

37 Toplin (2006) makes a similar distinction and has a chapter on the partiated and engaged documentary tradition in which Moore's work should be situated and interpreted (pp. 71ff).

38 On Hurricane Katrina and the Bush presidency, see Douglas Kellner, "Hurricane spectacles and the crisis of the Bush presidency," *Flow*, 3, 3 (October 2005) at www.jot.communication.utexas.edu/flow/?jot=view&cid=1049; and Henry Giroux, *Stormy Weather: Katrina and the Politics of Disposability* (Boulder: Paradigm Press, 2006).

Hollywood Political Critiques of the Bush-Cheney Regime *From Thrillers to Fantasy and Satire*

An exceptional number of films of the 2000s directly or indirectly launched cinematic weapons at the Bush-Cheney administration. It was almost as if a film had to take a dig at the Republican administration and its policies if it was to be taken seriously, even as popular entertainment. *Pirates of the Caribbean 3: At World's End* (2007), for instance, opens ominously with authorities intoning that *habeas corpus* has been suspended, martial law imposed, and the outcasts are to be summarily executed – a chilling reminder of Bush-Cheney administration “justice.” Scores of scruffy people are being hanged, presumably without trial, because they have been accused of consorting with pirates. This is an obvious coding of pirates as terrorists and of the established regime as repressive and murderous. The *Pirates of the Caribbean* films thus have a slightly subversive bent, as they sympathize with outsiders and attack established authorities.

Another popular entertainment, *Transformers* (2007), a story of alien robotic forces invading the US, mocks George W. Bush himself. A twangy Texan voice blurts out that he knows what the invading forces are and “we know what to do with ‘em,” when in fact he has no idea about the robots or what to do about their threats to the country. The Bush figure’s buffoonish character is emphasized when he asks one of his female assistants “could you wrangle me up some ding dongs, darlin’?” which alludes to Bush’s philistine food habits. The woman complains to an associate that she didn’t take a government job to carry out such dumb requests. Throughout, an official announces the president is taking decisive measures to deal with the invasion, which is obviously hot air and empty spin.

The X-Files: I Want to Believe (2008) presents prominently displayed pictures on the wall of George W. Bush and J. Edgar Hoover when Mulder

and Scully return to Washington FBI headquarters after many years of retirement. The camera zooms in for a close-up of Bush, as the eerie *X-Files* theme plays. A sharp discordant note coincides with a cut to a wide shot that catches the portraits of Bush and Hoover, linking the two as frightening figures in US history.¹

Harold and Kumar Escape from Guantanamo (2008) has two post-ethnic stoners arrested on a fake terrorism charge and sent to the infamous prison in Guantanamo, Cuba, from which they escape and engage in a cross-country tour to exonerate themselves. They are pursued by fanatical and utterly incompetent Homeland Security officials. En route, they encounter no less than George W. Bush himself, with whom they smoke some weed and discover that underneath we are all humans with the same desires and needs (and Daddy problems).

Satirical and critical cinematic slams at Bush were made until the end of his presidency. Peter Segal's satire of the spy genre and popular TV series *Get Smart* (2008) has the super-secret spy agency Control in fear of getting shut down by the ultra-controlling vice-president (read Dick Cheney). When we see the president, he is reading to school children (as Bush famously did on the morning of the 9/11 attacks). He asks what the vice-president has said about issues on which decisions are needed, not having a clue himself about what is going on. He is seen laughing inanely during the disruption of a classical music concert at the Los Angeles Disney Music Center, where Maxwell Smart (Steve Carell) and company prevent a nuclear bomb explosion. And, as I indicate below, even the satirical *The Simpsons: The Movie* (2007), based on the popular TV series, cannot resist taking shots at the current Republican regime, as well as Arnold Schwarzenegger.

In chapter 2, I discussed how some Hollywood political thrillers initially responded to the 9/11 attacks in largely apolitical or conservative fashion. In this chapter, by contrast, I argue that certain Hollywood political thrillers offer barely disguised allegorical critiques of the Bush-Cheney regime, ranging from Jonathan Demme's 2004 remake of *The Manchurian Candidate* and the *Bourne* trilogy films (2002, 2004, 2007) to Stephen Gaghan's *Syriana* (2005), which critically engages the complexity of global politics, and the ways that US oil corporations, and intelligence and government agencies, intervene in the politics of the region, often in a destructive and utterly immoral fashion. To be sure, the anti-Bush-Cheney political thrillers are countered by other films that replicate and celebrate the administration's interventionist policies,

and so in this chapter I will also contrast conservative thrillers with more politically critical ones.

The Hollywood Political Thriller Against the Bush-Cheney Regime

The political thriller is often a conservative genre that idealizes government officials or intelligence agents pitted against Evil Enemies in a Manichean duality of Good vs. Evil, in which the country of the film's origin embodies goodness. There are exceptions to this, such as political conspiracy films of the 1970s like *The Parallax View*, *Three Days of the Condor*, and *All the President's Men*, which pitted good individuals against an evil state, reflecting public beliefs during the Vietnam and Nixon era that the state was a locus of corruption and wrongdoing (see Kellner and Ryan 1988). During the Bush-Cheney era, not surprisingly, the political thriller often took a left turn, pitting moral and righteous individuals against corrupt and depraved government officials.

Political thrillers often catch the fears, paranoia, and fantasies of their era. Richard Condon's 1950s novel *The Manchurian Candidate* and the 1962 film version could be read as a conservative-paranoid anti-communist Cold War thriller. The 1962 film showed evil Chinese commies brainwashing young Americans to turn them into diabolical tools of communist world domination. In the film's chilling finale, a young American brainwashed during the Korean War in Manchuria is poised to assassinate the presidential candidate so that the vice-president, whose wife is a communist agent, can ascend to the presidency.

Jonathan Demme's 2004 version of *The Manchurian Candidate*, by contrast, features Gulf War soldiers subjected to genetically engineered mind control experiments by a malevolent US corporate conglomerate named Manchurian Global, modeled after the Carlyle Group or Dick Cheney's Halliburton. The film opens in Kuwait in 1991 with a troop of ambushed GIs, then cuts to the present. A somewhat robotic Lt. Ben Marco (Denzel Washington) is lecturing to various groups on his war experiences and intoning that Sgt. Raymond Shaw (Liv Schreiber), with whom he served and who received a Medal of Honor, was "one of the finest and bravest men" he'd ever met. A deeply disturbed member of Marco's unit (Jeffrey Wright) appears at one of his lectures and tells him afterwards of his dreams about their Kuwait experience. These tell a very



Jonathan Demme's *Manchurian Candidate* has a malevolent US corporate conglomerate as villain.

different story about Shaw, whose fable of heroism has helped propel him on a sky-rocketing political career.

The film then cuts to a political convention, where Shaw's ambitious mother Eleanor (Meryl Streep) – a powerful senator and daughter of a major industrialist – is pushing the party toward accepting her son as vice-presidential candidate. Her opponent, Senator Tom Jordan (John Voight), is an internationalist liberal who opposes militarism and the cutting back of civil liberties in the US. He is an obvious Good Liberal standing up to policies readily identified with the Bush-Cheney administration. In the intricate plot, Eleanor Shaw gets the party to name her son as the vice-presidential candidate. In cahoots with Manchurian Global, she helps manipulate her son's brain implant to impel him to kill Jordan and his daughter (who was Shaw's only love interest, a relationship quashed by his mother).

Demme's *Manchurian Candidate* articulates fears about giant corporations getting out of control, as well as biotechnology and genetic engineering refashioning human beings and producing monsters. It also deals with Gulf War syndrome and how the military experiments on soldiers, suggesting shadowy and sinister connections between key players in the military-industrial complex and their allies in the government. Released in the election year of 2004, the film resonated as an anti-Bush political

thriller at a time when an unholy alliance between the military, corporate giants, and the Bush-Cheney administration was wreaking havoc throughout the world.² As J. Hoberman put it:

From the opening theme, Wyclef Jean's cover of the anti-Bush anthem "Fortunate son," through the references to "no-bid contracts," computerized voting and constant terror alerts, to the elaboration of a corporate conspiracy to install a "sleeper" as president, the remake is an unambiguous attack on the current American [Bush-Cheney] administration. Despite the Internet-fueled rumor that Meryl Streep was evoking Hillary Clinton for her character, her portrayal of the candidate's mother is far more evocative of Bush aide Karen Hughes – or perhaps even Bush's own mother who, according to Kevin Phillips's *American Dynasty*, had spoken of becoming First Lady as early as the late 1940s.³

The Manchurian Candidate received mixed reviews and did only middling box office, and hence probably had limited, if any, political effect. Like Condon's novel and the 1962 film, Demme's version had a strong sexist subtext in the over-the-top performance of Meryl Streep (Angela Lansbury won acclaim in the 1962 version playing the same dominating and incestuous mother). The mother is an overbearing, power-mad monster, wicked in the extreme. In both film versions the son is completely under her control and kills the good liberal senator and his daughter. In the 1962 version Janet Leigh plays an irrationally devoted and nurturing woman who nurses Marco back to health. In the 2004 version the woman who cares for Marcos is a government agent, intensifying the paranoia even further.

The 2004 *Manchurian Candidate* has a fantasy happy ending in which Marcos assassinates Shaw and his mother rather than the president, illustrating the film's conviction that there is a good and free person behind every socially constructed (in this case, genetically engineered) individual. The film articulates the fantasy that the malevolent political forces that have plotted to seize power can be painlessly removed – the Good US Republic can be restored. In 2004 this remained wishful thinking, as the Bad Guys continued their rule of infamy when the Bush-Cheney-Rove Gang stole yet another election (see Miller 2005; Fittrakis and Wasserman 2005; Gumball 2005).

The *Bourne* trilogy is emblematic of anti-Bush-Cheney political thrillers. Paul Greengrass's *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007) fills in much of the back-story of the eponymous CIA-trained assassin (Matt Damon) who

in *The Bourne Identity* (2002) and *The Bourne Supremacy* (2004) finds himself in a state of amnesia. Pursued by sinister US government forces, he searches for knowledge of his past and discovers his abilities to elude and eliminate his pursuers. Based on the fast-paced spy thrillers of Robert Ludlum but shorn of their Cold War background and infused with post-9/11 paranoia, the films became increasingly relevant as “extraordinary renditions,” spying on American citizens, torture, and other forms of thuggery were brought to light (Hersh 2004; Suskind 2006; Mayer 2008).

The Bourne Ultimatum begins in Moscow, where Jason Bourne seeks the daughter of one of his victims to apologize. He eludes the assassins sent to kill him, and then tracks down the masterminds behind the CIA black-ops that turned him into a cold-blooded assassin, all the while seeking to discover his true identity. The sinister head of the CIA, Ezra Kramer (Scott Glenn), is conspiring with his subordinate, Noah Vosen (David Strathairn), to refigure the assassin program titled Treadstone into Blackbriar. When a British *Guardian* reporter is leaked information about Bourne and the assassin program, Vosen assembles an assassin team to kill the reporter and to take out Bourne. Bourne meanwhile hooks up with a CIA operative, Nicky Parsons (Julia Stiles), who knows of his programming and had earlier worked with him (with a hint of romantic involvement). She questions the CIA covert program and decides to help Bourne trace his programmers (opening the way for a romantic sequel).

The US intelligence agencies in the trilogy evoke fears of an out-of-control Bush-Cheney administration. In *The Bourne Ultimatum*, the CIA's deep-cover New York City office has an image of Donald Rumsfeld visible on a computer monitor. In a deleted scene featured on the DVD, there is a picture of Bush on the wall behind the evil Noah Vosen, thus evoking the real people who were doing vile and immoral deeds in real life.

The Bourne Ultimatum poses an increasingly moral and humane agent against menacing intelligence operatives who train assassins to kill. As Paul Greengrass notes in his commentary on the DVD, Jason Bourne is a new kind of action hero, without the gun-toting hypermasculinity of many other action adventure films and spy thrillers. The Bourne character is more humane, humble, remorseful, and reflective. He is both truth-seeking and intelligent, speaking a number of foreign languages and possessing incredible survival skills. Bourne's morality and humaneness

are pitted against the amoral villainy of adversaries who represent the operatives and policies of the Bush-Cheney era.

Syriana (2005) uses political allegory to provide a complex vision of the complicity of US corporations and government with political regimes and oil barons in the Middle East, and how that involvement has produced terrorism. *Syriana* transcodes mistrust of oil corporations and Arab sheiks, the CIA and government agencies, and their imbrication in criminal activities and terrorism. In intertwining stories about the Middle East, oil corporations contending for markets, Gulf emirs pushing competing national and US/corporate interests, Islamic terrorists and the CIA, and politicians acting with the various interests, the film comments allegorically on the nexus of powers wreaking havoc.

Written and directed by Stephen Gaghan, who penned the screenplay for Steven Soderbergh's highly acclaimed *Traffic* (2000) about the global drug trade, *Syriana* was inspired by Robert Baer's CIA memoir *See No Evil* and takes its title from a think-tank term for a reconfigured Middle East.⁴ A highly complex film, it sets out to map contemporary global capital and struggle in the Middle East between a myriad of competing forces. Action centers on Bob Barnes (George Clooney), an over-the-hill CIA agent loosely based on Robert Baer. After assassinating some Iranian arms dealers, Barnes returns to Washington and finds himself in a web of intrigue.

Major plotlines in the film's multiple overlapping stories include lawyers and executives trying to broker oil mergers, and the successor to the emir of a fictional Middle East country. The eldest of two sons, Prince Nasir (Alexander Siddig), appears interested in economic and political reform for his country and sells some oil rights to China, while the younger brother, Prince Meshal (Akbar Kurtha), appears ready to sell out to Western oil interests. The giant oil company Connex has just lost oil interests in a Middle East country and is seeking to buy out a smaller Texas oil company, run by wildcat Texan firm Killen, which has locked up the drilling rights to Kazakhstan, which allegedly has tremendous untapped oil reserves. This leads various US corporations, politicians, and lawyers to involve themselves in the merger and emir succession issues, bungling both – just as the Bush-Cheney administration bungled almost everything.

Syriana also features a Committee for the Liberation of Iran, evoking the Iraqi National Congress sponsored by the Bush-Cheney neoconservatives to push for war in Iraq. In the end, Barnes finds himself the dupe of

a plot to kill the reform-minded prince, while the oil companies continue to merge and expand. In a subplot, a young Pakistani worker has lost his job in the oil-drilling fields. Bitter and frustrated at his inability to make a living, he comes under the sway of an Islamic fundamentalist, showing how terrorists are recruited out of the mess that the US has contributed to creating in the Middle East.

Released the same year, Andrew Niccol's *Lord of War* (2005) explores the complexities of arms dealing in its story of a Ukrainian immigrant, Yuri Orlov (Nicholas Cage), who gets involved in the trade. The film opens with a bullet's-eye view of arms factories and the manufacture of tons of munitions which are often sold to the highest bidder. The camera continues to follow the bullet as it is loaded into boxes and shipped to Africa, where it is put into a gun. The camera follows the bullet's trajectory and point of view into the head of a young child.

Lord of War is a geopolitical satire told as a rags-to-riches immigrant saga. Yuri provides an ironic voice-over to his own rise and fall, in a story-form much like that of a tragic gangster film. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Yuri returns from the US to the Ukraine, where a connection with his uncle, General Orlov, gives him access to hordes of weapons that make him superrich. But Yuri is tracked by a government arms agent, Valentine (Ethan Hawke), who gets to Yuri's wife. She provides him with access to Yuri's dirty business records and he is set up for a bust. Just before his last big deal with a Liberian dictator trading "blood diamonds" for an arms cache to fight his opponents, the dictator holds up a newspaper with the 5-4 Supreme Court ruling that gave the presidency to Bush: now "the US must shut up forever" and quit lecturing others on democracy, mocks the dictator. Yuri's brother sees that the weapons will be used to kill innocent people and manages to destroy half the arms shipment before he is shot, but Yuri completes the deal.

Shortly afterwards, Yuri is arrested by Valentine, who has the full bill of goods against him. It appears that Yuri is finished, having lost wife, brother, and family, and facing years in jail. However, he tells Valentine that he is doing covert dirty work that serves the interests of the US government and will have all charges against him dropped immediately. A shadowy government figure, Col. Oliver Southern (obviously modeled on Iran-contra criminal Oliver North), orders Valentine to release Yuri, whose final voice-over points out that the world's biggest weapons dealers are not private individuals like himself, but countries like the US, Russia, Britain, and China.

Another Middle Eastern political thriller, Peter Berg's *The Kingdom* (2007), transcodes more conservative discourses in a conventional Hollywood format. The film tackles one of the most sensitive issues in US foreign policy: relations with Saudi Arabia and the latter's connection to terrorism. An opening montage encapsulates US-Saudi relations, from the 1930s when oil was discovered, to 9/11, shortly after which it was revealed that 15 of the 19 alleged World Trade Center murderers were Saudis. The film cuts to Americans in a softball game at a picnic in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, where US oil workers live with their families in an American-style community. Mayhem ensues when Saudi guards are shot and terrorists posing as policemen invade the compound and begin killing Americans. Suicide bombers blow themselves up and take out more than a hundred people with them, including two FBI agents.

In Washington the FBI calls for the immediate insertion of an investigative team, while State Department bureaucrats and the attorney general (Danny Huston) caution against rash action. The FBI director intimidates the weak attorney general and agent Ronald Fleury (Jamie Foxx) blackmails the Saudis into letting him fly in immediately with an investigative team. The team comprises the obligatory woman forensic expert, Janet Mayes (Jennifer Garner), to help demonstrate retrograde Saudi attitudes toward women; a Jew, Adam Leavitt (Jason Bateman), to demonstrate retrogressive Saudi attitudes toward Jews and to make bad jokes; and a white southern good ol' boy, Grant Sykes (Chris Cooper), an explosives expert, to give white guys someone to identify with. The team is greeted by a local police colonel, Al-Ghazi (Ashraf Barhom), who is their babysitter and who bonds with Fleury, to demonstrate good Saudi/Arab attitudes and behavior.

The Kingdom combines aspects of a forensic crime drama with an action-adventure film and a political thriller. Saudi Islamicist terrorists are uncovered as perpetrators of the crime, putting on display familiar images of terrorists killing innocents, using the Internet to propagandize their deeds, recruiting children as murderers, and preparing to behead one of the captured team members. The film privileges Bush-Cheney administration hard-right extremism in a pointed contrast to the liberalism of the attorney general and other politicians in the film. Diplomacy and negotiation with the Saudis are shown to be futile; resolute militant action is shown as necessary. The Saudi police are represented as inefficient, obstructive, and devious, but in a few days the Americans have discovered the terrorist cell responsible for the killings (based on the 1996

bombings of a US apartment complex in Saudi Arabia). In a rousing 30-minute climax, the cell is hunted down and destroyed. The Saudis themselves are pictured as either good allies of the Americans or evil terrorists devoted to murder and mayhem, just as the Americans are divided in Manichean fashion into good, aggressive, all-American men of action contrasted to liberal, weany, do-nothing bureaucrats. The FBI agents invade a Saudi compound to blow away the terrorists, providing narrative closure with an American victory over evil terrorists.

The Kingdom is a comic-book fantasy of US revenge against al Qaeda terrorism, while more serious films like *Syriana* attempt to capture the challenges of a dangerous Middle East in complex and open-ended narratives. *Lord of War* makes clear that the US is involved in compromised relations with shady characters and complicit in an arms trade that fuels global wars and massacres. Michael Winterbottom's *A Mighty Heart* (2007) provides a nuanced presentation of the impact of terrorist actions on victims while exploring the complexity of Middle Eastern politics. Recounting the kidnapping and execution of American journalist Daniel Pearl, it focuses on the efforts of his wife, Mariane (Angelina Jolie), their friends and colleagues, and American and Pakistani officials to track down the perpetrators. Eschewing black and white stereotypes, it shows a variety of individuals from different cultures and backgrounds working together to solve the mystery of who kidnapped Pearl and how to save him. The story, as many viewers know, ends in tragedy, as the jihadists beheaded Pearl and showed the killing on a video distributed on the Internet. However, unfolding the story captures the complexity of Pakistani politics, with a great diversity of people with differing views. The film depicts Mariane and her friends getting on with their lives and eschewing futile calls for violent revenge.

Other political conspiracy thrillers take direct aim at the Bush-Cheney administration. Paul Schrader's *The Walker* (2008) combines social drama, a murder mystery, and political intrigue in a story of how a gay man who accompanies wives of politically powerful men on shopping and cultural events uncovers political corruption. Catching the contemporary moment, there are off-hand comments throughout the film about Iraq, threats to civil liberties, and a vice-president deeply immersed in intrigue and dirty business deals. The film subtly puts on display the corrupt corporate lobbying and scandals that reached a zenith in the Bush-Cheney years, although its specific critique is more understated and indirect than many of the films analyzed here.

Star Wars Prequels as Anti-Bush-Cheney Allegory

By 2006 it was clear that the Bush-Cheney administration was a world-historical catastrophe of the highest order. While a series of Hollywood thrillers can be read as critical commentary on Bush-Cheney administration foreign policy, some popular fantasy adventure films can be directly read as allegorical assaults on the regime. I will read the three prequel episodes to George Lucas's *Star Wars* trilogy from *Star Wars I: The Phantom Menace* (1999) through *Star Wars III: Revenge of the Sith* (2005) in this way.

After a 15-year hiatus in his astonishingly popular *Star Wars* franchise, George Lucas envisaged and executed a trilogy of prequels that told the background story of Luke Skywalker, Darth Vader, and the battles between the Jedi Knights and their Rebel Alliance against the Evil Empire. This second *Star Wars* trilogy (1999–2005) can be read in retrospect as an allegorical premonition of the rise of the Bush-Cheney administration and its dangerous consolidation of presidential power, undermining of democratic rights and freedoms, and attempts at Empire.

Released 16 years after *Return of the Jedi* (1983) concluded the first *Star Wars* trilogy, *Star Wars I: The Phantom Menace* (1999) features a dark, evil, hooded villain plotting to overthrow established regimes and deploy violence and duplicity to take control of the Senate and turn the republic into an authoritarian and militarist empire. The villainous and twisted figure can be seen in retrospect as a remarkable anticipation of Dick Cheney, a power-mad individual who manipulates ruthlessly behind the scenes. In addition, Senator Palpatine who rises from Senator to Supreme Commander of the Empire, and who we later learn is the mysterious Darth Sidious, can be read as a figure representing the different faces of the Bush-Cheney-Rove Gang, ruthlessly accruing power, undermining democracy, and carrying out secretive political conspiracies and military adventures.

Of course, the *Star Wars* films are exemplars of the fantasy genre that operate on a high level of myth-symbol narratology. They can be read as articulations of a self-contained fantasy-mythic universe, as morality tales, and as examples of a spiritualist (albeit crusading militant) religious tradition.⁵ Yet, on the level of sociopolitical allegory, they reveal the social and political impulses of their era, and the narratives can be articulated with dominant political discourses, struggles, and events of the time.

Kellner and Ryan (1988) read the first three *Star Wars* films (1977–1983) as an anticipation of Reaganism, including a proto-Reaganite conservatism with its crusading militarism, hierarchical patriarchal values, articulations of religion and politics, entrepreneurial individualism (Hans Solo), and celebration of the family and traditional values. To be sure, there were echoes of 1960s countercultural motifs: themes of rebellion against coercive authority, communal bonding, and motifs of freedom and individualism. But just as Reaganism itself incorporated many of these discourses and motifs, so too could the countercultural motifs of the first three *Star Wars* films be accommodated to the ruling conservative hegemony of the 1980s. Similarly, California countercultural discourses and motifs were assimilated into the high-tech “California ideology” of the Silicon Valley technoculture that became a dominant ideological and material force of the 1980s and 1990s, in which Lucas participated via his Skywalker Sound and Industrial Light & Magic companies that revolutionized film technology.⁶ An older and more politically astute George Lucas, however, conceived and began a *Star Wars* prequel trilogy at the end of the Clinton era of globalization and relative peace and prosperity in the US. While the prequel trilogy contained many of the mythic and conservative motifs of its predecessors, it projects a much darker moral and political vision and intersects with the rise of the authoritarian Bush-Cheney regime and its fantasy of Empire which provided threats to democracy and the concept of a republic based on a separation and division of powers.

Star Wars 1: The Phantom Menace (1999) opens with Jedi Master Qui-Gon Jinn (Liam Neeson) and his apprentice Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor) on a diplomatic mission to the planet Naboo, where they are sent to negotiate a tax dispute and blockade of the planet by the Trade Federation. The thematics of taxation and trade war reflect the dynamics of economic-political competition in the neoliberal Clinton era of globalization. The Jedi Knights soon learn that something more sinister is going on behind the scenes, as the mysterious Darth Sidious (Ian McDiarmid) is plotting to take control of the Galactic Republic. Surviving an attack ordered by Darth Sidious, the two Jedi, after noisily dismembering an army of droids, move to save Naboo’s teenage ruler, Queen Padme Amidala (Natalie Portman), from possible danger. After their spaceship is attacked and needs repairs, Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi take Queen Padme and her retinue (including her favorite droid, R2-D2) to the desert planet of Tatooine, familiar from the very first 1977 film when Luke

Skywalker entered into popular culture immortality. There the group meets young Anakin Skywalker (Jake Lloyd), a slave child with amazing potential in the Force. After a pod race where Anakin proves his mettle, the group travels to the capital world of the Republic, Coruscant, which appears as a giant planetary city, as if Los Angeles were to spread out and become a single planet.

The gnomic Yoda (voice of Frank Oz again) sees the positive potential in Anakin, but warns him and the audience that fear is the most malignant passion of all, leading to anger, hatred, and destruction. Thus, the film anticipates the Bush-Cheney regime’s manipulation of fear after 9/11. The rise to power of the corrupt Senator Palpatine can also be read as an allegory of the transition from the more human rights and globalist-oriented regimes of Carter and Clinton to the militaristic and anti-democratic regime of Bush and Cheney. In *The Phantom Menace* the immature Queen Padme is manipulated by smarmy politicians into replacing Supreme Chancellor Valorum (Terence Stamp) with Senator Palpatine, who will reveal himself to be thoroughly sinister, transforming the republic into empire and setting it on the path to aggressive militarism.

Star Wars II: Attack of the Clones (2002) continues the Jedi education of Anakin Skywalker, but sketches out the beginnings of the end of the democratic republic and the rise of a militarist empire under Supreme Commander Palpatine. The film articulates disquieting worries in US culture about the fate of democracy and the country’s imminent plunge into militarism and empire. It became a blockbuster hit in the troubled period after 9/11 and the US-led military intervention in Afghanistan, when the war in Iraq was already conceived in the inner circles of the Bush-Cheney administration and was beginning to be publicly debated and openly promoted.⁷

The story begins approximately ten years after the events of *The Phantom Menace*, and shows the maturing into rebellious youth and Jedi proficiency of Anakin Skywalker (Hayden Christensen). Anakin falls deeply in love with Padme, now a senator of the republic, and reveals to her his inner anger and yearnings. He is angry at his mentor Obi-Wan, who is too harsh a disciplinarian and does not recognize that he is ready for greater things. In political discussions with Padme, Anakin is impatient with democracy and believes dictatorship can be more effective, with the right man in charge – a belief shared by Bush and Cheney. Plans to assassinate Padme put her under the protection of Obi-Wan and Anakin. After another attempted murder, Obi-Wan is sent to discover the

assassin, while Anakin protects Padme by taking her to her home planet of Naboo, where their love will mature.

On the planet of Kamino, Obi-Wan discovers that a secret army of clones is being developed on the orders of a Jedi Master, long disappeared, who used the bounty hunter Jango Fett as a template for the clones. Obi-Wan believes Jango is the assassin and trails him to the planet of Geonosis, where he discovers that Count Dooku (Christopher Lee) and Nute Gunray have produced a droid army. This sets up the scenario of wars between the droid army and the Jedi and their emergent clone army, anticipating postmodern war in which robotic forces play a significant role.

Attack of the Clones plays on widespread fears of the time over cloning and genetic engineering. The formation of a clone army also reflects fears in military circles that humans would be replaced by technology, rendering humans obsolescent.⁸ Read retrospectively, the republic's secret building of a clone army could be conceived as paralleling the US's attempt to build a high-tech military machine that would be used to maintain hegemony and empire throughout the world. One of the unstated elements of the so-called Bush doctrine was a belief that since the US had the most powerful military force in history, it should use it to pursue US interests, including preemptive strikes and regime change in countries deemed hostile (see Kellner 2005).

For Lucas's universe of the Force, rule by empire and a mechanistic army of droids could not be allowed. *Attack of the Clones* pits the Jedi and their allies against the military forces of the empire and the Sith who control them. It takes Yoda himself to ward off destruction by the Dark Side of the Force. The film ends on a disquieting note as the (ambiguously) evil Count Dooku/Darth Tyranus meets with the hooded Darth Sidious (who we will discover is Chancellor Palpatine). The doubling and doubled figures of the villains noted here will allow us to suggest that the Evil Ones in the prequel trilogy stand in allegorically for dyads such as Bush-Cheney or Bush-Rove.

For example, Dooku/Tyranus says that the clone war has begun and Palpatine/Sidious notes his satisfaction that all is going according to plan. In 2002, when *Clones* was released, Cheney and Bush's plan to invade Iraq was proceeding inexorably to its conclusion. In addition, Yoda tells the Jedi that "lies, deceit, and mistrust" are being spread by the Dark Side. The Bush-Cheney Gang spread lies about alleged Iraqi WMDs, creating the fear and mistrust that prepared the way for their catastrophic

Iraq War. And as the US faced a new era of militarism, authoritarianism, and perhaps even fascism in 2002, so was the republic quickly mutating into the empire in the *Star Wars* saga. *Attack of the Clones* thus warns against the coming evil of the empire replacing the republic as the Dark Side of the Force gained its power.

While my reading of *Phantom and Clones* is obviously a retrospective one, *Star Wars III: Revenge of the Sith* (2005) can be read explicitly as an anti-Bush-Cheney allegory. As the Iraq War spun into manifest disaster, Lucas stated at the 2005 Cannes film festival:

Because [the prequel trilogy] is the back-story [of the *Star Wars* saga] one of the main features of the back-story was to tell how the Republic became the Empire.... The issue was: how does a democracy turn itself over to a dictator? Not how does a dictator take over but how does a democracy and Senate give it away?... The parallels between what we did in Vietnam and what we're doing in Iraq now are unbelievable.⁹

While nervous executives did not want to have the film seen as a commentary on the Bush-Cheney administration and Iraq War, the film itself and Lucas's comments made such readings inevitable.¹⁰

Revenge of the Sith begins with the graphic title "War!" popping onto the screen accompanied by the familiar *Star Wars* theme music. The titles tell audiences that the republic is crumbling under attacks by the ruthless Sith, whose Lord Dookus has kidnapped Supreme Chancellor Palpatine. The kidnapping of Chancellor Palpatine is revealed as a ruse to persuade Obi-Wan and Anakin to rescue him. They do so, giving the chancellor the opportunity to tempt Anakin to increase his power by going over to the Dark Side of the Force (one thinks of Karl Rove and Dick Cheney tempting George W. Bush). Anakin and Padme have been secretly married and Padme is pregnant with twins, as Bush's wife Laura once was. A brooding Anakin has a dream of his wife's death. He fears he will not be able to take care of her and the twins, and needs the power that Darth Sidious has promised him. The dilemma of selling out to support and protect one's family is, of course, archetypal in many societies, but the narrative suggests that Anakin is really obsessed with power for power's sake and is increasingly megalomaniacal and violent (another uncanny parallel to the trajectory of George W. Bush).

Yoda and the top Jedi fear that Chancellor Palpatine is illicitly amassing power and planning to destroy the republic and make himself

emperor. They are also rightly worried that Anakin may betray them. The Jedi Council's refusal to bestow upon Anakin the coveted Master Jedi status further alienates and inflames the young buck and makes him more easily manipulated by Sith forces. George W. Bush's failures in the oil industry made him an easy mark for unscrupulous political forces who manipulated his will to succeed and overcome his earlier failures.

Chancellor Palpatine usurps power, declaring "I am the Senate." He then turns the Senate against the Jedi, whom he claims are trying to overthrow him. The chancellor's forces set out to exterminate the Jedi, who are condemned and labeled as "separatists." The right wing in the US targeted democratic and progressive forces who questioned the expansion of militarism and the dramatic increase of presidential power during the Bush-Cheney administration. In 2005 at the time of *Sith's* release, there was a huge debate about whether the US would remain a democratic republic or fall prey to the temptations and dangers of empire (see Johnson 2000, 2004; Vidal 2002, 2003; Mann 2003). The *Star Wars* prequel trilogy focuses on the dangers of a republic slipping into the temptations of empire and thus becomes a historically relevant warning about major dangers of the time.

The Chancellor successfully rallies the Senate against the Jedi and in the name of security and stability declares the end of the republic and the institution of empire, while the Senate wildly applauds. Palpatine watches the proceedings and sardonically exclaims, "This is how liberty dies, with tremendous applause." The scene becomes poignant in the light of the wild applause for George W. Bush when he made his annual State of the Union addresses from 2001 to 2006 (the applause died down in the final years).

Anakin had tried to persuade Palpatine that the Jedi were out to destroy him and that their future lay with the chancellor and empire, but she would have none of this. Deeply alienated from Anakin, she eventually dies while giving birth with a broken heart to her twins Luke and Leia, an event that would drive the narrative of *Star Wars IV-VI* (which of course had already appeared and would accrue new meanings and effects in the context of the prequels). In a frightening sequence, Anakin tries to convince Palpatine that his immersion in the Dark Side has made him immensely powerful, that he can overthrow the chancellor and that he and Palpatine together can rule the universe. It appears that Anakin has become completely mad, a victim of a lust for power whose humanity is

hopelessly destroyed (although he will be able to redeem himself partially in a subsequent episode).

In another powerful sequence, a delusional Chancellor Palpatine tells the assembly that he has brought peace, freedom, justice, and security to "my new empire," just as Bush would brag he was bringing freedom, justice, and democracy to the Middle East (when he was really bringing chaos and disorder). In obvious echoes of Bush, Anakin intones: "If you're not with me, you're my enemy." Obi-Wan comments: "Only a Sith deals in absolutes." The Sith are allegorical stand-ins for rightwing extremist Republicans like Bush, Cheney, and the neocons.

The narrative ends with two megafights between Obi-Wan and Anakin, and between Yoda and Darth Sidious. While the good Jedi are victorious, the evil one escapes – albeit horribly maimed – to return in the next trilogy that will feature the rebel alliance against the empire. Anakin loses his hand in his saber fight and his body is grievously injured, forcing his Darth Vader incarnation to wear metallic body parts. This is suggestive of the US troops and Iraqis mutilated in the Iraq War. The slaughter of the Jedi and the survivors' predicament mirror the difficulties the US experienced in maintaining control after the occupation of Iraq, putting in question Donald Rumsfeld's doctrine that a lean and efficient military and special forces can prevail without significant numbers of boots on the ground.

In historical context, the Jedi now appear as representatives of the progressive forces of the 1960s that combined spirituality and militancy in battling the evils of global capitalism and imperialism. From 1977 to 1983 it was reasonable to see them as crusading Cold Warriors and dangerous Samurai-like militarists, although even then one could read them as low-tech warriors fighting empire and a military machine (see McVeigh 2006). But the Jedi are much less overtly militarist in the prequel trilogy and in fact battle more dangerous militarist and anti-democratic forces. Thus, in this context, they become more progressive and positive figures – "freedom fighters," if you wish.

The vision of democracy in all of the *Star Wars* films is problematic. The Senate is generally shown from a neoliberal and anti-UN position as a squabbling forum of base interests with manipulation and deception the rule. The Jedi are a genetically elite warrior caste, somewhere between Plato's guardian-philosopher kings and the warriors in his Greek republic. All groups in the *Star Wars* cosmology and polity are hierarchically ordered, ruled by the superior and most powerful, and there is evidence

in Lucas's biographies that he too tends to be an authoritarian leader, completely in control of his empire and not a friend of participatory democracy. As John Lawrence (2006: 7) warns us:

It would be a mistake to see Lucas as a pacifically inclined, articulate philosopher of democracy. In his most complex public utterances on governing, he revealed himself as a closet monarchist – indicating a spiritual affinity to the Old Republic's aristocracy. Responding to Orville Schell in a 1999 interview with the *New York Times*, he spoke the language of “rulers” as opposed to speaking of democracy as an opportunity for participation and shared responsibility. He offhandedly remarked that “a good despot” or “a benevolent despot who can really get things done” would be desirable, explaining himself this way: “There’s no respect for the office of the presidency. Not that we need a king, but there’s a reason why kings built large palaces, sat on thrones and wore rubies all over. There’s a whole social need for that, not to oppress the masses, but to impress the masses and make them proud and allow them to feel good about their culture, their government and their ruler so that they are left feeling that a ruler has the right to rule over them, so that they feel good rather than disgusted about being ruled.... But there’s probably no better form of government than a good despot.”

Although one can interpret the Jedi as righteous warriors against the militarist empire and fascism, one should also note that they are deeply flawed. Throughout the prequels, various Jedi, including Yoda, fail to recognize their hubris and overestimate their abilities to control the situation. The Jedi Council makes mistakes and does not always have a good grip on reality, as when it alienates Anakin Skywalker and allows him to come under the control of Palpatine. As Tyson Lewis comments, the Jedi also fail pedagogically, helping to drive Anakin to the Dark Side. Their overemphasis on discipline, authority, hierarchy, and subordination, and their failure to address Anakin's emotions and concrete existential situation, help Darth Sidious take control of him. As Lewis suggests, the Dark Side ultimately has a more effective notion of pedagogy, as Darth Sidious gets Anakin to express his emotions, vulnerabilities, needs, and frustrations with the Jedi that help him bring Anakin over to the Dark Side.¹¹ Yet one could argue that the Sith pedagogy and Palpatine are deceptively and unethically manipulative, and that a genuinely emancipatory pedagogy should not guide student behavior in what could be destructive ways.

The *Star Wars* prequels are thus ambiguous as a social and political allegory and are lacking in democratic and egalitarian social relations, with no just, self-governing philosophy. Yet the entire series is an impressive moral allegory of self-development and mastering base emotions, while the prequels have progressive political effects in their compelling story of a fall from democracy to empire at a time when the US and other parts of the world were confronting just such a threat.

In retrospect, one can really only grasp the ideological problematics of the *Star Wars* series as a whole at the end of the cycle when the pieces fit together, the symbols and narratives can resonate in their historical moment, and interpretation of the entire cycle in the context of contemporary US and global culture becomes possible. In the 2002 and 2005 episodes, Lucas's vision of the US losing its democracy and falling prey to the evils of empire was one that could not be easily embraced by conservative sectors of his audience. However, when the horrors of the Bush-Cheney regime became apparent in the Iraq disaster, and in its relentless undermining of democracy and democratic values, and in the face of threatened US interventions in Iran and elsewhere, Lucas's cautionary tales became prescient, with the prequel trilogy taking on even more relevancy and power for the contemporary era.

Of course, the *Star Wars* saga can also be read as mythic-poetic spiritualism that articulates George Lucas's re-visioning of Joseph Campbell's “hero with a thousand faces,” enjoining individual and spiritual development, aiming at the triumph of good over evil in one's personality and in society.¹² One can also equate this mythical vision with traditional conservatism. For instance, there are militarist aspects to the cycle, when military action is deemed the most efficacious tool in a life-or-death struggle against evil. The blowing up of enemy machines, planets, and the deadly Death Star in the early post-1977 episodes can be read in the context of the video games culture at the time as programming young kids to perform nuclear war or push buttons to blow up stuff and people in Iraq. The light saber artistry of the entire series can also be equated with a militarist masculinism whereby the warrior, in touch with his inner feelings and the Force, is valorized as the highest form of human being, the flashing sabers signifying male phallic power. The light sabers' connection with the spiritual ideology of the Force arguably signifies a more organic link between individuals and technology than the mechanistic clone armies whose goal is to dominate and destroy, or the blasters, which are a pure tool of male aggression. However, the light sabers – among the

Hence, one of the major blockbuster series of all time provides prescient warnings against the assault on democracy in the US during the Bush-Cheney era and the dangers of militarism. A vast number of films presented more realist, satirical, and allegorical assaults on the Bush-Cheney regime, as I attempt to document in the next section.

From Satire to Dystopia

Blending allegory, satire, and low-key political realism, John Sayles' *Silver City* (2004) has a dimwitted and opportunistic candidate for governor in Colorado in cahoots with rightwing forces. Groomed for office by his father, former Senator Judson Pilager (Michael Murphy), a powerhouse in Colorado and national politics, the relation between father and son, and portrait of a callow and superficial Dickie Pilager (Chris Cooper), provide a barely disguised double of the relationship between George W. Bush and his father. The name Pilager nicely pinpoints the aims of the Bush dynasty.¹⁵

Silver City deftly explores how conservative politicians are connected with powerful economic interests to push a rightwing agenda. It opens with a photo-op of candidate Dickie Pilager fishing, highlighting how cynical advisers present tools of conservative economic interests as environmentalist. As the camera sets up a shot for a campaign commercial, the hapless Dickie pulls from the lake the dead body of a man. Fearing a political smear by opponents, the Karl Rove-like campaign manager Chuck Raven (Richard Dreyfus) hires a private investigator, Danny O'Brien (Danny Houston), to check on political enemies who might have played a dirty trick on Pilager. These include a rightwing talk radio host (Miguel Ferrer), a former mine engineer who has become a mining industry safety critic and whistleblower (Ralph Waite), and the candidate's ditzy and promiscuous sister (Daryl Hannah), who deeply despises her brother, offering Sayles and company a panorama of issues and personalities to dissect contemporary US politics and society.

Danny visits the editor of an alternative webzine (Tim Roth), with whom he had earlier worked on a community newspaper, and discovers how the candidate is involved in a complex web of Colorado politics and economic interests. Using film noir codes of an investigative mystery unpeeling layers of corruption, the film shows Danny regaining his investigative zeal and encountering a group of characters and stories that

most popular merchandising toys spun off the franchise – are clearly connected with aggressive male power and feudal militarism, hardly a positive role model for boys.

The prequel trilogy is nevertheless highly ambiguous toward military action, questioning its limits and its dangers, especially when a lethal military machine is in the wrong hands. Conversely, the cumulative universe in Lucas's saga is like the state of permanent war in Orwell's 1984 that justifies and helps reproduce a militarist, totalitarian, police state. Post-9/11 and post-Iraq invasion, the prequel trilogy circulated on video and DVD, often receiving cult-like attention, as well as ridicule.¹³ It can be articulated with discourses critical of unrestrained militarism, the loss of democratic rights and freedoms in the construction of empire, and fears about military appropriation of genetic engineering and biotechnology.

The *Star Wars* films are thus polysemic, inviting multiple readings. My reading presents a sociopolitical hermeneutic in which popular-cultural artifacts are articulated with political discourses and struggles and interpreted as commentary on contemporary events. Popular movies tap into people's social and political unconscious, bringing to expression their deep fears and hopes. George Lucas is an especially talented storyteller and mythmaker, able to synthesize disparate pop-cultural material and provide epic stories that connect with audiences. With the first series coming after traumatic defeat in Vietnam and when the Cold War seemed perpetual, the US and its global allies needed a comforting set of redemptive myths. Lucas's 1977–1983 saga fit the bill.

George Lucas is a storyteller and mythmaker who is able to tap into the culture's worries, fears, and conflicts and provide narratives that address contemporary issues in a way to attract mass audiences. The technological exploitation of high-tech special effects by Lucas's Skywalker Sound Industrial Light & Magic companies, which made him a billionaire many times over, are an important part of Lucas's storytelling. His computer generated imagery, sound effects, and animation units have spun off into separate companies and Lucas is acknowledged king of high-tech cinema, although his critics claim too much emphasis on computer generated imagery undermines his films' characters, dialogue, and stories.¹⁴ Indeed, one could see Lucas on the whole as part of a progressive high-tech liberal capitalist wing of the Silicon Valley California ideology, which combines pro-market and individualist values with liberal social ones.

illustrate contemporary political corruption and provide trenchant critical commentary on the Bush-Cheney administration. In a cameo role, Kris Kristofferson plays rightwing businessman Wes Benteen who, on horseback, and with a gorgeous Colorado scenic background, makes a speech about how the country's land and natural resources need to be "liberated for the people" – which means, of course, corporate forces like himself who support rightwing politicians who "liberate" the public domain for private interests.

Pilager's father is a powerful senator and scion of a Colorado political dynasty that evokes the Bush family. Like George W. Bush, there are intimations that Dickie Pilager has a drunk-driving charge in his background; like him, he has trouble putting together an unscripited sentence. Pilager is scripted by his Karl Rove-like manager, presenting the image of a politician programmed by his handlers, as George W. Bush was handled by Rove and Cheney (see Suskind 2006; Gellman 2008).

Danny learns that the deceased man was an exploited Mexican laborer who drowned in a mine being closed down to develop Silver City. This proposed land development deal crystallizes the economic, political, and environmental forces exposed in the film's plot. A subplot has Danny meet his ex-girlfriend reporter (Maria Bello), now engaged to a sharkish corporate lobbyist (Billy Zane), which provides an opportunity to expose the role of lobbyists in politicking for corporate interests, as well as the opportunity for the girl to dump the knavish fellow.

John Sayles and his crew use the form of an epic political drama with satirical overtones to criticize the Bush-Cheney administration, but the film got mixed reviews and did not find a large audience. Spike Lee's *Inside Man* (2005) uses the format of a gritty police thriller to explore the ethnicities and personalities of a variety of New Yorkers, and the relationships between the police, politicians, banks, and the power structure in post-9/11 New York. Shot in a fast-moving and quick-cutting style, the taking of a bank and hostages by a gang of crooks is punctuated by the opening confession of the main crook (Clive Owen), plus interviews, shot in a faded sepia, of customers and employees, some of whom are suspected to be part of an "inside job."

The film subverts the typical heist drama, as it appears that the four crooks have not stolen anything, the "death" they perform is faked, and they seem to have ulterior motives and a hidden agenda. *Inside Man* explores institutions, relations, and personalities rather than a standard genre storyline. It puts on display deep racial tensions after 9/11 and

makes clear that Arabs and Muslims are the targets of racism, as the multicultural city struggles to come to terms with its differences and problems.

Appearing at first to be a standard bank heist with hostages drama à la *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), *Inside Man* becomes an exploration of personalities, relationships, and past secrets, especially concerning the bank owner. In a plot twist, it turns out that the bank president (Christopher Plummer) organized the heist to steal Nazi-era treasures which he had stolen from Jews in concentration camps. Roger Ebert's website features a commentary by Jamie Cohen, "Bush: The real 'Inside Man'?" that suggests a political subtext and critique of the Bush family:

As soon as the Nazi finance angle came in, I thought of Prescott Bush. Then, in Christopher Plummer's office, there was a picture of the Bush family on the credenza behind Plummer's desk. There was also one of Plummer with Maggie Thatcher....

After the movie, I got to thinking about how Prescott's son was elected vice-president and president, and his grandson was elected president twice, despite the fact that the family got rich from helping finance the Nazi war machine. Would Christopher Plummer really have to worry about consequences in the real world, when it seems that war crimes committed by the rich and powerful don't?¹⁶

In the DVD commentary, Spike Lee tells how he has been asked if he intended to model the Christopher Plummer character on Prescott Bush. His answer is no, making it likely that this was the idea of screenwriter Russell Gewirtz. This episode illustrates how political messages can be inserted into genre films, including police thrillers.¹⁷

Taking up a different strategy, *American Dreamz* (2006) presents a direct satire of George W. Bush and the popular TV show *American Idol*. Paul Weitz's mordant satire features a president much like George W. Bush, programmed to appear on a popular TV show so as to boost his flagging popularity. Making fun of Bush's anti-intellectualism, the film opens with a reelected president (Dennis Quaid) bored and having trouble getting out of bed in the morning. Picking up a newspaper for the first time in years, he suddenly immerses himself in newspapers and books, but becomes reclusive, and his approval ratings go down. To help get him back on track, his chief of staff (Willem Dafoe), who appears as a morph of Cheney and Rove, books him as a guest judge on the hit talent show *American Dreamz*. The show's host, Martin Tweed (Hugh Grant),

in a dig at *American Idol*'s Simon Cowell, is presented as a completely narcissistic womanizer and all-around rotten guy. Tweed and his staff pick as contestants an all-American Midwestern blonde (Mandy Moore), a Hasidic Jew rapper (Adam Busch), and a would-be Iraqi dancer shown training in a terrorist camp in Afghanistan (Sam Golzari), sent to the US as a sleeper agent.

Tweed beds the ambitious young blonde, breaking her naive boyfriend's heart, and the Iraqi and his terrorist friends concoct a plan to blow up the president. The joke here is that, like George W. Bush, the president is wired,¹⁸ with handlers telling the dimwit what to say through an ear-piece. The wire connection breaks and the president is forced to ad-lib, a loose canon that could go any which way, just like George W. Bush. The comic fantasy format, of course, avoids disaster and, unlike the real world, this scenario ends with characters redeemed and the audience reassured that their president is not a complete dolt, that terrorists just want to dance and sing, and that the country's top-rated TV show is not corrupt and damaging to the well-being of the republic.

Going as far as possible into the terrain of broad political satire, Trey Parker and Matt Stone's *Team America* (2004) makes fun of the "war on terrorism" and the fetishism of high-tech special forces in sectors of the US military and Bush-Cheney administration. Making fun as well of Jerry Bruckheimer action films like *Top Gun* (1985), the film opens in Paris with the clay-puppet Team America after terrorists with WMDs. The team takes out the bad guys, but also wipes away the Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, and Arc de Triomphe – unfortunate "collateral damage" in the War on Terror. The all-American team leader decides to recruit a new member who must be an actor in order to infiltrate terrorist groups. Shown in a Broadway production spoofing *Rent*, a male singer performs in the number "Everyone has AIDS" and is whisked away to join the team in its secret hideaway behind the presidential faces on Mount Rushmore. After they destroy the pyramids and Sphinx in a mission to Egypt, they get down to the really important business of taking out Hollywood liberals like Michael Moore, Alec Baldwin, Sean Penn, Tim Robbins, Susan Sarandon, and Martin Sheen, who are shown as soft on Iraq and North Korea.

Not to be outdone by *South Park*'s animators, *The Simpsons: The Movie* (2007) develops an anti-Republican environmental satire. Based on the long-running and wildly popular TV series created by Matt Groening and produced by James L. Brooks, the film opens with the Simpsons and other

Springfield residents in a cinema watching a big-screen version of *Itchy and Scratchy*, the family's favorite TV cartoon show. Itchy becomes president and hits the fail-safe nuclear button to unload destruction on his arch-rival Scratchy, a truly scary image evoking a deranged Bush or Cheney pushing the button in the White House. The political subtext is quickly erased, however, as Homer bellows: "I can't believe we're paying for something we could get for free on TV. If you ask me, everyone in this theater is a big fat sucker," and turns to point to the spectator, "especially you."

The Simpsons: The Movie veers between insider jokes, the TV series' typical comedic antics, visual and puerile humor, and pointed political satire. The plot centers on environmental crisis and environmental politics, about which the populace of Springfield appears supremely apathetic. In an early scene, the band Green Day (played by themselves) are performing on a barge floating on Springfield Lake before a large audience on the shore. The crowd is enjoying the show until a band member tries to say a couple of words about the environment and pollution, at which point the barge is bombarded with so much debris that it sinks into the toxic lake.

The town's apathy is demonstrated when Lisa Simpson (Yeardley Smith) launches a campaign to clean up the ultra-polluted lake, and has every door slammed in her face when she tries to alert her neighbors. Persisting in the face of apathy, she makes a presentation to the town assembly titled "An Irritating Truth." Continuing the satirical references to Al Gore's lecture and film, she uses an elevated ladder to demonstrate how high the level of pollution is rising. Seeing a potential bandwagon, local politicians take measures to prevent dumping, including constructing a concrete barricade around the lake's perimeter. But Homer crashes through the barriers and deals a deathblow to the lake's ecosystem by dumping a large container of his pet pig's waste products, making Springfield the most polluted city in the country.

An administrator from the Environmental Protection Agency, Russ Cargill, brings the Springfield situation to President Arnold Schwarzenegger who, presented with five options, declares: "I was elected to lead, not to read." He blindly picks one of the choices: a giant dome around the city and quarantine for its toxic wastes and people. Satirizing the Bush-Cheney tendency to place representatives of industry and extreme rightwing ideologues in government, the EPA administrator is a thorough-going fascist who decides to use the nuclear option and destroy Springfield when it is revealed that people are escaping.

Britain with fireworks and parties – *V for Vendetta* uses a futuristic Britain to present allegorically fascist tendencies in the contemporary United States. The US has been largely destroyed by plague and civil war, while Britain suffers under a totalitarian police state with a Big Brother-like dictator, High Chancellor Adam Sutler (John Hurt). The regime is propped up by demagogic media, secret police, an enforced curfew, reduced civil rights, and torture for dissidents. A stand-in for Dick Cheney, Creedy (Tim Pigott-Smith), a pinched bureaucrat who is connected to the corporation that produces biological weapons like the plague and its cure, manipulates the deranged and vile Sutler. A hypocritical and lecherous bishop lends the church's support to the authoritarian government, just as hypocritical "Christian" evangelicals were point-men for the Bush-Cheney administration.

The film opens with a young woman, Evey (Natalie Portman), violating the curfew. She is confronted by secret police intent on gang raping her, but V appears to readily dispatch them. V invites Evey to observe a spectacular fireworks explosion at the Old Bailey, London's highest court. Chancellor Sutler appears on television and claims the destruction of the building was a planned demolition – John Hurt's face takes up the entire screen, as it did in his performance as Big Brother in *1984* (1984). Since many people had actually observed the destruction, individuals begin questioning the government in a process that continues throughout the film.

Parallels to contemporary American politics are obvious. Prothero, a Bill O'Reilly-like "Voice of London," speaks on what appears to be the country's only television channel. "The former United States is the world's biggest leper colony," he intones. "And it wasn't because of the immigrants, the Muslims or the homosexuals, or the war that they started. No," he says. "It's because they're godless!" Like supporters of the Bush-Cheney administration, Prothero combines religious nationalism with aggressive ultraconservatism, ending his broadcasts with the jingoistic "England prevails." Posters seen throughout the movie advocate "Strength through Unity," offering V and resistant graffitiists an excellent target for the V sign, proliferating messages of resistance that inspire the opposition.

Like the Bush-Cheney administration, Sutler's administration is based on fear. He exclaims in rage "We will show him what terror really looks like" when V takes over the broadcasting network and promises more fireworks on the next Guy Fawkes night and threatens the regime with retaliation. Set around twenty years in the future, after, as one character puts it, "America's war grew worse and worse, when unfamiliar words

Meanwhile, the offending container of pig poo-poo is pulled out of the lake with Homer Simpson's name on it and an angry mob drives the Simpson family out of town, who then emigrate to Alaska. The government employs Tom Hanks to prepare the country for the end of Springfield, with Hanks noting that since the government has run out of credibility, it is forced to use him to sell their policies. Learning of the impending destruction of their city, the Simpsons leave Alaska and return by train to Springfield. Homer remains in Alaska and has an epiphany in a sweat lodge where he finally learns the truth: human beings are put on earth to be with and take care of other people. He rushes to Springfield to try to save it from nuclear devastation. En route, Marge cautions Bart to pipe down until they arrive: "We have to keep a low profile 'til we get to Seattle to tell the world there's a plot to destroy Springfield." Lisa whimpers in response, "I don't know if you guys should be talking so loud!" but Marge replies, "No Lisa. It's not like the government is listening to everybody's conversations." The scene then cuts to the vast offices of the National Security Agency (NSA), where scores of agents are listening in on random telephone conversations. When he hears Lisa, an agent screams out with joy: "Hey everybody, I found one! The government actually found someone we're looking for! Yeah, baby! Yeah!" Fortunately for Springfield and the continuation of the TV series and film franchise, Homer makes it to Springfield and deflects the nuclear device, which instead just cracks the dome and liberates everyone.

Such tongue-in-cheek jabs at Republican administrations score points, but neither realist drama nor satire is really able to take account of the full horror of the Bush-Cheney era. For this task, a series of films use the codes of science fiction and futuristic allegory. While utopian science fiction celebrates a high-tech future, a dystopic tradition shows dangerous tendencies of the contemporary era intensified in a nightmare future, such as in *Blade Runner* (1982).

An allegorical futuristic drama in the dystopic mode which nevertheless ends with a utopia of revolution,¹⁹ *V for Vendetta* (2005) attempts to unfold the consequences of an extreme rightwing, quasi-fascist government. Based on the graphic novel by Alan Moore and with a script by the Wachowski brothers, who produced the *Matrix* films, the story features V (Hugo Weaving), a masked and caped crusader who exposes, attacks, and avenges the wrongs of a totalitarian police state. Drawing his inspiration from Guy Fawkes and the foiled Gunpowder Plot to destroy the English parliament on November 5, 1605 – a day celebrated annually in

like 'collateral' and 'rendition' became frightening," the film includes obvious references to Bush-Cheney America. In the world of *V for Vendetta*, the Koran is forbidden, homosexuals are violently persecuted, and torture is the treatment of choice for dissidents in facilities that evoke imagery of Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib.

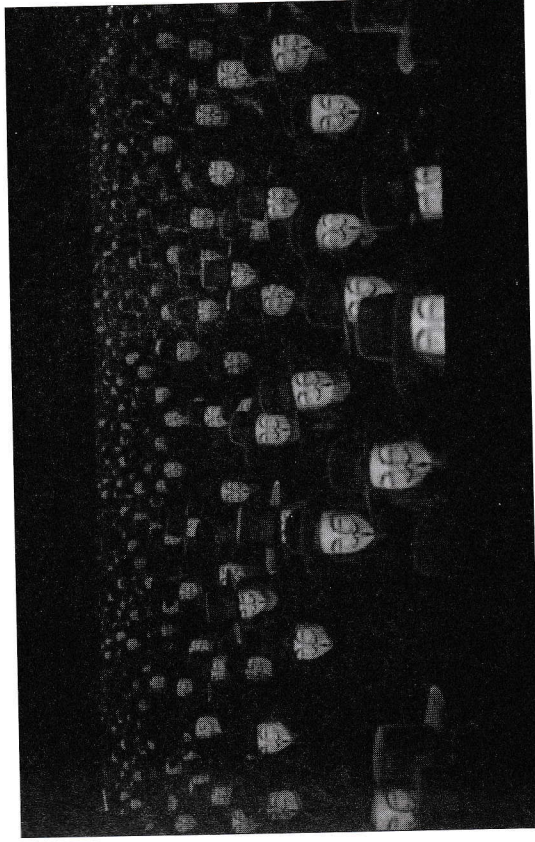
Evey becomes V's protégé and accomplice. She learns that V was horribly misshapen in a government biological weapons experiment, but was endowed with supernatural powers that make him an effective killing machine. To give Evey a sense of real oppression, he fakes her kidnapping, imprisonment, and torture, letting her find a memoir from a supposed earlier prisoner that tells a story of how the regime tortured and murdered gays and lesbians. Later, her television-show boss (Stephen Fry) tells her he's gay. After he broadcasts a Benny Hill-type campy comedy skit, he too is arrested and murdered.

V reveals to a police detective pursuing him, Chief Inspector Finch (Stephen Rea), that the current political regime gained power after using biological weapons to create plague. It then exploited fear and panic to win the election, and produced a cure for the plague from a corporation that enriched top government officials. Finch investigates V's allegations and comes to work with him to help expose and overthrow the corrupt regime.

Meanwhile, V murders the demagogic television host and top political officials like Sutler and Creedy one by one, in a barely disguised fantasy of vengeance against monstrous political leaders. In the concluding sequence, Evey pulls the lever that will set off the subway train to blow up the British Houses of Parliament. Scores of people with Guy Fawkes masks descend on parliament. The police, whose rulers have been murdered, give way to the crowd.

V for Vendetta was attacked for promoting terrorism, although the scenario makes it clear that V's role is to act out a revenge fantasy. The emphasis is not on terrorist violence, but awakening people to the oppression of the system in order to bring about change through direct action. Yet despite lip service to anarchism, the people do not really self-organize and militate, but mainly follow the lead of the mysterious V. On the other hand, V allows himself to be murdered at the end so the masses can shed their Guy Fawkes masks and assert their own collective democratic power, as well as their individuality.²⁰

While *V for Vendetta* puts on display the horrors of creeping fascism and projects a revolutionary fantasy of the overthrow of an oppressive



V for Vendetta: crowds of people with Guy Fawkes masks descend on parliament.

system, Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002) (based on a story by Philip K. Dick) provides a prescient anticipation of Bush-Cheney's domestic wire-tapping program and detention camps and government infamy to protect the system.²¹ In a futuristic society, murder is eliminated by "pre-cogs" who foresee the crimes, stream their visions to police functionaries who quickly arrest the suspect, and then incarcerate them in suspended animation tubes, thus reducing the murder rate in 2040 Washington, DC to near zero.²²

Appearing the year after 9/11, *Minority Report* presents a government that preemptively arrests crime suspects and holds them without trial, much as the Bush-Cheney administration did with terrorist suspects like José Padilla, completely denying them their basic rights. In the world of *Minority Report* no one protests against police surveillance, the violation of civil liberties, and the end of privacy, seemingly because an all-seeing surveillance apparatus makes resistance futile and an all-engrossing consumer society offers a dazzling array of commodities. In a clever visual conceit, products like cars and beer are offered personally to individuals who walk through shopping areas, as the ads scan the person's retina and send out a personal solicitation to buy the product advertised. Other

frightening portents of a panopticonic future include giant artificial spiders that enter a room, scan everyone's retina, and send the data back to a central computer for identification.²³

Tom Cruise plays John Anderton, who in opening scenes appears a perfectly programmed functionary without messy humanity, fitting in entirely with the police apparatus and doing his job. We eventually learn that the seemingly robotic Anderton is deeply disturbed by the loss six years previously of his son, is estranged from his wife, and takes drugs for maintenance. When he is himself accused of murder the next day and faces preemptive arrest, Anderton rebels, replaces his eyes to avoid retinal detection, and kidnaps one of the pre-cogs, after learning that occasionally a "minority report" from one of them raises doubts about the certainty of the forthcoming murder.

At this point, Spielberg departs from Dick's highly paranoid and politically critical story by bringing in Anderton's wife, who helps battle a conspiracy against him by the pre-crime agency, allowing Anderton to redeem himself. The saccharine Spielbergian ending of the restored bourgeois couple and redeemed father takes the bite out of Dick's relentlessly pessimistic vision and provides a sappy happy ending for adolescent viewers unable to face up to the dangers of a frighteningly repressive government. In his films of the past two decades, Spielberg just cannot help inserting his obsessive problematic of a family in crisis, solved by the restoration of order and redemption of the father.

On the other hand, *Minority Report* portrays a government willing to engage in lies and murder to maintain its totalitarian order, just as the Bush-Cheney administration did. While Spielberg typically takes socially critical and even explosive material and wraps it up in the fantasy of a redemptive couple or family, Richard Linklater's *A Scanner Darkly* (2006) provides the full force of a critical vision of a fascist future. Based on a 1977 Philip K. Dick novel, the film projects an image of the future in which a corporation linked to the government produces and sells drugs to keep the population under control and to legitimate a police state and war on drugs. Its view of future government strategies of domination is similar to *Vendetta* – perhaps both films were influenced by the vision of Philip K. Dick, who deeply mistrusted government and its police agencies, as well as big corporations. Such horrors, of course, mirror real-world situations: US political administrations from the Nixon era to the present have used a war on drugs to legitimate a prison-industrial complex in which over 2 million people are incarcerated (more than any

other country). More than half of those imprisoned on drug offenses are African American, and prisons linked to corporations provide super-exploited labor (see Kellner 2008).

A dim ray of hope emerges at the end of *A Scanner Darkly* when an apparently burned-out character, Bob Arctor (Keanu Reeves), a government agent and drug taker whose identity became blurred, picks up one of the Substance D plants cultivated at the secret drug factory in a government prison. He mutters to himself that he will give it to one of his friends soon, suggesting the faint hope that evidence condemning the nefarious corporation will eventually see the light of day.

Gabriel Range's *Death of a President* (2006) envisages another end to George W. Bush in a futuristic docudrama with a fictional imagining of Bush's assassination after giving a talk to the Economic Club in Chicago. A unique blend of documentary footage and fictional re-creation, the film takes the form of a conventional documentary on a (fictional) event with (fictional) interviews with (fictional) members of Bush's staff, mixed in with a montage of documentary footage, itself an amalgam of actual archival material and fictional restaging. While the film set off a firestorm of criticism before it was shown at the Toronto film festival in 2006, where it won the director's prize, *Death of a President* is remarkably sympathetic to Bush and provides "balanced" presentations of his activities and entourage, while depicting protestors strongly opposing his policies. Set in the form of a quasi-mystery (whodunnit?), the film looks at the treatment of Arabs post-9/11, anarchist movements in opposition, and an African-American family involved in the Iraq War. As the filmmakers state on the DVD, it provides a snapshot of the US at a moment in time, trying to catch the post-9/11 situation and the divided country. It articulates growing anger with the Bush-Cheney administration's Iraq policy and Bush himself.

Death of a President takes real Bush-Cheney policies and extrapolates them into a fictive future. For example, when discussing suspects in the murder an official is told to "look again" to document a weak assassination case, as intelligence officials were told to look again to find (non-existent) evidence of Iraqi WMDs. As happened with Bush-Cheney renditions, the film depicts people disappearing after the (fictive) assassination and the passing of Patriot Act III, exploiting fear once again after the (fictive) Bush assassination, which was exploited by the (fictive) Cheney administration, as was 9/11 exploited by the actual Bush-Cheney Gang. And, just as the Bush-Cheney administration constructed fallacious

discourses to justify its policies which the media uncritically reproduced, so too we see false administration spins on assassination suspects that are taken up and reproduced in the uncritical media. *Death of a President* also depicts the new President Cheney wanting to go to war with Syria, but blocked by establishment opposition and public opinion. This is a hopeful fantasy that the US might be stopped from going into further wars in the Middle East.

Richard Kelly's *Southland Tales* (2006) presents a mind-boggling extension of the madness of Bush-Cheney policies in an apocalyptic future. Five years earlier, Kelly's cult film *Donnie Darko* (2001) had combined science fiction, horror, and youth film motifs to explore the life of a young teenager (Jake Gyllenhaal) growing up absurd in Southern California. At an opening dinner conversation, his sister (Maggie Gyllenhaal) tells the Republican parents she will vote for Dukakis in the 1988 election that frames the story. Throughout, images of George H. W. Bush provide part of the collage of the real/imaginary horrors faced by young Donnie Darko.

Southland Tales goes much further in exploring societal and political madness. Its futuristic science fiction opening deploys home video footage of a nuclear attack on Abilene, Texas, which triggered World War III, in which the US is at war with Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and North Korea. Oil shortages have wreaked havoc with the economy and a mad German corporate scientist/CEO, Baron Westphalen (Wallace Shawn), seeks a new energy source from oceanic waves, Liquid Karma, which has the



Southland Tales presents a chaotic future in an imagined World War III in which the US is at war with Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and North Korea.

downside of generating potential rifts in the space-time continuum that could lead to planetary collapse.

Otherwise, it's business as usual in 2008, with a presidential campaign between Hillary Clinton-Joe Lieberman on the Democratic side against an Eliot-Frost Republican ticket, while a neo-Marxist revolutionary group plans an insurrection to mark the third anniversary of the Abilene explosion. Oh, and a more repressive Patriot Act has created a government agency to control cyberspace, leading to opposition by a coalition of neo-Marxists, porn producers, and slam poets. Republican candidate Eliot inspires voice-over recitation of an inversion of T. S. Eliot's famous assertion that "the world will end with a bang and not a whimper," and indeed it may in this film, at least. Republican Vice-President Bobbie Frost is allied with the German energy consortium, which seems to be funding the neo-Marxist revolutionaries. His son-in-law had disappeared in the desert and returned with an altered identity, taking up with porn star Krysta Now (played by *Buffy*: the *Vampire Slayer* lead Sarah Michelle Gellar).

Images of Bush and Cheney in the film caused the AFI Fest 2007 audience I saw it with to hiss. In an apocalyptic conclusion, the corporate and political elite party in a giant zeppelin, the *New Trier*, and is attacked by a flying ice-cream truck piloted by the neo-Marxist revolutionaries.²⁴ As the zeppelin explodes, there is a rift in the time-space continuum bringing it all to an end, which makes a sequel to this film unlikely, but not impossible. The hallucinatory craziness of the film is an apt analogue for the lunacy of the Bush-Cheney years, which found truly mad expression in the invasion and occupation of Iraq, the cinematic representations of which are explored in the next chapter.

Notes

- 1 While viewing the opening sequence of *The X-Files: I Want to Believe*, I thought that Chris Carter and his team might be producing a critique of the FBI, as opening images show FBI agents marching in lock-step and beating ice with sticks to find a dead body – an eerie spectacle of the FBI as a totalitarian police force. The images of FBI headquarters also suggest a possible critique emerging, but the plot features homosexual Russians killing people for organ selling and a pedophilic priest providing “visions” of the crimes. Further, the FBI is presented, as in the TV series, as heroic, hence the film ends up being muddled, conservative, and disappointing. For my take on *The X-Files* TV series, see Kellner (2003b: ch. 5).

- 2 Both Frank Rich and Paul Krugman published articles that interpreted the film in terms of growing criticism of the Bush administration and the coming 2004 election. Frank Rich saw it as a highly partisan anti-Bush film in his article "11 hours, 4 nights, 1 fear," *New York Times*, July 25, 2004 at www.select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F3081EFC3A5E0C768EDDAE0894DC404482. Paul Krugman referred to the original *Manchurian Candidate* and did a thought-experiment satire in which a "Manuchurian" president aided terrorists to recruit followers and discredit the country, making a barely veiled assault on Bush. Although the film had grossed \$96,105,964 globally as of December 31, 2008 (www.boxofficejojo.com/movies/?id=manchuriancandidate.htm), it probably had little if any effect on the election.
- 3 J. Hoberman, "Sleeper in the White House," *Guardian*, October 30, 2004.
- 4 Gaghan, Soderbergh, and George Clooney have worked on a number of films together or separately that constitute a critical cinematic mapping of the political complexities of the contemporary era. For discussion of Gaghan's *Michael Clayton* (2007), see the conclusion.
- 5 See Baxter (1999) and Kapell and Lawrence (2006).
- 6 See Barbrook and Cameron, "The California ideology" at www.alamut.com/subj/ideologies/pessimism/califideo_1.html. It may not be such a stretch to suggest that the droids R2-D2 and CP-30 helped circulate images that acclimated the geeks and intellectual workers of the world to the emergent computer culture of the 1980s at a time when many of us were forced (or chose) to sit in front of computers all day. Like the *Star Wars* figures, they eventually talked to us or communicated in metallic sounds.
- 7 As of January 4, 2009, *Attack of the Clones* had grossed \$649,398,328 globally (see www.boxofficejojo.com/movies/?id=starwars2.htm).
- 8 On the "revolution in military affairs" and postmodern war, see Best and Kellner (2001); on how the *Star Wars* films relate to official US military doctrine and debates since Vietnam, see McVeigh in Lawrence (2006).
- 9 See Bruce Kirkland, "George W. Vader," *Toronto Sun*, May 16, 2005 at www.torontosun.com/Entertainment/Movies/2005/05/16/1041776.html.
- 10 See David M. Halbfinger, "Latest 'Star Wars' movie is quickly politicized," *New York Times*, May 19, 2005. As of January 4, 2009, *Revenge of the Sith* had grossed \$848,998,877 worldwide.
- 11 Email from Tyson Lewis, February 7, 2007.
- 12 For critical views of the mythologies and spiritual dimensions of *Star Wars*, see Jewett and Lawrence (2002) and Lawrence in Kapell and Lawrence (2006). Lawrence (2006) argues that while the first three *Star Wars* films were deeply informed by Joseph Campbell, who Lucas saw as a quasi-guru, the prequel trilogy marks a break with Campbell toward a more direct political allegorical vision of the sort I describe here.

- 13 Contradictory responses to the *Star Wars* prequels are evident on the Internet Movie Database at www.imdb.com/find?s=all&q=star-wars&x=7&y=7 (accessed December 10, 2008). See, especially, the critical user comments, which are quite harsh and certainly varied in comparison to the adulation of the earlier films; see the user comments on *The Phantom Menace* at www.imdb.com/title/tt0120915/usercomments (accessed December 10, 2008).
- 14 The 2008 animated feature *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* regresses to computer-animated militarism and adds little to the series' mythology, showing how computer-animated special effects can kill creative filmmaking. The film was almost universally panned and received an embarrassing 19 percent approval rating at the Rotten Tomatoes website that reviews films; see www.rottentomatoes.com/ (accessed December 10, 2008).
- 15 On the Bush dynasty, see Kelley (2004) and Phillips (2004).
- 16 Jamie Cohen, "Bush: The real 'Inside Man'?" at www.rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20060330/LETTERS/60330004 (accessed October 29, 2008). On the connection between the Bush family fortune and its financing of Nazi businesses before World War II, see Phillips (2004) and Kelly (2004).
- 17 Spike Lee's political critique of the Bush-Cheney administration is apparent in a highly engaging HBO documentary on Hurricane Katrina, *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006) (see discussion in chapter 1).
- 18 See Douglas Kellner, "Media spectacle and the wired Bush controversy," *Flow*, 1, 3 (November 5, 2004) at www.idg.communication.utexas.edu/flow/?searchbyline=Douglas%20Kellner&jot=view&id=473 and Kellner (2005).
- 19 On *V for Vendetta* as an anarchistic utopia of revolution, see Sebastian Nestler and Rainer Winter, "Utopie im Film. *V for Vendetta*," in Markus Schroer (ed.) *Gesellschaft im Film* (Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft, 2008), pp. 309–32.
- 20 For an excellent account of how *V for Vendetta* differs from classical anarchism, see Richard Porton's review in *Cineaste* (Summer 2006): 52–4. On the film's anarchism as a utopia that combines collectivity and individuality, as in Hardt and Negri's category of multitude, see Nestler and Winter, "Utopie im Film."
- 21 After lawsuits by those detained for years without charge in military prisons, and various other court decisions, the US Supreme Court ruled in June 2008 that the Bush-Cheney administration was unlawfully detaining prisoners. See David G. Savage, "Constitution applies to detainees, justices say," *Los Angeles Times*, June 13, 2008: A1.
- 22 The story "Minority Report" is collected in Dick (1987). On Philip K. Dick, see Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, "The apocalyptic vision of

Philip K. Dick," *Cultural Studies/Critical Methodologies*, 3, 2 (May 2003): 186–202.

- 23 Many other films of the time depicted a surveillance society, including *Look* (2007), which unfolds a narrative from ubiquitous surveillance cameras. *Disturbia* (2007) shows a young man (Shia LaBeouf) using high-tech surveillance to spy on his neighbors, a motif also taken up in *Mimic 3: Sentinial* (2003).
- 24 Karl Marx was born in Trier, Germany, so the *New Trier* appears to refer to Marx's former hometown, although it was misspelled by the subtitle writers for the DVD as *Treer*. The film also refers to a Jenny Westphalen, who happens to be the name of Karl Marx's wife. Her father, Baron Westphalen, provides the name in the film for the deranged German who produced the zepplin and the alternative energy source that has ripped the time-space continuum. Kelly's imaginative vision draws on Philip K. Dick, Thomas Pynchon, and David Lynch, all of whom receive homages in the picture, as does Busby Berkeley for the musical numbers. A *Kiss Me Deadly*-style opening nuclear bomb triggers the fun.

5

The Cinematic Iraq War

In addition to Robert Greenwald's documentaries and Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (see chapters 1 and 3), an important cycle of non-fiction and fiction films have dealt with the US invasion of Iraq and its aftermath. Despite attempts by the US and its allies to control images and information in the Iraq War (see Kellner 2005), the invasion, occupation, insurgency, civil war, and chaos opened a Pandora's Box visible to an expanding global media. The Iraq Horror Show was documented on digital camera and video, film, and military blogs, as well as print news articles and critiques, often distributed throughout the world on the Internet. There were more primary media sources and diversity of images and opinion than in any other previous war, as eight Arab news channels supplemented the European, American, and other major global media, adding new voices and representations to the media mix, often showing much more horrible images and articulating more critical discourses than the Western media. The flourishing of documentary filmmaking helped generate an astonishing number of documentaries on Iraq, and Hollywood too made a series of fictional films on the Iraq War and its aftermath.

In this chapter, I discuss the first wave of Iraq *cinéma vérité* documentaries that used new digital media to capture the experience of US soldiers and the Iraqi people, in some cases to provide preliminary analyses and critiques of the war. A second wave of documentaries then critically analyzed and dissected the war and its momentous consequences, providing analyses of how and why the Iraq intervention and occupation was failing. I then examine some attempts to present fictional film portrayals of the war and its effects on Iraq and US participants, ranging from action films like *The Situation* (2006), to depiction of US soldiers'