

KEY TRENDS IN AMERICAN FILM

Session Six
Post-9/11 Cinema

Department of Film and Audiovisual Culture
Dr. Richard Nowell

Agenda

14:20–15:50

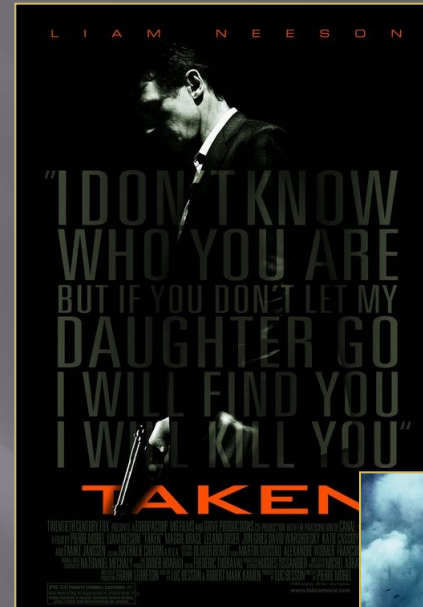
Screening: *Taken* (2008)

15:50–16:05

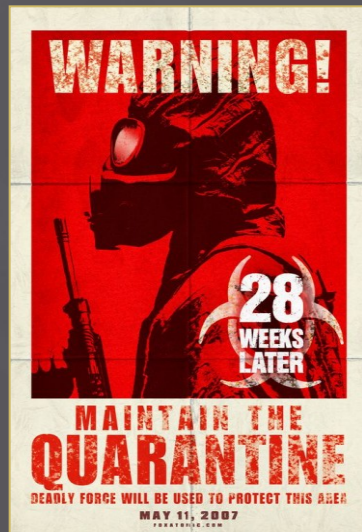
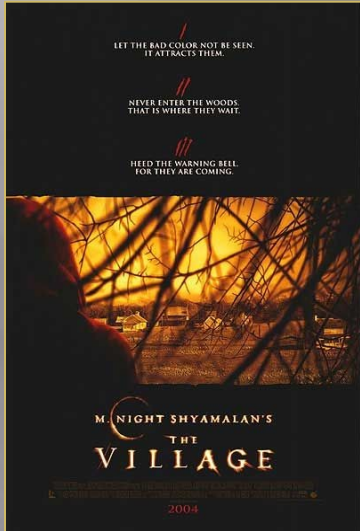
Break

16:05–17:20

Post-9/11 Cinema



Post-9/11 Cinema



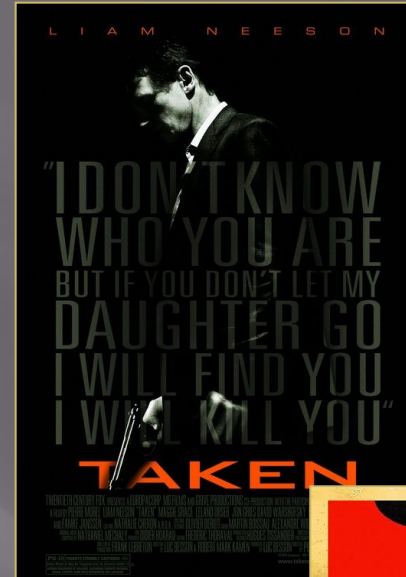
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Major “Post-9/11” discourses

The pitfalls of positing a Kellner-
esque vision of “post 9/11” cinema

Pro-Bush-Cheney “Post-9/11”
Cinema

Against trauma: reconsidering the
forces shaping post-9/11 cinema



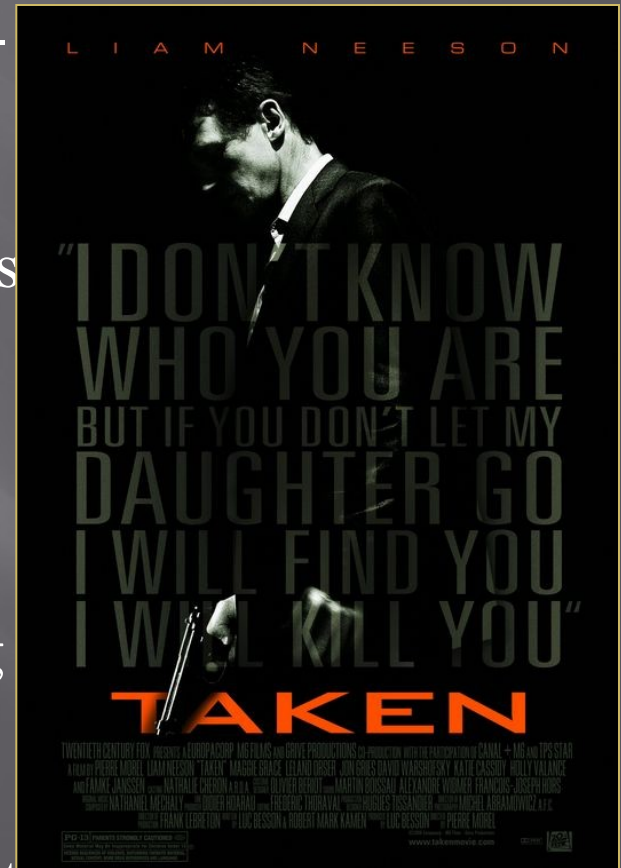
Screening Questions: *Taken* (2008)

In what ways does *Taken* comment on Post-9/11 America?

Does this film take up any specific positions on issues relating to the US's international role in the 21st century?

Does the film offer a coherent allegory of the Bush-Cheney years or more a scattering of views?

How does this film fit into Kellner's portrait of post-9/11 cinema?



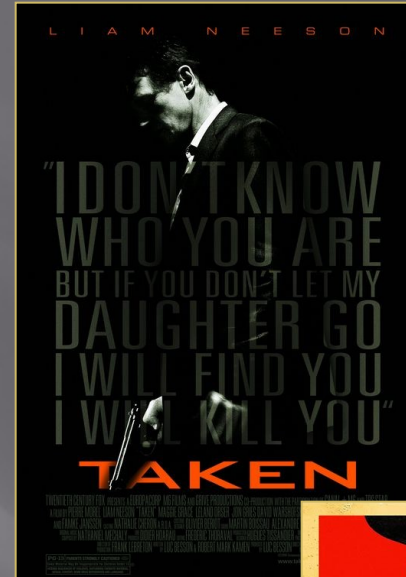
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Based on both Kellner's chapter and your general knowledge what were the major socio-political topics that characterized post 9/11 discourse?

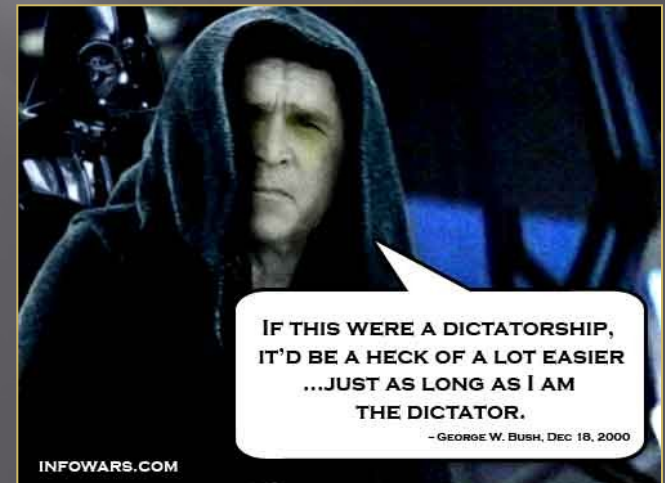
The Structure of Post-9/11 Discourse

Extends beyond 9/11 itself to become a synonym for Bush-Cheney era

Cluster of related discourses related to US foreign and domestic policies

Coalesced around issues of State power; of questions about democracy

1. Vulnerability and Aggression
2. Transparency, reach, secrecy,
3. Violence, surveillance, preemption



The Cornerstones of Post 9/11 Discourse

Alleged election fraud/Coup

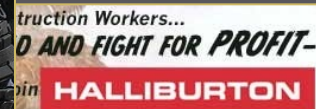
Causes and Events of 9/11

Invasion and occupation Iraq and Afghanistan

Escalation of military-industrial-complex extending to government

Use of torture and kidnapping

Dubious domestic surveillance and detention policies



The Post-9/11 (Cinematic) World: Or looking for new academic publishing opportunities!

Scholars doggedly looked for relationships between these topics and American films

Posited “Post-9/11 cinema”, “cinema in the age of terrorism”, “Bush-Cheney-era cinema”

1. Explicit Meanings

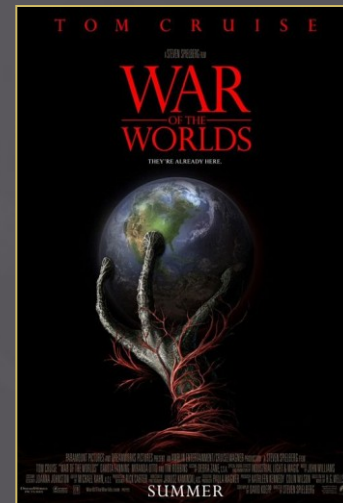
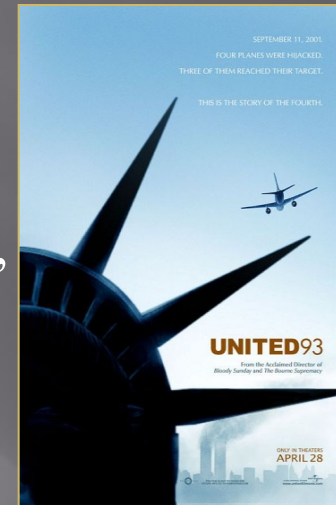
Topical and historical films

2. Implicit Meanings

Films as allegories

3. Involuntary Meanings

Films embodying supposed spirit of the times



What impression does Kellner give of Hollywood's use of "post-9/11" topics?

What types of approach does Kellner elide or overlook?

Do you see any problems with any of Kellner's claims?

Kellner: The Cathartic Nature of a (supposed) Left-Liberal Consensus

Kellner exemplifies some general tendencies in studies of “post-9/11 cinema”

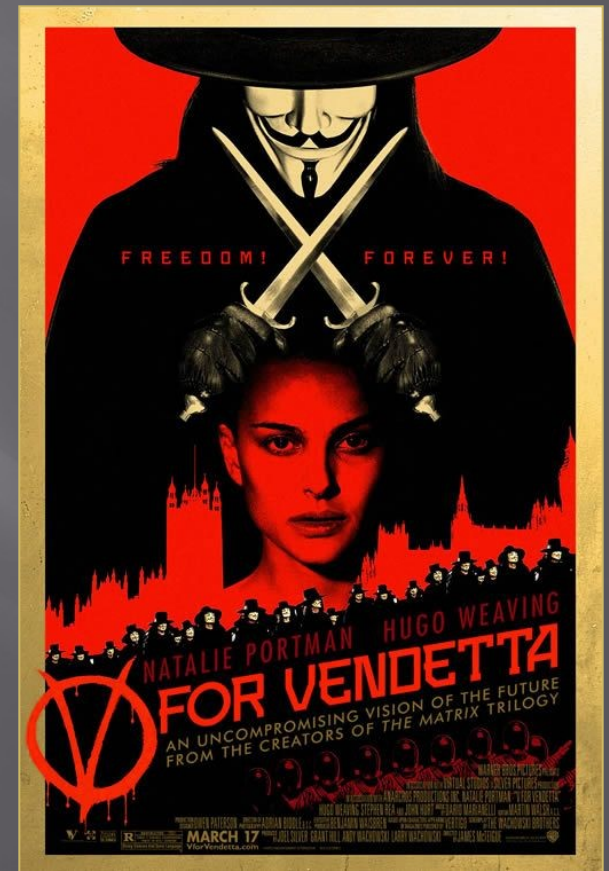
Pervasive and unilateral impact on filmmakers and society: working through trauma together

Wholesale subversive activity

Like himself, filmmakers were so outraged by Bush-Cheney years that it shaped their work

Liberal Hollywood Speaks Out

Underscores Kellner’s own outrage by suggesting universal condemnation



The Case of *V for Vendetta*

What post-9/11 discourses are mobilized in this film?

What positions does this film take up on these topics?

Does this film also offer a coherent allegory on the Bush-Cheney years? Or is its engagement more patchy?

V for Vendetta: Left-liberal Critique and/or Celebratory 9/11 Conspiracy Allegory

Offers temporally/spatially displaced allegory of Left-liberal perspective on Bush-Cheney years

Combines Left-liberal critique, with more alarmist conspiratorial ideas circulated during the period

Draconian acts and corruption engineered on the back of staged terrorism used to generate fear

Police state, fundamentalism, media manipulation

A hired gun comes back to overthrow the state; recuperates conspiratorial Bin Laden/CIA link



The Village: Two Extremes - In defense of Bush-Cheney or Promoting Conspiracy?

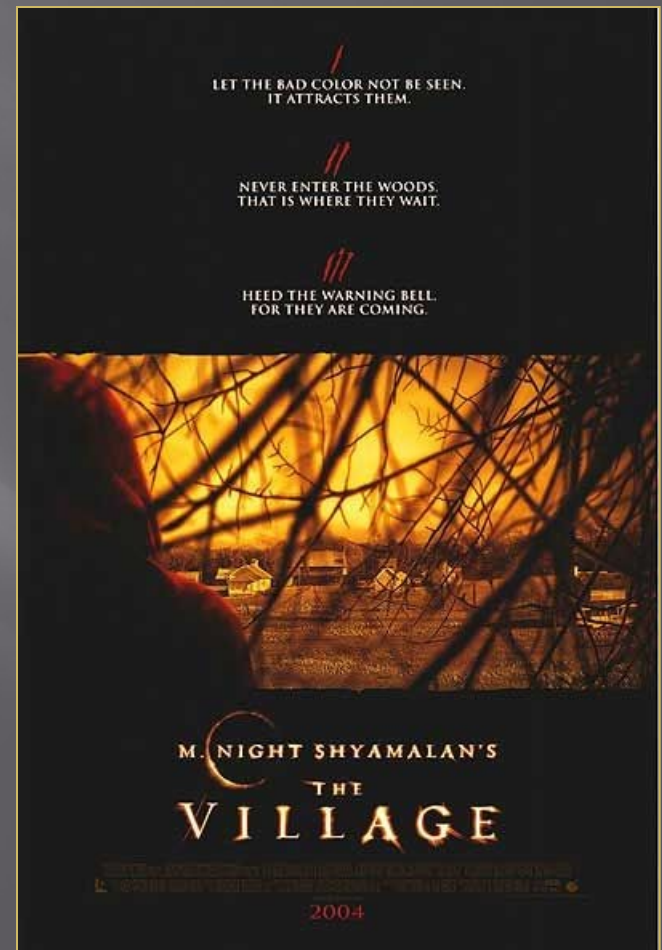
Traumatized baby-boomers protect an enclosed community by inventing monsters

Stephen Prince reads film as a sympathetic allegory of Bush-Cheney policies

Exaggeration of outside threat serves to build a sense of community and maintain order

However, this film also utilizes and spotlights the darkest of anti-Bush-Cheney of positions

Film suggests that threat is fabricated as an alibi for oppression, control, and despotism



Jason Middleton, *Hostel*, and the Endorsement of Preemptive Violence

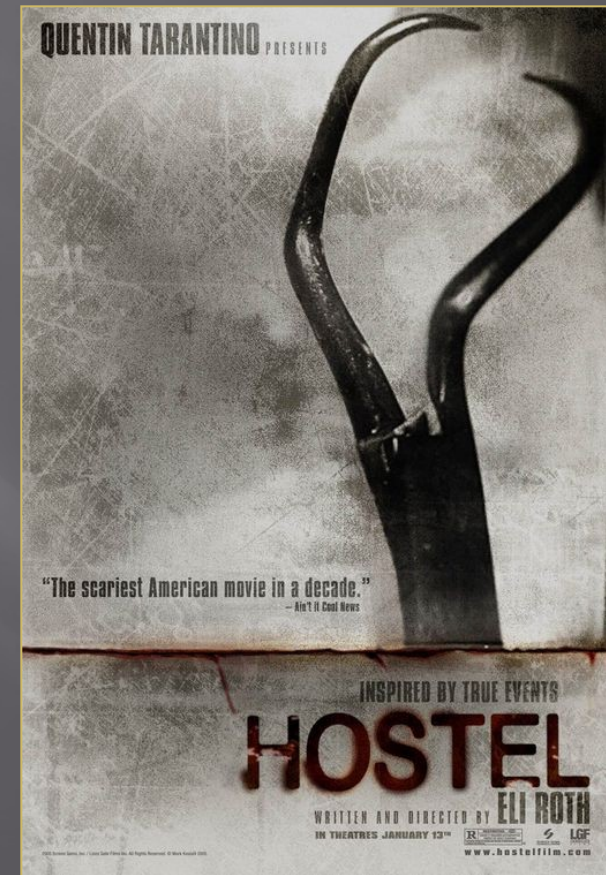
Yet, there was no consensus among filmmakers

Story of American students encountering an international torture ring in Slovakia

Initially offers critique of US cultural insensitivity, privilege, and arrogance

Film recuperates US privilege through hero's stalking and killing of his torturer

Film endorses neo-conservative position of US violent pre-emptive intervention overseas



The Dark Knight: Recuperating Bush-Cheney as altruistic pragmatism

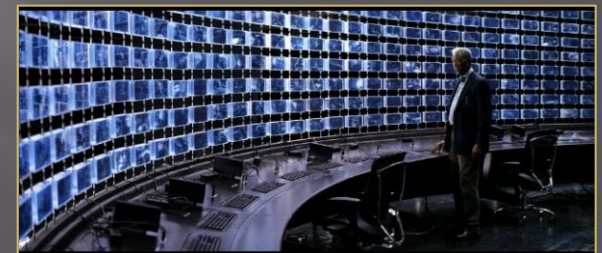
Lionizes: Privileged classes, military-industrial complex, vigilantism, hyper-masculine displays, torture, surveillance, myth-making

Frames threat as:

Anarchistic, apolitical, irrational, sadistic, targeted at the people not institutions

Casts full range of Bush-Cheney conduct as a necessary evil, and as knowing martyrdom

Criticism is treated like a straw man, safety is safe in the hands of the establishment



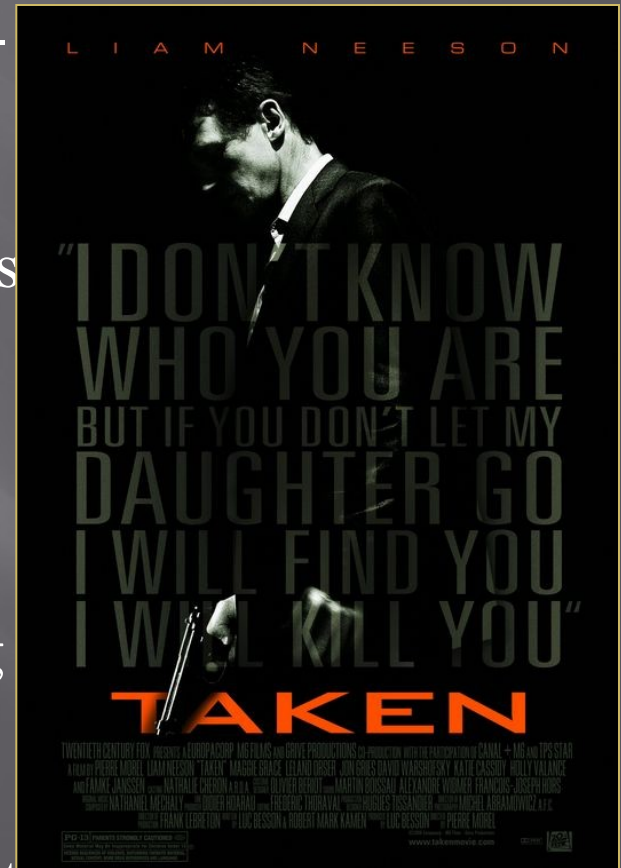
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Taken: Personalizing the Political?

Promotional allegory of Bush-Cheney positions

Innocent Americans threatened by globalization:
covert paramilitaries/technology is the solution

Valorizes

US interventionism overseas, surveillance,
torture, preemptive violence, private contractors

Demonizes

US liberals, French bureaucrats, Post-communist
immoral capitalism, Middle-Eastern Money



The Limits of Trauma Theory: Different understandings of Post-9/11 cinema

Scholars typically explained Post-9/11 cinema as a byproduct of a nation traumatized by attack and by the troubling responses of its government

This position is presaged on the existence of a critical cinema, and on a Left-liberal consensus supposedly pervading American culture

But these critical films existed alongside pro-Bush-Cheney tracts like *Taken*; we cannot account for these by invoking ideas about trauma

1. Not all filmmakers were anti-Bush-Cheney: was this personal politics?
2. Overtly critical films underperformed: was this product differentiation?
3. US was polarized, were these films made more for Conservatives?
4. Was this about redeeming US in the eyes of key overseas markets?
5. Were such films about currying favor with the US State Dept?

In Sum: Chasing Shadows (?)

The striking nature of 9/11 and the events that unfolded in its wake led scholars (hungrily) to find and explain their effects on film

The assumption that these developments would change things led to some questionable suggestions, such as Kellner's about *Star Wars*

Some films thematized erosion of democracy /civil liberties, state power, military-industrial complex, US roles overseas, preemptive violence

Yet, there was also a tendency among scholars to over-emphasize acts of critique, in order to stress the traumatic nature of 9/11 and its aftermath

By contrast, some filmmakers clearly used cinema to voice support for the Bush-Cheney administration's domestic and international responses