

Chapter 1 Tracing Echoes in Film

Ronald Reagan!?! The actor? Then who's Vice President?

Jerry Lewis?

— *Doctor Emmett Brown in Back to the Future (1985)*

Chapter Overview

The basic underlying claims of my book will be supported by the following concepts:

- The “media spectacle,” as defined by Douglas Kellner in his books *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity, and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern* (1995) and *Media Spectacle* (2003).
- The Hollywood “hard body,” as postulated by Susan Jeffords in her book *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (1994).
- The concept of the “strict father” as a political framing device, based on George Lakoff’s books *Don’t Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate* (2004) and *Thinking Points: Communicating Our American Values and Vision* (2006).
- A brief summary of the role of mythical signifiers in political narratives, as outlined by Roland Barthes in his book *Mythologies* (1972).

In addition, I will define my terminology (e.g. the term “blockbuster”) and circumscribe the potential advantages and limitations of the chosen approach.

The Case for the Continued Reaganization of Hollywood Blockbusters

As outlined in the introduction, the analysis in this book revolves around echoes of Reaganite rhetoric and metaphors in Hollywood blockbuster movies between 1982 and 2012. The ensuing examination of blockbuster movies as cultural and political texts will serve to test the following central assumptions:

- Hollywood Blockbuster movies continue to recycle pop cultural tropes that arrived in the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate, post-Iranian hostage crisis and post-stagflation climate of the early Reagan era, for example, the Hollywood

“hard body,” the biracial buddy cop duo fighting against a foreign invasion (Jordan 77), the usage of outer space as a narrative terrain for high-tech militarism, the “Reaganite female” (Kellner, *Media Culture*, 78), the “restoration of the father” as a response to 1960s social progressivism (Wood 152–155), the framing of terrorism as “war,” and the fashioning of domestic bureaucracy as well-meaning, but ultimately inept and/or harmful (much like Reagan portrayed the administration of Jimmy Carter).

- Hollywood blockbuster movies resolve the depicted social conflicts through a synthesized form of pushback politics. These pushback politics are characterized by both socially progressive and conservative imagery that is interwoven into triumphalist high-tech spectacles that generally affirm a form of late capitalism and US imperialism that gained ascendancy in the 1970s and 1980s.
- Hollywood blockbuster spectacles have evolved to incorporate social critique by espousing visions of “multicultural neoliberalism.” These films generally lack a coherent critique of late capitalism, but they do employ representational strategies that maximize appeal beyond the traditional white, middle-class Hollywood clientele. In doing so, they leave intact central provisions of neoliberalism as a cultural regime. Furthermore, this brand of “social progressivism” lacks a coherent stance against neoconservatism, leading to ambivalent cultural negotiations of “The War on Terror.”

These three positions are best understood as principal lines of investigation rather than stand-alone hypotheses since the diachronic angle for the analysis is geared toward the gradual uncovering of ideological and socio-cultural trajectories over a string of filmic analyses. As mentioned in the introduction, each specific blockbuster will be analyzed through the central prism of one specific core theme of Reaganism. Consequently, many observations and conclusions will be aggregated as the analysis progresses. Discussions of later films will draw on the insights of previous inquiries in this book, thereby painting an increasingly holistic picture of the ideological undercurrents of blockbusters. The aggregate nature of these arguments also applies to the themes of Reaganite rhetoric that will structure the film analysis:

- the “small-government” metaphor
- Cold War in outer space
- (counter-)terrorism as war
- hard-bodied entrepreneurialism.

As noted in the introduction, these foci have been selected because they mirror two essential constants of 1980s conservatism: neoliberalism (e.g. “small government,” hard-bodied entrepreneurialism) and neoconservatism (Cold War and counter-terrorism rhetoric). It should be acknowledged that these themes do not provide an exhaustive overview of Reaganism when considered individually, but taken together they can yield valuable insights into ideological correspondences between “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 revolution possible” (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 15).

The principal claims aim to engage with these correspondences and thereby set the stage for what Douglas Kellner has dubbed “diagnostic critique”: “A diagnostic critique also analyzes how media culture provides the resources for producing identities and advances either reactionary or progressive politics, often providing ambiguous texts and effects that can be appropriated in various ways” (*Media Culture* 6). Given the status of feature films as contested terrains for competing social visions, it is much less important to ask whether a movie pushes a certain point of view than it is to interrogate which specific societal struggles and dramas are chosen and how they are resolved (Kellner, *Media Spectacle* 2). In this context, the role of mass media in “agenda setting” for collective discourses should not be understated. Christensen and Haas point out that “movies contribute to general social and political learning, including affective patterns. Movies are part of a larger political socialization process” (12–15). This aspect of cinematic socialization has arguably acquired a new dimension as a result of the ascent of new multi-media technologies and enhanced modes of cross-channel distribution. When combined with a shifting language in cultural and identity struggles in a post-1960s climate, these technological shifts generate new forms of cultural mediation that make use of film’s power to reduce complexity in order to generate an accessible mass product.

This applies not only to film, but also to political communication. As Robert E. Denton, Jr. notes: “[T]he media reduce abstract or ideological principles to human personal components. Political issues and actions are linked to individuals. Rather than choose among policies or ideologies, we select among actors” (Denton in Prince, *Visions of Empire* xiv). The performance of simplicity in a time of (perceived) increasing complexity has significant repercussions for the narration of social conflicts and the diffusion of such narratives. The fact that Denton highlights the term “actor” emphasizes the centrality of cinematic imagination in channeling notions of hegemony or resistance. This book aims to elucidate the underlying technological and cultural shifts that have put

“actors” into the spotlight as prime mediators of national identity—both on the big screen and in the White House.

Subsequently, engaging in the power struggles that arise from these multitudinous shifts requires a thorough understanding of the genealogy and manifestations of contemporary media spectacles. Therefore, a multi-perspectival approach is suitable to highlight interrelationships between different sets of struggles not only through an intersectional lens, but also by including the political economy of cultural productions in conjunction with larger technological transformations. For this reason, Kellner’s concept of the “media spectacle” will be presented in the following section.

The Media Spectacle According to Douglas Kellner

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word “spectacle” as “a visually striking performance or display” or alternatively as “an event or scene regarded in terms of its visual impact.”¹⁵ These definitions point to the crucial aspect of visual experience—as well as the “pleasure of viewing” the spectacle. The performance aspect indicates that certain types of spectacles take the form of staged events (unlike natural spectacles, for example). It is critical to recognize the conscious and deliberate nature of these staged performances in order to comprehend the relationships between media spectacles and society.¹⁶ Therefore, this section will outline the nature of Kellner’s concept of the “media spectacle” and its social and economic functioning against the backdrop of post-industrial technological changes.

Kellner builds his concept of the “media spectacle” on Guy Debord’s notion of the “society of the spectacle” (Kellner, *Media Spectacle* 2–11). Debord contextualized the term “spectacle” in his observations on French post-war capitalism, in which he described a form of societal organization whereby commodities and consumption are at the heart of mass cultural productions (Kellner, *Media Spectacle* 2). Kellner further explicates this notion:

15 “Spectacle,” *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*, oxforddictionaries.com. Accessed December 21, 2018: <<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/spectacle>>.

16 Thompson et al. argue that current academic “theories of spectacle highlight how the productive forces of marketing, often associated with media and Internet proliferation, create symbolic forms of practice that are emblematic of everyday situations” (16). The spectacle as a pre-mediated cultural practice has therefore been at the center of recent scholarly discourse.

I argue that media spectacles are those phenomena of media culture that embody contemporary society's basic values, serve to initiate individuals into its way of life, and dramatize its controversies and struggles, as well as its modes of conflict resolution. [...] while Debord presents a rather generalized and abstract notion of spectacle, I engage specific examples of media spectacle and how they are produced, constructed, circulated, and function in the present era. (2)

Kellner's concept therefore aims to read media spectacles as comprehensive texts independent of the content of the actual audiovisual narrative. Media spectacles need to be understood within their respective economic, cultural, and political contexts in order to fully comprehend the undercurrents of their staged performances. This is especially vital for cultural productions that are primarily conceived as commodities, such as blockbuster movies. Furthermore, media spectacles are embedded within a market logic of maximizing attention and emotional resonance with a target audience from early screenwriting to the distribution of mass merchandise during and after the film's release. The entire life cycle can be read as a bona-fide cultural text that reflects the predominant biases and aspirations of both the producers and consumers. In his discussion of Hollywood's effects on the political culture in the United States, Daniel P. Franklin summarizes the market orientation of contemporary media spectacles: "[I]f films are truly made to meet the demands of the consumer, then the logic of the influence of film is simple. Filmmakers are businessmen and businesswomen. They want to make money. They make money by giving the public what it wants. Films then come to largely reflect the sensibilities of their audience" (20). Thus, it can be concluded that accomplished media spectacles not only expose widespread cultural epistemologies of basic values, controversies, and struggles, as Kellner aptly notes, but also provide insights into how the dissemination of images is anticipated and ultimately effectuated through established channels. Thus, the analyses in the following chapters of major Hollywood productions over the last 40 years will interrogate filmic texts, their production and distribution contexts, and their larger repercussions as pop cultural watersheds.

It can be observed that the corporatized structure of major Hollywood studios generally follows this logic, at least when it comes to their flagship, most capital-intensive products: blockbuster movies. In order to generate a maximum return on investment, a product needs to sell across demographics, across borders, and across different walks of life. In light of this, Kellner adds to Debord's theory that "spectacle culture has expanded in every area of life. In the culture of the spectacle, commercial enterprises have to be entertaining to

prosper” (*Media Spectacle* 3). Contemporary mass media spectacles therefore rely on the circulation of branded merchandise for their perpetuation in ancillary markets.¹⁷ What Kellner’s dubs the “commodification of previously non-colonized sectors of social life and the extension of bureaucratic control to the realms of leisure, desire, and everyday life” accentuates the interplay between larger technological transformations that haven taken place since the publication of Debord’s original theory in 1967.

In his book *Movies and the Reagan Presidency: Success and Ethics*, film scholar Chris Jordan designates the advent of multiplexes, cable television, and home video as momentous changes in the media landscape of the 1970s (40–48); this set the stage for so-called “high-concept movies,” including blockbusters.¹⁸ Thus, it can reasonably deduced that media spectacles also serve to negotiate technological shifts by transforming them into accessible items for consumption. The reduction of complexity in an increasingly heteronomous environment is achieved through bombastic, audiovisual catharsis, which underlines the instructive character of spectacles as heralds of technocapitalism (Kellner, *Media Spectacle* 11–15). Kellner connects contemporary spectacle culture with technocapitalism:

[C]urrently, we are entering a new form of technocapitalism marked by a synthesis of capital and technology and the information and entertainment industries, all of which is producing an “infotainment society” and spectacle culture. In terms of political economy, the emerging postindustrial form of technocapitalism is characterized by a decline of the state and enlarged power for the market, accompanied by the growing strength of transnational corporations and governmental bodies and the decreased strength of the nation-state and its institutions.

The ascent of the current form of media spectacle is inseparably linked with globalization and the rise of neoliberal capitalism. This creates an interconnection between the transformations that took place in Western societies in the 1970s and 1980s, marking the Reagan era as a political watershed moment for the development of media spectacles in a US-American context. The current form of spectacle culture is designed and institutionalized in a climate

17 Kellner notes that in order “to succeed in the ultracompetitive global marketplace, corporations need to circulate their image and brand name, so business and advertising combine in the promotion of corporations as media spectacles” (*Media Spectacle* 4).

18 Chris Jordan remarks that the term “high-concept” refers to “a mode of movie production that favors projects that can be summarized in a thirty-second television spot and sold in a single sentence” (7).

marked by increasing tension between corporate commercial interests and the institutionalized powers of the industrial nation state. The overall trend toward a post-industrial societal fabric manifests itself in cultural productions that dramatize such tensions and reflect popular desires for either the valorization or demonization of certain characteristics of the pre-neoliberal era. As a result, the usage of modern technology in spectacle narratives (both in terms of style and content) needs to be understood within the context of such cultural transformations.

The Reagan era presents an excellent starting point for tracing these developments over time, as it was situated within the context of a reactionary realignment whereby post-industrial high-tech capitalism was married to social visions derived from racist and heterosexist conservatism. This bifurcation was advertised by the Reagan persona, which presented a novel form of political spectacle, one that explicitly brought the tropes of the Hollywood cinematic form into the arena of national political discourse in the United States. Kellner notes that

his presidency was scripted to act out and play his presidential role. Reagan rehearsed his lines every day and generally gave a good performance. Every move was scripted and his media handlers had cameras on hand to provide the image, photo opportunity, and political line of the day that they wanted to convey to the media. Reagan was also a celebrity, a superstar of media culture, [...] and perhaps the first intersection of celebrity and politics in an era in which celebrities were increasingly not just role models but political forces who ran for office or were active politically. (*Media Spectacle* 166)

While Reagan's impact and legacy are hotly debated, Kellner rightly identifies the adeptness of his "performance" of the presidency for a modern TV format. Central to this media spectacle are the formulation of bite-sized (high-concept) plotlines, prudent choreography, and telegenic appearances. The "Reagan persona" should therefore be read not only as a product of Hollywood, but also as an active contributor to the introduction of late capitalist forms of cinematic storytelling into wider societal arenas (Thompson et al. 11).¹⁹ In line with McLuhan's seminal slogan that the "medium is the message" (*Medium is the Message* 8; *Understanding Media* 309), the delivery of political ideology in a

19 In "Puppets of Necessity? Celebritisation in Structured Reality Television," Thompson et al. state that "field actors are not intermediaries [...], but are themselves active agents in the process, actively shaping, and being shaped by the meanings produced" (11).

mass spectacle exemplifies the role of popular culture in conveying and shaping social meanings.

Kellner's conceptualization of the media spectacle has numerous advantages for the analysis contained in this book. The dramatization of eminent societal conflicts in cinematic form takes place in an increasingly complex social environment. This calls for an investigation of how blockbuster movies manage to transcend societal fragmentation and polarization and draw a maximum number of spectators. An adequate set of answers to this question can be provided by looking at the filmic text and its cultural, political, and economic contexts. Kellner's concept of the media spectacle highlights the interrelationship between staged performances and their production and distribution in fertile ways.

Since the four film analyses are united by a diachronic perspective, it is also necessary to investigate how the corporatization of Hollywood film production has shaped stylistic and thematic elements of blockbuster filmmaking over the last 40 years. Kellner's concept of technocapitalism facilitates this investigation, as it illuminates the workings of globalization and neoliberal capitalism in cultural mass productions. The associated conflicts surrounding the roles of technology, the state, and cultural discourses inherited from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s inevitably lead to updated translations of societal tensions.

Moreover, Kellner's approach traces the manifestation of spectacles through the entire process of production, construction, and circulation (*Media Spectacle* 2). This is vital for contextualizing the primary subject of this analysis, which seeks to understand blockbuster movies as a cultural and political phenomenon. Unlike other kinds of films, blockbusters are principally defined by their production design and awarded "blockbuster status" when they deliver the desired commercial mass effects (Hall 147–166).²⁰ Merely looking at the filmic text will not do justice to the larger implications of blockbusters as a societal spectacle. Thus, Kellner's approach offers a valuable means of studying the interplay between production, distribution, and the form and content of the movie itself.

As Kellner notes, the Reagan presidency is unprecedented in the pop culture history of the United States. A movie celebrity performed within the nation's

20 Sheldon Hall and Steve Neale define blockbusters in their book *Epics, Spectacles, and Blockbusters: A Hollywood History* as "unusually expensive productions designed to earn unusually large amounts of money"—that is to say, films which are not just exceptionally successful box-office hits but those which are specifically intended to be so, and are budgeted, made and marketed accordingly" ("Pass the Ammunition" 148).

highest office by explicitly referring to tropes borrowed from Hollywood imagination. One of these tropes, decisively shaped by blockbusters and Reagan in the 1980s, is the “hard body.”

The Hollywood “Hard Body” According to Susan Jeffords

In order to outline the role of the “body” in this study, it is necessary to briefly define the cultural and political dimensions of the term. Nadia Brown and Sarah Allen Gershon describe bodies as “sites in which social constructions of differences are mapped onto human beings. Subjecting the body to systemic regimes—such as government regulation—is a method of ensuring that bodies will behave in socially accepted manners” (1). The cultural representation of bodies is therefore inextricably linked to constructed social hierarchies and the exercise of power. Thus, bodies present a unique focal point for the investigation of ideological conflicts in popular culture, as they serve as accessible signifiers for prevalent conflicts.²¹

Susan Jeffords applies this understanding of the body as a contested terrain to both human beings and fantasies of national identity at large. In her assessment of how Reagan performed as both “a president and a man,” she states that

to the extent that the president stands for the nation, and to the extent that a particular president constructs that standing in distinctly masculine terms, then national identity must itself be figured in relation to popular masculine models and narratives of masculine generation and power. (*Hard Bodies* 12)

Jeffords considers the ramifications of bodies for dominant understandings of masculinity, femininity, the family, and national identities. The last of these relates directly to technological capabilities, notions of economic strength, and the narrative situating of the nation in global contexts. This indicates that large-scale economic, technological, and political realignments will manifest themselves in a cultural body politics that reflects updated notions of social conflict.

21 Brown and Gershon go on to state that “[p]ower is not manifested in a static form. [...] Analyzing the body as a site where power is contested and negotiated provides scholars with the ability to examine the fluidity of privilege and marginalization” (1). Through the diachronic approach, the analysis of bodies in filmic texts can generate insights into the developments of these very fluidities in relation to race, gender, and class, for example.

Susan Jeffords argues that the Reagan presidency constituted a watershed, in which a significant change in popular depictions of the body can be observed:

In the broadest of terms, whereas the Reagan years offered the image of a “hard body” to contrast directly to the “soft bodies” of the Carter years, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw a reevaluation of that hard body, not for a return to the Carter soft body, but for a rearticulation of masculine strength and power through internal, personal and family-oriented values. (*Hard Bodies* 13)

Pop cultural manifestations of the body also mirror larger narratives of political difference. This applies especially to media spectacles, which try to tap into a national subconscious. Tracing the specificities of fictional bodies in blockbuster movies can therefore uncover the implicit workings of larger socio-cultural metatexts in relation to political economy and global transformations. Jeffords’ understanding of the “hard body” as a national body is significant for the analysis of characters that come from a marginalized position. As I intend to examine expressions of “multicultural neoliberalism,” the integration of emancipatory discourses through bodies acquires a new dimension in the context of the national body. For example: How should we read the social meanings of feminine bodies that are incorporated into larger masculine structures of militaristic defense?²²

Building on the conceptualization of the masculine body as expressive of national identity at a time of tectonic social shifts, Jeffords sets out to provide a definition of the “hard body” that underlines how it has been shaped by long-standing power binaries:

In the dialectic of reasoning that constituted the Reagan movement, bodies were deployed in two fundamental categories: the errant body containing sexually transmitted disease, immorality, illegal chemicals, “laziness”, and endangered fetuses, which we can call the “soft body”; and the normative body that enveloped strength, labor, determination, loyalty, and courage—the “hard body”—the body that was to come to stand as the emblem of the Reagan philosophies, politics, and economics. In

22 In this context, Kellner has outlined the notion of the “Reaganite female.” In his brief analysis of the character Charlotte “Charlie” Blackwood in the quintessential Reagan-era action movie *Top Gun* (1986), he states “Charlie (Kelly McGillis), is the perfect Reaganite female: competitive, out for promotion, and proper in her behavior. She incarnates a conservative appropriation of feminism in which women compete as equals with men while retaining their ‘femininity.’ ‘Charlie’ has a man’s name, but thoroughly feminine looks, sensibility, and behavior. She also represents the new woman in the military, and during a period in which the volunteer army depended on women recruits, her image of a successful and attractive military woman provides free recruitment advertisements for the volunteer army” (*Media Culture* 78).

this system of thought marked by race and gender, the soft body invariably belonged to a female and/or a person of color, whereas the hard body was, like Reagan’s own, male and white. (*Hard Bodies* 24–25)

The “hard body” is therefore geared toward binary epistemologies of conflict and a clear-cut construction of social difference. This trope is located right at the center of the corporate-sponsored media spectacle, which generally seeks to reduce complexity and resolve conflict in an easily narratable form. Thus, “hard bodies” arrived at a time wherein increased demands for collective pleasure (27) coincided with the development of enhanced technologies capable of producing and distributing spectacles on an unprecedented scale.

In its essence, the “hard body” is evocative of popular desires for the restoration of an imaginary patriarchal, invincible, and dominant masculinity. In a political climate that was marked by the recent failure of US-American imperialism in Southeast Asia and the added humiliation of the Iranian hostage crisis from 1979 to 1981, the national body seemed to be “post-imperial” (3), vulnerable, and weakened from the perspective of white, normative masculinity. Reagan entered the national scene in the aftermath of these perceived degradations and performed as a viewable “hard body” himself. His status as a “hard body” was partly inherited from his acting roles in the 1940s and 1950s, which often saw him donning the attire of the “lone Western hero.” However, John Hinckley’s failed assassination attempt in 1981 offered spectators in the United States (and around the world) an instructive spectacle of the “hard body” in the 1980s. Reagan not only managed to survive, making him the first President of the United States to survive a shooting, but “stayed in character throughout” (30), making quippy remarks and entertaining the hospital staff. To many conservatives, this image of an impenetrable national body signaled a restoration of a masculinity that had previously been challenged by progressive interventions in the form of second-wave feminism, the Civil Rights Movement, and countercultural lifestyles.²³ Particularly after the Vietnam War, when filmic negotiations of this conflict were in high demand, Reagan catered to demands for a “strengthened and prepared body,” one which would soon find its way into the *Rambo* franchise of the 1980s.

Unlike previous “hard bodies” of the 1970s, the Reagan-era “hard body” is characterized by ultimate triumphalism—despite initial marginalization by

23 Robin Wood explains that the “restoration of the father” in Reagan-era cinema corresponds with “the restoration of women, after a decade of feminism and “liberation” (152).

bureaucratic authorities or a “soft-bodied” public.²⁴ Jeffords points to *Dirty Harry* (1971) as a precedent. In this film, the main character exhibits core elements of the Reagan-era “hard body”—a disdain for bureaucratic authority and procedure, rampant racism and sexism, a trigger-happy demeanor—and has a soft-bodied antagonist. However, Clint Eastwood’s character is denied a full societal rehabilitation at the end. Instead of being lauded by an approving public, Harry Callahan merely walks away from the scene of the final showdown (19). The Reaganite “hard body,” on the other hand, is generally awarded a sense of social triumph. Jeffords notes that, in lieu of nihilist visions of a doomed society that characterized previous depictions of “hard bodies,” the new type of “hard bodies” can successfully resuscitate institutions that have seemingly “fallen prey” to misguided individuals, who very often exhibit a soft-bodied and implicitly liberal bent (19).

Despite its apparent coherence, the “hard body” is not without contradictions. Jeffords observes that the hyper-masculine Hollywood protagonists of the 1980s must repeatedly navigate the inconsistencies and ethical dilemmas of technological progress. She notes that Reagan’s position on modern technologies was incongruous, as his philosophy espoused capitalist individualism as a driving force for a mythical form of patriarchal, social cohesion (40). Jeffords’ viewpoint is further supported by the fact that much of Reagan’s imagery relied on an aesthetic borrowed from the 1950s, leading to an array of optic discrepancies between modern technology and regressive fantasies. Movies like *Rambo III* (1987) resolve this dilemma by bifurcating notions of technological strength into the performance of a mindless, robotic, and totalitarian bureaucracy and a skilled, flexible body that uses state-of-the-art technology in highly efficient and individualized ways (41). The latter aligns perfectly with a capitalist logic of individual optimization and so-called “flexibility.” This point will be vital in assessing the performance of “hard bodies” in blockbusters within the context of a neoliberal cultural regime.

In addition, the fusion of the “hard body” with modern technology leads to collisions of conflicting desires; for example, in terms of anxieties surrounding the displacement of humans through automation²⁵ (a “post-human world”)

24 This is observable in the *Rambo* franchise when John Rambo is tormented by the local police in the first installment. However, by the second movie, the protagonist is reinstated into military ranks and takes out an entire Soviet-Vietnamese battalion through spectacular violence. Further examples are 1980s blockbuster movies like *Ghostbusters* (1984), *Die Hard* (1988), and *Lethal Weapon* (1986).

25 Ryan and Kellner point out that “[a]s conservative economic values became ascendant, increasingly technical criteria of efficiency came to be dominant. In addition,

and the ownership of weapons of mass destruction (Wood 149–150). These dissonances were negotiated in Reagan-era movies with results ranging from the externalization of these anxieties onto the Other—for example, in *Robocop* (1987) or *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981)—to a more Luddite mode of conflict resolution—for example, in *The Terminator* (1984) or *Rambo II* (1985). Yet, the “hard body’s” relationship to technology remains an enduring question in Hollywood filmmaking. As recent technological developments have been accelerated by the Internet and digitalization, it has become necessary to dive into contemporary depictions of the “hard body” in Hollywood blockbuster movies.

Jeffords’ concept offers a wide scope for investigations into the ideological undercurrent of blockbuster movies. The “hard body” serves as prism for narratives of national reassertion and/or cultural pushback against domestic challenges to white, male hegemony. The proximity of this hyper-masculine image to cultural fantasies of national identity allows cinematic performances of bodies to be viewed through a wider prism in which prevalent constructions of difference are made tangible. This makes it possible to compare the allocation of physical traits along racial, gendered, and class lines. As the overall analysis in this book also revolves around the incorporation of emancipatory discourses into Hollywood spectacles, it is of interest to find out whether “hard bodies” remain the domain of white masculinity over time or whether the trope evolves into more polysemous manifestations.

Given the exponential changes brought about by digitalization and the Internet, the role of the “hard body” in relation to technology is of critical importance when examining blockbusters as expressions of technocapitalism (Kellner, *Media Spectacle* 11–15). Since blockbusters aim to maximize revenues across borders and markets, different degrees of global technological penetration need to be reconciled within the form of the body. A closer inspection of the representation of bodies opens new avenues for decoding the mass appeal of blockbusters, while also providing tools for dissecting the performance of neoliberal consumerism in a time of more individualized technologies (made to “fit the body”).

As noted by Brown and Gershon, the body resides in a specific societal context that assigns specific social meanings to the physical manifestation of

conservative economic development emphasizes the displacement of excessively costly human labour by machines. [...] One antinomy of conservatism is that it requires technology for its economic programme, yet it fears technological modernity on a social and cultural plane” (65; Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 150).

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human beings (1). Bodies can therefore also be read as metaphors for more abstract political positions. Cognitive linguist George Lakoff locates the usage of such metaphors in his concept of “political framing.” According to him, one of the pre-eminent frames in political discourses in the United States is the “strict father.”

George Lakoff’s “Strict Father Model” as a Political Framing Device

As carriers of sight and sound, films are ripe with metaphors. The brevity and coherence of visual narratives relies on the effective use of digestible symbols, which help viewers to orientate themselves within a movie (Cavell, *The World Viewed* 16–41). Since movies create meanings through being viewed, metaphorical concepts are central to the transmission of filmic language. This has far-reaching implications for the relationship between film and ideology. Carlo Comanducci explains that

ideology and metaphor function as internalized systems of relations, or paradigms. Conventional metaphor and ideology are internalized in three senses: they are used unconsciously, they are early apprehended, and they are used as fundamental structures for the organization of experiences. (22)

Both terms are inscribed into cognitive processes that produce meaning and knowledge—on the collective and individual levels. Thus, the analysis of cinematic language in any given movie requires a disassembly of conceptual structures. This allows for implicit meanings to be examined in terms of both their symbolic and ideological content. In fact, both forms of content are inseparable. As cultural scholar and philosopher Slavoj Žižek remarks in *The Pervert’s Guide to Cinema*: “If you take away from our reality the symbolic fictions that regulate it, you will lose reality itself.”

In his book *Don’t Think of an Elephant!* (2004), George Lakoff argues that in modern political communication, meaning is frequently produced through metaphors. These metaphors reflect conceptual understandings of the world and can therefore activate and channel cognitive processes toward pre-conceived forms of meaning and interpretation. Lakoff describes this as “framing.” He states that “frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. [...] they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions” (xv). He goes on to state that frames are often linked to metaphors in political communication in order to

provide a succinct and tangible narrative. He references George W. Bush’s use of the phrase “tax relief” as an example: “When the word *tax* is added to *relief*, the result is a metaphor: Taxation is an affliction. And the person who takes it away is a hero, and anyone who tries to stop him is a bad guy. This is a frame. It is made up of ideas, like affliction and hero” (4). In line with his understanding of metaphors as conceptual, rather than a merely linguistic, constructions (Lakoff and Turner, *Cool Reason* 50), Kellner extrapolates a link between semiotic expressions and more abstract conceptualized narratives. Comanducci puts this succinctly: “Generally speaking, using metaphor is talking (representing, feeling or thinking) of something in terms of something else” (3). Metaphors activate mental frames, which, in turn, mirror the interpretation of a “world viewed” (Cavell, *The World Viewed—Enlarged Edition*). These processes occur inevitably and subconsciously (Lakoff, *Thinking Points* 36), making them an implicit vehicle for the effective transmission of both ideology and fictional narratives.

In his book *Thinking Points: Communicating our American Values and Vision* (2006), Lakoff expands his framing concept using insights from cognitive science. Frames can be subdivided into surface frames, which come in the form of phrases such as “War on Terror,” and deep frames, which are much more deeply ingrained in the political worldview of a person. The repeated use of surface frames can strengthen neural connections in the brain that reinforce the activation of deep frames to the point that they become part of one’s own “common sense” (29, 36–37; Andor 179–180). Since these deep frames can block the activation of “opposition frames,” that is, competing interpretations of the world, the reframing of political debates is critical for any form of social change.

Lakoff’s notions have reverberated throughout communication and political sciences, with commentators pointing out that his focus on “neural circuitry” (Williams) carries reductionist overtones. Moreover, the centrality of changing language in order to effect societal transformation has been contested. For example, Joanna Williams maintains that this “overstates the significance of language and underplays the importance of the material conditions of people’s lives.”²⁶ Lakoff’s concepts of framing and political metaphors do indeed reside within the realm of the semantic, which makes their implications for political activism a matter of debate.

26 Joanna Williams, “The Trouble with George Lakoff,” *consciencemag.com* (December 20, 2016). Accessed November 8, 2018: <<https://consciencemag.org/2016/12/20/the-trouble-with-george-lakoff/>>.

However, these notions play an important role in the film analyses. More than Kellner's media spectacle or Jeffords' "hard body," the framing approach can help to elucidate the conceptualized backgrounds of specific key terms and phrases that have found their way into the mainstream political lexicon of the United States. Therefore, Lakoff's insights will play a vital role in the deconstruction of Reaganite rhetoric in Chapter 2, in particular in relation to the repercussions of mythical metaphors like "small government," "Star Wars program," "trickle-down economics," and the "War on Terror." Translations of these terms do appear in Hollywood movies, which makes these cinematic productions complicit in the cultural prevalence of such political semantics. And since the repetition of frames is critical to the sedimentation of ideology, blockbusters—which are explicitly designed for repeat viewings across media—carry an increased responsibility in the shaping of political discourse. Given the role of the culture wars in the 1980s conservative realignment, one specific metaphor will be highlighted throughout this book, as it provides a central frame for the nation and the family: the "strict father" model (*Thinking Points* 57–59).

George Lakoff locates the "strict father" within the broader, widespread metaphor of the "nation as family" (*Elephant* 5–8; *Thinking Points* 49–66).²⁷ In this metaphor, the collective that is understood to form the nation state resembles the social unit of a biological family. This imagery permeates all forms of socialization. Furthermore, it structures public political discourse to a great extent, as it constitutes an accessible metaphor suitable for activating deeply embedded thought patterns. Lakoff writes:

[I]t's no accident that our political beliefs are structured by our idealizations of the family. Our earliest experience with being governed is in our families. Our parents "govern" us: They protect us, tell us what we can and cannot do, make sure we have enough money and supplies, educate us, and have us do our part in running the house. (*Thinking Points* 49)

Building on this observation, Lakoff discerns two competing philosophies in mainstream political discourse in the United States: a progressive one and a conservative one. Both tendencies can be narrated and conceptualized through the metaphor of the family. The progressive vision is associated with

27 In *Don't Think of an Elephant*, Lakoff argues that expressions of these family metaphors are manifold and imply a homogenous understanding of the nation: "We have Founding Fathers. The Daughters of the American Revolution. We "send our sons" to war. This is a natural metaphor because we usually understand large social groups, like nations, in terms of small ones, like families or communities" (5).

the “nurturant parent model” while the conservative one is associated with the “strict father model” (50). These two visions stand in contrast to each other and cannot be applied at the same time in the same situation. Activating one metaphor implies the negation of the other.²⁸ Lakoff dubs this dichotomy the “Moral Politics Model” and it is characterized by an emphasis on ideological purity and an emotionally resonant “value” discourse (51).

The progressive nurturant parent model is defined by ideals of gender equality, a more open-ended definition of the term “family,” and a focus on care-giving and empathy for children. Correspondingly, children are reared to develop empathy and responsibility for themselves and others (52–53). Lakoff explains that “nurturant parents are authoritative without being authoritarian. They set fair and reasonable limits and rules, and take the trouble to discuss them with their children. Obedience derives from love for parents, not fear from punishment” (52). Based on these fundamentals, Lakoff extrapolates a set of progressive values, which include protection, fulfillment in life, opportunity, fairness, equality, prosperity, and community.

The “strict father” model is the opposite. It is based on a patriarchal and heterosexist worldview with clearly defined gender roles and social hierarchies. It repeatedly invokes the threat represented by an Other that naturally resides outside the family and is inclined to harm it:

A family has two parents, a father and a mother. We live in a dangerous world, where there is constant competition with inevitable winners and losers. The family requires a strong father to protect it from the many evils in the world and to support it by winning those competitions. (57)

The permanent assumption of racialized threats builds a foundation for internal hierarchies that need to be policed and maintained by the father. A weak father would fail at protecting the nation from such imagined intrusion. Therefore, it is imperative, for the purposes of this analysis, to interrogate blockbusters’ depictions of foreign invasions, which are fought off through the realignment of domestic hierarchies and spectacular feats by a perceived paternal authority.

What further emerges in this definition is the clear reliance on a traditional gender binary and a naturalization of capitalism-induced conflict (“competition”). In the post–second wave feminist setting of the blockbuster era, this

28 However, Lakoff explains that many people are in fact “bi-conceptuals” and effectively apply different positions in different situations. He adds that “in real families, it is commonplace to have, say, a strict father and a nurturant mother” (*Thinking Points* 58).

understanding of the family has a restorative connotation. Lakoff underlines that this model affirms that “the mother supports and upholds the authority of the father but is not strong enough to protect the family or to impose moral order by herself” (57). It can be deduced that this emphasis assumes that challenges to patriarchal authority are conceivable (or have already been launched) but need to be curbed within the confines of gendered capitalism. This point is critical for the investigation of female characters in movies and their constructed role in upholding the family.

The “strict father” model is ultimately geared toward the maintenance of a gendered, racialized capitalist social order. The performance of “discipline” is vital in the preparation of children for capitalist competition. This discipline needs to be conveyed primarily by the father and then simultaneously internalized and publicly manifested: “Children who are disciplined enough to be moral can also use that discipline as adults to seek their self-interest in the market and become prosperous” (58). This focus on discipline can be translated into fitness for the labor and marriage markets and for capitalist competition overall. In the analysis of blockbusters, portrayals of capitalist entrepreneurship can serve as valuable texts for the implicit valorization of the “strict father” model.

The value-laden discourses of these two models has implications for the world of film and the world of politics. In the introduction to *Thinking Points* (2006), Lakoff uses none other than Ronald Reagan as a primary example of the institution of a “style-over-substance” discourse that has served conservatives well since the 1980s:

Reagan talked about *values* rather than issues. Communicating values mattered more than specific policy positions. [...] Recall Reagan’s mythical Cadillac-driving “welfare queen”. For Reagan, she represented more than just a case of welfare abuse. She came to symbolize all that was wrong with the government’s approach to dealing with poverty, especially a wide array of government “handouts”-programs he thought rewarded laziness, removed the incentive to be disciplined, and promoted immorality. Whatever we may think of Reagan, this has been a winning formula for conservatives for the past quarter century. (7–8)

This racist and sexist metaphor, employed Reagan in the late 1970s, soon assumed a life of its own and offered a new means of castigating marginalized communities, in particular African-American women, as unfit to be counted as members of the “national family”. Their alleged unfitness was located within the perceived failure of the welfare state, which now needed to be rolled back through a series of pro-corporate and neoliberal reforms. Therefore, the usage of metaphors in effectuating societal power structures cannot be understated.

Overall, Lakoff's concept of the "strict father" sits atop multiple cultural intersections that are relevant to my analysis. This model is useful for exploring power dynamics within larger societal conflicts. As blockbusters dramatize these conflicts, the "strict father" model provides a means of viewing these struggles through the prism of the nation as a family (or vice versa). Spectacular events, such as home invasions, alien invasions, or acts of terrorism, can be read as commentaries on the state of the family/nation at a given moment. The general focus on individual heroes, or tightly knit groups of protagonists, offers a viable terrain for deconstructing heroism in terms of gender, race, class, and space. For example, since the "strict father" is associated with the implementation of discipline, the capitalist fitness of protagonists becomes central to the unearthing of implicit meanings, such as neoliberal self-optimization and the gendered/racialized nature of leadership. As collective cultural fantasies with mass appeal, blockbusters need to be investigated for implicit postulations of the normative family in order to illustrate how popular understandings of "the family" are manifested.

Thus, the mythical imagery surrounding the nation can be better dissected and its historical evolution can be traced. After all, concepts of the nation and identity at large are heavily infused with mythologies.

Roland Barthes' Concept of Mythologies as a Tool for Deconstructing Capitalist Imagery

Roland Barthes' work on the role of myths in the maintenance of bourgeois society has been the subject of scholarly debates for decades. In his influential book *Mythologies* (originally published in 1957), Barthes proposes that cultural artifacts in the modern world can be read as a form of speech, in which signification often presents itself to the consumer/spectator in a naturalized and eternal form. This has far-reaching implications for the construction of realities in a capitalist system, as myths structure relationships between the individual and the object in profound ways. Every form of cultural production has "moral and political significance," since it affects not only attitudes toward the object, but also attitudes toward other subjects (Welch 20).

On this basis, Barthes develops a notion of myth by building on Ferdinand de Saussure's semiology, an area within the wider field of semiotics. Barthes extracts three elements of myth: the "signifier," the "signified," and the "sign/signification." He uses the example of roses as a signifier and passion as the

signified. Only when considered in relation to each other do these two elements synthesize into a sign:

[O]n the plane of analysis, we do have three terms; for these roses weighted with passion perfectly and correctly allow themselves to be decomposed into roses and passion: the former and the latter existed before uniting and forming this third object, which is the sign. (*Mythologies* 111–112)

According to Barthes, the form of myth is anchored in this tripartite system. The myth draws on semiological associations that have existed previously, which makes it a “second-order semiological system” (113). Myths therefore need to be deciphered in the context of larger systems of meanings, especially since a “signified can have several signifiers” (118). This requires a process of acculturation, which emphasizes cultural productions as both mediators and carriers of myths (Welch 24). For the purposes of my analysis, it is important to note that cultural artifacts, such as blockbuster movies, neither “invent” mythologies nor merely replicate them— as they are second-order semiological systems. Instead, the forms of signification presented by such films give an account of how politicized speech in consumer products builds on pre-established relationships of meaning. This applies to imagery within a blockbuster text, as well as the merchandise and advertisement associated with it. Myths carry a history with them and are, themselves, a way of talking about history. Since I intend to delineate an ideological trajectory within blockbuster filmmaking, the analysis of myths in this book offers a valuable means of uncovering cinematic negotiations of national foundation myths, visions of heroism, and the distortion of political discourse in service of a specific agenda.²⁹ As mass cultural artifacts, blockbusters do insert themselves into mythologies.

In relation to the reading and deciphering of myths, Barthes first points to the three elements of signification. He distinguishes between empty signifiers, full signifiers, and mythical signifiers. These different levels depend on how the spectator wishes to absorb the myth—“by focusing on one [part of the signification], or the other, or both at the same time” (127).

- In the case of the empty signifier, the signifier is taken literally, “without ambiguity.” For example, a boy of color who salutes the French flag is an “example of French imperialism.”

29 Barthes emphasizes that “however paradoxical it may seem, myth hides nothing: its function is to distort, not to make disappear” (120).

- In the case of the full signifier, the meaning and the form of the myth are separated from each other. Instead of interpreting the saluting of the French flag as an example of imperialism, it is interpreted as an “alibi of French imperialism” (127). By focusing on what is signified, the obfuscation at work in this image becomes evident. At its core, this approach demystifies and deconstructs.
- The mythical signifier represents the amalgamation of both forms into an “inextricable whole made of meaning and form” (127). The reader focuses on the aggregate interplay between signifier and signified, with the result that the boy of color saluting the French flag “is no longer an example or a symbol, still less an alibi: he is the very presence of French imperialism.” In this case, the signification becomes “dynamic” as it interweaves different forms into a new symbolism.

Barthes associates the dynamism of the third reading with “the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature” (128–129). The amalgamation of two forms is perceived as occurring naturally; thus, deliberate motivations and intentions behind the myth-making are discarded.³⁰ This effect of naturalization is critical when dissecting filmic narratives, especially those in the form of genres or specific formats such as blockbusters.³¹

According to Barthes, mythologies now largely function to “naturalize and eternalize the historically contingent forms of French bourgeois culture” (Durham and Kellner xxii), which corresponds with Guy Debord’s notion of the “society of the spectacle.” Mass-produced cultural artifacts promote consumption and will reflect this consumption logic in one way or another. This has implications for the emergence of neoliberalism as a naturalized, post-industrial cultural regime (Macris 21).³² Subsequently, it is important to shed light on blockbusters and to interrogate what exactly they naturalize, how this

30 Barthes adds that “myth is experienced as innocent speech: not because its intentions are hidden—if they were hidden, they could not be efficacious—but because they are naturalized” (130).

31 In his discussion of genre theory, Daniel Chandler makes reference to Jane Feuer when he writes that “the genre ‘positions’ the audience in order to naturalize the ideologies which are embedded in the text” (4).

32 Vicki Macris notes that “as with all (dominant) ideologies, neoliberalism has become naturalized, legitimized, universalized and firmly embedded in everyday discourse, operating as a mechanism for upholding and reproducing the asymmetrical power relations in society” (21).

naturalization is effected, and how this relates to larger ideological and cultural shifts in society.

For example, Barthes describes “identification” as one of the principal elements for myth on the political right. He links this identification with the construction of difference between the “petit-bourgeois man” and the Other (152). The naturalization of this imagining of the Other can be closely inspected its, especially since interaction with the so-called exotic is a recurrent theme in blockbuster movies. In order to better circumscribe ideological subtexts in these films, it is important to examine representations of the Other in light of essentializing strategies. In his essay “Subculture: The Unnatural Break,” Dick Hebdige summarizes Roland Barthes’ observations on this matter:

[T]he Other can be trivialized, naturalized, domesticated. Here, the difference is simply denied (“Otherness is reduced to sameness”). Alternatively, the Other can be transformed into meaningless exotica, a “pure object, a spectacle, a clown.” (Hebdige in Durham and Kellner 157)

A variety of textual analyses can be launched from these two, seemingly bifurcated, trajectories. For instance, the “domesticated Other” is of interest in the dissection of the character of E.T. in *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial*. The notion of the Other as “a spectacle, a clown” strongly mirrors the character of the Joker in *The Dark Knight*. Ultimately, Barthes’ concept of mythologies remains an outstanding means of dissecting the ideological connotations of myths. Reagan was known as a “story-telling” president and “mythologist;”³³ consequently, there is ample material for the dissection of his rhetoric in Chapter 2. First, however, I will postulate a definition of the term “blockbuster” for the purposes of this book.

Defining Hollywood Blockbusters as a Formula

In order to devise a working definition of the term “blockbuster,” I will briefly outline the etymology of the word and its contemporary usage in media and

33 Just like the hypothetical mythologist in Barthes’ writing (158), Reagan faced near-expulsion after the Iran–Contra affair, which Kellner has dubbed a “great political spectacle which could have made great movies, but was perhaps too complex and has never been presented in popular narrative form” (*Media Spectacle* 167). Given that Reagan acted out a filmic role as president for eight years, it can be speculated that neither the press nor the majority of the public had much interest in disrupting this cinematic spectacle with an “unhappy ending” after the presidencies of Nixon, Ford, and Carter (Bunch 99).

entertainment discourses. This will include a focus on the evolution of the “high-concept movie” in the 1970s and questions of budgeting, box-office success, and associated cross-channel distribution and merchandise. On the basis of these parameters, a definition of blockbusters as a specific mode of filmmaking will be proposed.

The usage of the term “blockbuster” originates far back in the history of US-American media. In his paper “Pass the Ammunition: A Short Etymology of ‘Blockbuster,’” Sheldon Hall traces the modern usage of the term to the mid-twentieth century:

[I]t has been possible to construct a reasonably accurate history of “blockbuster” before the mid-1950s, by which time it had become recognised and accepted by both the trade press and the film industry at large as betokening the kinds of film identified above: one which would “gross \$2,000,000 or more in domestic (U.S. and Canada) rentals” as well as “a relatively expensive picture that can head the program in all situations.” (148–149)

However, Hall goes on to point out that during World War II the aerial carpet bombings of entire block buildings were referred to as “blockbusters” in the press in the United States. This military connotation was soon expanded, with the term being used to describe war propaganda films that celebrated spectacles of destruction, like the RKO film *Bombardier* (1943), which was described in advertising taglines as “The block-buster of all action-thrill-service shows” (151–153). Hall indicates that the term fell out of use after the war, which undermines popular etymological attributions of the term to the common practice of “block booking,” which was implemented by the eight major Hollywood studios in the 1930s and 1940s (149–150).

Eventually, the term “blockbuster” came to be used most pervasively and enduringly in a Hollywood context in relation to a new mode of filmmaking pioneered by Steven Spielberg and George Lucas. In the wake of the immense financial success of *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977), many media observers contended that a new era of spectacle filmmaking had dawned in Hollywood. In his book *Blockbuster: How Hollywood Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Summer*, film scholar Tom Shone reiterates the historical assessment of David Brown, who worked as co-producer on the movie *Jaws*:

Movies used to be a solitary experience. You sat in the dark, alone, no matter how many people surrounded you. But with *Jaws* people started to talk back to the screen and applaud shadows. [...] It marked a crucial advance on the decade’s previous blockbusters. Say what you like about *Love Story* but it was not really an audience

participation film [...]; nor was *The Godfather*, which was essentially a study in collective isolation; you watched it alone, no matter how full the cinema was [...]. But *Jaws* united its audience in common cause [...] and you came out delivering high-fives to the three hundred or so new best friends you'd just narrowly avoided death with. And then you came back the next day to narrowly avoid it again. For here was the second major defining mark of the summer blockbuster: you watched it again. (36–37)

This telling observation reveals a set of properties that defined the high-concept style that started to take hold in Hollywood cinema in the 1970s. Critical features include, for example, the emphasis on collective and cross-segment consumption, as well as on repeated viewings, which resulted from new distribution technologies that allowed films to remain in circulation on multiple platforms (Jordan 59). This tendency is also reflected in the more episodic and TV-inflected nature of blockbuster filmmaking, which makes frequent use of sequelization and franchising (e.g. the *Rocky*, the *Rambo*, and *Die Hard* franchises).

Chris Jordan develops these thoughts further by situating the high-concept style in the context of the emerging Reagan era. He postulates that high-concept filmmaking synthesizes European art cinema conventions into “Hollywood’s genre and star-based system of entertainment” (63), thus injecting more stylistic expressivity in terms of “character, mise-en-scène and editing.” This trend across the now corporatized Hollywood studios was accelerated by a drive toward a

narrow range of themes with broad popular appeal and the reiteration of them across multiple genres. [...] The marketplace-driven, style-conscious design of high concept resulted in an inherent ideological conservatism that made it an effective vehicle for dramatizing Reagan’s construction of American identity in terms of moral absolutes of good versus evil. (63)

Jordan’s overview of the evolution of high-concept filmmaking evinces further characteristics of blockbusters: a conscious emphasis on stylistic “glossiness,” a firm grounding in star power and genre conventions, and, above all, a focus on formulaic narratives based on moral binaries.

Stephen Prince adds further elements in his discussion of ancillary markets in the 1980s. He describes how Warner Communications Inc. proudly proclaimed that its products “know no geographical boundaries” (*A New Pot of Gold* 139). This global orientation, in connection with growing demands for mass media entertainment outside the United States, has put new modes of filmmaking with more cross-cultural appeal on the map. This coincided with the vertical

and horizontal integration of business units into corporate structures across the globe. As a result, corporatized film studios were able to cater to markets outside of regular theaters:

Herein lay the connection between film production by the majors, the ancillary markets, and the consolidation of multinational corporate influence. Despite a film's initial theatrical release, production occurred to service the ancillaries, and blockbuster films stimulated a huge array of marketing and merchandising throughout the world's restaurants, toy stores, and other retail outlets. (*A New Pot of Gold* 139–140)

In accordance with Kellner's characterization of the technospectacle, blockbusters "colonize" all forms of modern life—offering immersive consumption experiences that reverberate long after the initial theatrical run. This is primarily achieved through merchandise, which includes the music and soundtrack as additional profit venues (Prince, *A New Pot of Gold* 210).³⁴ The inclusion of a global and multi-faceted merchandise empire is therefore another crucial characteristic of Hollywood blockbusters. The projected profitability of such large ventures is calibrated through extensive pre-production market research and pre-release test screenings, surveys, and aggressive cross-media promotional campaigns (Herrington 7–15). Blockbuster effects rarely result from completely unanticipated "sleeper hits."³⁵

A further thematic aspect is the reflection of white, male individualism, and associated tales of heroism in most blockbuster movies. Chris Jordan explains that—in the context of the late 1970s—this reflected "a rightward drift in popular taste" (62), stemming from desires for accessible "comic book fantasies like *Superman* (1978)" or for the cinematic renegotiation of the Vietnam War, as in *The Deer Hunter* (1978). In a similar fashion, Robin Wood specifies six elements

34 With regard to the integration of an MTV-inflected style of audiovisual music promotion into the world of film, Prince notes that "Portions of FLASHDANCE and TOP GUN are essentially rock videos, extended montage sequences cut to music, which facilitated synergies with recorded music merchandising. FLASHDANCE and subsequent Simpson–Bruckheimer films were carefully marketed in tandem with the release of singles and albums featuring music from the sound track" (*A New Pot of Gold* 210).

35 One example of an exception to this is *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), which was independently produced by amateur film-school graduates Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez and returned roughly \$250 million globally on a \$60,000 production budget ("The Blair Witch Project." Box-office information at boxofficemojo.com. Accessed January 1, 2019: <<https://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=blairwitchproject.htm>>).

that constitute what he dubs the “Lucas–Spielberg Syndrome”: Childishness, Special Effects, Imagination/Originality, Nuclear Anxiety, Fear of Fascism, and the Restoration of the Father (147–155).

For the purposes of this theoretical framework, it can be extrapolated that Hollywood blockbusters

- are built on formulaic tales,
- serve a narrative that generally reflects a “bad-versus-good” binary,
- are conceived as commodities and distributed for collective consumption,
- are designed for repeat viewings,
- offer an immersive viewing experience marked by escapism,
- exhibit a glossy and conscious stylistic expression,
- make prominent use of special effects,
- are tied to a merchandise universe (which is also mirrored in product placement),
- are designed to appeal to multiple audience segments across cultural/national boundaries,
- are accompanied by excessive market research and advertising campaigns,
- are frequently sequelized and turned into franchises,
- integrate the cross-promotion of the music and soundtrack into the filmic narrative,
- are thematically centered on patriarchic and capitalist visions of a mythical white, male individualism.

There is, however, one decisive aspect on which film scholarship has yet to produce a general consensus: What minimum budget and what level of financial box-office success are considered necessary for a film to be classified as a bona-fide blockbuster?³⁶ Film theorist Robert Stam uses a budget-based definition whereby the term “blockbuster” becomes applicable to productions that exceed a certain threshold in terms of monetary investment (*Literature Through Film* 56; *Film Theory* 14). This, however, begs the question of whether “blockbuster intent” equals “blockbuster effect” for a given production. In light of the numerous aspects discussed in this section, it stands to reason that the constituent elements of the blockbuster fully materialize in the reaction of the public and the desired full-scale implementation of a cross-media spectacle. This tilts the scale in favor of an output-oriented definition of the “blockbuster

36 Walt Hickey, “The 11 Defining Features Of The Summer Blockbuster,” *FiveThirtyEight* (May 2, 2014). Accessed November 9, 2018: <<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-11-defining-features-of-the-summer-blockbuster/>>.

effect.” For the purposes of my analysis, I settle on a threshold of \$100 million (adjusted for inflation) in total domestic gross at the box office during the original theatrical run of a given movie. This number has been chosen for reasons of efficacy and in order to create clarity for the selection of my sample. Different thresholds are, of course, entirely feasible for further analyses. The chapters containing the film analyses will provide additional information on why each movie was chosen.

Key Ideological and Methodological Terms

This section will provide brief working definitions of four terms that are of critical importance for my analysis: neoliberalism, neoconservatism, messianic Americanism, and metatexts/subtexts. These concepts will be sketched out in a more encyclopedic fashion in order to serve as guidelines for the analysis. Broad concepts such as neoliberalism and neoconservatism cannot be exhaustively characterized in all their facets in the scope of this study; instead, the definitions provided will focus on central tenets and features that are relevant for the subsequent analysis.

Neoliberalism

In his article on “Neoliberalism as Concept,” Rajesh Venugopal postulates that the term “neoliberalism” has been subject to “terminological inconsistency, weak definitions and conceptual drift” (6). In his 2018 online article for *Dissent Magazine*, Daniel Rodgers proposes to pry this term apart by identifying

four distinctly different phenomena. “Neoliberalism” stands, first, for the late capitalist economy of our times; second, for a strand of ideas; third, for a globally circulating bundle of policy measures; and fourth, for the hegemonic force of the culture that surrounds and entraps us. (Rodgers)

For the purposes of this study, the first and fourth phenomena are the most relevant.³⁷ In Michael Thompson’s summary of David Harvey’s delineation of

37 With regard to neoliberalism as an economic project, Rodgers notes that “neoliberalism (1) inscribes on politics and culture the needs of a global capitalism that sustains itself on the free flow of capital, goods, disembedded labor, and market-friendly state policies. It does not rely on the state in the same way that the ‘embedded’ corporate capitalism of the mid-twentieth century did, but it is not a creature of the minimal state either. It depends, rather, on complex structures of institutional supports, business-friendly regulations, and free-range investment opportunities arrayed in different ways across the globe” (Rodgers).

neoliberalism, he articulates a concise set of principles that capture the term's economic, political, and cultural implications:

Neoliberalism is the intensification of the influence and dominance of capital; it is the elevation of capitalism, as a mode of production, into an ethic, a set of political imperatives, and a cultural logic. It is also a project: a project to strengthen, restore, or, in some cases, constitute anew the power of economic elites. [...] Neoliberalism is therefore not a new turn in the history of capitalism. It is more simply, and more perniciously, its intensification, and its resurgence after decades of opposition from the Keynesian welfare state and from experiments with social democratic and welfare state politics. (23)

Thompson goes on to summarize Harvey's analysis of the Thatcher era in the UK and the Reagan era in the United States: "Thatcher in Britain and Reagan in the United States were both pivotal figures, not so much because of their economic policies, but, more importantly, because of their success in the 'construction of consent.' The political culture of both countries began to accept neoliberal policies" (24–25). Thus, it can be stated that neoliberal projects were accompanied by shifts in cultural and political discourses, which, in tandem, paved the way for neoliberalism as a cultural regime. This overarching influence on collective meanings and symbols is often described as the most engulfing feature of neoliberalism. In her book *Undoing the Demos* (2015), Wendy Brown points to the rise of a "governing rationality," marked by trends toward the "economization" and "monetization" of virtually all aspects of life (31–32). At the center of this rationality is a conception of the human being as "homo oeconomicus." According to Brown, this heavily gendered term (99–107)³⁸ stipulates that humans are not only rational actors, but a form of "capital" in themselves. This rationality dictates that this capital needs to be cultivated as such, leading to a figure of "the human as an ensemble of entrepreneurial and investment capital [...] evident on every college and job application" (36). As a result, all human arrangements become subject to a logic of market efficiency; that is, the state becomes a firm, the university a factory, and the self "an object with a price tag" (Rodgers).

38 Wendy Brown deconstructs the gendered aspect of "homo oeconomicus," stating that "when homo oeconomicus becomes normative across all spheres [...], there are two possibilities for those positioned as women [...]. Either women align their conduct with this truth, becoming homo oeconomicus, in which case the world becomes uninhabitable, or women's activities and bearings as femina domestica remain the unavowed glue for a world whose governing principle cannot hold it together" (104–105).

These definitions illustrate the tremendous, pervasive impact of neoliberal developments on cultural and political discourses around the globe. The pivotal role of the Reagan era in facilitating this development in the United States will be further explored in Chapter 2 in order to highlight more precise aspects of Reaganite neoliberalism.

Neoconservatism

In a US-American context, the term “neoconservative” was first coined by socialist activist and political theorist Michael Harrington in 1973 in order to describe the pro-Nixon positions of (formerly) liberal politicians such as Daniel Bell, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Irving Kristol (Harrington 165–272).

Justin Vaïsse affirms that many ideological progenitors of what is now considered “neoconservative thought” originally came from leftist or liberal political backgrounds. However, after the resounding defeat of anti-war candidate George McGovern in 1972, many liberal supporters of anti-communist and hawkish foreign policies felt that they didn’t have a home in the Democratic Party anymore. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, they largely joined the Reagan coalition of conservatives, which appealed to advocates of military rearmament and global unilateralism (Ehrman 9). The Reagan administration included one of the most ardent proponents of US-American military hegemony: Jeane Kirkpatrick, who served as US ambassador to the United Nations. In her essay “Dictatorships and Double Standards” (1979), she argues for a US-led global “promotion of democracy” through the exertion of power. Simultaneously, she contended that the implementation of so-called “free markets” took precedence over democratic reforms promoting freedom and egalitarianism, stating that perceived “authoritarian regimes” were still preferable to communist systems—as long as they were friendly to capitalist influence. This primacy of the market reflects the governing rationality of neoliberalism in its starkest terms.

The emphasis on economic imperialism and military might seemed to fade after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This, however, spawned a new generation of neoconservatives spearheaded by figures such as Bill Kristol and Norman Podhoretz (Vaïsse 3), who argued that the post-Cold War era presented a unique opportunity for the pursuit of unabashedly militarist and imperialist projects around the globe. This school of thought had a profound influence on the administration of George W. Bush (2001–2009), which is often considered

to be the premier example of contemporary neoconservatism in public and scholarly discourses.

When it comes to the specific tenets of modern-day neoconservatism, Stefan Halper and Jonathan Clarke detail the following characteristics in their book *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order* (2004):

1. A belief deriving from religious conviction that the human condition is defined as a choice between good and evil and that the true measure of political character is to be found in the willingness by the former (themselves) to confront the latter.
2. An assertion that the fundamental determinant of the relationship between states rests on military power and the willingness to use it.
3. A primary focus on the Middle East and global Islam as the principal theater for American overseas interests. (11)

This set of beliefs is then implemented through the following strategies:

1. Analyze international issues in black-and-white, absolute moral categories. They are fortified by a conviction that they alone hold the moral high ground and argue that disagreement is tantamount to defeatism.
2. Focus on the “unipolar” power of the United States, seeing the use of military force as the first, not the last, option of foreign policy. They repudiate the “lessons of Vietnam,” which they interpret as undermining American will toward the use of force, and embrace the “lessons of Munich,” interpreted as establishing the virtues of preemptive military action.
3. Disdain conventional diplomatic agencies such as the State Department and conventional country-specific, realist, and pragmatic, analysis. They are hostile toward nonmilitary multilateral institutions and instinctively antagonistic toward international treaties and agreements. “Global unilateralism” is their watchword. They are fortified by international criticism, believing that it confirms American virtue.
4. Look to the Reagan administration as the exemplar of all these virtues and seek to establish their version of Reagan’s legacy as the Republican and national orthodoxy. (11)

These themes reveal a belief in the triumphalist power of the US military in the face of (constructed) atavistic adversaries. Neoconservatives propose a mythical view of the world—much like the good-versus-evil binary in blockbuster entertainment—which neatly fits into simplified and spectacle-laden tales of heroism. This similarity with contemporary cinematic formulas calls for an

investigation of neoconservative echoes in Hollywood blockbusters. Moreover, the recourse to a mythical image of the Reagan administration has significant repercussions for the reconstruction of mythologies in both pop culture and politics. The analysis of Reagan's Cold War and counter-terrorism rhetoric will determine how the fortieth president assisted in the creation of narrative patterns that have reverberated in Hollywood entertainment of the post-Cold War era.

Messianic Americanism

In his analysis of "American exceptionalism" in presidential rhetoric since 1897, John Dearborn classifies four trends: messianic Americanism, messianic internationalism, realist exemplarism, and pragmatist moralism (1). He uses the speeches of individual presidents as case studies and determines that Reagan's language largely falls into the "messianic Americanism" category (197–203). Dearborn illustrates this rhetorical and ideological position in the following terms:

[M]essianic Americanism, fully embraces the idea of American exceptionalism. A president demonstrating this type emphasizes a belief that the U.S. is unquestionably unique with a destiny of leading the world toward freedom and democracy. Stark moral contrasts are used; the U.S. is the unquestionably "good" power fighting against an evil opposing force. Because the U.S. is always "good," any actions taken, however negatively perceived, are considered justified. Religious beliefs and rhetoric about the U.S. fulfilling a mission from God are often employed. Furthermore, the success of the U.S. in meeting all foes and challenges is considered inevitable, and there is generally a willingness to make sacrifices to achieve goals. Importantly, this type of exceptionalism focuses on the U.S. using its own power and ideals to achieve its destiny of spreading freedom. It does not as significantly pay attention to international opinion nor embrace international law and institutions; rather, these institutions are often viewed with suspicion. (25–26)

Remarkably similar to neoconservative ideology, this form of Americanism relies on narrative patterns that reproduce a good-versus-evil binary. The triumphalist and reassuring undertones of messianic Americanism mirror the high-concept template for Hollywood blockbuster filmmaking in critical ways, making this form of "American exceptionalism" a useful frame of reference for the closer examination of the interrelationship between presidential rhetoric and cinematic spectacles. Messianic Americanism will therefore be prominently applied in the analysis of one movie in this sample that is heavy on presidential speeches: *Independence Day*.

Metatexts/Subtexts

In his book *The Films of the Eighties: A Social History* (1995), William J. Palmer draws on New Historicism in his assessment of films as holographic conveyors of history. The multiple textualities of film give this medium a privileged position in capturing “the simultaneity of the events of history, the multiplicity of history’s meanings” (10). As a cultural text, film processes history through the incorporation of both a (historical) event and an idea. Thus, films transmit “potent sociohistorical messages”, which tend to “shape shift on different textual levels” (9) These levels are primary texts (consisting of the plot), subtexts (addressing themes), and metatexts (self-reflexive discourses). Palmer explains that

The surface texts of most films are constructed out of a limited number of conventional mass modes of discourse (plots), whereas the subtexts of films consist of a variety of sociohistorical discourse contexts (themes), such as political consciousness, revisionist history, moral messaging and existential themes. (10)

This approach to filmic textuality is notable in that its interpretation of the relationship between film and history emphasizes the “multiplicity of the facts and events” (11). A film is not merely read as a linear text but broken into layers of inter-related modes of meaning that “diffuse and interpret history” and/or “use and abuse it.” The investigation of these multiple layers allows for a “self-reflexive analysis of different texts as a means of delineating a metatext and/or metahistory. This metahistory places both the ‘facts’ and the various ‘texts of the facts’ within larger historical system of interpretation” (11).

In this book, however, the term “metatext” will be used in a slightly different manner to connote structural transformations, which can be read as cultural texts in their own right. Thus, the holographic nature of films as translators of social change can be more clearly examined. The readable surface texts include Hollywood blockbusters since the mid-1970s, but also the Reagan presidency itself (via Reagan’s rhetoric and public image) and the associated “cinematic Reagan era” (Kellner and Ryan). Among the various relevant subtexts are the restoration of the father, Cold War nuclear anxieties (Wood 147–155), post-Cold War fears of the Other (e.g. in the form of terrorism; Palmer 114–164), and middle-class economic anxieties in a post-industrialist environment (Kellner, *Media Culture* 15–20; see Figure 1).

In this context, Palmer deems the Reagan era unique in US-American film history:

This relationship between history and film is also unique in the eighties because of the sociopolitical stability, its overpowering Reaganness comparable to the Ikeness of the

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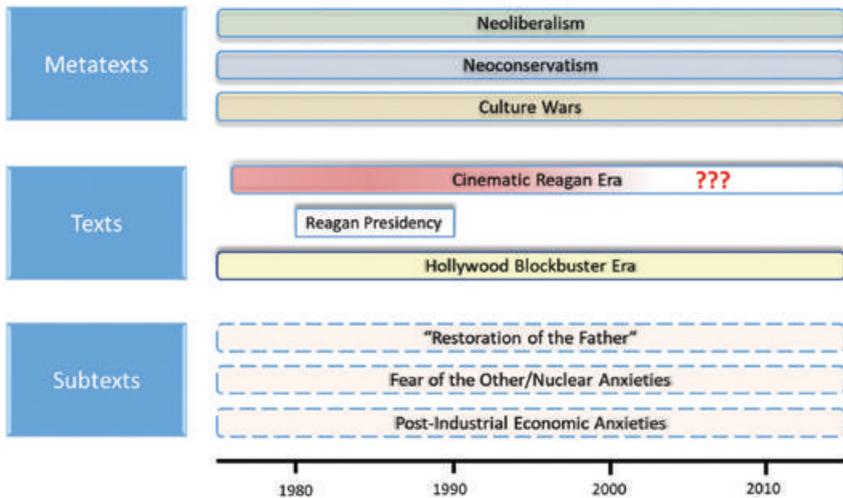


Figure 1: The positioning of metatexts, texts, and subtexts in the scope of this analysis. Of importance is the question of how far the “Cinematic Reagan era” extends given the continuation of its constituent meta- and subtexts.

fifties. [...] The victory of the Reagan agenda changed everything in America and by as early as 1982 had also changed the very nature of Hollywood films. (11–12)

This approach, just like the other approaches described in this chapter, comes with its own set of potentials and limitations.

Potentials and Limitations

The theoretical frameworks outlined in this chapter present a vast range of opportunities for investigating echoes of Reaganism in Hollywood blockbuster movies. Blockbusters can be approached from a multi-perspectival angle incorporating the media spectacle (Kellner), the “hard body” (Jeffords), the “strict father” (Lakoff), and Barthesian mythologies. This includes a more comprehensive reading of filmic texts as extensions of the production and distribution process, which contributes to a more elaborate understanding of blockbusters as mass media spectacles and not merely isolated texts. The economic background of a corporatized Hollywood continues to shape cultural productions, which in turn imbue all areas of modern life with popular images. Jeffords’ concept of the “hard body” and Lakoff’s “strict father” model provide excellent starting points for examining representations of the body and the family in a

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cinematic context and Barthes' conceptualizations help to illuminate the cultural implications of Reagan's political speech, on the one hand, and the usage of national myths and naturalization in film, on the other.

It is important to reveal the subtexts of these images for recurrent ideological patterns in order to magnify which conflicts are resolved and how. Thus, a Reaganite lens is highly suitable for ascertaining historical trends and reformulations across time. By capturing dominant ideological tendencies, questions of resistance can be targeted in a more detailed manner, thus minimizing the risk of what Douglas Kellner calls the "fetishization of resistance and pleasure" (*Media Culture* 37–39). Instead of reading Hollywood productions as simple crowd-pleasers catering to the popular demands of a mostly liberal movie-going public, this analysis dissects specific struggles and representations. Thus, pleasure and resistance can be delineated much more clearly, as it will become more manifest how specific spectacle elements reproduce dominant discourses and to what extent they offer a platform for counter-hegemonial language.

My diachronic approach to the impact of the New Right in cinema constitutes a further critical distinction. As noted in the introduction, contemporary scholarship on Reaganite cinema has largely focused on the 1980s/early 1990s (Prince, *Visions of Empire*; Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*; Palmer; Jordan; Belton 389–393; Rossi; Hackett).³⁹ This analysis seeks to provide a more comprehensive basis for investigation by approaching Hollywood blockbusters and Reaganism as ongoing projects within a neoliberal cultural regime. The analysis goes beyond the 1980s and ventures into the 2010s in an effort to determine the extent to which the same set of cultural struggles and formal conventions provide a profitable platform for producing consensus through consumption. Numerous scholars have already posited that the 1980s impacted Hollywood in decisive ways. It stands to reason that these developments did not come to a sudden halt in 1989; after all, several observers point out that the cinematic Reagan era had already started before Reagan took office, with conservative tales of masculine heroism like *Rocky* (1976) or *Star Wars* (1977).⁴⁰ It is for this

39 Notable exceptions include Robin Wood's *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan ... and Beyond* (2003) and Ben Dickenson's *Hollywood's New Radicalism: War, Globalisation and the Movies from Reagan to George W. Bush* (2006), which both follow repercussions of and reactions to Reaganism into their respective contemporary eras. However, neither conducts a thorough diachronic analysis of a set of given themes over time.

40 For instance, Peter Kramer explains in his article "Ronald Reagan and *Star Wars*" (1999) that George Lucas' space epic anticipated the SDI program.

reason that the analysis anchors classic Reaganite cinema through the inclusion of *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* from the 1980s and proceeds to trace Reaganite echoes in succeeding decades. Thus, multiple trajectories can be traced in order to provide better answers to questions such as: When did the Reaganization of Hollywood come to halt—if indeed it has? Which specific cultural and political struggles inherited from the post-1960s era retain currency in blockbuster filmmaking? And why do blockbusters continue to be successful?

Throughout his analysis of ideological subtexts in cinematic spectacles, Douglas Kellner generally adheres to a synchronic approach, that is, reading films in the political contexts of their respective times. By applying a diachronic framework to historical film analysis, the workings of larger cultural, political, and economic metatexts can be made visible, offering insights into readaptations, reformulations, and renegotiations. Discussions concerning an escalating cinematic redress for the past are certain to increase, given the current pop cultural trends toward remakes and relauches (Verevis 266).⁴¹

This investigation is further distinguished by its situating of blockbusters vis-à-vis presidential rhetoric. While numerous filmic narratives have been juxtaposed with the verbalized ideology of presidents of the United States, this book offers a survey of some of the most commercially successful movies of all time in relation to the rhetoric of one president, unlimited by genre or decade. This provides avenues for sketching out the ideological contours of top-grossing movies as a filmic format (Sanders 387–457). Academic discussions regarding the genre aspect of blockbusters are still rare or not fully developed in terms of ideological commonalities. The juxtaposition of blockbusters with Reaganite rhetoric offers a means of staking out political subtexts in a clearer fashion and within a comprehensive historical context. Moreover, the reverberations of presidential rhetoric in popular culture are of continued relevance, as presidents have occupied a privileged role in the in the promulgation and diffusion of metaphors in the history of the United States (Heidt 233–255; Roof 286–301). This is amplified by the fact that corporatized Hollywood has

41 Constantine Verevis writes that “[i]f one accepts Thomas Elsaesser’s suggestion that global Hollywood has entered a digital or franchise era of post-production then a blockbuster—like Spielberg’s *War of the Worlds*—can be understood as a ‘signature product’, an instance in which a pre-existing film or property no longer provides a (closed) narrative model but rather functions as a blueprint for ‘remediation’” (226). The changing media landscape of the 1970s/1980s therefore provided a set of blueprints that continue to exert an influence today.

adequate motivation to cash in on political celebrity status, as in the case of the first actor-president (Franklin 56).

My overall approach and sample have limitations as well. As stated in the introduction, it is beyond the scope and intent of this analysis to suggest causal relationships between filmic narrative and political rhetoric (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 15; Franklin 75–89), nor can I ascertain the degree to which the production process of blockbusters is intentionally infused with ideological themes or agendas. The selected theoretical frameworks do not explicitly provide for quantifiable results across analyses, that is, I will not present numeric data illustrating developments concerning themes or stylistic elements. Instead, I will discuss and situate several findings in a set of interconnected analyses.

It should also be emphasized that I will explore how blockbusters can be characterized as a specific style of filmmaking, distribution, and reception. However, my selected approach and focus make it impractical to provide a comprehensive genre theory for blockbusters. This would require a more thorough discussion of existing genre theories and cinematic conventions. Kellner's postulations regarding "multi-perspectival cultural studies" do invoke "ideology critique and genre criticism with semiotic analysis" in order to "discern how the generic forms of media culture, or their semiotic codes, are permeated with ideology" (*Media Culture* 98), but they do not offer a distinct model for delimiting cinematic genre beyond thematic content.

For reasons of limited access, the analysis cannot provide first-hand insights into the production process, nor can its methodology facilitate an exploration of phenomenological aspects of film as a collective experience, for example, a detailed analysis of viewer responses, audience surveys, etc. (Hanich; Maxfield). However, the sections on the production and legacy of each blockbuster will rely on secondary literature and newspaper articles to draw together important observations relevant to the overall analysis. In addition, each analysis will provide reliable numbers on box-office gross.

The size of the sample selected for the analysis constitutes a critical limitation. It needs to be acknowledged that this study cannot offer an exhaustive survey of blockbusters in general through the consideration of four films. Rather, I seek to highlight film historical landmarks that were critical for the developments of blockbusters in their current form—with the exceptions of *Jaws* and the *Star Wars* saga, which have been widely dissected. As stated in the introduction, the sample reflects pivotal turning points in the post-1970s development of US-American popular culture and society at large. This makes it possible to ask questions regarding the emergence, continuation, and discontinuation of prevalent political discourses, for example, why and how does

Reaganite Cold War rhetoric reverberate in *Independence Day*, a movie that was released at the height of the Clinton era? How do movies like *The Dark Knight* and *The Avengers* process the global financial crisis and the election of Barack Obama—two events that were often seen as pivots away from the neoliberal and neoconservative consensus? Ultimately, this study may not be able to provide a full-scale historical lineage of blockbusters, but it can shed light on critical turning points and their negotiations on the big screen. Thus, it contributes to larger discussions on the role of politics in film and the role of film in politics.

The utilization of explicit forms of oppressive language in the discussions in this book risks what Rebecca Barrett-Fox terms “the normalization of hatred” (22). Moreover, the focus on the legacy of the Reagan era can be seen to contribute to current “Reagan mythologies.” Barrett-Fox proposes to “deliberately cultivate awareness” (22) of the negative effects of such language, which is why I will consciously demystify oppressive discourses and expose their contradictions. Chapter 2, in particular, will work toward deconstructing metaphors that serve as euphemisms for militarist projects and the upward distribution of wealth. Nevertheless, the terminology in the subsequent analyses needs to reproduce the original formulation of certain rhetorical figures (e.g. “small government”), as they embody a specific narrative form that is vital for the film analyses. In the following chapter, I will discuss these specific constructions through an examination of the metaphors and ideological undercurrents of Ronald Reagan’s presidential speeches.

