violence must be channeled for them to be legitimate. The first, prewar superheroes were fighters for the common man and for ideals of the New Deal (Johnson, 2012: 7–28). Superheroes of the early 1940s were dedicated to the war effort, which was legitimated by the Allies’ success. After the war they returned to crime-fighting roles. The more conservative 1950s saw the Comics Code Authority, which removed sex and most violence from the comics. DC Comics led the way during this decade, as its upright heroes rounded up criminals and then turned to science fiction. DC scored a television triumph with a Superman TV series that showed the Man of Steel as best friend of the police. Batman was revived by a TV series a decade later, but its campiness made the Dark Knight appear silly and ultimately diminished the franchise.

The rebellious 1960s were ripe for a challenger, and Marvel Comics’ more complex characters and youth-oriented or wounded heroes appealed to young audiences. DC characters now seemed staid and old-fashioned. Marvel’s Spiderman was an angst-filled teenager, the X-men as mutants were young

misfits who could not find a home, and Bruce Banner or the Hulk was a brilliant young scientist damaged by gamma radiation in government experiments gone awry. The late 1970s to early 1980s saw serious TV adaptations of superheroes Wonder Woman, Spiderman, and the Hulk.

Superman led the way to superhero movies in the late 1970s to mid-1980s, and DC dominated silver screen superhero movies until the end of the century. These Superman films are sunny tales in which a public-spirited Caped Crusader saves Earth time and again. Batman was next but, as presented by Tim Burton and other directors, the first Batman movies were dark and pessimistic about American urban society. Batman is an ambiguous vigilante, never really embraced by citizens of Gotham City and disdained by city officials. Christopher Nolan's Dark Knight movies early in the twenty-first century are even darker, as Batman gives into the Darkness or compromises his own status for ostensibly noble reasons. No such luck with the newer Supermen, who becomes increasingly self-centered, morose, and less public-serving.

The Spiderman movies were Marvel's first cinematic move. Sam Raimi's Spiderman downplays Peter Parker's teen angst, while playing up his self-discovery. These first post-9/11 superhero films find us rooting for Spidey as he takes on supervillains set on destroying the New York skyline. Marc Webb gives audiences a more adult Spiderman that may have made more sense as America recovered from its forever wars. The Jon Watts films return Spiderman to his youthful origins, as he once again is an awkward, confused high school student with raging hormones.

Success of Iron Man and Captain America franchises leads to the elephantine Avengers movies that operated like a superhero's multinational conglomerate. The problem of vigilantism has been removed, as the Avengers now have the approval of a government organization, SHIELD and its head, Nick Fury. X-men have no such approval and gain legitimacy by being "good" mutants fighting against "bad" mutants who are out to damage the U.S. government and society to punish America and the world for persecution of their kind. They become like good Muslims working with the U.S. government against bad Muslims, or secularized Afghans and Iraqis working against their radical fellow countrymen.

The greatest change in superhero identities and norms came in gender. DiPaolo suggests that comics usually provide "dreadful portrayals" of women, and there are two major modes of presentation: as a damsel in distress or the "emotionless, voluptuous vixen with painted-on clothing who never has sex but is great at karate." Though the male gaze, the latter characters are both male fantasies and the male reader himself. So, these characters are not in any way aimed at female readers (DiPaolo, 2011: 42–44). As noted by Cocca and others, women in superhero comics and movies have always

faced a representation problem. Most superhero characters remain white, heterosexual males. The few very popular women superheroes have either been neutered or cancelled, and many of them (Batgirl, Batwoman, and Supergirl, in particular) were there mostly to complement male superheroes. What a shame, considering how resourceful and clever Batgirl and Supergirl have always been. Since the 1950s, there usually have been backlashes against powerful comics females. The feminist crusader Wonder Woman of the 1940s was forced into domesticity in the 1950s and lost her powers in the late 1960s. Briefly returned to feminism in the 1970s and 1980s, and given her own TV show, by the 1990s she was hyper-sexualized and spilling out of skimpiest costumes than ever. It took animated and live-action movies to bring her to her origins on Themyscira (Cocca, 2016: 1–55).

Social structures in superhero societies reflect urban environments under stress, in which crime is out of control, policing and local government are feckless and unable to stop supervillains, and only vigilante superheroes can bring order to chaos. Over eighty years of comics, movies, and television properties have given most people an intersubjective understanding of superhero tropes, and this has made the Marvel movies the most profitable of the past twenty years. State identities and interests are challenged by supervillains, and superheroes usually work with national and local government and police, though they often are not appreciated for their work, most notably in the case of Batman and the X-Men. The *Superman vs. Batman* film illustrates two different ways of seeing superheroes and showed post-9/11 tensions between those who saw anti-terrorism efforts as a policing problem and those who wanted a robustly militarized response. Black Panther demonstrates the rise of the developing world, with its own proud history and traditions. Wonder Woman films indicate the continuing appeal to universal peace and love for one's fellow humans. The recently prominent female superheroes and gay allegories in X-Men show the broadening of superhero identities.

Does the Hulsman-Mitchell application of IR theories to *Godfather* characters work for superheroes? Generally, it does work with some tweaking. Most traditional DC characters, for instance, are traditional or institutional liberals. Superman in his traditional form, seeks to affirm “truth, justice, and the American way.” He works closely with both the police and newspapers and is a moral beacon for citizens of Metropolis. Wonder Woman, as suggested above, is an idealist liberal seeking global peace. Marvel characters are more nuanced, and so act more like traditional realists or neo-realists, with an overlay of liberal concerns. They thus look much like American foreign policy actors during Cold War. Tony Stark, for instance, works to protect his self-interest, but he is driven to develop the Iron Man suit to fight against the kind of international injustice that he witnessed in Afghanistan. Peter Parker is more concerned about his teen angst and love for MJ than in saving New

York, but in each movie, he takes on the villains because of his belief in defeating the bad things that they represent. He convinces both Dr. Octavius and Sand Man to give up their activities because they have lost a sense of their true selves (Hulsman and Mitchell, 2009: 1–19).

I return to those qualities that mark female superheroes: collaboration, love, and mentoring. And why not add those other traditional qualities I mentioned: empathy, caring, nurturing, elegance, and style? In a violent time in which societies have been torn apart by toxic politics, terrorism, and ethno-nationalism, aren't those the things that we need to get to a better world? Hoorah for superheroes, especially female superheroes, and superheroes of color.

BACKSTORY: SUPERHEROES, CHILDREN OF THE COMICS

Superhero tales lend themselves to political discussion better than most genres, as they are rarely political allegories or loaded with disguised socio-political references. Instead, they present political ideas unironically as part of the overall narrative, without making a big deal about it. Superman, the first great superhero, emerged as an American idealist fantasy in the waning days of the Great Depression, and then became an avatar of American Exceptionalism during World War II. On TV in the 1950s, he affirmed conservative values and civic order by becoming best friend of the police and news media. He was an obvious role model for children (Palmer, 2013: 2–3).

Politics in superhero movies can be general or specific. General political themes include characters' attitudes to government, business-government relations, policing and vigilantism, America's postwar history and socio-political issues. Seeming specific references to current events, either implied by screenwriters or inferred by audiences, give the films extra power and resonance. Often, these are not planned, as the movies are in production for a year or two before release. For instance, the first Spiderman movie emphasized the New York skyline, though it had been attacked only months before in the 9/11 attacks. The movie was largely finished in September 2001. The third Iron Man film uses a sudden bombing at the Mann Theater in Los Angeles, immediately after the Boston Marathon bombing. The director and crew could not have known about that real terrorist attack (Palmer, 2013: 2–4).

Throughout history, people have enjoyed superhero-like characters. Think of Gilgamesh, Hercules, Samson, King Arthur, Siegfried, Mulan, and Aladdin. Since the early twentieth century, superhero literature and movies have formed a "subgenre of speculative fiction containing strong elements of fantasy and science fiction" (Plot Elements, 2020: 1–7). The recent success of

superhero movies owes much to their origins in comic books. In pulp form, stories could be embellished and reinvented over and over. Characters could be seriously injured or killed, and then revived in subsequent editions—and there was always a barely plausible explanation. Readers did not care, though they laughed about it; they just enjoyed the stories.

Superheroes often inhabit an urban environment, in a city that looks like New York City. They usually possess either a physical superpower (Peter Parker/Spiderman's ability to shoot webs) or specialized tools or equipment (Batman's car, plane, and tool belt) that give them extra abilities to beat adversaries. They overcome unusual or tragic backstories. This may be something as horrific as Bruce Wayne as a boy witnessing the murder of his parents on a Gotham street, sudden events such like Parker's being bitten by a radiated spider and feeling partly responsible for his uncle's murder, or a gradual physical change such as the X-Men coming to embrace and channel their mutant abilities at Dr. Xavier's school.

Superheroes often have a secret identity and wear costumes to hide their ordinary appearance. Superman works as the "mild-mannered reporter" Clark Kent, industrialist Wayne changes from a tuxedo or business suit to a full Bat costume, and Parker puts on a face covering along with his Spiderman costume. This dual identity causes considerable angst for the superhero, and he or she struggles to explain to significant others who they really are. Heroes often feel compelled to give up normal human relationships, especially romantic ties, because of their identities. For women superheroes, at least in the comics, it may have meant giving up their hero careers to become traditional housewives.

Superheroes face off against supervillain adversaries who they usually defeat, but who may come back again and again. These villains often have their own secret identities and terrible backstories that may make them partially sympathetic figures to readers and audiences. If a supervillain wins, it is only a temporary setback for the hero. A sidekick who may also be costumed sometimes accompanies the superhero, such as Robin and Batwoman for Batman. Spinoff characters such as Batgirl, Supergirl, and Superboy sometimes work with their character of origin. Superheroes also work in teams, such as X-Men, the Avengers, and the Justice League (Plot Elements, 2020: 1–7).

Superheroes usually possess superhuman strength, can stand extreme pain, and are excellent fighters. Some can become invisible, defy gravity, or attain flight. They are mentally stable and quite intelligent. They are courageous and exhibit strong morals and personal responsibility (Traits of Superheroes, 2018: 1–3). At key moments of their careers, they encounter major physical crises, which may include exile, banishment, or temporary death as mentioned above.

Those who study superheroes list several stages in their historical development, which vary by scholar. Coogan lists the first stage as an Antediluvian Age, in which many superhero traits began to develop prior to the advent of superhero comics, from the early nineteenth century to just before World War I. Second was the Golden Age of comics, 1938 to 1956, when the basic conventions of superhero characters became set. In the third phase, known as the Silver Age, 1956 to 1971, these conventions reached a stable equilibrium. The Bronze Age, 1971 to 1980, saw various stylistic embellishments that became critical to the genre, such as the dark urban tones common to graphic novels. The Iron Age, 1980 to 1987, saw these embellishments often take over from substance. Finally, the Renaissance Age, from 1987 to 2000, allowed comics to reestablish classic conventions (Coogan, 2006: 193–234). I would add one more stage: the Movie Age, 2002–present, in which DC and especially Marvel films came to dominate the genre.

Coogan also lists the ways superheroes have interacted with and challenged American ideologies. The very first superheroes were “superheroes for the common man” and accepted New Deal assumptions about government serving the people. Superheroes supported the war effort against the Axis powers, and young people felt empowered by comics that appealed directly to them as consumers. By the 1950s, comics reinforced a “blandly optimistic consensus view of America” including “anticommunism, corporatism, domesticity” and upward mobility. In the 1960s to early 1970s, comics addressed issues of bigotry (X-Men), challenged authority (Green Lantern), and expressed collective disappointment about Watergate (Captain America). Critics questioned whether all-powerful heroes underlined a sense of powerlessness in ordinary people, but many young people claimed that superheroes taught them important values. A hero like Batman, who had only special tools, could be just as effective as a superhero with superpowers. Superheroes also taught young people to help the weak against the strong, as Superman fought corrupt businessmen and feckless government, or Captain America battled militarism and fascism abroad (Coogan, 2006: 235–238).

For filmmakers and television show runners, the flexibility of superheroes makes them excellent subjects. Superhero personalities and capabilities have gone through so many stages in comics over the years, and their backstories have been altered so often, that a wide vista of possibilities opens to screenwriters. The rising numbers of women superheroes is testament to this. No longer designed to serve as eye candy or sidekicks of male heroes, they can take center stage as avatars of empowered womanhood. As constructivism might suggest, each generation discovers its own versions of Superheroes.

Using all of the elements above, we can sketch out a typical traditional superhero movie story. Shall we try it? Let’s call our invented superhero Lioness. She begins as Brenda Kale, a ravishing auburn-haired beauty and

brilliant college biology student with a dark past. Her mother and father were teachers on an Indian Reservation, and she is haunted by crimes against Native Americans that she witnessed. Her parents mysteriously disappeared when she was a young girl, and she has been raised and mentored by her grandfather, a professor of classics and mythology, and grandmother, a leading veterinarian. Her best friend is Brock Spencer, one of Megacity's leading police investigators, but she is unsure if she wants a romantic relationship with him. Her best female friend is Cilla Stewart, crack reporter for *The Megacity Sentinel*.

Brenda has come to believe that she is the descendant of prehistorical warriors and that the lion is her totem animal. A Native American, Brave Wolf, on weekends has trained her remarkable abilities to stalk and hunt, run incredibly fast and leap great distances, fend off bullets and spears, rope animals and climb almost any structure. He has also given her a Native American herbal drink that has enhanced her strength. With the assistance of former government investigator and weapons expert Jeff Knowland, she has fashioned her own cache of weapons, both ancient and modern. A freak accident when she visits a zoo finds her falling into the lion pit. Instead of attacking her, the lions gather around her, rubbing against her and licking her hand. A lioness approaches and looks up at her, and she strokes its head. Awed by her experience, she has a realization that a lioness lives within her, and she creates her own costume and head covering suggesting a female lion.

One night, Brenda sees a group of thugs attack a young girl. She instantaneously changes into her Lioness costume, chases and ties up the criminals, handing them over to the police. Night after night, Lioness prevents or stops crimes and becomes a hero to Megacity. Cilla is determined to find the superhero and reveals her quest to Brenda. Jason Smart is one of the most powerful young businessman in Megacity, founder and CEO of Mega Resources, Inc. In secret, he has been guided in his career by Jek, a humanoid alien from the planet of Magalindo, who wants to cultivate human leaders who can be used for their interests. Jek has given Jason the power to shoot death rays from his fingers, and he has fed him a steady diet of the mind-enhancing drug Oxyporto that has increased the businessman's physical stamina while making him narcissistic and paranoid. Jason seeks to gain control of the world's supply of Meta-Triton, a rare earth compound that can supply unlimited energy or be turned into a powerful weapon. One night, Jeff is killed under suspicious circumstances. Brock tells Brenda that it appears to be a professional hit. In Jeff's papers, they find references to sources of Meta-Triton and Mega Resources. Documents show that Brenda's parents were doing secret research on Meta-Triton for Mega Resources.

Cilla begins digging into Jason's shady business dealings, angering him. Lioness confronts Jason late at night in his office, insisting that he come clean

about his business operations and Jeff's murder, but Jason is dismissive. He meets career criminal Leatherskin, noted for his rough, gnarled skin, bald, stitched head, and powerful oversized fists. Jason gives him the task of luring Lioness to her destruction. Leatherskin kidnaps Cilla, holding her atop an abandoned building that used to belong to Mega Resources. Lioness and Leatherskin engage in an extended fight, and she pushes Leatherskin off the building to his death. Jason, who has been watching, shoots death rays at Lioness, but her agility allows her to escape each one. She uses an ancient atlatl to throw spears and pin Jason's hands to the building, and then ropes him, handing him over to Brock.

Later, Brock relates his story of meeting Lioness to Brenda, not knowing of his friend's true identity. They look longingly at each other, but Brenda tells him that she needs go home to take care of her grandmother. Later, she notes in her personal journal that, though she cares for Brock, she can never have a romantic relationship with him. She concludes, "In me beats the heart of a lion, and I must give that heart to the people of Megacity." Lioness climbs to the top of the Megacity War Memorial, looking out over the city.

Sounds pretty good, eh? Pardon me if it seems a bit derivative, but I was trying for a typical superhero story. Excuse me for using the term lioness, but it is the common term for a female lion, and there already is a subsidiary comics character called lioness. I hope my references to Native Americans do not come across as stereotypical. Do you think that I could get a contract for it from DC or Marvel?

DC'S BIGGER-THAN-LIFE CHARACTERS

Like superheroes fighting supervillains, two giants have battled for supremacy of the comics world: DC and Marvel. DC Comics (DC meaning Detective Comics) formed in 1939, and later took over other comics companies. The two most popular characters were Batman and Superman (The History of DC Comics, undated: 1–2). DC superheroes often are larger-than-life characters. Batman is a super-rich guy, Bruce Wayne, who fights crime as a sideline, while Superman is Kal-El, the son of Jor-El, the powerful ruler of planet Krypton, and his wife. Jor-El sends his baby boy to Earth just before the planet is destroyed. Of course, Diana Prince fits right in as a demigod and Amazon warrior.

Like Wonder Woman, Superman and Batman evolved through multiple comics, television and movie incarnations. Superman was created by writers Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster in 1933–1934, influenced by contemporary science fiction. The classic Superman grows up as Clark, raised by Jonathan and Martha Kent near Smallville, Kansas. He learns simple American values

from his guardians, or “truth, justice, and the American Way,” as his super body begins to develop. He has been given more superpowers than almost any superhero. He possesses superhuman strength, and his body is almost indestructible. He enjoys telescopic vision for seeing far away objects, micro-vision for seeing the extremely small, and x-ray vision to see through objects. He can fly both in and out of the atmosphere, as well as moving, reacting and thinking extremely fast. His major weakness is exposure to the substance Kryptonite from his home planet, which can kill him. Superman vows to use his powers only to help humanity. He goes off to Metropolis to study and becomes a writer for *The Daily Planet*, the leading newspaper of Metropolis. He becomes close to reporter Lois Lane, with whom he later develops a romantic relationship (“Superman Biography,” 2021: 1–4).

Also like Wonder Woman, Superman fights against fascists in World War II, and then focuses on criminals and supervillains. His longest battle has been with Lex Luthor, a corrupt business tycoon who devises various schemes to gain power and wealth. Superman’s greatest moment comes with the popular TV show of the 1950s, ABC’s *Adventures of Superman* (1952–1958, after a pilot movie in 1951) starring George Reeves as the caped hero with Phyllis Coates and later Noel Neill as Lois. The show was noted for its low production values and cheesy special effects, but kids loved it. This incarnation of Superman shows a positive attitude toward U.S. institutions, and he works closely with the police to solve crimes. Superman is also avatar of conventional American socio-political values in the 1940s and 1950s. Lois suspects that Clark is Superman and her greatest desire is to marry him. In 1950s television, this would suggest giving up her career and accepting her role as housewife. While a career woman who plays pivotal roles in many episodes, she often becomes a damsel in distress who must be saved by Superman.

The tragic death of its lead actor under mysterious circumstances a year after cancellation unfortunately stained the show. We may never know whether Reeves committed suicide or was murdered (the case was ruled a suicide). The movie *Hollywoodland* (2006), starring Ben Affleck as Reeves, suggests three possibilities: suicide, accidental shooting by his fiancée, and a hit orchestrated by a Hollywood producer angry at Reeves’s affair with his wife. Tragedy also attended the first Superman movie series (1978–1987). Christopher Reeve, no relation to George Reeves, starred as the Man of Steel. Reeve featured in several other popular films, but seriously injured his upper spine in an equestrian accident in 1995, causing him to be wheelchair-bound for the last nine years of his life. He became an activist for handicapped rights and stem cell research. Margot Kidder, who played Lois in all four movies, suffered severe episodes of bipolar disorder in the 1990s and apparently committed suicide in 2018.

Directed by Richard Donner, the first movie was well-regarded by critics and audiences. Thereafter, sequels declined in quality and audience acceptance. That first movie's initial scenes present the destruction of Krypton as an environmental fable. Marlon Brando plays Jor-El, who unsuccessfully warns his planet of the impending supernova of their sun. The segment on Clark's upbringing in Kansas becomes a conservative elegy for traditional values and the purity of America's heartland. Like the first *Star Wars* movie that had been released a year earlier, the film was a return to traditional values for audiences exhausted by Vietnam and Watergate. The movie's second half includes more camp and comedy, though Gene Hackman is delightful as Luthor, a supervillain who revels in his dirty work.

The third movie, involving the character Gus, acted by Richard Pryor, includes large chunks of comedy. The fourth installment was not well-reviewed or popular, though it is perhaps the most interesting politically. Superman thwarts a "Nuclear Man" created by Lex Luthor and tries to bring peace between America and the Soviet Union. The movie hit theaters just as Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev were seriously negotiating new nuclear deals and the end of the Cold War. The story also confronts contemporary changes in the news media, as *The Daily Planet* becomes a tabloid and subject to a hostile takeover.

The movies' social values evolve through the series. *Superman II* is more conservative than the first film, as Superman presents that "hetero-normal" male ideal against the bizarre trio of Kryptonians who arrive to fight him. Lois becomes more passive in relation to Clark/Superman. *Superman III* takes a more liberal tack, as it critiques the dominant capitalist economic system. Ross Webster is a predatory businessman who tries to use Gus for his evil schemes, including diverting a hurricane to Colombia, the only country whose coffee crop he does not control. Suffering under the influence of a synthetic kryptonite, Clark and Superman split into two people. The self-centered Clark gets beaten by the socially-conscious Man of Steel (Salminen, 2017: 1–10).

Superman took a film hiatus for nearly twenty years. Bryan Singer's *Superman Returns* (2006) with Brandon Routh as Superman, Kate Bosworth as Lois, and Kevin Spacey as Luthor, is more complex and brooding than the original movie series, well reviewed and one of the most popular films of the year. *Man of Steel* (2013), directed by superhero specialist Zack Snyder, did not venture far from blockbuster formulae that have come to dominate the genre in the new millennium: quick pace, lots of action and explosions, and sticking with Superman's basic backstory. It stars Henry Cavill as Superman and Amy Adams as Lois. It includes a greater role for the U.S. government and military, as Superman must help them battle a General Zod, who escaped

from Krypton before it was destroyed. Cavill went on to play Superman in the *Batman vs. Superman* and Justice League movies since 2016.

Salminen argues that the silver screen Superman underwent a major transformation from the first movie series to the recent flicks. The first movies seek to mediate between conservative and liberal impulses. Clark's upbringing takes a page out of conservative views of the 1950s, but Metropolis is a comfy urban environment, not the hell-hole of other superhero stories. While the 1970s–1980s Superman stories were generally conservative, the superhero possessed a high degree of social responsibility and sense of duty to take action to solve problems. The 1978 film presents him as a “polite, socially-minded idealist” who eschews violence and practices altruism. Superman thus became part of the “hero revival” that included the first *Star Wars* trilogy and the Rambo movies (Salminen, 2017: 1–10).

Superman Returns presents a dour, less friendly, or helpful superhero who is vaguely upset about the state of the world. Like so many movies after 9/11, the story takes a conservative stance on serious threats. Superman returns from a five-year search for the remnants of Krypton and starts working as a reporter again. He confronts a Luthor who is more terrorist than supervillain, as he employs crystals in the Fortress of Solitude to trigger power outages on the East Coast, nearly crashing a Space Shuttle, which Superman saves at the last moment. Luthor then combines the crystals with Kryptonite to create an Atlantic landmass that will cause Earth's oceans to rise and kill billions. Superman lifts the artificial island into space, sparing Earth. *Man of Steel* goes even further, with Superman questioning whether he should even save people. Rather than seeing the positive value in good acts, Superman sees himself as merely an example to follow. He is more interested in defeating General Zod, who seeks to terraform Earth into a copy of Krypton, than in saving Earth (Salminen, 2017: 1–10).

The television series *Lois and Clark: the New Adventures of Superman* in the 1990s and *Smallville* in the 2000s update both gender roles and Superman's personality. Unlike the Reeve films, in which the Clark identity is shy and bumbling and Superman strong and confident, *Lois and Clark* presents Clark as the dominant identity. *Smallville* focuses on the development of the young Clark and Superman before he relocates to Metropolis.

Batman is Superman's unstated and later actual rival as crime fighter. Bob Kane and Bill Finger created the Dark Knight in 1939. Kane came up with the character's Bruce Wayne backstory, while Finger suggested the costume. Batman's key story influence is the hard-boiled detective and crime novels and short stories of the 1930s–1940s. As such, the atmosphere is darker and the criminals more devious and outlandish than in Superman stories. In the comic's second year, Batman stops using guns and encounters the first unusual supervillains, Joker and Catwoman. The Caped Crusader gets the

sidekick Robin a few years later. As in film noir movies, views of police, courts and other institutions in Gotham City are more ambiguous than in Superman comics. Like Superman, Batman switches from crimefighting to battling Nazis in World War II comics. In the 1950s, due to the Comics Code, Batman downplays crimefighting and dark urban scenery, and science fiction and camp get played up. Declining sales almost lead to the character's demise in the 1960s (Arrant and Marston, 2020: 1–12).

Television rescued the character, as ABC launched its iconic *Batman* series in 1966. This incarnation plays up camp and comedy elements, while little of hard-boiled detective or noir aspects remain. When characters fight, comics-like action bubbles appear onscreen with dramatic music, screaming words like “Pow,” “Zap,” or “Bam.” The theme song by Neil Hefti becomes a mid-1960s earworm. Well-known television or movie actors play supervillains, most notably Caesar Romero as Joker, Burgess Meredith as Penguin, and Julie Newmar, Lee Meriwether and Eartha Kitt taking turns as Selina Kyle/Catwoman (Knight, 2019: 1–8). A movie spawned by the series, *Batman* (1966) is even goofier than the TV show, featuring all the supervillains working together to create a device that would dehydrate Earth's people. Unfortunately for the franchise, this silly version of Batman damages public perceptions during the 1970s. It also hurts lead actor Adam West's career, as he was typecast for a time, but his clear and distinct voice helped him get TV guest starring roles until his death in 2017. The series contained very little political content, as the murkier elements had been dumbed down (Arrant and Marston, 2020: 1–12).

Comics brings Batman back to his dark origins in the 1980s. This continues into the 1990s, as Robin and other sidekicks get killed off. Batman becomes a silver screen phenomenon and reaches much greater popularity with the first movie series, 1989–1997. Tim Burton directs the first two, starring Michael Keaton as Bruce Wayne/Batman. Burton uses his dark neo-gothic palette to create a moody Gotham City. Commissioner Jim Gordon (Pat Hingle), alone among the police, appreciates “The Batman,” and summons him when needed with the Bat-signal, but he is also weak and easily influenced, as in the series' final movie.

The first film, *Batman* (1989), was one of the most successful blockbusters of its time. Criticized by some comics aficionados as too dark and for getting comics canon wrong, such as fingering Joker as murderer of Wayne's parents, the story focuses more on Jack Nicholson's over-the-top Joker than on Batman himself. We learn that Joker gets his pasty look and unnatural grin when he fights Batman and falls into a vat of industrial chemicals. Joker takes over mob boss Jack Grissom's organization, and then terrorizes Gotham City by releasing Smylex, a chemical that causes victims to die laughing. Joker tries to win over photo-journalist Vicki Vale (Kim Basinger), with

whom Wayne is falling in love. Joker kidnaps Vale, but Batman saves her and destroys the villain's helicopter, sending him to his death.

The second film, *Batman Returns* (1992), is one of the very darkest superhero tales. Gotham police are unable to stop mask-wearing criminals of the Red Triangle Gang running wild. The movie pits Batman against their leader, a grotesque, bloated Penguin played by Danny DeVito, who as a deformed child was left by his parents in the sewers and raised by penguins. Penguin teams up with corrupt businessman Max Shreck (Christopher Walken), who is trying to suck power from Gotham's electric grid. Shreck's assistant Selina finds out about his energy project, and so he pushes her through a high window, but she survives surrounded by alley cats. She transforms into the most smoldering filmic Catwoman, embodied by Michelle Pfeiffer ("Meow," she purrs to Batman as she blows up the ground floor of one of Shreck's businesses). Penguin at first attempts to go straight and run for mayor, but people turn away when Batman plays a recording of his snide comments about Gotham's citizens. Catwoman at first fights Batman, but then works with him against Penguin, who captures Shreck. She electrocutes Shreck and herself but survives. Batman finishes off Penguin, whose real penguins bury him in the sewer.

In these first two Batman movies, Burton suggests that American urban life is inherently dangerous, with threats everywhere. The police are feckless, politicians don't know what they are doing, and supervillains can easily coopt the news media and gullible public. Only a figure as dark as the supervillains, working without legal sanction, can bring order to the city. This may have registered with viewers, who were inundated with daily stories about soaring crime rates, the crack cocaine epidemic, and urban gangs. Under Mayor David Dinkins (served 1990–1993), New York particularly seemed out of control. The first film was released the same year as the Central Park Jogger case, in which a female jogger was raped, beaten, and left for dead. Five black and Latino youths were arrested and railroaded in the Central Park 5 trials. They were not exonerated until 2002.

The third and fourth films, directed by Joel Schumacher, became increasingly campy and implausible, and were not well reviewed. In *Batman Forever* (1995), Val Kilmer replaces Keaton, and Batman faces off against hyper-camp supervillains Harvey the Two-Face (Tommy Lee Jones) and Riddler (Jim Carrey). Two-Face raids a circus, killing parents of one of the performers, who vows revenge and later joins Batman as Robin (Chris O'Donnell). Edward Nygma, a Wayne Enterprises technology genius, develops a system that can beam TV signals into people's brains, which Wayne rejects. Disappointed and promising to destroy Wayne, he becomes the criminal Riddler and goes to work with Two-Face. Robin captures Two-Face,

deciding not to kill him, and Batman causes Riddler's mind-control device to go haywire and disable him, so that he can be incarcerated.

The series' last movie, *Batman and Robin* (1997), sees then-rising star George Clooney take the cape. The movie was widely criticized for its over-the-top camp, leaden comedy, and incoherent story. This installment adds comics character Batgirl (Alicia Silverstone), one of the brighter aspects of the story that unfortunately gets short shrift. This time, Batman and Robin go after Mr. Freeze (Arnold Schwarzenegger), who as Dr. Fries was accidentally frozen in a laboratory accident while working on a cure for his wife's illness. He must live in a special suit that preserves his low body temperature. He teams up with Poison Ivy (Uma Thurman), or former plant scientist Pamela Isley, who has been turned into a powerful villain after being contaminated with toxic plant venom. Freeze freezes much of Gotham and its people, but Batman, Robin, and Batgirl use satellites to direct sunlight to melt the ice. Poison Ivy gets enclosed in a large Venus fly trap, while Mr. Freeze becomes trapped under the wreckage of the Gotham observatory. Freeze agrees to help Batman cure his ailing butler, Alfred, in return for his being allowed to work on a cure for his frozen wife. Imprisoned with Ivy, Freeze promises to make her life hell for nearly killing his beloved.

The latter two movies raise some then-current issues. *Batman Forever* plays with psychological dependence on cable television (in an era before live-streaming services such as Netflix), but the movie pulls its punches and the Nygma's device is little more than a MacGuffin to propel the story forward. *Batman and Robin* could have presented important issues of biotech research-gone-bad and human destruction of the biosphere, but the silliness of the plot and characters dilutes any serious consideration of such topics.

Batman was reborn for the cinema in Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* series (2005–2012), starring Christian Bale as Wayne/Batman. Of all the Batman movies, this series most directly incorporates political themes. *Batman Begins* (2005) presents Wayne's backstory from the murder of his parents, through his training in martial arts with the League of Shadows, to his rejection of the League and emergence as Batman. Wayne constructs the Batman identity, suit and equipment with help from his butler Alfred Pennyworth (Michael Caine) and Wayne Enterprises CEO Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman). He then defeats both the Scarecrow and his old mentor Ra's al Ghul (Liam Neeson). Batman forges a bond with police commissioner Gordon (Gary Oldman) and the Gotham City police. Gordon sets up a special spotlight (the Bat-signal) to summon Batman.

The Dark Knight (2008) was the most commented-upon of the series. Heath Ledger won a posthumous Best Supporting Academy Award for his riveting portrayal of Joker as a psychopath. Wayne wants to withdraw from his role as Batman and marry his love, Rachel Dawes (Maggie Gyllenhaal), even though

she is dating District Attorney Harvey Dent (Aaron Eckhart). Batman initially works with Dent against Gotham City's underworld leaders. Joker makes a deal with those leaders to kill Batman for half of their money. Dent intends to announce that he is Batman and is put under protective guard. Joker manages to trap Harvey and Rachel in separate buildings; explosions kill Rachel and disfigure half of Dent's face. Recovering in the hospital, Dent gets a visit from Joker, who gives him a gun and encourages him to seek revenge for Rachel's death. The once heroic Dent now becomes the killer Two-Face. He kidnaps Gordon's family to lure Batman, who sends him off a building to his death. Batman tells Gordon to put the blame for Dent's murders on him, to preserve the prosecutor's heroic image with the public.

In *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), Gotham needs Batman to return, but Wayne lives as a recluse. Bane (Tom Hardy), a notorious terrorist who once belonged to the League of Shadows, abducts a nuclear scientist to create a destructive fusion device. Wayne begins a romantic relationship with Miranda Tate (Marion Cotillard), a member of Wayne Enterprises' board of directors. Bane obtains Wayne's fingerprints, stealing most of his wealth and nearly bankrupting him. Batman confronts Bane, but the supervillain injures him and ships him off to a remote prison. Bane traps most of Gotham City's police in sewers, severs bridges to the city, and sets up unofficial courts to try and execute leading citizens. Batman escapes his confinement and frees the police, who battle and defeat Bane's men. Batman overcomes Bane, but Tate stabs Batman. She then reveals herself as daughter of Ra's al Ghul. Selina Kyle/Catwoman, played by Anne Hathaway, later kills Bane. Tate tries to set off Bane's reactor, but Commissioner Gordon interferes with her signal. Batman pursues her, crashing her truck, but she floods Bane's reactor so that it cannot be stopped. Batman uses his Bat plane to lift the reactor out to sea, where it explodes harmlessly. Batman is believed to be dead, but a vacationing Alfred later finds Wayne and Kyle together in Florence, Italy.

This beloved trilogy was permeated with conservative political themes of terrorism, torture, and surveillance. In these movies, Wayne is not interested in positive political action, but is a vigilante, a stance often celebrated on the right. The first film came out only four years after 9/11, the second one at the end of the Bush years, and the third one in the year Barack Obama was reelected. In *The Dark Knight*, Joker is a terrorist with whom Batman says one cannot reason, similar to conservative opinion on negotiations with Al Qaeda or the Taliban. Batman is pursuing a one-man Global War of Terror. He questions Joker alone, and tortures him by hitting him, breaking a mirror with his head and threatening him. Later, Wayne sets up a surveillance system to monitor everyone in Gotham City to catch Joker. Batman takes the fall for murders committed by Dent. Is he being compared to the George W. Bush, who by then had become unpopular for both the Global War on Terrorism and

the Iraq War? *The Dark Knight Rises* continues with conservative themes, as Bane is an anti-capitalist who frees criminals from Gotham jails and holds kangaroo courts to sentence and execute the city's leading businessmen. Nolan may have been comparing Bane and his followers to the Occupy Wall Street protesters (Scott, 2020: 1–5).

Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice (2016) pits the two superheroes against each other, as had been done occasionally in DC comics. The film takes up contemporary political economic issues, such as illegal weapons trafficking and bomb building with dangerous materials (in this case, kryptonite). Wayne (Ben Affleck) initially is opposed to Superman (Henry Cavill), seeing him as a threat to humanity. The two find out that Luthor has been manipulating their mutual feelings, and Lois (Amy Adams) explains Superman's importance to Batman. Luthor creates a super-creature with fellow supervillain General Zod and his own DNA. Superman realizes that it can be destroyed with kryptonite, manages to skewer it with a kryptonite-tipped spear, but apparently dies himself. Batman joins with Diana Prince to form a team of meta-humans (the DC term for superheroes). As Clark is buried, the dirt on his coffin levitates, indicating that he will be resurrected.

Some observers saw the film as an allegory about 9/11. The battle in Metropolis at the beginning of the film echoed the notion of an alien presence carrying out horrific urban attacks, complete with a building collapse, and the transformation of political actors due to a terrible shock to the politics of Gotham. Superman is blamed for damage to the city, while Batman decides that he must use extra-legal means to fight the supervillains. Batman's actions mirror the conservative response to 9/11, in which the government felt it should use all means necessary to fight terrorists, even if by doing so they curtailed rights and freedoms. Superman then appears as the liberal answer, calling for the upholding of democratic values as the country fights external threats. Connecting with Clark's mother Martha, Wayne comes to appreciate Superman as a person, not just a public figure. Luthor seems like the corporate and other private actors which took advantage of post-9/11 chaos to advance their own economic interests and crashing financial markets in 2008. Unlike the Batman movies, in which the Dark Knight is the shunned outsider, it is Superman who gets rejected and blamed for the battle of Metropolis (Calia, 2016: 1–3).

Batman and Superman as crime fighters should get along but, suggests Reisman, we enjoy seeing them in conflict. It is the elemental clash of a god figure (Superman) with a mortal, fallible human hero (Batman). Superman is the light, as he ostensibly is an idealist, while Batman is the nuanced figure who sees the reality of life. Batman has been the more popular figure in recent decades because we, too, have seen the darkness daily. The darker Batman

dates to the 1970s, a decade in which we were bombarded by bad news. In a way, the two superheroes complete each other, so it is natural that they should come together in the end. One of the first meetings of the two in a 1980s comics casts Superman as conservative and Batman as radical, seeking to clean up Gotham City. Batman's persona, "paranoid, fatalistic, violent," becomes the template for comics superheroes from the 1990s onward, and Superman seems increasingly out of touch. *Superman Returns* tries to be as upbeat as possible, but was not considered a box office success, while *Man of Steel* looks a lot more like a Batman movie, and was a greater hit (Riesman, 2016: 1–12)

Justice League (2017) was heavily edited and confusing to some viewers. A revamped version, *Zack Snyder's Justice League*, was released in 2021 and made more sense. This film is a sequel to *Batman vs. Superman*, presents several superheroes working together to defeat Steppenwolf, an ancient supervillain. Steppenwolf seeks to gather several Mother Boxes, which contain super-energy. Using them together, he will transform the Earth to a copy of his home planet. Superman is brought back to life by being placed in one of the Mother Boxes on a Kryptonian ship. At first hostile to the other superheroes because he has no memories of being Superman, he retreats to Clark's home at Smallville, where his memories gradually return. Superman joins the superheroes to separate the Mother Boxes and then attack Steppenwolf. The superheroes agree to set up a base of operations while resuming their previous lives.

Joaquin Phoenix won an Academy Award for his portrayal of Arthur Fleck, the troubled man who would become Joker. Directed by Todd Phillips, *Joker* (2019) is essentially a backstory for the Batman saga. Fleck is a struggling comedian and professional clown. As a child, he suffered abuse from his mother's boyfriend, and developed various neurological and psychological conditions that hinder his ability to interact with people and make him react inappropriately to events, such as laughing uncontrollably. His mother writes to Thomas Wayne, Bruce Wayne's father, claiming that Arthur is his son. Arthur steals a file from the mental institutions where he has been treated, revealing that his mother adopted the boy from a hospital. He smothers her in the hospital and kills two subway passengers who are hassling him. Later, he goes on a nation-wide talk show and shoots the host, Murray Franklin (Robert De Niro). He leads anti-establishment riots but is captured and returned to the mental institution, where his doctor resumes treating him. The last scene shows him escaping the institution, apparently trailing his doctor's blood.

This is an extremely disturbing tale on many levels. What is particularly unsettling is its realism in detailing mental illness and criminal psychosis. Arthur is a damaged product of his environment and upbringing, and clearly Gotham City's child welfare services and mental health facilities have failed

him and helped create a monster. Thomas Wayne's failure to see Arthur and his mother as victims of the system means that he cannot express empathy or extend help to them. This ultimately leads to his death and the scarring of his son when one of Arthur's rioters kills Mr. and Mrs. Wayne. The movie also forces viewers to confront the entertainment media-driven craziness that forces losers to try to become stars, even if they do not possess any discernible talent.

Aquaman (2018) is an innovative story, in that it is both environmental yarn and plea for inclusion. The civilization of Atlantis did not die but, after their city sank, Atlantians learned to breathe under water and swim fast. Arthur Curry (Jason Momoa) is son of a Maine lighthouse keeper and Atlanna (Nicole Kidman), queen of Atlantis. To save her man and son, Atlanna has to flee when Atlantan soldiers come looking for her. Growing up, Arthur gets secretly tutored by Nuidis Vulko (Willem Dafoe), who teaches the boy fighting skills and how to communicate with sea animals. Arthur's half-brother Orm Marius (Patrick Wilson) is plotting to start a war with the Earth's surface powers because of their relentless pollution of the seas.

The ancient and modern Atlantians are more sensitive about the oceans because their lives depend on them, and because they learned how to breathe underwater. But this is a gentle environmentalism that is thin on specifics and does not bash the surface nations very hard. The script writers could have thrown the book at humans for our destruction of fisheries, sea plankton, and coral reefs, not to mention rising sea temperatures due to climate change and the inundation of plastics into the world's oceans. A giant dead zone in the North Pacific centers on an enormous gyre of plastics, and none of the Pacific Rim countries has put forward a workable plan to deal with it. Perhaps the next *Aquaman* movie will have more to say about sea destruction and climate change.

Shazam! (2019) is an equally unusual story for DC. It seems more like a Marvel tale. An adolescent boy, Billy Batson (Asher Angel), runs away from various foster homes searching for his birth mother. He lands with a foster family that have created a loving home for five other kids. He defends Freddy, his superhero-geek foster brother, at school, then gets chased into the subway and is whisked away to the Rock of Eternity, a magical temple in another dimension. The wizard (Djimon Hounsou) grants Billy his powers and gives him his wizard's staff before disappearing as dust. If Billy calls out "Shazam!" he will be transformed into an adult superhero with various powers; saying it again, he will return to his youthful body. He must confront an evil corporate heir, Thaddeus Sivana (Mark Strong) who has taken superpowers from the Eye of Sin, which imprisons bad spirits. He becomes their vessel, and they work through him. Billy as adult-sized Shazam (Zachary Levi) fumbles as he

learns his new powers. The boy later finds his mother and learns that she gave him up because she felt inadequate as a mother.

Sivana guesses that Billy is Shazam, and he takes the foster siblings hostage. Billy agrees to give Sivana the Shazam powers in return for safety of the kids. At the Rock, the siblings attack Sivana. They notice that he becomes vulnerable if the Sins leave him. The kids escape to a local carnival, where Shazam uses the staff to make his siblings superheroes. The six battle Sivana, and Shazam manages to lure the Sins out of Sivana and put them back in the Eye of Sin. Billy now accepts the foster family as his real family, and the kids return to school as heroes.

Where such superheroes as Spiderman appeal to teens dealing with raging hormones and angst, *Shazam!* is aimed at pre-teens or adolescents, who often are unsure of their bodies and their identities. Like X-Men below, these are troubled youth finding their voices through becoming superheroes. They may fear abandonment by their parents, as Billy was abandoned by his mother, and in some cases must adapt to living with strangers. Adolescents often fantasize about changing into fully formed adults like the handsome Shazam figure. As in many other superhero franchises, the supervillain is a troubled rich adult male with a damaged childhood and poor relationship with his father. The scenes with Sivana are the darkest in the film and contradict the story's otherwise light-hearted tone (Raihala, 2019: 1–4).

MARVEL MOVIES CONQUER THE WORLD: SPIDERMAN TO AVENGERS

You've got to hand it to Marvel. They truly have conquered the movie world. Almost all of their movies of the past twenty years have been smash successes. They have transformed how the film industry markets their products, and the product tie-ins, franchise spinoffs, and character development have been amazing. What a style these movies have developed: the page-flipping Marvel logo that opens every recent movie, state-of-art computer graphics and spectacular special effects, excellent casting, striking costumes, cross-franchise tie-ups, the Stan Lee cameos, and in-credit or post-credit extra scenes. Not everyone has been impressed, as some observers decry Marvel's domination of film making and warping films toward a heavy emphasis on computerized special effects.

Marvel Comics goes back almost as far as DC, originally forming in 1939, but did not create most of its recently iconic characters until the 1960s. The most important surviving early character is Captain America who, like the DC heroes, fights the Nazis in World War II. Stan Lee revolutionized the genre in the 1960s by focusing on characters that appealed to older readers,

especially teenagers and young adults. This started with the Fantastic Four in 1961. Spiderman, The Incredible Hulk, Black Panther, Captain Marvel, and the X-Men all can be traced to this time.

Spiderman

Spiderman made his comics debut in 1962. An awkward, intelligent, conflicted high school student with ability to cast spider's webs and swing between buildings, the character appealed to alienated young people (Tucker, 2017: 22–24). Tobey McGuire, star of the first movie series, feels that Spiderman appeals to young people because he has the same “existential doubts and conflicting desires about who they are and where they stand in the world.” The stories are about “identity and self-discovery,” and finding out who one wants to be or should become (DiPaolo, 2011: 103). Spiderman was given his own TV show in 1979, which was fairly popular but only amounted to a pilot movie and eighteen episodes before being cancelled two years later. Nicholas Hammond played Peter Parker/Spiderman as a college student. Most of the episodes concerned thwarting of terrorists or other groups intent on doing harm. This reflected contemporary concerns about Middle Eastern, European, and Latin American terrorists and drug traffickers. The series presented no major supervillains from the Spiderman comics.

Three versions of Spiderman have appeared onscreen since 2002. The first was a popular series directed by Sam Raimi for Columbia Pictures and Marvel Comics. *Spiderman*, the first movie, tells much of Spiderman's backstory and confronts him with one of the key comics supervillains. It stars Tobey McGuire as Parker, Kirstin Dunst as love interest Mary Jane (MJ) Watson, and James Franco as best friend Harry Osborn. Peter is a high school student who lives with his Uncle Ben and Aunt May. MJ is literally the girl next door. On a science field trip, Peter gets bitten by a radioactive spider, and within days he has developed superpowers: enhanced strength, ability to throw webs and fly between buildings, and facility with climbing walls. Observers noted the prominent use of the New York skyline, which some interpreted as a sign of New York's pride in the wake of 9/11.

Peter's Uncle Ben (Cliff Robertson) is murdered in his own car, and Peter feels guilty for not listening to him. He recalls the old man's words: “With great power comes great responsibility.” Peter now feels that he must use his new powers to protect New Yorkers. Harry's father Norman (Dafoe) takes an untested performance enhancing drug, which creates a dangerous split personality. He becomes the armor-clad Green Goblin, flying on a powered glider and causing mayhem from above New York streets. Peter eventually defeats the Goblin, resulting in Norman's death. Harry blames Spiderman for his father's death, though he does not yet know Peter's superhero identity.

Peter realizes that commitment to his Spiderman persona means that he cannot enjoy a love relationship with Mary Jane.

This film is about both Peter's personal search for direction and an indictment of corporate America. Peter begins the film trying to avoid responsibility and using his powers to enrich himself through professional wrestling. It is only his uncle's death that forces him to rethink his life. He is conflicted by the transformation of Norman, who has been a mentor and surrogate father, but he realizes that he must confront the man. The corporate world comes across as cruel and uncaring, as his uncle gets laid off and Norman is replaced as head of his own company. The Enron and other major corporate scandals of the Clinton and Bush years focused attention on boardroom malfeasance like no other time before the Global Financial Crisis (DiPaolo, 2011: 94–95).

Spiderman 2 (2004), the second film, is one of the strongest superhero stories. It can be interpreted as a parable about technology run amuck and the need to reassert human control over advanced devices using artificial intelligence. The movie finds Peter deciding to pursue romance with Mary Jane, but he is disappointed to learn that she is engaged to an astronaut. Now a college student, Peter works as photographer for *The Daily Bugle*. Peter's nemesis this time is nuclear scientist Otto Octavius (Alfred Molina), Peter's mentor, whose experiment with a new kind of reactor goes awry, and huge mechanical prosthetic arms become permanently attached to him. The arms develop a mind of their own and prevent their removal. Octavius seeks tritium for his reactor from Harry, who agrees to give it to him in exchange for Spiderman, who he wants to punish for his father's death. Harry tells Octavius that Peter knows Spiderman. The mad scientist holds Mary Jane hostage at his reactor, about to go critical. Spiderman battles and defeats Octavius and then convinces the scientist to stop the reactor. Octavius sacrifices himself to destroy the reactor. "I will not die a monster," he declares. Afterward, as Mary Jane is about to get married, she leaves the wedding to declare her love for Peter.

The second movie is a redemption story for Peter, as he overcomes a personal slump and confronts Dr. Octavius. He knows that he can make the good doctor see that he needs to stop the reactor. The film is also a cautionary tale on the corrupting influence of technology, as Octavius is destroyed by the very machines that have made his career. Peter also redeems himself in the eyes of his other mentor, Dr. Connor. He does not give up on MJ and, as fickle as she is, she leaves the astronaut to come back to Peter (DiPaolo, 2011: 95).

Spiderman 3 finds Peter and Mary Jane again facing further romantic difficulties, as Peter becomes arrogant about his fame and fails to support her acting career. Spiderman must face three enemies. Harry has learned to use his father's Green Goblin equipment, and fights with Peter above Manhattan. Harry gets seriously injured and his subsequent amnesia means that he cannot remember his father's death. An alien symbiote that attaches a black skin

to its victim finds Peter. Peter temporarily succumbs to it, but then realizes that it is changing him into a bad person. He uses the high-pitched sound of church bells to remove the skin, but it attaches to rival *Bugle* photographer Eddie Brock (Topher Grace), who becomes the villain Venom. The Venom character/sub-plot can be viewed a parable about the dangers of being taken over by an uncontrollable external technology or presence.

Meanwhile, escaped convict Flint Marko (Thomas Haden Church) has been exposed to a particle accelerator which transforms him into variably-sized sand creature called Sand Man. Venom and Sand Man join together to defeat Spiderman, and Venom holds Mary Jane captive at a high-rise construction site. Poor MJ often ends up screaming at the top of high-rise buildings. Harry recovers his memory, vowing revenge against Peter, but learns the truth of his father's death from the family butler. Harry comes to Peter's aid, saving Mary Jane but receiving a blow from Venom intended for Spiderman. Spiderman uses sound to strip Venom's suit, but Eddie gets killed when he tries to stop Spiderman's destruction of the alien entity. Peter reconciles with the dying Harry. Marko confesses to Peter that he killed Uncle Ben but says that it was an unintended accident. Peter forgives him and lets him escape. Peter and Mary Jane make up, at last. Given how unstable their relationship has been, one wonders if it *will* last.

The last installment of the Raimi films showcases Peter's ability to multitask, as he takes on three very different foes. He must reconcile with his former best friend Harry, who cannot get over his father's death, he must separate Eddie from the Venom symbiote, and he needs to overcome the unusual Sand Man. Politically, the Sand Man may be the most challenging entity that he has faced, as his shapeshifting nature makes it impossible to take him on directly. Also, Marko is a working-class villain that acts out of sympathetic motives, as he wants to get funds to pay his daughter's hospital bills. He is no rich guy who wants to control the world. His accidental shooting of Uncle Ben is understandable and forgivable (DiPaolo, 2011: 95–96).

The Amazing Spider-Man (2012) was the first of two movies directed by Marc Webb, also for Columbia Pictures. This Peter Parker is brainier and more science-focused, far less interested in photography, and more confident in his romantic abilities. Andrew Garfield plays Spidey, and Emma Stone takes the role of girlfriend Gwen Stacy, daughter of police captain George Stacy (Denis Leary). The Gwen-Peter relationship is more solid than the MJ-Peter tie-up, and she knows about the Spiderman thing long before MJ did. Gwen is not the screaming damsel-in-distress that MJ usually became but is a confident young woman who can take care of herself.

The movie takes Peter's backstory in slightly different directions than the Raimi movies. We learn that Peter's parents gave their son to Uncle Ben (Martin Sheen) and Aunt May (Sally Field) after the family house was

burglarized and some papers stolen. Peter gets bitten by the spider while sneaking into the Oscorp Labs to check on cross-species research that his father was doing with Dr. Curt Connors (Rhys Ifans). Peter starts using his new powers at school, not on criminals. Uncle Ben gets killed by a robber who had attacked a store and ran away. Connors develops a serum that he uses on himself, becoming a giant lizard-like creature. He plans to release the toxin into the air, changing all humans into lizard-like beings. Gwen creates an antidote, which Peter releases, curing Connors and other victims. A mortally wounded police captain Stacy, who has discovered Spiderman's identity, asks Peter to promise to keep Gwen out of his superhero world. In class later, Peter tells her that the best promises are the ones that are not kept.

The Amazing Spider-Man 2 (2014) develops two parallel stories. A nerdy Oscorp employee, Max Dillon (Jamie Foxx) gets accidentally shocked and falls into an electric eel tank. He transforms into a new being that can channel electricity. After a brief fight with Spiderman in the street, Max gets short-circuited, taken into police custody, and shipped off to the Ravencroft Institute for research. Meanwhile, we see a Harry Osborn (Dane DeHaan), who is very different from the first series. He returns from boarding school to see his dying father Norman (Chris Cooper), who he blames for his misfortunes. Norman informs him the disease that is killing him is genetic and will also kill his son. Harry wants to use an injection of Spiderman's blood, but the superhero turns him down.

A corporate coup removes Harry from chairmanship of Oscorp. He frees Max, who now goes by Electro, to lure Spiderman to his death. Harry injects himself with the Oscorp's spider venom, which nearly kills him, but turns him into the Green Goblin. Electro causes a massive blackout, but Peter and Gwen are able to stop it. Green Goblin captures Gwen and takes her to the top of a clock tower. Spiderman beats the Goblin, but Gwen falls to her death. Grieving his love, Peter retires as Spiderman. Later, he puts on the mask again to defeat a Russian supervillain Sytseвич (Paul Giamatti) who dons a heavily armored suit called Rhino.

Following the collapse of sequel projects for the Webb movies due to poor box office, Columbia launches another reboot series. Beginning with *Spiderman: Homecoming* (2017), they were directed by Jon Watts and starred Tom Holland as Spiderman. These movies were intended to fit into the larger Marvel Universe, and so Spiderman is being cultivated as one of the Avengers and Ironman's Tony Stark (below) mentors Peter Parker. The story pays less attention to Spiderman's backstory, except that Peter's high school love interests are Liz (Laura Harrier) in the first movie and MJ (or Michelle, played by Zendaya) in the second, making Peter the first silver screen superhero in inter-racial romantic relationships. MJ was selected as the name to mirror MJ Watson of the earlier comics and movies. Peter's class, in fact, is

a multicultural mix, and his best friend is Asian American. Spiderman must battle Adrian Toomes (Keaton), who is using alien technology to develop terrible weapons. It turns out he is also Liz's father and knows all about Peter's Spiderman identity.

Spiderman: Far from Home (2019) takes Spidey decidedly in the direction of comedy and camp. Parker's class goes on a European study trip, and he is more interested in impressing MJ and fitting in with his high school classmates than being a superhero. While in Venice, he is forced to fight the Elementals, a group of extraterrestrial entities composed of Earth, Water, Fire, and so on. He works alongside Quentin Beck (Jake Gyllenhaal), also known as Mysterio, a superhero from a parallel Earth. We learn that Beck actually is one of several disgruntled former Stark Industries employees (see Iron Man below) who create the illusion of the Elementals attacking Earth to obtain key Stark technologies, along with control of their company. At the Tower Bridge in London, Peter battles Beck, who apparently dies in the struggle but later manipulates footage to make Spiderman look responsible for destruction in London.

Iron Man

Iron Man is a standout character in the Marvel Universe, in that he has no superpowers and depends on a special suit that he has created for the U.S. government but has been souped-up for his own use. He first appeared in 1963 and got his own comics series in 1968. While most of the Marvel superheroes touch on political concerns and social issues, Ironman is the most overtly political of them. Tony Stark (Robert Downey, Jr.) is a rich guy like Bruce Wayne, but is genuinely conflicted about his father's business, Stark Industries, which is one of America's largest defense contractors. He comes to believe that he has become a death merchant and must turn his company to more peaceful pursuits. He is unsure of how to do that and loses control of the company. He later leaves his secretary and subsequent girlfriend Pepper Potts (mentioned above) to manage the company while he perfects his Ironman suit and taking on bad guys.

The Iron Man character may have resonated with audiences in the wake of various government contracting scandals surrounding the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, and concern that the U.S. Defense Department was becoming too dependent on private contractors, including heavy use of mercenaries, such as Blackwater Security Co., later renamed Xe Services. As the first movie is set in Afghanistan, it expresses contemporary concerns about the course of the war: the failure to defeat the Taliban, the region's endemic warlordism, and U.S. reliance on high tech weapons and occasionally corrupt

contractors. By the time the first movie came out, the conflict had gone from initial success to never-ending quagmire (Palmer, 2013: 1–7).

In *Iron Man* (2008), Tony travels with his friend, Lt. Colonel James Rhodes (Terrence Howard, and then Don Cheadle in subsequent movies), to Afghanistan to see the test of Stark Industries' new Jericho missile. After the test, Tony's caravan gets ambushed, and Tony is wounded and captured by a group of rebels, the Ten Rings, led by Raza. Held with another captive Yinsen, the two are told to develop a Jericho missile for Ten Rings. Tony and Yinsen know that Raza is likely to kill them, so they stall for time while building an armored suit. Yinsen helps Tony create an electromagnetic device (arc reactor) to plant in Tony's chest to prevent shrapnel from reaching his heart. The rebels realize that the two captives are not building a missile and attack the lab. Yinsen is mortally wounded, but Tony escapes in the armored suit, which breaks apart in the desert.

Rhodes rescues Tony. At a news conference back at Stark headquarters, Tony announces that his company will no longer manufacture weapons. Obadiah Stane (Jeff Bridges), Stark managing director, convinces Tony that this is not a good move, as it will hurt the company's stock value. Tony retreats to his personal lab and develops a refined version of the Iron Man suit, as well as a better electro-generator. A reporter informs Tony that Stark weapons have been used by the Ten Rings, and that Yinsen's village was attacked with them. Tony uses the Iron Man suit in the field for the first time, going to Afghanistan to protect the village.

Stane completely takes over Stark Industries. He has been supplying weapons to Raza, whom he visits to get Tony's original suit. He kills Raza and all his men and then fashions his own armored suit. He cannot make it work without Tony's arc reactor, which he steals from Tony's chest. Tony manages to reattach the original copy, which Pepper preserved. Tony and Stane fight in their suits on top of the Stark building, but Tony is losing because his suit lacks an arc reactor. He instructs Pepper to use the building's reactor to overload Stane's suit, and Stane tumbles into the reactor, killing him. At a later press conference, Tony admits that he is Iron Man. SHIELD director Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) visits Tony, suggesting that he work with his Avenger Initiative. This sets up Iron Man to be part of the Avengers.

Marvel reportedly cut a deal with the U.S. military, allowing it to use military technology, uniforms and insignia, as long as the films portrayed them positively. The Defense Department lost interest as soon as the SHIELD organization was included in storylines, as it suggested that this fictional organization operated above other federal departments and agencies, including DOD. Nevertheless, the movies present the U.S. military in a generally favorable light, while military contractors such as the Stark Corp. get serious criticism.

Political content in *Iron Man 2* (2010) is even more centered on government contracting. Returning to a Cold War-style narrative, it is mostly a story of Tony's struggle against Russian inventor Ivan Vanko (Mickey Rourke), who is building his own arc reactor so that can defeat Tony. Tony learns that he is being contaminated by the element palladium in his arc reactor. He makes Pepper CEO of the company and takes off to enjoy what he thinks are his final days. Vanko attacks him at a car race in Monaco using electric whips. In the end, Tony's rival inventor Justin Hammer (Sam Rockwell) becomes the real villain, as he breaks Vanko out of prison and recruits him to build suits to rival those of Stark Industries.

Tony learns from Fury that his father had worked with Vanko's father to develop the arc reactor. He also receives materials showing his father's sincerity, along with a diagram of an unknown element. He uses his computer/AI Jarvis (voiced by Paul Bettany) to synthesize the element, thereby replacing the palladium in his arc reactor and getting a new lease on life. At a special ceremony at an Expo to honor Stark's father, Vanko gets control of a series of new suit-drones to attack Tony. SHIELD agent Natasha Romanov manages to deactivate most of the drones, and Rhodes pilots one of the suits with Tony to defeat Vanko, who commits suicide by blowing up his suit. At the end, Fury tells Tony that, due to his difficult personality, he will only be used as a consultant.

Iron Man 3 (2013) deals with issues of terrorism and biotech weapons. A new regenerative treatment called Extremis can be used to enhance terrorists' physical abilities, explode their bodies, or cause debilitating injuries to ordinary people. Meanwhile, Tony has created a host of armored suits that can be remotely piloted. A dangerous terrorist known as the Mandarin does a series of attacks, exploding his own henchmen. We learn that scientist Aldrich Killian (Guy Pearce) is the man behind the Mandarin image. He kidnaps and injects Pepper with Extremis, hoping to force Tony to help him improve Extremis. Killian kidnaps the president, but Rhodes frees him as Tony finds and releases Pepper. Tony uses his multiple iron suits controlled by Jarvis for air support for both Tony and Rhodes. Pepper falls off a platform, but her Extremis injections allow her to survive and she saves Tony by killing Killian. Tony then destroys all the remotely piloted suits and has surgery to remove the shrapnel endangering his heart. He throws the arc reactor into the sea, but states that he will always be Iron Man.

After the stand alone Iron Man movies, Tony Stark becomes the de facto lead superhero in the Avengers movies, and then serves as mentor for the third Spiderman. He gets killed in an Avengers movie, so it is unclear whether he will return in some form, or whether the Stark character will be rebooted sometime in the future, a la Batman or Spiderman.

The Hulk

The Incredible Hulk is a unique superhero. He first appeared in 1962, and sporadically thereafter until he got his own comics series in 1968. Nuclear scientist Bruce Banner, while saving a teen, receives a blast of gamma radiation. Seemingly unscathed, that night he turns into a large lumbering form (at first gray, until Stan Lee decided on a more impressive green). Initially, Banner's alteration is seen as caused by darkness but, when he turns into the Hulk during the day, it becomes clear that anger is the trigger for the creature's emergence. Banner tries with varying degrees of success to control his anger and thus his condition.

Like Batman, Wonder Woman, and Spiderman, the Hulk got a TV treatment. After two pilot movies in 1977, *The Incredible Hulk* aired for four seasons and then part of a fifth season on CBS. NBC aired TV movies in 1988–1990. The series starred Bill Bixby as “David” Banner, to get away from Marvel's alliterative names, along with Lou Ferrigno as the Hulk. The comics and TV series reflected public concern about defense research gone amok during the Vietnam War era, along with worry about effects of such substances as Agent Orange, used to defoliate jungle areas during the war and which caused horrific birth defects in Vietnam and neurological damage to American troops.

Recent years have given us two movie versions of the Hulk: *Hulk* (2003) and *The Incredible Hulk* (2008). The first film focuses on themes of science run rampant and genetic damage to researchers. It stars Eric Bana as Bruce Banner, Jennifer Connelly as his on-again, off-again girlfriend Betty Ross, Sam Elliott as her father Thaddeus Ross, who oversees Bruce's research on gamma radiation and nano technology, and Josh Lucas as Glenn Talbot, who seeks to profit from the technology. Bruce is born with the damaged DNA, just like his father David, who tries to kill him as a child. Bruce gets irradiated by a lab accident but not killed like everyone else because of his DNA. He becomes enraged at attempts to control his research and transforms into the Hulk. He must battle both Talbot, who wants to capture him and get a sample of his DNA to develop weaponized soldiers, and his father David, who transforms into a powerful electric creature when he bites into a power line. Bruce leaves to work in the Amazon, so that he will not cause any more damage for Betty and her father.

The second film is about Banner seeking to lead a normal life. Edward Norton takes the title role in a story that deals with Banner's efforts to control his condition and evade capture by the U.S. government. He realizes that he can maintain control if he keeps his heart from beating more than two-hundred times per minute. A Russian-born Royal Marines officer, Emil Blonsky (Tim Roth), is tracking Banner but learn his secrets. Blonsky gets

injected with a serum similar to the gamma radiation that caused Banner's condition. It heightens his strength and speed but transforms into the horrific creature called Abomination. Hulk defeats Abomination but spares his life. Banner retreats to British Columbia, where he hopes to control his condition, so that he can transform if necessary to help the good guys. Tony Stark follows him there, telling him about the Avengers team.

Captain America

Captain America, otherwise known as Steve Rogers, is the oldest current Marvel character. *Captain America: First Avenger* (2011) is an origin story, in which a weak, sickly, short Rogers (Chris Evans), rejected by the Army in World War II, gets injected with a special serum that gives him greater height and super-strength. The head of Germany's secret research organization Hydra, Johann Schmidt (Hugo Weaving), has accessed the Tesseract, a device of great power. He has stolen and injected himself with the serum that gave Rogers his powers, becoming the powerful supernatural supervillain the Red Skull. Captain America leads a team to attack Hydra's bases. Schmidt leaves in a plane, with Cap aboard. A container holding the Tesseract gets damaged and, as Schmidt handles the device, he gets sucked into a wormhole and is lost in space. The Tesseract then falls into the ocean. Trying to avoid exploding the plane's weapons, Rogers crashes into the sea. Presumed dead, Rogers is awakened by SHIELD seventy years later.

Grippaldi and McKeivitt examine the first Captain America movie as an exaggerated comic book version of World War II. The Cap is a vigilante operating outside the military system, but he symbolizes the transition of ordinary men to extraordinary soldiers in the war. Abraham Erskine (Stanley Tucci), Rogers's mentor and creator of the serum that transforms the young man, urges him to hold tight to his decency. Captain America ends up fighting not the German Nazis and Adolf Hitler, but a grotesque super-villain who has been corrupted by alien technology (Grippaldi and McKeivitt, 2020: 160–162, 171–172).

Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014) shows Rogers working for SHIELD to defeat a plot to undermine the organization from within. Dr. Zola, who had worked with Schmidt, has recreated Hydra to operate within SHIELD. Captain America teams up with Natasha Romanoff to fight the organization. Rogers's World War II friend Bucky Barnes, thought killed in the fight at the Hydra headquarters, has been brainwashed and turned into the assassin Winter Soldier. Nick Fury, faking his own death, forces the Secretary for Internal Security to reveal the existence of Hydra. Captain America destroys several Heli-ships which are designed to destroy Hydra's enemies

from above. He falls into the Potomac River, but Barnes saves him before disappearing into a forest.

Captain America: Civil War (2016) finds Rogers pitted against Tony Stark over the direction of SHIELD. It presents the most explicit references to international governance of superhero activity and so may be one of the most useful superhero films for students of international relations. After the defeat of Ultron and widespread destruction in the European country of Sokovia (see *Avengers* below), the United Nations drafts the Sokovia Accords, which include oversight of the Avengers. This divides the Avengers, with Rogers opposed and Stark strongly in favor because of his previous belief that lack of oversight led to the terrorism he encountered in Afghanistan and contributed to the creation of Ultron.

Barnes is once more on the loose and has been accused of bombing of a U.N. conference in Vienna and killing King T'Chaka of Wakanda (see *Black Panther* below). Rogers is determined to save his old Army buddy and bring him to justice. We learn that a Sokovian terrorist called Zemo is responsible for the bombing and has set up Barnes as the suspect. Stark becomes angered when he learns that Barnes was responsible for his parents' deaths and briefly fights Rogers, and destroys Barnes's robotic arm, but Rogers deactivates Stark's armored suit. Barnes gains asylum in Wakanda, while *Black Panther* T'Challa captures Zemo.

The Avengers

The advent of the Avengers as a mega-blockbuster project may have had more to do with temporary exhaustion of the Spiderman, Iron Man, Captain America, and Hulk franchises than a desire to put several superheroes on the screen at the same time. Spiderman was on its third iteration, Robert Downey, Jr. may have been tired of spending hours at a time in the iron suit, and Hulk did not get beyond single-event movies. For me, these movies' principal weakness is cramming too many major characters into a story. That makes it difficult to fully develop any of the superheroes' story arcs, and it precludes the audience from emotionally investing in the characters as much as in the stand-alone films. For instance, Tom Hiddleston's Loki is a juicy, well-drawn villain in *The Avengers* (2012), but he just gets going as a nasty little god when he gets captured. He escapes and tries to cause more mayhem, but Hulk subdues him and Thor returns him to the planet Asgard. Loki has one of the great dark political moments of the series, when he tries to force a German crowd to bow to him, which they do only reluctantly. One elderly German man refuses to bow. Captain America arrives, noting that this reminds him of events in Germany in the wartime era.

Other than that moment, we can find political themes and story elements that make the stories worth watching. Critical observers were bothered by the films' endorsement of lead characters Tony Stark and Steve Rogers (Captain America) "machismo, capitalist intent, and patriotism." The heroes are all individualistic and militarist. All the major characters are white, with the exception of Tony's friend Rhodes. Except for Natasha, women are secondary to story development. While the first movie's carnage is mainly in America, later movies visit destruction on South Africa and other developing world locales. African countries often are presented as primitive and backward, their leaders unable to reach decisions (Ward, 2020: 1–6).

Commentators noted environmental themes in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), the last installment in the series. Supervillain Thanos, who started as a genocide survivor, has decided to destroy half of the universe, to conserve resources and limit overpopulation. He has been influenced by resource scarcity on his own planet, Titan, and he thinks that humans are destroying Earth and other planets. Thanos is like environmental "prophets" who see environmental doom approaching. They are opposed by "wizards," who believe that technological solutions will save humanity. The movie did spark discussion of environmental issues online. Environmental conference organizer Jesse Bryant notes that the problem is that, as fascinating as these cinematic environmental parables are, such popular discussions are not breaking through to political elites and so policy discussion still moves at a glacial pace (Russo, 2019: 1–6).

That same movie saw the death of Tony Stark. One of the screen writers, Christopher Markus, felt that his demise "legitimizes" the whole franchise, providing a poignant death, a la *The Great Gatsby* or other great novels. The writers also felt that the tension between Stark and Captain America had to be resolved, and the best way to do that was for Tony to be sacrificed and Cap to learn important lessons about life and so get over his growing self-centeredness. Keeping one of the two lead superheroes also gives the audience some hope at the end (Carbone, 2019: 1–5). I think that Tony Stark, like so many other superheroes, will find a second life. Comics killed off Superman and Batman many times, and they always returned in some form. When Hollywood finds another actor as snarky as Downey, they may give Iron Man another chance. While we are at it, anybody for a gender change here? How about Tony's unknown cousin, Iron Woman, or Antonia "Toni" Stark?

POST-MODERN SUPERHEROES: X-MEN AND DOCTOR STRANGE

X-Men was one of Marvel's most successful comics franchises because of its obvious appeal to young people. Three generations of disaffected youth since the 1960s have identified with these marginalized young mutants with specialized "gifts," that is, superpowers. Mutants split off from ordinary humans some time in the past and lived in the shadows until the post-World War II era. Unappreciated because of their supposed freakishness, these outcasts must band together to save themselves from humanity—yet have literally saved the world many times over. The movie series has been one of the more successful and prolific superhero franchises. Excellent story writing that differed from the traditional superhero lore, spot-on casting of big names or new talent that became big stars, well-thought-out story arcs, and excellent stand-alone spinoffs ensure that this series likely will continue, though new films have not appeared since 2019.

Dr. Charles Xavier (Patrick Stewart in the present, James McAvoy in the past) sets up a school to train mutants, though he is frequently opposed but occasionally helped by his old friend Erik Lehnsherr, known as Magneto (Ian McKellan in the now, Michael Fassbender in former times). Xavier's superpower is ability to read minds and communicate telepathically, while Magneto uses magnetic forces to easily manipulate and move objects, no matter how large. Younger mutants join the school, all using nicknames. Cyclops generates heat beams, Beast changes into a powerful blue creature, Phoenix (Jean Grey) uses telekinesis, Raven or Mystique, who has known Charles all of her life, is a powerful shapeshifter that can change into any human form, Storm changes calm weather to violent events, and Rogue uses her touch to briefly use other mutants' powers, but she has to wear gloves because that touch can cause serious injury to non-mutant humans.

So far, X-Men have divided into four series: a present-day series of three movies (2000–2006), a prequel series of four movies (2011–2019), Wolverine spinoff of three films (2009–2017), and a comedy/irony spinoff of two *Deadpool* movies (2016–2018). Each series reflected current issues of its time. The first series' concern with persecution of mutants, along with attempts to use drugs to suppress mutant identity, mirrors the experience of various American marginalized communities, from the LGBTQ community to Latin American immigrants, Muslims and Asian Americans. "Conversion therapy" occasionally used by religious conservatives on young gay Americans resembles movie efforts to inject drugs to make mutants "normal." After 9/11, the similarity to treatment of Muslims in Western countries became obvious. Using drugs and torture on mutants could be a stand-in for

Muslim militants tortured at secret sites (extraordinary rendition) or sent to Guantanamo prison in Cuba.

Of these, gay allegorical themes stand out for many critics. Mutants are outcasts, and society is trying to stamp them out, just as American and British society sought to do in the 1950s–1960s. The stigma of being mutants makes them ashamed of who they are, forcing them to hide and even hurt themselves. Mutants such as Mystique are seen as monstrous, though other mutants find her beautiful. But Xavier tells them to be “mutant and proud,” just as pride is a key aim of the LGBTQ community. Mutants face the fear, suspicion, and lack of understanding of the outside world, as society has feared and misperceived gay people for centuries. Bobby Drake’s family asks him, “have you ever tried not being a mutant?” as if that were possible. Also, representation of the gay community on the series has been strong, with several LGBTQ writers, director Bryan Singer (who identifies as bisexual),¹ and most prominently actor McKellan, an outspoken voice for gay rights (Colvin, 2017: 1–7).

To these issues, the prequel series added a reinterpretation of historical events of the Cold War and early post-Cold War era. For instance, the first prequel, *X-Men First Class* (2011) gets placed against the backdrop of the Cuban Missile Crisis (October, 1962), in which the two superpowers almost go to war over the mutants, not the missiles in Cuba. The movie changes U.S. interpretation of the “quarantine” of Cuba, having President Kennedy state that any Soviet ship crossing the embargo line would cause nuclear missiles to be fired. The real JFK did not say that, and this was not the intention of the blockade. The second installment, *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014) finds the X-Men of the future trying to stop Mystique (Jennifer Lawrence) from killing industrialist Bolivar Trask (Peter Dinklage) as American military involvement in Vietnam ends in 1973. In the future timeline, this crime serves as the event that launches persecution of mutants in the first series. The younger Xavier convinces Mystique to save President Nixon, Trask, and White House and military staff, rather than killing them. Trask gets imprisoned in a high security cell under the Pentagon. The movie also suggests that JFK was assassinated because he also was a mutant, though the story never reveals the president’s superpower.

Wolverine, also known as Logan (Hugh Jackman), has been one of the most popular X-Men movie characters. He appeals to audiences as the ultimate untamed, primal man. He does not sugarcoat his disdain for authority or any kind of control over him. His alienation from ordinary society, barely controllable rage, difficulties in making friends, frequent loss of those dear to him, especially his long-time lover Jean, make him a sympathetic character. His nearly indestructible body and long metal claws turn him into an excellent fighter. *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009) traces his life back to the 1840s.

In the Vietnam War, he and his older half-brother Victor (Liev Schreiber) are part of a special forces unit of mutants, but Logan leaves because of atrocities committed by the unit. Victor tracks him to Canada six years later, making Logan think that he has killed his lover Kayla (Lynn Collins). An enraged Logan chases Victor across the country, ending up at a mutant research facility under the Three Mile Island nuclear plant in Pennsylvania. Dr. Stryker (Danny Huston), who led his old special forces unit, injects Wolverine with adamantium to give his bones super strength. Logan finds that Kayla has only been used to lure him there, and the reunited pair free the mutants held captive. Shot with adamantium bullets, he loses most of his memory.

The Wolverine (2013) is a silly Japanese fantasy. As I noted in chapter 1, Hollywood often presents Asian countries as exotic lands filled with martial artists and organized crime. I have lived in Japan for over twenty years and have never experienced or heard about the nutty things in this movie. Where to begin: yakuza thugs attempting to kidnap an heiress at a high profile funeral—and then again on the *Shinkansen* high-speed train, black-clad ninja-like characters scurrying across rooftops (in broad daylight, no less) and using bows and arrows, a major industrialist's home that looks like a cross between a high-class Asian restaurant and a martial arts dojo, a traditional Japanese garden in the middle of a Buddhist temple, and a Shinto *torii* gate just outside a World War II prisoner-of-war camp, to list but a few.

Putting all that aside, the story helps develop the Wolverine character. We learn that Logan was a prisoner of war in Nagasaki during World War II and saved a POW camp officer, Yashida, who later becomes a major industrialist. Logan recovers most of his memories and works in the Yukon, but Yukio a young mutant who can predict the future tracks him down for Yashida, who is dying. Taken to Japan, Logan is offered a chance to end his near immortality if he transfers his healing properties to the older man. Yashida apparently dies, transferring his company to his granddaughter, but her own father arranges the kidnapping attempt so that he can become the new CEO. Logan saves the young woman, but her grandfather is not dead and is developing a robotic fighting suit. Logan battles and defeats the old man, thwarting his plan to absorb Wolverine's power. Yukio leaves with Wolverine, stating that she will be his bodyguard.

Dr. Strange (2016) is an unusual story about surgeon Stephen Strange (Benedict Cumberbatch), who is an arrogant wise-cracker at the top of his profession. He is horribly injured in a car accident that leaves him unable to use his hands in surgery. His career seems over when he hears about a spinal patient who recovered use of his legs after treatment at Kamertaj, a temple in the Himalayas. He is admitted to the temple, hoping for a cure, but instead is told that he must train his spirit to heal his body. He does not believe in spirit but begins training with the Ancient One. In the comics, this was an Asian

man, but in this version becomes a Celtic Mystic woman (Tilda Swinton, in a character gender change). Marvel and Disney reportedly tried to avoid conflict with China by not including a Tibetan monk as a central character. Stephen learns to use magic to open gateways between universes and bend reality. A monk, Karl Mordo (Chiwetel Ejiofor), becomes Stephen's mentor.

Kaecilius (Mads Mikkelsen) has broken away from the Kamertaj temple and seeks to unite all the positive and dark universes into one. He obtains pages of a book of secret knowledge from the temple and destroys one of the citadels guarding Earth. The monks fight Kaecilius to prevent his unification of realms, but he gravely wounds the Ancient One. Stephen follows her astral body, and she admits that she has used dark energy to enhance her power, that he must be willing to bend rules, and that he must work with Mordo to control his arrogance and fear. The Ancient One dies, but Stephen learns how to reverse time and restore the destroyed temple. Traveling into the dark realm, he defeats Kaecilius by creating an endless time loop that forces the dark lord Dormammu to give up his attempts to conquer Earth. Stephen agrees to return to Kamertaj to continue his training and help protect Earth.

Did you get all that straight? Viewers might be a bit confused the first time they see the movie. This is more than a typical superhero franchise, as it includes elements of mysticism and faux Eastern religions, especially Tibetan Buddhism. To be sure, Buddhist monks do not practice superhuman powers, open portals to other universes or reverse time, but advanced monks have claimed to enhance physical conditioning and health, make out-of-body journeys, and glimpse realities beyond our own. Dr. Strange combines a bit of the snarkiness and brilliance of Tony Stark with the semi-mysticism of many martial arts tales. Stephen is not as charismatic or politically interesting as Tony, but we may identify with his evolving spiritual and superpower quest. His is a world in which neither national governance nor modern institutions such as hospitals and medicine count for much. Instead, one can rely only on religious institutions and mystical practices to save him/herself or the world.

A SUPERHERO FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The world was saddened by the sudden passing of actor Chadwick Boseman from colon cancer in August 2020. He had imbued the character Black Panther with “regal confidence and real vulnerability,” according to a review in Slate. Boseman had been fascinated by T’Challa, the king of the fictional African state of Wakanda since his student days and considered it the greatest honor to give life to the character. The film, presenting the first major on-screen black superhero, fascinated world audiences, sparked pride in black fans, and found almost universal acclaim from critics for its presentation of

African culture, themes of positive black empowerment, and a great ensemble cast (Ugwu and Levenson, 2020: 1–6).

Black Panther (2018) begins with a flashback to the 1990s, when king T'Chaka travels to America, where he finds that his brother is secretly aiding arms dealer Ulysses Klaue to steal vibranium, the world's hardest metal, a source of great power. In the present, T'Chaka has been killed in a terrorist attack at the U.N. At coronation ceremony for T'Challa, the young prince overcomes a challenge from M'baku, another prince. He will soon face another challenge from a half-American cousin.

The politics of *Black Panther* follow three strands, all of which director Ryan Coogler and his team make seem real. We see the African kingdom of Wakanda as a beautiful pre-colonial country that has preserved its ancient culture while creating a futuristic city. It is the only source for vibranium, the secret of Wakanda's technology and basis for everything that the Wakandans possess. They have created holograms to hide their modern development. A second story in the past presents N'Jobu, who works in America, wants to spread vibranium world wide to aid the struggles of African Americans and other ethnic groups to rebel against white control of the world. T'Chaka kills N'Jobu (his brother) and scuppers the effort to spread vibranium. Erik Stevens, or Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan), the cousin, grows up in America. He wants an even more radical version of his father's vibranium program, in which Wakanda would lead a worldwide revolution to overthrow white rule. T'Challa must battle and defeat his cousin to restore order (Brody, 2018: 1–6).

Coogler captures in intimate moments the ways that silent desperation create personal darkness that in turn can lead to corrosive ideology and destructive politics. Stevens has grown up with anger in his heart because of his father's murder and the crime and poverty of his urban American youth. He turns to a virulent form of black nationalism to combat injustice, instead of learning more about the beautiful culture in the land of his father. He may look strong and buff, but he is psychically wounded man (Brody, 2018: 1–6).

Some observers were bothered by a conservative tone throughout much of the film. Killmonger, as misguided as he may be, is the only character fighting for global black empowerment. T'Challa and the Wakanda authorities are all eager to make peace with—and even team up with—the U.S. government, as represented by a CIA agent, Ross (Martin Freeman) (Thrasher, 2018: 1–9).

One hopes that the great triumph of *Black Panther* can lead to greater superhero diversity. While most superheroes have been white, the world's population is mainly black, brown, or yellow. The movie's positive view of African success, a kind of Afro-futurism, and its presentation of strong women who are the equal of the male heroes, may point the way to global superheroes (Thrasher, 2018: 1–9). The second season of the *Batwoman* TV

series gives viewers an African American Batwoman: Ryan Wilder (Javicia Leslie), who finds Kate Rose's Batwoman costume and begins acting as the superhero. Rose apparently has been killed in an aircraft accident, but may come back, as superheroes often do. Along with the most recent Spiderman's multicultural classmates and African American girlfriends, the palette of superhero identity is gradually broadening.

One of the most commented-upon recent Marvel films is *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021), the first Asian superhero flick. Simu Liu plays Shang-Chi, who is trained as a youngster to be an assassin but escapes his family to live quietly in San Francisco under the name Shaun. Secrets from his past emerge and he is reunited with his sister, the powerful fighter Xialing (Chinese theater actor Meng'er Zhang, in her first movie role). The pair go up against their father Wenwu (Hong Kong movie legend Tony Leung) to defend their mother's village. Wenwu is a nuanced character who is both scary and tragic. Comedian/actor Awkwafina plays Shaun's best friend Katy who supportively comes along on his adventure, and who provides much of the story's comic relief. The movie has been widely praised for its sensitivity to Chinese culture and for its unusual take on the superhero genre (Sblendorio, 2021: 15; Walsh, 2021: 16).

Also released in 2021 is *The Eternals*, an ensemble movie about an alien race that comes out of hiding to protect Earth from their extraterrestrial rivals, the Deviants. The cast is ethnically diverse, and includes Asian, Latino, Black, female, and gay characters. The movie is directed by Chloe Zhao, who previously helmed the Academy Award Best Picture winner *Nomadland* (2020).

WATCHMEN AND MORALITY

By Cord A. Scott

When people watch movies or television, they wish to be entertained. However, the writers also gain insight from the world around them and may make political observations on those events in the script. What at first glance may be a "simple" movie or comic book might in fact be a metaphor for the political status in the world, one in which the writers may try to affect readers to look at the historical events which inspired the comic book or movie. For one such title, the comic book, and later film *Watchmen* (2009; Zack Snyder,

director) the story served to relay both the zeitgeist as well as commentary on the world around us. So, what is *Watchmen* and how does it tell us of politics?

The source material for the movie was the limited series comic book written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Dave Gibbons. Both creators were from the UK, and the story was to show the frustration of the politics run by conservative political leaders, specifically Margaret Thatcher as well as Ronald Reagan (Abad-Santos, 2019: 1–8). Most of all, the story was one of how unlimited power, combined with questionable morality, could lead to great problems. This story line noted how conservative political values, specifically law and order, was altered to create a world that seemed less stable with superheroes.

The movie—and the comic book—were centered on characters that had severe trauma or a sense of a God complex due to their powers. When any series then combines that power with aspects of enforcement of ideals, the results may not go as expected. To that end, the characters in *Watchmen* are all flawed in their concepts of a just society. The Comedian—Edward Blake—has no sense of the value of life and is driven by desires and cynicism. He kills people while wearing a smiley face pin on his armor, and in many terms is a metaphor for U.S. political involvement which is centered on military action to attain those goals. In one twist, the Comedian is even shown as the assassin of JFK, as a means for propelling the Vietnam War. Doctor Manhattan—John Osterman—is an immediate consequence of the Manhattan Project when he is destroyed by an explosion but recreates himself and now has omnipotent powers. As such he has the power to do many incredible things, but at the same time he becomes completely devoid of human emotions, hence his split from humanity.

Ozymandias—Adrian Veidt—is one of the most innovative business leaders, but sees the inherent flaws of humanity, and uses his immense mental power to propel a “cure” of a perfect society; and finally, Rorschach—Joseph Kovacs—whose backstory includes an abusive relationship and a prostitute for a (neglective) mother, which leads to his excessive power when punishing those who have done wrong to society. Significantly his moniker comes from his mask, which changes shapes like the ink blots invented by Hermann Rorschach to determine mental state. In fact, the character undergoes psychoanalysis to determine his mental state, only to be determined to be sane.

In the storyline of both the comic and movie, the key factor is that of unbundled power combined with those who are fighting for what is morally correct. But who makes such a determination? What is considered the moral decision. For Ozymandias, that end goal of a unified humanity must be forced, to prevent the wider threat of nuclear conflagration, when the Soviet Union invades Afghanistan and Pakistan, further stoking tensions. So, he creates a greater

threat: a monster of unimaginable proportions, who kills several million in New York. On one hand, it does what it is supposed to do: forces the population of the world to confront a mutual threat and work together. At the same time, one of the other superheroes, Dr. Manhattan, who does have the ability to teleport or even vaporize anyone who is a threat, does nothing. He is simply removed from what he considers to be the petty squabbles of humanity.

All the plots and sub-plots show that even under the best of circumstances, humans have their flaws. The use of power and violence to achieve a higher goal of lasting world peace is not always what any envision. For other characters such as the Comedian, or Rorschach, the aspect of unchecked power gives them a sense of entitlement to do whatever they feel they want. One of the most shocking aspects of the movie was when the Comedian is confronted by his Vietnamese lover in a bar as the war is ending. She announces she is pregnant and that he is the father. Rather than attempting to do the right and moral thing, he kills the woman. He then rationalizes it by stating it is mere collateral damage, not to mention admonishing Dr. Manhattan for not stopping the actions of the Comedian. This commentary was written into the script not long after the public became aware of the psychological abuses inflicted on POWs at the Abu Grahیب prison in Baghdad during Operation Iraqi Freedom. The real-life military incidents were further exacerbated by the gun camera footage of Iraqi civilians being gunned down despite not appearing aggressive (Global Policy Forum: 1–8).

For Rorschach, the abuses of power are even more severe. Once arrested for his deviation from the “heroic” actions of others, he is incarcerated with prisoners he detained for arrest. This turns violent when a prison riot ensues, and Rorschach is sought out by the prison bosses for death. During a particularly gruesome scene involving power tools, the tables are turned, and Rorschach is victorious, as well as aided by former team members.

Both stories demonstrate the Hollywood trope of the good guys do what is needed for society. In this case, the “hero” may be faulty in logic or extra-judicial in executing sentence, but he is ultimately right in that the ends justify the means. This attitude was also a part of American foreign policy in the Cold War: if the leader of a country was an avowed anti-communist in view, their internal actions against their own people would be overlooked, no matter how egregious. The list of world leaders backed by the U.S. government at this time included Shah Rezva Palhavi of Iran, Antonio Samoza of Nicaragua, and Augusto Pinochet of Chile to name but a few (Herring, 2017: 672–673, 683–684, 788).

From a political standpoint, the superheroes are meant to be an extension of law enforcement, which are supported more vigorously by the conservative elements of political society. In both versions of *Watchmen*, the concept of superheroes being vigilantes drove down morale for law enforcement

agencies as it was expected that the superheroes would simply end crime. This in turn drove superheroes to complain about having to work on petty crimes and even do mundane tasks like crowd control. All of this ended in the passage of the Keene Act which outlawed superheroes except those officially sanctioned and controlled by the U.S. government. In this case, the remaining superheroes, particularly Dr. Manhattan, were considered a weapon for democracy, or necessary to enforce U.S. foreign policy in the case of the Comedian. While Snyder did make use of the student protests and various real life riots of the 1960s to drive the story, the perception of the political left attempting to destroy all things related to law enforcement is a concept that has some truth (specifically in the case of limiting abuses of power, as in the movie), it is amplified by the movies of Hollywood, who use those same stories to create bigger events for the storyline (Ross, 2013: 8).

The movie also delved into how the perceptions of morality can be skewed. For the movie the characters often behave in ways that are anti-heroic. Depictions of rape, aspects of kinks (one superhero cannot perform sexually unless wearing a costume), and the adrenaline rush from fighting to serve as an aphrodisiac, are concepts that many would NOT expect in a comic book or movie on the same topic. This was yet another reason why the comic book mini-series was a success and was made into the movie. That the comic book was produced by DC comics, where the superheroes show less moral conflict during decisions, was also interesting (Scott, 2014: 63).

The established “universe” of the movie *Watchmen* was extended in 2019 when HBO created a miniseries with the same title. This new *Watchmen* was met with critical acclaim as well as controversy (Lindelof, 2020: 1–8). This new series looked at the merging of both superheroes into law enforcement entities, specifically the Tulsa Oklahoma police department on which the story is focused. Here the alternate reality established in the movie about controlling and sanctioning superheroes into U.S. law enforcement was extended to rank and file agencies. The opening episode dealt with the 1921 Tulsa race riot, which left approximately four-hundred people killed. When this episode aired, people started to hear of the Tulsa riot, and how such an event was not publicly known.

As the series progressed, the story of how different characters, now more racially diverse, sought to look at how race became an aspect of law enforcement. In the end, the story arcs exposed the real-life issues of how racist groups such as the KKK permeated law enforcement agencies and how history has been constructed to emphasize a positive image and minimize or even eliminate any negative events (Loewen, 1995: 33). Further it was noted in the script that Rorschach was seen as a vigilante hero revered by the Seventh Cavalry, a right wing terrorist group established to not only counter

the law enforcement superheroes, as well as push for a white-dominated agenda (Epstein, 2019: 1–8).

This group used the Rorschach masks to hide their identities from the authorities as well as other superheroes while they pushed a white nationalist agenda of purifying the United States. While written before the events of January 6, 2021, the role of current and former law enforcement in the process of supporting an insurrection against the U.S. government seems prophetic (Nevius, 2021: 1–9).

Both the movie and television series sought to inform the viewer that nothing is ever black and white, and that the world is often far more complicated than many media would have us believe. Our political landscape in recent years has become more enmeshed into the teaching of history or even simply watching movies or reading comic books. These two movies combined with the Amazon show *The Boys* (based on the comic book produced by Dynamite entertainment, written by the Irish writer Garth Ennis) take the stratified role of superheroes and bends the vision to show abuses of power. In all these examples the idea that superheroes have the simple answer to any threats and can fix things with a simple solution of violence, is one akin to how many now perceive politics. It is produced as a winner take all game in which one wins while the other is vanquished. Overwhelming power to attain an end will most likely backlash. Life is not so tidy, and compromise is more important to both the end of conflict, to the passing of laws, and even the depictions of what one might do with superhuman powers.

THE MCU AND AMERICAN SOFT POWER

By Daryl Bockett

Soft power is a concept developed to explain the difference between American and Soviet influence during the Cold War. Both countries had enormous coercive power, primarily in military and economic terms, but the U.S. seemed to have more attractive power—people wanted the things that the United States wanted them to want, without being coerced—and this influence was dubbed soft power (Nye, 1990: 32). So, for example, in the 2003 Iraq War the U.S. deployed vast hard power resources in order to overthrow a tyrant and install a democratic system. Contrast that with the end of the Cold War, when a wave of democratization seemed to sweep the globe, toppling tyrants

without America having to fire a shot; in other words, countries wanted for themselves what the United States wanted for them, and this is the essence of soft power.

In practice, it can be hard to disentangle soft power from more traditional power resources, as well as from the simpler fact that countries will tend to emulate the most successful actors (Waltz, 1979, 76–77), but two things seem clear: (1) the movies that comprise the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), starting from 2008's *Iron Man* through 2019's *Avengers: Endgame* (and beyond, COVID willing), have been tremendously popular internationally; and (2) they do a fantastic job of communicating American values in a way that is potentially very influential.

At the most superficial level, the stars of the MCU movies are heroes, fighting courageously to protect the lives and freedoms of others, which is certainly how many Americans see their country and want to be seen by others. But at a deeper level, the stories and characters are more politically aware and self-reflective, putting forward a “warts-and-all” version of America that is somehow all the more noble for its flaws. For example, the first *Iron Man* movie opens in Afghanistan, where the protagonist, Tony Stark, is shown to be an arms dealer and war profiteer. Thus, the movie openly acknowledges one of the most problematic issues of American foreign policy, before leading the character on a redemption arc. By the end of movie, American weapons, in the form of the *Iron Man* armor, have defeated enemies both foreign and domestic: the indisputably evil terrorists of the Ten Rings and Stark's own business partner and mentor, the arch-capitalist Obadiah Stane. Stark ends the movie by announcing that he will no longer use his superior technology to create weapons to sell to governments, but also that he will continue to use force to intervene around the world in the name of justice. Back in the real world, American foreign policy interventions are not unproblematic, but there is still plenty of evidence of America's role as the “indispensable nation”—a narrative that may be amplified by such pop culture portrayals as *Iron Man*.

While *Iron Man* was merely funded by the American government, *Captain America* was literally created by it, engineered to be a patriotic symbol that could fight against insidious foreign threats (the “super-Nazi” of Hydra), but quickly established that he was not willing to blindly follow the orders of authority figures (either U.S. government on his first mission, or later the fictitious organization SHIELD, which seems to represent both the U.S. government, and, at times, the United Nations). When he had suspicions about the morality of SHIELD, he investigated independently and challenged his erstwhile boss directly, before breaking away and stopping the alien invasion without approval.

Even more starkly, when SHIELD turned out to have been thoroughly infiltrated by Hydra in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, “Cap” showed

that disobeying immoral orders is the essence of heroism (“If I see a situation pointed south, I can’t ignore it,” as he said in *Civil War*). However, at the same time, good guys can only save the day because so many members of SHIELD are fundamentally good, honest, and honorable people, even if the black-clad Hydra agents are better at actually fighting.

In his continued defiance of authority, Captain America exemplifies the freedom of choice and personal responsibility that is at the heart of democracy; thus, ironically, by ignoring the instructions of (broadly) government authorities, he manages to represent the country even more authentically. It is hard to imagine a similar movie coming out of an authoritarian country that combines a compelling character, a realistic portrayal of a sometimes-flawed system, and continued defiance of authority, that still somehow represents that system in an attractive and even inspiring way.

In a sense, the overarching plot of the first three phases of the MCU movies reflects deep-seated western liberal values, and thus can be seen as serving American soft power (spoiler alert!). The “third” movie in the Avengers series was eventually split in two, *Infinity War* and *End Game*, and they told the story of the quest for the Infinity Gauntlet, a hyper-MacGuffin that granted the wielder infinite power when six powerful “infinity stones” were gathered together. The villain of the piece, Thanos, sought the stones in order to radically transform the universe in a gesture of genocidal benevolence. The Avengers fought him, eventually getting their hands on (in?) the Gauntlet, and using that power purely to undo what Thanos had done. Then, rather than use that power for themselves, they returned the stones to their original owners.

If we think of the Infinity Gauntlet not as flashy comic-book trope, but as a metaphor for political power, then the moral of the story is clear: power should not be monopolized but shared by the people—and to cement the moral of the story, who else but Captain America was entrusted to return the all-powerful infinity stones to their respective owners? The heroes rejected the temptation of infinite power, choosing not to use it rather than risk being corrupted; and what is the essence of liberalism if not restraints on the use of power?

Financially, the Marvel Cinematic Universe has been a juggernaut. Politically, there is no way to tell how influential the films have been and will continue to be in the future. However, the presence of at least one reported Captain America cosplayer in various Hong Kong protests is just one anecdotal data point that suggests it may have an important, if unintended, role in promoting the values of American liberalism to future generations. In an age where distrust of traditional political institutions seems to be at an all-time high, it may be that the soft, attractive power of a country like the United States will be better served by its pop culture than by its government.

NOTES

1. Singer has been accused of sexual misconduct for the past twenty years, but the director denies these allegations (French and Potter, 2019: 1–19).

Chapter 5

Movies Go to War

Shifting Images of Humanity's Most Searing Experience

REIMAGINING THE GREAT WAR AND THE GOOD WAR: 1917 AND DUNKIRK

The two wars that made the biggest impact on modern history were World Wars I and II. World War I was the first great calamity of the twentieth century, a meat grinder of a war in which up to twenty million military personnel and civilians were killed. Most of the military deaths came in the trenches and moonscape of No Man's Land between enemy lines on the Western, Eastern, and Italian Fronts. Others died in the Balkans, the Middle East, the Atlantic, East Africa, and East Asia. The war completely eviscerated the carefully constructed Balance of Power system that had kept European peace since the Napoleonic Wars, destroyed three of the great European monarchies (the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian Empires), and brought nationalism and instability to much of the continent during the 1920s and 1930s.

The terrible children of that nationalism were the fascist regimes that arose in Italy, Germany, Spain, and the Balkans. Nazi Germany, along with its Italian and Japanese allies, went to war to dominate the Eurasian super-continent. The resultant World War II united Western Allies with the Soviet Union to bring down the fascist states and militarist Japan. Unlike World War I, this second conflict was a war of rapid movement and bombing from the sky, and it ended with nuclear weapons dropped on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Perhaps because of the inconclusive nature of World War I and popular revulsion at its political consequences, filmmakers did not find it a popular

subject and made only a few great movies about it. The one-hundredth anniversary of World War I in 1914 went little noticed, so it was appropriate for filmmakers to examine the conflict before the one-hundred years from the armistice had passed. A much more decisive war that took up to seventy-five million lives led to the triumph of Western democracies and the Soviet Union, World War II gave us a whole sub-genre of films about the Good War, in which plucky Americans (or Brits, French, and Russians) pull together to defeat evil Nazis and fanatical Japanese militarists. Between 1945 and 1970, hundreds of World War II flicks filled theaters and thrilled viewers. With endless production of these films, we were less likely to forget this greatest war in history. The unpopular Vietnam War killed off pro-war movies for a time, though they made a comeback from the 1990s onward. Seventy-five years after the Good War and nearly fifty years after Vietnam, films are taking new looks at those seminal conflicts of the early twentieth century.

Every war movie is about both the conflict that it depicts, and about war as a phenomenon. It usually is backward looking, considering a war in terms of collective or manufactured memory. Constructed popular images of the war become critical and, for a war movie to be successful, it must align with public thinking about the war. For instance, as Vietnam was an extremely unpopular war that most Americans came to reject, the greatest Vietnam films were against both that war—and war in general. By contrast, World War II was a well-supported war that majorities of people in Allied countries thought was a worthy cause and, until the late 1960s, most movies celebrated the heroism and sacrifice of its soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines. A reassessment of that war led to fewer World War II flicks being made until the public discussion of the “Greatest Generation” and success of *Saving Private Ryan* in the 1990s (Elitzik, 2017: 1–5).

Sam Mendes’s *1917* (2019) is unique as cinema, as the entire movie plays as one continuous shot. This differs from such films as Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope* (1948), a psychological thriller which pioneered a series of long takes. Mendes and his team seamlessly blended various long shots to follow two British soldiers as they relay a vital message to a frontline unit, as telephone lines have been cut. What an irony that fluid motion describes the most static of general wars. The story follows two friends, lance corporals Tom Blake (Dean-Charles Chapman) and Will Schofield (George MacKay), who are tasked by General Erinmore (Colin Firth) with delivering orders to Colonel Mackenzie (Benedict Cumberbatch) of the Devonshire Regiment to halt an attack against the Hindenburg line to which the Germans have withdrawn, as the enemy is preparing a trap for the British. Blake is motivated to carry the message because his brother is a Devonshire lieutenant. The two soldiers move from their own trenches to the abandoned German trenches, wherein a tripwire explodes a bomb that nearly kills Schofield. Blake saves him and

they continue. At an abandoned farm, they rescue a German pilot from a downed fighter plane, but the pilot stabs Blake, who dies in Schofield's arms.

Schofield promises to carry on, and a British unit transports him closer to the front. Walking through a wrecked town at night, he kills one German soldier before hiding with a French woman and her baby. He gives her his rations and milk from the farm and, despite her pleas, says he must leave. He kills another German in a fight, then jumps into the river and tumbles over a small waterfall. Coming ashore, he finds a British unit waiting to go the front. He finally finds his way to the Devonshire Regiment. In the film's most arresting sequence, Schofield realizes he cannot reach Mackenzie in time, so he sprints across No Man's Land along the trench line just as the regiment is starting to go over the top. He barges into Mackenzie's dugout without permission, and the colonel reluctantly calls off the attack. By chance, the young soldier meets Blake's brother, who is saddened by the news of his brother, but agrees to let Schofield write a letter to his mother about Tom's heroism. A spent Schofield sits beneath a tree and looks at photos of his wife and children.

This movie considers the Great War from the perspective of a few ordinary soldiers and officers. We see no titanic struggle, no grand strategy, no meetings of politicians or command staff. Two soldiers have a simple mission, are dedicated to completing it as quickly as possible, and are partly guided by need to save Blake's brother. Thomas Newman's spare score unsentimentally propels the two soldiers forward. While the story reflects the actual withdrawal of German forces to the Hindenburg line in Operation Alberich, it is a bit confused about where British and German units would have been placed. We see black and Indian soldiers in regular units, when almost none were in British Army units at that time. The movie's most glaring error may have been its depiction of British brass being concerned about casualties at that point in the war. They had shown time and again that they had little concern about loss of life. Runners usually were employed for only the most vital messages, and commanders might not have considered saving one regiment from sustaining high casualties so important (Waxman, 2019: 1–5).

Mendes notes two key motives for his movie. First is to honor his grandfather Alfie Mendes, who served on the Western Front and told the younger Mendes stories about luck and chance while serving as a runner in the trenches. Before the credits, Mendes inserts a note that the movie was inspired by his grandfather. As all World War I veterans have now died, it is important to remember their stories, so that the war is not forgotten. Second is that "the winds that were blowing then are blowing now, and these people were fighting for a free and unified Europe" (Chuba, 2019: 1–3; Waxman, 2019: 1–5). Some saw the movie as an expression of British nationalism, noting that nationalism played a strong role in creating the conflict and all the major combatants shared responsibility for the carnage. Britain, then, was no

puer than any of the other nations at war (Rozsa, 2020: 1–7). Still, another reviewer felt that the film downplayed the war’s horror and, with its single take gimmick, turned the conflict into a “theme park showcase” for the public (Rivera, 2020: 1–5).

1917 was almost a companion piece to Peter Jackson’s groundbreaking documentary, *They Shall Not Grow Old* (2018). Like the above movie, this film was inspired by Jackson’s grandfather, a New Zealander who served on the Western Front. Jackson takes old World War I news film, slows it down, adds sound effects and conversation, and gloriously colorizes it. The long-gone veterans of the war magically come to life before our eyes, and we see them as ordinary lads and young men that might live down the street. We hear recordings of aging veterans describing their experiences in training, at leisure, moving up to the front, fighting in battle, enjoying the war’s end, and returning to civilian life. The documentary forces us to think about the sacrifice of that generation and how far (or not) we have come in the century since Armistice Day.

Another powerful recent World War I film is James Kent’s *Testament of Youth* (2014), also released as part of British commemorations of the war’s hundredth anniversary. It stars Alicia Vikander as Vera Brittain, a British pacifist and feminist who loses her fiancé, brother, and two good friends in the war. Kit Harrington plays her fiancé, poet Roland Leighton. She volunteers as a nurse to be near her brother, and for a time takes care of wounded German prisoners. After the war, she begins to speak out against war. Her book relating her experiences becomes a major antiwar statement of the World War I generation. Her story was also made into a 1979 BBC television series starring Cheryl Campbell as Brittain.

Christopher Nolan’s *Dunkirk* (2017) looks at a key moment in World War II, also from the point of view of ordinary participants. In May, 1940, the British Expeditionary Force in Belgium was surrounded and forced back to the French coastal town of Dunkirk by German forces, called “the enemy” in the film. While only a few thousand British are evacuated in the first days, boat owners from all over Southeast England heed a call for help. Along with the Royal Navy, they withdrew 338,000 British and French troops by early June. Called the “Miracle of Dunkirk,” this operation saved the British Army and was a key factor in the survival of Great Britain, despite the impending fall of France.

All of the characters depicted are fictional, though partially based on real people. Commander Bolton (Kenneth Branagh), a composite character, oversees the evacuation and his conversations tell the audience how it is going. Tommy (Fionn Whitehead) is a British private. Along with another British soldier Alex (Harry Styles) and a French soldier, he tries various tacks to get evacuated. At first, he volunteers as a stretcher bearer. When prevented

from boarding a hospital ship, he waits under the mole (pier or breakwater) for another ship. With that ship sunk at night, he makes his way to the beach, and joins a group of soldiers trying to use a derelict boat on the beach. Farrier (Tom Hardy) is a Spitfire pilot low on fuel whose wingman, Collins (Jack Lowden), gets shot down over the Channel. Farrier hovers over the beach shooting down German dive bombers until he runs out of fuel, lands on the beach beyond Allied lines and is captured. Mr. Dawson (Mark Rylance) takes his boat from Weymouth to Dunkirk, joined by his son Peter and a helper, the teenage George. They pick up a shell-shocked soldier (Cillian Murphy) on a shipwreck, who becomes enraged when he notices that Dawson is headed toward Dunkirk. The soldier struggles with Peter and pushes George down one deck, causing a serious head injury. Dawson and Peter rescue Collins as he is about to drown in his sinking plane. Arriving at the beach, Dawson and Peter pick up several soldiers, including Tommy and Alex.

At Weymouth, the shell-shocked soldier sees George's body carried away. Peter visits the local newspaper to tell the story of George's heroism, which is published the next day. Arriving on a train at Woking, Tommy and Alex are surprised to receive a warm welcome and free beer from townspeople. Tommy reads a section of Prime Minister Winston Churchill's address to Parliament, in which he calls the Dunkirk operation a "deliverance."

This movie gets most of the Dunkirk events correct. British fighter planes over Dunkirk were limited to one hour due to small fuel capacity, French soldiers were initially prevented from boarding British ships, the first day's evacuees were relatively few, but numbers picked up as civilian boats pitched in, and the British in the end did evacuate 120,000 French, though most of them were transported to French ports, and so they ended up killed or captured in subsequent fighting. The film does not adequately depict the actions of French, African colonial, and Indian troops, particularly in efforts to stave off the German forces. Why the film never refers to Germans, but just a shadowy "enemy," is not clear. Perhaps Nolan sought to keep the focus on the British characters, but it seems to excuse Germany from its unprovoked blitzkrieg invasion of the Low Countries and France, which caused those countries' peoples an unspeakable nightmare for the next five years.

While the conceit of *1917* is its use of extremely long takes, *Dunkirk* employs the intercutting of three time periods: the soldiers on the beach and the beach commander for one week, Mr. Dawson's boat for one day, and the pilots for one hour. As in *1917*, a minimalist score by Hans Zimmer underscores the action. Zimmer makes particularly effective use of a slowed-down version of Edward Elgar's "Nimrod" from the *Enigma Variations* (1899) to underscore British commitment and national pride. As the World War II veterans pass from the scene—their average age is in the nineties—we look back

at the Greatest Generation, who literally saved the world from a Dark Age of German Nazism and Japanese militarism.

The problem for British patriots or believers in the Greatest Generation, Dunkirk and Churchill myths is that the filmic *Dunkirk* gives us only a little heroism. Mr. Dawson, Farrier, and Commander Bolton embody the accepted idea of the Dunkirk operation as the best of the British bulldog spirit. Most of the soldiers on the beach exemplify only passive terror as they wait helplessly to evacuate or be bombed by the shadowy “enemy” from the sky. Tommy and Alex are anything but heroic, pretending to care about the wounded (or possibly dead) soldier that they bring aboard the hospital ship, hiding below the mole, then falling in with a mixed group in the damaged boat (Elitzik, 2017: 1–5).

Dunkirk is not the only recent movie to deal with Britain’s lowest point of the war. *Darkest Hour* (2017) earned a Best Actor Oscar for Gary Oldman as Churchill. Clad in prosthetics and makeup, Oldman is convincing as the notoriously flinty but determined PM who led a coalition government throughout the war. The film focuses on those dangerous weeks in spring, 1940 surrounding the Dunkirk evacuation as France falls, Britain stands alone against Nazi Germany, and his government totters. But the film takes great liberties with those events. For instance, it overstates the political danger to his government from Lord Viscount Halifax (Stephen Dillane) and former PM Neville Chamberlain (Ronald Pickup), who were not planning an imminent vote of no confidence. It virtually ignores the vital coalition of the Conservative and Labour Parties that unified the country throughout the war. And it falsely implies that Churchill’s dealings with King George VI (Ben Mendelsohn) were frosty, when in fact they enjoyed a generally cordial working relationship.

The movie also suggests that U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt (voiced by David Strathairn on the phone) was not interested in helping arm Britain. Given strong legal constraints, he did all he could to aid the British war effort before America entered the war. Churchill did not decide on a whim to ride the Underground and ask ordinary citizens if they wanted to make peace with Germany. In May 1940 they might not have so enthusiastically supported the war effort, as later noted by George Orwell. During the blitz on London, Churchill visited bombed out areas and got an earful from residents (Broich, 2017: 1–7). Why are scriptwriters so eager to insert such phony feel-good moments into history movies?

Also, few British leaders beyond Halifax were interested in making a deal with Germany. It is true that Churchill preferred to fight on, but the movie neglects to mention that Churchill was willing to consider peace with Germany if the situation warranted it. Churchill’s personal secretary, Elizabeth Layton (Lily James), did not start working for him until the next

year, and her brother was not killed at Dunkirk. The PM's famous "we will never surrender" speech was not broadcast from Parliament, he did not get a thunderous ovation (more like mild approval), and the House of Commons has never been lit like a cavernous nightclub (Broich, 2017: 1–7).

What an irony that narrative ambiguity describes a series of events considered among the most heroic of Great Britain's war. These movies caused more than a few observers to note that Britain in 2017 was undergoing another evacuation from continental Europe, this time via Brexit withdrawing from the European Union. The U.K. in 1940 had no choice but to go it alone until America and the Soviet Union entered the war. British voters did not have to choose ending membership in the EU but did so by the tiniest of margins. *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour* thus may be signals, not of British greatness, but of Britain in decline (Elitzik, 2017: 1–5).

FROM GOOD WARS TO FOREVER WARS: CONSTRUCTIVISM AND WAR FILMS

War movies either bolster or undermine social structures. Prowar films show national unity, in America's case through bringing together men from various ethnic groups and regions. Ambiguous films show the difficulties of melding together people from differing backgrounds and keeping them together is ever challenging. Hollywood war movie tropes are well recognized by audiences, such as the soldier who shows his buddies a picture of his girlfriend and gets killed. In prowar movies, war is a unifying experience, while in antiwar stories war destroys people both physically and morally/emotionally. State interests are clear in movies: the war must be seen as a noble cause taken by heroes in pursuit of important national interests. That is easier to demonstrate in the morally clear conflict against the Nazis, much less obvious in the morally murky conflicts in Vietnam, Iraq, or Afghanistan. During a war, states promote prowar propaganda, but after the war states desire favorable conflict retrospectives. Identities that are unified or divided by war have shifted over time. World War II films focus on ethnic, class, and regional identity, while largely ignoring African Americans. Vietnam War movies include prominent black characters traumatized by war and facing difficult readjustment to civilian life. Gender and religious identities receive more attention in movies about post-Cold War conflicts, as women move from support players such as wives and nurses to combatants.

War films provide one of the best illustrations of how constructivism can illuminate popular culture. Since World War I, the war film has always reflected both popular and government-promoted norms and attitudes about wars. During wartime, the whole apparatus of the state is turned to promoting

the war, and movies play key roles in propaganda. During World War II, for instance, most Hollywood movies contained huge dollops of prowar propaganda. Some movies were low quality boilerplate stories that mostly served young or mass audiences. Other films, such as *Mrs. Miniver* or *Casablanca* were among the most accomplished projects of the entire era and would have been considered great art even without the war as a backdrop. The Vietnam War was a rare case in which the government only got Hollywood to produce a handful of prowar films.

After every American or European war, the film industry assesses the value of the war. Americans and Europeans had mixed feelings about World War I, and thus films about that conflict were distinctly ambiguous. As World War II was a great triumph for the Western Allies and the Soviet Union, so Hollywood and European movies continually pointed to the honor, sacrifice and unity engendered by “The War,” as the Greatest Generation called it—at least until the mid-1960s. Ambiguous movies got released, but they did not question what Dwight Eisenhower called “the Great Crusade in Europe.” Korean War films were mostly ambiguous, reflecting the war’s stalemate and lack of popular support.

The grindingly unpopular and morally questionable Vietnam War forced the most expressive outpouring of antiwar movies ever. As unrealistic as they may have been, films such as *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer Hunter*, and *Platoon* were searing statements against the horror and dehumanization of war. But by the 1990s, this trend had run its course, and no more major antiwar films about Vietnam got made. Significantly, *Forrest Gump* took a much more positive view of the conflict and its soldiers. Most movies about the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars are ambiguous or only mildly antiwar. Those wars had no conscription to turn a generation against them, and battle deaths were relatively light, so the public did not react as negatively as it did to the Southeast Asian conflict. I would not be surprised to see a Gump-like reassessment film made about those two wars in this decade.

Unlike other film genres, war movies also spend much effort on war veterans, and these views have also changed. From *The Best Years of Our Lives* and its optimistic attitude of things aren’t so great for veterans but they will turn out well in the end to the horrific experiences of Vietnam veterans in *Rolling Thunder* and *Rambo: First Blood* was a long fall. The vets’ experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, as depicted in movies, is only marginally better than in Vietnam.

Applying the Hulsman and Mitchell scheme of IR theories as embodied by movie characters to war movies may be less fruitful than for other genres. Most pro-war movies, at least in America and Western Europe, have taken a distinctly liberal approach to their stories. Characters may be cynical or jaded, but they are still willing to fight for democracy. Ambiguous movie

characters are often traditional realists, just trying to survive the war so that they can return home to their prewar lives. These movies sometimes ridicule officers or politicians who promote democratic propaganda or military discipline. Antiwar movies carry this criticism even further, suggesting that these authority figures are responsible for creating bad wars or horrific campaigns. Central characters are both disdainful of officers and simply trying to survive. More of them than in either pro-war or ambiguous films get killed in service of a dubious cause or nonsensical war doctrine (Hulsman and Mitchell, 2009: 1–19).

ETHNIC/CLASS UNITY AND ROMANCE: PRO-WAR FILMS AND WORLD WAR II

The heyday for the war film genre was the postwar era's first twenty years. Americans and Europeans were justifiably proud of their actions and enjoyed celebrating their nations' heroics and the democratic war-bonding experience on-screen. Both governments and film studios were eager to present a positive spin on the recent conflict. So, it was an era of the most full-throated pro-war movies ever made. When I say pro-war, I mean films that note the horror and destruction of war but celebrate the heroism and individual achievement of participants—and underline the nobility and honor of the cause. Usually, they focus on real or fictional individuals who put their duty and missions before their own interests. Stories may mention real campaigns, but do not always track with actual events.

Romantic subplots figure prominently, so to attract female viewers and give male viewers appealing fantasies. Soldiers go off to war, while their loves stay home. The boys promise to return, and most of them do, but a few must be sacrificed for the greater effort. Hot-button issues such as Antisemitism or race may be brought up, but in a gauzy, polite manner. War movies got made for both feature and B-movie double bills (the latter were often black-and-white). Some theaters specialized in showing war movies, crime stories, and film noir. Big name actors such as John Wayne, Van Heflin, and Frank Sinatra frequently appeared in war stories, as did rising stars such as Steve McQueen, James Garner, and Clint Eastwood. War movies also were popular at drive-in theaters, which blossomed all over America.

A typical fictional World War II movie of the 1950s to early 1960s might go something like this. Johnny is a wise-cracking, cynical Italian American from Brooklyn, Joey a straight-arrow Norwegian American farm boy from Minnesota, and Bill a tough, no-nonsense part-Native American ranch hand from Texas. Johnny has been in trouble with the law, Joey plans to become a pastor, and Bill has fought with his father over their ranch operations. Along

with several men from other states, the draftees enter Army basic training in Alabama. At first, they don't like each other, but learn grudging respect during the rigors of training. On leave, strait-laced Joey meets blond local party girl Sally. Opposites attract and they fall in love. He receives her picture to take with him and promises to write every day.

The three GIs ship out to Europe, where they become replacements in an infantry company (Bravo Company) in France. The veteran soldiers disrespect them at first. The unit fights in a skirmish, where Bill gets slightly wounded, but the replacements prove themselves. The company liberates a French village, where the soldiers meet friendly locals who share their wine, and they are attracted to local girls. Johnny flirts with one of them, passionate but smart, dark haired Marianne. She flirts back, they fight and make up. They stay up all night sharing their common dreams for a better life. Clearly taken with her, Johnny promises to return.

Bravo Company prepares for a big campaign in Lorraine. The three friends share their concerns about the fight to come. Joey shows his photo of Sally to Johnny and Bill. Joey and Johnny encourage Bill to make up with his father. At the end of 1944, Germans launch an offensive, nearly overwhelming U.S. and French forces. Bravo is pinned down on a hill, resisting Nazi forces and taking heavy casualties. Johnny gets wounded in the arm and leg but keeps fighting. Several German tanks are about to break through. Joey and Bill pick up a bazooka, destroying two of the tanks and blowing the track off a third.

A German tank commander puts his hands up. Joey gets up to take his surrender, but the German whips out a concealed pistol, mortally wounding him in the abdomen and hitting Johnny in the shoulder. Johnny and Bill shoot the German officer and comfort Joey as he dies holding Sally's photo. A relief force reaches the hill and saves the remnants of Bravo Company. A wounded Johnny and exhausted Bill get sent to the rear. The two friends embrace before parting, Johnny to a hospital in Paris and Bill back to his unit. Much later, the war over, a recovering Johnny returns to the French village. Marianne runs to meet him, and Johnny whispers, "I promised I would come back." They kiss passionately and walk away as the music swells and the credits begin to roll.

I could have made a pretty good living as a screen writer in the 1950s, don't you think? What do we learn here? First, war unifies Americans of various ethnicities and regional backgrounds. Boot camp knocks disparate men into a cohesive unit that can fight better than authoritarian Germans or Japanese. So, war is good for democracy and social cohesion. After boot camp, real soldiers would likely as not report to separate units, but the movie keeps them together for dramatic purposes. Second, if you are a cynical wise-cracker, war will make you more mature and seasoned and you will lose much of your cynical attitude. A little cynicism can be tolerated if it helps oil social relations among the men. Third, our World War II enemies were treacherous villains,

and so we were right in killing them. Fourth, being wounded is an ennobling ritual of transformation, not maiming that destroys lives. Fifth, some soldiers/sailors/airmen/marines must sacrifice their lives so that their buddies can live completed lives. Finally, if you go off to war, never, ever show your buddies a photo of your love—or you will be a goner. You must earn love through combat before you can claim it. These are elements of myth, not the reality of the war, but most American movie goers were willing to accept them, at least until Vietnam intruded into the national reverie.

Several popular films of the 1950s take that individual approach to action. John Wayne starred in several war movies of the 1940s, but his best known is *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949). Contrary to his heroic image, he did not volunteer for war service, despite numerous opportunities to do so. Much later, when Wayne strenuously supported the Vietnam War, antiwar activists pointed out his apparent hypocrisy. Wayne is Marine Sergeant John Stryker, disliked by his men because of his tough discipline and training but they come to appreciate that he is preparing them so that they can win and survive the war. Stryker conflicts with Private Pete Conway (John Agar), haughty upper crust son of Stryker's former commander, and Private Al Thomas (Forrest Tucker), a former sergeant who blames Stryker for his demotion. The Marines land on Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands, and several of them get killed in the furious fight for the island. Back in camp, Stryker beats up Thomas when he discovers that the private's neglect led to the deaths of two Marines. The unit then joins the month-long fight for Iwo Jima, nearer Japan, in which Stryker leads the men up Mount Suribachi. As they rest near the top, a sniper kills Stryker. The men read a letter that Stryker wrote to his son, expressing his values and all that he could never tell him. Conway pulls the men together to push to the summit, where they witness the raising of the American flag. Stryker molds boys into men, and the unit achieves its objectives. He sacrifices his life because he is a total Marine that cannot exist in postwar civilian life.

When released, *Battleground* (1949) was one the most realistic combat films. It centers on the disparate soldiers of fictional I Company of the 101st Airborne Division (the "Screaming Eagles") which defends the pivotal Belgian crossroads town of Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge (December, 1944 to January, 1945). Soldiers include playboy and wise-cracker Holley (Van Johnson), Jarvess, serious student of both French and German (John Hodiak), Pop, a father figure who is banking on a family discharge (George Murphy), and Rodrigues, a Latino from Los Angeles who has never seen snow close-up (Ricardo Montalban). Holley panics and runs at a critical moment but collects himself and takes out several Germans. Rodrigues dies, but the others survive, literally marching out of Bastogne stronger.

The film realistically depicts the rigors of the Bastogne siege: frequent shifting of positions to keep German attackers off-base, extremely cold

weather, limited food, especially hot “chow,” inadequate medical care, the need to conserve ammo, and widespread destruction and loss of civilian life in the town. It shows clearing of bad weather just before Christmas, which allows Allied air support and supply drops, and relief by George Patton’s Third Army just after Christmas. We see soldiers suspect each other of being German infiltrators, and so quiz each other on American culture, but this is inaccurate, as it happened on the northern flank of the Bulge, not around Bastogne. The story also references General Anthony McAuliffe’s terse rejection of a German surrender demand with a one-word reply: “Nuts!”

From Here to Eternity (1953), directed by Fred Zinneman and based on a popular novel by James Jones, examines career Army noncoms in Hawaii on the eve of Pearl Harbor. The story centers on Private Robert E. Lee Prewitt (Montgomery Clift), a bugler who refuses to enter fight competitions for the company commander, and so suffers frequent physical abuse. His friend, Private Angelo Maggio (Frank Sinatra), misguidedly gets into a fight with stockade sergeant James “Fatso” Judson (Ernest Borgnine), becoming the target of Judson’s vicious beatings when jailed for leaving guard duty and getting drunk. First Sergeant Milton Warden (Burt Lancaster) sympathizes with Prewitt, but can do little to help him, recognizing that he is a “hard-head.” Warden pursues a potentially career-ending affair with Karen Holmes (Deborah Kerr), the company commander’s wife.

To meet the Production Code and get Army cooperation in making the film, the script deleted or changed the novel’s anti-military elements and plot points involving venereal disease, prostitution, and homosexuality. In shutting down the boxing competition, the military brass appear to be on Prewitt’s side, contradicting the novel’s central thrust. If the movie had followed the novel more closely, it might have become an antiwar film. The movie was something of a comeback for Sinatra, who won the Best Supporting Actor Oscar. Like Wayne, Sinatra’s lack of wartime military service was a sore point for some viewers.

The Young Lions (1958), based on an Irwin Shaw novel and directed by Edward Dmytryk, is all about American ethnic unity and doing one’s duty. It presents two American soldiers, entertainer Michael Whiteacre (Dean Martin) and Noah Ackerman (Clift), who become friends in basic training. Ackerman gets treated badly because of his Jewish background, but he marries a non-Jewish girl, Hope Plowman (Hope Lange) after her surprised father comes around to accepting the young man. This is one of the few movies that takes on Antisemitism during the 1950s. Many war movies of the 1950s–1960s skirt controversial social issues. Whiteacre tries to avoid combat, spending much of the war in London, but at last his girlfriend shames him into switching units.

The GIs' story contrasts with that of Christian Diestl (Marlon Brando), an apolitical German skiing instructor who joins the Army but quickly becomes disillusioned with the war. His captain, Hardenberg (Maximilian Schell), is seriously wounded. He asks Diestl to bring him a bayonet, which the captain later uses to commit suicide. The two Americans participate in the liberation of a German concentration camp near the end of the war in Europe. Disgusted by what he has seen at the concentration camp, Diestl smashes his rifle and walks toward the Americans, intending to surrender, but is killed by Whiteacre. Transformation through warfare is available to the Americans; for Germans, it's only disillusionment and death. Later, Ackerman returns to a joyous Hope and his baby daughter.

Also in 1958, *Kings Go Forth* stars Sinatra as Lt. Sam Loggins and Tony Curtis as Corporal Britt Harris, a radioman assigned to his unit. While on leave, Loggins falls in love with a French American young woman, Monique Blair (Natalie Wood). She is the biracial daughter of an African American father and French woman. Monique worries about getting involved with an American soldier, and Loggins is initially unsure if he wants a romance with a biracial woman. In taking on black-white race issues—even though Wood was not biracial—*Kings* also is an outlier war film, but it handles race issues gently. Later, playboy Harris courts her, asking her to marry him, and she agrees. But he is not serious about it and makes no effort to apply for Army permission to marry. Loggins forces Harris to tell her the truth, and she runs to the sea, nearly committing suicide. The two soldiers go on a mission, and Harris gets killed in a battle for a French town. A flippant attitude toward romance can get you killed in 1950s war movies. Seriously wounded, Loggins survives the war and returns to Monique, who is now running an orphans' school. They look at each other warmly, but the audience does not know if they will rekindle their romance.

Yet another 1958 entry is *Run Silent Run Deep*, directed by Robert Wise and taken from a popular novel. One of the finest submarine dramas to come out of World War II, it is also a transition of sorts between Hollywood's Golden Age, embodied by Clark Gable, and the younger actors that came to stardom in the 1950s, in the person of Burt Lancaster. Commander P.J. Richardson (Gable) has a *Moby Dick*-like obsession with a Japanese destroyer, *Akikaze*, and its captain that have bedeviled him on previous missions. He disobeys orders, recklessly driving his crew into an attack on the destroyer. When Richardson is injured, first mate Lt. Jim Bledsoe (Lancaster) takes over the boat, so to return to Pearl Harbor. Bledsoe and his men discover that the destroyer and a sub are working together against them, as Richardson returns to duty. The crew manage to force the sub to the surface and destroy it. Richardson collapses and dies on the tower and gets buried at sea.

Though Richardson is unstable and obsessed, his perseverance is rewarded in the end and he dies a hero. The honor of the silent service is maintained and the sub returns home. However, a monomaniacal focus on a destroyer would go against what we know of U.S. sub strategy in the Pacific War. Their primary mission was to sink merchant ships in the approaches to Japan, and this effort effectively strangled the Japanese economy and war production. American sub captains were professional and focused, and they were not easily distracted from their core task. A secondary task was to protect surface fleet operations, but that is not their job in this story.

The Longest Day (1962), based on a popular non-fiction book by Cornelius Ryan, is one of the greatest World War II epics. This movie is not only about American unity, but Allied common cause, too. British, French, and Americans cooperate easily, and we see none of the heavily documented tension among U.S. and British leaders or between Supreme Commander Dwight Eisenhower and Free French leader Charles DeGaulle. Helmed by three directors—American, British, and German—and starring a huge international cast, it (mostly) factually recounts the D-Day invasion of Normandy in June, 1944. Unlike most big pictures, it is filmed in black and white, appropriate for the famously bad weather facing the Normandy landings and parachute drops.

Aside from a few actors with substantial roles, such as Wayne, Robert Mitchum, Henry Fonda, Richard Todd, and Peter Lawford, many parts are little more than cameos. The directors emphasize little details from the Ryan book, such as a French militiaman greeting British commandos (Lawford and others) with a bottle of wine, a British beach master (Kenneth More) bashing a stalled armored personnel carrier with his shillelagh to get it moving, a U.S. 82nd Airborne Division paratrooper (Richard Beymer) getting lost in the countryside, finally ending up with a wounded British pilot (Richard Burton), and a U.S. paratrooper (Red Buttons) suspended from a church steeple in the village of St. Mere Eglise, made temporarily deaf by bells ringing all night.

The most impressive sequence for me is the twenty-minute set-up, underscored by the low cadence of military drums, as the audience gets introduced to the major players on both sides. The Allies anticipate coming action, and German brass are confused about mixed signals they are getting for the coming day. We can feel the building anticipation, smell the stormy seas, and lose our bearings in the night drops. British paratroopers' seizure of the Pegasus bridge, led by Major John Howard (Todd), is a well-staged set-piece. Howard achieves his simple orders, which he keeps repeating in his head: "hold until relieved, hold until relieved." The French Resistance blow up the tracks as a train nears a railroad bridge, and a French Resistance woman (Irina Demick) wrestles a German soldier into a creek in hand-to-hand combat, before he is shot by one of the woman's teammates. Also exciting is the end-of-movie

U.S. breakthrough on Omaha Beach, as General Norman Cota (Mitchum) organizes use of bangalore torpedoes to clear beach obstacles and leads his men to storm the concrete pillboxes above.

British war movies from the 1940s to 1960s often present war as a salve to a class-based society, as working-class lads pull together under upper-class officers to bring off vital missions. The best films show British technical and tactical prowess in the war's most sensitive operations. *Dam Busters* (1955), starring Todd, Michael Redgrave, and Basil Sydney, outlines Bomber Command's use of "bouncing bombs" dropped from Lancaster bombers to destroy Western German dams and thereby damage industrial production. Two films highlight the Royal Navy. *The Battle of the River Plate* (1956), with Anthony Quayle and John Gregson, shows the British task force that tracked down and beat the German pocket battleship *Graf Spee* early in the war. *Sink the Bismarck* (1960), acted by More, Laurence Naismith, and Dana Wynter, details the Royal Navy's hunt for and destruction of Germany's greatest battleship in 1941.

The fictional *633 Squadron* (1964), produced by the workhorse war film studio Mirisch Productions, centers on a Mosquito light bomber squadron that goes after a German rocket fuel plant in Norway. It stars Cliff Robertson as a Canadian who serves as squadron leader. The film influenced George Lucas's staging of the attack on the Death Star in the first *Star Wars* movie. All the squadron gets shot down, but their mission succeeds and theirs is an admirable sacrifice. Air Vice-Marshal Davis (Harry Andrews) concludes at the end, "you can't kill a squadron." The climax of British pro-war films is *Battle of Britain* (1969), directed by Guy Hamilton and acted by an all-star British cast, including Michael Caine, Ian McShane, Susannah York, and Trevor Howard, along with Christopher Plummer, the lone Canadian. It focuses on "the few," the brave British, Commonwealth, and European pilots flying Hurricanes and Spitfires, who thwarted air attacks and so staved off German invasion of the British Isles after the fall of France in 1940. Like *The Longest Day*, it gives us earnest but clueless Germans on the other side. It includes some of the most spectacular air battle photography ever filmed and effectively deploys the German-built aircraft of the Franco era Spanish air force.

One of my favorite movies from this period is the French film *Is Paris Burning?* (1966), directed by Rene Clement and lifted from the eponymous Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre history of the August, 1944 Liberation of Paris. The cast is a virtual Who's Who of 1960s French actors, along with a few Americans. Maurice Jarre's score is evocative and jaunty, and the theme song, "Paris Smiles," is among the loveliest odes to the French capital. The film captures the elan and spirit of French political and Resistance leaders who sought to free their city before the retreating Germans could carry out Hitler's

orders to destroy it. Parisians learn that the Allies plan to bypass the city. French Gaullists want to take no immediate action, but Communists force the issue by initiating a popular street rebellion. As French take over key buildings, Germans begin to rig explosives at Parisian landmarks. Gaullist leader Jacques Chaban-Delmas (Alain Delon) goes over to the Allies to request help. Francophile General George S. Patton (Kirk Douglas) allows a Free French armored division to enter the city, assisted by American units. German commander Dietrich von Choltitz (Gert Frobe), realizing that destruction will not help the German cause, refuses Hitler's orders and surrenders.

Is Paris Burning? emphasized French dedication to recovering their freedom. It came out three years before the groundbreaking documentary, *The Sorrow and the Pity*, which caused a sensation and sparked heated debates on the behavior of the French during the German occupation. It noted the heavy collaboration between the Vichy puppet government and the Nazis, fueled by a mix of Antisemitism, Anti-Communist thinking, and anti-British sentiment. Many French were content to go along with the occupation, so that their lives would not be disrupted.

The Battle of the Bulge (1965) is another big budget movie with a huge international cast. Unlike *Battleground* and *The Longest Day*, it veers far from the historical record, focusing on the mirror obsessions of German tank colonel Martin Hessler (Robert Shaw, relying on a German accent that needs some work) and American Lt. Col. Daniel Kiley (Henry Fonda). Hessler, based on SS Colonel and war criminal Joachim Peiper, wants to break the Americans' will and keep the German war effort going indefinitely. Kiley, echoing the real Col. Ben "Monk" Dickson, predicts the attack and struggles to get his superiors to do something when it comes. My dad joked that this filmed effort should have been titled, "How Henry Fonda Won the Battle of the Bulge." Virtually every period or battle detail is wrong or off-the-mark, the story concentrates on only one sector of the battle, and it plays up quirky supporting characters such as U.S. tank commander and black marketeer Sergeant Guffy (Telly Savalas). More credible are James MacArthur as a lieutenant who panics early in the fighting, but then finds the courage to lead a rag-tag group of lost soldiers, and Charles Bronson as a captured major who challenges Hessler to treat American prisoners according to the Geneva Convention.

Hollywood continued to make pro-war movies, even as the Vietnam War became unpopular, though studios saw diminishing returns for these stories. One of the last big hit World War II films during the Vietnam War was Franklin J. Schaffner's *Patton* (1969), from a screenplay by Francis Ford Coppola and based on a biography by Ladislav Farago. It relates General George Patton's experience leading the U.S. Seventh and Third Armies in the European Theater. George C. Scott earned a Best Actor Oscar—which

he controversially declined—as Old Blood and Guts (“our blood, his guts,” as one soldier puts it). Outstanding supporting players include Karl Malden as General Omar Bradley, Michael Bates as Field Marshall Bernard Montgomery, and Edward Binns as Ike’s Number 2, General Walter Bedell Smith. Curiously, Ike himself does not appear in the story.

The movie peers into Patton’s head and psycho-analyzes his drive and strategic ambitions: his belief in reincarnation and feeling that he has lived countless lives as glorious military commanders, his impatience to achieve victory in the greatest war in history, his over-emphasis on honor and discipline that makes him insensitive to the lives of his soldiers, his difficulty in cultivating political allies, and his inability to control his public outbursts. One of the best scenes has Bradley calling for Third Army to slow down its advance across France, to which Patton objects and asks why Bradley picked him. “I didn’t pick you,” explodes the usually unflappable Bradley, “Ike picked you . . . George, you’re a pain in the neck.”

By deconstructing one of the war’s great generals, *Patton* might be classified in the ambiguous category below, but many viewers felt that the story was pro-war. Despite Patton’s weirdness, the movie suggests that the cause is still just, Germany needs to be defeated, and his men grudgingly respect him. If hard-charging George Patton can win faster than anyone else, so be it. One viewer reportedly was so inspired by the movie that he ordered an invasion of a country as a result. President Nixon’s Cambodian incursion to interrupt North Vietnamese supply of their forces (April–July 1970) came weeks after watching the film at the White House. The movie was beloved on the right and disdained on the left and in the antiwar movement. Some in the audience may have yearned for the relative strategic simplicity of World War II and wished for a Patton that could quickly win in Indochina. After Vietnam, critics reassessed *Patton* as one of the best war films ever.

Tora! Tora! Tora! (1970) was not as well received as *Patton*. It is a painstakingly accurate rendering of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December, 1941. Employing a docu-drama approach like *The Longest Day*, it had two directors—American and Japanese—and an international cast. The movie was popular in Japan but suffered disappointing box office in America. Some critics found the movie plodding and boring, but historians and TV audiences ever since have appreciated its attention to detail and verisimilitude. To be sure, the film spends too much time laying out all the missed signs and fouled communications on the American side, but the Pearl Harbor attack scenes are well staged. I liked Martin Balsam as Admiral Husband Kimmel, Pacific Fleet commander, a tragic figure who received insufficient information from Washington. I am impressed with the Japanese scenes, as they illustrate the dedication, professionalism, and camaraderie of the Imperial Navy—at least at the beginning of the conflict. Many Japanese doubtless saw this as

recognition of them by Americans as worthy foes. In the end, both Americans and Japanese come off as ennobled by the fight: the Japanese by pulling off such as complex operation, and the Americans by learning to fight back.

The real attack left many Americans angry that the Pacific Fleet had been left so vulnerable and capital ships easily destroyed, and the fallout and conspiracy theories surrounding the incident became an issue in the 1944 presidential election. For Japan, the surprise attack became one of history's greatest strategic blunders. By carrying out a seemingly unprovoked surprise attack and uniting Americans against it, there was virtually no way a country with a small industrial base like Japan could defeat the Arsenal of Democracy that the U.S. became. As architect of the attack Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto may have said—and actually states to his staff at the end of the film—“I fear all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant and fill him with a terrible resolve.”

In any case, *Tora! Tora! Tora!* is much better than the dawn-of-the-millennium big budget soaper *Pearl Harbor* (2001), directed by Michael Bay. This one is essentially a love triangle involving two friends and the Navy nurse that, due to circumstances, both come to love. Rafe McCawley (Ben Affleck) and Danny Walker (Josh Hartnett) grow up together in Tennessee, sharing a passion for flight. Both join the Army Air Corps, but Rafe gets accepted into the British Eagle Squadron, made up of Americans. This did not happen, as Eagle pilots were mostly civilians. Before leaving, Rafe falls in love with nurse Lt. Evelyn Johnson (Kate Beckinsale). He is assumed killed when his plane gets shot down over the English Channel, and Danny starts a relationship with Evelyn, the two making out for the first time under billowing parachutes. My, how symbolic. Rafe escapes occupied France and shows up in Hawaii one day before the Japanese attack. By now, the movie is pretty high on the implausibility chart.

It goes downhill after the attack. To be sure, the battle sequences are spectacularly filmed, most notably the explosion of the USS *Arizona* and the capsizing of the USS *Oklahoma*. But even more ridiculous than the phony romance are the historical whoppers contained in the film. Admiral Kimmel (Colm Feore), controversially removed from command for not properly preparing for the attack, comes across as a hands-on hero. President Roosevelt (John Voight heavily made up) demands an immediate attack on Japan the next day, which did not happen. He then calls attention to his disability, which he almost never did. Rafe and Danny take the place of two real Air Corps pilots who shot down several Japanese aircraft. The two men join the Doolittle raid on Tokyo and Yokohama in 1942, though no Pearl Harbor pilots were included in that mission. In fact, Rafe accomplishes a unique air war trifecta: the Eagle Squadron, Pearl Harbor, and the Doolittle raid. The movie got many other Tokyo raid details wrong, too, but enough said.

The World War II subgenre had exhausted itself by the late 1960s, and few movies dealt with Vietnam at all. Wayne wanted to make a pro-war film about Vietnam. Inspired by the stories of Army Special Forces in Vietnam's highlands, he co-directed and starred in *The Green Berets* (1968). Releasing the movie in the year of the Tet Offensive, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, and mass protests at college campuses, was not opportune. Critics across the board panned the movie as simplistic, insincere, phony, and a Western disguised as a war movie. A set-piece siege of a forward base camp has the whiff of *Alamo 2.0*. In part because of protests against it, the movie generated curiosity and had strong box office returns. Wayne said that he was pleased, but he never made another war movie.

There were few excellent pro-war movies in the immediate aftermath of Vietnam. *Midway* (1976) is a serviceable all-star rendering of the June, 1942 air-naval battle, turning point of the war in the Pacific. It has become a staple of late-night TV and movie channels. This battle resulted in sinking of four Japanese aircraft carriers and a cruiser, to only one aircraft carrier and a destroyer on the U.S. side. I particularly liked James Shigeta as Admiral Chuichi Nagumo, commander of the Japanese aircraft carrier taskforce. He reflects both supreme confidence going into the battle and crippling confusion as it gets underway. Hal Holbrook is great as Commander Joe Rochefort, who heads the code breaking team that determine that Midway will be the Japanese target. Henry Fonda is calm and steady as Admiral Chester Nimitz, commander of the Pacific Fleet. The story gets a few command and battle details wrong, but the biggest issues are in production and script. To save expenses, director Jack Smight and his crew make extensive use of war combat footage, along with stock scenes from *Tora! Tora! Tora!* The problem is that most of the war film was from the latter stage of the conflict and depicts aircraft and aircraft carriers that were not in service in 1942. Some pilots appear to change planes in mid-flight, and Ensign George Gay, a pilot who survived the battle, crashes into the sea in a different type of plane than he flies on his torpedo run.

The second problem is the underwhelming soap opera at the heart of the movie. Fictional Captain Matt Garth (Charlton Heston) is a utility man who starts as staffer for Admiral Nimitz and gets assigned as officer on the USS *Yorktown*. But he is preoccupied with his son Lt. Tom Garth (Edward Albert), who wants to get his Japanese American girlfriend Haruko Sakura (Christina Okubo) and her parents released from detention as security threats. Captain Garth succeeds by calling in favors, at potential damage to his career. After *Yorktown* is seriously damaged in a Japanese attack, he is asked to fly a Dauntless dive bomber, joining others to go after the remaining fourth Japanese carrier. Of course, he drops the fatal bomb on the carrier. Returning to the USS *Enterprise*, his shot-up craft crashes in a fireball, killing him

instantly. This probably would not have happened, as his plane would have been low on fuel. One TV version of the film adds more context, with Matt's affair with Ann, a woman played by Susan Sullivan. This helps make sense of Matt's divorce from Tom's mother and underlines the tragedy of Matt's loss in the battle. That version also includes a sequence on the Battle of the Coral Sea, a pivotal struggle that preceded Midway.

Roland Emmerich remade *Midway* as a big-budget film in 2019. It got more history right and gave more historical context to the battle than the 1976 movie. It also used computer graphics to depict mostly correct aircraft but suffered from a pedestrian script and thin character development. The soap opera elements are replaced by navy wives who are worried about their husbands. Admiral Yamamoto makes the "sleeping giant" remark to his wife, not to his staff.

"MADNESS! MADNESS!": FICTIONAL WAR AMBIGUITY

Like pro-war films, ambiguous movies acknowledge that a war may be a worthy cause, but play up the negative consequences, especially to individual soldiers and civilians. Key characters start and remain cynical about the war and, especially, the military. Gung-ho or martinet characters come off badly, and often meet bad ends or are forced to reassess the war. Especially during the early postwar era of good feelings about World War II, films could not directly attack the war effort. As time went on, movie directors and screenwriters felt more freedom to explore negative aspects of the Good War or consider all sides of other conflicts. As with many pro-war movies, typical ambiguous war films examine how individuals behave under stress. They may contain similar tropes of unity, romance (though more often thwarted by events), and baptism by fire, but the effects are usually more awful—and more characters die. Ambiguous movies also include stories on the home front, narratives about war critics, or tales that involve little to no fighting.

One of Hollywood's greatest war films was not about the war, but how veterans adapted fitfully to peace. *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), directed by William Wyler, is considered one of the best films of its time, and it won Seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture. Wyler's innovative use of deep focus to show contrasting actions expands on Orson Welles's camera framing in *Citizen Kane*. The movie follows three veterans who return together to the fictional Boone City, somewhere in the Midwest: bomber navigator Fred Derry (Dana Andrews), navy petty officer Homer Parrish (Harold Russell), and Army sergeant Al Stephenson (Frederic March). The opening scene is among the most effective, as the three vets share an unstated

bond among them, talk lightly about their experiences, but grow tired as their plane approaches the city. Each one's face shows a mixture of anticipation and dread of the future.

Fred suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) nightmares and flashbacks, and he has few job prospects, disappointing his party animal wife Marie (Virginia Mayo). He has no choice but to return to his prewar work as a soda jerk. Homer lost both hands in the war and must adapt to his disabled condition, and thus is unsure whether to marry his sweetheart Wilma (Cathy O'Donnell). Al turns to the bottle to deal with his demons and becomes cynical about the business of banking. His drinking causes tension with his patient wife Milly (Myrna Loy).

Marie gives the movie its ironic title, when she complains to Fred that she has given him "the best years of my life" and received little in return. She leaves Fred to enjoy her life, and Fred begins a tentative relationship with Al's daughter Peggy (Teresa Wright). This angers Al, who demands that Fred break it off, as he is still married. Fred agrees, and makes plans to leave Boone City. At a boneyard near the airport, he offers to work for the junk contractor scrapping bombers, who is also a vet. By sheer dumb luck, he starts a new career. Homer talks forthrightly with Wilma about his disability, and the couple decide to marry. Months later, at Homer's wedding, the now divorced Fred meets Peggy again and two share a kiss as they look forward to a life together.

The film becomes a template of sorts for all future filmic yarns about war veterans: the psychological difficulties of readjusting to peacetime, the challenges of finding adequate employment, families' and loved ones' lack of understanding of the veterans' wartime experiences, the terror of PTSD, and the marriages broken by long separation and lack of patience. More importantly, *Best Years* illustrates civilians' failure to appreciate what veterans have done, and even to disdain their service. Fred loses his job when he punches a customer who has made light of Homer's disabilities and suggested that veterans were suckers. In the end, only veterans can really understand each other, as we see in several scenes. The film is also noteworthy as one of the first to deal with the challenges facing disabled vets. Russell was a non-professional actor who had lost his hands while an Army demolitions trainer during the war. He was awarded both the Best Supporting Actor Oscar and a special academy award in 1947.

The Caine Mutiny (1954) was unusual in depicting a mutiny aboard a U.S. Navy ship, as the Navy claims that there never has been a mutiny on one of their vessels. After over a year of negotiations, the Navy agreed to cooperate in filming. Directed by film noir veteran Edward Dmytryk and taken from a Herman Wouk novel, the story centers on a minesweeper crew's reaction to an unstable captain, Lt. Commander Philip Queeg (Humphrey Bogart).

Second-in-command Lt. Steve Maryk (Van Johnson again) is concerned with the captain's odd behavior and is encouraged by Lt. Tom Keefer (Fred MacMurray) to take action. These are some of the most powerful performances by all three actors, especially Bogie's iconic, bizarre Queeg, mimicked by a thousand impressionists.

During a typhoon, Maryk urges maneuvering out of the wind but, having received no orders to move at will, the captain refuses. The lieutenant relieves Queeg and then stabilizes the ship. Back at Pearl Harbor, Maryk is put on trial for mutiny. Keefer refuses to support him, lying under oath that he did not think Queeg was unstable and did not encourage Maryk. Cross-examining Queeg, Maryk's defense attorney Barney Greenwald (Jose Ferrer) forces the captain to display neurotic behavior, as he rolls metal balls in his hand and obsesses about counting of the ship's strawberries. The lieutenant is acquitted. At a celebratory party, a drunk Greenwald blames Keefer as the "author" of the entire incident and throws a drink in his face. He says he will be outside if Keefer wants "to do anything about it." He then leaves, followed by the others. Keefer is left alone, ashamedly wiping the drink off his face.

This story is hardly noble or heroic, and no one comes off looking well. Only a young officer who supported Maryk, Willie Keith (Robert Francis), seems to have learned anything from the incident. His former pride and arrogance departs as he reports to his next ship, captained by Queeg's predecessor on the *Caine*. The movie was one of the most popular of 1954, but it must have left more than a few Navy veterans uncomfortable. The first time I saw it, I could not help thinking why would the Navy allow such an unbalanced man to serve as captain of one of its ships. Several scandals involving Navy ship captains in the last twenty years make the *Caine* story more plausible today. The film barely avoids tipping over into the antiwar camp, as it still suggests that the war was a just cause.

By the late 1950s, filmmakers felt sufficient distance from the war to question its high costs. David Lean's *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) has gained greatly in stature since its release and is widely regarded as one of the greatest movies of the 1950s. Even at the time, it was both popular and lauded. Like *Best Years*, it won seven Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Actor for Alec Guinness. The story concerns two parallel narratives: the Japanese project to build a railroad bridge in the jungle, and a commando unit's mission to destroy that bridge.

At a Japanese prisoner of war camp in Burma, senior Allied officer Lieutenant Colonel Nicholson (Guinness) refuses to allow his officers to do manual labor on the bridge, citing the Geneva Convention. Camp commander Colonel Saito (Sessue Hayakawa) forces the officers to stand in the hot sun for an entire day, and then puts Nicholson into a hot box as punishment for his continued refusal. Eventually, an exhausted Nicholson sees that working

with the Japanese on the bridge will give his men a purpose and demonstrate superior British ingenuity, and he agrees to cooperate. American Navy Lieutenant Commander Shears (William Holden) is this movie's cynic. He escapes from the camp and gets shot, but Burmese villagers save him. Picked up by the Royal Navy, he enjoys recovery at a military hospital in Ceylon, dating the Allied nurses. British commando Major Warden (Jack Hawkins) asks Shears to join his team as a guide to the bridge, but Shears insists that he does not want to go back. Warden shows Shears proof that he is an enlisted sailor impersonating an officer. Faced with the prospect of being turned over to the U.S. Navy for court martial, he volunteers to join the team. "Good show," enthuses Warden.

Also joining the team is Lieutenant Joyce (Geoffrey Horne), a young Canadian who has never killed in combat. The commandos parachute into the jungle, making their way to the bridge, assisted by five Thais (four women and a village chief). Warden's foot is injured in a fight with a Japanese soldier and he has to be carried. Two of the Thai women share mutual attraction with Shears and Joyce. Allied prisoners finish the wooden bridge, and Nicholson is proud of his men's work. With Saito, he reflects wistfully on his long military career. At night, Shears and Joyce plant explosives under the bridge, but the next morning the river level has fallen, exposing wires to the detonator, manned by Joyce.

In a quick paced set-piece, Nicholson finds the detonator, a hidden Joyce knifes Saito, Shears swims across the river, intending to kill Nicholson but is seriously wounded by Japanese firing from near the bridge. Nicholson suddenly realizes his mistake in helping the Japanese, saying, "what have I done?" Warden uses a small mortar to kill Joyce and Shears, so that they cannot be captured and tortured for information. A mortally wounded Nicholson, stumbles and falls on the detonator, destroying the bridge and the train passing over it. A distraught Warden throws away the mortar, as the Thai women react in horror. The team prepares to leave quickly. Observing the bridge's destruction from a hill, camp doctor Major Cipton (James Donald) exclaims, "Madness! Madness!"

Great cinema it is, but the story differs markedly from actual war experience. Allied prisoners working on the Thai-Burmese railroad were treated much worse than depicted in the film. Essentially worked to death and receiving little food or medical care, they had a low survival rate. They constructed 250 miles of rail line, plus the infamous bridge (actually two bridges: a wooden structure that was replaced by concrete and steel). An Allied officer like Nicholson would probably have been killed by his own men, as prisoners had no intention to help the Japanese any more than necessary to live. The real Lt. Col. Toosey, upon whom Nicholson was based, actively tried to sabotage the bridge's construction. A typical commando crew would have

consisted of more than four Allied personnel. With only four, injury or death of one would have compromised the mission, as Warden's injury almost did (The Bridge, Undated: 1–5).

Movies about secret missions thus are fertile ground for ambiguity, as chances are rife that they could end in disaster. *The Guns of Navarone* (1961), taken from an Alistair MacLean novel and directed by J. Lee Thompson, was one of the biggest movies of the early 1960s. It unites stars Gregory Peck, David Niven, and Anthony Quinn in a thrilling tale of a mission to destroy large German naval guns mounted in caves on the Aegean island of Navarone. The guns are preventing the Royal Navy from rescuing two-thousand troops on a nearby island. This loosely reflects the failed British Dodecanese campaign to pry part of the Aegean away from the Germans in 1943.

A small commando group led by Major Roy Franklin (Anthony Quayle) lands on Navarone. The team includes experienced spy Captain Keith Mallory (Peck), Franklin's friend and explosives expert Corporal Anthony Miller (Niven), and Greek Army Colonel Andrea Stavros (Quinn). Miller is the designated military cynic, who would prefer to sit out the war as a civilian. Stavros blames Mallory for the deaths of his wife and child. Franklin seriously injures his leg as the team climbs a cliff, and Mallory takes over. The team meets with local resistance fighter Maria Pappadimos (Irene Pappas) and friend Anna (Gia Scala), who claims that she has been tortured by the Germans.

The team gets chased around the island, is captured but escapes. Mallory leaves Franklin behind but gives him false information so that the Germans will be misled; he says that the operation is a deception and the Allies will land on the opposite end of the island. Anna turns out to be a Nazi double agent, and Maria shoots her because Mallory apparently cannot bring himself to kill a woman to whom he is romantically drawn. The last day, two team members try to distract the Germans, but get killed. Mallory and Miller lock themselves into the gun bay, and Miller plants explosives among the guns' ammunition. The two climb down the cliff to waiting boats. An ammunition elevator triggers a huge explosion, destroying the guns. Andrea decides to stay with Maria, while Mallory and Miller make it to a British ship. The mission has succeeded, but half the team has been killed and the wounded and drugged Franklin may be permanently disabled.

While exciting and fun, this story is complete fiction. Though there is no Navarone, British forces did seize Leros island. There were naval guns aimed at the Royal Navy, but they were nowhere as huge as those depicted in the movie. There was no special commando team sent to destroy those guns. The film resorts to occasional implausibility, especially the frequent near-disasters, escape from German officers, and two supporting characters getting themselves killed in a stand-up machine gun duel in a public square. Stavros's

decision to stay with Maria introduces a feel-good romantic element, while Mallory and Miller set aside their conflict to finish the job (“#93,” 2010: 1–6).

Another costly mission movie is *Tobruk* (1967), starring Rock Hudson, George Peppard, and Nigel Green. It posits a fictional covert mission to destroy a fuel depot at the big German base in the Libyan city of Tobruk in 1942. British special forces commanded by Col. Harker (Green) and including Canadian Major Craig of the British Long Range Desert Group (Hudson) pose as prisoners of war in a truck/half-track convoy going to the city. German Jewish operatives under the command of Capt. Bergman (Peppard) of the Special Identification Group pose as German soldiers. Once inside Tobruk, the group is supposed to find and destroy the depot. They succeed, but most of the team are killed. Craig and few others make their way to the coast and rescue. No such mission occurred, though attempts to sabotage Tobruk failed. The movie is perhaps more notable as a heavy-handed statement against Antisemitism and in favor of Israel’s founding. Bergman says he is not fighting for the Allies, but for the future Israeli state. The three main characters frequently clash with each other and only trust each other once inside Tobruk.

Late 1960s World War II films reacted to Vietnam by trying to present war both ways: the allies mounted heroic campaigns, but stories depicted destruction, exhaustion, and greater cynicism about the whole effort. *Anzio* (1968), directed by Dmytryk and starring Mitchum as a war correspondent and Peter Falk as an Army corporal. It was one of the first movies to present an Allied failure, the botched attempt to land behind the Germans in Italy and collapse the front line in early 1944, and it skewers the incompetence of the generals guiding the operation. Like the pro-war films, it focuses on a group of individual soldiers, only a handful of whom survive to make it to Allied lines.

The Bridge at Remagen (1969), helmed by John Guillermin and starring George Segal, Robert Vaughn and Ben Gazzara, examines a serendipitous event toward the end of the war in Europe, as American forces seize an intact bridge across the Rhine River. For ten days, American forces flood across the bridge before it collapses. Fortunately, hastily constructed pontoon bridges continued to operate. Lt. Phil Hartman (Segal) is weary about the war, clashes with Sgt. Angelo (Gazzara), and has to intervene to prevent troops from molesting a local woman. Germans under Major Krueger (Vaughn) are unable to blow up the bridge and have insufficient men to stop advancing Allied forces. The Americans take control of the bridge but show neither heroism nor joy in their work. Hitler orders Krueger arrested and shot.

By the late 1970s, the West had recovered enough from Vietnam to allow a rousing big budget World War II flick to fill theaters, but producers were not quite ready for a full pro-war film. *A Bridge Too Far* (1977) is Richard Attenborough’s examination of Operation Market Garden, the Allies’ most

spectacular failure. With German forces on the run in September 1944, Field Marshal Montgomery proposes an elaborate thrust forward to quickly seize four bridges and cross the Rhine in the Netherlands. The operation depends on keeping to a strict timetable and goes awry from almost the first moment. Like *The Longest Day*, it is based on a non-fiction book by Cornelius Ryan. It emphasizes little human details, such as Sergeant Eddie Dohun (James Caan) forcing a military doctor (Arthur Hill) at gunpoint to treat his seriously injured captain. The doctor, understanding the sergeant's devotion, puts him under arrest for thirty seconds and then releases him. The story also focuses on officers' failure to communicate intelligence that contradicts the operation's optimistic assumptions. John Addison's jaunty soundtrack gives us Allied anticipation that the operation might lead to the war's end, which shifts to discordant notes as things gradually fall apart.

The movie shows how the operation gradually unravels and, due to faulty intelligence, may have been doomed at the start. It includes an all-star cast of any British or American male actor who was anybody in the late 1970s. The movie's first half outlines the Allied determination to end the just war "by Christmas," as narrated by Liv Ullmann, who also plays Kate ter Horst, a Dutch woman whose house becomes a makeshift hospital. The Allies' enthusiasm is infectious. General Brian Horrocks (Edward Fox) briefs XXX Corps, telling his men they are like the cavalry rushing to rescue the settlers in a Western movie. Lt. Col. Vandeleur (Michael Caine) leads his tanks forward with utter confidence, but he quickly falls behind schedule as resistance grows stronger than expected and the Germans blow up the smallest of the bridges, forcing construction of a pontoon bridge. Delayed delivery of boats to take American airborne units to the third bridge adds more time to the expedition. A paratrooper battalion under Lt. Col. John Frost (Anthony Hopkins) seizes the north end of the Rhine bridge but, after being pummeled for days, is compelled to surrender.

Major General Roy Urquhart (Sean Connery) and the First Airborne Division are forced into a small area west of Arnhem. As XXX Corps decides to stop short of the Rhine, Urquhart withdraws what is left of his men across the river. An exhausted and dirty Urquhart confronts General Frederick Browning (Dirk Bogarde), commander of Allied airborne forces in Market Garden. Browning notes that Monty believes the operation is mostly successful. Urquhart asks Browning what he thinks, to which he replies that he always thought that the operation was going "a bridge too far." While the cause may be just, Browning and those who championed the project are unwilling to take responsibility for an obvious failure.

“THE HORROR! THE HORROR!”: PERENNIAL APPEAL OF ANTIWAR FILMS

It may be hard for audiences to distinguish between pro-war and ambiguous movies, but antiwar films are easily identified. Here, war is not unifying, ennobling, or in service of a worthy cause. Sacrifice does not elevate the group, but usually is pointless and degrading. Cynicism is not for comic relief or intended to bond the group, but is justified by stupid, bureaucratic, or inflexible military leadership. Antiwar films take one of several tacks. First, the war is a horrible experience that destroys those who serve in it. Soldiers are treated unjustly, and voices of reason are not heard. Second, war is unnecessary or wasteful and achieves very little. Pitched battles go on, and neither side wins anything of value. Third, war aims are ghastly or unjust, and conflict results in the needless deaths of many civilians. Fourth, war takes away soldiers' spirit or destroys their bodies, making it difficult for them to function again in civilian life. The war thus extends into life beyond the war and haunts them for the rest of their days.

The grandmother of all antiwar films is *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), adapted from the classic novel of the same name by Erich Maria Remarque and directed by Lewis Milestone. The story is told by protagonist Paul Baumer (Lew Ayres). It follows several teenage boys who, inspired by their nationalistic teacher, Professor Kantorek, join the German Army as World War I begins. The young men begin to lose their romantic illusions about war in basic training, as they are brutalized by Sergeant Himmelstoss. Once at the front, they experience the horrors of war. One by one, they are all terribly wounded, driven mad, or killed. Himmelstoss arrives as a replacement, and the soldiers humiliate him for his cowardice (he then dies going over the top). Paul survives serious wounds, fearing that he will die in the hospital, and takes leave to see his mother. He visits the professor and tells his students about the real war, but they berate him as a coward. He no longer feels part of civilian society and decides to return to the front. Even Paul's grizzled, jaded mentor "Kat" Katzinsky now dies from shrapnel wounds. Just days before the war ends, Paul reaches for a butterfly above the trench but is killed by a sniper.

The first time I read the novel, I was struck by the hopelessness of the major characters. All are destroyed in one way or another by war. The patriotism of the professor is false and hollow. There is no redemption, no class unity, no cleansing baptism of fire, no transformation to meaningful adulthood, and no romance. The novel and movie were popular throughout the Western world and added to public disgust about the recent war. An excellent television version in 1979, starring Richard Thomas as Paul, Borgnine as

Kat, and Donald Pleasance as Prof. Kantorek, adds scenes and details from the novel that did not make it into the 1930 version. These include Paul's and other soldiers' sexual encounters with French girls, Paul's relationship with his mother (Patricia Neal), and more details about the deaths of Paul's friends.

The 1960s auteur Stanley Kubrick contributed four antiwar movies to the canon. The first is *Paths of Glory* (1957). Kirk Douglas plays a World War I French officer, Col. Dax, tasked with defending three soldiers court-martialed for refusing to join a suicidal attack. The trial is a sham, and Dax is not allowed to present evidence that would exonerate the men. In the end, Army brass do not care at all about their soldier's lives. *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) is a black comedy about a nuclear bomber's attack on the Soviet Union, launched by a mentally unstable Air Force general, Jack D. Ripper (Sterling Hayden). The president (Peter Sellers), working with Soviet leaders, tries to thwart the attack, but one bomber gets through, triggering a Soviet doomsday device. *Dr. Strangelove* shows that comedy or satire can be perfect vehicles to express opposition to war. I discuss the movie further in Chapter 7. *Barry Lyndon* (1975), a beautifully and innovatively filmed period drama based on a William Thackeray novel about the rise and fall of the titular scoundrel, Redmond Barry (Ryan O'Neal), presents eighteenth century warfare as brutal, personally destructive, and mindless. *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) is one of the great Vietnam antiwar films discussed below.

The Americanization of Emily (1964) presents a war skeptic, Lieutenant Commander Charlie Madison (James Garner), assistant to an admiral who wants the first person killed during the Normandy landings to be a sailor. Charlie has fallen in love with a British military driver, Emily Barham (Julie Andrews). Charlie goes ashore to film the event but flees. Wounded by a pistol shot by his upset friend Lieutenant Commander "Bus" Cummings (James Coburn), and by German shrapnel, Charlie suddenly finds himself lauded as a hero, instead. He determines to tell the press the truth, even if it means he will be court-martialed. Emily convinces Charlie to go along with the hero story, so that they can be together.

Robert Aldrich's *The Dirty Dozen* (1967) is one of the most entertaining and unusual 1960s war stories. The movie takes a jaundiced view of the military, as the mission team disdain and mock leadership and major characters even question the worth of the war. Col. John Reisman (Lee Marvin) has been tasked by General Sam Worden (Borgnine) to put together a unit of military prisoners—all facing death sentences or long prison terms—to undertake a vital mission. If they survive, they will be pardoned. Twelve prisoners agree to join Reisman but, resentful of authority and not trusting the military, they resist the colonel's discipline. The Dozen include surly Franko (John Cassavetes) who hates the military, psychotic sadist Magott (Savalas), diffident and slightly dull Pinkley (Donald Sutherland), and gentle giant Posey

(Clint Walker). Gradually, the men realize that they share a common purpose and so pull together. Personally humiliated by the Dozen, Col. Everett Breed (Robert Ryan) demands that the team be disbanded. The brass are on the verge of doing so when Major Max Armbruster (George Kennedy) suggests that the Dozen could prove themselves in scheduled war games. Using subterfuge and trickery, they capture Breed's headquarters, demonstrating their mettle.

The Dozen learn that their secret mission is to kill as many German officers as possible at a resort chateau in Brittany, France. Worden hopes that this will disrupt the German chain of command on the eve of the D-Day invasion. As firing breaks out, the German officers and their women companions crowd an underground shelter. The team use incendiary grenades and gasoline to kill the Germans, but only Reisman, his sergeant Bowren (Richard Jaeckel), and one of the team, Joseph Wladislaw (Charles Bronson) survive. Recuperating in the hospital with Reisman, Wladislaw sums up the dozen's attitude toward the military when a general visits and pronounces the mission a success. "Killing generals could get to be a habit with me," he deadpans after the officer leaves. The movie undoubtedly resonated with Americans who were turning against the Vietnam War. This team of anti-heroes scored a popular success in the same year as other anti-social or anti-establishment leading characters in *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Graduate*, and *In the Heat of the Night*.

Robert Altman's *M*A*S*H* (1970) is a satirical antiwar film about the Korean War, but audiences knew that it was really about Vietnam. The anachronistic long hair, droopy mustaches, long sideburns, and granny glasses clearly place the film in the late 1960s, not the early 1950s. Almost anyone in a position of authority or supportive of military order comes across as stupid or deluded. The war is out of sight and pointless, even though the MASH unit is near the front. The 4077th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (MASH) performs battlefield surgery, patching up soldiers mindlessly maimed in the conflict. Capt. "Trapper John" McIntyre (Elliott Gould), Capt. "Hawkeye" Pierce (Sutherland) and Capt. "Duke" Forrest (Tom Skerritt) are excellent doctors but as draftees disdain the military. They spend much of their time playing practical jokes, drinking heavily, and bedding the nurses.

MASH commander Lt. Col. Henry Blake (Roger Bowen) is a weak and confused leader who finds making decisions difficult. Trapper John and Hawkeye meet their nemesis in Major Frank Burns (Robert Duvall), an incompetent career Army doctor and lover of military discipline. Burns begins an affair with strait-laced nurse "Hot Lips" Houlihan (Sally Kellerman), but Trapper John finds a way to broadcast their tryst to the whole camp. Hawkeye later provokes a fight with Frank, who is removed from the camp for psychiatric examination. The doctors arrange a football game with another MASH unit, but cheat by using a former professional football player to win. And on it goes . . .

*M*A*S*H* on television became one of the most popular sitcoms of the 1970s–1980s, running for eleven seasons. Starting as a run-of-the-mill comedy show, it developed greater depth as it morphed into one of the first “dramedies” on American TV. The producers managed to gradually sideline the laugh track, and script writers took on serious wartime topics, including battlefield wounds as experienced by the soldiers, problems encountered by Korean refugees, mental illness faced by personnel in wartime situations, and sudden death of friends in the war theater. It also addressed key social issues of the time, such as behavior of bureaucratic organizations, gender discrimination, gay rights, and alcoholism. The change in tone was driven in part by star Alan Alda (“Hawkeye” Pierce), who took a bigger role in production and demanded more meaningful scripts. The series finale in 1983 was the highest rated American TV show until 2010 (MASH [TV series]), Undated: 1–6).

By the 1980s, even the Good War became fodder for antiwar movies. The great German antiwar film *Das Boot* (The Boat, 1981) examines life aboard one of Nazi Germany’s famed U-boats (submarines) that prowled the Atlantic and sank countless Allied merchant ships. Directed by Wolfgang Petersen and taken from a popular German novel based on actual experiences, the movie recreates the cramped quarters, filth and lack of hygiene, and boredom on long patrols. Each crew member has a distinct personality type. Lt. Werner (Herbert Gronemeyer) is a dedicated war correspondent tasked with reporting on the crew’s heroics, and the story is told largely through his eyes. The captain (Jurgen Prochnow) is the oldest man in the crew, a veteran of several voyages who cares about his crew and holds their respect. He is openly critical of the war effort. The chief engineer is second oldest and worries about his wife who lives in Cologne, which recently has been bombed. The first watch officer is a young, dedicated Nazi and stickler for procedures, making the captain skeptical of him. “Ghost,” the chief mechanic who operates the engines alone, is a reclusive man who hardly talks to anyone.

The crew suffer much tedium on their Atlantic trek, undergo frequent depth charges attacks, and only see short action against an Allied convoy. In one of the more heartrending scenes, the boat sinks a flaming tanker, not knowing the crew have not been rescued, and then back away as British sailors swim toward the U-boat. Arriving at the Spanish port of Vigo for resupply, the captain is ordered to transit the Gibraltar Strait and go to Italy. Severely depth-charged and nearly sunk near Gibraltar, the crew manage to repair the boat and resurface, making their way back to their French base. Just as they arrive, British planes attack, killing or wounding several of the crew. The dying captain watches the boat sink outside the sub pens, as Werner collapses in tears beside him. In the end, the boat wins no victories, they accomplish almost nothing, and death stalks the whole crew.

Soviet director Elim Klimov's *Come and See* (1985) is a searing examination of Soviet partisans' war against Germany, and Germans' destruction of Belorussian villages. Combining hyper-realism with fairytale-like images, the film focuses on one adolescent boy, Flyora (Aleksei Kravchenko). He digs up an old rifle and gets conscripted from his village into the partisans. Left behind as the partisans go on a raid, he bonds with Glasha (Olga Mironova), an adolescent girl who works as a partisan nurse. German aircraft bomb the base, and the two flee to the boy's home. His village is now abandoned, but the young man refuses to believe that they have been killed. The two plunge into a bog, slogging their way to an island where some villagers have escaped, but Flyora's mother and siblings are not among them. After meeting a burned village elder, Flyora realizes that his family is dead and blames himself for bringing on the disaster (a German observation plane may have seen him digging up the rifle). Seeking food for the people on the island, Flyora ends up in a village called Perekhody, just as an SS detachment arrives.

There follows one of the most devastating war film sequences, a twenty-minute assault on the audience as a SS unit systematically murder almost everyone in the village. Women and children are herded into the village church, and men with some women are placed in another building. German soldiers then throw gasoline and incendiary grenades into the buildings, as the people shriek and scream. Other soldiers use flamethrowers against the buildings or shoot into the structures. Flyora escapes the church just before it is fired; soldiers toy with him, photographing him with a gun to his head before leaving him on the ground. A girl resembling Glasha is taken by soldiers in a truck and gang-raped.

The partisans then capture some of the German soldiers and their collaborators. Some plead for their lives, while others are proud of their work. Enraged villagers shoot all the Germans. Flyora finds a discarded Hitler poster on the ground, shooting it numerous times as the audience sees film of Hitler running backward to a photo of the Fuhrer and his mother, at which point Flyora stops. A title card notes that German detachments destroyed 628 Belorussian villages. Flyora rejoins the partisans as they move to a new base in the forest.

THE SMELL OF NAPALM IN THE MORNING: DRUGS, ROCK 'N ROLL, RUINED LIVES

The first twenty years of the post-Vietnam era was the most fruitful time for American antiwar films. Just as audiences in the 1940s–1950s wanted positive images of GIs fighting the good fight, viewers in the 1970s–1980s expected

negative images of the Vietnamese conflict. A majority of Americans by the mid-1970s felt that the war was unjust, unnecessary, and wasteful, and too many people had died on both sides. These films play up the senselessness, personal destruction, and horror of the endless war. There is little to no romance, idealism gets ground into the dirt, and even ostensibly good people do terrible deeds. Pop culture, especially recreational drug use and blaring rock 'n roll or R&B music, appears prominently. This emphasizes how divorced American soldiers and Marines were from Vietnam and its people—and demonstrates their yearning to go home. Death permeates the films set in Vietnam, while disillusionment, hopelessness, and resort to violence are common themes in movies taking place on the home front or focusing on veterans.

Like *The Best Years of Our Lives*, some of the earliest post-Vietnam movies confronted veterans' difficulties readjusting to life at home. The struggles of *Best Years* vets are nothing like the awful homecoming that greets these soldiers. *Rolling Thunder* (1977), a low budget movie that made a pile of money, centers on Major Charles Rane (William Devane), a former POW returning to his home in Texas, accompanied by his friend Sergeant Johnny Vohden (Tommy Lee Jones). Rane's wife, instead of being happy to see him, wants to marry a local man. The town gives Rane a Cadillac and a collection of silver coins to commemorate his time as a POW. When he returns home, four thugs invade the house, demanding the coins. He refuses and the thugs torture him, forcing his arm down a garbage disposal. His wife and son return home and are immediately kidnapped. The boy gives the coins to the criminals, but they at once shoot Rane and his family. Only the major survives.

Recuperating in the hospital, Rane asks Vohden to join him in revenge against the thugs. Rane's new romantic interest Linda Forchet (Linda Haynes) tries to dissuade him, but she accepts that he is committed to his course of action. The two buddies trace the bad men to a border town brothel, and they kill all of them. The wounded vets hobble out of the brothel, supporting each other. Their fate is uncertain. This is not at all like World War II vet Fred Derry getting fired from his job and wondering what he will do with his life. Here, veterans are both brutalized and become criminals themselves. The only way to redeem their lives is to kill all those who have victimized them. Still, any redemption seems hollow and pointless. The image of Vietnam veterans as dangerous and crazy got established early in such movies and TV shows, and it was not until the 1990s that more positive stories began to appear, such as *Forrest Gump* and TV's *Walker, Texas Ranger* (1993–2001)

Coming Home (1978), directed by Hal Ashby, is a bigger movie boasting stars Jane Fonda, Jon Voight, and Bruce Dern. Sally (Fonda) and Bob Hyde (Dern) are a military couple. He welcomes an assignment to Vietnam, as it will advance his career. Sally dreads being apart but gradually embraces her

freedom. She volunteers to work at a veteran's hospital and meets an old classmate, Luke Martin (Voight), a paraplegic wounded in Vietnam who is angry about how his life has turned. Luke and Sally strike up a friendship, which makes Luke more positive as he prepares to leave the hospital and resume his life. Luke's friend and vet Billy is unable to overcome his difficulties and commits suicide. Eventually, Luke and Sally become lovers, but they know that they will have to part when Bob comes home. Luke protests the war at a recruiting station, chaining himself to its gates.

Bob returns earlier than expected, suffering from PTSD and flashbacks. He learns from military intelligence about Sally's affair with Luke, who has been surveilled since the recruiting station incident. Bob loads a rifle and confronts the two, but Luke convinces him not to shoot. "I'm not the enemy. Maybe the enemy is the f—ing war. But, you don't want to kill anybody here. You have enough ghosts to carry around," he tells Bob. As the movie ends, Luke gives a talk on the war to a group of young men, while Bob folds his Marine uniform and walks naked into the ocean to kill himself. Like *Rolling Thunder*, this goes way beyond World War II vet flicks, as two major characters commit suicide and another barely pulls himself together.

Rambo: First Blood (1982) features Sylvester Stallone as decorated Green Beret John Rambo, who reacts violently to abuse by local sheriff's deputies in a small town in Washington state. After torture and an attempt to dry shave him, he fights his way out of the police station and flees into the woods. Sheriff Will Teasle (Brian Dennehy) pursues him, convinced that one man cannot hold out against a full manhunt. Rambo's mentor Sam Trautman (Richard Crenna) arrives, telling Teasle that this vet can use his combat and survival skills to outwit any police. In the end, Rambo nearly kills Teasle, but Trautman convinces his former soldier to let him go. Rambo breaks down in tears about all his friends killed in Vietnam and his anguish about the antiwar protests as he returned from the war. He cries,

Nothing is over! Nothing! You just don't turn it off! It wasn't my war! You asked me, I didn't ask you! And I did what I had to do to win! But somebody wouldn't let us win! And I come back to the world and I see all those maggots at the airport, protesting me, spitting. Calling me baby killer and all kinds of vile crap! Who are they to protest me? Who are they? Unless they've been me and been there and know what the hell they're yelling about! (Rotten Tomatoes, Undated: 1)

On Trautman's advice, he surrenders to state police. As we see in sequels, Rambo's time in prison only fuels his sense of grievance against military leaders and bureaucrats.

That first Rambo movie helped cement the conservative insistence that soldiers in Vietnam were prevented from winning the war, and antiwar protesters were scum for challenging the heroes who came home. The Rambo franchise by 2019 encompasses five quite violent films. The second through fourth films find Rambo pursuing enemies in Asia: Vietnamese holding American prisoners after the war (the biggest movie to advance that false narrative), Soviets in Afghanistan, and the Burmese military. In the fifth movie, *Last Blood*, Rambo fights Mexican drug cartels that have abducted and trafficked his daughter. He rescues her, but she dies on the trip home. He beheads the man who drugged and cut her up, and then prepares his farm as a death trap for the cartel's soldiers, killing all of them and their leader. These movies gradually move away from the aggrieved vet narrative, and please audiences with their violent escapism and American triumphalist catharsis. During the Reagan years, conservatives welcomed comparisons between the fortieth president and Rambo, going so far as to create a poster with Reagan's head on Rambo's body, calling the hybrid Ronbo. The fifth movie reflects popular American fears about the current state of Mexico as a cesspool of drug cartel influence and control.

The Deer Hunter (1978), directed by Michael Cimino, examines the home front, the war, and veterans' difficulties readjusting to civilian life. The movie received both critical acclaim and various awards, including Academy Awards for Best Picture and Best Director. It centers on three Russian American steelworkers from Pennsylvania who enjoy hunting on weekends: Mike Vronsky (Robert De Niro), Nick Chevotarevich (Christopher Walken) and Steve Pushkov (John Savage). Both Mike and Nick are in love with Linda (Meryl Streep, in only her second movie). The lavish wedding of Steve with his fiancé Angela has been compared to *The Godfather's* wedding scene. It establishes the three men's friendships and their awkward working-class ways. The friends join the Army and go to Vietnam together. Improbably reunited on the battlefield, they get captured by the Viet Cong and are forced to play a deadly game of Russian roulette. Steve is seriously wounded as they escape, eventually losing both legs and an arm. Nick's mind has been affected by the experience, and he opts to stay in Vietnam, where he later deserts and drifts into the gambling underworld (Lair, 2020: 237–239).

Returning home, Mike cannot interact with friends who have not experienced war. He skips a welcome home party and on a hunting outing can no longer shoot a deer. He learns that Steve has been receiving money from Vietnam, and suspects Nick is sending it. He goes back to Saigon, where he finds that Nick has become a heroin addict and plays Russian roulette to earn money. Mike tries to convince Nick to leave with him, and offers to sacrifice himself to save his friend, but only elicits slight recognition before

Nick shoots himself. Back in Pennsylvania, the remaining friends join Mike to bury Nick, later singing “God Bless America” for him at a local restaurant.

This film is a powerful drama and captures well the differences between civilian life and the horror of war. But, in using the artificial and completely fictional device of Russian roulette competitions, it does not address the real experiences of soldiers in the field or veterans recovering from war. Nick’s descent into addiction, madness and suicide games is never adequately explained, nor is Mike’s difficulty in interacting with people at home. If Mike, Nick, and Steve only had the one brief terrible experience of being held captive, would it be enough to destroy their lives? Steve’s loss of limbs puts him in the same camp as millions of disabled vets, and so his experience seems the most authentic.

The movie is also profoundly conservative. It follows the 1980s right-wing trope that, though Americans make good soldiers and wanted to serve their country, they were not allowed to win in Vietnam. The working class of Clairton support the war effort, and the town willingly sends its sons to fight. The four young men volunteer for the Army, belying the reality that most who served on the frontline were drafted. When Mike visits Steve in the VA Hospital, it is clean, well-staffed, with World War II vets serving as volunteers. This ignores persistent news reports throughout the war’s latter years that military hospitals were filthy, understaffed with indifferent personnel, and vets were allowed to languish without adequate treatment. *The Deer Hunter*, notes Lair, thus is a “subtle exercise in national absolution” (Lair, 2020: 237–241).

Apocalypse Now (1979), Francis Ford Coppola’s passion project, will always be one of the greatest antiwar films. Like *The Deer Hunter*, it is based on artifice, in this case adaptation of Joseph Conrad’s nineteenth century novel, *Heart of Darkness*, and placing it in Vietnam. Captain Ben Willard (Martin Sheen) is an assassin on a downward personal spiral. Ordered to regional Army command in Nha Trang, he is given an assignment to “terminate . . . with extreme prejudice” (or kill) Col. Walter Kurtz (Brando), who has gone rogue and set up his own “kingdom” inside Cambodia. Willard is given use of a Navy patrol craft that will take him up a river to Cambodia, with a crew of four: Chief Phillips (Albert Hall), “Chef” Hicks (Frederic Forrest), Lance Johnson (Sam Bottoms), and “Mr. Clean” Miller (Laurence Fishburne). Before they enter the river, a Viet Cong-held village needs to be cleared by an Air Cavalry unit commanded by Col. Bill Kilgore (Duvall). As the boat makes its way up the river, Willard and the crew find increasing danger but decreasing levels of U.S. control. The Chief and Clean are killed along the way, leaving only Chef and Lance to accompany Willard.

Reaching Kurtz’s compound amid the Montagnard people, Willard and Lance search for Kurtz but are tied up and put in cages. A crazed

photojournalist (Dennis Hopper) praises Kurtz to Willard. Willard had instructed Chef to call in an air strike if they did not return, but Chef is decapitated to prevent radio contact. Kurtz frees Willard and explains his ideas about the war. He says he admires the purity of thought shown by the Communists. He relates a horrific story of Viet Cong retaliation for a Green Beret inoculation program:

I remember when I was with Special Forces. Seems a thousand centuries ago. We went into a camp to inoculate the children. We left the camp after we had inoculated the children for polio, and this old man came running after us and he was crying. He couldn't see. We went back there and they had come and hacked off every inoculated arm. There they were in a pile: a pile of little arms. And I remember I . . . I . . . I cried. I wept like some grandmother. I wanted to tear my teeth out. I didn't know what I wanted to do. And I want to remember it. I never want to forget it . . . And then I realized, like I was shot—like I was shot with a diamond . . . a diamond bullet right through my forehead. And I thought: My God, the genius of that. The genius! The will to do that: perfect, genuine, complete, crystalline, pure. And then I realized they were stronger than we, because they could stand it. These were not monsters. These were men, trained cadres—these men who fought with their hearts, who had families, who have children, who are filled with love—but they had the strength—the strength—to do that. If I had ten divisions of those men our troubles here would be over very quickly. You have to have men who are moral and at the same time who are able to utilize their primordial instincts to kill without feeling, without passion, without judgment. Without judgment. Because it's judgment that defeats us. (“Apocalypse Now,” Undated: 1–2)

Kurtz knows that Willard is there to kill him, and he asks the captain to tell his son what he tried to do in Vietnam. While the Montagnards ritually slaughter a water buffalo, Willard sneaks into Kurtz's room and attacks him with a machete. As Kurtz dies, he whispers, “The horror . . . the horror.” It is both a recognition of the awfulness of the conflict and an admission of his part in it. Willard collects Kurtz's writings and throws away the machete as the Montagnards bow before him. He leads Lance by hand to the boat and they depart.

Coppola tinkered with his magnum opus and released a version with several added scenes in 2001, *Apocalypse Now Redux*. This version added extra minutes to scenes with Playboy Bunnies on the river, a stop at a French plantation farther up the river, and Kurtz reading articles from *Time* magazine questioning official stories about the war. The French interlude is interesting but overlong, as the plantation patriarch explains that Americans do not understand the war and so will lose it. Willard does not argue with him, and merely seems adrift. The problem with the obviously symbolic scene

is that there were virtually no French people left in Vietnam by the 1960s. *Apocalypse Now Final Cut* (2019) is the original version that Coppola felt came closest to what he originally wanted.

While a truly great piece of cinema, the film is more magical realism than war history. If Willard needed to get up the river quickly, why not just do it by plane or helicopter? No, the boat trip is integral to this journey into darkness. The most powerful antiwar moments arrive when military leaders demonstrate their insanity before the camera, as Willard's voiceover narration questions why such people would have a problem with Kurtz.

The film's most iconic moment is Col. Bill Kilgore's monologue about the war, quoted at nauseum as a touchstone of the war: "I love the smell of napalm in the morning . . . it smells like victory." It illustrates the disconnect between professional military attitudes and the horrible reality on the ground. Kilgore is disappointed that he cannot use the freshly pacified beach for surfing and bizarrely reflects on firebombing of the enemy. Duvall based his characterization on military men he knew growing up, along with officers he met while an actor. The scene also illustrates how little Americans understood Vietnam or Cambodia. Their peoples are exotic threats, to be wiped out in the coastal village or machine gunned in a sampan on the river. None are developed as real people. Everyone in the war zone is on edge, depressed, or crazy. Ironically, the only remaining rational, level-headed person is Kurtz (Phillips, 2020: 1–7).

Platoon (1986) was first of Oliver Stone's Vietnam trilogy, along with *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) and *Heaven and Earth* (1993). Stone based much of this fictional story on his experiences as a soldier in Vietnam in 1967–1968, and he promised an authentic film that would get war details right. The autobiographical figure Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen) is narrator and protagonist. Like Stone, he has joined the Army to experience the war. Though a young lieutenant leads Chris's platoon, two experienced squad sergeants, Barnes (Tom Berenger) and Elias (Willem Dafoe) make most of the decisions. What Chris calls a "civil war" between Barnes and Elias informs much of the film, with soldiers choosing sides. Lair feels that the two-sergeants-in-conflict plot device "advances toward the ridiculous" as the film unfolds (Lair, 2020: 247–248). Barnes is hardened and cynical, with a brutal attitude toward both the war and the soldiers. His face is disfigured from seven previous wounds. Elias is an idealist who cares for his men and smokes dope with them. After the platoon capture a Vietnamese village, Barnes interrogates a village elder about aid to the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). Frustrated with his unresponsiveness, Barnes kills the man's wife. Elias rushes in, yelling at and striking Barnes. Elias informs company captain Harris (Dale Dye), who promises a court-martial if an unauthorized killing took place.

On another patrol, NVA units attack. Elias, Chris, and two other soldiers run interference, with Elias traversing the area near a river. Barnes orders Chris and the others to rejoin the others, while he looks for Elias. He then shoots Elias, leaving him for dead. In an arresting sequence, from helicopters the departing soldiers glimpse a seriously wounded Elias running out of the trees into an open area. They try to circle back, but Elias gets killed before they can help him. Chris assumes that Barnes shot Elias, and back at camp argues for “fragging” (killing) Barnes. Barnes overhears this and challenges the soldiers to kill him. They do not move, Barnes berates them, and then Chris attacks Barnes, who throws him down and draws a knife on the young man. One of Barnes’s followers convinces him to stop; he only cuts Chris below the eye. As he leaves, he taunts Elias’s followers: “Death? What do you know about death?”

A third major action sees an even more serious NVA attack at night. The Army positions are overwhelmed and most of the platoon are killed or wounded. Captain Harris orders air support to dump their ordnance inside his perimeter to stop the attack. A crazed Barnes is about to kill Chris when both are knocked out by the aerial bombardment. Waking up the next morning bloodied, Chris grabs an NVA AK-47 and finds Barnes, who instructs him to get a medic. He aims his weapon and Barnes resignedly says, “do it.” Chris kills him, then evacuates with the other wounded soldiers. He later reflects,

I think now, looking back, we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves. The enemy was in us. The war is over for me now, but it will always be there, the rest of my days. As I’m sure Elias will be fighting with Barnes for what Rhah called “possession of my soul.” There are times since, I’ve felt like a child, born of those two fathers. But be that as it may, those of us who did make it have an obligation to build again. To teach to others what we know, and to try with what’s left of our lives to find a goodness and a meaning to this life. (“Platoon,” *Quotes.com*, Undated: 2–3)

This is not a struggle in which the soldiers believe. There is no cause to fight for, except to survive long enough to rotate out of the country. Personal development is possible, as Chris suggests, but it emerges out of a stinking pile of bad experiences. As in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, most characters are killed or seriously wounded—and all are emotionally scarred. Stone effectively uses Samuel Barber’s *Adagio for Strings* (1936) on the soundtrack to underline the hopelessness and sense of loss felt by Chris and others. The real fight is not with the North Vietnamese or Viet Cong, it is among the platoon’s soldiers. Barnes and Elias represent two prevalent attitudes toward the war: either war is a dirty business that must be pursued with vigor, or the warriors must maintain their morals and not descend into depths of depravity.

This tension never gets resolved, and it will go on after the deaths of the two sergeants. And all this is well beyond Major Clipton's temporary "madness." As Chris notes, "Somebody once wrote: 'Hell is the impossibility of reason.' That's what this place feels like. Hell."

While *Platoon* presents the major social divide among the soldiers as based on class, *Hamburger Hill* (1987) forefronts race as key to understanding those who served in the war (Lair, 2020: 248–249). The latter movie also presents the lives of a handful of U.S. soldiers, focusing on a platoon of the 101st Airborne Division in a battle for a non-descript hill in 1969. In the actual battle, NVA forces dug in and decided to fight the Americans, whereas in previous engagements they had resorted to hit-and-run attacks. The assault on the numberless hill dubbed Hamburger Hill went on for days before the Americans prevailed, but later abandoned the position. The soldiers are weary and disillusioned, and there is no glory or satisfaction in their work. Like 1950s movies, they are all different types, including: Beletsky (Tommy Swerdlow), who has trouble remembering military training; Languilli (Anthony Barilli), who always talks about sex; Elliott Washburn (Don Cheadle), quiet and old-fashioned; and "Doc" Johnson (Courtney Vance), the oldest, most seasoned and a combination mentor and cynic. Sergeant Frantz (Dylan McDermott) tries to get the men ready so that they can survive. As in *Rambo: First Blood*, they discuss popular opposition to the war and antiwar protesters' disdain for the troops. The men take the hill on the eleventh try, but only three of the main characters survive. They survey a bleak landscape, and nothing seems to have been won.

Full Metal Jacket (1987) is Kubrick's contribution to the Vietnam antiwar sub-genre. Its gimmick is to frame the story in two parts, with a transition in the middle. A riveting first-third sequence follows recruits through Marine Boot Camp at Parris Island, South Carolina. This is not the bonding experience of 1950s movies, but the slow evisceration of individual identity and destruction of souls. The men are subjected to intense verbal abuse by their drill instructor, Gunnery Sergeant Hartman (R. Lee Ermey, who had been a DI during Vietnam). He is particularly harsh on an overweight and slow-witted recruit, Leonard Lawrence (Vincent D'Onofrio), whom he dubs "Gomer Pyle" because of his inability to get anything right. Hartman assigns J.T. "Joker" Davis (Matthew Modine) to guide the hapless young man, but Pyle begins to crack under the pressure. The only thing he can master is marksmanship. On the last night before the new Marines ship out, Pyle begins shouting in the head (toilets) and drilling with a rifle. An upset Hartman orders Pyle to lay down his weapon. Pyle does not, Hartman yells at him again, and Pyle kills the sergeant with a shot through the chest. He then turns the weapon and commits suicide.

The second two-thirds is well done, though not as compelling as the boot camp scenes. Joker is now a military journalist in Vietnam, writing propaganda stories for *Stars and Stripes*. Tasked with covering the Marines' counterattack in Hue during the Tet Offensive, he goes along with an infantry squad and meets his friend from boot camp, "Cowboy" Evans (Arless Howard), now temporarily in charge. The squad takes fire from a sniper in a group of buildings and two Marines are mortally wounded. The Marines attack the buildings, but Cowboy gets shot and dies. Squad members force their way into the building and find a female sniper, who they shoot several times. In agony, she begs them to kill her, but Animal Mother (Adam Baldwin), the senior non-com, refuses. Joker says that they cannot just leave her. An angry Animal Mother says that Joker should shoot her, which he does.

The Marines then march off to the Perfume River in central Hue, singing the Mickey Mouse song. Joker's voice over suggests that the Marines are in "a world of s—t" and happy to merely survive. In the end, survival is all that these Marines can take from the war: no objectives achieved, no values defended, not even a manly bonding experience among brothers. Kubrick's vision is among the bleakest of the major post-Vietnam films.

Within a few years, conservative movies began to reclaim the Vietnam conflict. The most robust effort has been *We Were Soldiers* (2002), based on a Vietnam memoir by Lt. General Hal Moore, about the pivotal early set-piece battle in the Ia Drang Valley. Mel Gibson plays Moore as a caring leader, determined commander, and dedicated family man. The film is almost like a conventional World War II epic. Soldiers on both sides are good men; the Americans serve selflessly, die honorably with deathless words on their lips, and are well-equipped and supported by their officers. Joe Galloway (Barry Pepper), a journalist covering the battle, is in awe of the American soldiers and never seriously questions the conflict. The movie glosses over the unusual nature of the battle: a conventional toe-to-toe fight between two evenly matched battalions, with no Vietcong guerrillas in sight, and a battleground in the mountains without any civilians to get caught in the crossfire. The script compares the North Vietnamese Army to Indians in the Old West, though it attempts to humanize a few NVA soldiers. Scenes from the U.S. home front present supportive, waiting wives and children, with racial harmony between black and white families. After the battle, Moore returns home to a heartfelt reception and breaks into tears (Lair, 2020: 253–256).

RECLAIMING THE GOOD WAR AND VIETNAM: REVIVAL OF PRO-WAR AND AMBIGUOUS FILMS

The Vietnam antiwar movie trend exhausted itself by the early 1990s. Stone's *Heaven and Earth* was one of the few big Vietnam movies during the 1990s and, taking an important shift, its central character is a Vietnamese woman. As America was soon to normalize relations with Vietnam, and Vietnamese Americans had worked hard to integrate into American society, perhaps audiences were ready for a story about these new immigrants. Meanwhile, NBC News anchor Tom Brokaw's book *The Greatest Generation* (1998) stimulated much public discussion of the World War II generation's contribution to the postwar order. Two Tom Hanks movies of the 1990s reevaluated both the Vietnam War and World War II.

Forrest Gump (1994) takes a decidedly positive view of the soldiers who served in Vietnam. Based on Winston Groom's novel of the same title, it is Robert Zemeckis's moving story of the slow-witted Gump (Hanks) who through luck and circumstance manages to find great success in school, sports, the military, and business. Along the way, Gump gets thrust into most major events of the mid-1950s to early 1980s. He is less successful in love, only managing to marry the love of his life, Jenny Curran (Robin Wright), as she is coming down with an HIV-like or Hepatitis C-like disease. Their short-lived marriage ends with her death.

The story takes an enjoyable and often tear-jerking you-are-there approach to Baby Boomer history, as Gump meets everyone from Elvis to Nixon, but commentators noted the essential conservatism of the piece. Anti-Vietnam War protesters and the counterculture of the 1960s come across as dangerous, violent, and self-obsessed. Far more noble are Lt. Dan Taylor (Gary Sinise), Gump's Army friend Bubba (Mykelti Williamson) and other soldiers serving in the war. Lt. Dan's personal crisis is not brought on by the horror of war, but by his disappointment at becoming an amputee, and so not being able to fulfill his military destiny to die in battle.

We see Jenny slide into a debauched life fueled by sex and drugs during the Me Decade of the 1970s. Her disease seems like divine punishment for her wild lifestyle, and her one real accomplishment is giving birth to Forrest's son, also named Forrest. For the blissfully ignorant Gump, history and politics really do not count for much and the only things that matter are his family and friends. In the end, he reaches a philosophical epiphany when he speaks to Jenny over her grave that he is unsure whether destiny or capricious circumstances drive one's life. "Maybe it's both," he concludes.

Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) was beloved by both audiences and critics. It is an old-fashioned World War II story about unity,

purpose, and noble sacrifice in the pro-war mold. It is the fictional story of an Army Ranger squad dispatched to fetch a paratrooper, James Ryan, whose three brothers have been recently killed in action, so that he can return to his mother. The movie begins with a harrowing depiction of the Omaha Beach landings on D-Day, in which company commander John Miller (Hanks) leads his men to open a beach sector. The twenty-minute segment is far truer to the horror of that invasion than *The Longest Day*.

Days later, Miller gets an assignment to find Ryan. The squad moves through the countryside, losing two soldiers to German fire. They finally locate Ryan (Matt Damon) who, with his fellow paratroopers, are defending a bridge in the deserted French town of Ramelle. Ryan refuses to leave his fellows, and Miller decides to help them defend the town from a German attack. Ryan survives the assault, but most of the men in the squad are killed. An American P-51 Mustang zooms in, strafing the Germans as American armor appears. A mortally wounded Miller tells Ryan to “earn this,” or to make his life mean something. We then see an elderly Ryan standing over Miller’s grave in a Normandy military cemetery, saying that he has remembered what Miller said every day and that he hopes his life mattered.

Widely praised for getting many war details right, *Ryan* nonetheless received criticism on a few key facts. The actual mission on which the story is based involved a chaplain walking to the young man’s unit and simply retrieving him. Why couldn’t Ryan’s unit be contacted by radio to locate him, and why didn’t Miller’s squad have a radio to ask for information at key moments? At the time of the mission, a U.S. unit would have had to traverse German-held territory to get from the Omaha beachhead to where the 101st Airborne Division operated. The squad probably would not have deviated from its mission to join a fight for a small town and then take on Germans holding a radar facility. Also, the Normandy town hosting the climatic battle probably would not have been completely deserted.

The movie joins conventional war movie storytelling to a documentary sensibility. Spielberg was impressed with John Huston’s World War II documentary, *The Battle of San Pietro*, which combined battle film with staged action. *Private Ryan* emphasizes the ordinariness of the soldiers, with Hanks serving as the traditional “strong, silent type” like Henry Fonda and Gary Cooper. Decency becomes the movie’s central theme, and this value becomes intimately connected to the soldiers’ ordinary qualities and stereotypical roles of women as keepers of the home. For much of the movie, “home is where the women are”: Miller wants to get back to his wife, squad cynic Pfc. Richard Reiben (Edward Burns) remembers a busty woman in the family shop who tried on a bra too small for her and who told him to remember her breasts as he went off to war, and Ryan recalls a date gone bad with one of his brothers the last night he saw them alive. Most importantly, the Army wants to

spare Mrs. Ryan receiving a fourth telegram about a dead son (Grippaldi and McKeivitt, 2020: 162–169).

The Greatest Generation narrative stimulated HBO to release two ambitious TV war miniseries: *Band of Brothers* (2001), based on a best-selling history by Stephen Ambrose, and *The Pacific* (2010). Spielberg and Hanks were executive producers for both series. The two series continue the decency and ordinariness themes embedded in *Private Ryan* (Grippaldi and McKeivitt, 2020: 169–170). *Brothers* follows one company (Easy Company) of the 101st Airborne from D-Day through the end of the European campaign, and *Pacific* focuses on several Marines in three regiments of the Marines' First Division. Differentiation of good and bad officers, along with self-centeredness and teamwork, are constant themes in *Brothers*. Damian Lewis is particularly impressive as one of the good officers, Major Dick Winters. Both series are traditional, concentrating on the honor and heroism of the central characters, but both emphasize the psychological damage to World War II vets and their difficulties readjusting to civilian life. *Pacific* shows bigger traumas to the three Marines at the story's core, presents more full-blown sexual relationships with women, and has the darker vision, especially dealing with the Marines' difficult postwar readjustments (Grippaldi and McKeivitt, 2020: 169–170).

Another old-fashioned film attracting much attention was *Gettysburg* (1993). Directed by Ronald F. Maxwell and based on a popular novel by Michael Shaara, it outlines the seminal 1863 America Civil War battle, long considered the turning point of the war's eastern theater. The large ensemble cast captures the nobility and fortitude of both Union and Confederate officers, and the drama focuses on three iconic actions during the battle. The story briefly made Union General Joshua Chamberlain (Jeff Daniels) a household name. His men forced Confederates off Little Round Top, the hill that anchored the Union line's southern end. Confederate General Lewis Armistead (Richard Jordan), killed in Pickett's Charge on the last day of battle, is courageous, honorable and chivalrous to his enemies. The movie might have been more effective by relating stories of individual soldiers, who are often undifferentiated.

While some observers found the film too reverential to the Confederate cause, it was popular with audiences. It was followed by a prequel, *Gods and Generals* (2003) about the Battle of Chancellorsville. Both films focus on single battles as titanic struggles, while not confronting the politics of war, the cost to civilians, or the disabled veterans of the conflict. They set up a false equivalence of the Union and Confederacy that should offend anyone who believes in human freedom. Remember, the Confederacy was fighting to preserve the ghastly institution of slavery. *Gettysburg* was a pet project of Turner Broadcasting chair Ted Turner, who wanted to foster a more positive image

for the South. Other civil war films, such as *Glory* (1989), *Cold Mountain* (2003), *Lincoln* (2012), and *Free State of Jones* (2016) took on more contentious issues of slavery, the Union's black soldiers, war crimes, and the origins of the Jim Crow system in the South.

Clint Eastwood contributed to the conservative war film revival with two companion pieces on the Iwo Jima campaign in 1945: *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (both 2006). Despite employing conservative tropes, both films are ambiguous in nature, as they question the motivations of military and political leaders, while noting the noble sacrifices of soldiers and Marines on both sides. *Flags*, taken from James Bradley's non-fiction account of his father's role in the flag raising on Iwo Jima's Mount Suribachi, recounts the personal struggles of the three surviving participants: Pharmacist's Mate "Doc" Bradley (Ryan Philippe), Corporal Rene Gagnon (Jesse Bradford), and Native American Corporal Ira Hayes (Adam Beach). The three tour America on a war bond drive and are forced to reenact the flag raising over and over. The hyper-emotional Hayes cannot cope with his fame, becomes increasingly alcoholic, and finds it difficult to find work before dying of exposure after a night of heavy drinking. Gagnon hopes to capitalize on contacts made during the trip, but no one responds to his calls and he ends up as a janitor for the rest of his life. Only Doc finds some success as owner of a funeral home.

Letters is one of the more impressive recent war films, as it presents the thoughts and motivations of Japanese soldiers. Eastwood should be praised for taking on a Japanese language film. The story concentrates on Iwo Jima's commanding general Tadamichi Kuribayashi (Ken Watanabe) and fictional composite character Private First Class Saigo (Kazunari Ninomiya). Kuribayashi comes across as a sophisticated man who cares about his soldiers. Saigo, a baker, only wants to survive the war, as he promised his wife that he would return to her and their baby daughter. Almost all Saigo's fellow soldiers get killed, but he lives on after witnessing Kuribayashi commit suicide and then burying him. Exhausted, wounded and taken prisoner, he waits on the beach with other wounded POWs. Like *Tora! Tora! Tora!*, *Letters* was very popular in Japan but found tepid returns in America. Even so, it made more money than *Flags* which, while a critical success, was a rare box office disappointment in Eastwood's directing career.

David Ayer's *Fury* (2014) is an ambiguous story loosely based on actual events, about an M-4 Sherman tank called "Fury" and its crew in Germany during the last weeks of World War II. First Sergeant Don "Wardaddy" Collier (Brad Pitt) is a tough tank commander who is breaking in a new crew member, Private Norman Ellison (Logan Lerman), and tries to teach him about the cruel realities of the war. After over two years at war, the other crew

members are jaded and cynical about the war and their officers. But Ellison is greatly affected by his experiences. He fails to warn the tank about a Hitler Youth boy who uses a *Panzerfaust* anti-tank weapon to destroy the tank in front of Fury. Collier forces him to kill a German who has surrendered but is wearing a U.S. Army coat. When the tank platoon liberates a town, the sergeant encourages Ellison to have sex with a teenage German girl, only to see her killed by German shelling shortly thereafter. Later, a land mine damages the tank's track at a rural crossing, but the tank crew decide to stay with the tank and fight it out with an advancing SS battalion that could threaten U.S. supply trucks. The crew hold off attacks throughout the late afternoon and night, and all but Ellison are killed. The young man gets rescued the next morning as American troops reach the area.

While *Private Ryan* is about a group of ordinary, decent men, *Fury* centers on one extraordinary man, Collier, who can motivate his tank crew to do extraordinary things. His crew is a collection of oddballs, but the audience identifies with the ordinary Ellison, who Collier shapes into a man. The scene of the sullen crew gathering around the table after Norman has made love with the German girl symbolizes the destruction of family life and normal human relations during the war. The second half of the film, as Collier vows to stay with his damaged tank and fight the SS battalion and his crew join him, brings a kind of redemption for the psychically damaged men and Norman gets accepted as an equal and a man (Grippaldi and McKeivitt, 2020: 175–178).

Hacksaw Ridge (2016) is Mel Gibson's contribution to the conservative war film revival. It is based on the true story of Army Medic Desmond Doss (Andrew Garfield), who saved seventy-five soldiers in combat during the Battle of Okinawa in 1945. Doss's Seventh-Day Adventist religious faith does not permit him to fight, but he wants to be a Medic. At first thought to be insubordinate for refusing weapons training, he is allowed to serve as a non-combatant. After an initial U.S. attack on the Maeda escarpment fails, Doss stays behind all night and lowers wounded American and Japanese soldiers to the ridge bottom. With each wounded soldier he lowers, he prays to his God, "help me get one more." In gratitude for his bravery, the soldiers insist that Doss join them in the next attack but, as it is his Sabbath, wait for him to finish prayers. In this action, Doss gets wounded as he deflects grenades from fellow soldiers.

The movie affirms the nobility, sacrifice, and cause of the Americans, while depicting the Japanese as fanatical enemies. Like *Private Ryan*, it focuses on an ordinary, decent man. In this case, he operates partially outside the military system, as he insists that he will not carry a rifle and nearly gets imprisoned as a result. After an appeal from his father (Hugo Weaving), a World War I vet who still suffers PTSD, the military court relents. Unlike soldiers or Marines

in the other films, Doss relies on his religious faith to guide him. His former adversaries, especially his company commander Captain Jack Glover (Sam Worthington) and Sergeant Howell (Vince Vaughn), realize that they were wrong and embrace Doss before the final attack (Grippaldi and McKevitt, 2020: 181–183).

FOREVER WARS: IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN AT THE MOVIES

Movies about America's recent wars or minor conflicts are mostly skeptical and generally ambiguous about war aims and conduct. But they pull their punches and do not present the full-throated antiwar dissection that we see in the Vietnam films of the 1970s and 1980s. Only a few movies take on the Gulf War, perhaps because it was quite brief and an overwhelming U.S. victory. David O. Russell's *Three Kings* (1999) is a black comedy involving soldiers hunting for gold bars to get rich quick in the immediate aftermath of war. Sam Mendes's *Jarhead* (2005) describes a group of Marines in Saudi Arabia and Iraq, but is not a particularly emotionally engaging movie. Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* (2001) is the first movie to confront intervention in Africa. It straddles the line between ambiguous and antiwar films, as the soldiers depicted are dedicated professionals, but the U.S. intervention in Somalia (1992–1994) is presented as unfocused and misguided. When U.S. forces begin searching for warlord Mohamed Farah Aidid, his men force down one of the helicopters and a major firefight develops with an American convoy coordinating with the helicopters.

Various movies take up the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. Movies such as *In the Valley of Elah* and *Lions for Lambs* (both in 2007) examine decision making in the two wars from the standpoint of a father and a professor. Paul Haggis's *Elah* is about soldiers returning from Iraq who find adjustment difficult and turn to drugs. Hank Deerfield (Tommy Lee Jones) is trying to find out why his soldier son was killed. The son was greatly affected by killing of Iraqi insurgents and civilians and willingly participated in atrocities. *Lions* is a quiet examination of the Afghanistan War. An on-the-make Congressman (Tom Cruise) tries to ramp up the war to position himself for higher office, a veteran journalist (Streep) who feels that her best days are past is skeptical of his plans, and a professor (Robert Redford, also directed) whose two students died in Afghanistan tries to use their experiences to convince a smart slacker (Garfield) to take life more seriously.

Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2009) gained her the first Best Director Oscar awarded to a woman. It also is an ambiguous film that has antiwar overtones. Demolitions experts Sergeant First Class William

James (Jeremy Renner) and Sergeant J.T. Sanborn (Anthony Mackie) daily must defuse or detonate improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in Iraq. Each instance makes them question the war and methods used. They chase down insurgents after a bombing, but James mistakenly wounds one of their fellow soldiers. In one horrific scene, a middle-aged Iraqi man has been fitted with explosives against his will. James attempts to take the explosives belt off the man but cannot do so within the explosive's time limit. He must leave the man, saying "I'm sorry" before the man blows up. Returning to base in a Humvee, Sanborn tells James that he hates Iraq and is afraid that if he dies no one will remember him. He adds that he wants to have a son. James returns to his ex-wife and child but cannot fit into civilian life. He volunteers to return to Iraq for another one-year tour.

Bigelow also contributed *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), the definitive film on the government-sanctioned killing of Al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden in Pakistan in 2011. The story focuses on a composite CIA analyst Maya (Jessica Chastain), who tracks Bin Laden to Pakistan, despite skepticism by her CIA colleagues. It accurately depicts in nearly real time the mission to take out Bin Laden at his compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. The movie stoked controversy for suggesting that torture resulted in actionable intelligence in the Bin Laden case. Torture-for-information became a well-used trope in post-9/11 movies and TV series, most notably *24* (2001–2010, and again in 2014), in which counter-terrorism specialist Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) frequently tortures terrorism suspects for information.

Lone Survivor (2013) relates the true story of a Navy SEALs operation to capture a Taliban leader, Ahmed Shah, in the Hindu Kush. Shah is responsible for killing U.S. Marines and Afghan civilians. The SEALs dispatch a four-man reconnaissance team to scout out Shah's location. They are seen by goatherders in the mountains. Rather than killing the goatherders, they decide to abort the mission. As they leave, they are attacked by Taliban fighters. A wrenching sequence shows the team retreating, being wounded, and falling down a long, steep slope to rocks below. Only one team member, Hospital Corpsman Marcus Luttrell (Mark Wahlberg) survives, but is seriously wounded. Local villagers save him, and resist Taliban demands to kill him, citing the Pashtunwali code of conduct, which mandates hospitality to and protection of strangers. The Taliban come back to kill the villagers, but U.S. forces arrive to defeat them and evacuate Luttrell.

Clint Eastwood's Iraq War entry is *American Sniper* (2014), based on Navy SEAL sniper Chris Kyle's life story. Kyle (Bradley Cooper) is the deadliest U.S. sniper with 255 kills. Deploying to Iraq, he is emotionally damaged by his experiences, especially when he must shoot women and children who threaten American troops or Marines. Like James in *Hurt Locker*, readjustment to civilian life becomes challenging. Helping with struggling

ex-soldiers and Marines at a Veteran's Hospital, he gradually learns to cope and reconnects with his wife. Just as things are returning to normal, he meets an unstable vet who kills him. Kyle is mourned across the nation.

12 Strong (2018) tells a fictionalized version of the operations of Green Berets Operational Detachment Alpha 595 in the early days of Afghanistan War. These ODA teams supported local fighters of the Northern Alliance take on and defeat the Taliban. It was a remarkable success, with very few casualties, but not without road bumps. ODA 595 leader Mitch Nelson (Chris Hemsworth) works with General A. R. Dostum (Navid Negahban), an Alliance Leader. Dostum briefly leaves when he hears that another ODA is working with one of his Alliance rivals, Atta Muhammed, but comes back to lead the final push to take the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif. Dostum and Muhammed reconcile. Dostum thanks Nelson with the gift of a special riding crop but reminds him that Afghanistan remains the graveyard of empires.

The Outpost (2020), based on a non-fiction book by CNN reporter Jake Tapper, tells the story of PRT Kamesh, an outpost in northern Afghanistan near the Hindu Kush, repeatedly attacked by the Taliban. The base is supposed to close soon, but the remaining soldiers are intent on holding it. They hold off a night attack and barely survive a major daylight assault. Bombing by B-1 aircraft and dispatch of a rapid reaction force thwart the attacks, but at the cost of twenty-seven killed and destruction of the base as the last soldiers leave. This movie evokes the beleaguered fort or last stand narratives of *The Alamo* (1960) or *300* (2007). Whereas those were noble sacrifices in which all defenders were slain, some of the soldiers in the Outpost survive.

WOMEN AT WAR: FROM WIVES AND NURSES TO WARRIORS

Women traditionally have not figured prominently in war movies. They are supporting characters, principally wives, romantic interests, and nurses. They are the girls the soldiers left behind, or the ones to whom they return. We know that women have served in combat in most wars in modern history, often by disguising themselves as men. In the Soviet Army and Air Force in World War II, women served with distinction in a variety of frontline and air units. The Israeli Defense Force (IDF) has allowed women to serve in many functional units, except combat units, from the founding of the state. In most Western countries, women have gained gradual acceptance into a variety of professional grades. Only recently have they begun to serve in combat units, and their numbers remain small. One would not know about much of this progress from the movies, as few of them address women serving in the military.

World War II and Vietnam War films generally relegate women to secondary roles, not only nurses, wives, and girlfriends, but also prostitutes and bar girls. Some of the best films about women focus on the home front, such as *Mrs. Miniver* (1942) about the title character (Greer Garson) and her struggle to keep her family together during the German blitz on England, and *Millions Like Us* (1943) about British women war production workers. Fred Zinneman's *Julia* (1977) considers author Lillian Hellman's complex relationship with her friend Julia, who worked for the German resistance to the Nazis, during the years leading up to war. *Les Femmes de L'ombre* (Female Agents, 2008) is one of several movies in the last two decades detailing the actions of women in the French Resistance during World War II.

Two exceptional films in the 1990s spotlighted women. *Courage Under Fire* (1996) is about a fictional medevac helicopter commander, Capt. Emma Walden (Meg Ryan), who has been recommended for a Medal of Honor after the Gulf War. Lt. Col. Nathaniel Serling (Denzel Washington) investigates the case and comes to suspect that foul play may have been involved in her death. He also struggles to deal with the destruction of one of his tank crews by his own friendly fire. He finds that an insubordinate soldier (Lou Diamond Phillips) accidentally shot Walden and lies to relief helicopter crews that she was dead. As she covers the retreat, she is killed by napalm. On Serling's recommendation, Walden receives the medal, which is given to her young daughter.

G.I. Jane (1997) is about a female Marine, Lt. Jordan O'Neil (Demi Moore), who wants to join the U.S. Navy Combined Reconnaissance Team. Naturally, she faces many struggles and much sexism to fit into this very macho unit. However, when the team gets sent to Libya to retrieve plutonium material, her map reading, leadership, and life-saving skills prove invaluable to the mission, and she gains respect from her male colleagues. Moore also plays a key role as Navy defense attorney in *A Few Good Men* (1992), a courtroom drama about Marines stationed at Guantanamo Bay base in Cuba, alongside Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson.

Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), described in the previous section, is about the War on Terrorism, rather than the Afghanistan or Iraq Wars. It's central character, Maya Harris (Jessica Chastain), is a CIA analyst who pushes her colleagues to go after Osama Bin Laden, Al-Qaeda's leader, and from Afghanistan helps coordinate the mission to kill Bin Laden. *A Private War* (2018) presents the story of war correspondent Marie Colvin (Rosamund Pike), who was killed in the Syrian civil war.

Other women-centered war films include *Megan Leavey* (2017), in which the title character (Kate Mara) is a Marine corporal and part of a K-9 unit. She bonds with a German Shepherd named Rex. They undertake one-hundred missions together, and the dog saves her life. *Home of the Brave* (2006)

focuses on a female soldier, Vanessa Price (Jessica Biel). She struggles with readjustment to civilian life, just as in male-centered films going back to the 1940s. Similarly, *Return* (2011) gives us an Army reservist Kelli (Linda Cardellini), who finds it difficult to cope with her life out of the military (Oyibo, 2017: 1–9).

Science fiction or historical fantasy war stories can more easily integrate women into conflict scenarios. These include the sci-fi classic, *Starship Troopers* (1997), in which women serve alongside men to patrol a planet of insectoid creatures. They even shower together, a point approvingly noted by my military students. *Battleship* (2012) shows women and men serving together, including singer Rihanna, on the eponymous ship as they take on alien invaders.

Edge of Tomorrow (2014) is another sci-fi mega-movie, starring Emily Blunt as a battle-hardened (and buff) British Sergeant Rita Vrataski, working with U.S. Marine Major William Cage (Tom Cruise) to figure out how to defeat adaptive aliens that have taken over most of Europe. *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* (2004) is a throwback to movies of the 1930s and 1940s. It presents Angelina Jolie as a pilot who takes on flying robots attacking New York City, and Gwyneth Paltrow as a reporter who teams up with Jude Law's character to find out the robots' origins. *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* (1999) is one of several great movies about the Maid of Orleans, who led French forces in triumph over the English at the siege of Orleans in the fifteenth century. It stars Milla Jovovich as the young heroine. But the transcendent performance of Maria Falconetti as Joan in Carl Theodor Dreyer's landmark silent film *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), focusing on her trial, is not to be missed.

It would be nice to see more movies made about great women military leaders and outstanding female soldiers from history. Artemisia I of Caria led the Persian naval forces against the Greeks in the Battle of Salamis (480 B.C.). She was depicted sensationally in *300: Rise of an Empire* (2014), played by Eva Green. A stand-alone film would be useful to describe her background and motivations. Boadicea led an almost successful but ultimately doomed rebellion against the Roman occupation of Britain in the first century. Her life story has been told in numerous documentaries and docu-dramas, but not in a movie. Queen Isabella I of Castille defeated the Moors and reunified Spain at the end of the fifteenth century. Britain's Queen Elizabeth I went into the field to encourage her forces to fight the Spanish in 1588. Her story has graced the screen many times, but this incident gets glossed over. Florence Nightingale set modern standards for treatment of wounded soldiers in the Crimean War. Lyudmila Pavlichenko and Lilya Litvak were two of the most accomplished Soviet snipers during the Great Patriotic War (World War II). Pavlichenko had 309 confirmed kills. There was also a successful Soviet women's air

unit that flew the heavily armored Sturmovik fighter-bomber, also called the Flying Tank. Golda Meir led Israel through the wrenching Yom Kippur War of 1973 (Hoppe, 2016: 1–10). Ingrid Bergman played her in a biographical television movie (1982), but a movie about the war would be good to see.

Also, in almost every major armed conflict up to World War II, women have disguised themselves to fight with heroism and distinction. This was true in most European wars going back to the fourteenth century. During the American Revolution, Deborah Sampson (1760–1827) served with distinction until she fell seriously ill and the doctor discovered her gender but did not disclose it. He kept treating her until she was discharged. She resumed wearing women's clothes, married, and bore children. She later received a pension for her service. As many as a thousand women served in the American Civil War, some dying in battle. They included Sarah Edmonds (called Pvt. Franklin Thompson), Jennie Hodgers (Albert Cashier), Sarah Rosetta Wakeman (Pvt. Lyons Wakeman), and Loreta Janeta Velazquez (Lt. Harry T. Buford) (Thomas, 2021: 1–5; Jabour, 2017: 1–4). Why are there no movies about these doubly brave women? Think of the courage it took to not only volunteer to fight, but to disguise one's true identity and risk the shame of being revealed before fellow soldiers, family, and friends.

WHAT CAN A DRAMEDY TEACH US ABOUT AMERICA'S LONGEST WAR?

By **Damien P. Horigan**

War is serious business. Not surprisingly, films about war are often somber affairs regardless of whether they are either supportive or critical of any particular conflict. However, comedies and comedy-dramas, or dramadies, set during wars are not unheard of. *Good Morning, Vietnam* is a popular example that focuses on a DJ working for an American military radio station in 1960s Saigon (Barry Levinson, director, 1987). A less well-known example would be *A Perfect Day* (León de Aranoa, 2015) that revolves around a group of aid workers in the Balkans during the 1990s.

Besides providing entertainment, comedy can offer us a different way of looking at warfare and its impact. Even dark humor potentially helps in coping with the stress and tragedy of war as well as its aftermath (Skovlund, 2020: 1–10). Yet, a war dramedy is a tricky balance. On the one hand, some

people will find any attempt at getting laughs from war to be inherently offensive. On the other hand, too much drama injected into the mix will destroy the comedy.

The war in Afghanistan started in late 2001 in response to Al-Qaeda's 9/11 attacks on the United States (DeLong and Lukeman, 2004; Tanner, 2009: 221–320). It only ended with the Fall of Kabul and the American pullout in 2021. Within the global context of the War on Terror, Afghanistan was sometimes described as being the “right war” as opposed to the “wrong war” in Iraq. Each war started off with initial American success, but then significant post-invasion challenges emerged (Weston, 2016: 213–345).

Be that as it may, the Afghan War often seemed forgotten by the American public. For the United States, the war effort relied upon an all-volunteer military thereby minimizing the potential impact on certain segments of American society. The stateside political and social dynamics were thus very different from those of the Vietnam Era when a military draft was in effect. The use in Afghanistan of NATO members' other allies' armed forces was a notable feature of the conflict (Tanner, 2009; Weston, 2016).

Afghanistan became America's longest war (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021: 1–40). As such, it was a so-called “forever war.” (Higgins, 2019: 1–6). The conflict started before America's war in Iraq began and continued into 2021. Indeed, toward the end, there were individuals serving on active duty in the U.S. military who were not even born when the war began. Although the Korean War has not technically ended and thus might be thought of as being an even longer war, the period of active conflict in Korea (1950–1953), not counting isolated incidents since then, was much shorter than in Afghanistan (2001–2021).

This essay examines the dramady *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* (2016), directed by Glenn Ficarra and John Requa. The title derives from expression “WTF” spelled out in the NATO phonetic alphabet, which has been used for communications in Afghanistan. As its lighthearted title suggests, *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* is not a particularly political film, but it does provide insights into the Afghan War. Moreover, it paints a fairly accurate picture of life in Afghanistan during the war albeit from a Western point of view. Of course, Afghans themselves tend to see their country differently (Daud, 2020: 1–5; Ebtikar, 2020: 1–4).

Admittedly, the film does not address certain complexities such as the various ethnic, lingual, regional, sectarian, and economic divides within the nation. Important issues such as corruption and drug production are briefly touched upon but could have been explored more. Due to security concerns, filming occurred largely in the U.S. state of New Mexico, which offers scenery resembling Afghanistan (Barber, 2020). Yet, some second unit footage

was actually shot on location in Kabul (Nord, 2016: 1–9). Overall, the film has an authentic feel.

In *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*, actress Tina Fey plays a TV news copywriter-turned-reporter named Kim Baker, with just one “r” in the surname. The character had reached a plateau in her career and her personal life. So, she takes an unexpected opportunity to go abroad. Baker is soon on her first assignment as a foreign correspondent in a radically different culture rooted in very traditional interpretations of Islam. Moreover, she has never been in a conflict zone before. As such, it is partly a fish out of water tale.

In adopting to her new life, Baker is helped greatly by Fahim Ahmadzai, her local fixer. A couple of especially amusing scenes have Ahmadzai creatively interpret to avoid offending people. He is played by Christopher Abbott. Naturally, the choice of non-Afghans to portray certain Afghan characters did cause a bit of controversy (Henquinet, 2016: 1–4).

The movie is loosely based on the experiences of Kim Barker, with an “r” in the first and second syllables of the surname (CBS News, 2016: 1–5). The real Kim Barker worked as a print journalist in not only Afghanistan, but also Pakistan and other countries. She was the South Asia bureau chief for *The Chicago Tribune* from 2004 to 2009, and she wrote a book about her time overseas entitled *The Taliban Shuffle: Strange Days in Afghanistan and Pakistan* (Barker, 2012). Currently, Barker serves as an investigative reporter with *The New York Times* (Barker, 2016: 1–4; Barker, 2019: 1–2).

Hollywood often takes liberties with the truth for the sake of narrative. The film departs from Barker’s life story in various ways. For example, the glamorous TV reporter from another network, that is, the Tanya Vanderpoel character played by Margot Robbie, is completely made-up. Perhaps more importantly, though, the significant amount of time the real-life Barker spent in neighboring Pakistan is simply omitted. Nonetheless, Pakistan plays a major role in Afghanistan partly due to the presence of Pashtuns living on either side of the border. It thereby makes sense for the same reporter to cover both countries.

Whiskey Tango Foxtrot looks at the war from a journalist’s perspective and from the perspective of a Western woman. The film depicts the reality of the country being generally segregated along gender lines to an even greater extent than some other Muslim societies. In this cultural context, Western women have been treated as “honorary males” enjoying greater freedom than Afghan women. Moreover, Western women were able to interact with Afghan women in ways that Western men and sometimes even Afghan men could not. As the film humorously states on more than one occasion, due to their relative rarity in Kabul, Western women tended to be perceived by Western men as being more attractive while in Afghanistan than they would be back in their home countries.

The main character must cope with a new and dangerous environment that offers up more than just a normal dose of culture shock. Besides adjusting to Afghan culture, she needs to learn how to successfully interact with deployed U.S. Marines during stints as an embedded journalist. She grows professionally and personally in the process. Along the way she encounters poverty, substance abuse, boredom, and violence as well as cooperation and rivalry among foreign correspondents. What was originally planned as an assignment for a few months lasts for years.

One of the key features of the movie is the main character's efforts to get her network to devote more airtime to the Afghan War. This reflects genuine frustration with Afghanistan being largely forgotten by the West during much of the two decades of the conflict. Some of that is because the war in Iraq had started a few months before the main character's arrival in Afghanistan. The media's focus had already begun to shift from Afghanistan to Iraq and Afghanistan became something of a sideshow.

At one point, even Baker's job is at risk due to the network's financial priorities. Eventually, Baker gets a scoop that helps her to negotiate for an anchor job back in New York. So, there is a happy resolution for the main character. The real-life Barker faced similar problems with her newspaper. Reporting from conflict zones is expensive. Even reporting from peaceful locations overseas can entail costs that some media companies are simply reluctant to bear. It is easier and cheaper to cover, say, the latest domestic celebrity gossip instead.

Another noteworthy aspect of the film is the depiction of the efforts of the Marine Corps. While special forces might have gotten much of the glory, a lot of the heavy lifting was done by the Marines. This is even though Afghanistan is a landlocked country. As it turns out, I first watched *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* in a theater on Camp Foster, a key U.S. Marine base located in Okinawa, Japan. From the audience reaction, I could tell that many who were present enjoyed the story. Some cinemagoers may have served in Afghanistan, Iraq, or both.

Unfortunately, the film got mixed reviews and fared poorly at the box office (Verhoeven, 2016: 1–6). Regardless of its overall reception, the film personally resonated with me as someone who had once worked in Kabul as a civilian. The Afghan War during the time covered in the movie (2003–2006) was an insurgency. The insurgency is depicted in several ways. One of the Marines interviewed by Baker in the movie later loses his legs because of an improvised explosive device (IED). Despite being wounded in action, he begins a new life as a farmer back in the states and is surprisingly philosophical about what happened to him.

A key feature of the conflict especially in the capital city of Kabul was acts of terrorism, including the use of suicide bombers and coordinated attacks.

Often the insurgents would hit soft targets. Hence, many of those killed or injured were civilians. Sadly, civilians were also caught up in coalition operations especially when drones were used.

Afghanistan is now under the Taliban again after a complete American pullout that briefly caught the world's attention. Yet, the country still is not at peace due largely to the presence of the Islamic State-Khorasan. That terrorist group, which is sometimes referred to as IS-K, is an enemy of both the Taliban and the West. To make matters worse, the Afghan economy has been teetering on the verge of collapse. The future looks bleak.

Chapter 6

Let's Play Cowboys and Politicos

The Imagined West, Society, and Politics

REVIVING WESTERNS: *TRUE GRIT*, *THE REVENANT*, AND *HOSTILES*

It's funny how you see something different each time you watch a movie you like. I re-watched the Coen Brothers' revisionist Western *True Grit* (2010) a few months ago. Based on the 1968 novel by Charles Portis, it tells the story of Mattie Ross (a forceful screen debut by Hailee Steinfeld), a fourteen-year-old girl who determines to find and bring to justice Tom Chaney (Josh Brolin), the man who killed her father in Arkansas. She hires U.S. Marshall Reuben "Rooster" Cogburn (Jeff Bridges) to venture into the Indian Territory (eastern Oklahoma). She meets Texas Ranger LaBoeuf (Matt Damon), who has been trailing Chaney for two years for the murder of a Texas state senator, and who dismisses Mattie as out-of-her-depth. Cogburn decides to team up with LaBoeuf and they leave the girl behind. She impresses Cogburn by fording a wide river with her horse Little Blackie, and he lets her go along. The trio pick up various clues about Chaney and the Ned Pepper gang that he has joined but are unable to locate Chaney, as the trail seems to have gone cold. LaBoeuf decides to leave but acknowledges that he has misjudged Mattie.

Collecting water from a nearby river, Mattie encounters Chaney. She wounds him with her father's pistol, but the weapon then misfires and Chaney seizes and takes her to Pepper (Gary Pepper). Pepper forces Cogburn to leave with threats to kill Mattie. Ned leaves to take care of gang business and tells Chaney to stay with Mattie. He insists that if Chaney harms her, he will not be paid. Chaney decides to knife her but is surprised and knocked out by

LaBoeuf. Meanwhile, Cogburn blocks the way for Pepper and challenges him to a fight. As the Marshall rushes toward the gang members, he kills three and wounds Pepper, but gets trapped by his own wounded horse. LaBoeuf shoots Pepper at long range, but Chaney wakes up and knocks out the Ranger. Mattie grabs LaBoeuf's Sharp's Carbine and kills Chaney. The rifle's recoil sends her into a vertical cave, where a rattlesnake bites her. Cogburn rescues her and rides Blackie to death getting her to treatment at an outpost store. She loses an arm but survives. Twenty-five years later and never married, Mattie travels to meet Cogburn at a Wild West Show but learns that he died only three days before. She takes his body home to bury in her family plot.

What impressed me this time were the language, period details, and nineteenth-century values of the major characters. For instance, characters do not use contractions, and even banal statements may seem timeless to twenty-first century ears, as they proclaim, "I will not go . . ." or "I do not know this man." Small details of frontier life come into focus, such as the need to share beds in a rooming house, the dinginess of the general store, or cooking of Softkee, a Seminole-Creek Indian dish of cornmeal, lye and salt (Wallace, undated: 1–2). Most notable is Mattie's moral determination, derived from her Presbyterian upbringing and belief in God's justice and grace. The recurrent use of the 1888 hymn, "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," as Mattie's theme by soundtrack composer Carter Burwell underlines her moral certainty and transcendent determination. Folk singer Iris DeMent sings the hymn over the end credits.

The prominence of evangelical Christians in right-wing American politics since the 1980s has made presentation of religious themes in movies more acceptable than during the early Cold War years, when secularism or diffuse religious or Christian sentiment were more likely. Religious themes may not have fit well with the movie's earlier version in the 1960s, but they make perfect sense in 2010.

The story can also be taken as proto-feminism, as we see the whole story from the standpoint of an adolescent girl as she enters into womanhood. Mattie refuses to be limited by traditional gender roles and uses her wits and negotiating skills to get what she wants. In the absence of her father, Mattie becomes the *de facto* leader of her family. She makes most of the key decisions or convinces Cogburn and LaBoeuf to go along with her wishes. A voice-over of the thirty-nine-year-old Mattie (Elizabeth Marvel) tells her story after the events of 1878. She lives independently, even though she is handicapped after losing an arm to the snakebite, and she says she has not had time for marriage.

The Coen Brothers' movie stays closer to the book's plot than the 1969 version, directed by Henry Hathaway and starring John Wayne as Rooster, Kim Darby as Mattie, Glen Campbell as LaBoeuf, and Robert Duvall as

Pepper. Darby's performance, unfortunately, was underrated. She should be applauded for giving us one of the strongest adolescent female characters of the era, though she was twenty-one years old at the time of filming. Wayne won his only Best Actor Oscar for his role. Arguably, the 2010 version would not have been made in 1969, as the Hathaway-Wayne installment emphasized action and the hunt for the fugitive Chaney. The newer film mirrors other Coen Brothers' stories with its emphasis on bleak landscapes, morally ambiguous villains, and reluctant law officers. *Fargo* (1996) and *No Country for Old Men* (2007) feature, respectively, a pregnant police chief and near-retirement sheriff. The former chases two hapless killers involved in a botched kidnapping, while the latter searches for a relentless hitman and his prey who made off with a drug money stash. Where *True Grit* differs is the inclusion of the element of moral certainty in the protagonist.

True Grit's evolution from popular novel to two very different movies shows the perennial appeal of the Western and the adaptability of the genre. Maybe the most America-centric of all the genres here presented, the genre is America itself: the stunning landscape, which is often an unstated star of the story, the upright lawmen and sturdy pioneers, the craven and villainous outlaws and murderous gunmen, the saloons filled with gamblers and prostitutes, the rugged cowboys and their cattle drives, the general stores, the rustic churches, and the simple ranch homes on the plains. It once presented Native Americans as evil antagonists or Noble Savages, but recently has appreciated them as humans. It perfects a hard-won America that may have partially existed while mythologizing an America that never existed.

The Western movie has made something of a comeback since the dawn of the millennium. Derided as old-fashioned and too character-driven, few Westerns were made in the 1970s, but the pivotal 1990s saw the release of several seminal Western films, discussed below. Another notable recent take on the frontier is *The Revenant* (2015), which won Oscars for Leonardo DiCaprio and director Alejandro Inarritu. This is a new take on a real incident: Hugh Glass, a mountain man and guide for a trapping party in the 1820s, gets heavily mauled by a mother bear and is left for dead by his compatriots. He survives and makes an arduous journey to a trading post, where he reconciles with the men who left him. The story had made the silver screen before as *Man in the Wilderness* (1971) starring Richard Harris as Zachary Bass (similar to Glass). John Huston plays the expedition leader, who fears Bass's return. When they meet again, Bass merely says that he has a son that he wants to see again.

Revenant finds Glass (DiCaprio) nearly killed by John Fitzgerald (Tom Hardy), who convinces young trapper Jim Bridger (Will Poulter) that Glass cannot be helped. When the pair reach Fort Kiowa, expedition commander Andrew Henry (Domhnall Gleason) is skeptical of Fitzgerald, but initially

accepts his story when Bridger says that Glass died and Hawk disappeared. A scared French trapper who escaped an Indian attack arrives at the post and says that Glass is still alive. Fitzgerald flees and Henry's party pursues. They find an exhausted Glass, who has survived by using his wits and receiving help from Indians. Glass and Henry follow Fitzgerald, who kills Henry. Glass finally catches Fitzgerald, besting him in a knife fight. About to kill Fitzgerald, Glass floats him down a small river to waiting Arikara Indians, who kill him. Grateful to Glass for freeing the chief's daughter from the French trappers, they let him go. Glass hears the voice of his dead wife speaking in the forest and we hear his breathing as the movie ends.

Inarritu's survival film adds a number of elements to the original story. Glass has a Pawnee wife who died and the mixed-race son Hawk. Trapper John Fitzgerald (Tom Hardy) has been left to watch over Glass but tries to smother him. When Hawk sees this, Fitzgerald kills him as a prostrate Glass watches. Fitzgerald forces Bridger to join him in lying that Glass is dead. The historic story was different: it was summer, not winter, Fitzgerald and a young man (perhaps Bridger) left Glass behind following the mauling, and the wounded man made his way across two-hundred miles of plains (not forests and mountains) to Fort Kiowa. Intending revenge, he forgave Bridger and Fitzgerald (Crow, 2016: 1–8).

Inarritu feels that the story is a reflection on the xenophobia rampant in America at the time of the movie. Donald Trump had just begun his run for president by attacking Mexican illegal immigrants. Another theme is protection of family, as Glass's love for his wife and son are his key motivations (O'Sullivan, 2016: 1–6). For DiCaprio, the movie also had an environmental message, as much of it was filmed in Canada and Argentina, where snowy, forested mountains and clear rivers could still be found, unlike much of the western United States, the climate of which has drastically changed in the past two hundred years.

Hostiles (2017) is the story of Captain Joseph Blocker (Christian Bale), who is about to retire and is ordered to escort Yellow Hawk (Wes Studi), a Cheyenne war chief, from New Mexico to his ancestral home in Montana. Yellow Hawk is accompanied by his son Black Hawk (Adam Beach), daughter, daughter-in-law, and grandson. Along the way, the party picks up Rosalee Quaid (Rosamund Pike), a traumatized widow whose husband and three children were killed by Comanches. Along the way, most of the soldiers with Blocker's detachment are killed, along with a soldier accused of murdering an Indian family they pick up at Fort Winslow in Colorado.

The movie puts forth the commonly accepted notion that, once people get to know each other, it is difficult for them to fight one another. Blocker initially hates Indians, but grows to respect Yellow Hawk and his kin, particularly when they band together to fight Comanches or fur traders. While the movie

does not make a particularly compelling case for this widely shared idea, it is serviceable storytelling. This is the latest film that tries to humanize and sympathize with Native Americans' plight at the hands of Americans (discussed later in the chapter). While the effort has been uneven, it has attempted to correct racist plots and dramatic elements prominent in the 1950s.

Blocker finds redemption in his journey to Montana. He is touched by the Natives' kindness, as they help Rosalie. They also assist the captain to repel the same Comanche party that killed Quaid's family. Master sergeant Metz (Rory Cochrane) is traumatized by what he has seen and done in the Indian wars. He asks the Natives for forgiveness, and then commits suicide. On reaching Montana, Blocker reconciles with Yellow Hawk, both noting that they have lost many friends and that death comes for everyone (Graybill, 2020: 96–98).

Quaid elects to stay with the party, rather than stay at Winslow. The women are abducted and raped by fur traders, but are rescued by the soldiers, along with Yellow Hawk and Black Hawk, who kill the fur traders. Upon reaching Montana, Yellow Hawk dies and is to be buried. A local landowner and his sons confront the party, demanding that they leave with Yellow Hawk's body. A fire fight breaks out, and only Blocker, Quaid, and Yellow Hawk's grandson survive. Blocker parts with Quaid at the train station but at the last moment boards the train, presumably to start a new life in Chicago with Quaid and the grandson. The train scene may be an homage to *The Searchers*, presented below. Blocker pauses at the train car door, as the character Ethan in the final scene paused at the cabin door. Unlike Ethan, he walks through the door to begin a new life (Graybill, 2020: 99).

BUILDING CIVILIZATION AND U.S. VALUES: WESTERNS AND CONSTRUCTIVISM

Social constructivism fits Westerns well. The social structure presented is the frontier society of nineteenth and early twentieth century America, along with Mexico during its mid-nineteenth and early twentieth century political struggles. Key social groups are farmers versus ranchers, small towns, and cities on the periphery of the West, such as San Francisco. Key social groups are cowboys, gunslingers, lawmen, prostitutes, small businessmen (or women), and Native Americans. The genre tropes of Western movies have been set for over a century, allowing inter-subjective understanding of these films and spawning the Spaghetti Westerns and Euro-Westerns of the 1960s-1970s. The state's identity and interest in these films is extending civilization and bringing law and order to the frontier. The U.S. government also extends its influence to northern Mexico. For post-World War II Hollywood movies,

Mexico often is a stand-in for the developing world, whereas for Spaghetti Westerns it becomes an arena to discuss ideas current in Italian or European politics. Key identities expressed include women, Native Americans, and African Americans. Class identities also frequently appear, in the form of conflict between farmers and ranchers, or country people versus townspeople.

The sociopolitical reality of Westerns has been constructed and reconstructed over and over since the first Westerns were released in the early days of film. The classic Westerns of the mid-1940s to early 1960s stressed conservative values and conventional American identities, such as civilized whites versus savage Indians. Unusual films such as *High Noon* indirectly confronted McCarthyism, while *The Magnificent Seven* was a parable of counter-insurgency in developing countries. Norms during this time focused on the lone hero pushing the frontier outward: he must have a code of honor, protect women and children, and violence must be constrained. With exceptions, such as in *Johnny Guitar*, women were supporting players who were there to bolster or support the hero.

In the 1960s, both norms and values of Westerns began to change. The revisionist Westerns began to question the morality of whites' push into the wilderness, Native Americans began to get fairer and more nuanced treatment, and stronger women began to appear onscreen. The Spaghetti Westerns completely overturned the moral code/limited violence approach of the 1950s, as gratuitous violence practiced by amoral characters appeared throughout these films. Italian directors also promoted a specifically leftist agenda, using the Mexican Revolution of 1910 as a surrogate for leftist politics in both Europe and the developing world.

By the 1990s to 2010s, the Western revival had restored some of the genre's luster, and more accurately approached such real-life Western heroes as Wyatt Earp as flawed characters with mixed motives. Women's Westerns explored more varied and complex female characters that reflected the realities of women in the Old West. By now, Native Americans have received more sympathetic treatment in stories of the West, but they still are often spectators in their own movies, which rarely present stories from their points of view.

The Hulsman-Mitchell schema of IR theories applied to *Godfather* characters works less well for Western characters than most genres. Most traditional Western protagonists are liberals in one form or another, though this gets more complicated in revisionist Westerns. Marshals and sheriffs in traditional stories are there to uphold the rule of law, the ultimate expression of liberal governance. Reformed gunmen like Shane may have worked on the wrong side of the law in the past, but they become defenders of honest citizens who will build the new civilization in the wilderness. Spaghetti Western heroes are very complicated, with nearly all characters exhibiting shades or gray. Thus, they show mixes of liberal and realist thinking. Villains, in either outlaw or

predatory rancher and businessman form, are usually offensive realists or neocons, depending on how over-the-top these characters behave. Female characters often represent the civilizing influence of American values that will eventually conquer the West so, in a sense, they are the ultimate liberals of these stories (Hulsman and Mitchell, 2009: 1–19).

ORIGINS OF CLASSIC WESTERS: MYTHS AND NOSTALGIA ON THE FRONTIER

Westerns constitute perhaps the oldest genre examined here. The Western emerged from dime novels of the nineteenth century and the popular early twentieth century fiction of Zane Grey and Owen Wister. One of the first Westerns to make a splash was *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), directed by film pioneer Edwin S. Porter. It combined a number of then-innovative techniques, such as intercutting simultaneous action, using outdoor location shots, employing matte paintings, and moving cameras during a shot. The final shot of the gang leader shooting his pistol directly at the camera shocked audiences (The Great . . . , 2021: 1–3). Martin Scorsese used the technique at the end of *Goodfellas*. By the 1920s, Westerns were among the most popular films, and talkies added to the realism of action.

Westerns have always been about violence: “spectacular imagery of wounding, trauma and death,” as Fisher describes it. Much of the genre’s appeal has been its violent resolution of most stories. Early Westerns such as *Jesse James* and *Stagecoach* establish that violence is not to be condemned, and it is righteous if used properly. If institutions fail and justice is not served, heroes are required to take the law into their own hands. Heroes commit multiple murders with the aim of making the frontier safe for women and children. Thus, the Western spends much of its effort “defining and constructing masculinity (or ‘making the man’) through violent trauma.” And the six-gun becomes a potent phallic symbol, often described as part of the hero (Fisher, 2014: 63–65).

Women in Westerns usually are meant as “domesticated, peaceful counterpoints to men.” They represent the civilized future that heroes are fighting for, but that future must be secured by male-on-male violence. Male violence gets presented as “cleansing” and “regenerative,” while pacificism or non-violence is branded as weak or feminine. However, Hollywood’s Production Code meant that this violence had to be couched in strict terms: the hero operates by a clear moral code, he resorts to violence only as a last resort, and bad men cannot succeed. The “dirty Westerns” of the late 1960s, such as *The Wild Bunch*, dispensed with these niceties and presented violence as a means to survival. The Spaghetti Westerns went even further, getting

rid of the moral dimension and employing violence throughout the story. As noted above, these new Westerns also reflected the leftist and anti-fascist Italian politics of the 1960s (Fisher, 2014: 66–69).

Since Westerns encompass almost the entire American experience on the frontier, several kinds of plots have graced the screen. The Union Pacific plot deals with building of railroads, telegraph lines, or wagon trains carrying settlers. The Ranch confronts threats to honest ranchers from rustlers, the operations of big landowners, and conflict between cattle barons and farmers. Related to the Ranch is the Empire, in which large ranchers form larger units, attempt to unite communities, or conflict with other cattle barons. The Revenge plot presents a chase or pursuit, either of someone seeking redress for killing of people close to them or are wrongly accused of crimes they did not commit.

Cavalry and Indian stories deal with the taming of the West, the quelling of Native American rebellions, or moving Indians onto reservations. As we will see, this sub-genre has undergone considerable evolution as attitudes to indigenous people has changed. The Outlaw considers both gangs who rob (usually banks and trains), and individual criminals. A related plot is the Gunman, who may be a vicious negative force, or who has reformed but usually cannot be assimilated into a civilized community (unless he meets the right woman). The Marshal (or sheriff) brings law, order, and civilized norms to the frontier (“The Seven . . .,” Undated: 1–2).

Perennial characters appearing in these types of stories include cowboys who work on the ranches or on the great cattle drives. Gunmen are loners who may be “bad guys,” or who may serve as avengers for the community. Indians or Native Americans were usually implacable antagonists until the 1960s, when they began to be reassessed. Sheriffs or marshals fight against the bad guys. Settlers and townspeople bring civilization to the frontier, but townspeople also may be narrow-minded, corrupt or untrustworthy. Ranchers and farmers (often called “sod busters”) are often key antagonists, as are big and small businesses. Saloons are a key site for socialization and conflict, where saloon girls (sometimes pouring drinks, but often unstated prostitutes) are a common sight (“Western Characters,” Undated: 1–2).

The origins of the Western lie in Americans’ fascination with the advancing frontier in the early nineteenth century. One of the first great American novels, James Fennimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*, looks backward to the French and Indian War (1754–1763) and fictionalizes several key moments in that conflict. In line with other works of the period, it suggests that Native Americans were disappearing, and this cleared the way for whites to take their land. Even so, the eponymous last Mohican (Chingachgook) is a sympathetic figure as “Noble Savage” and adoptive father for the protagonist, Nathaniel “Hawkeye” Bumppo (Poe in the 1990s movie), independent scout

for American settlers and the British. Other Native Americans, especially the vengeful Huron warrior Magua, appear as “barbarous” or “savage” (Koffler, 2010: 1–4).

Daniel Day-Lewis provides the story’s definitive on-screen Hawkeye in the 1992 film adaptation directed by Michael Mann. Having rescued the daughters of Colonel Edmund Munro (Cora and Alice) and Major Duncan Heyward, Hawkeye assists the British during a French siege at Fort William Henry in the Adirondacks. He falls in love with Cora (Madeleine Stowe), while Chingachgook’s son Uncas and Alice feel mutual attraction. When Nat helps other Americans leave the fort to return to protect their families, he is charged with sedition. The French take the fort’s surrender and parole the British garrison, but Magua (Studi again) ambushes them on the road and kills most of them, cutting out Munro’s heart in revenge for the killing of his family.

Escaping the attack, Hawkeye leads a party including Chingachgook (Russell Means), Uncas, the Munro daughters and Heyward behind a waterfall. Hawkeye realizes that he cannot save them from Magua’s men, and it is better to let the daughters and Heyward be captured temporarily. His promise to Cora that he will search for her and her sister is one of the great romantic scenes of the 1990s. “You stay alive!” he instructs her.

If they don’t kill you, they’ll take you north up to the Huron lands. Submit, do you hear? You’re strong! You survive! You stay alive, no matter what occurs! I will find you! No matter how long it takes, no matter how far. I will find you!

They embrace. Hawkeye, Chingachgook, and Uncas leap through the waterfall and swim downriver.

Hawkeye and his party trail Magua and his men to the Huron settlement. Presenting his captives, Magua appeals to the great sachem (or chief) for rewards. Hawkeye walks alone into the gathering, beaten by several warriors, and appeals for release of the captives. The sachem gives Alice to Magua, sends Heyward to the British to calm their anger, and orders Cora to be burned. Hawkeye offers to take her place, but Heyward translates this as himself taking her place. Hawkeye and Cora leave, and Hawkeye shoots Heyward as he is being burned. Uncas catches up with Magua, killing several of his men, but Magua kills him and throws his body off a precipice. Alice then throws herself off the precipice after Uncas. Hawkeye and Chingachgook kill the rest of Magua’s men, and Chingachgook dispatches Magua. Chingachgook prays to the gods and spirits of his people to accept Uncas, noting that he is now the last of his tribe.

John Ford’s classic *Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939) presents settlers in upstate New York who cope with marauding by the British and their Indian

allies during the American Revolution. Lana Borst (Claudette Colbert) is the daughter of German Americans who marries Gil Martin (Henry Fonda). Gil serves in the local militia during the early stage of the war, then returns to help his wife and a widow who has taken them in because their farm was destroyed. When British and Indian allies attack again, Gil undertakes a difficult mission to send for reinforcements. The American forces arrive, just in time to beat back the British. Lana and Gil return to their old farm and begin to rebuild it as the war ends.

SETTLERS, SAVAGES, AND CAVALRY: FORD AND WAYNE DEFINE THE GENRE

When I grew up, the Western was our family's favorite genre. I watched Western TV shows during the evening, and the next day played Cowboys and Indians in the backyard with my friends. During the summer, we went to drive-in theaters at least a couple of weekends per month. It was great fun anticipating the movies and preparing popcorn, homemade popsicles, and other things to eat, so that we wouldn't have to spend money at the expensive concession stand. It seemed that a quarter of the movies were Westerns and about half of those starred John Wayne. The rugged Westerner—actually named Marion Michael Morrison, born in Iowa and raised in California—seemed the embodiment of American values and honor. My family loved him, and he was one of my first celebrity impressions that I did as a kid (“you sent a boy to do a man's job . . . that'll be the day . . . get on your horse . . . think back, Pilgrim” and other Wayne catchphrases). One of my uncles put up a huge painting of the star in his workshop. When the actor passed in 1979, my father couldn't stop talking about it for days. You would have thought that a president had died.

The modern Western may not have arisen without Wayne and his long-time director and guru, John Ford. Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) includes a variety of elements of successful Westerns. It is widely viewed by critics as one of the best Westerns ever made. White settlers fight Native Americans, the cavalry rescues settlers on the frontier, a stagecoach takes passengers across the desert, an escaped fugitive wants to avenge his family and engages in a shootout in the street with bad guys, and a prostitute seeks redemption. It also is the film that made Wayne a star. From his first appearance as the Ringo Kid a third of the way into the movie, his character dominates the action, and the audience sympathizes with his search for honor—and for his desire to marry Dallas (Claire Trevor), a prostitute who has been kicked out of an Arizona town and is going to Lordsburg, New Mexico, to resume her profession. Ringo loves her, anyway, and wants her to join him at this ranch.

For modern audiences, the most troubling aspect of the movie is its treatment of American Indians. The Apache are presented as fanatical savages bent on killing white people. They stupidly chase the stagecoach across the Monument Valley landscape that Ford used in several of his movies, where they become easy targets. The manager of the Apache Wells station, whose wife is Apache, suggests that Indians' nature is wild and completely different than civilized people. Such anti-Native views, called out by some as racist, can be found in many of his films of the 1950s, especially his cavalry trilogy: *Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), and *Rio Grande* (1950), along with *The Searchers* (1956).

Fort Apache is loosely based on the last stage of Col. George Armstrong Custer's career, though it is set in Arizona, not the upper plains and Montana. Col. Owen Thursday (Fonda), an arrogant stickler for military discipline, arrives to take command of Fort Apache. He ignores advice from Capt. Kirby York (Wayne) to treat the Apache with honor, and to relieve a corrupt Indian agent because Thursday thinks that as a government agent the man must be protected. Against York's advice, Thursday pushes his men into an Apache ambush. He relieves York and orders him to stay with reserves on a ridge above. Thursday returns to his men, who are surrounded, and dies with them. York then negotiates with the Indians to end the conflict.

She Wore a Yellow Ribbon concerns Capt. Nathan Brittles (Wayne), who is about to retire from the Army. He is given contradictory orders to stop an Indian rebellion and to escort the wife and daughter of the fort commander to catch the stagecoach. He seems to fail at both tasks but tries to negotiate with an Indian chief whom he has known for many years. That failing, he stampedes the Indians' horses, forcing them to return to the reservation. He ends the movie being made Chief of Scouts by order of the War Department.

Rio Grande concerns York (Wayne) again. Now in Texas to defend white settlers, he is ordered to cross the Mexican border to go after attacking Apaches. As York approaches the border, he learns that a wagonload of children has been kidnapped. Three troopers, including Trooper Tyree (Ben Johnson) who is wanted by Texas authorities for manslaughter, find the children being held in a ruined church at a Mexican village. York sends the troopers back to infiltrate and save the kids as York leads an all-out attack on the Indians. The children are saved, but York is wounded by an arrow. He and the troopers return to a hero's reception. He makes sure that Tyree has a head start to escape the marshals.

The Searchers is considered one of the greatest Westerns—and one of the greatest films of the 1950s. I discuss it more thoroughly in the section on Native Americans below.

The Horse Soldiers (1959) is one of my favorite Ford-Wayne collaborations, and Ford's only full film set in the American Civil War. It is loosely

based on Grierson's Raid through Mississippi, and the Battle of Newton Station, which were in support of General Ulysses S. Grant's 1863 campaign to capture the critical Mississippi River port of Vicksburg. Col. John Marlowe (Wayne) leads his cavalry brigade on the raid through Mississippi, assisted by a war-skeptical doctor, Major Henry "Hank" Kendall (William Holden). At the Greenbriar plantation, Hannah Hunter (Constance Towers), the owner, acts as a gracious host, while secretly listening to Marlowe's war council, and she intends to warn the Confederates. Kendall discovers Hannah and her slave Lukey (Althea Gibson) and reveals how they listened through the mansion's heating pipes.

Marlowe has no choice but to take Hunter along when the brigade leaves. At first angry for her life being upended, she comes to appreciate Marlowe's honor. Marlowe's men defeat a suicidal Confederate attack at Newton Station, where the cavalry also destroys Confederate provisions. Marlowe decides to make his way south to Baton Rouge but is trailed by Confederates the whole way. The brigade makes its way through a swamp, then destroys a Confederate detachment facing them. Kendall removes a bullet from Marlowe's leg, buying him time to get to Baton Rouge. Marlowe apologizes to Hunter for all the hardship he has caused her and later confesses his love for her. Hunter says nothing, but gazes at him longingly. They both realize that they have no future together. Kendall decides to stay and go into captivity, so that he can care for the wounded. Marlowe blows up a nearby bridge behind him as he leaves.

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962) finds Ford, surprisingly, making one of the first revisionist Westerns. It is a wistful look back at the closing of the frontier and meditation on the falsehoods on which Western myths were based. It employs the framework of the central character, who has become a major national-level politician, relating his life story to local reporters. He has come to town to attend the funeral of Tom Doniphon (Wayne), a local rancher. In flashback, Ransom "Ranse" Stoddard (James Stewart) arrives out West to practice law, but his stagecoach is waylaid by bandits led by the sadistic Liberty Valance (Lee Marvin), who viciously whips Ranse when he protests the gang's stealing jewelry from a woman passenger. Tom takes the wounded Ranse to the town of Shinbone, where he is cared for by feisty Hallie (Vera Miles), who is Doniphon's girlfriend and expected to marry him. She is attracted to Ranse, who teaches her to read. Ranse wants to use law and education to civilize the West, but he comes to realize that Valance must be confronted by force. Tom tells Ranse that Hallie is his girl and shows him an addition to his house he is building for her.

Valance challenges Ranse to a gunfight. After Valance beats and whips the newspaper editor Dutton Peabody (Edmond O'Brien) for attacking Valance in print, Ranse accepts the challenge. Concerned for Ranse's safety, Hallie

asks Tom for help. Valance toys with Ranse as he approaches, shooting him in the arm and laughing. He then readies to shoot Ranse “right between the eyes.” Ranse shoots first, and Valance drops dead in the street. Tom sees Hallie caring for Ranse’s wound and he knows he has lost her. In a drunken fit, he burns down his house. Ranse and Peabody travel as representatives to the statehood convention, but Ranse has second thoughts about running for delegate to Washington and, considering himself a murderer, prepares to leave. Outside, he is confronted by an unshaven Tom, who tells him, “you didn’t shoot Liberty Valance.” In flashback, he relates how he was waiting in an alley as Ranse approached Valance and shot the bandit with his rifle just as Ranse was about to shoot.

Ranse goes back into the hall and is acclaimed the delegate to Washington. Back in the present, the newspapermen decide not to use the story. “This is the West, sir,” one says. “When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.” Returning to Washington on the train, Ranse tells Hallie that he wants to retire from politics and return to Shinbone. She is happy to hear this, as if they never discussed her wishes before. Lighting his cigar, Ranse commends the train conductor for his efforts to get to their destination early, to which the conductor replies, “nothing’s too good for the man who shot Liberty Valance.” Hallie sighs, as Ranse blows out his match and looks down.

This is a troubling story that nearly serves as epitaph for Ford’s career. Gone is the heroic West of upright cavalymen, righteous settlers, and salt-of-the-earth cowboys. Ranse Stoddard’s righteous “legend” is built on a lie. Tom Doniphon, the real hero, dies in obscurity without the love of his life, who now belongs to the poser. Hallie still remembers her lost love, and she places a special cactus flower on his coffin. The audience is left wondering how much of the American West—or America as a whole—is a pack of concocted legends. The story is also troubling concerning the nature of governance in the West, where brigands can roam at will and can freely visit the town of Shinbone without being arrested. Only the resort to gun violence can save the town from the wild bandit. Is America today, armed to the teeth with more firearms than people and registering about twenty-thousand deaths from gun violence per year, much different from the Old West?

Corkin uses *Liberty Valance* as an example of a “nostalgic imperialism” that seeks to connect the imperialist present to values that have been lost. Before the Vietnam War, both the Right and Left sought to overcome the damage to American society wrought by modernization by appealing to an idealized past. Other films dedicated to such a project include *Lonely Are the Brave* and *Ride the High Country*, the latter of which is discussed below among revisionist Westerns (Corkin, 2004: 205–247).

Westerns peaked as a genre in the 1950s. Stewart became one of Hollywood’s most bankable stars in the 1950s due to a string of Westerns

directed by Anthony Mann. The Mann series is considered one of the most serious examinations of manhood in Western films. These are men who seek to prove themselves but are heroes “ceaselessly trying to eradicate the memory” of some terrible pain from their past, often from their own families or loves (Willemen, 1998: 209–212). One of the best of these films is *The Naked Spur* (1953). Stewart plays Howard Kemp, who is tracking a notorious robber Ben Vandergroat (Robert Ryan), wanted for murdering a marshal in Abilene, Kansas. Playing against type, Ryan’s outlaw is garrulous, friendly, and likeable, while Kemp is driven and obsessive. Kemp gets help from seasoned prospector Jesse Tate (Millard Mitchell) and ex-cavalryman Roy Anderson (Ralph Meeker). Vandergroat’s traveling companion is Lina Patch (Janet Leigh), whose father was Kemp’s friend. Kemp wants the reward for Vandergroat’s capture so he can buy a ranch (his ex-fiance sold his previous ranch when he was serving in the Civil War). On the trail, Howard and Lina fall in love, but he is determined to bring in Vandergroat for the reward. Finally, he realizes that his love for Lina is more important than the money, and he buries the now dead outlaw and agrees with Lina to go to California to start a new life.

THE ALAMO: AMERICA’S THERMOPYLAE?

John Wayne’s first directorial project, *The Alamo* (1960) about the 1836 battle at the eponymous mission in San Antonio, situates at the nexus of Westerns and war movies. Taking place on the frontier, its main characters on the Texas side are settlers, recent immigrants, and opportunists, drawn to the Mexican province of Coahuila-Texas with promises of land and self-government. The battle itself was part of the Texas Revolution, in which mostly white rebels with some local Latinos known as Tejanos separated from Mexico to form the Republic of Texas (1836–1845). Texas then became a U.S. state by bilateral international agreement in 1845.

To the rebels and generations of Texas school children, the siege and battle was Texas’s equivalent of Thermopylae, in which between 182 and 250 Texans and immigrants (usually with little mention of Tejanos) sacrificed their lives to delay Mexican President Antonio Lopez de Santa Ana’s march northward to quash the rebellion. The rebel army under Sam Houston adopted the slogan “Remember the Alamo!” in their victory at San Jacinto, near Houston, six weeks later. I was one of those Texas school kids, and I grew up believing in the Alamo as one of the greatest battles in American history. My family visited the mission when I was ten, and I was a bit disappointed that it did not look like the movie set that Wayne had constructed at Brackettville, 120 miles west of San Antonio.

To many Mexican historians, the battle was a minor event, easily won with light Mexican casualties in the pre-dawn hours of March 6. Modern historians suggest that the stand at the mission was motivated by commander Colonel William Barret Travis, a radical who had encouraged rebellion since he had arrived in Texas in 1831, and he acted against the wishes of Houston to blow up the mission and remove the needed cannons. The other key officers leading two groups of volunteers, Jim Bowie and David (Davy) Crockett, seem to have been driven by a mix of political and material motives to participate in the fight (see Kilmeade, 2020: 86–133).

Welborn suggests that Texas fits with the history of “filibustering” expeditions of the early nineteenth century, as private groups of Americans sought to gain control of Spanish colonial lands. He notes that the Alamo movies fail to supply the complex history of Texas and employ three common tropes: an American exceptionalism assumption, identifying American culture with its masculine expression, and the downplaying of slavery as a major factor in the Texas Revolution (Welborn, 2020: 107–108).

Wayne was originally slated to direct and star in the exiting but conventional Alamo film, *The Last Command* (1955), but instead Frank Lloyd directed and Sterling Hayden starred as Bowie, the central character. Wayne used his own film to advance his conservative political beliefs that Americans were fighting for rights and freedom around the world. Crockett’s and Travis’s bombastic speeches suggest that the Texas Revolution is solely about freedom and democracy. The movie presents the Mexican army as an inexorable and terrifying force, not unlike Cold War depictions of Communist armies. Santa Ana is a plumed figure on horseback who has no lines. He thus is a threat that hangs over the fort, without humanity or justification for his actions (Welborn, 2020: 108–109).

The film is full of historical errors, such as Houston encouraging Travis to hold the mission, characters stating that the battle takes place on the Rio Bravo (it was on the Rio San Antonio), suggestions that refugees would be evacuated south to Coahuila (they went east to escape the Mexican forces), portraying Juan Seguin as an elderly alcalde, or mayor, of San Antonio de Bexar who questions Travis’s actions (he was actually a young rebel who left the fort to carry a message to Houston), assertions that the massacre at Goliad takes place during the Alamo siege (it was two weeks later), and that Jim Bowie’s wife dies during the siege (it was two and a half years earlier). The movie battle takes place at mid-day, but the real one occurred in the pre-dawn hours, when Mexican forces effectively used the cover of darkness to surprise the defenders.

Richard Widmark, an actor of average height, plays the towering Bowie. He gets wounded, while the real Bowie was quite ill during the siege. The film depicts two dramatic raids on the Mexican forces that never happened.

In fact, most of the events depicted and colorful minor characters included are ahistorical. The most egregious error is presenting Travis as a prickly martinet and stickler for military discipline, even though he had little military experience. Travis is played by Laurence Harvey, who begins the movie with an ersatz Southern accent and then switches mid-film to his native British accent. The real Travis had grown up in South Carolina and moved to Alabama, where he practiced law and ran a local newspaper, but he had left his family to relocate to Texas and later divorced his wife (McDonald, 2017: 1–5).

The film crystalizes post-World War II confidence in American political and social values. Though they differ in personality, the three main characters exemplify American ideals. This is shown most forcefully in two scenes. In the first, the zealot Travis meets the backwoodsman Crockett. Each is pleased that the other embraces core American values and views, especially their shared belief in American cultural and political ideals. Crockett expresses his central beliefs in his “Republic” soliloquy. On the night before the final assault, the defenders discuss their fates as they realize the likely outcome of the battle. Almost all of them express belief in a personal God who will save them. Only one man, who may be Hispanic, disdains religion. The implication is that American culture stands for Christian religious values, and that the Mexican Catholic army facing them is an enemy of Christian civilization (Welborn, 2020: 108–110).

The 1960 film, says Welborn, is suffused with white racial supremacy and gender paternalism. The only black character, Bowie’s fictional slave Jethro, is a stereotype using slave patois and acting deferential to the Alamo’s white leaders. Upon receiving his freedom from Bowie, he decides to stay and die with his former master. Travis dismisses military intelligence from Seguin, judging it more important to keep morale in the fort than offend a Tejano ally. Crockett meets the fictional well-born Mexican lady “Flaca” Lopez de Vejar (Linda Cristal, in one of her best performances) and immediately intervenes on her behalf with an unwanted suitor. Through all his interactions with her, Crockett puts himself forward as patriarchal protector, even though she says she does not need his assistance. Bowie expresses admiration for Mexican culture, but it is a constrained acceptance couched in liberal American terms. Most importantly, the story paints the Alamo defenders as well-developed individuals, while contrasting the Mexican soldiers as an undifferentiated “horde” that will roll over the Americans (Welborn, 2020: 115–117). The audience could have drawn comparisons between the Mexicans and the Russian and Chinese adversaries arrayed against America during the early Cold War.

Despite all of that, the kid in me still loves the film, and it provokes pangs of nostalgia every time I see it. I revel in the over-the-top Wayne dialogue,

the goofy stock supporting players, such as Ken Curtis, Denver Pyle, and Chill Wills, and the fumbling but earnest romance between Crockett and Flaca. Harvey makes a great Travis, even if the historical figure was very different. Now, if he could just settle on an accent. Anyone can thrill to Dmitri Tiomkin's passionate score, including the tragic theme song, "The Green Leaves of Summer," which becomes a leitmotif throughout the story. At the end, as fictional boy message rider Smitty (Frankie Avalon) escorts Susannah Dickinson (Joan O'Brien) and her daughter away from the vanquished fort and the music swells, I defy anyone to not feel the tragedy wash over them.

A year after the Alamo sesquicentennial in 1986, NBC put out an ambitious TV movie, *The Alamo: Thirteen Days to Glory*. It was filmed at the same Brackettville set used by Wayne and crew. Like many television movies in the 1970s and 1980s, it suffers from slow pacing, lagging action, and leaden dialogue, but it is a sincere effort. Once again, Travis (a young Alec Baldwin) clashes with Bowie (an aging James Arness), but they resolve their differences more amicably than in the Wayne film. Crockett (Brian Keith) is neither the charismatic figure we know from history nor vital to the siege. Raul Julia gives a juicy performance as Santa Ana, an unforgiving authoritarian who suffers neither fools nor dissenters. He is particularly tough on a fictional British officer seconded to oversee use of British weapons, Col. Blake (David Ogden Stiers), who challenges the generalissimo's decisions.

The movie corrects a few of the mistakes in the 1960 film but adds a few more of its own. Like the 1960 effort, the story has Bowie injured, not sick, it depicts a raid on Mexican cannon, and it stages the final attack during daylight. It repeats the myth that Alamo siege bought time for Houston's army, suggests that the Texas convention in Washington-on-the-Brazos voted for independence because of the siege, places Travis on the western wall and makes him one of the latter casualties in the battle (he was near the eastern breach and one of the first to die). An Alamo courier confronts Houston (Lorne Greene) as cowardly for not coming to the Alamo's defense, and the story suggests that Santa Ana attacked the mission to avenge his brother-in-law, who was defeated by the rebels several weeks before. No in both cases. Houston was gathering his forces and pursued a smart rope-a-dope strategy against the Mexican army. And no, Santa Ana wanted to secure San Antonio de Bexar as the gateway to Texas and to warn the other rebels. Travis's speech and drawing of the line-in-the-sand are well staged, though historians disagree over whether the event took place (*The Alamo . . .*, 2018: 1–3).

One of the best scenes has the friends of one of the defenders, a virginal young man, arranging for him to spend his last night under the covers with his Mexican girlfriend. After the battle, she finds his body among the slain defenders. Their love story is very affecting, though it is entirely fictional.

The boy-meets-girl subplot may have been included to show that Mexicans or Tejanos were not the enemy, and to make the story more appealing to the burgeoning Hispanic television audience (*The Alamo* . . . , 2018: 1–3).

A 2004 version of *The Alamo*, directed by John Lee Hancock, is more historically accurate, correcting most of the errors in the 1960 and 1987 movies. Mexican leaders and a few soldiers get a sympathetic portrayal and, as in the TV movie, Santa Ana (Emilio Echevarria) comes across as an authoritarian who tolerates no opposition. But, in presenting the Alamo's defenders as unsure of their cause and depressed about their pending doom, it misses the revolutionary zeal that drove these men to give their lives in a hopeless battle. Billy Bob Thornton's Crockett disdains his own celebrity, popular persona as "Davy" Crockett, and political career—and seems uncertain why he is even in a confined fort. Surviving accounts of the battle show that Crockett was enthusiastic and spent much of his time encouraging the other defenders. Most of the defenders believed in the Texas Revolution and were dedicated to the Alamo's defense. As much as anything, their defeat was due to their small numbers and the mission's being ill-suited to serve as a fort. Both theatrical movies over-emphasize conflict between Travis and Bowie, who arranged to share command before Bowie was laid up with his illness. Once Bowie was incapacitated, Travis took complete command.

Welborn feels that the 2004 film demonstrates the "prevailing cultural, political, and military confidence" of America as it pursued the Global War on Terrorism, yet we see "American braggadocio tinged with latent insecurity." All the major characters are conflicted about their contradictory values and ambitions. Sam Houston (Dennis Quaid) visits Washington but as a frontiersman is not taken seriously by the Washington elite. Crockett is the only politician to take Houston seriously, but he comes off as "common charlatan and crooked politician." Bowie (Jason Patric) tries to walk a line between gentlemanly refinement and his dark, violent nature. Travis (Patrick Wilson) is the representative of the elite gentry, yet he is both inexperienced and longs for military glory. Though unstated in the movie, all four men seek to make good in a new land but are at heart southerners driven by a system founded on white privilege and black slavery (Welborn, 2020: 110–112).

This latter version also presents a more nuanced picture of race and ethnicity, though women are largely absent, except as wives and relatives. Two black slaves, Joe and Sam, discuss the proper way under Mexican anti-slavery laws to surrender, so that the Mexicans will not kill them. Joe tells Sam to say, "Soy negro, no disparo" (I am black, don't kill me). The phrase would have been nonsensical to a Mexican in the 1830s; it should have been "Soy esclavo, no disparo" (I am a slave, don't kill me). Bowie lets Joe leave with other non-combatants but insists that he is still Bowie's "property." Seguin sizes up the Texians with one of his Tejano compatriots: they are greedy

low-lifes, but they can be useful because “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” The movie shows the multi-ethnic makeup of Houston’s army at the Battle of San Jacinto, with a hesitant Houston finally allowing the Tejanos to join the assault on Santa Ana’s camp. Seguin instructs the Tejanos to identify themselves with playing cards in their hat bands (Welborn, 2020: 117–118).

The 2004 movie was a big box office disappointment. It deserved better. Nonetheless, it contains some great moments. Crockett plays his violin to accompany the Mexican “no quarter” musical piece *Deguello*. The Mexicans decide not to bombard the fort that day, and Crockett observes, “amazing what a little harmony will do.” After Travis gives his big speech without drawing the line, the ailing Bowie praises his effort, suggesting that Travis may turn into a great man. Travis replies, “I think I will have to settle for what I am now.” Unlike other Alamo flicks, we accurately see Houston opposed to a defense of the Alamo, but then using the tragic siege to rally the Texas forces and quickly defeat Santa Ana at San Jacinto.

COLD WAR AND ANTICOMMUNIST PARABLES: HIGH NOON TO MAGNIFICENT SEVEN

The 1950s were the height of Western movie popularity. From the late 1940s to late 1950s, most years saw over fifty feature Westerns produced by Hollywood, with fifty-four made in 1958. Numbers fell into the twenties by the 1960s, and by 1977 there were only seven released by major studios. Western films of the 1950s became surrogates for the Cold War struggles in which American engaged; most of them were produced in the shadow of the Korean War, in which America intervened but was forced into a stalemate with Communist forces. Corkin notes that three great Westerns, *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* (1957), *The Magnificent Seven*, and *The Alamo* (1960) all contained themes of Containment. Americans, who have attained civilization, have the right to intervene in societies that have not yet reached that level of attainment, that is, lawless Tombstone, Arizona, northern Mexico, and pre-independence Texas. *High Noon*, *Shane*, and *The Searchers* (1956) present the need to stop criminals or intervene or punish Indians (read international bullies) (Corkin, 2004: 13–17).

Stanley Kramer’s *High Noon* (1952) is a fast-paced, real-time story of a town marshal who cannot find anyone to help him face down a hardened criminal who has come back to town. For many in Hollywood, it was also an attack on the anti-Communist witch hunts of the McCarthy period of the early 1950s, and an allegory about the prevalent blacklisting of writers and other film personnel. None of the townspeople will stand with the marshal against the bad guys, just as few Americans supported Hollywood writers and actors

who were hauled before the House Un-American Activities Committee and pressured to give names of leftists. The black-and-white morality tale has also become one of the most watched movies at the White House. Bill Clinton, for instance, watched it several times. Presidents have seen themselves as the lone town marshal who must face down assorted enemies and can only rely on himself.

The story centers on Marshal Will Kane (Gary Cooper), who is getting married to a younger woman, Amy Fowler (Grace Kelly), and is about to step down, start a family, and operate a general store in another town. Kane gets word that gang leader Frank Miller (Ian MacDonald) soon will arrive by train to join his gang and take revenge on the marshal for sending him to jail. Kane decides to delay his departure, which upsets his bride. As a Quaker whose father and brother have been killed by gun violence, Amy says that if Kane stays, she will leave on the noon train. Kane cannot get any help around town. Some turn him down out because they fear Miller, others disdain him because he cleaned up the town, meaning that they could not make as much money from cowboys and outlaws. His deputy, Harvey Pell (Lloyd Bridges), demands that Kane recommend him as the new marshal, which he will not do because of the young man's immaturity. All his friends back out, and only a fourteen-year-old boy volunteers. Kane praises the kid, but politely turns him down.

As Amy waits for the train, she meets saloon owner Helen Ramirez (Katy Jurado), who was once Kane's lover. Ramirez says she cannot do anything for Kane because he is not her man anymore, and questions why Amy will not help him. Ramirez sells her saloon, fearing what Miller will do to her, as he was her boyfriend before Kane. She and Amy go by wagon to the train. An iconic tracking shot moving from the ground upward shows Kane standing alone in the street. Miller arrives and marches to town with his four men. Just as the shooting begins, Amy runs off the train back to town. Kane kills two of Miller's men. Amy shoots a third from Kane's office, and Miller takes her hostage and walks into the street, demanding that Kane throw down his gun and come out. She claws Miller's face and he throws her to the ground. Kane shoots Miller dead. The townspeople come out now that Miller is no longer a threat. As Kane is about to get on his buckboard, he dismissively throws his marshal's badge into the dirt.

Frankel follows the development of the film from conception to screening. Screenwriter Carl Foreman for several years had intended to make a film about a criminal gang and the marshal who brings them to book. Foreman was called before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1947, but as a minor script writer he did not receive much attention. By 1951, he had been nominated for awards and was again called before the committee, and he knew that he would be asked to give names of Hollywood Communists or

leftists. As he was pondering what to do, he decided to turn the *High Noon* script into a parable of the postwar Red Scare and the blacklist. In his mind, he was the marshal, HUAC members were the gang of outlaws, and the cowering, fearful townspeople were those in Hollywood who refused to stand up to HUAC. He did not know that audiences would take to the story as a universal allegory about doing the right thing. Director Kramer was Foreman's good friend and warmed to the idea. The movie was a cheap black-and-white effort to fulfill multiple contracts, shot in a little over a month but, upon release, was widely hailed and quite popular (Frankel, 2017: xiii–xx, 247–263).

Wayne was initially offered the Kane role, but did not accept because he supported the blacklist and did not like the story. He was determined to bring to the screen his own vision about law and order in a small town. This he did in Howard Hawks's *Rio Bravo* (1959). John T. Chance (Wayne) is sheriff of a west Texas town. He holds Joe Burdette (Claude Akins), brother of big rancher Nathan Burdette (John Russell), in jail for murder. Chance is assisted initially by aging, crippled deputy Stumpy (Walter Brennan), drunk ex-deputy sheriff Dude (Dean Martin), and young gunslinger Colorado (Ricky Nelson). Feathers (Angie Dickinson), widow of a notorious gambler and card player herself, assists and romances Chance. Chance and his friends must wait for the marshal to arrive and pick up the prisoner. Hawks takes his time building all these characters, so when the climax comes the audience cares for them and wants them to succeed (Phipps, 2021: 1–25).

Hawks and Wayne criticized the *High Noon* concept of a lone sheriff unable to get support from his town. *Rio Bravo* presents a positive view of the town and its people. The sheriff is supported by both his crew at the jail and by the local hotel manager and others. Burdette's numerous gunmen are thwarted every time they attempt to attack the jail. Coordinated action by Chance and his men allow the team to overcome Burdette's men, killing several of them in buildings at the edge of town, and forcing the rest to surrender.

Hawks essentially remade this story in the similar *El Dorado* (1966). In this case, Sheriff J. P. Harrah (Robert Mitchum) is the drunk, and Cole Thornton (Wayne) is a friend who comes to town and helps the sheriff. Once again, a large landowner is terrorizing the town to get someone released from jail. Hawks's third Wayne vehicle using the same theme, *Rio Lobo* (1970), is yet another statement of the townspeople standing with law enforcement against the bad guys.

John Sturges's *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) is a much different kind of Cold War parable. Based on the Akira Kurosawa film, *Seven Samurai* (1954), it tells the story of seven hired gunmen who save a Mexican peasant village from a predatory bandit's gang. What makes this a Cold War allegory is that the gunmen behave like U.S. military advisors entering "brushfire"

wars in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. They undertake a thankless job of both training and fighting, and most of them get killed. Like Green Berets in Vietnam, they are willing to do so to stop the banditos (read Communist guerrillas) who are seeking to control the village (read developing country). It is no accident that the Mexicans are chosen, as they are Latin Americans, in a region where many Cold War brushfire wars occurred. This story could just as easily be set in Bolivia in the 1960s, Central America in the 1980s or Colombia in the 1990s.

After being preyed upon for food and supplies by bandito Calvera (Eli Wallach), villagers take advice from the Old Man of the village and travel to a U.S. border town to buy guns. Chris Adams (Yul Brynner), a Cajun gunslinger, tells them to hire gunmen to protect the village because they are cheaper. He agrees to help, and then decides to recruit a group of such gunmen. They include the broke drifter Vin Tanner (Steve McQueen), professional gunman in need of money Bernardo O'Reilley (Charles Bronson), dandy gunman who has lost his confidence Lee (Robert Vaughn) and knife specialist Britt (James Coburn). Six men leave, followed by a seventh, Chico (Horst Buchholz), a hotheaded young gunman. Adams allows Chico to join because he will not give up. The seven help the villagers build defenses, and train them to use rifles. Chico disdains the villagers because they are like those in the village from which he escaped. The Seven kill Calvera's scouts, then beat off an attack, killing eight of Calvera's men.

Using a ruse to get the seven to leave, Calvera takes over the village and forces the seven to surrender their guns when they return. They are taken some distance from the village and given their guns back. After discussion, all but fortune hunter Harry Luck (Brad Dexter) decide to return to the village. In one last fight, they kill Calvera and disperse his men, but only Chris, Vin, and Chico survive. Harry returns and gets killed saving Chris. As Calvera dies, he asks Chris, "You came back . . . to a place like this? Why? A man like you? Why?" Chris and Vin leave, but Chico decides to stay with Petra (Rosenda Monteros), one of the village girls, with whom he has fallen in love. Chris observes, "The Old Man was right. Only the farmers won. We lost. We'll always lose." Indeed, counter-insurgency is ever a thankless business.

Corkin uses *The Magnificent Seven* as an illustration of America's embrace of modernization theory in the early 1960s. W. W. Rostow was the most prominent scholar who put forth a theory suggesting that, to be successful, economic development should be modeled on the American experience and have the goal of becoming an industrial economy like America in 1960. This film asserts the right of the superior U.S. civilization to intervene in and shape the course of economic development in "backward" states, and this notion united liberals and conservatives before the Vietnam War (Corkin, 2004: 164–204).

The Magnificent Seven was remade into a post-modern parable about predatory capitalism in 2016, directed by Antoine Fuqua. The Seven and other characters in this version mirror characteristics of their 1960 counterparts. Instead of Mexican peasants preyed upon by banditos, a small white town is captured and enslaved to work in gold mines run by Robber Baron industrialist Bartholomew Bogue (Peter Sarsgaard) and his small army. Townswoman Emma Cullen (Haley Bennett), whose husband was killed by Bogue, seeks help from Marshal/warrant officer Sam Chisholm (Denzel Washington). At first reluctant, Chisholm agrees to recruit gunmen when he hears that they will be up against Bogue.

The new Seven include Joshua Faraday (Chris Pratt), gambler and explosives expert, based on Vin Tanner (he even uses a couple of Vin's lines); Goodnight Robicheaux (Ethan Hawke), sharpshooter and former Confederate soldier dealing with PTSD, who loses confidence like Lee; Jack Horne (Vincent D'Onofrio), eccentric mountain man who shares features with Bernardo; Billy Rocks (Byung-hun Lee), taciturn knife expert and assassin, similar to Britt; Vasquez (Manuel Garcia-Rulfo), an outlaw on the run, loosely related to Harry Luck; and Red Harvest (Martin Sensmeier), a Comanche warrior, youngest member of the team and Chico's quieter counterpart. The Seven battle a much larger and more heavily armed force than the banditos who attacked the Mexican village. As in the original, Bogue and most of his force are killed. Only Chisholm, Vasquez, and Red Harvest survive. At the end, Cullen in voiceover notes the gratitude of the community for the Seven's service.

OUTLAWS AND MARSHALS: FRONTIER GOVERNANCE AND POLICING

Hollywood loves to play with and remold famous Western historical figures. Wyatt Earp (1848–1929) was the most famous lawman in Western history, and his story has been told on the silver screen (and little screen) several times. For many, he and his brothers Virgil, Morgan, Warren, and James are the epitome of law and order and the taming the Wild West. Stories focus on their clash with the Clanton gang in the town of Tombstone, Arizona in 1881. The brothers have been presented in movies as honest, honorable, and incorruptible. The truth was much more complicated. The Earps viewed law enforcement jobs as platforms for personal enrichment, as they used the positions to move into lucrative ventures such as gambling saloons, prizefight refereeing and mining. The Earps' approach to law enforcement was simple and direct: confront potential troublemakers and disarm them as quickly as

possible. They demonstrated this effectively in Wyatt's term as town marshal in Dodge City, Kansas, a railhead and cow town at the end of the cattle drives from Texas (Isenberg, 2014: 3–9).

The Gunfight at the O.K. Corral on October 26, 1881, “the greatest gunfight in the West's history,” was the culmination of a political struggle for control of Tombstone between two factions: those aligned with the “Cowboys” led by the Clantons and McLaurys, and those in the town supporting the Earps. Deputy sheriff Johnny Behan claimed to be neutral, but often opposed the Earps. Also, Earp was courting Behan's on-again, off-again girlfriend, Josephine “Josie” Marcus (1861–1944). In the infamous Gunfight, Frank and Tom McLaury, and young Billy Clanton, were killed. Virgil and Morgan Earp, along with John Henry “Doc” Holliday, were wounded, but Wyatt was unscathed (“Wyatt Earp,” 2020: 1–5).

These events have been depicted quite differently in each movie version of the story. Ford made the first major attempt with *My Darling Clementine* (1946). Considered one of his greatest films, a black-and white effort that effectively uses light and shadow, it nonetheless bears little resemblance to the events of 1881. Many of the plot elements, such as those involving Doc Holliday (Victor Mature), the saloon singer Chihuahua (Linda Darnell) or the eponymous Clementine (Cathy Downs), Doc's invented former love interest, are completely fictional. Chihuahua and Clementine represent the bad girl/saloon girl vs. good girl/teacher or wife dynamic that determines female characters in many classic Westerns. Clementine, of course, gives her name to the title, as she embodies the civilized values that the Earps want to bring to the frontier (Phipps, 2021: 1–25). Wyatt (Fonda) is in love with her throughout the film, but it remains a chaste, unrequited love to the end. The focus of the film is thus the difference between right and wrong. Wyatt is an earnest young man who wants to bring law and order to Tombstone, while seeking vengeance for the murder of his brother James. In the real West, older brother James was not killed in Tombstone. In fact, the Earp family is all messed up in this movie. Wyatt's brothers Morgan and Warren were murdered after the O.K. Corral, but instead the movie suggests Virgil was killed by the Clantons.

Eleven years later, John Sturges gave us *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral*, a big-budget Technicolor telling of the Earp legend. This time it includes major stars Burt Lancaster as Wyatt and Kirk Douglas as Doc Holliday. This is a more coherent story, taking the Earps from their lawman days in Dodge City to Tombstone, and then relating the growing tensions with the Clantons. The charismatic Douglas is more compelling as Doc the rogue, and his toxic relationship with Big Nose Kate (Jo Van Fleet) gets brief screen time. Wyatt has a love interest in Laura Denbow (Rhonda Fleming) but, as an ordinary woman from polite society, she is like neither Wyatt's opium-addicted common law wife Mattie nor his mistress/common law wife Josie. Laura leaves Wyatt

when he refuses to leave his violent life and instead moves to Tombstone. He promises to join her later in California. In 1950s Westerns, a lawman must be upstanding in all areas of his life, including his love life. Some critics have noted a subtle homoerotic note, as well. Wyatt and Doc express mutual admiration for each other, each saying he likes the “look” of the other.

Wyatt and his brothers again become avatars for law enforcement, and the film plays down their various commercial interests. It suggests tension between Wyatt and Doc in *Dodge City*, even though they usually got along well. Wyatt's main problem with the Clantons is his objection to their rustling Mexican cattle and putting them on trains in Tombstone, but the proximate cause of historical conflict with the Clantons was their failure to disarm themselves when they entered Tombstone. The story culminates in a sprawling ten-minute battle between the Clantons and the Earps with Doc. This is quite unlike the historic thirty-second gunfight at the real O.K. Corral. Like *Clementine*, the film does not deal with the messy aftermath of the big gunfight.

Sensibilities had shifted by the mid-1960s, when Sturges revisited Wyatt's story in *Hour of the Gun* (1967). This time, the story begins with the O.K. Corral and focuses on the bloody aftermath, as Wyatt (James Garner) and Doc (Jason Robards) hunt down all the Cowboys who were not killed at the corral. As a revenge story, this is not a pleasant watch, but Garner gives a compelling performance as a man on a mission, and his friendship with Doc as the latter dies from tuberculosis is touching. Ironically, Garner again plays Wyatt as an aging advisor to early Western movie productions in a lackluster drama-comedy, Blake Edwards's *Sunset* (1988).

Hollywood returned to the Wyatt and Doc story several times, but none of them resonated with the public as much as these earlier films. By the 1990s, time was ripe for more historically accurate renderings of this mythic tale. Unfortunately for viewers, two major efforts were released almost simultaneously. First out of the gate was *Tombstone* (1993), directed by George P. Cosmatos, the better of the two films. Excellent casting brings together Kurt Russell as Wyatt, Val Kilmer as Doc, Sam Elliott as Virgil, and Bill Paxton as Morgan. Dana Delaney, then fresh off her success in the popular *China Beach* TV series, gives us a compelling Josie. It is perhaps the most historically accurate Earp movie, and explores the murky ethical world in which Doc and the Earps operated. While Cosmatos is clearly on the Earps' side, we see them not so much as exemplars of law and order, but as men taking advantage of opportunities.

The next year came *Wyatt Earp*, a Kevin Costner star vehicle for his portrayal of Wyatt. While it contains some watchable moments and believable life story, the casting is not as effective, and the interpersonal dynamics are not as interesting. Dennis Quaid as Doc has some good lines, but he delivers

them with that gruff voice he began using in the 1990s. *Tombstone*'s Kilmer is more believable as a young man in his early thirties dying of tuberculosis. Isabella Rossellini makes a fascinating Big Nose Kate but is gone after only a few scenes. The intra-family dynamics are the best-done part of the story, as Wyatt repeatedly puts his brothers and their mutual interests above their long-suffering wives, or drug addict common law wife, in Wyatt's case. Like *Tombstone*, this film also gives us Earps as men on the make, rather than upstanding lawmen. As in *Hour of the Gun*, both *Tombstone* and *Wyatt Earp* give the audience Wyatt's extended post-Corral retribution against the Clanton-McLaury gang.

Another historical figure given frequent filmic treatment is the young gunman called Billy the Kid (1859–1881). His childhood name was Henry McCarty, but he was often known as William Bonney. Operating mainly in New Mexico, he joined a group of hired guns called the Regulators during the Lincoln County War (1878) and is credited with killing several men, most notably the Lincoln County sheriff William Brady and his deputy. He was convicted for that crime, but escaped jail, killing two more deputies. Sheriff Pat Garrett traced him to the eastern New Mexico town of Fort Sumner and shot Billy dead as he entered a darkened room (Billy the Kid, 2021: 1–3).

As with the Earp stories, most of the movie versions of Billy's short life depart wildly from the facts. Howard Hughes's infamous film, *The Outlaw* (1943), gained far more attention for actress Jane Russell's cleavage and skimpy costume than for the story of Billy winning a shootout with Doc Holliday and humiliating Garrett. Really? *The Left Handed Gun* (1958) is an early star vehicle for Paul Newman, who plays Billy as a fun-loving young man who reacts to the killing of his mentor by tracking down and killing those responsible. The notion of Billy as left-handed derived from the famous ferrotype photograph (c. 1879–1880), which printed a reverse image. Historians agree that he was right-handed (Cook, 2019: 1–2). Garrett (John Dehner) decides to kill him, and Billy allows himself to be shot, so that he can choose the way he will die. Really? *Chisum* (1970) is very loosely based on the Lincoln County War, centering on John Chisum (Wayne), a kindly cattle baron who does not fight until forced to do so. Billy is just one of several players in the conflict, and he survives the movie.

Sam Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973) was intended to create an historically true portrayal of the relationship between the two former friends Garrett (James Coburn) and Billy (Kris Kristofferson). Though Kristofferson is too old for the part, some scenes get accurate treatment and certain lines have been lifted from the historical record. Some observers were put off with tawdry elements added to the story, such as Garrett sleeping with several prostitutes in one bed. Peckinpah was upset about the studio's editing,

which he felt damaged the story, and critics found the story underwhelming. The movie got more attention for Bob Dylan's theme song, "Knockin' on Heaven's Door," than for the drama. Pekinpah's intended version was released in 1988, with critics praising it as one of Pekinpah's best efforts (Kitses, 1998: 223–243).

Young Guns (1988) and *Young Guns II* (1990) tell the Lincoln County War story and its aftermath in terms of the young posse members. It is sort of a Brat Pack of the Old West, as it includes several then-rising young stars as Regulators, including Kiefer Sutherland, Lou Diamond Phillips, and Charlie Sheen. Sheen's brother Emilio Estevez plays Billy. *Young Guns* focuses on the Lincoln conflict, while *Young Guns II* presents the rest of Billy's life but suggests that he was not killed by Garrett in 1881 but survived as "Brushy Bill" Roberts of Texas, one of several people who later claimed to be Billy.

One more historical figure is the ultimate bandit, Jesse James (1847–1882), who has been given film treatment several times. As train and bank robbers, Jesse and Frank James are beyond the pale, hunted by the government and the Pinkertons, but to many Missourians they are latter-day Robin Hoods and ex-Confederate heroes (Biography, 2021: 1–3). The first major film effort is *Jesse James* (1939), starring Tyrone Power as Jesse and Fonda as Frank. Perhaps reflecting the Depression, the story posits Frank and James as driven to a life of crime by "injustice and corruption," and they fight for the poor farmers and townspeople. Very little in it aligns with what we know of the James brothers. Nicholas Ray's *The True Story of Jesse James* (1957), more-or-less a remake of the 1939 film, is even more inaccurate and presents the story almost entirely via flashbacks. *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid* (1972) shifts the focus from Jesse (Duvall) to Cole Younger (Cliff Robertson) and the disastrous attempt to rob banks in Minnesota, the beginning of the end of the James-Younger gang (Top Ten Film, 2016: 1–4).

My favorite Jesse James movie is Walter Hill's *The Long Riders* (1980), which uses four sets of real brothers to depict the James-Younger gang, as well as Bob Ford and his brother, who killed Jesse. The film provides fascinating character sketches: Jesse (James Keach) as an ice-cold gang leader lacking empathy, who always manages to escape without a scratch; Cole Younger (David Carradine), a violent and cynical man who trusts no one, especially Jesse; and Frank (Stacy Keach), the loyal brother who has more sense than Jesse and is willing to cut a deal with the government to save himself after Jesse's death. Fascinating period details, such as clog dances, funerals, family gender dynamics, and traditional music (by Ry Cooder) create a uniquely atmospheric film.

The more recent *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007) is an art-house psychological study of the influence of hero worship and news media coverage on an ordinary man. Casey Affleck as Bob

Ford has worshipped Jesse (Brad Pitt) all his life and seeks to join his gang. A suspicious Jesse continually toys with and needles him before letting him in. Shocked by Jesse's brutality, Bob along with his brother Charley (Sam Rockwell) make a deal with Missouri's governor (James Carville) to kill Jesse. The movie suggests that Jesse has a death wish, as the outlaw sees Bob reflected in a framed picture lining up to shoot him, and he does not react. The Ford brothers cannot deal with their post-killing fame: Charley commits suicide and several years later Bob gets killed in his Colorado saloon by a man who is still upset over Jesse's killing.

The West was ever a wild place. The archetypical gunman who hires out to ranchers as the Old West equivalent of hitman or enforcer ultimately has no place in a civilized society. One of the best character sketches of such a loner is Henry King's *The Gunfighter* (1950). It tells the tale of Jimmy Ringo (Gregory Peck), whose fame has become a trap and a well of shame that keeps him from the respectable life for which he yearns (Phipps, 2021: 1–25). He is so infamous that aspiring gunmen want to shoot him to establish their own notoriety. Ringo kills one who draws on him, sparking his brothers to come after him. He goes to the nearby town of Cayenne, hoping to find his wife Peggy (Helen Westcott) and start a new life. She has become a respected schoolteacher and initially refuses to see him. Ringo's old gang friend Mark Strett (Millard Mitchell) is now the town marshal, and he tells Ringo to leave town. Jimmy asks for just an hour to see if Peggy will change her mind. He finally meets her and, while she refuses to rejoin him, she agrees to see him in a year's time if he has changed his ways. A happy Ringo is about to leave town when aspiring young local gunman Hunt Bromley (Skip Homeier) shoots Jimmy in the back. Dying, Ringo tells Mark to say that Bromley shot him in self-defense. That way, the young man will become a target for any other young "gunny" who wants to make a name for himself. Mark beats the young man, telling him that is just the beginning of his misery, as he is now a marked man, and ordering him to leave town.

Movies would suggest that often the only person who could bring order was a champion from outside the civilized world of farmers and townspeople—a knight errant who would save the people. In George Stevens's classic *Shane* (1953), a powerful rancher, Rufus Ryker (Emile Meyer) is trying to force settlers off their homesteads, so that he can expand his cattle holdings. Gunman and drifter Shane (Alan Ladd) decides to stay with farmer Joe Starrett (Van Heflin) and his wife Marian (Jean Arthur). Shane is attracted to Marian, but he honors the family too much to pursue her. We see the story through the eyes of the Starretts' young son, Joey (Brandon de Wilde). In town, Grafton's general store is the only source of key goods, so the settlers must shop there. Shane is harassed by Ryker's toughs in the adjacent saloon. The next time he comes with several settler men, who proceed to beat the

hired men up. Ryker hires a sadistic gunman, Jack Wilson (Jack Palance) to confront the settlers. Wilson toys with one of the settlers before shooting him as he stands in the mud.

The settlers debate leaving the valley. Some decide to leave, but most stay. Ryker invites Starrett to town to talk, intending to kill him. Shane decides to go to town and settle matters but has to knock out Starrett first. In the saloon, he shoots Wilson, Ryker, and Ryker's brother, but gets wounded in the arm. In an iconic ending, he sees Joey, who has tailed him into town. He tells him to grow up to be a good man like his father. Shane leaves town, with Joey repeatedly shouting "Shane! Come back!" We see Shane ascending into the hills, his arm bleeding. The lone gunfighter has saved civilized men and women, but there is no place for him in this new society, so he must leave. His wound is ambiguous: is it fatal, meaning the end of the frontier life of such men, or will he survive and find some way to live in this new world? Audiences since 1953 have debated Shane's fate.

Tobias suggests that Shane is an old-fashioned Christian morality tale. The hero emerges seemingly from nowhere, and may be compared to a "frontier Jesus Christ," the god Apollo, hero Hercules, or Medieval knight. Though mysterious, he promotes a clear behavior code and provides strength to the settlers. Though tempted by Marian, he does not stray from his code. Shane's morality echoes Judeo-Christian values, as he gives clarity to good and evil, and we learn acceptable behavior from him. He thus "brings faith to the valley and the wicked are destroyed" (Tobias, 1993: 46–47).

Shane-like themes have popped up again and again in Westerns and other genres: the lone fighter from beyond the pale who saves good people, people taking the law into their own hands to clean up a town, or people taking revenge on the corrupt and powerful businessmen or ranchers who control towns and seek to destroy freedom in the countryside. Almost all of Clint Eastwood's American Westerns have been about loners or damaged men who are called upon to clean up towns or fight the corrupt and powerful. In *Hang 'Em High* (1968), Eastwood plays Jed Cooper, a man who survives an unjust lynching over cattle ownership. He becomes a federal marshal who rounds up bad guys, while visiting revenge on the men who hanged him. But he saves an old man who participated in the hanging yet expresses remorse. He shares a thirst for justice with Rachel Warren (Inger Stevens), who is looking for the men who killed her husband and raped her, and the two begin a romance.

Joe Kidd (1972) has Eastwood as the title character, a former bounty hunter who goes to work for landowner Frank Harlan (Duvall). Harlan mounts a party to kill Luis Chama (John Saxon), a local rebel who fights for Mexican American farmers who are losing their land rights. Appalled by Harlan's tactics, Kidd turns against his boss and helps Chama. He then kills most of Harlan's men and, finally, Harlan himself. This is a rare film that takes the

side of Mexican Americans against the Anglos who dominated Southwestern frontier society. Latinos in New Mexico had been asserting their land rights in the 1960s, and an activist group under Reies López Tijerina seized the Tierra Amarilla courthouse to get control of land records, making national news in 1967 (1967: Texas, Undated: 1–2).

High Plains Drifter (1973) is the ultimate trippy post-modern revisionist Western and Eastwood's first directed Western. The small mining town of Lago, California lives in fear of three criminals who have been released from prison and are intent on taking vengeance on the town. A Stranger (Eastwood) comes into Lago and is offered anything he wants if he will protect the town. He organizes the citizens to fight but requires them to do odd things such as painting every building red and setting out a banquet table for the criminals. He suddenly leaves, and the three criminals come into town and set it on fire. The Stranger appears again, killing the bad men. It is strongly suggested, but never explicitly stated, that the Stranger is the spirit of the town's former sheriff who was horsewhipped to death while the townspeople did nothing. The Stranger leaves, disappearing into the desert.

Eastwood's most explicit borrowing from *Shane* is in *Pale Rider* (1985). He plays The Preacher, a mysterious figure who arrives in LaHood, California. Coy LaHood (Richard Dysart) runs a strip-mining operation and tries to push small prospectors off their land. Like *Shane*, The Preacher takes up with the locals, but in this film he sleeps with a single mother (Carrie Snodgrass). Her daughter Megan (Sydney Penny) is the equivalent of Joey. It is her prayer for deliverance that has brought the Preacher to town. After he helps the prospectors and saves Megan from being raped, the girl wants to marry Preacher, but he turns down her proposal. Like *Shane*, he kills LaHood and most of his men. He leaves town, heading for the mountains with Megan running after him, shouting for him to return and that she loves him.

Eastwood's long goodbye to Westerns culminated in *Unforgiven* (1992), widely regarded as his best Western. It won Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Director (Eastwood), and Best Supporting Actor (Gene Hackman). It is a story of an ex-gunfighter Will Munny from Kansas, who struggles as a farmer and comes out of retirement to take a contract to kill cowboys who cut up a prostitute's face in Big Whiskey, Wyoming. Munny teams up with old friend Ned Logan (Morgan Freeman) and an aspiring but nearsighted young gunman, The Schofield Kid (Jaimz Woollvett). Big Whiskey's sheriff Little Bill Daggett (Hackman) has heard of the contract and determines to stop anyone from carrying it out in his town. He viciously beats English Bob (Richard Harris), a famous British gunman who comes to town.

Munny, Logan and the Kid finally reach Big Whiskey. Logan and the Kid take an "advance" on their fee by using the prostitutes' services, while a feverish Munny waits downstairs. Little Bill challenges Munny to give up

his weapons. When he doesn't, Little Bill seriously beats him, too. Munny recovers outside town, but experiences nightmarish visions of his dead wife. The trio kill one of the suspected cowboys, but Logan decides he has had enough, and he leaves. Munny and Kid finish off the other cowboy. Kid is clearly troubled by what he has done, and he decides to leave, too. Munny learns that Little Bill has captured and killed Logan. On a stormy night, he goes into town, killing the bar owner for displaying Logan's body, several deputies, and then Little Bill with a shotgun blast to the head. Before he dies, Little Bill insists, "I don't deserve this . . . to die like this. I was building a house," to which Munny replies, "deserve's got nothin' to do with it." As he leaves, Munny shouts to the townspeople to not shoot at him or he will kill them. He also warns them to "bury Ned right" and not harm the prostitutes, or he will come back and kill them all.

The West is becoming civilized, but it is still a wild place. Little Bill's style of law enforcement is vicious and not fit for normal society, and so the audience does not mourn his passing. For a conservative like Eastwood, getting rid of law enforcement all together is a big step beyond Harry Callahan, who merely challenged his police supervisors. Munny, the former killer of men, women and children, ultimately has no place in it at all. Returning home to Kansas, he sells his farm and disappears. Rumors of his whereabouts include that he became a dry goods store owner in California. We see no sign of him at the house, and the clothes drying on the clothesline disappear, too.

PLAYING COWBOYS AND INDIANS: NATIVE AMERICANS' EVOLUTION ONSCREEN

Screen images of American Indians or Native Americans swung back and forth between stereotypes of the wild savage and the Noble Savage. The wild savage is the more common of these. He was ignorant of Western (read civilized) society, sought only to prey on white people, became addled by alcohol, and lusted after white women. These are neither nuanced nor understanding films. We learn little of legitimate grievances of Natives, who from colonial times were systematically pushed west, lost their homes or were cheated out of their lands by white people, and were often massacred. The Noble Savage, though a more positive view, sets up another stereotype of Indians as nature-loving, simple-living innocents who understand life better than the rambunctious Westerners. The Noble Savage often includes the Disappearing Indian type, discussed for *Last of the Mohicans* above.

Early movies often were about Indian attacks on white settlements, or the brutal invasion trope. For instance, D. W. Griffith's *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch* (1913) presents crazed Natives attacking a white settlement, when

in fact most of the time the opposite was true. White actors play Indians in exaggerated actions. An early John Ford film, *The Iron Horse* (1924) uses actual Native American actors but has them swarm like a horde over railroad construction workers. In *Stagecoach*, Ford uses the climactic Indian attack on the coach to build tension and underline the relations among the key white characters (Olson, 2013: 14–41; James, 2002: 1–7).

Pre-World War II films seldom painted whites negatively. For instance, Raoul Walsh's *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941) is a misdirected hero worship exercise for one of the West's most notorious figures, Col. George A. Custer (Errol Flynn, who looks nothing like Custer), who died with most of his command at the Battle of the Little Big Horn in 1876. The movie gets almost everything about Custer backward. He comes across as trying to avoid conflict with Indians, critical of the mining interests that moved into the Black Hills of South Dakota, attempting to make peace with Lakota war leader Crazy Horse (Anthony Quinn), and reluctant to go on his last mission. In real life, it was his expedition into the Black Hills that fueled white interest in the area, and he had little interest in making peace. His tactics were aggressive to the point of recklessness, and his ill-considered splitting of his command in the face of overwhelming Lakota and Cheyenne forces led to his doom on the Little Big Horn (Graybill, 2020: 86).

Most Westerns from the mid-1940s to mid-1960s present Indians as vicious predators who destroy whites' farms, torturing and killing white men, and raping or abducting white women. *The Searchers* (1956) is now considered Ford's greatest film, the greatest Western ever, and an incredible landmark of the 1950s. It also is the culmination of Hollywood's racist take on Native Americans. The story gives us a story touching a sensitive nerve for whites: the abduction of a beloved daughter by a ferocious Indian warrior.

The story centers on Ethan Edwards (Wayne), who arrives at his brother's homestead after eight years fighting for the Confederacy and in the Second French Intervention in Mexico. One day, the nearby Comanche create a ruse of stealing cattle, drawing away all the men. When they return, the homestead has been burned, Edwards's brother, wife and son are dead, and their two daughters, Lucy and Debbie (Natalie Wood) have been abducted. Ethan and his adoptive nephew, Martin (Jeffrey Hunter) and Lucy's fiancé Brad (Harry Carey, Jr.) set out across West Texas and New Mexico to find the two girls. They promise to return to the Jorgensen's homestead. Martin promises to write to Laurie Jorgensen, who is in love with him.

The three find Lucy has been killed. In a rage, Brad rides into the Comanche camp and is shot. Ethan and Martin find that a Comanche named Scar (Henry Brandon) has taken the girls. They meet Scar but are unsuccessful in negotiating Debbie's return. Debbie meets Martin outside the camp. Ethan appears ready to shoot her, but Martin shields her, and a Comanche shoots Ethan with

an arrow. After a brief return to the Jorgensens' place, during which Martin heads off Laurie's wedding to a local man, Ethan and Martin locate Scar again. This time, a group of local volunteers and a cavalry detachment join them to attack the Comanche village. Martin sneaks in just before the attack, rescues Debbie and shoots Scar. With the village destroyed, Debbie flees into the desert. Ethan pursues her, and Martin thinks he intends to kill her. Instead, Ethan picks up Debbie and declares, "let's go home, Debbie." Ethan returns Debbie to the Jorgensens, and Martin is welcomed by Laurie. In the iconic ending, Ethan walks away alone holding an injured arm as the door closes. Like Shane, Ethan is a man outside of polite civilization who cannot share the family's happiness.

An "inverted conquest" narrative, in which the dominant whites are depicted as victims, motivates much of the film. The underlying story of *The Searchers* is the captivity narrative that so captivated Americans during much of the nineteenth century. The settlers are more horrified by thoughts of the two daughters' sexual exploitation than of their captivity. These considerations cause Lucy's husband, Brad, to lose his senses and heedlessly attack the Comanche camp. Ethan sees sexual relations with Indians as disgusting. He believes that Debbie's becoming wife to Scar as an affront to white society, and this fuels his rage and desire to kill Debbie. It also adds to his dislike of his nephew-by-marriage Martin, who is part Indian. Ethan is a "lost soul who uses revenge to excuse the darkness and prejudice" within. Graybill feels that Ethan's racism and hatred of the Comanches is the "dark heart" of the film. It also explains why Ethan cannot enter the Jorgensens' house at the end of the movie: his rage makes him a wild man who is unwelcome in a civilized home (Graybill, 2020: 87–89; Phipps, 2021: 1–25).

For a time, Hollywood shifted to a more palatable take on whites and natives, and the White Native narrative took hold. In these films, a white man becomes familiar with native life and seeks to make peace between Indians and white settlers or the Army. In *Broken Arrow* (1950), Tom Jeffords (Stewart) makes friends with Apache chief Cochise and marries an Apache woman. He tries with only limited success to rein in white predation of Indian lands. Two major flaws are that the story is told only from Jeffords's perspective, with no ordinary Indians speaking. The key parts of Cochise and Jeffords' wife Morningstar are played by white actors, that is, Jeff Chandler and Debra Paget. Such "Redfacing" of white actors was common up to the late 1960s.

In Delmer Daves's *The Last Wagon* (1956), Widmark stars as Jonathan "Comanche" Todd, a white who has lived among the Comanche. He is being transported by a sheriff to be tried for murder of his three brothers. A group of settlers traveling by wagon train view him skeptically, but one young woman, Jenny (Felicia Farr) and her younger brother Billy come to respect him—and

Jenny to love him. The others take time to come around but realize that he is helping them to escape from the Apache. Todd saves a cavalry detachment, but they recognize him and take him into custody. At the fort, he tells General Howard (a historical figure) that the sheriff's brothers killed his Comanche wife and children, and he acted to carry out frontier justice. Jenny, Billy, and the other young settlers speak up for Todd. Howard takes pity on Todd and releases him into the custody of Jenny and her brother. The story implies that Todd will marry Jenny.

Gender differences about mating with Native Americans are clear. Movies of the 1950s present white women being abducted and forced into sexual and menial slavery by bloodthirsty Indian braves. This touches a primal fear of many whites that their women could be stolen. By contrast, white men mating with Indian maidens comes across as positive, and their Indian wives are seen as innocent and pure. Morningstar's death at the hands of whites is one of the most noble deaths in a Western. The murder of Comanche Todd's wife and sons gets presented as an atrocity by voracious whites. The *Going Native* films thus are a recapitulation of the Eden myth that has informed American thinking about the wilderness since the early nineteenth century: modern people can be redeemed from the corrosive influences of modern life by returning to wild nature. In these movies, the Indians represent a pre-civilized simplicity and honor that puts industrialized white society to shame (Baird, 1998: 279–282).

Ford's *Two Rode Together* (1961) presents a marshal, Guthrie McCabe (Stewart) acting as go-between for whites and Indians. He goes to a Comanche camp with his friend, First Lt. Jim Gary (Widmark again) to retrieve white captives. McCabe negotiates with Quannah Parker, an historical Comanche leader, for the release of two captives (two others do not want to return to white society). One is a wild young man who does not remember his white childhood, while the other is a Mexican woman, Elena de la Madriaga (Linda Cristal) who has lived among the Comanche for only a few years. The whites spurn or question Elena at an Army dance, causing her great shame. McCabe berates the officers and their wives for their treatment of the young woman. The young man gets claimed by an elderly woman who thinks that he is her son but, when she tries to cut his hair, he kills her. A party of white men then lynches him. A despondent Elena is about to leave town on the stagecoach when McCabe's business partner and lover tells him that she has taken up with another. McCabe jumps onto the shotgun seat on top of the stage to ride West with Elena, who is delighted.

From the 1960s onward, various films began to present Indian life and culture as positive alternatives to nasty or dehumanizing white culture. Perhaps to make up for his frequent negative indigenous images, Ford directed *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), one of the biggest budget pictures about natives.

It sympathetically presents Indian grievances about the loss of their lands and forced relocation to unfavorable land on Indian reservations. However, redfacing dominates the acting here, too, as key native parts are played by Latinos Ricardo Montalban, Gilbert Roland, and Delores del Rio, along with Italian American Sal Mineo.

Martin Ritt's *Hombre* (1967) is a revisionist Western that purports to show Native Americans in a more positive light. Oddly, no Native actors or major characters appear in the film. Paul Newman stars as John Russell, a white who has lived for many years among the Apache. He is looked down upon by whites and faces various forms of discrimination early on. He decides to sell a boarding house owned by his recently deceased father, upsetting the boarders, and he joins a stagecoach leaving town. The stage gets robbed by a gang that targets an Indian Agent, Alexander Favor, who has a large amount of money he has taken from the Apache. They seize his wife as a hostage. Russell goes off to try to recover the wife, while Favor is only interested in protecting his money and taking the supplies on the stage. The story climaxes in a big shoot-out with the gang. Russell kills the gang leader, Grimes (Richard Boone), but is killed while shooting a Mexican bandit. This movie is an examination of how the Other is treated by whites, and how ingrained racism may be within the American experience, rather than a consideration of the Native American experience.

The most searing attack on white treatment of Native Americans during that revolutionary film era of 1966 to 1977 is *Soldier Blue* (1970). Though fictional, it presents events surrounding the Sand Creek Massacre (1864), one of the most horrific atrocities against unarmed people during the Indian Wars. The film starts as another captivity narrative, this one about Cresta Marybelle Lee (Candice Bergen), a white woman who has lived among the Cheyenne for two years. She became wife of Cheyenne leader Spotted Wolf, and clearly relished her time with the natives. The Indians kill all but one of a detachment escorting her home; the lone survivor is Pvt. Honus Gant (Peter Strauss), who she leads to safety. The film takes a mildly feminist turn as she sheds some of her Victorian clothes and then tries to explain to Gant how badly whites have treated the Indians.

The two split up. Gant urges Colorado Volunteers Col. Iverson (John Anderson) to make peace with Spotted Wolf, but Iverson rejects the advice. By contrast, Cresta receives a warm welcome back at the Cheyenne camp. The next day, the bluecoats appear in front of the Indian camp. Spotted Wolf goes out to greet them, bearing an American flag. Iverson orders a bombardment of the camp, anyway. There follows a horrendous scene of massacre, including sexual mutilation of native women. Gant wonders through the camp, stunned that what he has seen. Director Ralph Nelson, while getting the Sand Creek Massacre details wrong, acknowledged he was creating an

allegory for Vietnam: the My Lai massacre of over five-hundred Vietnamese civilians, including the rape of several women and girls, had just been revealed months before the movie's premiere (Graybill, 2020: 89–91; My Lai Massacre, 2020: 1–7).

Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man* (also 1970), based on a popular novel, is the story of a between-cultures man Jack Crabbe (Dustin Hoffman), who comes to understand both societies. The movie begins as yet another captivity story. It gives audiences a much more nuanced view of Natives, who are “fully realized human beings” capable of both personal pettiness and acts of surpassing kindness. Old Lodge Skins (Chief Dan George), who becomes Crabbe's surrogate grandfather, imparts the wisdom of his years to the young man. Whites, by contrast, are either uptight, hypocritical religious fanatics consumed by personal demons, or they are charlatans trying to scam other whites. The movie is toughest on the military, recounting another famous massacre, this one by Col. Custer (Richard Mulligan) on the banks of the Washita River in 1868. Crabb's wife, Sunshine, and their baby are killed by troopers as a helpless Crabbe watches from a distance. In presenting Crabbe's happy life with Sunshine, the film reflects the reality of many white men who married Native women on the frontier (Graybill, 2020: 92–94).

Though he prefers living as an Indian, he ends up returning to white society because both the frontier of his youth and the good life in the wilderness have disappeared. Penn uses comedy and satire to skewer white society and the U.S. cavalry, while sympathizing with the gentle life of natives. He uses mostly indigenous actors for the natives, though they speak English (Hetebrugge, 2020: 1–6). Crystalline set-pieces throughout the film make the story worth watching multiple times. A third gender Native asks to live with Crabbe as his partner. He is touched by the offer, but respectfully declines. One of my favorite scenes shows several young Native women in a large teepee taking turns sharing Crabbe's carnal favors. Each one clears her throat to announce her turn to enjoy Jack's ministrations, and Jack is completely exhausted at the end. Also noteworthy is Crabbe's effort as a scout to confuse and fake out Custer, making him take the very course that leads to his doom at the Battle of the Little Big Horn.

Eastwood's *The Outlaw Josey Wales* (1976) is story of an unjustly accused rebel guerrilla, Wales (Eastwood), at the end of the Civil War. It presents Native Americans sympathetically, if not realistically, and uses native actors. Wales escapes from Missouri to Texas, tailed by bounty hunters and an irregular Union Army detachment, all seeking to cash in on a reward for his capture or death. Along the way, loner Wales acquires traveling companions in Lone Watie (Chief Dan George), a Cherokee elder, and a Navajo woman, Little Moonlight (Geraldine Kearns). Later, an elderly lady seeking her son's homestead (Paula Trueman) and her granddaughter Laura Lee (Sondra

Locke) join the group. Josey and Laura tentatively begin a romantic relationship, and Wales enjoys the possibility of life with this surrogate family. This new family may have expressed Americans' desire to rebuild American society after Vietnam and Watergate.

Wales speaks directly to a neighboring Comanche leader, Ten Bears (Will Sampson), negotiating his agreement to leave the settlers alone. He then shoots it out with the troopers and bounty hunters. Wounded, he kills their leader, but is let go by the remaining bounty hunter. Bleeding at the end, like Shane, he leaves for parts unknown. Reconciliation and healing the nation's wounds after the civil war is a clear theme. This doubtless resonated with viewers in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War (Phipps, 2021: 1–25).

Kevin Costner's *Dances with Wolves* (1990) is the culmination of the sympathetic approach to Indians. It was widely praised for its positive portrayal of the Lakota (or Sioux) nation, for its inclusion of various aspects of Indian culture, and for its use of the Lakota language. This latter caused some levity among the Lakota, though, as Lakota is a gendered language and both male and female lines were spoken in female-gendered words and grammar. The film was criticized for its negative portrayal of the neighboring Pawnee tribe as brutal marauders. We know that the Pawnee were just as often the victims of Sioux attacks. The movie was an updating of the Disappearing Indian narrative, as the Lakota's buffalo-hunting way of life is on its way out and the tribe will in a few years be forced onto the reservation.

Costner plays Lt. John Dunbar, a Civil War soldier who wants to experience the West before it disappears. Sent to Fort Hayes in Kansas, a suicidal officer dispatches him to abandoned Fort Sedgwick, where he tries to repair the post while waiting for relief. He makes contact with a group of Lakota, including holy man Kicking Bird (Graham Greene), and then returns a woman who has tried to kill herself. Eventually, he visits the tribe's camp, and that woman, Stands-with-a-Fist (Mary McDonnell), translates. She is a white who has lived most of her life among the Lakota. Dunbar goes on a buffalo hunt with the Lakota and enjoys their post-hunt celebrations. He spends increasing time at the Lakota village, and marries Stands-with-a-Fist. Returning to Fort Sedgwick to fetch some possessions, he gets captured by Army soldiers. Appearing to be a deserter, he is arrested for transport to Fort Hays. The Lakota rescue him and kill the soldiers. At the tribe's winter camp, Dunbar tells the tribal leaders that he must leave to spare the Indians the Army's wrath. He parts emotionally with his Lakota friends and leaves with Stands-with-a-Fist.

Graybill suggests that *Dances with Wolves* is a "tidy inversion" of *The Searchers*, in which the advancing whites become the mostly unseen and feared menace. White buffalo hunters leave carcasses butchered only for their skins on the ground, Dunbar observing that they are "a people without value

and without soul.” When the soldiers relieve Fort Sedgwick, they are crude and uncouth, shooting the wolf Two Socks for fun. When the Lakota party attacks the wagon party taking Dunbar back to Fort Hays, the audience roots for them the way audiences cheered the cavalry in 1950s Westerns (Graybill, 2020: 94–96).

The landmark film won various awards, including the Oscar for Best Picture. Though praised for its sensitive portrayal of the Lakota, it was skewered for over-romanticizing the Indians, who seem too good to be true, and for making Dunbar the sole narrative lens through which the audience sees the Lakota. We learn about individual Lakota, but we know little about their internal lives, experiences, or way of life.

Walter Hill’s *Geronimo: An American Legend* (1993) is an earnest if un compelling story of the great Apache commander who held off the U.S. Army for several years before surrendering and being relocated to Florida. Stalwart Native actor Studi plays Geronimo as a man forced to fight by frequent broken promises and gratuitous actions by the Army and government officials. We see the story through the eyes of a sympathetic Army officer, 1st Lt. Charles B. Gatewood (Patric) and the narrator, 2nd Lt. Britton Davis (Damon). Brigadier Gen. George Crook (Hackman), tasked with controlling and relocating the Apache, like Gatewood, admires Geronimo but must do his duty. Geronimo slips away and twice rebels due to government actions, but he eventually surrenders and gets shipped off to Florida where he lives his final years.

Native American filmmakers began making movies on their own collective experience. A notable effort was the first feature-length Native American film, *Smoke Signals* (1998). It is the story of two contemporary Native Americans, Victor Joseph (Adam Beach) and Thomas Builds-the-Fire (Evan Adams) who travel by bus from their reservation in Idaho to Phoenix, Arizona to receive the ashes of Victor’s father, Arnold. Victor resents his father’s alcoholism, wife beating, and abandonment of the family, but Thomas looks up to Victor because he believes that the man saved him from a fire. Arnold’s friend Suzy Song (Irene Bedard) tells them that Arnold in his drunkenness started the fire that almost killed Thomas. Victor and Thomas are very different people but come to reconcile as result of their road trip. Thomas comes to a better grasp of Victor’s alcoholism, while Victor understands Thomas’s love for Arnold.

Ron Howard’s *The Missing* (2003) once again gives the audience fear-some, menacing Indians. A blood-thirsty renegade, El Brujo, is kidnapping local girls to sell into sex slavery in Mexico. The story is most notable as a traditional heroine story in which the protagonist triumphs by putting together a cooperative group to rescue her daughter. Magdalena “Maggie” Gilkeson (Cate Blanchett) is determined to retrieve the captured girls, including the daughter. She teams up with her estranged father, Samuel Jones (Tommy Lee

Jones), who has lived among the Apache for some time. While a compelling tale full of fast-paced action, it is in part a return to the Brutal Savage narrative.

A FISTFUL OF IRONY: SPAGHETTI WESTERNS UPEND THE GENRE

In the 1950s Western heyday, who would have thought that Europeans (mainly Italians) a decade later would provide the most intriguing take on the genre? Italian directors were fascinated with Hollywood Westerns that employed a degree of irony, cynicism, and amorality, such as *Veracruz* (1954), starring Gary Cooper and Burt Lancaster, and *The Magnificent Seven*, discussed above. These directors found that they could make genre movies cheaply by hiring a mix of Italian and Spanish actors, bringing in a few Americans for lead roles, and filming most of the outdoor scenes in southeastern Spain, which looks like the Southwest U.S. or northern Mexico. The ostensibly American stories could make much more money in international markets than the typical Italian fare of the period. Full of irony, sly humor, casual violence, misanthropy (and misogyny), and sociopolitical subversion, the Spaghetti Western flourished from 1964 to 1979. At the time considered cheap knock-off movies, many of them are now taken as film classics—and among the best Westerns made.

Several excellent studies have exhaustively dissected the Spaghetti Western. Here, we focus on those films with significant political or socio-political content. For instance, Tonino Valerii's *The Price of Power* (1969) is a veiled examination of the JFK assassination, displaced to the assassination of James Garfield in 1881. Many of the Italian Spaghetti Western directors were leftists and used stories of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 to illustrate their ideas. Mexico becomes a stand-in for modern Italy and developing countries. These have been called Zapata Westerns, referring to Mexican revolutionary peasant leader Emiliano Zapata (1879–1919). These include *A Bullet for the General* (1966), *The Mercenary* (1968), and *Tepapa* (1968).

Several Italian directors were leftists who wanted to adapt Westerns to teach revolution. They used the Mexican Revolution of 1910 to craft allegories and critiques of society and programs of revolt. Damiano Damiani's *A Bullet for the General* (sometimes titled *Quien Sabe?*) is a fascinating character study of El Chunchu Munos (Gian Maria Volonte), a man who straddles the line between banditry and revolution. Loyal to General Elias, the bandit seizes a trainload of arms. There, he befriends Bill Tate (Lou Castel), an American businessman who claims he was a prisoner of the other side and now wants to join the Munos gang. Chunchu punishes a group of

businessmen and foreigners traveling in a train, who represent the classes dominating Mexico. He then returns to the town of San Miguel, where he captures and executes the town boss, Don Felipe. Tate convinces the bandits to sell their weapons to Gen. Elias. A group leaves with the weapons, while Chunchu stays to defend San Miguel.

Missing the bandit life, Chunchu leaves to join his fellows. Several of the bandits get killed on the way, but they reach the general's camp and Munos sells the weapons. But then, the general announces that San Miguel has been sacked by the enemy because Chunchu abandoned it. The bandit is about to be executed when Tate shoots both the general and the officer taking Munos to his execution. Reduced to poverty, Chunchu prepares to shoot Tate in Juarez, but the American gives his friend half of his fee for assassinating the general. He cleans himself up and buys a new suit. Days later, as Tate is boarding the train for the United States, Chunchu says that he must kill Tate and shoots him. He gives his bag of money to nearby peasants, shouting at them to buy dynamite, not bread, and he flees from the federales.

Chunchu cannot explain why he has killed his erstwhile friend, Tate. He asks in Spanish, "¿Quién sabe?" (who knows). This was a typical sentiment for script writer Franco Solinas, who felt that revolutionary instinct should trump materialist motives. Killing Tate, he has freed himself from the capitalist greed represented by the hired assassin (Grant, 2011: 195). Chunchu reminds the audience of other bandits who became revolutionaries during the 1910 revolution, especially Francisco "Pancho" Villa (1878–1923), the most potent rebel in northern Mexico during the war.

The Big Gundown (1967) starts conventionally enough, with veteran bounty hunter Jonathan "Colorado" Corbett (Lee Van Cleef) hired by a Texas railroad president Brokston to bring in Chuchillo (Tomas Milian), bandit and accused rapist of a twelve-year-old girl. Corbett tracks Chuchillo to Mexico and captures him in a brothel. But he learns that Chuchillo is innocent, and in fact Brokston's son-in-law committed the crime. Corbett's is an honorable man who sees the injustice of the charges and the system that creates them. He is the archetypal man in the middle, who wants to uphold the law but knows that the law supports an oppressive system (Grant, 2011: 199–202).

Sergio Donati's *Face to Face* (also 1967) is the story of an American college professor Brad Fletcher (Volonte again) whose conservative views of the status quo are challenged when he arrives in the Southwest. He encounters Beau Bennett (Milian), whose violent and untamed lifestyle appeals to Brad. Brad gradually feels the need to dominate this world. He educates Beau about the awful socio-political realities of their world, and the two gradually change places: Beau becomes civilized and Brad becomes a violent aggressor. When Siringo (William Berger), a lawman, infiltrates the gang, Brad shoots him.

Beau then kills Brad as he is about to finish off Siringo, thus allowing the bandit to return to normal society (Grant, 2011: 204–206).

Mexican revolutionary politics get more complicated in Giulio Petroni's *Tepapa* (1968). Petroni claimed that the movie was not about Communism or fascism, but about the general struggle for liberation from tyranny. The title character is a man of the people committed to the freedom of Mexicans, but he is also a rapist. Details of the crime emerge; we learn that Tepapa virtually forgot about it, though his victim committed suicide. He also shoots one of his friends for stealing money from the revolutionaries, though the man did it to help his son. There is a continuous sense of betrayal throughout the film. Tepapa appeals to Mexican President Madero for clemency but his gang of agrarian rebels get outlawed, instead (Grant, 2011: 207–209).

Sergio Corbucci contributed two films to the Zapata canon: *A Professional Gun* (1968) and *Companeros* (1970). Both are stories of a “calculating, cultured” mercenary (both played by Franco Nero) and a “naïve, instinctive” Mexican rebel. The two characters in their own ways are essentially anti-authoritarian but also revolutionary. Corbucci did not want to call these movies Westerns, as they were set in Mexico and were about that country's revolution. In the former movie, Paco Roman (Tony Musante) is a peasant rebel who is tutored by Polish mercenary Sergei Kowalski (Nero). Roman thinks that the purpose of revolution is only “to kill the bosses and take their money.” His companion Columba helps him see that the revolution is not for personal gain, and that the money belongs to the Mexican people. In *Companeros*, Vasco (Milian) is a rough rebel dressed like Che Guevara, complete with beret. Swedish arms merchant Yod Peterson (Nero) instructs him about how the world works. Vasco's love interest Lola and idealistic professor Xantos teach him what the revolution is really about. Both Paco and Vasco are like lumpenproletariat who need to be shaped into genuine revolutionaries (Grant, 2011: 210–214).

The five most famous Spaghetti Westerns were directed by Sergio Leone. The first three, the Man with No Name trilogy, made Eastwood a star. The fourth, *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968), is a big-budget epic Western and perhaps the highest quality Spaghetti Western. The last, *Duck, You Sucker!* (1971) is a flawed but fascinating contrast of a Mexican revolutionary whose primary loyalty is to his family with a hired demolitions expert with strong memories of the Irish Rebellion.

A Fistful of Dollars (1964), based on Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo*, is a twisted tale of two gangs fighting for control of a Texas border town. The Mexican gang is headed by Ramon Rojo (Volonte), while the American gang centers on the town sheriff and the Baxter family. Ethnic conflict underlies the story, and clearly Leone's sympathies are with the fun-loving Mexicans. The Stranger (Eastwood) weaves his way between the two groups, while

helping Marisol (Marianne Koch), a woman whom Ramon has forced to live with him, so that she can rejoin her husband and child and leave town. The Rojas destroy the whole Baxter family one terrible night. In an iconic scene, the Stranger and Ramon shoot it out on the street. The Stranger uses a metal shield under his poncho to deflect all of Ramon's rifle bullets, then shoots the Rojas and finally Ramon (Welles, 2013: 1–9).

In *For a Few Dollars More* (1965), almost all characters are motivated by greed. Only Col. Douglas Mortimer (Van Cleef) is driven by non-financial concerns, as he seeks revenge for the rape and suicide of his sister and murder of her husband by a ruthless bank robber, “El Indio” (Volonte). The Man with No Name (Eastwood), a bounty hunter also called Manco, arrives in town and quickly teams up with Mortimer. He pretends to join Indio's gang, helping to rob the El Paso Bank in Santa Cruz. Manco is the only one to return. He and Mortimer hide the stolen money. Indio reveals that he knows Mortimer and Manco are bounty hunters. Indio and Mortimer line up for a gunfight, to shoot when a watch stolen from Mortimer's sister stops playing its tune. Manco gives Mortimer his gun and says they should use Mortimer's identical watch, which Manco holds. Mortimer shoots Indio. His revenge achieved, he declines to split the stolen money, and Manco takes it and the bodies of the robbers for their rewards (Welles, 2013: 1–9).

Leone's attempt at a comedy-drama, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966) also centers on characters primarily driven by greed. Leone combines pop art with its splashy imagery, the “Western as opera” by building violent suspense, and entertainment over drama (Phipps, 2021: 1–25). The title's joke is that none of the three main characters is completely good, none thoroughly bad, and all are ugly in that they are ruled by greed and self-interest. The Man with No Name, also referred to as “Blondie” (the “Good,” Eastwood) is capable of acts of compassion, but is just as much a money-mad killer as the others. “Angel Eyes” (the “Bad,” Van Cleef) is a brutal sometime soldier who delights in torturing or hunting down enemies, but always sports a smile. Tuco Ramirez (the “Ugly,” Wallach) is a two-bit bandit, a fast-talker and amoral opportunist. The three are hunting for a treasure buried by a Confederate soldier, Bill Carson. When they arrive at Sad Hill Cemetery where it is buried, Blondie says they will have to earn it and seems to write the grave name on a rock. In another iconic tableau, the three face off in a three-way fight, and Blondie shoots Angel Eyes. He emptied Tuco's pistol the night before, so does not have to worry about the bandit shooting him. Blondie did not write anything on the rock because the treasure is buried in a grave marked “Unknown” next to Arch Stanton.

The movie has a clear antiwar subtext, as it is set during the New Mexico campaign (1862) during the U.S. Civil War. Both Union and Confederate forces are cruel, and there is little to differentiate them. Tuco

and Blondie drive a wagon and see cavalry approaching. Thinking they see gray-uniformed men, Tuco shouts, "hurrah for the Confederacy!" An officer dusts off his sleeve, revealing a blue Union uniform. The two are clapped into a prison camp, where prisoners are routinely beat up by Angel Eyes and his corporal as gentle music plays outside. The officer in charge objects to Angel Eyes' methods, but there is little he can do, as he is dying. Tuco and Blondie are shocked by the destruction of war, and Blondie comforts a dying soldier, giving him a few drags on his cigarillo. They help a kindly Union officer by blowing up a bridge for him; Blondie hopes this will open up the road to Sad Hill for them. The officer dies just after hearing the bridge blow up. The two treasure seekers pass through depopulated towns that are destroyed by the war yet continue to be bombarded. They see deserters shot and prisoners manacled to the front of trains (Welles, 2013: 1–9).

Religion gets better treatment. Tuco's brother, Pablo (Luigi Pistilli) is a priest who runs a mission where Blondie recovers from Tuco's mistreatment in the desert. The only honorable character, Pablo confronts Tuco about his thievery and debauched life. Tuco reacts violently, declaring that it was him whose life was harder and required more commitment. As Tuco leaves, his brother plaintively calls after him. Leone may have avoided criticism of religion because Italy was still a devoutly Catholic country, and most of his Italian audience were working class Catholics. Other Spaghetti Westerns did not shy away from attacking priests or the Church (Welles, 2013: 1–9).

Once Upon a Time in the West (1968) is Leone's magnum opus, the first spaghetti product to get major studio treatment. Leone builds on ironic elements from his earlier films, but adds an air of tragedy, as all characters must pay very heavy prices for their decisions (Phipps, 2021: 1–25). Unlike his other films, this one is suspicious of towns and cities, which bring killers and corruption to the frontier. The movie also suggests that people cannot change their essential natures. Cheyenne (Robards) is a wild bandit from the pre-civilized era, and he knows that he will never fit into the new railroad town being built. Frank (Fonda, cast against type) is a killer and rapist, and hires himself out to a crippled railroad magnate, Morton (Gabriele Ferzetti) who wants to control the town. Harmonica (Charles Bronson) wants revenge on Frank for killing his brother. Once he achieves his aim by shooting Frank in a standoff, his life is an empty vessel and he has nothing left to do.

Only Jill McBain (Claudia Cardinale) is a survivor that can adapt to the new reality. A former prostitute who married a rancher that Frank murdered, she becomes the most powerful landowner along the rail line, overseeing construction of the new train station. A mortally wounded Cheyenne advises her to willingly cater to male customers, since the sight of a woman to a workingman is very special, and she should not mind if one of them touches her on her bottom. Harmonica could easily stay with Jill and build a new life,

but he has nothing left to give her. Like Shane, Ethan, and Josey Wales, he must leave civilized society, though his wounds are psychic, not physical.

In fact, all the characters are vulnerable in some way. Tough-skinned Frank realizes he is just an ordinary man before Harmonica kills him in a quick draw. Morton may be restricted by his infirmity, but until his sad death he maintains passion for the railroad's development. Cheyenne is a rough character but eyes Jill with great tenderness and chivalry. Death tracks all the major characters, including Jill, though she takes the death of her husband in stride (Welles, 2013: 1–9).

Duck, You Sucker! (also called *Fistful of Dynamite*, 1971) is Leone's last Western. It is a complicated story of Juan Miranda (Rod Steiger), another man who straddles the line between bandit and revolutionary. He forces Sean (or John) Mallory (Coburn), an Irish explosives expert for hire, to join him to rob a bank. The two become close, though they remain suspicious of each other. Hunted by a Col. Reza, the pair escape and later Miranda kills a tyrannical governor. Reza shoots Mallory in the back. Dying, he blows up a dynamite stash, killing many of the counter-revolutionaries. Neither Miranda nor Mallory is a fully committed revolutionary. Miranda is more concerned about his family and immediate colleagues than political struggle, while Mallory has fled Ireland because of charges of murdering two British policemen and is indifferent to the Mexican Revolution. Leone apparently did not know much about the Irish Rebellion, and the audience is left wanting more information about Mallory's past.

The story had more to do with Leone's memories of fascist Italy in World War II than the revolutionary politics of the postwar era. Like the puppet Mussolini government during the latter stages of the war, the movie's Mexican government forces are treacherous and brutal. The Mexican Army carries out mass executions of peasants in an old sugar mill, and Miranda finds his family and comrades killed in a cave. Leone also is saying that the idealism of Communist revolution has failed. The 1960s are over. After the disappointment of the 1968 Paris demonstrations, the disastrous rock concert at Altamont, California and the shock of the Tate-LaBianca killings in Los Angeles, an unsettling pessimism has descended on the Western world (Welles, 2013: 1–9).

Hollywood reacted to both the Spaghetti Western phenomenon and the broader sociopolitical events of the 1960s with a string of revisionist Westerns and anti-Westerns (Fisher, 2014: 67–68). Honorable characters with strong moral codes who resorted to violence only because they were forced to do so dominated in the 1940s and 1950s. Replacing them were morally ambiguous characters who primarily sought financial gain and were unrestrained in their use of violence. Sam Peckinpah's *Ride the High Country* (1962) is one of the earliest revisionist Westerns, in which two aging cowboys (Randolph Scott

and Joel McCrea) get tasked with bringing a gold shipment from a mining camp to a small town. They know that this is likely their last hurrah, and they want to make the most of the experience. Peckinpah plays with themes he employed in other films: the passing of the West and men out of place and running out of time (Phipps, 2021: 1–25).

The archetypal revisionist Western is Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) about a gang of down-on-their-luck bank robbers (William Holden, Ernest Borgnine, Warren Oates, and Ben Johnson) who retreat to a Mexican village ruled by a tyrannical Army officer. They agree to do a heist for the general, but he captures and tortures Angel, a Mexican working with them. They consider leaving with their earnings but decide to go back to rescue Angel. The general kills Angel in front of them, provoking the gang to shoot the general and a German officer advising him. There follows a long shootout in which the gang members and most of the general's soldiers are killed. The main characters may be outlaws, but they maintain their own honor code, and they are haunted by their choices to allow greed and fear to rule them (Phipps, 2021: 1–25).

Also in 1969 was the more popular and accessible Western, George Roy Hill's *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, starring Paul Newman as Butch Cassidy, Robert Redford as Sundance, and Katherine Ross as shared love interest, Etta Place. Based loosely on the real bank and train robbers, the story also is an allegory for the closing of the West and the extinguishing of the Western spirit of untamed freedom. Butch and Sundance, the good-natured bandits, become the de facto good guys. They enjoy an easy life in which their predations are winked at by weak law enforcement, until the Union Pacific Railroad hires a team of professionals as a posse to hunt down and kill the two robbers. "Who are those guys?" the bandits ask incredulously several times as they are chased across the Wyoming landscape. They escape with Etta to Bolivia, where they continue robbing for several years until Etta decides to return home. Later, they are cornered and killed by Army troops in a town market. The last shot of them is a freeze-frame that turns to sepia, as we hear the Army volleys but do not see them die. The real fates of Butch and Sundance are unknown, as contradictory stories of their whereabouts and demise continue to circulate over a century after their supposed deaths at a small Bolivian inn.

WOMEN OF THE OLD WEST: BEYOND SALOON GIRLS AND SETTLER WIVES

Spaghetti Westerns often were misogynistic, with women reduced to victims of physical and sexual violence. They were rarely leaders or stars in

these movies. However, a few of the Zapata Westerns presented strong or (somewhat) effective women. Women such as Columba (Giovanna Ralli) in *A Professional Gun*, Lola (Iris Berben) in *Companeros* and Mercedes in *Killer Kid*, are there to encourage the male characters to be better. Perhaps the strongest is Adelita (Martine Beswick) in *A Bullet for the General*, who is a revolutionary leader that goes toe-to-toe with her male counterparts. Other female characters are more traditional, such as Marisol with her son in *Fistful of Dollars* who serve as a Madonna and child, or various femmes fatale that pop up in assorted stories (Grant, 2011: 130, 215).

As noted above, Jill McBain is one of the sub-genre's strongest and most resilient characters (Grant, 2011: 215). Jill would be a heroine in any genre, one of the best-defined female characters in any traditional story. Jill's unusual relations with the three male leads allow this former prostitute to recover from the murder of her husband and to land on her feet as leader of a new town, showing how a woman can be a "transfiguring" presence in a Western story (Lucas, 1998: 318). It is a shame that the studio dubbed Cardinale in English, as her smoky Italian accent would have added to the story. Be sure to catch the undubbed Cardinale in Richard Brooks's *The Professionals* (1966), which is a fine early revisionist Western starring Lee Marvin and Burt Lancaster.

Women occupy a curious place in American Westerns. On one hand, they are peripheral to the stories, as they often are merely catalysts for the male leads taking action of some kind. On the other hand, they are central to the stories. Director Anthony Mann said that without women, Western stories do not work. Because Western stories are elemental myths, women in Westerns are often unrealistic. Mann used distinctly noir-like women in his 1950s films, that is, femmes fatale, women with dark pasts, and women with ambiguous ties to both the hero and the bad guys (Cutshaw, 2013: 35–51).

The frontier is all about the opposition of masculine values of the wilderness to feminine values of the civilized garden that the wilderness can become. Jimmy Ringo in *The Gunfighter* agrees to give up his life as a gunman so that he can rejoin his teacher wife and raise the son he has not known. His tragedy is that a younger gunman kills him before he has a chance to change. While feminine values will win out, and the masculine heroes will be tamed by civilization, it is women who give up their independence and active lives to become secondary as mothers, teachers, or "social mediators" of some kind. If stories allow women to be active, such as Amy in *High Noon*, it is in service of the male lead's cause. Cook suggests that Westerns can never allow women to be the heroes, as that would destroy the genre (Cook, 1998: 293–295). I do not agree with this, as some of the movies cited here do present heroic women. But as noted by Cocca and others, the problem of women

in Westerns is one of representation: few leads are female, and women most often play supporting characters (Cocca, 2019: 3–7).

Thus, women have been in Westerns from the beginning, but most often as supporting players: saloon girls (often a euphemism either for prostitutes or young women getting male customers to buy drinks), love interests, tom boys, settler wives, and snooty townswomen. In most stories, women are either Madonna or whore. *My Darling Clementine* presents an obvious Madonna/whore dichotomy in Chihuahua and Clementine. *Stagecoach* is a rare film in which the whore becomes a Madonna. Dallas, the shamed prostitute, helps stagecoach passenger Lucy Mallory give birth to her baby, then cradles the baby in several scenes, becoming a saintly figure for saving Lucy and taking care of her child better than the actual mother could. She also is the civilizing force that brings Ringo back to a normal relationship with society. By agreeing to join Ringo at his ranch across the border, she completes crossing of the line, becoming a future loving wife to the hero who has now completed his task of revenge on those who killed his father and brother (Cook, 1998: 295).

Hawks gave audiences some of the strongest female Western characters. His *Red River* (1948) presents two women who show both the latent possibilities and limitations of their gender in Westerns. Early in the story, Tom Dunson (Wayne) travels west from St. Louis with a wagon train and falls in love with Fen (Coleen Gray). When they reach Texas, he tells her he must leave to go to the ranch he is starting up and that it is no place for a woman. She begs to go with him, saying that she is as strong as any man. “I’m strong; I can stand anything you can.” Tom asserts that it would be “too much for a woman.” She then pulls out her strongest arguments:

Put your arms around me, Tom. Hold me, feel me in your arms. Do I feel weak, Tom? I don’t, do I? You’ll need me; you’ll need what a woman can give you to do what you have to do. Oh, listen to me, Tom . . . the sun only shines half the time, Tom; the other half is night. (Pippin, 2010: 33)

The compelling nature of her arguments do not sway him, and the masculine imperative of building his ranch trumps romantic love. He leaves but quickly regrets his decision, as an Indian attack kills most of the wagon party, including Fen. Fen could have been Tom’s equal partner and lover, but he will not allow that possibility.

Much later, Tom’s surrogate son Matt Garth has rebelled and taken over a cattle drive to Missouri. Matt meets another woman, Tess Millay (Joanne Dru), and the two fall in love. Tom, trailing the drive, meets Tess, and apparently tests her by offering her half of his wealth if she will bear him a son. She turns him down. After the cattle drive diverts to Abilene, Kansas, Tom arrives to confront and kill Matt. The two men engage in a vicious fistfight

and, in an iconic moment, Tess grabs a pistol. She shoots into the air, stopping the fight. She declares, “any fool with half a mind can see that you two love each other.” The men are shamed and agree to work together to build up the ranch. Tom suggests that Matt should marry Tess. Tess becomes the peacemaker who stops the two men from destroying each other. Some critics find the scene unbelievable, given Tom’s murderous rage, but most viewers have liked it (Pippin, 2010: 33–60). Will the strong Tess become an equal to Matt, who everyone says is weaker (read more feminine) than Tom? As the credits roll, we do not know, but my bet would be on Tess.

The most well-defined female characters exist in relationship to male heroes. Marlene Dietrich plays a determined saloon lady who makes romantic sparks fly with the new town sheriff (Stewart) in *Destry Rides Again* (1939). Then-popular musicals present their heroines in relation to their men, with *Annie Get Your Gun* (1950) about sharpshooter Annie Oakley and *Calamity Jane* (1953) about the most famous woman in Deadwood, South Dakota (Kiang, 2016: 1–7), played by Doris Day. Even so, in the conservative 1950s, several films with strong women graced the silver screen. Anthony Mann’s *The Furies* (1950) presents two women who are potent in their own ways: Vance (Barbara Stanwyck) is the daughter of a powerful rancher TC, played by Walter Huston. She turns against him when he disfigures his gold-digger girlfriend (Judith Anderson) in a jealous rage. Stanwyck later stars in *Cattle Queen of Montana* (1955), as Sierra Nevada Jones, who teams up with Ronald Reagan’s character Ferrell to round up cattle rustlers. She also plays a major landowner, Jessica Drummond, in *Forty Guns* (1957).

The most famous female-led Western of the period is Nicholas Ray’s *Johnny Guitar* (1954). Joan Crawford plays Vienna, a take-charge woman who owns her own saloon, the best in the area. She loves the title character (Sterling Hayden), who does not care about her behavior or her past. The townspeople resent her independent ways—and her unrestrained womanhood. Fanatical local rancher Emma Small (Mercedes McCambridge) hates Vienna for everything she is and is determined to lynch her on trumped up charges of abetting murder. Through her own resourcefulness and help of her man, Vienna manages to survive and reveal the truth to the townspeople. The story climaxes in a shootout between Vienna and Emma. Emma loses, tumbling off the balcony of a hilltop house. The film’s depiction of female conflict and differing views of proper women’s behavior make this a fascinating study in an era when the women’s movement was just beginning to stir after slumbering for a few decades (Kiang, 2016: 1–7).

Some of the best drawn 1950s and 1960s female characters gain their strength from awakening romantic feelings or sexuality, such as Lolly (Colleen Miller) in *Four Guns to the Border* (1954) or Emmy (Felicia Farr), a young woman tending bar at a small saloon who gently romances the

captured outlaw Ben Wade (Glenn Ford), who has a soft spot for women, in *3:10 to Yuma* (1957). One could add Feathers in *Rio Bravo*, the romantic aggressor who overcomes the clueless-with-women John T. Chance. Often, women are family matriarchs who try to bend their men in the direction of civilized behavior, such as Kathleen (Maureen O'Hara) in *Rio Grande* (discussed above) or Alice (Leora Dana), wife of farmer Dan Evans (Van Heflin), also in *3:10 to Yuma* (Lucas, 1998: 313–320). O'Hara was one of the most powerful actors of her era, but she spends much of the movie doing traditional wifely things such as washing clothes or comforting her son—and trying to get him to leave the cavalry (Lucas, 1998: 313–320).

Perhaps the most complex and compelling Western woman is Hallie (Miles) in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (also above). In a quiet scene with former sheriff Link Appleyard (Andy Devine) early in the film, she discusses how the town of Shinbone has changed. They visit Tom's old ranch, where she retrieves a cactus rose and comes to terms with the love she lost and the choice she made. She is a woman caught between two men, and she knows that they touched different parts of her soul, but she embraces her choices and understands the tragedy that they unleashed (Lucas, 1998: 313–320).

While Hallie can live with her choices, Pearl Chavez (Jennifer Jones) from King Vidor's *Duel in the Sun* (1946) can never resolve her male dilemma. Offspring of a white father and Mexican-Indian mother, the story suggests that she is drawn in both wild-erotic and conventional-female directions. She loves two brothers, the "good" brother Jesse (Joseph Cotton) who wants her to be his wife, and the "bad" brother Lewton or "Lewt" (Gregory Peck), who lusts for her and wants to possess her. She gives in to Lewt but regrets her act. She engages to marry a local rancher, but Lewt kills him. Jesse confronts his brother, saying he will be punished as a murderer, and Lewt shoots him, too. Though the wound is not mortal, Lewt apparently is not finished with him. Pearl arms herself, then shoots it out with Lewt in the desert. The two die in each other's arms (Cook, 1998: 298). This overwrought eroticism may have been a bit much for critics and audiences in the 1940s, and the high production costs and advertising campaign meant that the film did not make much money.

Corkin feels that the movie is both an illustration of the social dislocation in early postwar America, as servicemen came home to women who had been empowered by their work during the war, and a more "feminine" approach to foreign policy that attempts to use coercion rather than brute force. The movie endorses the actions of the more civilized (read feminine) characters and condemns the barbaric Lewt. As melodrama, the film also seeks to locate women in their supposedly proper sphere as dutiful wives and demonstrate the consequences of straying from defined gender roles (Corkin, 2004: 51–93).

Along with the advance of women's movement in the 1960s–1970s, audiences saw more compelling women in Westerns. *Cat Ballou* (1965) is a comedy romp starring Jane Fonda as the title character, a former strait-laced teacher who puts together a gang to take revenge on those who seized her father's land and killed him. *Two Mules for Sister Sara* (1970), an unusual double star vehicle, has mercenary Hogan (Eastwood) team up with a Catholic nun, Sara (Shirley MacLaine) to fight against the French intervention in Mexico. It turns out that she is a prostitute who is working with the Juaristas who are fighting the French. Having succeeded in their mission, she and Hogan go off to start a gambling establishment in San Francisco.

Hannie Caulder (1971) comes closest of any film up to the 1970s in giving us a female as central hero. The title character (Raquel Welch) is a rape victim who avenges that crime and the murder of her husband. Bounty hunter Thomas Price (Robert Culp) teaches her how to survive in the West but tells her she will be changed forever if she takes revenge. She kills the gang members, but realizes he was right. Like male heroes, she cannot return to society, while a black figure shadows her, possibly indicating that she can never be a conventional hero, as she is not male (Cook, 1998: 297). Kiang calls this “muddled” movie feminism, though she acknowledges that it is a compelling story (Kiang, 2016: 1–7).

More nuanced depictions of western women appeared from the 1990s onward. One of the most fascinating is Sam Raimi's *The Quick and the Dead* (1995). By placing a woman in a normally male role, this Western directly overthrows the genre's conventional gender dynamics in a way that *Hannie Caulder* could not. As noted by numerous critics, this movie is hard to place: is it an updating of Spaghetti Western conventions to the 1990s, should it be taken as high camp or even comedy, or could it be seen as a revisionist-feminist recasting of the Western? Take your pick; there is no right answer here. The story is both improbable and a mess, but it keeps you watching through numerous TV viewings. Sharon Stone is stunning in both broad daylight and the chiaroscuro of night, and Hackman makes a deliciously awful villain (more over-the-top than his turn in *Unforgiven*). It's fun to see very young Leonardo DiCaprio and not-yet-star Russell Crowe in supporting roles.

Ellen (Stone) comes to the town of Redemption to enter a shootout elimination competition. The town is ruled with a tight fist by ex-outlaw John Herod (Hackman), who sets the rules for the competition. Herod disparages women as shooters, but Ellen enters the contest, and is thereafter referred to as “The Lady” because she will not give her name. Herod has captured Cort (Crowe), a quick draw who used to be part of his gang, forcing him into the competition. Cort says he will not fight because he is now a preacher but does so anyway. Cort and Ellen survive their first rounds, but Ellen panics

and leaves town. She comes back to find that Herod will fight his own son, Fee or "The Kid" (DiCaprio). The Kid grazes Herod's neck, but is mortally wounded (Kiang, 2016: 1–7).

The audience learns that Ellen seeks revenge on Herod for killing her father, the town marshal (Gary Sinise). He was strung up on a gate, like Harmonica's brother in *Once Upon a Time in the West*, and Herod gave the child Ellen a gun to shoot the rope. She missed, killing her dad. Cort and Ellen are slated to fight next, and Ellen is apparently killed. Cort and Herod then must face off in the final gunfight the next morning. As the clock tolls the hour, town buildings explode all around. Having faked her death, Ellen emerges from the smoke, challenging Herod. He demands to know who she is, and she throws her father's badge at his feet. They draw; Ellen is grazed, but she shoots Herod through the heart. She picks up the badge and tosses it to Cort, declaring, "the law's come back to town." She could have stayed with Cort, with whom she shares romantic feelings, and the two could have cleaned up Redemption. But like Shane and the other lone male heroes, she mounts her horse and rides out of town.

Equally campy, overwrought, and a bit silly is *Bad Girls* (1994). When a prostitute, Cody (Madeleine Stowe) kills a john who is abusing her, she and three other sex workers flee to start a new life: Anita (Mary Stuart Masterson), Eileen (Andie MacDowell), and Lily (Drew Barrymore). Through various misadventures, they must fight against a gang of bank robbers, and they defeat the bad guys. Eileen decides to stay and start a family with a young ranch owner, turning her from whore to Madonna. The other three ride West, like the male heroes of old, to an uncertain future. Do you notice by now how often female characters are prostitutes in these films? Filmmakers cannot seem to escape the Madonna vs. whore division. While prostitutes could be found in almost any substantial town in the West, and they faced a very difficult existence, they amounted to only a small fraction of the population.

Other women's Westerns since the 1990s have mostly been character studies of individual women or groups of women. Maggie Greenwald's *The Ballad of Little Jo* (1993) examines Jo (Suzi Amis), a woman who has to leave her life in the east because she bore a child out of wedlock. As she makes her way West, she disguises herself as a man and befriends two potential allies: a British man (Ian McKellen) who likes Jo as a man, but is brutal toward prostitutes, and Badger (Bo Hopkins), who has always felt betrayed by women. *The Missing*, discussed above under images of Native Americans, portrays a strong settler woman (Blanchett) who mounts an expedition to recover her abducted daughter and other girls. She reluctantly partners with her father (Jones), who had abandoned his family when she was a girl. *Meek's Cutoff* (2010) is a wagon train story, in which the settlers suspect that their guide, Stephen Meek (Bruce Greenwood), does not know what he is doing.

The women are excluded from decision making on the trail, but Emily Tetherow (Michele Williams) takes matters in her own hands, stopping Meek from killing a Native American who can lead the lost wagons to a source of water (Kiang, 2016: 1–7).

Sweetwater (2013) is a revenge story, in which a widow, Sarah Ramirez (January Jones) seeks vengeance against the leader of religious sect (Jason Isaacs) who killed her husband. She gets help from the local sheriff, Cornelius Jackson (Ed Harris). Tommy Lee Jones directed *The Homesman* (2014), a story about an unmarried woman, Mary Bee Cuddy (Hilary Swank) who is tasked with escorting three “mad women” across the plains to a woman who will shelter them (played by Meryl Streep). Cuddy asks a drunken claims jumper, Briggs (Jones) to help them get to their destination. Initially suspicious of each other, they gradually forge a bond.

Natalie Portman stars in *Jane Got a Gun* (2015) about Jane Hammond, a woman whose homestead is threatened by the Bishop gang who have shot her husband. She asks her former lover, Dan Frost (Joel Edgerton), for help. He is angry at her because he went off to fight in the civil war and feels that she did not wait long enough for his return. At first reluctant, he helps her kill the gang members and recover their daughter who is working as a servant in a brothel (Kiang, 2016: 1–7). *Brimstone* (2016) is a muddled story about injustice toward Liz (Dakota Fanning), who is wrongly accused of murder, and the Reverend (Guy Pearce) who comes after her. Clergymen obviously do not fare well in these recent movies. This movie was widely criticized for exploitive violence. *Woman Walks Ahead* (2017) is based on the true story of Caroline Weldon (Jessica Chastain), a portrait painter who traveled through the wilds to paint Lakota leader Sitting Bull.

Despite recent attempts to put women at the center of Westerns, most of these characters still exist in relationship to men. Little Jo may be an exception. So, how could women claim a better place in this genre? I recommend that directors, especially women directors, dispense with the Madonna/whore dichotomy and stop writing stories about prostitutes and women settlers. Also, aping male hero tropes does not seem to work so well. Instead, they should try stories based on real women of the Old West, whose lives are both fascinating and humbling. Annie Oakley (1860–1926), perhaps the greatest trick shooter in American history, was given the musical treatment, played by Betty Hutton, but only once has been subject of a dramatic film, played by Stanwyck in 1935.

Lottie Deno (born Carlotta J. Thompkins, 1844–1934) was one of the greatest gamblers in the West and used her extensive winnings to settle down as a society lady in New Mexico. Eleanor Dumont (1829–1879) also was a successful gambler, who owned both her own gambling hall and a brothel. Known as Madame Moustache because thickened hair follicles on her face

caused her to grow facial hair, she chose to end her life because she was tired of living (and because of sudden gambling debts). Elizabeth McCourt Tabor (known as Baby Doe Tabor, 1854–1935) married Horace Tabor, the richest man in the Colorado mining town of Leadville after a scandalous affair, but they lost everything in the Panic of '93. In a tragic riches to rags story, Baby Doe lived out her days in poverty in a Leadville shack. Mary Fields (1832?-1914) was one of the first African Americans to work for the postal service, delivering mail by stagecoach, and she worked a variety of other jobs, including farmer and ranch forewoman. Fannie Porter (1873–1937) ran the fanciest brothel in San Antonio, which catered to Butch Cassidy and other members of the Hole in the Wall Gang (Ladies of Legend, 2020: 32–35; Wild Women, 2021: 58–69).

Then there was Charley Parkhurst (born Charlotte Parkhurst, 1812–1879), who lived most of her life as a man, the toughest and most successful stagecoach driver in California, who was never held up by robbers. Pearl Hart (1876–1955?) was the most notorious female stagecoach bandit, so it is fitting that she never crossed paths with Charley. She served a few years in prison but was pardoned when she became pregnant. Nothing much is known about her after she left prison, except that she married. Laura Bullion (1876–1961) was a member of the Hole in the Wall gang and served three years in prison. Etta Place (1878-?), companion of Sundance and Butch Cassidy, is the ultimate mystery woman of the West. After she left her friends in South America, she faded into obscurity, with tall tales of her showing up in various Western states (Ladies, 2020: 32–35). Katherine Ross reprises her role as Etta in a speculative TV movie, *Wanted: The Sundance Woman* (1976), which places her in Mexico during the 1910 Revolution (Ladies of Legend, 2020: 32–35; Wild Women, 2021: 58–69).

A perennial favorite Old West woman is Rose Dunn (1878–1955), also known as the Rose of Cimarron. At about fourteen, she became companion of George “Bitter Creek” Newcomb, an Oklahoma outlaw. Her second husband claimed that she was never romantically involved with Newcomb or members of his outfit, the Doolin gang. In any case, she was beloved by the Doolin gang because of her kindness, calmness, and caring for them when they were wounded. She also bought supplies for the gang. Her brothers had taught her to ride and shoot, and she was known as an excellent horsewoman. She may or may not have been involved in the Newcomb gang’s shootout at Ingalls, Oklahoma, and she may or may not have known that her brothers set a trap for Newcomb, when they killed him for the reward in 1895. She married an Oklahoma politician in 1899, and then remarried in 1946 after being widowed. Her second husband, who had known her since she was seventeen, claimed that she was embarrassed by the stories about her young life (McCubbin, 2005: 1–4). Her story reached the silver screen in *Rose of*

Cimarron (1952), starring Mala Powers, a revenge tale that had very little do with Rose Dunn's life. The country rock group Poco released a moving song about Rose in 1976 titled, of course, "Rose of Cimarron."

CATTLE WARS OF THE OLD WEST

A powerful economic dynamic centered on cattle ranching played out in much of the West during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As eastern and midwestern cities grew, an expanding middle class and burgeoning working class made America into an industrial superpower. Millions of immigrants journeyed from southern and eastern Europe to take those jobs and to form the social backbone of cities throughout the northern tier. All those millions working in industry had to be fed: grain, corn, and beans from the Mid-West, vegetables from California and the South, and beef from Texas and much of the West. Cattle ranchers thus served a vital function in keeping Americans in food.

In the first two decades after the Civil War, railroads are scarce west of the Mississippi, and cattle must be driven north from Texas to the railheads in Kansas. The classic *Red River*, discussed above, details one such cattle drive. Cattleman Tom Dunson is a dictator in the saddle, driving his cowboys to the verge of exhaustion. His ward Matt Garth wants to treat the men fairly, and he sides with them against Dunson. John Wayne's Dunson is among the most psychologically complex characters the actor would ever play, almost a Captain Ahab of the Plains (Phipps, 2021: 1–25). At the railheads, villages such as Abilene and Dodge City become boom towns, and their local economies depend on money spent by cowboys that come with the cattle drives. Respectable families live north of Main Street, while the saloons and bordellos are to the south. The decent folk of these towns depend on hired city marshals who keep order while allowing the cowboys to enjoy a good time. *Wyatt Earp* outlines the legendary lawman's tough but fair approach to policing, and Costner's *Earp* upbraids Ed Masterson (Bill Pullman) for being "too affable" and so not firm enough with the cowboys. Ed loses his life to a drunk cowboy, but his brother Bat (Tom Sizemore) becomes a legendary marshal.

These cattle ranchers naturally felt that their role in the West's economy is more vital than that of farmers and sheep ranchers. The three groups came into conflict, as ranchers sought to control land use and prevent open range from being converted to anything other than cattle grazing. Powerful ranching interests joined with politicians to give them control over territorial and state legislatures and governors. This political conflict can be glimpsed in such movies as *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, in which Lee Marvin's bandit/

bully Liberty Valance attempts to intimidate the townspeople of Shinbone to elect him as their representative. The assembly tasked with petitioning for statehood becomes a battleground between large ranchers and smallholders and townspeople. The Shinbone delegation carries the day, as Ranse Stoddard gets chosen to represent the unnamed territory.

Full-blown conflict between ranching and farming interests, or between competing ranchers, occasionally boils over. The Lincoln County War in New Mexico centers on a fight between two ranching groups, who find allies among townspeople. William Bonney (Billy the Kid) and the other Regulators thus feel that they are a legitimate force seeking to establish the rights of their employers, as seen in *Young Guns* and *Chisum* (New Mexico's . . . , 2021: 1–5). A recent reinterpretation of Billy in *The Kid* (2019) gives us Bonney (Dane DeHaan) as a volatile but affable young man who makes a series of bad decisions that determine his fate. Ethan Hawke plays Pat Garrett as a man with no ill will toward Billy, but he must do his duty by hunting down the killer of two deputies who has escaped jail. Billy's story takes a back seat to a tale of another young man (the titular Kid, Rio Cutler, played by Jake Schur) who is trying to find and save his older sister from being forced into prostitution.

The political conflict in Tombstone, Arizona, centers on the Cowboys, headed by the Clantons, who straddle the line between legal cattle ranching and illegal cattle smuggling along the Mexico border, and the business and mining interests in the town. The Earps insert themselves into the conflict, siding against the Cowboys while Sheriff Behan claims to want peace but tends to support the Clantons. This conflict is described in both *Tombstone* and *Wyatt Earp*. These films also present the messy aftermath of the Gunfight at the O.K. Corral, in which personal vengeance trumps economic motives, as Wyatt Earp went after the remaining Cowboys. As noted above, most earlier filmed versions of the Earp story paint the Cowboys as the villains, when the truth was more complicated.

The Johnson County War in Wyoming (1889–1892, with most of the fighting in 1892) was much bigger than New Mexico and Arizona conflicts, and it pitted ranchers against farmers. Ranchers hired a private army to go after cattle “rustlers,” many of whom were farmers whose animals were in the same area as ranch cattle. The fight culminated in a pitched battle along the Powder River, and President Benjamin Harrison was compelled to call in the U.S. cavalry to separate the private army from the farmers (Davis, 2014: 1–7). This conflict is detailed in *Heaven's Gate* (1980), which in its day became Hollywood's most expensive flop, nearly bankrupted United Artists, and hobbled director Michael Cimino's career. Cimino went four times over budget, collected over two-hundred hours of film, and took innumerable shots of single scenes. The film was panned by critics as incomprehensible,

and audiences stayed away. A redone version some years later garnered more positive assessment (50 Greatest . . . , 2019: 78).

A more well-received movie is *Open Range* (2003), Costner's third directorial project. Based on a novel by Luran Paine, it centers on two independent cattle ranchers, Boss Spearman (Robert Duvall) and Charlie Waite (Costner), who go up against Denton Baxter (Michael Gambon), a large landowner who dominates the town of Harmonville. Boss and Charlie graze their cattle on "open range," but Baxter considers the land as his own, and does not want open rangers using it. Baxter's hired guns terrorize the open ranger camp, killing Mose, one of their hired hands, and seriously wounding Button (Diego Luna), a young Mexican. Boss and Charlie take Button to Harmonville, where the doctor (Dean McDermott) and his sister Sue (Annette Bening) treat the young man. Boss and Charlie call out Baxter's men, and an extended street shootout ends in the killing of Baxter's men—and Baxter, too. Charlie confesses his love to Sue and leaves but returns to ask her to marry him. She accepts, and Boss and Charlie decide to give up the cattle business and open a saloon (50 Greatest . . . , 2019: 92).

Films depicting fictional conflicts between large ranches are popular in the 1950s and 1960s. The big budget Western *The Big Country* (1958), directed by William Wyler, shows a struggle over water rights between two ranch barons: Henry Terrill (Charles Bickford), who dominates the area, and the rougher Rufus Hannassey (Burl Ives), whose family lives in a fortress-like box canyon. Jim McKay (Peck), a former ship captain from back east, wants to marry Terrill's daughter Pat (Carroll Baker), but decides to break up with her because of her immaturity and expectations that he must prove himself as a man in front of others. McKay tries to become peacemaker by buying a smaller ranch between the two ranches, called the Big Muddy, from its nominal owner, Julie Maragon (Jean Simmons). He will offer water to all ranchers, but this satisfies neither side. In the end, the two cattlemen will not give up their vicious feud and kill each other in a shootout in the canyon. Jim and Julie ride away from the canyon to start a new life together.

On 1960s television, ranchers have an easier time of it. They are patriarchs and matriarchs who supported their communities and settle disputes almost like the Godfather. Bad guys show up almost weekly, but there is little communal conflict, with either farmers or other ranchers. These are imagined versions of the West, and their families are more like contemporary Rotary and Lions Club leaders than denizens of the Old West. *Bonanza* (1959–1973) becomes one of the most popular shows of the decade. *Pater familias* Ben Cartwright (Lorne Greene) is an ideal family man with three sons. From his fictional ranch near Lake Tahoe, Nevada, he helps his family and community solve pressing moral problems. *The Big Valley* (1965–1969) allows Barbara Stanwyck to reprise her roles as ranch barons in 1950s Westerns as Victoria

Barkley, a widow with two grown sons and an adult daughter. She also raises her dead husband's illegitimate son. Her big spread is near Stockton, California in the 1870s and, though she is a female counterpart to Cartwright, she encounters more personal difficulties than old Ben.

The High Chapparral (1967–1971) moves the action to Arizona in the 1870s. The story is more complicated, as rancher “Big John” Cannon must cope with continuous Apache attacks on his ranch and the death of his wife in one attack. His brother Buck (Cameron Mitchell) and son Blue also work on the ranch. To cement an alliance with a neighboring Mexican rancher, Big John marries the man's much younger daughter (Linda Cristal), and her brother Manolito (Henry Darrow) comes to work for John. Buck and Manolito, the most colorful characters, gradually become the series leads.

Cowboys like Mose and Button worked hard caring for ranchers' cattle. They were the blue-collar workers of the West, often taking the difficult and dirty work of herding cattle because that was all they were trained to do. Their simple lives made them the original Western mythic figures. One of the most affecting cowboy stories is *Will Penny* (1968). Penny (Charlton Heston) has been hired to watch over cattle from a remote line station during the winter. He shares the cabin with a widow, Catherine (Joan Hackett), who with her son thought the cabin was abandoned. He tries to defend her against a family gang of marauders, led by Preacher Quint (Donald Pleasence). The gang take over the cabin, but Penny escapes and defeats the gang with help of his former partners. The ranch boss shows up to resume regular operations as winter ends. Though Penny grows to love Catherine and her boy, he feels that he is too old and set in his ways to settle down with her. Their parting is one of the most bittersweet endings in all Westerns.

Eventually, the frontier closed and conflicts between farmers and ranchers subsided. The West no longer had a place for those who enforced the ranchers' domination of the range. *Tom Horn* (1980), Steve McQueen's next to last film, relates the true story of Horn, an out-of-work scout who gets hired by a Montana cattlemen's association to investigate and stop cattle rustlers at the turn of the twentieth century. U.S. Marshal Joe Belle gives him his tacit approval, and Horn takes this as a green light to carry out vigilante justice against the rustlers. He warns some cowboys but kills or drives away others. Public opinion turns against Horn after a gunfight, and the Marshal wants to get rid of him. Trumped-up murder charges over a boy who was shot by a pistol like Horn uses land him in jail. An inaccurate transcript of a private conversation, in which he seems to admit to the killing, is the primary evidence. Having not heeded warnings to leave town and now refusing to defend himself at a procedurally dodgy trial, conviction is inevitable. He tries to escape but gets recaptured. Reconciled to his fate, he goes to the gallows calmly.

Fights over Western land use have not completely disappeared. Now, the principal conflict is between ranchers and the federal government. Ranchers graze their animals on federal land but must pay annual fees. In 2015, a twenty-year struggle between the feds and Oregonian Cliven Bundy over \$1 million in back fees came to a flash point when a federal appeals court ruled against rancher Dwight Hammond and his son Steven, charged with arson on federal land. The court overturned sentences of one year-plus and imposing five-year terms. Militants from several states flocked to Burns, Oregon to protest the perceived injustice of the sentences. In January 2016, the group seized control of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge headquarters and held it for forty-one days. At the end, only four militants remained at the headquarters. One protester had been shot by the FBI, and twenty-six participants were charged with crimes. Eleven plead guilty to various charges, while seven were acquitted or had hung juries (Oregon standoff, 2019: 1–10).

Chapter 7

Other Genres, Other Politics

From Love Stories to Religious Movies

Various other film genres have addressed political issues. Politics is either a side plot point or a subtext for most of such movies, but occasionally politics surfaces as a major story element or theme. In genres that we do not usually view as political, this is particularly exciting. I present here some of the stand-out movies with political themes in some of these other genres. This is just an introduction to politics in other genres and is not intended to be exhaustive. Pardon me if I do not include some of your favorites, as this is meant to stimulate discussion of politics in other genres.

CONSTRUCTIVISM AND OTHER GENRES

Social structures are often exaggerated in various genres, or audiences only see one or two aspects of them. Horror movies, for instance, focus almost exclusively on teens and young adults, and the rest of society gets only passing attention. Intersubjective understanding of genre stories is vital to acceptance of the tropes and themes of most film genres. Fans of genres will not embrace a movie if it strays far from common story elements but will be bored if the films do not cover new ground. Mysteries and police procedurals are among the most conventional, and there is an expected quality to these stories that keeps audiences coming back for more. Actors can play with interpretation of a detective such as Sherlock Holmes—think Basil Rathbone, Jeremy Brett, Robert Downey Jr., and Benedict Cumberbatch—but the iconic character still must be seen as supremely knowledgeable and able to connect all the dots of the cases.

State identity and institutional formation is an exaggerated part of both comedy and satire movies. It also features in traditional spy and thriller stories, especially those dealing with the Cold War, when Western states were

just getting into the espionage business in a big way. Movies during the Cold War socialized Americans and Europeans to accept state action against Communism and security threats in the developing world, but comedies and satire films provided healthy questioning of the ways governments acted in that same era.

Identities diverge in most various genres, as viewers witness culture clashes and new ways of seeing identities. Views of women, ethnic minorities, and the LGBTQ community have markedly altered over the past fifty years, as stories have become more tolerant and inclusive of diverse identities. Political change becomes evident when one examines how these other genres have shifted since World War II. The subjects considered acceptable for comedy and romance stories have greatly changed, while the objects of spying or political suspense shifted after the end of the Cold War to less ideological and more nationalist and terrorist adversaries.

ROMANCE MOVIES/ROMANTIC COMEDIES AND POLITICS

Who doesn't love romance movies? We don't often place romance movies and politics in the same sentence, but various romantic films have taken up politics, if only in a cursory manner. Occasionally, it is about a national leader in love. *The American President* (1995) is director Rob Reiner's Clinton era plea for full-throated liberalism from the White House. President and widower Andrew Shepherd (Michael Douglas) prepares for reelection by pushing a weak crime bill through Congress, but sees an opportunity to get climate change legislation, instead. At that moment, he meets Sydney Ellen Wade (Annette Bening), a key environmental lobbyist, and sparks fly. He makes a deal with her: If she can get twenty-four House votes, he will find ten additional votes for the bill. Republican Senator Bob Rumson (Richard Dreyfus) attacks Wade for alleged youthful indiscretions, along with accusing Shepherd of immorality for his budding relationship with her. It looks like the environmental bill will fail, and Wade gets fired from her job. Shepherd says he will go back to the crime bill, and Wade breaks up with him. Suddenly, Shepherd strides into the White House briefing room to rebut Rumson's charges and says he will introduce both a stronger climate change bill and a beefed-up crime bill with strong gun control provisions. He has become the forceful liberal president that Reiner wanted. Wade makes up with Shepherd, and the two leave for the president's State of the Union address. Liberalism and love have conquered all.

A few films have focused on First Daughters' romances and the challenges of living in the First Family bubble. These have included *Chasing Liberty* and

First Daughter, both released in 2004. In the former, presidential daughter Anna Foster (Mandy Moore) tries to escape her Secret Service protection, and she ends up falling in love with one of her protectors (Matthew Goode). The latter is a similar story, in which daughter Samantha MacKenzie (Katie Holmes) chafes under her security restrictions. She meets a guy that she likes but is upset when she learns that he is a Secret Service agent (Marcus Blucas). Later, her dad gives her an old Volkswagen car, and she goes back to college, where she will be reunited with the former agent. Hmm, makes you wonder if these two movies' scriptwriters collaborated.

Richard Curtis's ensemble Christmas movie, *Love Actually* (2003) shows an odd assortment of British and others falling in or out of love. It also is in part a Blair era plea for the British prime minister to defy U.S. foreign policy. Remember, the movie came out the year of the Iraq invasion. The British PM, named David (Hugh Grant), is upset about Britain being taken for granted by America. His catalyst for taking issue with the president (Billy Bob Thornton) is the American's inappropriate comments about one of his junior staffers, Natalie (Martine McCutcheon); later the president makes an aggressive pass at her. At a joint press conference, David disagrees with the chagrined president and asks for mutual respect in the trans-Atlantic relationship. Meanwhile, David has become smitten by Natalie and, after he receives her passionate Christmas card, seeks her out on Christmas Eve so they can talk. They kiss backstage at an elementary school Christmas play, but someone raises the curtain to reveal their embrace to a surprised audience. The couple bow, wave, and leave the stage.

Grant's PM is a young Blair knockoff, while Thornton's boorish president is an obvious dig at George W. Bush. The latter is ironic, considering that, despite all his shortcomings as a leader, Bush is known as a strait-laced family man who probably does not make inappropriately sexual comments or try aggressive passes at women. For his part, Blair is a family man who had been married for several years before he became prime minister and so apparently had no girlfriend while he was Britain's leader. Well, this is a romantic fantasy, so we can grant Curtis some leeway.

Romances involving princesses have provided opportunities for light-hearted political commentary. William Wyler's classic *Roman Holiday* (1953) finds Princess Ann (Audrey Hepburn) from an unspecified European country visiting Rome. She decides to leave her courtiers and minders and explore the city on her own. A sedative she had taken kicks in, and she falls asleep on a bench. American reporter Joe Brady (Gregory Peck) finds her and takes her to his apartment so that she can sleep. He finds out the next morning that she is the princess and concocts a plan to scoop all the other newspapers: he will take her around the city while she is secretly photographed by

associate Irving Radovich (Eddie Albert). As Joe develops feelings for Ann, he decides that he cannot exploit her for the story. The two realize that they cannot be together, embracing and kissing before parting. At a press availability the next day, Ann looks at Brady and the two trade bland words that carry extra meaning about their understanding of each other. At the end, Joe is alone, but walks confidently back to his job.

The movie was one of the first films to show how constrained personal lives can be for European royalty. Ann essentially has no life of her own and, when she marries, she cannot choose someone like Joe, a lowly reporter. All this is thirty years before Diana's searing experience as British princess, and sixty years before Meghan's sour turn as Prince Harry's duchess. The story was also important to the politics of the early Cold War, as the script was one of the first ghost-written efforts from Dalton Trumbo after he was blacklisted due to the anti-Communist hysteria of the early 1950s. The screenplay was credited to writer Ian McKellan Hunter.

Seth Rogen stars in the unusual romantic comedy, *Long Shot* (2019). Fred Flarsky (Rogen) is a crusading leftist journalist who has quit his job because his small newspaper has been taken over by Parker Wembley (Andy Serkis), a Rupert Murdoch-type media mogul. At a party for Boyz II Men, he meets Secretary of State Charlotte Field (Charlize Theron), who as a teenager babysat the younger Flarsky. He kissed her then and has been in love with her ever since. The two reconnect and she hires him as a speechwriter, focusing initially on humor and then getting into policy. Fairly quickly, they become romantically involved, but Field's assistant does not think Flarsky will be a good match for the Secretary as she gets ready to run for president. Field accepts a deal with the president and Wembley to weaken an international environmental agreement, so that a video of Flarsky masturbating will not be released. The couple apparently break up but, in her candidacy announcement, she repudiates the deal with the president, says she has a boyfriend, and warns everyone about the video. The last scenes show Flarsky enthusiastically accepting the secondary role of First Man to President Field.

COMEDY MOVIES AND POLITICS

So many comedy movies and TV programs have incorporated political themes that I could easily write a chapter on them. Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940) was one of the first political comedies, but this one had real bite to it. The year that Hitler's armies overran France, Chaplin makes fun of the German dictator, renamed as Adenoid Hynkel, the Phooey (read Fuhrer) of the nation of Tomania. The film cleverly makes the protagonist a Jewish barber, who happens to look exactly like the Tomanian leader. Trying

to escape the invasion of neighboring Osterlich, the Barber puts on a copy of the leader's uniform and gets mistaken for the dictator, while Hynkel in civilian clothes is taken away to a concentration camp. The Barber must address a crowd to avoid arrest. The speech is Chaplin's masterstroke: an impassioned plea for peace and the unity of humankind.

The Great Dictator infuriated the Nazis, but it was shown widely in Europe and helped stimulate the resistance to Germany. Already beloved throughout Europe for his silent films, Chaplin was admired for taking on Germany at the height of its power, as its armies were marching across the continent. So, even though Chaplin's films are classed as comedies, this is a deadly serious film about Hitler, fascism, and the Holocaust before we even knew it was happening. Its plea for peace and liberal government is now particularly poignant as several European countries have embraced hard-right politics and virulent populism.

Several films have skewered electoral politics. *The Campaign* (2012) lampoons a North Carolina Congressional campaign as dummy incumbent Congressman Camden "Cam" Brady (Will Ferrell) gets challenged by little known, goofy Martin "Marty" Huggins (Zach Galifianakis), who loves his family and pug dogs. Huggins gets over-handled by an uber-campaign consultant Tim Wattlely (Dylan McDermott), but he realizes he should be true to himself. John Lithgow and Dan Ackroyd play the Motch brothers, mega-campaign contributors modeled on the Koch brothers, and they employ Wattlely. The wild antics of the two candidates, unfortunately, are not that far removed from some of the crazier elections in recent years.

My favorite of this sub-genre is Alexander Payne's *Election* (1999), about a high school student body president election. The overly driven Tracy Flick (Reese Witherspoon) is expected to win, but civics teacher and student government faculty sponsor Jim McAllister (Matthew Broderick) dislikes her because she had an affair with a fellow teacher and Jim's friend, who was forced to resign. Jim encourages popular high school jock Paul Metzler (Chris Klein) to run. This upsets Tracy, who resents Paul's popularity and privileged family. Paul's sister Tammy (Jessica Campbell), angry that her girlfriend has left her and become Paul's campaign manager, decides to run, too. Her speech to a school assembly denouncing student government as a sham is the movie's best moment, but the school principal disqualifies her for the election. The election is very close between Tracy and Paul, and McAllister makes a fateful decision that will change both the outcome and his career.

International relations figures in several comedies. Two movies about North Korea attracted much comment. *Team America: World Police* (2004), a story told by puppets, makes fun of dictator Kim Jong Il, suggesting he is a kind of large cockroach. *The Interview* (2014) caused an international

incident when North Korean hackers attacked Sony Pictures to try to prevent release of the film. The story is about talk show host Dave Skylark (James Franco) and his producer Aaron Rapaport (Rogen) who land an interview with Kim Jong Un, but they are approached by a CIA agent to assassinate Kim with a poison strip attached to Skylark's hand. Unsuccessful, the two try to escape, but in the process Skylark shoots down Kim's pursuing helicopter, killing the dictator.

SATIRE MOVIES AND POLITICS

The line between comedy and satire often blurs. Instead of just having fun with politics, satire thoroughly skewers politicians or governments and shows the insanity, hypocrisy, and smugness behind those in power. The topics may be covered in a lighthearted way, but they are pungent critiques of government and politics. A perennial favorite satire is the Marx Brothers' *Duck Soup* (1933), about a political conflict between two fictional European countries, Sylvania and Freedonia, that boils over into war. Groucho is hilarious as Rufus T. Firefly, the prime minister of Freedonia who is, to put it mildly, detached from his work. Chico and Harpo are spies for Sylvania, but easily switch sides. Sylvania's ambassador Trentino (Louis Calhern) sparks the war by calling Firefly an "upstart," to which the prime minister takes mock offense.

One of the most remarkable satires is Stanley Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), which concerns the most serious subject imaginable: nuclear war. A brief description of the film does not do it justice. A Strategic Air Command general, Jack D. Ripper (Sterling Hayden) goes crazy and orders SAC B-52 bombers to attack the Soviet Union. President Merkin Muffley (Peter Sellers) convenes his top military advisors at the Pentagon War Room, and searches for a way to stop the bombers while asking the Soviets for help. Muffley orders the Army to seize Ripper at his air base, but the general kills himself without giving up the recall code. Ripper's British adjutant, Group Captain Lionel Mandrake (also Sellers), recovers the code from Ripper's writing pad and relays it to Washington.

All the bombers are recalled, save one with a damaged radio, commanded by Major T. J. "King" Kong (Slim Pickens). The title character (Sellers, in a third role), a German nuclear scientist based on Edward Teller in a wheelchair who cannot control his own arm, comes to the War Room and is incredulous about why the Soviets have created a doomsday device to be triggered by any single bombing attack. Over the secondary target, Kong cannot release the bomb and so kicks it loose, riding it down to the ground like a bucking

bronco. Dr. Strangelove suggests that the country's top leaders go underground to survive and then repopulate the planet. The doctor then stands and proclaims, "Mein Fuhrer, I can walk!" as the doomsday device goes off and the audience hears Vera Lynn's World War II hit, "We'll Meet Again."

Dr. Strangelove was one of the more discussed movies of the 1960s. While it pointed to the insanity of nuclear weapons and nuclear strategies, one wonders if it changed any minds in or out of government about the utility of such weapons. Such films as *Fail Safe* (also 1964), which depicted a computer mistake causing a bombing attack on the Soviet Union and the sacrifice of New York to compensate for the bombing of Moscow, are more likely to have scared viewers.

Chapman notes that the film's central point is its critique of the anticommunist hysteria of the early postwar era. The insane General Ripper gives voice to many of the loony ideas that were widely circulated, including fear of fluoridated water. Dr. Strangelove's manic behavior, including the arm that spontaneously goes into a Nazi salute, indicates the quasi-fascism lurking under the surface of America's Cold War militarization. And General Buck Turgidson (George C. Scott) gives voice to the bounding illogic of Cold War thinking when the discussion turns to moving people underground so that more Americans than Soviets will survive the coming nuclear holocaust. "Mr. President, we must not allow a mine shaft gap!" he declares (Chapman, 2020: 223–225).

The news media and their manipulation for political ends became frequent targets during the 1970s. *Network* (1976) roasted American TV networks for their stoking of division and sensational stories. Network executives use the mentally unstable anchor Howard Beale (Peter Finch) to whip up people with his shouted mantra, "I'm mad as hell and I'm not gonna take it anymore," until they decide to revive declining ratings by arranging to assassinate Beale on the air. *Being There* (1979) considers the possibility that a simple-minded gardener, Chance (Sellers again), spouting bromides might be taken seriously as a sage and ascend to the political heights.

More recently, *In the Loop* (2009) imagines the nightmares of coordinating a joint American-British attack in the Middle East. The Coen Brothers' *Burn After Reading* (2008) presents a series of crazed misunderstandings and over-reactions surrounding the disappearance of the draft memoirs of former CIA analyst Osbourne Cox (John Malkovich). An exercise gym worker, Linda Litzke (Frances McDormand), and her doofus coworker, Chad Feldheimer (Brad Pitt), try to force him to pay for its return, to obtain funds for Litzke's cosmetic surgery. Several others get trapped in an expanding web of nuttiness. Even the CIA supervisor monitoring the case (J. K. Simmons) cannot figure it out. On the surface, the story is all about the commonplace insanity

of the Washington bubble, but it also shows how easily the U.S. government's culture of secrecy can turn toxic and destroy people's lives.

MUSICALS AND POLITICS

The American musical has always been an odd duck. During its heyday in the 1950s, Hollywood turn out scores of these feel-good stories wherein women and men spontaneously break into song and dance. By the 1970s and 1980s, the stories turn grittier and more complex, but still retain a residue of good feelings. Politics or at least social issues lurk in the background of even classic musicals. For instance, the landmark *South Pacific* (1958) contains a subtext of anti-racism, as characters confront prejudice against Pacific Islanders by U.S. military personnel and a biracial romance. *Silk Stockings* (1957) includes a Cold War frame, as an All-American Fred Astaire woos a Soviet Commissar (Cyd Charisse). Of course, Astaire and Charisse end up becoming amazing dancing partners.

Popular musicals of the 1960s to early 1970s subtly included ongoing social and political changes. *West Side Story* (1961), essentially a Romeo and Juliet story, raised concerns about the prevalence of ethnic-based gangs in New York. *Man of La Mancha* (1972), based on the Broadway musical of the previous decade, resonated with audiences who may have grasped the connection between Miguel Cervantes's knight errant Don Quixote (Peter O'Toole) who kept true to his dream of chivalry and the young generation who wanted to change the world.

During the 1990s, musicals such as *Rent* (play 1996, movie 2005) took on difficult social issues of drug use and struggles with sexuality, based on Giacomo Puccini's opera *La Boheme*, while the play *Miss Saigon* addressed the difficult end and aftermath of the Vietnam conflict by adapting Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* and placing it in Southeast Asia. Some critics did not like perceived Asian female stereotypes applied to the heroine. The most celebrated political musical of the period, *Les Miserables* (movie version, 2012) makes Victor Hugo's nineteenth century critique of both the criminal justice system and capitalist economics. The song, "Do You Hear the People Sing?" inspired protest movements around the world, such as Hong Kong's umbrella and universal suffrage protests.

An unusual recent musical, Andy Kirshner's *Liberty's Secret* (2016), is about vice presidential candidate Liberty Smith (Jacline Wilk), a preacher's daughter who is popular because of her singing voice, who falls in love with one of the campaign's consultants, Nikki Levine (Cara AnnMarie), who is also a woman. It is thus the first "all-American lesbian movie musical." The film has many plot holes, such as how the two women fall in love so quickly

or why Nikki would work for a conservative presidential candidate that she disdains, but the story is a fluffy, feel-good piece that calls for inclusion and acceptance (Hedeyatfar, 2017: 1–4; Stateside, 2016: 1–2).

Lin-Manuel Miranda wrote and starred in *Hamilton* (2020), a live-action filming of his notable Broadway musical of the 2010s.. Using a cast made up almost entirely of black and brown actors and employing hip hop instead of traditional lyrical pieces found in most musicals, it tells the life story of American founder Alexander Hamilton (Miranda) from his arrival in America as a youth to his death in a duel with Aaron Burr (Leslie Odom Jr.). Audiences are encouraged to reflect on how different American history would be as a story of color, and to see a direct connection to the present via hip hop. The Broadway version got injected into presidential politics in 2016 when Vice President-elect Mike Pence attended the show and the cast addressed him directly, calling for a repudiation of the ugly politics that had been unleashed by the Trump campaign.

SPORTS MOVIES AND POLITICS

The best sports movies are underdog stories, in which the protagonist and her/his teammates triumph over adversity, criticism, and injury to win or fail nobly. Leni Riefenstahl's documentary *Olympia* (1936) on the Berlin Olympiad was an amazing tour de force of sports photography. Unfortunately, Riefenstahl's association with the Nazi German regime and her personal relationships with Adolf Hitler and propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels meant that the work would always be tainted. Muhammad Ali starred in a fascinating docu-drama about his own boxing career in *The Greatest* (1977). We see the arc of Ali's career from the 1960 Olympics to the draft induction fight with the U.S. government and the Rumble in the Jungle fight in the 1970s. Will Smith starred in a biopic of "The Greatest," *Ali* (2001). Though the story plodded along, and the movie got mixed reviews, Smith captured both Ali's distinctive voice and his outsized personality.

Hugh Hudson's *Chariots of Fire* (1981) is one of the most inspiring sports films, deftly combining sports and personal ideals, while expressing a sense of loss for upper class chivalry which once informed British athletics. The film thus stirred British patriotism early in the Thatcher era. The story presents the U.K. track and field team at the 1924 Paris Olympics, focusing on two athletes: Harold Abrahams (Ben Cross), a Jewish Cambridge student who wants to prove himself and overcome Antisemitic prejudice, and Eric Liddell (Ian Charleson), an evangelical missionary who intends to return to China with his sister Jennie (Cheryl Campbell) after the Olympics. Abrahams breaks tradition and hires a trainer, Sam Mussabini (Ian Holm), losing the

200-meter race, but winning the 100-meter. Liddell finds out that he is scheduled to run in the 100-meter race on Sunday which, as a devout Christian, he cannot do. Another athlete who already has won a medal gives his place in the 400-meter to Liddell, who wins.

Clint Eastwood's *Invictus* (2009) relates how the South African rugby team, the Springboks, became a national symbol in the post-apartheid era. President Nelson Mandela (Morgan Freeman) wisely sees the white team's quest for the World Cup as a way to unite the country. He meets with team captain Francois Pienaar (Matt Damon) and gives his full backing. As the team trains, they establish a new relationship with the public, and blacks begin to support the mostly white team. The team get inspiration from a visit to Robben Island, where Mandela was imprisoned for twenty-seven years. After a hard-fought game, the Springboks beat their rivals, New Zealand's All Blacks, for the 1995 World Cup.

42 (2015) is the true story of Jackie Robinson (Chadwick Boseman), Major League Baseball's first African American player. Brooklyn Dodgers owner Branch Rickey (Harrison Ford) enthusiastically champions Robinson's cause. Despite facing constant resistance and racist insults, Robinson goes on to become a valuable player who helps the Dodgers win the National League pennant. Returning to the Berlin Olympics, Stephan James plays American runner Jesse Owens, in *Race* (2018). Owens became the star of the 1936 Games, proving that a black man was just as capable as—and beating—the white German athletes.

HORROR MOVIES AND POLITICS

Jaws (1975), Steven Spielberg's first blockbuster, is an adventure story but it is built on horror movie tropes. The relentless Great White Shark is an ocean-going serial killer/slasher that is seemingly unstoppable. Politics enters with the mayor of Amity Island Larry Vaughn (Murray Hamilton), who is more interested in his reelection and keeping the beach open to tourists than in the looming threat of shark attacks. Police Chief Martin Brody (Roy Scheider) must take charge and he mounts an expedition to hunt down the big bad shark. After seeing the shark, he declares "We're gonna need a bigger boat." The mayor apparently was reelected because he is back in *Jaws 2*.

George Romero's *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968) is a landmark in the zombie sub-genre. Making it remarkable is the lead, Ben (Duane L. Jones), the first black character to headline a major horror picture. He leads a group of human survivors throughout the film, defending mostly uncooperative white people. The film's end takes a troubling turn when Ben, the only survivor, is immediately gunned down by the police. This reflects the shoot

first, ask questions later approach of many police departments in the 1960s, especially when dealing with African Americans.

Living Dead set the stage for other horror films in which blacks are victims of racism. *Candyman* (1992) on the surface is a slasher film, but it also contains a plot line about a black man who is tortured for falling in love with a white woman. The movie also suggests that a white community would neglect a serial killer case if the victims were African American. *Candyman* was remade in 2021.

The racist theme was continued with two recent high-profile horror films: Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) and *Us* (2019). In *Get Out*, photographer Chris Washington (Daniel Kaluuya) gets invited to the home of his white girlfriend Rose Armitage (Alison Williams) for a family gathering. He notices that several people behave strangely, especially two blacks working for the family, the maid Georgina and groundskeeper Walter. He reaches out by phone to his friend Rod (Lil Rel Howery), who works for TSA and starts to investigate. It turns out that the family is suppressing the minds of Black people, and then using their bodies to house the consciousness of white people. Chris is being prepared for surgery but escapes. Rose tries to stop Chris, but Walter gets control of his own body and shoots her. Chris starts to strangle her but leaves her bleeding on the road as Rod arrives to save him.

MYSTERY MOVIES AND POLITICS

Like romances, mysteries are not commonly associated with politics, but all sorts of political and sociopolitical themes pop up in them. *In the Heat of the Night* (1967) is a tense take on the racial, sexual, and class politics of fictional Sparta, Mississippi during the Civil Rights era. In a stunning performance, Sidney Poitier plays Virgil Tibbs, a Philadelphia homicide investigator who is in town to visit relatives and gets dragged into a murder case: a wealthy industrialist who wants to build a factory in the town. Police Chief Bill Gillespie (Rod Steiger) reluctantly asks Tibbs to stay to help after the murdered man's wife (Lee Grant) and the mayor (William Schallert) press him to do so. Tibbs corrects the police's shoddy work and dismisses their suspects, all the time battling racism from both low-class toughs and the wealthiest man in town. The mystery's big reveal is a bit of a let-down for current audiences, as the businessman was killed to steal his money for a back-alley abortion, but this had some resonance in the years before the Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion. Access to abortion is under serious legal stress now, so the movie may become relevant again.

Zodiac (2007) presents one man's obsession with California's most notorious unsolved crime spree, the Zodiac killings in the late 1960s to early 1970s.

Jake Gyllenhaal plays Robert Graysmith, who follows the case for many years and writes a bestseller on Zodiac. The film details the difficulties faced by both police and newspapers in covering the story and how it was impossible to follow up on suspects for whom there was only scant circumstantial evidence. Graysmith thinks he knows who committed the crimes and traces him to a hardware store where he works, but the man dies before he can be charged with a crime.

The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo (2011) deals with investigation of a woman's disappearance by a disgraced newspaper reporter Mikael Blomkvist (Daniel Craig) and hacker/investigator Lisbeth Salander (Rooney Mara), a young woman who has lived a "difficult life" because of her dysfunctional family and her own run-ins with the law. The movie is based on a popular novel by Swedish author Stieg Larsson. The case in question, the disappearance of a rich businessman's niece forty years before, is not as interesting as the Salander character, who survives her circumstances despite unimaginable hardship, including rape by the guardian who is supposed to help her. She takes revenge on him by shocking and tying him up, raping him with a dildo, and then tattooing "I'm a rapist pig" on his chest. She uses recordings of the sessions to blackmail him into writing favorable reports about her and getting the guardianship ended.

Salander provides the key information that solves the case. While Mikael has become romantically involved with Lisbeth, he does not consider a long-term relationship with her and goes back to his former girlfriend. The tragedy of Salander's life is that she has a brilliant mind but must live on the margins of society as a hacker. In the wake of the Brittany Spears conservatorship case, the issue of court-appointed guardianships and institutionalization is troubling.

David Fincher's *Gone Girl* (2014), based on Gillian Flynn's novel of the same name (Flynn also wrote the screenplay), is a disturbing story of a marriage gone bad, news media obsession with a woman's disappearance, and the ways that human expectations often fail to match reality. Writing teacher Nick Dunne (Ben Affleck) becomes a suspect when his wife Amy (Rosamund Pike) disappears. Their marriage had been deteriorating since they moved from New York back to his home in Missouri. After Amy disappears, Nick comes across sympathetically on TV, but doubts appear as he seems uninterested in some aspects of the case. Meanwhile, we learn that Amy has been on the run, ending up in the house of friend Desi (Neil Patrick Harris), who is attracted to her. She murders him, making it appear on surveillance cameras that he may have raped her. She returns home and confesses her story to Nick. The local police are suspicious of her, but the FBI accept her attempted rape story. She tells Nick that she wants him to be the husband she saw him

become on TV and reveals that she has used his sperm to get pregnant. He considers leaving her but decides to stay in part for the child.

This movie reminds us how easily news media coverage of mysterious disappearances, particularly those involving young white women, can become frenzies that distort and obstruct the cases' realities. Latinas or black women do not receive the same attention, and a rash of murders of young Native American women received little coverage until recent years. Journalist Gwen Ifill called this the "missing white woman syndrome" (Ellefson, 2021: 1–2). Perception takes over and innocents can be tarred with suspicion, or probable murderers or kidnappers can hoodwink the public. Nick did not kill his wife but, because of his marriage's weakness, he looks like he is hiding something. Amy is a cold-blooded murderer, but she comes across as an innocent young woman.

LEGAL DRAMAS AND POLITICS

Legal dramas are always exciting, and their intricacies challenge the viewer to stay ahead of the cases as they unfold. Some of the best courtroom dramas graced the silver screen in the 1950s. One that really holds up is Sidney Lumet's *12 Angry Men* (1957), which may be one of the best civic education films ever made. A jury deliberating a capital murder case involving a poor youth that we only see briefly is ready to convict him, except for Juror 8 (Henry Fonda), who raises doubts about the case. The other jurors agree to review the evidence, as two jurors express frustration because they firmly believe in the defendant's guilt. One by one, the jurors find reasonable doubt in the verdict, until the only holdout is Juror 3 (Lee J. Cobb), who is angrier about his estranged son than the defendant, but he too gives in and votes "not guilty." The story was remade as a TV movie in 1997, and included four African Americans (but no women, except for the judge).

A Few Good Men (1993), based on an Aaron Sorkin play, presents a military court martial of two Marines accused of causing the death of another Marine at Guantanamo, Cuba. It raises troubling questions about the extent of severe discipline in the military. The case seems hopeless, but Navy lawyer Lt. Commander JoAnne Galloway (Demi Moore) thinks the defense has a chance and recruits hotshot attorney Lt. JG Daniel Kaffee (Tom Cruise). The team faces several setbacks but get a break when they find information that higher-ups at Guantanamo may have persecuted the dead Marine. The case comes down to confronting the Marines' commander, Col. Nathan Jessup (Jack Nicholson) about his role in the case. The problem is that to do so is against military protocol of not dishonoring a senior officer in court. Kaffee takes the chance, and Jessup confirms that he ordered a "Code Red" (severe

physical punishment) on the deceased Marine, thus causing his death. Jessup is arrested and must be restrained as he tries to attack Kaffee. What seems a triumph for the defense turns into tragedy. The two accused Marines are acquitted of murder but convicted of “conduct unbecoming” a Marine and ordered dishonorably discharged.

A Civil Action (1998) deals with pollution of a Massachusetts river by an industrial solvent that has caused the deaths of children. Lawyer Jan Schlichtmann (John Travolta) pursues what he believes is a good case but runs out of funds and has to settle with the companies involved for a sum that barely covers his expenses. Later, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) takes on the case, forcing two companies to spend millions to clean up their operations. Julia Roberts won an Academy Award for her portrayal of the title character in Steven Soderbergh’s *Erin Brockovich* (2000). Brockovich, working as a paralegal, exposes pollution of water supplies by Pacific Gas and Electric Co. in California. Things turn out better than in Massachusetts. Several local residents sue for damages due to tumors and cancer. The case goes to trial and ends in a \$333 million settlement for the plaintiffs—and a \$2 million bonus for Brockovich.

Runaway Jury (2003) is a barely plausible story in which New Orleans resident Nick Easter (John Cusack) gets himself seated on a jury trying a civil case against an arms manufacturer because of a mass shooting. A mysterious woman Marlee (Rachel Weisz) calls both the plaintiff’s attorney Wendell Rohr (Dustin Hoffman) and defense consultant Rankin Fitch (Gene Hackman) with offers to deliver the jury. Fitch agrees to pay, but the jury awards damages of \$110 million to the plaintiff. Nick and Marlee are actually Jeff and Gabby, former boyfriend and girlfriend from a small Indiana town that once sued the gun maker and lost. Gabby’s sister had been killed in a mass shooting. Jeff and Gabby confront Fitch, telling him to quit the trial consultant business or they will reveal his \$15 million payment. The money will be given to the Indiana town and families of the victims.

The movie works best as a polemic for gun control. A script that made more sense about a straight-ahead lawsuit might have had more impact. The anti-gun message unfortunately gets lost in the convoluted plot and melodrama.

The past decade has enjoyed several strong court case stories. These include *Denial* (2016) about the case brought by Deborah Lipstadt (Wiesz again) against Holocaust denier and historian David Irving (Timothy Spall). *Marshall* (2017) sees Chadwick Boseman play the young future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall as he defends a young black chauffeur who was accused of rape. *Just Mercy* (2019) is about African American lawyer Bryan Stevenson (Michael B. Jordan) who defends Walter McMillian (Jamie

Foxx), a man unjustly convicted and sentenced to death for the murder of a white woman in the 1980s.

The Trial of the Chicago 7 (2020) was a positively reviewed and awarded film that examined the landmark riot incitement case against the organizers of protests at the Chicago Democratic Convention in 1968. Written and directed by Sorkin, it follows the historical events of the trial and the convictions of the seven. The trial was a key moment in the antiwar movement against the Vietnam War.

CRIME DRAMAS/POLICE PROCEDURALS AND POLITICS

Crime movies usually do not focus on politics, but social and sociopolitical concerns permeate many of them. Perhaps Alfred Hitchcock's best police procedural is *Dial M for Murder* (1954), in which a snotty Tony Wendice (Ray Milland) decides to commit the perfect crime, the murder of his wife Margot (Grace Kelly). He pressures a petty criminal, Swann, to do the deed, but Margot manages to kill the man with her scissors. London police inspector Hubbard (John Williams) thinks the case looks fishy and slowly builds his case until he forces Wendice to make a mistake by using the wrong key to the front door, the one he placed under the stairs rug for Swann. The movie subtly raises questions about women as victims and witnesses, and how the criminal justice often does not believe them. Margot is at first convicted and sentenced to die, until Hubbard realizes she is telling the truth and he saves her.

Bullitt (1968) contains one of Steve McQueen's finest performances, along with a thrilling car chase that set the standard for action and crime movies ever since. The story concentrates on Detective Frank Bullitt (McQueen) and his efforts to protect an underworld witness who is set to testify before a Senate committee. When that witness is killed, Bullitt tracks down the hitman who did it. Politically, *Bullitt* is most fascinating as a study of municipal corruption, as the detective repeatedly clashes with District Attorney Walter Chalmers (Robert Vaughn). Police captain Sam Bennett (Simon Oakland) tries to help Bullitt, but information is scattered and unreliable. Bullitt traces the hitman to the airport, chasing him across the runway and finally killing him as he tries to leave the terminal.

Steven Soderbergh's *Traffic* (2000) is a wrenching examination of the U.S.-Mexico drug war. It outlines the difficult moral and personal choices made by those fighting the war, while presenting partially sympathetic portrayals of the drug dealers. The movie, one of many ensemble films of the late 1990s to late 2000s, focuses on three overlapping stories. The first follows Mexican narcotics policeman Javier Rodriguez (Benicio del Toro) as he goes

after the Obregon Cartel and finds that General Salazar (Tomas Milan) who is in charge of the effort is being used by the Juarez Cartel. Salazar forces Rodriguez to watch as he murders the policeman's partner. Rodriguez makes a deal with the DEA to turn over information about Salazar, who gets arrested and later murdered in prison.

Meanwhile, Ohio judge Robert Wakefield (Michael Douglas) gets appointed the U.S. president's drug czar. He is initially encouraged by Salazar's reports of progress when he visits Mexico City, but he later finds that the Mexican leader has been working against the drug war. Wakefield's daughter Caroline (Erika Christensen) has been taking increasingly powerful narcotics, ending in freebasing of cocaine. Her father enters her in a drug rehab program, but she escapes, ending up getting high and sleeping with her boyfriend's drug dealer. Wakefield rescues her and resigns as drug czar because fighting the drug war and admitting a drug problem in his family makes the position untenable for him.

In San Diego, DEA agent Montel Gordon (Don Cheadle) and his partner arrest drug dealer Eduardo Ruiz (Miguel Ferrer), who agrees to testify against his boss, Carl Ayala (Steven Bauer). While Ayala is in jail awaiting trial, his wife Helena (Catherine Zeta-Jones) steps into leadership of the drug operation. She arranges for two unsuccessful attempts on Ruiz's life. A third attempt with poisoned food, set up by the Obregon Cartel, succeeds, ending the trial. The Ayala operation will now be the sole distributor for Obregon drugs. Carl's lawyer and partner Arnie Metzger (Dennis Quaid) tries to manipulate the situation to his advantage, but Carl finds out that he has accepted \$3 million to betray him and so Carl has him killed. Gordon goes to Carl's homecoming party, causing a disturbance. As security guards remove him, he plants a listening device under the dining table. He walks away from the house smiling, knowing he can gather better information on Carl.

Steven Spielberg's *Catch Me If You Can* (2002) is based on the true story of Frank Abagnale, Jr. (Leonardo DiCaprio), one of the most successful serial comen and forgers, who as a teen was responsible for passing millions of dollars of fake checks in America and Europe. He gets chased across the globe by FBI Agent Carl Hanratty (Tom Hanks). After Abagnale flees to Europe, Hanratty tracks him to a small French town with a uniquely perfect printer. He later makes a deal with Abagnale, in which the young man assists the FBI to catch other forgers. The backstory of Frank's fractured family and his struggling father Frank Sr. (Christopher Walken) posit several questions about the fragility of post-World War II family life, failure to address the needs of children of broken families, and IRS harassment of small businesses (which Frank Sr. blames for destroying his men's clothing shop). The movie slyly questions American materialism, as Frank, Jr. manages to push the right materialistic buttons to manipulate young women to sleep with him, become

his fiancé, or dress up as airline flight attendants so that he could pose as a pilot. I wonder what happened to those poor coeds when they found out that they did not actually get airline jobs.

Ridley Scott's *All the Money in the World* (2017) recounts the kidnapping of John Paul Getty III in Rome in 1973. Efforts to free the young heir to the Getty fortune are complicated by his grandfather J. Paul Getty (Christopher Plummer) whose infamous stinginess and initial unwillingness to pay ransom money complicate matters. The magnate eventually relents and pays, but not before the young man's ear gets cut off as proof of life. Michele Williams gives a powerful performance as young Paul's mother Gail who, ironically, ends up in charge of the Getty empire after the old man dies, and Mark Wahlberg plays Getty's security chief who work to free Paul. The movie became a focus of the #MeToo Movement when actor Kevin Spacey, accused of sexual abuse of young men, was replaced by Plummer and several scenes had to be reshot. Williams was paid less than Wahlberg for the reshoots, even though she had more screen time than her costar. This underlined charges of Hollywood discrimination against women at heart of the movement.

Wind River (2017) came out as news organizations reported a rash of killings of Native American women. The film presents a fictional case of a young Native American woman, whose body is found barefoot and without adequate clothing during winter, an apparent rape victim. FBI Agent Cory Lambert (Jeremy Renner) gets called into the case by novice Agent Jane Banner (Elizabeth Olson). The audience learns that the woman was Natalie Hanson (Kelsey Chow), who was in a romantic relationship with a white oil drilling worker, Matt. Three of his coworkers come to his trailer quite drunk and proceeded to beat Matt and one of them (Pete) rapes Natalie. When Matt fights back, Natalie runs into the night but, poorly dressed, is overcome by the frigid air in her lungs. At the drilling site, a shootout leaves reservation police dead and Banner wounded. Lambert shoots three guards, and the wounded Pete leaves. Lambert tracks him up the mountain and, after taking his confession lets Pete go poorly clothed like Natalie. Pete later falls dead in the snow.

Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri (also 2017) won numerous awards, including Best Actress for Frances McDormand and Best Supporting Actor for Sam Rockwell. The story is about a woman, Mildred Hayes (McDormand), in fictional Ebbing, Missouri who is angry about perceived police inaction in the rape and murder of her young daughter. She puts up three billboards to stimulate the investigation, but her action becomes unpopular in the town. Her persistence gradually wins over the police chief Bill Willoughby (Woody Harrelson), who is dying of pancreatic cancer and later commits suicide, as well as suspended police officer Jason Dixon (Rockwell), who finds a suspect who brags about raping a woman. Police test a DNA sample he collects by scratching the man, but they rule out the suspect. Mildred

and Jason decide to take a road trip to kill the man, but in the end are not sure if they will do it. Protesters around the globe took inspiration from the movie to demand action in neglected criminal cases, such as the murder of Daphne Caruana Galizia, a leading female journalist in Malta.

PRISON MOVIES AND POLITICS

Prison movies are a subset of crime films, focusing on incarceration of convicted criminals, terrible conditions faced by convicts, and unjustly convicted people. Mervyn LeRoy's *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932) was a landmark film in the last years before the advent of the Production Code. Based on a true story of a man wrongly convicted in Georgia, the fictionalized story presents World War I veteran James Allen (Paul Muni) who wants to learn the construction business and so takes a job in an unnamed southern state. Coerced into participating in a robbery, he runs when the police come and is convicted and sentenced to a chain gang. Enduring horrible conditions, Allen manages to escape and make his way to Chicago. He gets romantically involved with his landlord, Marie Woods (Glenda Farrell), who learns about his criminal past and blackmails him into marriage. He falls in love with another woman Helen (Helen Vinson) and asks Marie for a divorce, but she reveals his secret to the police.

Allen's case becomes national news, and the Illinois Governor refuses to extradite him south. He cuts a deal with the southern state to serve a short term and receive a pardon. But the deal is just a ruse and he gets returned to the chain gang. This time, he uses dynamite to blow up state trucks and cause a landslide. After eluding a multi-state manhunt, he pays Helen a visit, bidding her goodbye. She asks how he will live, and he replies, "I steal." The movie was one of the first to portray convicted criminals in a sympathetic light and sparked a national conversation on abolition of chain gangs, which many people in the North considered inhuman and cruel.

John Frankenheimer's *The Birdman of Alcatraz* (1962) stars Burt Lancaster as Robert Stroud (1890–1963), a self-taught ornithologist who had been convicted of murdering a bartender in Alaska and a federal prison guard four years into his jail term. Sentenced to death for killing the guard, he is eventually given a life term and serves much of his sentence in solitary confinement because of his frequent conflicts with other prisoners and lack of cooperation with guards. He begins to work with birds while in solitary and becomes a leading expert on bird diseases. During a riot in Alcatraz in 1946, called the Battle of Alcatraz, he protects several other prisoners from the rioters.

The movie gained much sympathy and calls for parole for the aging Stroud, who seemed to benefit from prison rehabilitation efforts. Others noted that

Stroud was a vicious criminal who had been labeled by prison psychologists as a psychopath. Stroud died in a prison hospital before he could be considered for release.

Cool Hand Luke (1967) was one of the more commented-upon films of 1967 and a cultural landmark of the 1960s. After World War II, veteran Luke Jackson (Paul Newman) gets convicted and sentenced to two years for cutting parking meters off their poles while drunk. Sent to a chain gang prison farm, Luke goes up against the prisoner hierarchy and engages in a boxing match with top prisoner Dragline (George Kennedy). He is on the verge of losing the fight but gains the prisoners' respect and Dragline's friendship. After his mother's death, Luke makes three escape attempts. During the third one, he gets shot in the neck. The prison warden, known as the Captain (Strother Martin) orders him taken to the far away prison infirmary, instead of a local hospital, ensuring Luke's death.

The movie echoed the non-conformist and anti-establishment mood of the 1960s and, like *Bonnie and Clyde*, Luke appealed to young viewers as a folk hero. The Captain's ironic assertion of authority over the prisoners became a touchstone of the film: "what we've got here is failure to communicate." The iconic and ironic line was applied to the Vietnam War, corporate behavior, and the "Generation Gap" between the Baby Boomers and their Greatest Generation parents.

Midnight Express (1978) was one of the first big budget films to present Americans facing horrific conditions in foreign prisons. Here, young vacationer Billy Hayes (Brad Davis) gets busted for smuggling hashish in Turkey and ends up in the infamous Sıgırcılar Prison. After five years of brutal treatment, he manages to escape. While widely praised for its realism, the film offended many Turks for its portrayal of their country. *Escape from Alcatraz* (1979) is the final collaboration between director Don Siegel and star Clint Eastwood and details the apparently successful escape of three inmates (Frank Morris, and brothers John and Clarence Anglin) from the Alcatraz federal prison in San Francisco Bay in 1962. I say apparently because we do not know whether the trio survived the attempt. While the story stays close to the facts of the escape, it changes the warden (Patrick McGohohan) from the reform-minded real figure to a cold, unsympathetic character.

The Shawshank Redemption (1994) became one of the most popular prison movies. Taken from a Stephen King novella, it relates the tale of Andy Dufresne (Tim Robbins), a Maine banker convicted and sentenced to two life terms in the murder of his wife and her lover in 1947. Andy's patient, long-term view of life allows him to adjust to his difficult prison life. He befriends Ellis "Red" Redding (Morgan Freeman), a prisoner known for being able to procure almost any item for prisoners. The corrupt warden, Samuel Norton (Bob Gunton), uses Andy's financial skills to stash all his dirty money in fake

accounts as “Randall Stephens” in area banks. Meanwhile, Andy provides tax services to the prison guards and expands the prison library.

A new young prisoner Tommy Williams (Gil Bellows) tells his fellows that a cellmate in another prison was the real killer of Andy’s wife. When Tommy announces that he will testify to help Andy, Norton has him shot by Byron Hadley (Clancy Brown), captain of prison guards. After a long stay in solitary, Andy decides it is time to escape. He shimmies through a hole he has been digging for twenty years, and then crawls through a quarter-mile sewer pipe to freedom. The next day, dressed neatly as Randall Stephens, he empties Norton’s accounts and leaves for Mexico. A package of documents mailed to a local newspaper reveals Norton’s corruption and Hadley’s murders of prisoners. State police arrest Hadley, but Norton commits suicide. Redding gets paroled the next year and, remembering Andy’s verbal instructions, makes his way to Mexico, where he and Andy reunite.

The Shawshank Redemption raises serious questions about wrongly convicted prisoners, which became a major issue in the years surrounding the film’s premiere. DNA testing became widely available and led to the exoneration of various convicted criminals. The Innocence Project and other NGOs have worked hard to get reconsideration for prisoners given long sentences, especially for minority convicts who did not receive adequate legal assistance when they were tried.

SPY STORIES/INTRIGUE AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Spy stories were the rage during the height of the Cold War. Like James Bond movies discussed in chapter 3, many of these stories focus on glamorous or heroic spies accomplishing great deeds for their governments. The gritty, mundane world of intelligence work was seldom seen. Martin Ritt’s *The Spy Who Came In From the Cold* (1965), based on a John le Carre novel, is an exception. Richard Burton stars as Alec Leamas, who poses as a fired MI6 under-station section chief, but it is ruse for him to give disinformation to the East Germans. The mission goes awry when Leamas is captured, beat up and then used by Mundt, an MI6 operative who is working as a fake high East German intel officer. In the arresting climax, Mundt arranges for Leamas and his companion Nan Perry (Claire Bloom) to escape across the Berlin Wall, but suddenly a spotlight shines on Nan who is shot to cover up the operation. Leamas climbs down to retrieve her body and is killed, too.

The Good Shepherd (2006) is a roman-a-clef about the early days of the CIA, directed by Robert De Niro. Matt Damon and Angelina Jolie play against type. Damon is diffident and secretive CIA operative Edward Wilson,

based in part on James Jesus Angleton, postwar mega-spy involved in various Cold War operations, and operations director Richard Bissell. Jolie plays Wilson's passionate but ultimately sidelined wife, Clover Russell. Wilson gets recruited for the OSS by General Bill Sullivan (De Niro), based on Bill Donovan. He exposes a British spy chief accused of aiding the enemy, who refuses to resign and gets killed.

Wilson then works counterintelligence in immediate postwar Berlin, and helps Phillip Allen (William Hurt), based on Allen Dulles, form the CIA. He then works on CIA operations in Latin America. Dealing with the fallout from the failed Bay of Pigs operation, he finds that his son Edward, Jr. (Eddie Redmayne) inadvertently leaked information about it to his African fiancée, who is a Soviet spy. Wilson saves his son from involvement and implicates a Soviet double agent, but the fiancée gets killed. In the wake of the Bay of Pigs, the CIA is reorganized, Allen gets fired and Wilson is promoted.

The film forces viewers to consider the relationship between secretive intelligence operations and democratic norms. One particularly striking scene has the sidelined Sullivan telling Wilson that the Nazis were brought to power by mindless clerks, and the new postwar intelligence units are turning all their assets into such clerks. Another scene illustrates the elitism of U.S. intelligence, as Wilson makes a deal with Mafia boss Joseph Palmi (Joe Pesci) for underworld assistance against the Cuban government. Palmi asks Wilson which ethnic group he belongs to, to which Wilson replies that he and his group are Americans and everyone else are just guests.

Argo (2012) is a pet project of Ben Affleck, who directs and plays Tony Mendez, CIA escape (or exfiltration) expert who guides a small group of U.S. embassy staff out of Iran during the Hostage Crisis (1979–1981). Mendez uses the cover of a Canadian film crew that is scouting locations to shoot a *Star Wars*-style movie, called “Argo.” Hollywood producer Lester Siegel (Alan Arkin) and makeup man John Chambers (John Goodman) collaborate with Mendez to find a plausible script and set up a fake production office. The movie ramps up the tension at the airport as the diplomats leave (their actual exit went very smoothly). The film also was criticized for not giving enough credit to the Canadian Embassy staff, but otherwise it tracks the early stages of the Hostage Crisis.

A Most Wanted Man (2014) is the fictional tale of German counter-terrorism operations. Gunther Bachmann (Philip Seymour Hoffman) is one of Germany's leading terrorism operatives, and he hopes to turn a Chechnyan refugee who has escaped from Russia. He uses an American lawyer Annabel Richter (Rachel McAdams) and a banker Tommy Brue (Willim Dafoe) to get in touch with the Chechnyan and an Arab businessman who is funneling money to Al Qaeda. Things are going well until the CIA decide to take over and capture the terrorists. Bachmann yells in anguish, but there is nothing he can do. This

film showed Allied frustration about American heavy-handedness in handling anti-terrorism operations after 9/11.

THRILLERS THAT ARE NOT EXPLICITLY POLITICAL

We dealt with political thrillers and action movies with strong political themes in chapter 3. Now, let us examine a few thrillers that were less political, but either contained some political themes or influenced political discussion in various ways. A good example of the latter is George Cukor's *Gaslight* (1944), a thriller often classed as an early film noir. A manipulative foreigner in London, Gregory Anton (Charles Boyer), tries to get his naïve young bride, Paula Alquist Anton (Ingrid Bergman) to doubt the reality that she sees in front of her and to convince her that her supposed forgetfulness is a sign of her madness. We learn that Anton is Sergis Bauer, who murdered Paula's aunt and wants to get hold of the lady's jewels and other possessions. A Scotland Yard investigator, Brian Cameron (Joseph Cotton), reopens the aunt's murder case, confronting and finally arresting Anton. The term gaslighting has come to mean governments' or politicians' efforts to convince the public that reality is not what they perceive. The term was frequently used during the Trump years.

Alfred Hitchcock only directed a few explicitly political films, such as his early Hollywood hit *Foreign Correspondent* (1940) and his Cold War entries *Torn Curtain* (1966), starring Paul Newman and Julie Andrews and dealing with nuclear espionage in East Germany, and *Topaz* (1969) with John Forsythe and several European actors that considers Soviet-American spying in the run-up to the Cuban Missile Crisis. Hitchcock loved the story of *The Man Who Knew Too Much* so much that he made it twice, in 1934 and 1956. The latter effort was a big budget Hollywood production with James Stewart and Doris Day as a married couple whose son is kidnapped in Morocco, and they get caught up in an assassination plot in London. Other than chills and thrills, the story only tangentially relates to any conceivable 1950s conspiracies. *North By Northwest* (1959), starring Cary Grant and Eva Marie-Saint, is widely considered one of Hitch's best films. Though it supposedly involves Cold War spying and nefarious dealings by James Mason's character, one would be hard pressed to see it as an incisive examination of 1950s espionage.

Several 1970s thrillers or suspense movies have political subtexts. William Friedkin's Oscar winner *The French Connection* (1971), with Gene Hackman and Roy Scheider, is one of the best movies on America's Drug War, which was just gearing up as the movie was in theaters. It deals with New York police efforts to take down the infamous Marseilles heroin supply operation. *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975) based on an actual botched New York bank

robbery and directed by Sidney Lumet, was a tour de force for actors Al Pacino, John Cazale, and Charles Durning. Pacino's character is robbing a branch bank to get funds to pay for his boyfriend's sexual reassignment surgery. The story related tangled themes of psychological abuse of women, gay and transgender identities, and ethnic marginalization. The film also skewered the news media's role in escalating dangerous incidents such as hostage taking into sensationalist spectacles in which spectator and participants play to the cameras.

Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), also considered a psychological horror story, is ostensibly about the hunt for a horrific serial killer who preys on young women but, for many viewers, the most fascinating aspect of the movie is Jodie Foster's characterization of an FBI agent-in-training. We see her grow from an intense young girl who lost her father to a respected agent, all the while dealing with casual sexism as the only woman in the room. *Fight Club* (1999) became a leading cult film of the 2000s. It did not perform well at the box office, perhaps due to its controversial material, but DVD sales were strong. It sparked much discussion about casual violence and the warped idea of proving manhood by engaging in vicious fights with other men. The film was also an incisive critique of America's out-of-control predatory capitalist system and its dehumanized politics.

With elaborate heist film *Inside Man* (2006), Spike Lee tries to make political points about how the powerful can cover up misdeeds from their past, but the message becomes muddled as the movie winds its way to a mild conclusion. A team led by Dalton Russell (Clive Owen) rob a bank only for the contents of a safety deposit box belonging to Arthur Case (Christopher Plummer), the bank's board chairman. Case has covered up his past links to Nazi Germany. Detective Keith Frazier (Denzel Washington) negotiates with the robbers and investigates after the robbery ends. He believes that something is missing but cannot get the city to do anything about Case.

BIOGRAPHICAL MOVIES AND POLITICS

Many biographical movies focus on key political figures. These often are international leaders, such as Indian independence leader Mohandas Gandhi, well profiled in Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi* (1982), or Nelson Mandela in *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom* (2013), the great anti-apartheid campaigner played by Idris Alba.

British royalty is a frequent subject of biographies, as the public is captivated by their struggles, contemporary or historical. Cate Blanchett gives a dominating performance in *Elizabeth* (1998), as the Tudor head of state, often regarded as Britain's most powerful monarch. The film deals with the

queen's struggles to establish her rule as a young monarch and the various plots against her. Geoffrey Rush is a delight as the manipulative spy chief Francis Walsingham. A sequel, *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007) presents her love-hate relationship with Sir Walter Raleigh (Clive Owen) and the run-up to the battle with the Spanish Armada.

The Queen (2006) dissects the royals' hesitant response to the death of Princess Diana in 1997, and Helen Mirren expertly channels the famously reserved Elizabeth II. Watching the movie makes one wonder why people would want to keep the archaic institution of the monarchy, but the ending scene saves it, as the Queen moves to cement a working relationship with Tony Blair (Michael Sheen) that helps set his government on a strong course. *The King's Speech* (2010) examines the queen's father, George VI (Colin Firth) and his struggle to overcome stuttering so that he could give coherent radio speeches. Sofia Coppola's *Marie Antoinette* (2006), oddly, tries to humanize and make us sympathize with the infamous French queen whose apparent lack of empathy for common people helped set the stage for the French Revolution. Its use of musical and other anachronisms is jarring and out of place. The film is a well-intentioned misfire.

Several American presidents have been profiled in the movies. Oliver Stone's *Nixon* (1995) dissects the introverted and neurotic Chief Executive Richard Nixon. Given Stone's leftist proclivities, the film is surprisingly sympathetic to its subject. Anthony Hopkins channels all of Nixon's famously odd gestures and personality ticks. Particularly striking are the flashback scenes of Nixon's childhood, in which the young Richard strives to be a loyal son to his strict Quaker mother, and he is torn apart as he loses two close brothers to tuberculosis. The movie was attacked by the Nixon family, and it advanced without much proof an unsupported theory that Watergate somehow was meant to cover up aspects of the Kennedy assassination.

Stone's *W* (2008) is a rare movie about a president while he was in office, in this case George W. Bush. Like *Nixon*, it is a surprisingly even-handed portrayal of the second Bush president, and takes a chronological stroll through Bush's life, from his time as Yale University student through the invasion of Iraq and its aftermath. Josh Brolin portrays Bush, while Richard Dreyfus is Dick Cheney and James Cromwell plays the father, George H. W. Bush.

RELIGIOUS MOVIES AND POLITICS

During the 1950s and 1960s, the most common way to present religiously themed stories was via historical epics. Such films as *Quo Vadis* (1951), *The Robe* (1953), *The Silver Chalice* (1954), Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956), and William Wyler's *Ben Hur* (1959) were both

popular and embraced by a variety of Christian and Jewish denominations. *Ben Hur* is a remake of a silent film and based on Lew Wallace's popular nineteenth century novel of a man who witnesses the crucifixion and so loses his desire for vengeance against Rome for destroying his family. It was *the* movie of 1959, grossing more than any film going back to *Gone with the Wind* and garnering eleven Academy Awards, a record at that time. The Roman sea battle and the thrilling chariot race between Judah Ben Hur (Charlton Heston) and Messala (Stephen Boyd) are among the high points of the film. Critics derided the historical epic genre as plodding, boring, and too conservative in outlook, but the public loved these films. Even so, epics lost favor in Hollywood after the hyper-expensive four-hour flop *Cleopatra* (1963) starring the then-scandalous couple Elizabeth Taylor as the Egyptian queen and Richard Burton as Roman Triumvir Mark Antony. Rex Harrison plays Julius Caesar, and Roddy McDowall gives his most over-the-top performance as Caesar's grand-nephew Octavian, who becomes the Emperor Caesar Augustus.

Religious movies were far less common during the 1970s to 1990s. A few movies and TV movies about Jesus got made, such as Franco Zeffereilli's reverential *Jesus of Nazareth* (1977), the overtly evangelical *Jesus* (1979), and Martin Scorsese's controversial *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), based on the novel by Constantine Kazantzakis. Many Christians hated Scorsese's film for portraying Jesus (Willem Dafoe) as conflicted about his mission and uncertain about his role as messiah. The rise of evangelical Christianity and the Christian Right led to demands for more religious stories on-screen.

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) focuses exclusively on the trial, flogging, condemnation, and execution of Jesus. The film was popular with conservative Christian churches, which arranged trips to the theater for their congregations. This helped make the film the most profitable religious film ever (Hansen, 2016: 1–6). To enhance authenticity, the dialogue is exclusively in Aramaic and Latin, though Greek was the lingua franca for the eastern Mediterranean in the first century. Pope John Paul II stated that the film captured the reality of the passion. "It is as it was," he said simply (Catholic, 2003: 1–3). Liberals and many critics attacked the film for a gratuitously overlong flogging scene (with copious blood) and for seeming to promote the historical "blood libel" against the Jews for Jesus's execution.

The past decade has seen a resurgence of religious movies. These include *Risen* (2016), which looks at the crucifixion and its aftermath from the point of view of a disillusioned Roman Tribune, played by Joseph Fiennes, and *Miracles from Heaven* (2016) starring Queen Latifah and Jennifer Garner about the healing of a young girl. *God is Not Dead* (2014) was made by the same team that put together *Miracles from Heaven*, and it was also quite profitable. More mainstream movies such as *Noah* starring Russell Crowe as the

ark builder and *Exodus: Gods and Kings* with Christian Bale as Moses and Joel Edgerton as Pharaoh Ramses II (both 2014) were shunned by Christians and Jews because they were perceived as straying too far from biblical texts (Hansen, 2016: 1–6).

SCIENCE FICTION/DYSTOPIA AND POLITICS

Science fiction, showing us other worlds, alternative societies, and possible futures, is an excellent arena for political parable and allusion. This is particularly true for dystopian stories that illustrate futures gone wrong. One of the earliest and most influential sci-fi dystopias is *Metropolis* (1927), Fritz Lang's examination of rigid class divisions in a future society ruled by technology. Lang's futurist imagery of a large city dedicated to the wealthy and powerful and the robot Maria are arresting images. Fear of nuclear Armageddon informs Robert Wise's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) about a cultured humanoid alien who travels to Earth to offer humanity a simple proposition: give up your nuclear weapons and join a peaceful interplanetary civilization dedicated to peace, or face destruction (Anders, 2013: 1–2).

Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) may be the most influential SF movie ever. It details a mission to Jupiter that goes wrong, but the one surviving astronaut undergoes a transcendent experience. The movie questions government secrecy and coverups, dehumanized bureaucratic communications, and over-reliance on unchecked computers. Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), based on an Anthony Burgess novel, considers a near-future society in which uncontrolled delinquent gangs make governments undertake aversion therapy to cure gang members, yet the news media and civil society groups sympathize with the heinous criminals (Anders, 2013: 1–12).

Future policing features in two influential films of the Reagan and Clinton eras. Paul Verhoeven's *Robocop* (1987) considers a cyborg who could be the ultimate cop because he combines both human and machine capabilities. The problem is that Murphy (Peter Weller) retains powerful memories of his human life, remembering both his wife and the men who nearly killed him. The film disturbingly lays out a near-future America with corrupt police, industrial blight, and corporate control of local government. *Demolition Man* (1993) was very popular, in part because it skewered then-current political correctness and nanny state tendencies, as a future government penalizes use of profanities and replaces corporeal sex with mechanical coitus. With police restricted to non-violent action, only cryonically suspended cop John Spartan (Sylvester Stallone) can summon lost policing skills to kill hardened criminal Simon Phoenix (Wesley Snipes) (Anders, 2013: 1–12).

The Matrix (1999) and its sequels made viewers question the nature of reality, as the supposedly autonomous individual within society is shown to be an illusion. We willingly give up our freedom to consume more goods and enjoy more leisure time. A computer programmer (Keanu Reeves) blissfully lives his life, unaware of alien control, until offered a chance to see reality and take action as the One who will free humanity. James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) was even more popular than *The Matrix*, and its pounding environmentalist, anti-militarist, anti-colonialist message resonated with viewers. Borrowing from such films as *Dances with Wolves*, it sides with the blue-skinned Navi people on the moon Pandora in the Alpha Centauri system. Humans seeking the mineral unobtainium are destroying the moon's landscape. But the Navi, along with a few humans, resist the mercenaries and miners who are cutting down the native trees at the heart of Navi spirituality (Anders, 2013: 1–12).

The Hunger Games (2012) and its sequels were the first of a wave of dystopian adventures with strong heroines in the 2010s. An annual television spectacle pits young representatives from various regions in a fight to the death. Katniss Everdeen (Jennifer Lawrence), an accomplished archer, finds a way to win the competition, save her family back home, and in the sequels take on the authoritarian political system running the games. The story also focuses on a predatory class system that separates rich and poor, and it illustrates how news and entertainment media manipulate the public to accept almost any entertainment, no matter how dehumanizing (Anders, 2013; 1–12).

WOMEN IN OTHER GENRES: REPRESENTATION AND HOPE

Women are indispensable to romance stories and romantic comedies, and these genres are designed to appeal to female audiences, so women are well represented. Images of women in romance stories have markedly changed in the past thirty years. Romances in the 1950s usually showed women seeking partners and settling down as housewives and mothers. More recent romantic tales depict career women who may be uncertain about settling down, but often find partners who respect their career choices and want to be supportive spouses who will share housekeeping and parenting duties. Of course, the reality is that, despite men's promises to be sharing spouses, most parenting and domestic chores still are borne by women. Since these movies end at the happily-ever-stage or a wedding, we do not get to see any domestic arguments, separations and divorces, or child custody battles.

Comedy movies and satires often feature female leads, but those with political themes more often feature men at the center of action. It would be

fascinating to see more political comedies and satires told from women's perspectives. The promise of this may explain the success of the HBO comedy series *Veep* (2012–2019), starring Julia Louis-Dreyfus as Selina Meyer, a fictional Vice President who desires to do good, but usually becomes enmeshed in political messes of various kinds. Women are also well represented in musicals, but the political ones mentioned above tend to be male-centered, except for *Liberty's Secret*.

Sports movies are heavily male-focused, but an occasional female biopic provides a different perspective. In *Battle of the Sexes* (2017), Emma Stone stars as 1970s tennis champion Billie Jean King, who battled self-promoter Bobby Riggs in an exhibition match in 1973. Riggs half-jokingly claimed that the match would settle which gender was better at tennis, and King thrashed him. *I, Tonya* (also 2017), starring Margot Robbie as Olympic figure skater Tonya Harding, follows the sensational case of the knee-bashing of fellow skater Nancy Kerrigan before the 1994 Winter Olympics. The movie raises troubling questions of class, gender, spousal abuse of women, and news media coverage of sports scandals. It also suggests that the Olympics are biased against working class athletes, letting them compete but not allowing them to win.

Horror movies usually find women as the most common victims. Classic monster movies often show creatures carrying off women for no other reason than they were available and scream a lot. Slasher movies, especially, fixate on young women as murder victims, with tropes involving “the blonde victim,” “the victim who has sex,” and “the Final Girl,” a brunette who stays alive to defeat the slasher. Funny, these movies never present young men as victims by hair color or ability to stay alive until the last reel.

Traditional mysteries often involve women as victims, with men solving the cases. This is particularly true for police procedurals, where hard-bitten cops who challenge their own departments manage to find the murderers when no one else can. Exceptions include the various Nancy Drew mysteries about a teenage sleuth since the character emerged in novels of the 1930s, and Agatha Christie's Miss Marple stories. There were Nancy Drew movies in 2007 and 2019, and a 2019 TV series. *Murder, She Wrote* (1984–1996), starring Angela Lansbury as amateur detective Jessica Fletcher, was one of television's most successful shows and spawned four TV movies.

Legal dramas most often concentrate on powerful male lawyers, but women lawyers have gained greater exposure since the 1980s. A few movies illustrate the evolution of filmic women lawyers. In *The Accused* (1988) Kelly McGillis plays Assistant District Attorney Kathryn Murphy, who prosecutes three men who gang-raped a bar patron, Sarah Tobias (Jodie Foster). The movie won praise for fictionally depicting a famous case from Massachusetts, but some critics thought that the story was more interested in titillation and

sensationalism than in depicting the horror of this crime. *I Am Sam* (2001) finds Michelle Pfeiffer playing Rita Williams, a lawyer representing Sam Dawson (Sean Penn), a special needs man who wants to raise his daughter Lucy (Dakota Fanning) after her mother has died. Tilda Swinton plays Karen Crowder, counsel for the corrupt U-North Corp., up against eponymous fixer-attorney Clayton (George Clooney) in *Michael Clayton* (2007). *On Account of Sex* (2018) stars Felicity Jones as the young Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who takes on job discrimination based on sex in a case involving a man.

Like thrillers, spy stories traditionally present women as ancillary or supporting characters. The Bond girls were combination eye candy and sex objects. Diana Rigg was an exception as Bond's wife Tracy di Vincenzo in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* (1971). Recent movies have detailed actual women who got caught up in intelligence operations-gone-wrong. In *Fair Game* (2010), Naomi Watts plays Valerie Plame, who was outed as a CIA operative by Dick Cheney's chief of staff Scooter Libby during the run-up to the Iraq War. Sean Penn plays her husband, Joseph Wilson, who questioned the Bush administration's bogus intelligence on Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction programs. *Official Secrets* (2019), in which Keira Knightley plays whistleblower Katherine Gun, who leaked British government documents about an illegal British-American operation to test-run possible blackmailing of U.N. ambassadors that might vote against resolutions leading to the Iraq War.

Biographical movies often profile famous women, but they give more film space to well-known men. That also goes for religious movies, which often relate tales of great male religious leaders. In the past few decades, films have profiled both Mary, the mother of Jesus (*Mary, Mother of Jesus*, 2013 and *Mary of Nazareth*, 2018) and Mary Magdalene, key female follower of Jesus and first person to see Jesus after his resurrection (*Mary Magdalene*, 2018, starring Rooney Mara as Mary and Joaquin Phoenix as Jesus). Finally, more serious women are showing up in science fiction movies. This is a big change from, say, the 1950s, when female characters were eye candy, captains' assistants, or screamers.

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