International Relations on Screen: Hollywood's History of American Foreign Policy

Perhaps it's fitting that American cinema's dalliance with U.S. foreign policy should have started with a Briton. J. Stuart Blackton from Sheffield, co-founder of the Vitagraph Corporation of America in 1897, one of the east-coast's early influential studios, had been tempted into the film business by Thomas Edison. An influential pioneer and restless creator, Blackton produced a short film in 1898 entitled *Tearing Down the Spanish Flag*. Lasting no more than a few seconds, the audience saw the director's own hands rip a Spanish flag from its mast, only for the offending article to be replaced with the Stars and Stripes. In the midst of the controversies surrounding the Spanish-American War in Cuba, the film caused a sensation in the United States. In one fell swoop, Blackton brought iconic imagery, political commentary and international relations to the American cinema. The provocative act was seen as every bit a stinging piece of patriotic fervour for American conquest as were the reports of atrocities committed by the ruling Spanish authority filed by newspaper columnists on the island at the time. The hands were, as Guy Westwell comments, "entangled with the audience's own nationalist fervour."[1]

115 years later, nationalist fervour and international relations are alive and well in Hollywood. In 2013, director Antoine Fuqua's *Olympus Has Fallen* made as much of a fuss of North Korean terrorists taking over the White House, as Blackton had done with Spain's human rights record more than a century before. In Fuqua's movie, the North Korean initiative is fuelled by a number of disparate elements: the leader of the rogue force blames America for the death of his parents; wants all of the country's nuclear weapons obliterated; and, just for good measure, has some international diplomacy in mind with the reunification of Korea after a eradiated United States has fallen from its superpower mantle.

In the summer blockbuster season a deal of attention was afforded the film's rivalry with Roland Emmerich's equivalent offering, *White House Down*, where once again the Oval Office is under threat and a 'loose cannon' hero has to save the day. In the former film, and echoing Blackton's intervention all those years before, it is another Brit in the form of Gerard Butler's Special Forces operative, Mike Banning who is obliged to intervene and restore institutional order and authority; while in *WHD*, the corresponding lone enforcer, backed by Jamie Foxx's President James Sawyer, is Channing Tatum's Washington D.C. cop, John Cale.

Fuqua's film arrived in multiplexes first and took only a fraction short of $100 million at the U.S. box-office, while Emmerich's picture, on a production budget twice the size ($150 million), managed only $73 million in domestic sales. The numbers might at once tell a familiar tale of the laws of Hollywood's economic movie-making model in the modern age. But they also offer something else possibly. The two films, while identical in many respects as regards their construction of the generic action-adventure blockbuster, differed in one crucial regard. In *WHD*, while the backdrop features a presumptively liberal-minded president concluding negotiations for a Middle-Eastern peace treaty that will see American forces retreat from the region, the motivation for the attack on the president's home comes not from the outside forces of anti-Americanism, as with *Olympus Has Fallen*, but from political insiders disgruntled over peace and settlement in the Middle East. One reaffirms America's riposte to the threat from ideological adversaries, while the other makes it all about personal, political infighting and conspiracy.

Was the former's gung-ho reassertion of American might the trump card? One might be overstating the case to

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suggest that in the box-office reception of these two films lies the roots of both Hollywood's, and cinemagoers' enduring fascination with America's relations in the world, but there are conclusions to posit. For one, *OHF*'s unexpected success – Jim Orr, president of the film's distribution company, FirstDistrict, declared that the film "exceeded all our estimates"[2] – altered at least some of the terrain for Hollywood's recurrent focus on international relations in the post-9/11 world.

Writing on this very web site, Bruce Bennett has recently done a fine job of extrapolating the visceral documentary leitmotif that has informed any number of recent foreign policy-themed productions, from feature films such as *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008) and *Green Zone* (Paul Greengrass, 2010), through docu-dramas like *Taxi to the Dark Side* (Alex Gibney, 2007) and *Redacted* (Brian De Palma, 2007), to television shows like *Generation Kill* (2008) and *Over There* (2005-06). Bennett sees this "generic and stylistic turn" as a response to the "global explosion of violence and its spectacular hypermediation".[3] His theory takes up Garrett Stewart's theme that the early years of the 21st Century have left the public in a state of "digital fatigue". Stewart cites the rising tide and swift turnover of technology as a reason for the increasingly blasé attitude towards the battle-conditioned realism of the Iraqi/Afghanistan war films, if not war movies more generally. Emphasising the appeal of computer gaming especially, Stewart plays on the notion of an ideological and aesthetic temporality at work. Ideological because the games and the reality of televised, 24 hour-a-day war numbs the senses to conflict and consequence. An aesthetic temporality because, as Stewart recognises, in the second half of the 2000s Hollywood headed further and further down the road of cinematic pyrotechnics in creating narratives that took audiences way beyond the confines of normal space and time.

Citing movies such as *Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan, 2005) *Vantage Point* (Pete Travis, 2008) and Ridley Scott's *Body of Lies* (2008), Stewart argues that such films proved almost too ambitious for audiences in their parallel editing across hemispheric distances in what he calls the "geopolitics of montage." The audience had no frame of reference, no point-of-view shots on which to actively engage with the protagonists. Instead, "the panoptic model [gives the] idea of a central point of view circumscribing all visible space under a mobile and pinioning gaze."[4] Stewart concentrates particularly on the final moments of Scott's film to amplify his point. Roger Ferris (Leonardo DiCaprio) is a CIA operative working out of Jordan, on the trail of a terrorist cell, involved in double-dealing, who then witnesses his Iranian girlfriend get kidnapped. He hatches a plan to get her back while exposing a Muslim cleric, but it all goes horribly wrong. Ferris is so disillusioned by this and his work that he resolves to excuse himself from further government service and extricate himself from the control of his 'handler', Ed Hoffman (Russell Crowe), based in Langley.

The denouement sees Ferris wandering through a bazaar being observed by drones in the sky. Hoffman has the drones "clear off target" and his screen clicks off, a two-fold paradigm for Stewart that is both meant to exemplify an omniscient narrative running through not just the film but everything in our 21st Century lives. The closedown of the surveillance is, he asserts, "the closest thing we get to narrative resolution."[5]

These films are doing a combination of things then that might well be as imponderable to the average cinema-goer as the government's own policy is on combating terror and pursuing hi-tech wars via mobile phones, satellite technology, un-manned aerial vehicles and the like. Plots have multiple entries following several paths, characters are unusually ambiguous and even dislikeable, and closures seem not to wholly or even partially offer redemption or hope. In movies like *Vantage Point* as well as Gavin Hood's *Rendition* (2007), the temporal replay and digital framing in each film actually stands in as the narrative component rather than acting as a technological function that aides narrativity; it is, if you like, the movies' engine in these instances and is deliberately conceived as so. *Olympus Has Fallen*, by contrast, adopts none of these technological and philosophical counterpoints and, short of not knowing whether the North Koreans are 'rogue' or government-sanctioned, lines up the good/evil, righteous/barbarous binaries immediately at the start. A return to go old-fashioned destiny and exceptionalism the critics might suggest, if not imperialist *Pax Americana*.

Both Bennett and Stewart offer similar conclusions that rest on American society's entertainment culture – especially film – functioning as a product of military form and interplay. In other words, even films attempting to complicate the terms of the combat situations set up by the 'War on Terror' – *The Hurt Locker*, *Green Zone*, *Rendition*, *Battle for*

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Hiditha, *Zero Dark Thirty* – are, in effect, like *OHF*, arms of an establishment practice that reinforces rather than contradicts doctrines about the foreign policy of the United States.

Work of this nature has been very important therefore, and extremely productive over the last decade or more, in highlighting how and why the Hollywood/Washington power nexus has constructed themes and theories of foreign policy imperatives and necessity in the way it has.[6] Indeed Jean-Michel Valantin goes as far as to suggest that the "national security cinema industry" has joined forces with the "national security State" to legitimise foreign policy strategy under the aegis of – that emboldened word for the 21st Century – threat. "The production of all American strategy centres around the idea of a threat that could legitimize agreements, [from] large-scale weapons programmes, to decisions to launch military expeditions all over the world," he says. "The history of relationships between the American State and strategy is also that of communication between Washington and Hollywood, which constantly transforms the application of American strategic practices into cinematic accounts."[7]

So it has been that international relations on screen since 9/11 and over the course of the 'War on Terror' era have solidified the dynamic between two powerful institutions – set in train by the now legendary meeting between Bush adviser Karl Rove and studio executives in Hollywood on November 11th, 2001[8] – aided and abetted by a stylistic and technological shift in the way combat, spying, and diplomacy in general, is cinematically presented.

The films above and many more besides have been at the heart of this debate between Hollywood verisimilitude and political expediency therefore. But what about history? Valentin makes the point that Hollywood has long been at the forefront of documenting a history of the national security state, in turn shifting the focus of prevailing ideological threats; from Soviet communism, to Middle-Eastern dictators, to terror networks. And in the 2000s, arguably, some of the more important reflective portrayals of America's foreign policy history, and state security evolution have appeared. Aside from examples like *The Quiet American* (Phillip Noyce, 2002) *The Recruit* (Roger Donaldson, 2003) and *Spy Game* (Tony Scott, 2001) three are worthy of particular mention. For in *The Good Shepherd*, *Breach* and *Fair Game*, lie subtly crafted, ambiguous and analogous tales of the nation's diplomatic and foreign policy past.

Both *The Good Shepherd* (Robert De Niro, 2006) and *Breach* (Billy Ray, 2007) investigate the United States' secret service infrastructure in retrospective fashion; one dating back to the early 1960s and the establishment of the CIA's heavy political influence over successive White House administrations; the second the tale of Robert Hanssen, a rogue FBI operative who was revealed in 2001 to have been handing over secrets to the Soviets for more than twenty years. In somewhat allegorical fashion, both Matt Damon's young recruit, Edward Wilson in the former film, thrown into the agency's hegemonic world view after the war, and Ryan Phillippe's Eric O'Neill in the latter, as the rookie whose eyes are opened to the insider dealings of the FBI and its treatment, and exposure, of one of their own, lead the audience down the path of stories that resonate with the themes of coercion, secretive forces and unaccountable actions conditioned for the times in which the films were made. The performances in both pictures are subtle and underplayed; especially Chris Cooper as Hanssen in Ray's movie, and an ensemble cast led by De Niro, William Hurt and Angelina Jolie in *The Good Shepherd*.

The recollected fashion in which these films deal with America's foreign intelligence superstructure happily keeps idealism and nostalgia at bay and certainly doesn't mean counter-terrorist narratives and current affairs paradigms are absent; in fact their presence in each film prophesises the shortcomings of a 'War on Terror'-like age to come, increasingly mired in conflict and instability.

Fair Game (Doug Liman, 2010) by contrast, is that age come to fruition. Relaying the Bush administration's unmasking of CIA agent Valarie Plame in 2003 soon after the invasion of Iraq had begun, and in the light of Plame's husband having been involved in the search for Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq and elsewhere, Liman's film deals in incredulity from beginning to end. The incredulity of a search for WMD that proves hollow, for the exposure of a public servant undertaking incredible risks on behalf of the state, and incredulity directed at an administration that would appear to go to as many lengths as possible in order to divert blame from its door. Lacking anything that smacks of the 'bombs-and-bullets' approach of *Olympus Has Fallen*, *Fair Game*'s explosive countenance lies in its quiet certitude and refusal to be diverted from anything other than the injustice of the act and the political ideologies that motivated that act. While feature films of this ilk always suffer from what we might term the 'accuracy issue' –

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and the assertion in the movie that Plame's cover was blown *only* by White House aide Lewis 'Scooter' Libby has often been refuted, with State Department official Richard Armitage generally now recognised as the (first) to divulge her name to a journalist – there are nevertheless tremendous performances from Naomi Watts as Plame and Sean Penn as her husband Joe Wilson.

The film may be the only one in recent times to meaningfully, as Douglas Kellner calls it, *transcode* the diplomatic/foreign policy landscape.[9] In Kellner's eyes, Hollywood cinema has actually been a battleground or "contested terrain" for recent ideological fluxes in American life, more than it has a co-conspirator in state-sponsored diplomatic determinism.[10] Whatever the reality, and despite the ubiquity of a film like *Olympus Has Fallen* in the summer blockbuster season, *Fair Game*, *Breach* and *The Good Shepherd* show us that Hollywood's foreign policy history does have something to share about the nature, confluence and complexity of state power and authority; in this age, and many that have gone before it.

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Endnotes

[1] Guy Westwell, *War Cinema: Hollywood on the Front Line* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p.11.

[2] Daniel Wattenberg, "*Olympus Has Fallen* Box-Office: Hollywood Fooled Again", *The Washington Times*, Monday, March 25th, 2013 < http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/mar/25/box-office-has-risen-olympus-has-fallen-beats-holl/?page=all>

[3] Bruce Bennett, "Documenting the 'War on Terror'", *e-International Relations*, October 16th, 2013 <http://www.e-ir.info/2013/10/16/documenting-the-war-on-terror/>

[4] Garrett Stewart, "Digital Fatigue: Imaging War in Recent American Film", *Film Quarterly*, Volume 62, No. 4, (Summer 2009), pp. 47-8.

[5] Garrett Stewart, p. 50.

[6] Other notable works include; Klaus Dodds, Hollywood and the Popular Geopolitics of the War on Terror,*Third World Quarterly*, 29:8, (2008), 1621-1637; Cynthia Weber, *Imagining America at War: Morality Politics, and Film* (London: Routledge, 2006); Matthew Alford, *Reel Power: Hollywood Cinema and American Supremacy* (London: Pluto Press, 2010). Tony Shaw's *Hollywood's Cold War* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2007) is an excellent historical introduction into propaganda foreign policy/diplomacy/Cold War films emerging since the Second World War.

[7] Jean-Michel Valantin, *Hollywood, The Pentagon and Washington: The Movies and National Security, From World War II to the Present Day* (London: Anthem Press, 2005), p. xi.

[8] Rick Lyman, "A NATION CHALLENGED: THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY; Hollywood Discusses Role in War Effort", *The New York Times*, November 12, 2001 <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/12/us/nation-challenged-entertainment-industry-hollywood-discusses-role-war-effort.html>

[9] Douglas Kellner, *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era* (London: Wiley, 2010), p. 2.

[10] Douglas Kellner, pp.2-6.