

Introduction

Yes, the 1980s are our very own Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon game: Everything defining today's politics seems connected to that decade. And even though many of these political narratives were around before the Reagan era [...] they were vastly amplified by the new technologies, corporate reorganizations and federal policy changes of the time.

— David Sirota, “From Charlie Sheen to Reagan Nostalgia, The ’80s Just Won’t Go Away,”
The Washington Post, March 11, 2011

Blockbusters and Reaganism

Blockbuster movies wield considerable mass cultural influence on a global scale and represent one of the most profitable sources of revenue for Hollywood studios.¹ Despite the massive commercial success and far-reaching socio-cultural repercussions of this style of filmmaking, its ideological genealogy and historical development over the decades have received only limited scholarly attention.

Thus, this book will discuss specific “echoes” of Ronald Reagan’s rhetoric and ideology in Hollywood blockbuster movies since the 1980s. These echoes are understood as conceptual, narrative, and stylistic parallels between cinematic story lines and key tenets of Reaganism. In the context of the emergence of the contemporary blockbuster formula in the late 1970s, the Reagan presidency and its associated brand of cinema in the 1980s provide a unique semiotic anchoring point for an investigation of the cultural metatexts that have shaped two seemingly different cultural practices: postmodern presidential rhetoric and postmodern Hollywood filmmaking. Notably, both practices are informed by the reproduction of cultural knowledge through myths and the affirmation of mainstream self-certainties (Rogin, *Independence Day* 43), since both practices aim for an easily marketable mass appeal. Therefore, I approach both practices as textual formats, which are strongly intertwined with the underlying discourses that shape the creation, production, distribution, and dissemination of images. These practices have gained considerable

1 I define the term “Hollywood” as the “Big Six” film studios: Warner Bros. Pictures, 20th Century Fox, Paramount Pictures, Universal Pictures Sony Pictures Entertainment, and Walt Disney Studios.

currency as conveyors—and mediators—of societal discussions on race, gender, class, space, and body politics, as well as national and individual identity politics. Analyzing the interrelationship between the two can yield valuable insights into the workings and manifestations of a “national sub-conscious” since the 1980s (Britton 102–103; Wood 156–160; Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, The Movie*). The dramatization of struggles inherent in capitalist, gendered, and racist power structures arguably exerts its most far-reaching influence in the cultural productions of two institutions, which can easily leverage national and global attention: multinational Hollywood media conglomerates and the White House.

I will, therefore, begin by dissecting Reagan’s presidential rhetoric and then I will closely examine four blockbuster movies from the period between 1982 and 2012: *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), *Independence Day* (1996), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Avengers* (2012). In separate close readings, these films will be explored in terms of their resonance with or resistance to two key trajectories: Reaganite neoliberalism and Reaganite neoconservatism.² These two foci are further undergirded by a reactionary form of backlash politics in opposition to socially progressive movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Soles 2). Therefore, a set of political metaphors used by Reagan in his rhetoric will facilitate access to these two trajectories, while also serving as a “Reaganite lens” through which each film can be read.³ These ideological tenets will be followed over a period that extends beyond the Reagan presidency (1981–1989). This adds a diachronic⁴ dimension to the overall analysis.

The simultaneity of the rise of the blockbuster and the ascent of Reaganism (Jordan 29–50) puts Reagan’s brand of conservatism in a privileged position for a thorough historical analysis. Therefore, the perspective detailed in this book is unique, as it examines Reaganite echoes in Hollywood cinema beyond the 1980s and into the 2010s. Unlike previous, synchronic analyses of Reaganite cinema, which largely focused on the 1980s (Davies and Wells; Prince, *American Cinema of the 1980s*; Rossi; Hackett), I dive headfirst into the question of how far the cinematic Reagan era extends beyond the 1980s. Thus,

2 The terms “neoliberalism” and “neoconservatism” will be defined and contextualized in Chapter 1.

3 The term “Reaganite lens” is understood throughout this book to mean a filter that highlights the ideological tenets and contradictions central to Reaganism.

4 In this study, the term “diachronic” denotes the consistent tracing of one type of ideological discourse across multiple historical phases. “Synchronic” refers to the analysis of an ideological discourse within the period in which it originated.

this study contributes to a more precise delineation of the historical reach of the cinematic Reagan era and can, thereby, illuminate the pop cultural and ideological legacies of the 1980s in mass media.

The Long Shadow of the 1980s

The discussions in this book revolve around dramatized socio-cultural struggles and their cinematic resolution, from the early 1980s all the way to contemporary Hollywood. My argument is central to the following three claims:

- Hollywood blockbuster movies continue to recycle ideological tropes and metaphors that were prominent in both Reagan's rhetoric and Reagan-era cinema.
- Hollywood blockbuster movies incorporate both socially progressive and conservative visions in their negotiations of societal conflicts, which are presented as a "populist backlash" against forces that threaten white, middle-class masculinity.
- Hollywood blockbuster movies reflect their increasingly global and diverse viewership through the incorporation of a "multicultural neoliberalism," which cements the blockbuster's status as a "commodity spectacle." This points toward a reformulation of cultural struggles within a continued late capitalist and neoconservative framework.

Central to these claims is the observation that several technological and financial metastructures—which have governed the political economy of Hollywood since the late 1970s—are still intact or have gradually strengthened over the last four decades. These economic co-ordinates structure the output of major film studios in the United States against the backdrop of three continuing cultural, social, and political paradigms, which affect both supply and demand in the film business: neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and the so-called "culture wars" (Hunter). As Reaganism provided an early, right-wing articulation of all three of these discourses, there is reason to assume that subsequent reiterations of conservative discourses in Hollywood film still relate to this continuously dominant form of US conservatism.

The overarching theoretical framework for this analysis is based on Douglas Kellner's concepts of "technocapitalism" and the "media spectacle" (*Film, Politics, and Ideology; Media Culture; Media Spectacle*) as a basic epistemology for the reverberance of new mass media technologies in the cultural, political, and social realities of post-industrial societies. In this context, I will also

trace the continued repercussions of the corporatization of Hollywood studios, which started in the late 1970s (Jordan 40–41).

This becomes especially relevant given the fact that high-concept⁵ blockbusters, despite having been conceived 40 years ago, are nowadays more financially successful than ever. According to the box-office revenue-tracking website Box Office Mojo, 19 of the 20 highest-grossing films worldwide were produced in the period between 2009 and 2018.⁶ From a film historical perspective, the impact, resonance, and—most prominently—profitability of the blockbuster concept are increasing significantly (Prince, *A New Pot of Gold*). Therefore, I endeavor to offer a more holistic analysis characterized by a focus on the correspondences between a larger ideological consensus and the demand-driven, profit-oriented dynamics of Hollywood filmmaking (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*). This approach allows for a clearer delineation of the radical shifts that US society has experienced since the neoliberal departure from New Deal welfare capitalism and the intervention of progressive social movements in the 1960s and 1970s (Cannon; Troy, *The Reagan Revolution* 45–48). The Reagan presidency, therefore, emerges as a pivotal watershed moment for the ascendancy of a social/economic conservatism after the 1970s. This watershed moment is marked by the beginning of the culture wars, the end of the Cold War, and the institutionalization of a neoliberal consensus that has taken form not only as a political and economic, but also as a cultural regime.

In this context, the political rhetoric of subsequent presidents, from Reagan to Trump, is relevant as it sheds light on discernible commonalities, continuations, adaptations, and differences. Given the ongoing discussions about the legacy of 1980s neoliberalism during the 2008 financial crash, the emergence of the Tea Party movement in the United States, the echoes of Reagan's counterterrorism rhetoric in George W. Bush's "War on Terror," and the emphasis on an optimistic "American exceptionalism" in Barack Obama's and Bill Clinton's speeches (Freie 21), there are grounds for examining an overarching mode of political communication that has endured since the Reagan era (Sirota, *Back to Our Future*; Bunch).

5 The term "high concept" is used by film scholars to denote an artistic work that is built on a succinct premise or story line; for example, a "what-if" scenario or a "set of themes that could be easily summarized in a fifteen-second advertising spot or print campaign" (Jordan 63).

6 "All Time Box Office—Worldwide Grosses." [boxofficemojo.com](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/). Accessed January 1, 2019: <<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/>>.

How to Trace Ideology in Blockbusters?

As previously noted, Douglas Kellner's concepts of "technocapitalism" and the "media spectacle" (*Media Culture; Media Spectacle*) provide the primary starting point for my analysis. Susan Jeffords' notion of the "Hollywood hard body" (*Hard Bodies*), George Lakoff's dissection of the "strict father" model as a political framing device (*Elephant; Thinking Points*), and Roland Barthes' observations on the structure and usage of mythologies in late capitalist storytelling (*Mythologies*) will be utilized to build on this foundation. These different but interconnected prisms allow for a multi-perspectival analysis whereby blockbusters can be dissected as media spectacles within and beyond the filmic text.

Kellner's concept of the media spectacle provides an avenue for interrogating the political economy of Hollywood and its effects on filmic content. This facilitates the mapping-out of social and cultural transformations from different critical perspectives (Kellner, *Media Culture* 26), thereby allowing for the analysis of blockbusters as cultural phenomena rather than mere stand-alone texts. Top-grossing media spectacles are suited to such an inquiry as their commercial success and diffusion through merchandise and branding represent a broad collective experience of post-industrial consumerism (Kellner, *Media Culture* 37).⁷ This, in turn, has far-reaching implications for the continuation of neoliberal and neoconservative projects that started to take shape in the Reagan era.

Susan Jeffords' concept of the "hard body" offers a viable means of illuminating filmic narratives in terms of the portrayal of gender, as well as a reasserted national identity. In view of the post-Vietnam, post-stagflation, and post-Watergate climate during which the modern blockbuster formula was conceived, it is vital to interrogate how representations of the body reflect cultural fantasies of a conservative "pushback" against perceived threatening forces—either in the form of a racialized Other, shifts in gender relations, or technological progress. Jeffords argues that the re-centering of a muscle-laden and indestructible white masculinity is an expression of escalating fears of

7 In his book *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern*, Kellner posits that "focusing on texts and audiences to the exclusion of analysis of the social relations and institutions in which texts are produced and consumed truncates cultural studies, as does analysis of reception that fails to indicate how audiences are produced through their social relations and how to some extent culture itself helps produce audiences and their reception of text" (37).

imperial decline and the onset of globalization (*Hard Bodies* 3, 193). Thus, it is worth examining the depiction of bodies across decades and genres in order to explore the shifting contours of such pushback fantasies.

The conservative restoration of hierarchies is also central to Lakoff's "strict father" model. Lakoff's notion, which derives from his research in cognitive linguistics, allows depictions of the family and the use of tendentious metaphors and terminology to be pried apart. The narrative shape of what Lakoff describes as a "political frame" activates thought processes that link ideological mappings of society and its constituent binaries, for example, "the restoration of the family." The focus on simplified and heroic story lines in blockbuster movies presents fertile ground for exploring the construction of hierarchies and notions of the "nation as a family." The family metaphor continues to be a common feature of discourses that arise in the context of the culture wars (Hunter), especially since Reagan and the self-declared "Moral Majority" injected a reactionary and allegedly "values-oriented" family discourse into the conservative cultural lexicon. For these reasons, Lakoff's approach can generate detailed insights into the historic reconstruction and reformulation of "family" in the mainstream cinematic imagination.

Given the nature of films as audiovisual texts, both speech and visual language are critical to the construction of meanings. Therefore, Barthes' explorations of myths and mythologies facilitate the deconstruction of the interplay between image and speech in movies. Furthermore, Barthes offers methodological strategies to expose semiotic layers in connection with their ideological functioning. This allows for a thorough disassembling of national foundation myths, for example, or the essentialization of the Other in blockbuster movies. And since the Reagan era was infused with images of both capitalist and racist mythologies, Barthes' approach serves as a solid means of investigating potential commonalities between Reaganism and Hollywood tales.

These different approaches provide a comprehensive basis for investigating both the content and context of blockbuster movies. The intersections between cultural, political, and economic paradigm shifts, which are mirrored in major Hollywood productions, require a broad analysis that draws from multiple levels of inquiry. Thus, the "resonant images" of dramatized conflicts portrayed in film need to be examined in order to shed light on why these visual narratives are so popular and to determine the degree to which they reproduce or challenge domination in a societal context (*Media Culture* 107). In accordance with Kellner's understanding of media culture as "contested terrain" (*Media Culture* 101–102), movies are viewed in this book as multiple textual layers with often competing, resonant images. In this sense, the proposed analysis is

fundamentally geared toward uncovering implicit and explicit power dynamics that reflect prevalent societal conflicts.

Considering the nature of movies as “contested terrain” (Kellner & Ryan), this thesis does not seek to explore any direct and/or mono-causal relationships between Reaganism and Hollywood productions. As a multi-faceted phenomenon, cinematic spectacles are involved in a variety of contextual relationships that even a multi-perspectival approach cannot fully cover. In addition, the approaches selected for consideration in this book do not allow for a thorough disassembly of technical and cinematographic aspects. However, the analysis will offer dissections of filmic dialogues, cinematography, *mise-en-scène*, and the narration of selected scenes in order to decode the cinematic communication of implicit meanings.

These theoretical concepts are also unsuitable for the delimitation of blockbusters as a genre. While I will outline a working definition of the term “blockbuster movie,” a more targeted and comprehensive genre theory would be required to fully define this mode of filmmaking as a coherent entity. Yet, the analysis is conducive to discerning commonalities over the period in question and across subject genres and can thereby contribute to further scholarship on questions related to blockbusters as genre.

It should also be noted that these theoretical frameworks do not provide the tools for an exhaustive ideological analysis of either Reaganite rhetoric or all of the potential political symbolism of a given movie. Rather, the discussions in the ensuing chapters aim to illuminate critical watershed moments that affected both the history of Hollywood and US society at large. Thus, the development and trajectories of specific ideological inflections resulting from the corporatization of Hollywood in the 1970s can be delineated. This contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of media culture as a phenomenon that resides at the intersections of technology, capital, and dominant cultural discourses (*Media Culture* 102–103).⁸

Focal Points for Analysis

This book includes a theoretical discussion and the textual analyses of two phenomena: Reaganite rhetoric and its echoes in blockbuster movies.

8 As Kellner points out in his outline for contextual cultural studies, “films and other forms of media culture should be analyzed as ideological texts contextually and relationally” (*Media Culture* 102–103).

In Chapter 1, I will discuss the purpose, contours, and parameters of the selected theoretical approaches. Douglas Kellner's concepts of technocapitalism and media spectacle will serve as the starting point of my analysis, which will be further supported by Susan Jeffords' concept of the "hard body," George Lakoff's "strict father" model, and Roland Barthes' discussion of mythologies. I will also provide basic delineations of key terms, such as "neoliberalism" and "neoconservatism," as well as outlining a working definition of the term "blockbuster movie."

In Chapter 2, I will dissect Reagan's presidential and campaign rhetoric. This will include a textual analysis of the semiotic and ideological underpinnings of Reagan's public addresses. Thus, a set of parameters will be worked out, allowing for the proper positioning of these discourses in their cultural and political context. This analysis will incorporate Barthes' concepts of myth (*Mythologies* 106–164) and Lakoff's criteria for political framing and metaphors (*Thinking Points* 35–66; *Elephant* 3–34), as well as certain specifics of US-American political ideologies as outlined by Daniel P. Franklin (104–117). Kellner's observations on the facets of late capitalist media spectacles will provide additional context.

The ideology of Reaganism, which forms the basis for Reagan's rhetoric, is understood to be at the confluence of neoliberalism and neoconservatism and characterized by a reactionary stance in relation to cultural issues (i.e. the culture wars). In order to specify these ideological themes and translate them into narratives that can be juxtaposed with cinematic story lines, a set of key themes will be examined:

- The invocation of a mythical "limited/small government" during Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign and subsequent first term in office.
- The conception of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) or "Star Wars" program as a Cold War strategy for technological superiority in outer space.
- The framing of "terrorism" as "war" and the related discourse on individual heroism as a metaphor for national unity.
- The conception of rugged, self-styled entrepreneurialism as a discursive pushback strategy against economic anxieties and external competition.

These foci were selected on the basis of two main trajectories that are of vital importance for a diachronic analysis: the ascendancy of neoliberalism and neoconservatism as political and cultural regimes in the four decades after Reagan's election in 1980 (Godwin 56–84; Vaisse; Heilbrunn 105–128). Observations regarding the imperialist undertones of the SDI program and "terror as war" are bracketed by investigations of "rugged individualism" and masculine,

neoliberal capitalism. The specific order of these sections is reflective of the chronological arrangement of the movies.

Chapters 3 to 6 contain analyses of four seminal blockbuster movies from the time period between 1982 and 2012: *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), *Independence Day* (1996), *The Dark Knight* (2008), and *The Avengers* (2012). These movies fulfill the basic criteria necessary to be considered a Hollywood blockbuster movie, in the sense that these are high-concept films that were produced by major Hollywood studios and have grossed more than \$100 million domestically in their original run (Shone). They exceed these criteria in notable ways, as they constitute the most financially successful films of their respective decades and have entire merchandise universes attached to them. These filmic texts were also chosen on the basis of their historical positioning, as each one can be read as a reflection of a respective presidency since the 1980s. *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* will be analyzed as a reflection of middle-class anxieties regarding “big government” in the Reagan–Bush era; the examination of *Independence Day* will focus on Reaganite foreign policy echoes in the Clinton era; and *The Dark Knight* will be considered as a terrain for investigating the “War on Terror” metaphors of both Reagan and George W. Bush (Jackson 3). *The Avengers* was released during Obama’s first term, which was heavily impacted by the financial crash of 2008—an event that led many observers to claim that Reaganite neoliberalism had reached its end (White 185–212; Bunch 225–229).

Each movie will be analyzed in a separate chapter in a parallel pattern. The groundwork for discussing each movie as a blockbuster will be laid in a film historical overview centering on the political economy of Hollywood prior to and at the time of the release of the movie in question. This more descriptive perspective sheds light on questions of ownership and how these informed filmmaking decisions (especially in terms of narrative, style, and marketing). This will add a structuralist dimension to the overall analysis, thereby highlighting the interrelationship between the neoliberal turn of the late 1970s and the innovative and restorative qualities of blockbuster filmmaking in the following years.

The core analysis in each chapter will focus on a reading of the film itself. Key scenes, dialogues, and narrative threads will be analyzed from a stylistic and textual angle—leading to discussions on the implicit meanings and possible interpretations from a socio-cultural and historical perspective (Franklin; Gocsik et al. 39–46). Reagan’s rhetoric on the four themes outlined above and the related co-ordinates of his ideology will serve as a primary frame of reference for this ideological analysis. It is the goal of this analysis to determine the extent to which specific components of Reagan’s rhetoric overlap or clash with certain textual layers of the filmic narrative. Building on these foci, the textual

reading will draw together possible resonances and dissonances between Reagan's rhetoric and the movie. Hence, the analysis of each movie will be tied to a hypothesis of how the filmic text furnished certain imaginations of power struggles for which Reagan had provided his own answers.

In Chapter 3, *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* will be investigated through one of the principal antagonisms of the film: the conflict between government bureaucracy and white, suburban child protagonists. Through the formal and narrative positioning of Elliott and E.T. as victorious protagonists, it can be reasonably argued that the film's attitude toward this conflict is highly conducive to an interpretation that celebrates a racialized and gendered form of individualism in the face of an intruding, yet ultimately ineffective, bureaucracy. Against this backdrop, a possible interrelationship between Reagan's endorsement of a mythical "small government" in 1980 and the tremendous success of a blockbuster movie that pits suburban boys against federal agents in 1982 becomes tangible. I will, therefore, trace echoes of Reagan's campaign rhetoric in the movie and dissect the role of neoliberal policies in the production and distribution of the film.

The analysis of *Independence Day* in Chapter 4 will focus on echoes of Reaganite Cold War rhetoric and the translation of this rhetoric into a 1990s context through the inclusion of Clintonite discourses on "diversity" and "multilateralism." Through this lens, the continuation of Reaganism and its conceptions of "American exceptionalism" (Baker 10–14) throughout the Clinton years can be made visible. This chapter will, therefore, revolve around the reconstruction of the Reaganite Cold War imagination in *Independence Day* along the following parameters: the Reaganite approach to building and maintaining "space superiority," the role of "Messianic Americanism"⁹ (Dearborn 197–203), and the integration of Clintonite "multiculturalism" as a legitimizing vehicle for perpetual global hegemony (Rogin, *Independence Day*). All of these examples will serve to illustrate the continuation of conservative frameworks in both politics and pop culture during the 1990s and thereby shed light on the broader socioeconomic transformations that occurred in the preceding decade.

In this context, Chapter 5 explores how *The Dark Knight* reflects collective post-9/11 anxieties, the state of civil liberties, and the proper response to violent,

9 In his analysis of "American exceptionalism" in presidential rhetoric since 1897, John Dearborn identifies "Messianic Americanism" as a recurrent theme, marked by clear moral binaries and a religiously coded triumphalism. George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan are among the chief promulgators of this notion (28).

ideological challenges through non-state actors. The political and social climate after 9/11 provided numerous echo chambers for George W. Bush's neoconservative rhetoric. Cultural depictions of law enforcement, counter-terrorism, military interventions, and national security were inevitably influenced by Bush's framing of the newly found role of the US government as a so-called "defender of the civilized world." Therefore, it is vital for this analysis to determine the extent to which this overlaps with Reagan's public imagination of the fight against terrorism and identify possible echoes of such approaches in the movie. This will be supported by scholarly observations on how the firm, paternalistic and Manichean language that Reagan employed in the 1980s experienced an explicit and visceral comeback during the Bush administration (Jackson 3; Winkler 303–333). Reagan's framing of terrorism as "war," in particular, is prominently continued in political and cultural discourses. This framing is also echoed in *The Dark Knight*, which presents an ambivalent depiction of the struggle against terrorism and the usage of torture.

The 2012 Marvel superhero film *The Avengers*, discussed in Chapter 6, presents a cross-section of various ideological discourses that became pre-eminent in the wake of the continued "War on Terror," as well as the global financial crisis that hit the US economy particularly hard in the late 2000s. Among other topics, the filmic narrative deals with notions of the feasibility and effectiveness of US-American global leadership after the neoconservative turn during the Bush years. Moreover, it touches upon themes of post-industrial economic anxieties. This is crucial in the context of widespread doubts about Reaganite neoliberalism. For movie-going "millennial" generations, in particular, the paradigm of so-called "Reaganomics" seemed to have contributed to an economic crisis that had shattered myths of individual entrepreneurialism as beneficial to society. These doubts and insecurities were addressed by Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. In tandem with the Obama presidency, *The Avengers* can therefore be read as a progressive renegotiation of certain elements of Reaganite neoliberalism, especially the notion of entrepreneurialism as a vital element in maintaining the national body.

It should be noted that this analysis does not seek to argue that Reaganite rhetoric is in any direct causal relationship with the respective movies and/or their narrative content. Akin to Susan Jeffords' discussion of the Reaganite "hard body" in 1980s cinema, this inquiry is

about the correspondences between the public and popular images of "Ronald Reagan" and the action-adventure Hollywood films that portrayed many of the same

narratives of heroism, success, achievement, toughness, strength, and “good old Americanness” that made the Reagan Revolution¹⁰ possible. (*Hard Bodies* 15)

This examination aims to explain how the rise of conservative neoliberalism—and its mainstream popularization through Reagan—helped to create a popular cultural atmosphere in which such movies would thrive.

Furthermore, the textual analysis does not attempt to suggest an ideological congruence between Reaganism and the entirety of all of these movies’ possible meanings. The analysis is dedicated to juxtaposing a primary theme of Reagan’s politic rhetoric at a given time (mainly from his presidential speeches given between 1981 to 1989) with the implicit meanings of selected scenes and narrative threads that arise from the central conflict presented within the movie in question. The prospective argument rests on the premise that—based on the examined aspects of the film—the narrative reinforces Reagan’s rhetoric rather than contradicts it, that is, more compelling evidence speaks for his rhetoric than against it. Therefore, possible dissonances with Reaganite themes will be part of this analysis, as they can offer valuable insights into the extent to which the cinematic Reagan era is disrupted by popular counter-narratives. This can help to delineate the complicated and multi-directional exchange between Hollywood film and political shifts since the late 1970s.

The resulting findings and observations will be summarized and discussed in “Conclusions and Outlook.” This final section will locate important conclusions within contemporary scholarship, as well as offer suggestions for further inquiries. Special attention will be paid to recent manifestations of a cinema- and TV-inflected spectacle logic in politics, most notably the “Trump phenomenon,” which marks the second time that a former mass media celebrity has gained access to the White House. This development demonstrates the ongoing relevance of media spectacles in the narration and structuring of societal conflicts, which underlines the importance of the analysis in this book.

10 The term “Reagan Revolution” is a highly contentious one as there is significant disagreement over whether it succeeded on its own terms (Troy, *The Reagan Revolution* 53–70) and whether its goals can even be described as “revolutionary,” rather than reactionary.

Why Does Reaganism in Blockbusters Matter?

The exploration of the relationship between Reaganite imagery and blockbuster success is of the utmost importance in the contextualization of a variety of ongoing cultural and political transformations in the United States.

Through the diachronic analysis of Reaganism in Hollywood entertainment, critical new insights can be gained regarding the legacies of the cultural and economic rightward shift that occurred in the late 1970s (Lemann 401–411), including observations that can help to determine the film historical extent of what Andrew Britton dubs “Reaganite entertainment” (97–111). Like numerous other scholars, Britton places the beginning of this period outside the actual Reagan presidency, pointing out that “the characteristic features of this movement—both formal and thematic—are already substantially developed in films which were made before the election of the current president: not only *Rocky* (1976) and *Star Wars* (1977), but also the disaster cycle” (97). As the start of this trend toward reactionary and capitalist reassurance in Hollywood cinema began before Reagan’s election (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*: 15), it is worthwhile investigating the extent to which this legacy continued after Reagan left office in 1989. Which possible film historical watersheds could signal a dissipation, continuation, or possible intensification of the themes and formats of the cinematic Reagan era? Blockbusters offer a unique perspective on this film historical question as they mirror broad and critical developments in mass media entertainment.

This angle also serves to provide new material for a discussion of Chris Jordan’s projection that “the trends in Hollywood production, distribution, and exhibition, which coalesced under the Reagan administration’s philosophy of success, will continue to grow for the foreseeable future” (160). Through an investigation of these trends in major filmic spectacles into the twenty-first century, these assumptions can be fleshed out and defined with clearer thematic and formal contours. This has repercussions not only for cinema in the United States, but also for filmmaking around the globe, as the blockbuster formula is now being adopted by producers on all continents (Scott, “Hollywood and the World” 33–61).

This perspective can also be linked to historian Sean Wilentz’s claim that the period between 1974 and 2008 presented an “extended Reagan era” in that it was primarily shaped by the cultural dominance of right-wing and neoliberal discourses (1–11). Journalist David Sirota offers a similar view in his book *Back to Our Future*, in which he posits that conservative action entertainment and

1980s mass media culture are returning to the screen in an intensified manner (xx). Therefore, my analysis forms part of a larger discussion about the history of pop cultural spectacles and the frequent recourse to the cultural and political struggles of the 1980s.

Furthermore, this book offers an in-depth and historical analysis of what Kellner terms “media cultural studies.” He describes this as “the project of analyzing the complex relations between texts, audiences, media industries, politics, and the socio-historical context in specific conjunctures” (*Media Culture* 37). Conducting such investigations into some of the pre-eminent filmic texts of the last few decades presents an excellent opportunity to enter into discussions on the role of the spectacle in mediating cultural and political meanings in a post-industrial setting. This is critical for the cultivation of new forms of resistance and audience empowerment (340) at a time when pop culture and political spectacles are increasing at an exponential rate (Street 435–452).

This is also observable in the rise of “celebrity politics” in the United States, for which the Reagan presidency arguably provided a lasting blueprint.¹¹ In his discussion of “The Democratic Worth of Celebrity Politics in an Era of Late Modernity,” Mark Wheeler speaks of the “‘hyper-reality’ of the US entertainment–politics nexus” (415), which politicians such as Reagan or Obama have filled using “telegenic imagery.” Dissecting entertainment-oriented media spectacles on multiple textual levels offers a means of uncovering the mechanisms of post-industrial power structures in a digitalized age. As mass media spectacles continue to be shaped by neoliberal logic and vast technological shifts, the tracing of ideological trajectories in such spectacles facilitates the diagnosis of the persistence of specific pop cultural images and plotlines that are now experiencing a general resurgence.

So far, little scholarship has been conducted on what Sam Saunders described as “the Age of the Remake” in an article for *The Huffington Post* in 2012. The notable trend toward franchise reboots—with a focus on blockbusters from the 1980s¹²—begs the question of how cinematic imagination continues to borrow

11 In his piece for *The Guardian*, entitled “You’re hired! How TV carried Reagan and Trump to the White House,” journalist Jonathan Freedland argues that “A facility on TV had been important since John F. Kennedy, but Reagan made it an essential requirement of the job” (*The Guardian* (September 27, 2017). Accessed November 18, 2018: <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/sep/29/youre-hired-how-tv-carried-reagan-and-trump-to-the-white-house>>).

12 A few key examples are the *Ghostbusters* remake in 2016, the reboot of the *Star Wars* franchise with *The Force Awakens* in 2015, a *Top Gun* sequel slated to be released in 2020, and the continuation of the *Terminator* series in film and television.

from the societal dramas of the Reagan era in order to produce crowd-pleasers of global magnitude. This diachronic angle allows for a better delineation of the historical contours of power and resistance, which remain relevant to this very day. Through an examination of production and distribution, this analysis can shed further light on how recycled tropes of white, masculine heroism are negotiated in changing technological and transnational settings.

In her final thoughts on the future of the Hollywood “hard body”, Susan Jeffords articulates a similar line of thought. She expects the “hard body” to show resiliency and become “more intimately woven into the fabric of American culture” (*Hard Bodies* 192–193). She goes on to state that these national models of masculinity

are dangerous models, not only because they depend on the kind of nationalism and militarism that brought the country to military actions in Panama, Grenada, and the Persian Gulf but also because they seem now to represent the desperation of an aging superpower that is reluctant, under a conservative framework, to relinquish its international status and influence and may, like William Munny, be willing to punish harshly those who insist to do so. (193)

With this projected development in mind, the ruptures caused by 9/11, the disastrous Iraq War, and the financial meltdown of 2008 have resulted in more egregious, more punitive and more complex presentations of the “hard body.” For this reason, the analysis of movies that reflect the imagined social mood at specific historical moments in the post-Reagan era assists in determining the extent to which blockbusters still rush to generate cultural fantasies that tackle mounting challenges to white, male US-led capitalism in a globalizing world. For instance, *Independence Day* was released at a time of relative economic growth and post-Cold War triumphalism; *The Dark Knight* was produced in response to the illegal excesses of the Bush administration’s so-called “War on Terror”; and *The Avengers* is informed by economic and imperial anxieties brought about by the financial crisis of 2008 and the re-emergence of Russia and China as challengers to US-American hegemony (Dodds 476–494).¹³

13 In his article “‘Have You Seen Any Good Films Lately?’ Geopolitics, International Relations and Film,” Klaus Dodds notes that “At times of crisis, Hollywood has often been more than willing and able to produce and market films designed to ‘raise’ national morale and spirit” (476). Hollywood shares this mythical distinction with Ronald Reagan, who is frequently said to have “lifted the spirits of the nation” by both liberal and conservative commentators (Schroeder; Rollins), though such claims often neglect the question of whether he “improved the nation” (Bunch 229).

The filmic dramatization of social conflicts is also relevant to a more comprehensive understanding of the culture wars (Hunter 274–278) and increasing political polarization in the United States (Wood B. 45–65). The “battles” in this struggle are frequently fought using memorable rhetoric, compelling images, and narratives about the role of the United States and its people in world history (Dearborn 197–203). Hence, the exploration of the role of metaphors in “Reaganite cinema” constitutes an indispensable part of the elucidation of the cultural shifts and polarization that the United States has been experiencing since the late 1970s.

Moreover, this analysis will yield further details on the survival of mythical images from the 1980s. These are of relevance to contemporary scholarship regarding more recent and deliberate myth-making efforts surrounding Reagan’s divisive political and cultural legacy (Bunch 209–229; Espinoza). Notable among these efforts to bring back Reaganite ideology is the “Reagan Purity Rest” introduced by the Republican National Committee (Beinart) and the efforts of the Ronald Reagan Legacy Project, launched by conservative writer Grover Norquist in 1997, an organization that has dedicated itself to renaming public sites throughout the country after the fortieth president (Bunch 151–154). This relatively new phenomenon has so far only received scant attention in academic discussions on the cultural legacy of the first actor-president.¹⁴ But in light of the tremendous popularity of blockbuster movies and their perpetual recuperation of tropes from the 1980s, it is crucial to detail the workings of reimagined presidential mythologies through the prism of the media spectacle (Werner 1–18).

Ultimately, this analysis is designed to shed light on how the ideological underpinnings of cinematic conflicts interconnect with a form of rhetoric that aided in effecting a reactionary shift in social and economic policies in the United States at a crucial point in history. Therefore, this analysis will illuminate the production, distribution, and inherent mythologies of two ongoing cinematic blockbusters: Hollywood spectacle movies and the Reagan era.

14 In his article on “Evocative Mythology: Constructing Reagan the Cold Warrior in Public Memory, 1980–2012,” Jack Werner explains that “it is the meeting point of Reagan the man and the story of American Exceptionalism as told by Reagan himself that empowers evocative mythology” (12). Contemporary Reagan mythologies are arguably shaped by cinematic narratives that Reagan utilized in the construction of his persona.