‘Have You Seen Any Good Films Lately?’
Geopolitics, International Relations and Film
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Abstract
This article explores the intersection between geopolitics, international relations and film. The first section examines how popular geopolitics and related areas of International Relations have engaged with film and Hollywood. Thereafter, it considers the interrelationship between Hollywood, the Bush administration and the post-9/11 era in an attempt to better understand some of the contours of the military-industrial-media-entertainment complex. At times of crisis, Hollywood has often been more than willing and able to produce and market films designed to ‘raise’ national morale and spirit. Finally, the article considers the challenge of researching audience reactions and the potential of a variety of sources, including interviews and online commentary to facilitate such discussions further.

Introduction

Having waved the flag for so many years before September 11th, Hollywood’s first reaction was to put the industry at the government’s [i.e. the George W. Bush administration] disposal. (Young 2003, 256)

Speaking from personal experience, I have often used films as a way of ‘breaking the ice’ with strangers and, from my understanding again, people like talking about their favourite films equally as much as they enjoy considering why some films ‘worked’ for them or not. The term ‘worked’ is significant here because many of the discussants frequently expressed strong views about leading stars, narrative structure, genre, and, if they were fellow James Bond fans, for instance, gadgets and stunts. In that sense, it is difficult not to concur with Chris Lukinbeal (2004) that ‘film and television act as maps for the everyday social–cultural and geopolitical imaginaries and realities of everyday life’ (Lukinbeal 2004, 247).

The starting proposition of this article is that films matter to many people and forms an important part of their popular geopolitical repertoire (on geopolitics and the visual see Hughes 2007). As Henry Giroux (2002, 7) has noted with reference to the USA, ‘as the opportunities for civic education and public engagement begin to disappear, film may provide one of the few mediums left that enables conversations that connects
politics, personal experiences, and public life to larger social [and we might add geopolitical] issues.’ His book-length jeremiad is pertinent because it drew attention to the pervasive media culture in post-9/11 America that has been dominated by mainstream organisations such as the New York Times and Fox News. Such organisations seemed unwilling to critically interrogate the Bush administration’s response to the spectre of terrorism and allegations regarding Iraq’s possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), in particular.

A number of scholars have considered how movies work as geopolitical texts, which involves a whole series of visual, textual and emotional engagements (e.g. Carter and McCormick 2006; Power and Crampton 2007). Major studios in Hollywood such as Time-Warner and MGM invest a great deal of time and attention trying to predict likely audience reactions because making movies, especially the blockbuster variety, is big business and recouping their investment in terms of box-office receipts, advertising and related product marketing is a key objective. While Hollywood studios are often eager to ‘rally around the flag’ in times of crises, this does not mean that other Hollywood production companies and well-known producers such as Oliver Stone are not willing to make (and secure funds) for movies that do tackle difficult and problematic issues such as the use of extraordinary rendition, rape, terrorism and torture. Films such as Salvador (1986) and Three Kings (1999) have unquestionably provided more critical visual and textual assessments of US foreign policy activities in Central America and the 1991 Gulf War, respectively. A new generation of films such as Redacted (2007), Rendition (2007) and In the Valley of Elah (2007) are addressing controversial issues, including sexual violence inflicted by US soldiers on Iraqi children and women.

This article has three sections and the first considers how political geographers and others in related fields such as International Relations (IR) and Security Studies have also been concerned with the role of film, popular culture and representations of global politics (e.g. Booth 2005; Croft 2006; Dahlman 2002; Davies and Wells 2002; Davis 2006; Debrix 2007; Dodds 2003, 2007; Gow 2006; Kellner 1995, 2005; MacDonald 2006; Nexon and Neumann 2006; Weber 2005; Weldes 2003). Second, the role of film in the post-9/11 era is considered in order to elucidate further how film might work in a variety of geopolitical contexts including war, humanitarianism and what has been called ‘warrior politics’ (see, for example, Lisle 2003; Lisle and Pepper 2005; Mirzoeff 2005; Rich 2001; Valantin 2005). Finally, this article will pay particular attention to audiences and consider in some detail how a growing interest in reception studies is highlighting the diverse ways in which people interpret, react and are affected by films. Recent work such as that of Carter and McCormick (2005, 242) on the film Black Hawk Down (2001) claims that this movie ‘combines narrative strategy and affective technique that makes it a (potentially) powerful cinematic intervention’. Significantly, the word potentially is depicted in parentheses.
because their skilful interrogation of the production and release of the film contains no sense of how audiences actually addressed the film.²

Common Ground? Geopolitics, International Relations and Film

Twenty years ago, geopolitics and the discipline of IR underwent a scholarly revolution. Within the discipline of political geography, the controversial intellectual field of geopolitics was rebranded and a new generation of scholars armed with discourse analysis and post-structural theory addressed pertinent issues such as the ending of the Cold War as we knew it. Likewise, in IR the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ was credited by some as rejuvenating this intellectual field with a focus on the textual basis of world politics. Unlike the discipline of geography, which has a well-established visual archive often in the form of maps, IR was perhaps more wedded to this textual focus. Critical geopolitical scholars such as Ó Tuathail (1996) not only explored, what we might call elite representations of global geopolitics in great detail but also considered what, was later to be called ‘popular geopolitics’. Joanne Sharp (1998, 2000) deserves much credit in initiating a conversation about how the linguistic and the visual are performed in geopolitical life. In Sharp’s case, the popular magazine the Reader’s Digest and Hollywood films such as Executive Decision (1996) featured in her discussions of American popular and visual cultures and complemented a wider geographical interest in film and cinematic landscapes (see Aitken and Zonn 1994; Cresswell and Dixon 2002).

Within IR, the ‘visual turn’ was perhaps a little later in coming even though Michael Shapiro (1997) and Richard Gregg (1998, 1999) were instrumental in provoking further discussion on the role that film could play interpreting and representing global politics. In Shapiro’s case, cinematic representations were discussed as part of an examination of how Hollywood was implicated, in particular, with Orientalist renditions of global political life. Subsequently, scholars such as Mark Lacy (2001, 2003), Michael Shapiro (2007) and Cynthia Weber (2001, 2006) have been particularly influential in performing two fundamental tasks. First, they have demonstrated for IR audiences that visual language, like textual language, needs to be understood as a form of grammar and syntax. Second, to use films to critically engage with interpretations and representations of war, nationalism, colonialism, world orders, the War on Terror, international political economy, and so on. As Cynthia Weber noted:

Accessing visual culture, through popular films, allows us to consider the connections between IR theory and our everyday lives. Using popular films in this way helps us get a sense of everyday connections between the ‘popular’ and the ‘political’. (Weber 2001, 9)

Understanding visual language has arguably become all the more important in the post-9/11 era as political leaders such as President George W.
Bush invest great care in manufacturing particular visual moments (Rose 2001). One well-known example would be the so-called ‘Top Gun’ moment when he was a passenger on a plane that landed on the USS Abraham Lincoln in May 2003. The purpose of the spectacle was to announce to the navy crew and, of course, television audiences in the USA that the US troops serving in Iraq had accomplished their mission. The phrase ‘Top Gun’ not only refers to the elite naval fighter school in California but significantly to a very popular film of the same title starring Tom Cruise as a naval pilot who, with the help of others, successfully engages and dispatches enemy aircraft ‘somewhere over the Indian Ocean’. As many observers, most of them critical have noted, the film celebrates American technology, ingenuity and individual spirit often in the face of adversity (both personal and collective). Critically, the film was released in 1986 when a former Hollywood actor, Ronald Reagan, who was determined to ‘win’ the Cold War, administered the USA (Wood 1986).

Comprehending these kind of ‘photo opportunities’ is important if we want to understand better what kind of political function the visual performs including references to film. In the case of the so-called ‘Top Gun’ affair, Bush’s naval outfit and flying performance was interpreted as a deliberate attempt to align the President with the armed forces and to use his announcement that ‘major combat operations in Iraq have ended’ to convey the impression that the USA was in control of its own destiny once again. The entire spectacle, as Douglas Kellner (2003, 58) concluded, was carefully stage managed by the administration, even the unfurling of the banner on the aircraft carrier, which proclaimed ‘Mission Accomplished’. During the actual performance, George W. Bush changed outfits so that he not only looked like a Commander-in-Chief (fighter pilot outfit) but also a global statesman (dark suit and sombre tie). A 15-year-old Hollywood film produced the caption with which all the major television and newspapers in the USA and elsewhere followed. As the Daily Telegraph (London) noted on 2 May – ‘Bush takes a Top Gun stance on US carrier’.3

This was not, of course, the first time a US President has knowingly invited comparisons with film imagery and rhetoric. Former B-movie actor, Ronald Reagan, was instrumental in using science fiction and action thriller movies such as Star Wars and Rambo to contextualise his foreign and security policies (Lipschultz 2001; Sharp 1998). Susan Jeffords skilfully noted how cinematic representations of the white male body (again Top Gun provides a striking example) provided a vehicle for expressing Reagan’s late Cold War America (Jeffords 1994). President George H. W. Bush adopted Clint Eastwood’s line (in the Dirty Harry movie series) ‘Read my lips’ to explain to potential electors his proposed taxation policy. Scholars such as Neal Gabler (1998) have contended, that movies have become a model for public policy and, in particular, notes how the Gulf War conflict of 1991 was packaged as if it was akin to a movie script with a linear narrative filled with evil villains, innocent victims and heroic victors (Gabler 1998, 113).
Popular visual expressions participate in framings of the structures and agents of global politics. Popular geopolitical writers, alongside colleagues in IR, have used a varied repertoire of films, cartoons, comics and newspapers to reflect on the representations of global politics and the consequences of such audio-visual depictions in the case of film. Over the last 10 years, this interest in films/cinema in particular has expanded steadily and scholars have documented not only how catalytic events such as 11 September 2001 have stimulated new productions (with reel enemies and threats) but also how more established cinematic and visual conventions and represented get revisited and renegotiated (see, for example, Jansson 2005). As Agnew (2000) and Campbell (1998) have noted, internal others (and corresponding spaces such as ‘the South’) have played a critical role in shaping not only the identity politics of the USA but also relationships with the wider world.

The net result of this endeavour is perhaps best encapsulated by the edited collection of essays by Marcus Power and Andrew Crampton (2007). Under the title *Cinema and Popular Geo-politics*, a range of authors from geography, international relations and political science consider the myriad ways in which film and cinema represent (but do not necessarily explain) global geopolitics (Dalby 2007; Debrix 2007; Dodds 2005; Monaco 2000; Ó Tuathail 1996, 2007). As the editors note,

Film represents a unique way of arranging these dramas and actors and of attempting a kind of spatialisation and visualisation of boundaries and dangers and American identity is connected to the geopolitical constructions and ideological codes of Hollywood films. They provide a way of solving (geo) political uncertainty, and the very uncertain nature of America itself, through building moral geographies and making clear the lines between ‘us’ and ‘them’. (Power and Crampton 2007, 6)

Existing geopolitical scholarship on film has not given, in my opinion, sufficient time and attention to the question of genre and even subgenre with regard to the manufacturing of geopolitical constructions and identity politics. Genre refers to a way of differentiating movies on the basis of their narrative structures and, what Richard Maltby (1995) has called ‘emotional landscapes’. Most film scholars agree that it is possible to differentiate between the thriller, western, horror and even distinct subgenre productions such as *Die Hard* (1988) and subsequent creations (Altmann 1999). Why, you might ask, does genre matter? Generic films profile not only plot and character development but also permit the audience to potentially anticipate and predict the denouement of specific films. Producers, by and large, like generic movies because they can be pre-sold to audiences. While certain types of films vary in popularity, movies with strong generic themes are
often very successful in commercial terms. For example, the long-standing James Bond series is successful in part because audiences know what to expect – the British super-spy will ultimately prevail and save Britain or even the world usually at the expense of an evil genius stationed in some formidable environment. As a form of action thriller, it also works hard to create a mood (using in part the famous James Bond theme) to explain why Bond’s mission had to be resolved via force. The geopolitical contexts used in the films matter in terms of ensuing some kind of contemporary creditability so that it came as no surprise to this James Bond fan that the latest movie, *Casino Royale* (2005) used the backdrop of global terror networks to geopolitically situate the latest 007 mission.

The popularity of particular types of movies can also vary over time and the changing fortune of the disaster movie provides one example of a generic type that was commercially popular in the 1970s and again so in the 1990s (Keane 2001). In the 1980s, films such as *Die Hard* (1988) ushered into existence a new kind of action thriller, which combined elements of the ‘disaster film’ genre alongside tongue-in-cheek dialogue and the self-deferential lead male actor. The film also works geopolitically in the sense that Bruce Willis’ character battles against East German terrorists within a large building owned by a Japanese corporation. In so doing, contemporary US–Japanese geoeconomic rivalries sit alongside a longer-standing cinematic tradition of representing German characters as malfeasant. The geopolitical/geoeconomic contexts operate alongside well-known action–thriller generic traditions such as the individual performing against the odds. The film was very successful in terms of box-office receipts (US$138 million worldwide) and led to the development of a host of other movies that recycled the narrative structure of a hero trapped in a tight space overcoming apparently dire odds: *Under Siege* (1992), *Speed* (1994) and *Air Force One* (1997). The latter, as with *Die Hard* (1988), works geopolitically in the sense that the audience is given some contextual information regarding the background of the adversaries. In the case of *Air Force One* (1997), the US President has to defeat ex-Soviet terrorists who have taken over the presidential plane. As with other Hollywood productions including James Bond films such as *GoldenEye* (1995) and other like *The Peacemaker* (1997), the break up of the Soviet Union has provided a geopolitical backdrop to imagine new threats and enemies.

**Genre and Geopolitics: Hollywood, 9/11 and ‘National Security Cinema’**

The relationship between Hollywood and the Pentagon has arguably become more significant in the post-9/11 era. Shortly after the assaults on New York and Washington, President Bush’s advisor Karl Rove met with Hollywood executives to consider how the motion picture industry might contribute to the War on Terror (Lisle and Pepper 2005; Robb 2004; Valantin 2005). At the Beverly Hills summit, leading Hollywood
figures such as the chairman of the Motion Picture Association of America, Jack Valenti pledged their support and reaffirmed the significance of what James Der Derian had called the military-industrial-media-entertainment complex (Der Derian 2001; Stockwell 2005). Subsequently, a new post-9/11 generation of movies has materialised either examining the circumstances surrounding that fateful day (e.g. United 93 [2005] and World Trade Center [2006]) or have been deemed subsequently as being sympathetic portrayals of past and present military activity (e.g. We Were Soldiers [2002] and Tears of the Sun [2003]). Other films such as Collateral Damage (2001), Buffalo Soldiers (2002) and The Quiet American (2002) had their release dates delayed because production companies feared that the storylines might be now judged by audiences to be ‘insensitive’ even though they were all produced before the attacks on New York and Washington (Dodds and Hatfield 2008; Weber 2006).

The emerging cinematic landscapes of post-9/11 America is deserving of further reflection but this is complicated by the fact that, ‘some films seem to encourage the warrior spirit, while still others question it, and others seem to avoid it altogether’ (Dixon 2007, 1). Hollywood studios are in the entertainment business first and foremost and thus as some film scholars have contended, no more than 5–10% of the films produced (total 400) will have overtly political themes such as war and terror (Giglio 2005, 18). Some films and associated generic categories succeed at the box office while others such as Buffalo Soldiers (2003), which had its release date delayed twice failed because audiences did not want to watch a story about some opportunistic and badly behaved American soldiers based in late Cold War Berlin. The film only grossed US$354,000 compared to US$86 million for Tears of the Sun (2003), which was widely released and publicised within the USA and beyond.

If we are to begin to address how Hollywood studios and audiences have responded to the post-9/11 era, at least four dimensions are worthy of further discussion. First, existing cinematic traditions both American and overseas have been revisited in the light of those 2001 attacks on New York and Washington. Having been compared to movies, it was perhaps unsurprising that many individuals and institutions turned to film in a bid to make sense of contemporary developments. How are we to understand the decision by the Pentagon to privately screen the film Battle of Algiers produced in 1966 by the renowned filmmaker, Giles Pontecorvo? In August 2003, the US Directorate for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict at the Pentagon used the film to illustrate the problems facing the American occupation of Iraq. The parallels with the French occupation in Algeria during the 1950s were explicitly acknowledged and according to one flyer, viewers were invited to consider,

How to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas. Children shoot soldiers at point–blank range. Women plant bombs in cafes. Soon the entire
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Arab population builds up to a mad fervor. Sounds familiar? The French have a plan. It succeeds tactically, but fails strategically. To understand why, come to a rare showing of this film. (Kaufman 2003)

Unsurprisingly, critics of the Iraqi invasion used this screening as evidence that the resistance to the American-led occupation was not only exposing earlier optimistic pronouncements by President Bush but also revealing the flawed imperial ambitions of the USA. The subsequent scandals associated with prisoner torture, rape, shootings and extraordinary rendition added further poignancy to this cinematic connection, which portrays the savage brutality of the French security forces in colonial Algiers (see Stone 2007, 151–164).

In other areas of America’s international relations, academic critics have turned to films produced in the 1990s to reconsider the role of country as a global/imperial superpower in the post-9/11 era. The film Independence Day (1996) has attracted particular attention in this regard (Webber 2005). Consider, for instance, the speech by fictional President Thomas Whitmore on the eve of an attack by aliens:

> We can’t be consumed by our petty differences anymore. We will be united in our common interests. And should we win the day the 4th July will no longer be [remembered as] an American holiday, but as the day the world declared that we will not go quietly into the night. We will not vanish without a fight. We’re going to live on. We’re going to survive. Today we celebrate our independence day. (cited in Davies 2005, 398)

Endorsed by President Clinton and even his Republican presidential rival Senator Bob Dole, Independence Day (1996) was extremely successful and became the 17th highest grossing movie in all time. The movie attracted the attention of IR scholars because of the role that the USA is given with regards to global leadership and military superiority.

Moreover, as Davies (2005, 400) notes, the film presents a highly idealised vision of the national community (as amplified by the interaction between the characters played by the actors Jeff Goldblum and Will Smith) working together in order to defeat alien forces threatening the world. But this cinematic vision, in order to be effective in terms of developing a narrative, also relies on a series of stereotypes (regarding Jews and African Americans), cultural and sexual others (the only openly gay character does not survive long) and strategic silences over the problematic relationship between the USA and other parts of the world including the Global South. However, the denouement of the film replicates the generic tradition of the disaster movie (see Keane 2001).

Second, the commercial success of documentary films within and beyond the US market is also noteworthy. Documentaries, unlike action thriller and disaster movies, attempt to engage the viewer directly (usually without the intervention of actors) and seek to present a portrayal of the world as it really is. The three most successful documentaries in terms of box-office
receipts were produced in the aftermath of the 2001 attacks. Michael Moore’s award winning *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) was a scathing critique of the Bush administration and its relationship to allies such as Saudi Arabia alongside the occupation of Iraq (Toplin 2006; Weber 2007). The purpose of the documentary was to not only expose the mendacity of the administration but also to prevent it from securing a second term of office. Notwithstanding the international recognition the film received, President Bush did prevail in the 2004 elections. *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) made a star out of the 2000 presidential loser and later Nobel Peace Prize Winner, Al Gore. The latter’s PowerPoint presentation seeks, with some justification, to persuade others that the greatest threat facing the USA and the world is global climate change rather than international terrorism. Despite President Bush’s rejection of the Kyoto Protocol, states and cities across the USA appear to be taking the issue seriously including the Governor of California, former movie actor Arnold Schwarznegger. Finally, the *March of the Penguins* (2005) also provides a salutary warning about how global climate change can and does affect even the remotest of continents and its inhabitants. As Eckersley (2007, 440) has usefully noted,

There is an uncanny connection between these films. Moore’s documentary takes aim at the Bush administration handling of the WMD and terrorist threats (which has landed it in a quagmire in Iraq). *An Inconvenient Truth* directs attention to a bigger global threat that the Bush administration fails to confront seriously. And since temperatures are rising faster at the poles than the Equator, our marching penguins are on the front line of climate change.

There is unquestionably evidence that audiences are prepared to watch films that are critical in an overt way of contemporary US foreign and energy policies.

Third, the role of fantasy has been highlighted in many commercially successful movies made in the aftermath of September 2001. Films such as Peter Jackson’s trilogy *The Lords of the Rings* (2001, 2002, and 2003) and others including those popularising older confrontations between the Greeks and Persians (e.g. *300* released in 2007) have been hugely successful in the USA and elsewhere including Britain. However, in the case of *300* (2007), the film has attracted more critical attention from both the Greek and Iranian governments, which complained that the dramatisation of the Battle of Thermopylae is one-dimensional and culturally offensive. One reason for the popularity of such fantasy films in the USA might be because they reduce complex situations to simple moral categories involving good and evil. As Anker (2005) has noted, with reference to the US television media, the most significant interpretative disposition to emerge following those attacks on New York and Washington was fundamentally melodramatic. As she opines,

I will suggest that comprehension of the attack was generated through the news footage that situated the United States as a morally powerful victim in a
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position that required it to transform victimisation into heroic retributive action for crisis resolution . . . I contend that melodrama is not merely a type of film or literary genre, but a pervasive cultural code that structures the presentation of political discourse and national identity in contemporary America. (Anker 2005, 23)

The fantasy film, as with other genres, such as the action thriller works by using melodrama to identify ideas and values associated with truth and justice, while demarcating the boundaries between good and evil (see Nexon and Neumann 2006). As Damon Young (2007) has noted,

Throughout 300, themes of close masculine collaboration are lionised. And as today we are routinely told stories of a ‘war on tyranny’, where civilization fights against an ‘axis of evil’, perhaps it is easy for us to feel at home amongst the sweaty, gregarious Spartans . . . this classical vision evokes familiar principles of right and wrong, good and bad. As Greeks, the Spartans represent all the straightforward values cherished by the West. (p. 176)

As with the enormously popular series of films associated with Star Wars (1977), conflict is represented as both just and necessary in the struggle to defeat the forces of evil (or in the case of Darth Vader and his storm troopers – the empire and the ‘dark side’).

Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, there has been a renewed interest in what one might call ‘warrior politics’ and associated movie releases, which celebrate the endeavours of American soldiers (Dalby 2008). In his Pulitzer Prize winning account of the events leading up to 9/11, Lawrence Wright has claimed that the warrior politics films were one way of showing that the USA had the capacity to engage militarily with enemies and, if necessary, endure substantial losses (Wright 2007, 187). Two films such as We Were Soldiers (2002) and Tears of the Sun (2003) can be used to illuminate this trend further. On the one hand a film such as We Were Soldiers (2002) has been interpreted as highly significant in recasting the involvement of the USA in Vietnam. Mel Gibson’s portrayal of Colonel Hal Moore played a part in ensuring that the film was a box-office success and this recasting of Vietnam as a more honourable episode in recent American history is all the more significant when one considers that the country is embroiled in Afghanistan. In the most significant part of the film, Moore delivers a speech to his troops prior to their departure for Vietnam:

I can’t promise you that I will bring you all home alive, but this I swear: I will be the first one to set foot on the field, and I will be the last to step off. And I will leave no one behind. Dead, or alive, we all come home together.

While critics were divided over the artistic and geopolitical merits of the film, Moore’s leadership qualities and ethical sensitivity remains a powerful presence in the film. It is arguably the most positive Hollywood-produced representation of the Vietnam conflict since the John Wayne film, The Green Beret (1968).
Events following September 2001 demonstrated that President Bush was only too willing to deploy US armed forces in a series of overseas locations, including Afghanistan and Iraq. Despite the global unpopularity of the 2003 Iraqi invasion, President Bush was still reelected by American voters a year later. *Tears of the Sun* (2003) explores humanitarianism and uses the generic conventions of the action thriller to convey how a few individuals can overcome the odds against overwhelming forces. Starring Bruce Willis as a US soldier charged with saving a female American doctor, he later decides to save an accompanying group of refugees from certain slaughter by renegade forces in civil war-torn Nigeria. The film, according to one academic critic, ‘is ultimately a narrative about redemption and atonement, weaving the tale of a rescue mission “into the heart of Africa” together with a story of the moral conversion of its protagonists’ (Behnke 2006, 945). Although not noted within the film, the shadow of Rwanda and the lack of US intervention during the genocide of 1994 hover over this production. Indeed, the opening scenes of the film feature fictional television coverage portraying a country wracked by indiscriminate violence often directed at women and children. The end of the mission becomes apparent when Willis’ diminished group of soldiers are represented as having completed their mission because the refugees alongside the American doctor reached the apparent safety of the border with Cameroon. With the help of US air power, the renegade forces pursuing this group were exterminated. As Behnke (2006, 945) concluded with some justification, ‘their decision to bring the African refugees to safety and to risk their own lives doing so turns them into ethical warriors.’

There is clearly a great deal more that could be said about post-9/11 cinema but for the moment it is worth reemphasising a number of facets worthy of more sustained analysis. As these aforementioned examples exemplify, film can dramatise particular events and make visible some events at the expense of others. Movies can and do make connections with past events such as World War II, the Cold War, the 1991 Gulf War and Vietnam. One reason for such a connection might be to aid and abet the audience in terms of situating the longer-term significance of the War on Terror and its relationship to President Bush’s oft stated claim to be saving Western civilisation itself. However, as Michel Moore demonstrated, it is also possible to produce films that are sharply critical of prevailing American foreign and security policies. Finally, we should not neglect the importance of film genre in shaping narrative structure/plot development alongside the marketing and consumption of particular types of films judged to be apposite to the period in question. It is as interesting to consider why some films ‘fail’ in the box office such as *Buffalo Soldiers* (2003) while others ‘succeed’ such as *Black Hawk Down* (2001), which grossed US$172 million worldwide.
Films, Audiences and Reception

One of the really striking features about a great deal of the existing academic corpus on geopolitics/IR and film is the complete absence of audiences and reception. In other words, there is a great deal of detailed textual and visual analysis of particular films on offer without any corresponding attention to how people watching those movies (whether in the cinema or at home on DVD) make sense of them. This strikes me as a major lacuna and may well be a reflection in part of the intellectual legacy of film studies, which was deeply influenced by ideas of spectatorship and the auteur in terms of analysing meanings within films. However, as Jancovich and Fare (2003, 6) reflect,

More recently, however, there has been a growing interest in reception, and it can be divided into three areas. The first concerns the audience as a market, while the second concerns the inter-textual contexts within which the reception of a film takes place, and is therefore concerned with the ways in which films are framed for audiences. The third and final area is the ethnography of film audiences, or work that examines audiences’ own accounts of their relationship to film.

Each of the elements identified by Jancovich and Fare (2003) deserves further, if brief, elaboration. The development of the so-called ‘blockbuster’ film has had important consequences for movie production and the audience as a market. With the release of films such as Star Wars (1977), a new generation of films began to emerge that laid emphasis on fast paced, visceral and spectacular productions. Plots often proceed through spectacular action and indeed the plot may be of minimal significance (Bordwell 2006). The existence of so-called ‘intertextual contexts’ is also significant and frequently commented on by film fans and critics alike. There are at least two ways to develop this point and the first would acknowledge that audiences including critics such as Jean Baudrillard described real-world events such as the September 2001 attacks by using film references even mentioning specific genres (Baudrillard 2003). The disaster movie, such as The Towering Inferno (1974), in particular, has been frequently been used to communicate a sense of the destruction and horror of 9/11. In another context, films often get interpreted with reference to other productions and generic conventions. For example, the film Blood Diamond (2006), which depicts the violence attached to the exploitation of the diamond trade in Africa and beyond, was frequently compared and contrasted with other productions such as The Constant Gardner (2005) and its unflattering portrayal of the pharmaceutical industry in Africa. Both films attempt to address corporate corruption alongside the exploitation of vulnerable communities in Africa and touch on Western complicity.

The final area concerning the ‘ethnography of film audiences’ is particularly pertinent and scholars in film studies have used a host of research methodologies, including interviews, focus groups, surveys and
online forums (see Barker and Brooks 1998; Dodds and Hatfield 2008; Erb 1998; Staiger 2005). Due to considerations of space, I will highlight just one area of potential future research and this considers the role of online forums such as the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). On accessing the IMDb (http://www.imdb.com), one is presented with an opportunity to consider the possible effect of popular films on individuals and interpretative communities. Research by Dodds (2006) and van Zoonen (2007) has used this online facility to contemplate how and with what consequences people respond to films. According to Gamson (1992), three types of resources are routinely used by people to discern politics in the most general sense – the media, popular wisdom and experiential knowledge (i.e. stories and experiences learned directly or via the experiences of others such as family members). Films, as van Zoonen (2007, 532) recognised, offer an opportunity to consider how all three of these resources are utilised and the ‘personalised and linear narrative that is typical of Hollywood film and popular television in general is capable of evoking intense audience investments.’

Sites such as the IMDb are hugely popular and films such as the latest James Bond film, Casino Royale (2006) have attracted, 94,000 voters (each giving the film a mark out of 10) by November 2007 and hundreds of contributions to the merits or otherwise of the latest in a long line of 007 movies. By carefully reading the contributions/comments, one can begin to chart the range of audience reactions to certain films. In the case of Black Hawk Down (2001), these can vary from those who interpreted it as a crude propaganda movie to others who took pleasure in the dramatic elements of the production (see Carter and McCormick 2005). Consider the following two IMDb comments, which are reproduced in their original form:

Ridley Scott is a great film maker but in BHD [Black Hawk Down] he misses the mark completely, what was he thinking, teaming with J Bruckheimer. The film is a bizarre mess of green photography and non-acting, with a poor script. I’ve seen more interesting videos on liveleak Unless you are a fanboy of George W bringing a plastic turkey into Iraq for a troop photo op its better to avoid this embarassment. Scott cut a deal with the Pentagon in order to use 2 Blackhawks in trade for a propaganda puff piece. This is not much more than a recruiting poster masquerading as a documentary.  

Alternatively,

Black Hawk is quite simply the best movie of the year (2001) and the best war movie I have seen. It’s an astonishing achievement that puts you right in the middle of the hellish horror faced by U.S. soldiers in Somalia in 1993. Every explosion startled me and filled me with fear, every gunshot felt like it was whizzing right by me, every mistake or unforeseen event had me on the edge of my seat with stress and anger. I felt as though I had been transported to Mogadishu for 2.5 hours and plumped in the middle of the ambush faced by
the 100 or so U.S. Rangers and Delta Force Troops as they set about to capture
a Somalian warlord responsible for stealing Red Cross food shipments in his
starvation-ravaged country. I really felt this movie, it was tangible to me; the
confusion, the fear, the sense of dislocation and horror the soldiers must have
faced. At the end I was emotionally and mentally drained.\(^6\)

There are, of course, a series of limitations regarding online commentary
even if some scholars have pored over hundreds of coded threads and
contributions. While this public forum and others clearly attract people
who willingly and knowingly post their comments for a wider audience,
it is not clear what other purpose these comments perform and thus further
online and offline research would be invaluable for better understanding
the significance of these contributions.

What is clear, however, is that contributors tend to approach films such
as *Black Hawk Down* (2001) in a number of distinct ways – some simply
describe the events portrayed in the film while others use the film to
reflect on contemporary events such as the US occupation of Iraq. Moreover,
as van Zoonen (2007, 536) noted in her analysis of a range of productions
including *Wag the Dog* (1997) and *All the President’s Men* (1976), other
contributors used the films to initiate a normative discussion about other
ways of conducting international relations and US domestic politics. In
their research on American, British and Dutch student reactions to the
film *Three Kings* (1999), which was held in 2002–2003, a number of contrib-
utors mentioned how this film influenced their views of a proposed invasion
to topple the Saddam Hussein regime because of its sympathetic portrayal
of ordinary Iraqis, and in particular, Kurds (Kooijman et al. 2004). However,
the study also suggested that there were profound differences of opinion
over the portrayals of race and racism, Iraq and American motivations for
Operation Desert Storm (1991) and the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

One element not noted, however, with regard to online commentary
(of the non-student variety as discussed above) is the sheer number of
contributors who often devote extraordinary energies to exposing plotline
flaws or speculate on their favourite moments in a film. As students of fan
studies would recognise, there is a great deal of evidence of obsessive
behaviour and devotion to particular films and genres such as the James
Bond series, without any commitment to engage in ‘serious’ geopolitical
issues such as humanitarian intervention, genocide and/or the War on
Terror (on fan cultures see Jenkins 1992). This, in turn, can lead some
other IMDb contributors to engage with other users and raise questions about
particular geopolitical and artistic judgements proffered on the forum. For
example, it is very common for a threaded discussion, sometimes in a
matter of hours if not minutes, to turn into a frank exchange of views
about say the righteousness of the US-led War on Terror. In other words,
the online conversations that people have with one another can metamor-
phose from the apparently trivial (e.g. the exposure of a plot flaw) to a
passionate debate about contemporary global politics.
Online forums have thus provided a platform for some contributors at least to interpret, represent and perform certain understandings of the contemporary geopolitical condition. As emphasised earlier, online forums do provide insights into how fans negotiate specific films and generic conventions ranging from plot, character development, special effects, locations and themes. However, as other authors have demonstrated from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, other methodologies such as questionnaires and focus groups involving cinema goers are effective in terms of better understanding how viewers make sense global processes such as climate change. As Lowe et al. (2006, 453) conclude with reference to their research on audience reactions to *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004),

A critical finding is that some viewers of the film expressed strong motivation to act on climate change; more so than prior to seeing the film even if ‘Overall the film, like government policy, sends mixed messages . . . the individuals who participated in this study do not feel that they have access to information on what action they can take or the opportunity in their daily lives to individually and collectively implement change.

**Conclusions**

This article has sought to provide an overview of some of the research being carried out on film by geopolitical and other scholars in disciplines such as IRs and Security Studies (Lisle 2003). With regard to the latter, there has been a determined effort to explore popular media such as film and popular visual cultures more generally. Unlike programmed television (often punctuated either by commercial advertisements and associated vagaries of watching while socialising with others), the medium of cinema offers the possibility of producing a linear narrative without interruption especially when most people pay money to watch a film at the cinema (Monaco 2000). Further research might consider how and with what consequences audiences respond to films whether in the aftermath of 11 September 2001 or not.

There is also a real need to critically evaluate contemporary cinema, especially of the ilk produced by Hollywood given its expressions of support for the Bush administration. As Guy Westwell (2006, 115) has concluded with reference to the genre of war cinema,

> . . . [I]t is important to be suspicious of Hollywood’s cultural imagination of war in which a myopic view of the past – predicted on a limited point of view, a prejudicial and nationalistic construction of cultural and ideological otherness, a reconstructed masculine capability, and a profound nostalgia for a mythologized version of World War II – has become justification for war in the present.

I would not dissent from this conclusion. However, it is also important to recognise that newly released films are beginning to address more troubling aspects of the US geopolitical and legal responses to 9/11. Films such as *Redacted* (2007) will generate much debate and some audiences will be
more moved than others. It remains to be seen, so to say, whether these films that tackle the ‘dark side’ of the US-led ‘War on Terror’ will be commercial successes particularly in the USA.

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**Short Biography**

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**Notes**

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1 Olive Stone’s film *Salvador* (1986) was nominated for two Oscars and *Three Kings* (1999) grossed over US$100 million worldwide. Information on box-office receipts can be found at [http://www.boxofficemojo.com](http://www.boxofficemojo.com)

2 This article concentrates on a select number of films originating from Hollywood-based studios in the main. Hollywood is both a physical location and a metonym for the activities of film studios and production companies including the largest such as MGM, Paramount, Sony and Time-Warner (see Scott 2005). I am mindful of the fact that there are many other cinematic traditions that deserve further attention from geographical scholars such as the Latin American, Iranian, Lebanese and others heralding from the Global South (Bose 2006; Kenez 2000; Khatib 2006; Kumar 2006; Noble 2005; Power 2001, 2004; Sadr 2006).

3 George Bush’s so-called *Top Gun* was, even at the time, lampooned and mocked by some critics including Hollywood actors, such as Sean Penn. Later, comedians and musicians, such as Stephen Colbert and Neil Young, have also ridiculed his attempt to visually manipulate the progress of military operations in Iraq.

4 Secretary of State William Cohen later presented Jack Valenti with a citizenship award.


**References**

Have you seen any good films lately?


