

Chapter 2 Key Myths and Metaphors in Reagan's Rhetoric

Politics is just like show business. You begin with a hell of an opening, you coast for a while, and you end with a hell of a closing.

— Ronald Reagan speaking to his advisor Stuart Spencer in 1966
(*The New Yorker*, September 24, 2012)

Chapter Overview

In order to effectively analyze the intersection of Reaganite rhetoric and popular filmic narratives, it is important to identify the constituent elements and outlook of Reaganite discourses. I will, therefore, conduct a textual analysis on the semiotic and ideological underpinnings of Reagan's speeches and public addresses. Thereby, these discourses can be situated within their cultural and socio-political contexts. This is necessary in order to identify themes, myths, and metaphors that corresponded with societal shifts away from the countercultures of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the New Deal-inflected welfare capitalism of the mid-twentieth century. The public pronouncements of Reagan and his administration serve as pivotal, oratorical documents in the tracing of the cultural realignments that informed subsequent neoliberal and neoconservative currents in the United States. Analyzing these texts is, therefore, critical to a diachronic investigation of the interrelationship between mass media and politics in a neoliberal, post-Fordist setting.

The following analysis and discussion of Reagan's speeches will incorporate Roland Barthes' concepts of myth (106–164), George Lakoff's criteria for political framing (*Thinking Points* 35–66; *Elephant* 3–34), as well as aspects of US-American political ideologies, as outlined by Daniel P. Franklin (104–117). Douglas Kellner's observations on the facets of postmodern media culture will serve as additional background for the discussion. The following main themes of Reagan's rhetoric will be inspected in four separate sections:

- Reagan's rhetoric on "limited/small government" during his 1980 presidential campaign and his first term in office.

- Reagan's conception of the SDI/"Star Wars" program as a Cold War strategy for technological superiority in outer space.
- Reagan's framing of "terrorism" as "war" and the related discourse of individual heroism as a metaphor for national unity.
- Reagan's conception of rugged, self-styled entrepreneurialism as a discursive pushback strategy against economic and political anxieties.

These foci were selected on the basis of two main trajectories that are central to a diachronic analysis: the ascendancy of neoliberalism and neoconservatism as political and cultural regimes in the three decades after Reagan's election in 1980 (Godwin; Heilbrunn, 105–128).⁴² Observations on the jingoistic undertones of the SDI program and "terror as war" are bracketed by investigations of mythical rugged individualism and patriarchal, neoliberal capitalism. This order is also reflective of the chronological arrangement of the movies that will be explored in Chapters 3–6. From a historical perspective, it makes sense to determine the early language used by Reagan as he entered the presidential stage. Thus, the next section will deal with one of the principal tropes of his 1980 campaign: the call for a so-called "small/limited government."

The "Small-Government" Metaphor

In his 1980 campaign, Reagan's verbalized positions on the role and current condition of the federal government⁴³ demonstrate the recurrent theme of an existing governmental entity that appears to be disconnected from the

42 Jacob Heilbrunn argues that "with the presidency of Ronald Reagan and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, neoconservatives believed that their hawkish approach had been vindicated" (109) and that Reagan's arms buildup, the Strategic Defense Initiative, and depiction of the Soviet Union as an "evil empire [...] seemed to signal that the United States was back on the offensive" (122–123). These impressions led notable neoconservatives William Kristol and Robert Kagan to write an article for *Foreign Affairs* in 1996, entitled "Toward a Neo-Reaganite Foreign Policy" (124). This article was invoked the Reagan myth to call for an aggressive and neo-imperialist foreign policy in a post-Cold War environment.

43 It should be acknowledged that Reagan himself rarely used the exact terms "small government" or "limited government" in public addresses. These terms have, however, come to represent his ideology in numerous public and scholarly discourses, leading to their widespread use as denotations of Reagan's articulated positions on the federal government and its social programs (bar its military programs and the fact that the size of the federal government grew under the Reagan era in terms of employees and budgets; Bunch 61).

population it is supposed to serve/represent. He makes the scolding of a supposedly detached and irresponsible federal government a prominent theme in his announcement of his presidential bid in November of 1979:

The crisis we face is not the result of any failure of the American spirit; it is a failure of our leaders to establish rational goals and give our people something to order their lives by. [...] The people have not created this disaster in our economy; the federal government has. It has overspent, overestimated, and over-regulated [...] At the same time, the federal government has cynically told us that high taxes on business will in some way “solve” the problem and allow the average taxpayer to pay less.⁴⁴

The discursive logic of this rhetoric presents a dynamic between two separate entities—the government and the people—with contrasting visions for the future. Both entities have supposedly come into conflict due to a perceived government expansion, sidelining any aspects of democratic legitimization or consensus-oriented politics in all three branches of government. Moreover, Reagan plainly uses the federal government as a scapegoat for economic crises, thereby employing federal government as a signifier for the unresolved challenges facing US-American society. Thus, he confers a negative mythical quality on the federal government (more specifically, the Carter administration).

As noted in Chapter 1, Roland Barthes distinguishes between empty signifiers, full signifiers, and mythical signifiers as sub-types for reading a myth (127). In the case of the “empty signifier,” the signification follows a clearly literal and static path whereby “the concept fill[s] the form of the myth without ambiguity.” This allows for a reading according to which the federal government represents the perceived “malaise” invoked by Reagan. It stands for and is exemplary of “failure.” However, according to Reagan, this failure cannot be traced to the mythical qualities assigned to the white, middle-class mainstream. This reinforces Reagan’s strict semiotic separation of “government” and “people.” The government, therefore, is distinct from the people and does not communicate with the people in a meaningful or mutual way. Through a reading of the myth as a full signifier (i.e. reading it as an imposture or decoding the myth), the gaps and distortive qualities become apparent. Reagan does not specify any other factors that may have contributed to the economic crisis of the late 1970s, nor does he acknowledge the multi-directional dynamics between an elected government and its people. The term “government” seems to refer only to the

44 Ronald Reagan, “Ronald Reagan’s Announcement for Presidential Candidacy” (November 13, 1979).

Carter administration's handling of economic issues and does not encompass the preceding Republican presidents and their roles in the crises of the 1970s.

The mythical signifier is understood through the "constituting mechanism of myth" (127), thereby exposing an entire narrative of decline, a supposed crowding-out of previously ascendant mythical qualities and strengths possessed by the white middle class, which is now under siege by an irresponsible and expanding force. This story line lends itself to interpretations of white, male hegemony within a capitalist framework ("American spirit") as the beleaguered part of society.⁴⁵ The characterization of the government as "cynical" due to its "high taxes on business" underlines the government's intent to stifle this naturalized element of society. Barthes remarks that "the very principle of myth" is that "it transforms history into nature." In the presented dichotomy between "people" and "government," Reagan absolves his target audience and endows them with immutable qualities of greatness. Thus, it is implied that a restoration of these qualities of greatness would be congruent with a pushback against the bureaucratic forces that threaten them. This is forcefully exemplified in a later passage of the same speech:

We must put an end to the arrogance of a federal establishment which accepts no blame for our condition, cannot be relied upon to give us a fair estimate of our situation and utterly refuses to live within its means. I will not accept the supposed "wisdom" which has it that the federal bureaucracy has become so powerful that it can no longer be changed or controlled by any administration.⁴⁴

The repeated narrative of an expansive and intrusive government adds a note of urgency to the subtext of this message. This transparent attempt to evoke certain emotional responses can be dissembled into its constituent surface and deep frames (Lakoff, *Thinking Points* 28–29). According to Lakoff, surface frames build on lexical terms and phrases that can cognitively activate deep frames. These deep frames reflect a person's deeper moral and political worldview. While Reagan maintains that the "federal bureaucracy" can still be "controlled" (the "surface frame"), the use of the term "control" evokes deep frames of a volatile and jeopardous development. These deep frames are underlined by Reagan's assertions that there is consensus that the situation has already spun out of control and that he is the only one standing up to this form of supposed

45 Stephen Prince remarks that "[t]he dominant symbolic motifs of the Reagan period, then, portrayed a society under threat. America and the family were besieged by resurgent forces of chaos and disorder: communism, terrorism, gay and women's rights, school bussing, abortion, and so on" (*Visions of Empire* 32).

defeatism. In light of the previous observations on the mythical signifier as a vehicle for narrating a naturalized dynamic (Barthes 127, 130), the urgency created by the subtext of “controlling” the federal bureaucracy becomes even more apparent. Reagan’s invocation of an “out-of-control” government creates a myth that provides motivation. This motivation is supplemented by an appeal to faux commonsensical beliefs regarding the containment of threats. While the motivation itself is not “natural” (Barthes 125),⁴⁶ the myth transposes it into a narrative that makes it appear naturalized. One of the effects of this framing and myth-making is the construction of the tale of a federal government that is on the verge of becoming “un-American,” overly intrusive, wasteful, and unresponsive.

The term “arrogance” is used in tandem with a faceless abstract noun (“federal establishment”), which allows Reagan to attack the Carter administration, its Keynesianism, and its liberal welfare policies without resorting to naming names and thereby activating competing deep frames in people who don’t hold a negative view of Carter as a person. This rhetorical strategy was aimed at independents and Democratic voters who had voted for Carter in 1976.⁴⁷ Thus, it is critical to note that Reaganite anti-government rhetoric of the 1980 campaign often resorted to abstract and vague descriptions of “bureaucracy” and “establishment” as antagonistic forces.

Reagan’s rhetorical remedy for this menacing constellation takes the form of an invocation of foundational myths as a guiding principle. Through the usage of vague descriptors and an appeal to “values,” he presents his views as the logical result of colonialist histories derived from foundational myths of the United States:

My view of government places trust not in one person or one party, but in those values that transcend persons and parties. The trust is where it belongs—in the people. The responsibility to live up to that trust is where it belongs, in their elected leaders. That kind of relationship, between the people and their elected leaders, is a special kind of compact. Three hundred and sixty years ago, in 1620, a group of families dared

46 Barthes writes that “motivation is unavoidable. It is none the less very fragmentary. To start with, it is not ‘natural’: it is history which supplies its analogies to the form” (125).

47 According to a *Time* poll published on September 15, 1980, 59 percent of Carter supporters felt positive about him as a person, whereas only 48 percent of Reagan supporters felt similarly about their candidate (“The Mood of the Voter,” *Time* magazine (September 15, 1980). Accessed December 8, 2018: <<http://edition.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1996/analysis/back.time/9609/15/index.shtml>>).

to cross a mighty ocean to build a future for themselves in a new world. When they arrived at Plymouth, Massachusetts, they formed what they called a "compact"; an agreement among themselves to build a community and abide by its laws. [...] Isn't it once again time to renew our compact of freedom [...]? (Golway, 45–46)

Along the lines of Barthes' "mythical signifier," Reagan narrates an imaginary historical trajectory based on the premises of "American exceptionalism" and "the experience of flight" (Franklin 22–23). The utilization of the *Mayflower* myth effectively excludes Native Americans from this national narrative and casts the European settler population of the United States as the "dispossessed," who—through entrepreneurial spirit—set out to create a new society. The repeated use of the word "compact," which is associated with this popular myth, implies a language of consent, mutuality, and accountability.⁴⁸ Barthes has noted that "this distortion is possible only because the form of the myth is already constituted by a linguistic meaning" (121). Therefore, Reagan resolves the previously stated tension between government and people by arguing for a return to the original trajectory, implying that an unjust intervention (or usurpation) has taken place. The potent imagery "of families [who] dared to cross a mighty ocean to build a future for themselves in a new world" underlines the mythical centrality of masculine individualism, family, and entrepreneurial initiative in the securing of the compact.

Another prominent theme in Reagan's 1980 campaign rhetoric was the dystopian characterization of the supposed effects of "big government," which was painted as having disastrous results for both the middle class and the impoverished strata of society. Reagan regularly ended such tales by proclaiming that this was not an inevitable fate. While this theme was already present in the two speeches that were previously analyzed in this chapter, the Reagan campaign managed to expand on the theme through the inclusion of personal "tales of compassion" in the televised debate between Carter and Reagan on October 28, 1980. Kurt Ritter and David Henry highlight one of the key moments in the debate, in which Reagan constructs a dystopian narrative that casts him as a compassionate protagonist up against allegedly excessive and misguided government intervention:

Noting Carter's emphasis on federal assistance and expansive government, Reagan recalled a visit he had made recently to the South Bronx, to the same spot the President had visited in 1977. Where Carter had "promised to bring a vast program to

48 Notions of consent and mutuality are demonstrably limited in the case of the Pilgrims at Cape Cod, as they excluded women, Native Americans, and non-Congregationalists from the exercise of political power.

rebuild” the area, Reagan instead found what “looks like a bombed-out city—great, gaunt skeletons of buildings, windows smashed out; painted on one of them ‘Unkept promises,’ on another, ‘Despair.’ And this was the spot at which President Carter had promised that he was going to bring in a vast program to rebuild this area. There are whole blocks of land that are left bare, just bulldozed down flat, and nothing has been done. And they are now charging to take tourists through there to see this terrible desolation.” [...] “I talked to a man just briefly there who asked me one simple question: ‘Do I have reason to hope that I can someday take care of my family again? Nothing has been done.’” Lest the viewer miss the point, Reagan made clear that the culprit was his opponent, whose misguided dependence on government programs was doomed to failure. (Ritter & Henry in Friedenberg 78–79)

In this narrative of urban and social decline, several myths that repeatedly structure Reagan’s rhetoric on “limited government” come to the forefront: firstly, the anonymity and facelessness of “big government” and its representatives. In line with Barthes’ definition of the myth as an empty signifier, the presence of desolation and despair is not evidence of the absence of “big government,” but is, rather, a clear indictment of its overbearing presence and intrusion. Secondly, the destructive and bleak atmosphere supposedly created by “big government” is described as uncharacteristic of the contemporary United States (“looks like a bombed-out city”). Thirdly, the alleged lack of accountability and dialogue between the government and its constituents (“unkept promises”) is highlighted. And fourthly, it is suggested that this calamitous situation represents a recent departure from a naturalized trajectory of history.

Instead of discussing long-standing discriminatory structures and practices, Reagan opines that the misery faced by the inhabitants of the South Bronx is the result of a recent misguided intervention. This is observable in the subtle, but critical inclusion of the word “again” in the question, “Do I have reason to hope that I can someday take care of my family again?” The mythical signification here makes reference to a preferable past that has only recently been lost, thereby narrowing culpability down to the Carter administration and its associated social programs. Barthes writes that the “signified” in a myth “is in no way abstract: it is filled with a situation. Through the concept, it is a whole new history which is implanted in the myth” (117). And it is in this situation that Reagan inscribes himself as a source for emotional rapport and a signifier of a mythical past and aesthetic.

A final and crucial element in Reagan’s rhetoric on “small government” is the legitimization of Reaganite neoliberalism through its infusion with references to mythical heroism. The tales of wide-eyed imagination embraced by Reagan endow this anti-government rhetoric with an inflection of almost

childlike sanguinity. This offers an escapist vision of a depoliticized nature while brushing over the socio-economic ramifications of the neoliberal turn. In a frequently quoted passage from his inaugural address, Reagan paints a picture of individual potential that has been stifled by excessive bureaucracy:

It is no coincidence that our present troubles parallel and are proportionate to the intervention and intrusion in our lives that result from unnecessary and excessive growth of government. It is time for us to realize that we're too great a nation to limit ourselves to small dreams.⁴⁹

In this tall tale, he reinforces the idea of a national trajectory that has been usurped and needs to return to its naturalized state. However, unlike in the juxtaposition analyzed in the previous speeches, the dichotomy that is narrated here is not “the government” versus “the people,” but “the government” versus “dreams.” This implies that “small dreams” are a result of “big government.” This is embedded in an ahistorical narrative that suggests a negative relationship between unspecified national predicaments and the presence of welfare liberalism and social programs. On a linguistic level, the use of the word “dream” can activate deep frames that are evocative, for instance, of notions of the “American Dream” and the related immigrant experiences (Franklin 22–23, 39–41) or concepts of brotherhood or indivisibility along the lines of Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech (Blanton 90). However, in the context of the advent of neoliberalism as a cultural regime, all these dreams—whether they are socially progressive or conservative in origin—rest on the pushback against “big government.” Reagan thus articulates a neo-capitalist framework by appealing to the seemingly innocuous: “dreams” (Barthes 142–145). This is further amplified in this passage from the same address:

We have every right to dream heroic dreams. Those who say that we're in a time when there are not heroes, they just don't know where to look. [...] Your dreams, your hopes, your goals are going to be the dreams, the hopes, and the goals of this administration, so help me God.

The accord that he invokes between people and government brings the previous rhetoric on a democratically legitimized compact full circle. The now mystified and spiritualized discourse of rugged individualism is expressive of a new sense of supposed national harmony—class, gender, and racial concerns are relegated to the background in favor of an escapist language of “individual achievement.” This language is both escapist and triumphalist, as it echoes the “People beat

49 Ronald Reagan, “First Inaugural Address” (January 20, 1981).

the politicians” frame that conservative populism has invoked in subsequent elections.⁵⁰ But more importantly, it reassures Reagan’s target audience of rural and small-town white, middle-class voters that they are “essentially good” and that their aspirations find a proper metaphorical expression in Reagan’s rhetoric. Lakoff sums up the implications of this mystified “free-market” creed in his exploration of the “strict father” model:

The good people are the disciplined people. Once grown, the self-reliant, disciplined children are on their own, and the father is not to meddle in their lives. Those children who remain dependent [...] should be forced to undergo further discipline or should be cut free with no support to face the discipline of the outside world. (*Elephant* 41)

In this framework, the market is itself a “strict father” as it rewards the “disciplined people” and punishes those who are supposedly “lacking discipline.” Believing in the market means believing in the “appropriate father.”

In summary, it can be stated that Reagan employed a variety of ahistorical and emotionally resonant mythical story lines in his propagation of the notion of a “limited government.” In Reagan’s announcement of his candidacy for the presidency, several themes that structured the ensuing language on the campaign trail came to the forefront. The repeated juxtaposition of “the people” and “the government” was shown to be imbued with references to mythical qualities that the white, middle-class mainstream of the United States was supposed to possess. These qualities were allegedly being stifled by an expanding and increasingly intrusive government. Reagan underlined the seriousness of his message through a subtext of urgency.

Another prominent theme in this anti-government rhetoric was the invocation of national founding myths that appealed to white voters and social and libertarian conservatives. In his presidential debate against Jimmy Carter, Reagan portrayed the federal government as faceless, anonymous, and vigorously destructive in its irresponsibility. The notion of a bureaucracy that is “out of touch” with the middle class was semiotically linked to a narrative of the country having been usurped by “un-American” forces—linking the idea of an unaccountable government to subconscious images of totalitarianism. Reagan’s proposed remedy for the calamitous situation he depicts takes the form of a renewal of a “mythical compact,” which he describes in a depoliticized manner. This renewal is structured by a general pushback against federal and social programs (which evidences the re-installment of racial and masculine

50 One example is the election of Arnold Schwarzenegger as Governor of California in 2003 (Lakoff, *Elephant* 36).

hegemony along the lines of neo-capitalist individualism) and the invocation of myths of heroism and dreams, which he expresses in an empathic and nostalgic manner.

All these semiotic constellations inscribed themselves into a larger set of narratives that positioned the Reagan campaign as a spearhead for the neo-liberal and neoconservative realignment of the 1980s. It is safe to say that the Reagan campaign found a new and more effective way of channeling the previous Goldwater conservatism into a rhetorical formula that resonated with the US electorate on a larger scale. This aided in the formation of a new conservative coalition. This type of discourse, therefore, corresponds directly with a larger societal subconscious, which makes the analysis of a contemporaneous mass media text such as *E.T.—The Extra-Terrestrial* so important.

The “Star Wars” Program as a Pop Culture Invocation for Cold War Rearmament

A central and recurrent claim of the Reagan administration was the return of the United States to a position of international dominance. Reagan contended that this position had been lost in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the Iranian hostage crisis, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. By invoking the mythical “missile gap,”⁵¹ which was frequently used by foreign-policy hawks throughout the Cold War era, Reagan returned the attention of the US-American public to the sky. According to his vision, the militarization of space would provide state-of-the-art protection from any alleged Soviet aggression. One of the most prominent projects associated with this strategy was the SDI program, a proposed missile-defense system announced by Reagan on March 23, 1983. The associated imagery provided tales of national assertion through the ability to prevent strikes or intrusions before they even occurred—leading the national press and media to refer to it as the “Star Wars” program.⁵²

51 It is important to note that Reagan-era discourse on the missile gap was permeated by repeated exaggerations of Soviet progress on high-end military weapons (Hoffman 294).

52 Similar to the term “small government,” Reagan himself rarely used the term “Star Wars” to refer to the SDI program in public speeches or interviews. Nevertheless, the filmic associations evoked by the program were numerous and arguably stem from Reagan’s own involvement in Hollywood film. Michael Rogin argues that the Strategic Defense Initiative was possibly derived from the “inertia projector” in the 1940 science-fiction movie *Murder in the Air*, in which Reagan himself starred (*Ronald Reagan, The Movie* 1–43). One of the first national figures to verbally connect

His public address announcing the Strategic Defense Initiative is characterized by a sense of urgency in the face of an alleged secret military buildup of the USSR:

[S]ince 1969 the Soviet Union has built five new classes of ICBM's, and upgraded these eight times. As a result, their missiles are much more powerful and accurate than they were several years ago, and they continue to develop more, while ours are increasingly obsolete. [...] But the Soviets are still adding an average of 3 new warheads a week, and now have 1,300. These warheads can reach their targets in a matter of a few minutes. We still have none. So far, it seems that the Soviet definition of parity is a box score of 1,300 to nothing, in their favor.⁵³

The postulation of a large military discrepancy between the United States and the USSR echoes Barthes' discussion of motivation as a central feature of the myth. Barthes writes that

the mythical signification, on the other hand, is never arbitrary; it is always in part motivated, and unavoidably contains some analogy [...]. Motivation is necessary to the very duplicity of myth: myth plays on the analogy between meaning and form, there is no myth without motivated form. (124)

Given Reagan's stated goals to replace the previous Cold War policy paradigm of “Mutually Assured Destruction” (MAD),⁵⁴ the missile gap becomes an ideological prism, suggesting not only the necessity of keeping up with the Soviets, but also a radical departure from previous long-held paradigms of national defense. The presentation of a large gap constitutes the “motivated form.” This connects with the myth of a complacent and unassertive foreign policy in significant ways. Reagan effectively argues that merely attempting to close the gap would be insufficient for national security, as doing so would mean remaining within the confines of MAD. The stark contrast evoked by the mythical image plays into the underlying motivation of legitimizing a radical departure from previous defense policies and justifying higher-rank militaristic projects. Reagan asserts his desire to increase the defense budget in this passage from the same speech:

this program to the *Star Wars* franchise was Democratic senator Ted Kennedy (“‘Star Wars’: How the Term Arose,” *The New York Times* (September 25, 1985). Accessed December 8, 2018: <<https://www.nytimes.com/1985/09/25/world/star-wars-how-the-term-arose.html>>).

53 Ronald Reagan, “Announcement of Strategic Defense Initiative” (March 23, 1983).

54 Reagan and his aides regarded MAD as flawed and unsustainable (Troy, *The Reagan Revolution* 87, 96).

The calls for cutting back the defense budget come in nice, simple arithmetic. They're the same kind of talk that led the democracies to neglect their defenses in the 1930's and invited the tragedy of World War II. We must not let that grim chapter of history repeat itself through apathy.

Several mythical signifiers serve as thematic interlocutors for Reagan's broader ideology here: the invocation of an imaginary past of national strength and dominance, located in the 1950s, and the construction of a totalitarian threat, which operates on hyper-masculine principles. In this story line, the threat can only be forestalled through the reassertion of one's own masculinity. Using the notion of the full signifier, it is possible to decode Reagan's reference to the supposed inaction of Western democracies when faced with the rise of fascism as a distorting narrative. Invoking this historical myth reconfigures contemporary debates into the realm of the absolute and leaves only a few remaining options, as the presence of nuclear warheads creates a rigorous sense of urgency.

Toward the end of the speech, Reagan uses accessible language and imagery to paint his alternative vision for national defense:

What if free people could live secure in the knowledge that their security did not rest upon the threat of instant U.S. retaliation to deter a Soviet attack, that we could intercept and destroy strategic ballistic missiles before they reached our own soil or that of our allies?

The illusion of absolute safety through pre-emptive action has significant ideological repercussions that continue to reverberate in neoconservative discourses in the United States to this very day. Within the context of a military arms race, the militarization of space offered new profit venues for a military-industrial complex that was experiencing saturated markets in conventional warfare, as well as the loss of key allies, such as Iran and South Vietnam. The shift from a Fordist economic setting toward a neoliberal setting resulted in a renewed focus on investment-heavy markets that necessitated a new degree of public-private partnership. This inscribed the SDI and its imagery into a neoliberal political and cultural regime. The political resonance is exemplified by fantasies of national reassertion, which celebrate the nation's technological capabilities on post-Fordist terms (e.g. advanced and efficient technology are juxtaposed with massive and bloated machineries).

The supposed versatility, agility, and capitalist drive behind such ventures are presented as critical to the survival of the nation. For instance, James Oberg of the US Air Force Academy states, in his theory on "Space Power," that "a strong economy makes it easier to fund a strong space program, both government and commercial programs. But a weak economy should not be allowed

to lead or to terminate space activities” (45). The proper character of the president is evidenced by his support of such military innovation even in times of economic hardship, as the presence of otherized foes remains a constant in this framework (in line with Lakoff’s reasoning on the basics of conservative morality). Oberg also refers to the role of market capitalism in maintaining “Space Power”:

[P]rivate industry must vigorously pursue space technology and applications for “business and profit” and fund their own in-house basic and applied research to maintain a competitive edge in the designing, manufacturing, deploying, and operating of space systems. (44–45)

The emphasis on the economy in a framework of corporate capitalism intersects with the key visions of Reaganite neoliberalism and neoconservatism, as it is implied that a strong defense rests upon profiteering in the private sector.⁵⁵ This is amplified when the United States is facing a totalitarian Other, which relies on a collectivist system and thus appears to be less responsive to market forces. These notions of “war preparedness in peace time” and “military strength through innovative competition” reappear in cinematic form in *Independence Day*.

Of vital importance to Reagan’s legitimization of the weaponization of space were his articulations of religious triumphalism in the face of Soviet-style communism. Frances Fitzgerald outlines in her book *Way Out There in the Blue: Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War* that Reagan’s “patriotic pieties” (24) were shaped by nineteenth-century Protestant beliefs that the United States was “a covenanted New Israel” that received divine instruction to become “invulnerable” (İşçi 106). Fitzgerald addresses the skepticism among leading scientists and politicians, as well as a section of the general public, regarding the degree to which the title “Star Wars’ [...] was a reflection not merely on the improbability of making nuclear missiles impotent and obsolete” (Fitzgerald 22, İşçi 106). In fact, the title “Star Wars program” acquired several intertextual connections as Reagan’s SDI announcement came only two weeks after his widely noted address to the National Association of Evangelicals in

55 Barry Smart refers to David Noble when explaining that a digitalized, information-based military apparatus is strongly tied to notions of social control: “The formative technological roots of an increasingly digitalized informational machine-centric capitalism can be traced back to the Second World War and military sponsorship of research in the fields of communication and control of information, specifically in electronics, servomechanisms, and computers” (20).

Orlando, Florida. In this speech, he described the Soviet Union as an "Evil Empire," thereby echoing the *Star Wars* franchise (Kramer 41–47). The links between religious triumphalism and Reagan's Cold War rhetoric are therefore evident and critical to understanding the structure and mythical imagery of this rhetoric. It is important to note that Reagan did not *introduce* religiously coded Cold War rhetoric into political discourses in the United States. However, his spin on "American exceptionalism" allowed him to leverage a surge of conservative patriotism that emerged in reaction to perceived slights to the collective psyche of the white mainstream. This climate allowed for a vision that departed from that of his predecessors in its spatial setting and greater belligerence.⁵⁶

In his "Evil Empire" speech, Reagan saves his thoughts on relations between the United States and the Soviet Union for the end. Up until then, he primarily focuses on domestic culture war issues, for example, abortion rights, prayers in school, and the supposed "pitfalls of secularism." He establishes a series of moral binaries, in which the perceived "moral side" can only prevail through dominant assertiveness (Baker 22). Thus, Reagan invokes a consistent theme of "good" versus "evil," mythically casting his own side as the beleaguered side. He reactivates the linguistic frames of the "strict father" model by performing the role of an alert patriarch, who discerns right from wrong. He also warns his base of impending doom using language that echoes traditions of the Puritan jeremiad. By the time Reagan addresses the Cold War, he has firmly established himself as an unwavering "Christian soldier."⁵⁷

The underlying dichotomy is continued when Reagan warns against accepting any proposals of a nuclear freeze: "The truth is that a freeze now would be a very dangerous fraud, for that is merely the illusion of peace. The reality is that we must find peace through strength. [...] A freeze would reward the Soviet Union for its enormous and unparalleled military buildup."⁵⁸ Reading this passage from the perspective of Lakoff's "strict father" concept, the United

56 Scott Spitzer argues that "Reagan entered office as a reconstructive rather than a preemptive President, providing him with an opportunity to build a new Republican Party, engage in institutional construction, create new conservative networks of elites, and extend his leadership throughout the nation under a warrant for remaking national politics" (5–6).

57 This address was followed by a rendition of the English hymn "Onward, Christian Soldiers" from the nineteenth century (Baker 24).

58 Ronald Reagan, "Address to a Meeting of the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida" (March 8, 1983).

States is cast as a family that is in dire need of such a father, especially since the enemy is asserting aggressive masculinity.

This scenario, in which the United States needs to be heroically rescued, squarely places Reagan’s narrative in mythical and metaphorical territory. The exercise of strength on an international scale is presented in a depoliticized manner—as if the metaphor of the freeze was the dominant discursive distortion of the time and Reagan was merely attempting to restore a naturalized balance between the two superpowers. This parallels Barthes’ thoughts on “depoliticization [... supervening] against a background that is already naturalized” (143). The populist strain of Reaganite conservatism thereby comes to the forefront, with Reagan establishing himself as a critical voice speaking out against perceived “establishment wisdom” and the associated diplomatic efforts, which ought to be resisted on moral and religious grounds. The subtext of this language aligns closely with models of the state as a rational actor that engages in business-style transactions with other nations. This transactional logic is manifested in Reagan’s repeated references to the missile gap as a strategic imbalance, the implication being that previous administrations were not sufficiently rational and competitive in their foreign policies—that is, they lacked “common sense.” Also notable is the use of the term “freeze,” which commonly connotes being static and/or lacking dynamism. This terminology allows Reagan to activate deep frames of resistance against the perceived inertia of “politics as usual.” He ends his “Evil Empire” speech on a triumphant note:

I believe we shall rise to the challenge. I believe that communism is another sad, bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages even now are being written. I believe this because the source of our strength in the quest for human freedom is not material, but spiritual. And because it knows no limitation, it must terrify and ultimately triumph over those who would enslave their fellow man.⁵⁸

This language characterizes the competition with the Soviet Union as a divinely pre-ordained struggle with a predestined outcome. The Soviet Union/United States moral binary is underlined by discourses of the “irrational Other” versus a “rational Western world,” which recognizes the pitfalls of communism. This knowledge is informed and structured by a knowledge of God, which gives the neo-expansionist foreign-policy impulses of the Reagan administration a sheen of virtuousness. This can be juxtaposed with the mere pragmatism of the “Realpolitik” of the Nixon administration or the more calculated, long-term foreign-policy project of Jimmy

Carter.^{59,60} By echoing ages-old Protestant beliefs that the United States was “a covenanted New Israel” (İşçi 106), Reagan asserts a new metaphorical sense of the national body. This “hard body” is not only capable of recuperating after previous slights but can also reassert masculine dominance in uncompromising ways (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 25). As the preceding observations on domestic cultural issues have suggested, the global exercise of the national “hard body” is also predicated on the containment of domestic “soft bodies”—as represented by feminism, challenges to heteronormativity, and liberal intellectualism, as well as societal advances made by racialized minorities (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 38).

It is, however, observable that the language and the actual policies of the Reagan administration took a more conciliatory and co-operative stance in the second half of the decade. Frequently, his rhetoric on global politics would revolve around accessible myths of diversity in the United States as a model for global co-operation. In his address to the United Nations General Assembly on October 24, 1985, Reagan expressed his view of a pluralist form of “American exceptionalism”: “America is committed to the world because so much of the world is inside America [...]. The blood of each nation courses through the American vein and feeds the spirit that compels us to involve ourselves in the fate of this good Earth” (Baker 39).

In this short passage, a multitude of myths paint a picture of the United States as a unified global village that is held together by a spiritual component. Aside from the manifest distortions in terms of racial, economic, and gendered power disparities in US-American society, this framework is highly inculcated by myths of “American exceptionalism” and the inherent goodness of the country. Since the United States unites “so much of the world,” it logically follows that the country will be characterized by the essentialized qualities of “this good Earth.” Consequently, remaining involved on the global stage is not only a political but also a moral mandate, since the country combines and represents the positive traits of the entire planet (“feeds the spirit that compels us to involve ourselves”). Within the context of Reagan’s “messianic Americanism” (Dearborn 197–203), this mythical progressivism re-enshrines the idea of a “melting pot” of nations as divinely chosen to usher in an ultimate age of peace, freedom, and prosperity for the entire world. Global leadership by

59 Kyle Longley argues that “Carter’s approach rejected the short-term appeal of cooperating with dictators who trampled on the rights of people with a zeal equal to that of the communists” (95).

60 John A. Dearborn characterizes Reagan’s language as “Messianic Americanism,” Nixon’s as “Realist Exemplarism,” and Carter’s as “Moral Pragmatism” (28).

the United States is presented as inherently moral, as it is uniquely established by divine foresight. This notion would echo throughout the succeeding decades in discourses regarding a supposed “End of History” (Fukuyama, *The End of History*) on both neoliberal and neoconservative terms. It is therefore important to note that, despite its emphasis on international co-operation, Reagan’s language nonetheless extolled mythical virtues of “American exceptionalism” that laid the groundwork for capitalist and expansionist projects in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

At one point, Reagan’s space defense rhetoric even explicitly invoked the notion of an extra-terrestrial Other as an integrative force for overcoming global differences. In a speech given in 1988, the president mused about the following:

I’ve often wondered, what if all of us in the world discovered that we were threatened by an outer—a power from outer space, from another planet. Wouldn’t we all of a sudden find that we didn’t have any differences between us at all, we were all human beings, citizens of the world, and wouldn’t we come together to fight that particular threat?⁶¹

Reagan does not specify why these aliens would be hostile or how the threat would manifest itself. Yet, the mere presence of an Other serves as the genesis for a tale of global integration and universalist identity building. The construction of a binary on global terms transposes Reagan’s previous anti-Soviet language onto the canvas of outer space. Thus, this anecdote exposes an undercurrent of continuity between the fight against communism and an imagined future confrontation with aliens. The SDI program is thereby afforded discursive legitimacy, as it represents a technological bridge between the late stage of the Cold War and hypothetical expansion into uncharted new spaces.

The program acquires another dimension as a futuristic means of defense: According to Reagan, it can bring about a universal sense of purpose and identity for all humans. Like the alien invasion, the focus on outer space frames the fight against communism in cosmic terms. It becomes an all-encompassing endeavor with religious connotations. The mythical nature ascribed to the Cold War is accented by a language of “incomplete images” (Barthes 125). As previously noted, this imagery, with its vague descriptors, lends itself to caricature and pastiche, as well as mimetic reproduction. The SDI program assumes the role of a psychological signifier for global co-operation and the defeat of communism rather than a strategic military measure to

61 Terence Hunt, “Reagan—Space Invaders,” *Associated Press Dispatch* (May 9, 1988). In Michael Rogin, *Independence Day* (8).

counteract the suggested missile gap. Through recycled tales of symbolic othering, this anecdote proposes the eradication of racial, cultural, and economic difference on Earth. The result is a form of depoliticized speech (Barthes 142–145) that is conducive not only to the maintenance of the status quo, but also to the introduction of vast corporate-sponsored military projects.

In summary, it can be stated that Reagan's invocation of the mythical missile gap laid the groundwork for naturalized and apparently commonsensical discourses on rearming the United States. The shift from a Fordist mode of production to a post-Fordist one facilitated and incentivized the pursuit of military projects outside of conventional warfare (i.e. in the realm of space). This phenomenon was accompanied by Reagan's escapist appeals to national impenetrability, seemingly derived from the Hollywood imagination. Reagan's language is, therefore, infused with imaginations of triumph and mass media-ready spectacle. The mixture of these elements is also present in *Independence Day*.

Counter-Terrorism as “War” against the Other

Throughout the 1980s, the Reagan administration was confronted with terrorist groups on multiple occasions and in changing constellations. Early on, Reagan publicly articulated a set of guidelines and ideological corridors that outlined his vision for dealing with terrorism. Chief among these were his public promises never to negotiate with terrorists under any circumstances, never to make concessions to terrorist groups, to proactively pursue and “punish” regimes that were deemed supportive of terrorism, and never to retreat in response to terrorist attacks. Yet, the Reagan administration failed to live up to these guidelines in significant ways, leading many historians and commentators to relegate the fortieth president's anti-terrorism rhetoric to the realm of “Reagan mythology” (Bunch 76–77, 107). Nevertheless, the firm, paternalistic, and Manichean language that Reagan employed experienced an explicit and visceral comeback during the administration of George W. Bush (Winkler, “Preemptive War Rhetoric” 303–333).⁶² Thus, it is important to determine the exact contours and novelties of Reagan's anti-terrorism rhetoric in

62 Carol Winkler notes that presidential war rhetoric has often been analyzed as a “genre of public discourse” and that the “public communication strategies of the Bush administration on Iraq and the Reagan administration on the bombing of Libya [...] demonstrate that despite changes in the situational exigencies, the nation's leadership uses a heavy reliance on strategic misrepresentation to maintain compliance with the genre's expectations” (“Preemptive War Rhetoric” 303).

order to discuss how it has laid some of the groundwork for ideological and cinematic discourses on war and terrorism in the early twenty-first century.

First and foremost, the language Reagan used when speaking about terrorism in the 1980s was informed by the same Manichean underpinnings that largely structured the language he used when speaking about the Cold War. In his speeches, Reagan presented terrorism as a tangible entity that operates outside the realm of a “civilized world.” This distinction between “civilized” and “uncivilized” is predicated on the terrorist’s use of intentional violence against civilian targets. Reagan detailed this view in his statement regarding the 1985 Zona Rosa attacks in El Salvador, in which 15 people were killed (among them two US-American businessmen):

This atrocity, like the bombing earlier yesterday in Frankfurt, Germany, is further evidence that the war which terrorists are waging is not only directed against the United States, it is a war against all of civilized society. This is a war in which innocent civilians are targets. This is a war in which innocent civilians are intentional victims, and our servicemen have become specific targets. This cannot continue.⁶³

Terrorism is constructed as a form of physical and political violence that is perpetrated by non-state actors; yet, it constitutes a declaration of war against all “civilized” nation states and their respective populations. Possible social or political grievances are eclipsed by the perpetrators’ willingness to resort to physical violence against non-combatants. This renders the perpetrators’ ideological concerns either mute or not worthy of discussion. In this conception of “civilization versus terrorism,” the possibility of a neutral and/or nuanced stance is diminished. The framing of this struggle as a “war” implies a necessary mobilization, regardless of one’s own political stance or connection with the events.

As opposed to “police” or “intelligence action,” the “war” frame offers a more immersive experience marked by a departure from the “normal state of affairs” in that all other concerns—aside from the war—become secondary (Lakoff, *Thinking Points* 29).⁶⁴ The war that terrorism supposedly brings into the lived experience of a whole population is described as an unprecedented axiomatic threat, one that is inescapable for both the individual and the collective as it

63 Ronald Reagan, “Statement Announcing Actions Against Terrorism” (June 20, 1985).

64 Lakoff explains that the “conceptual frame associated with ‘war’ has semantic roles: armies, a fight, a moral crusade, a commander in chief, a capture of territory, the surrender of an enemy, and patriots supporting the troops. ‘War’ implies the necessity of military action. When we’re in a war, all other concerns are secondary” (29).

appears to endanger a vaguely defined “way of life.” In this sense, terrorism is not about competing policy models or geopolitical resource struggles; rather, it insinuates a totalizing emotion, which challenges “life” at its most basic level (Jackson 4–5). The emotional dimension of “terror as a state of mind” can perpetuate the war frame at will, without defining any specific victory (Lakoff, *Thinking Points* 29–30).

Moreover, Reagan's emphasis on “servicemen” suggests that this is a struggle that is primarily fought by male members of the US armed forces, thus implying that it can only be won by males. This effectively genders the government narrative of anti-terrorist efforts and exposes its additional social function perpetuating gendered power structures at home and the defusing of progressive movement politics (Jackson 18–19). In this framework, the people fighting terrorism are considered to be masculine, which implicitly ties this discourse to the concept of the “hard body” in the context of 1980s cinema. As the forces representing “good” are connoted as male, the opposing terrorists logically need to exhibit some form of “internal bodily failure” (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 52) or insufficient masculinity. The rhetorical emphasis on the masculinity of the US forces creates a binary, in which terrorists are poised to lose as they do not possess such “hard bodies.” Moreover, it eclipses female voices, as women are prevented from positioning themselves in this male exercise of war.

Through its employment of the terminology of “war,” Reaganite counter-terrorism rhetoric represents a departure from the discourses of previous administrations. Richard Jackson elaborates on this point by highlighting the repeated use of this term in the 1980s:

For example, the Reagan administration discursively re-constructed instances of anti-American terrorism as “acts of war”, rather than as crime, insurgency, or simply kidnappings, bombings, hijackings, and the like. Speaking about the kidnapping of American citizens in Lebanon for example, Reagan declared that, “Their acts of terror constitute a declaration of war on civilized society”; earlier he had stated that America “would not tolerate what amounts to acts of war against the American people.” In another speech, Reagan suggested that so-called “terrorist states”—nations that sponsor terrorism—are “now engaged in acts of war against the Government and people of the United States”. (3)

The positioning of terrorism within cultural and linguistic markers of “war” is expressive of a rhetorical alignment that emphasizes military responses and overall mobilization in response to threats that are designated as outside the threshold of “civilization” and devoid of legitimate political context. However, it is important to note that the “war” frame was activated by Reagan specifically in relation to terrorist incidents that could be associated with leftist or

anti-imperialist causes. These movements were frequently “depicted as the Soviet Union’s proxy forces in the global struggle against the West” (Rosenau 28). This conjunction of terrorism and war gave way to rhetorical performances of bellicosity against any group that was deemed to present an ideological challenge to the government. This was cemented by a strong discursive element of racial othering, which places terrorism in the realm of state sponsorship by nation states, which are considered illegitimate (“terrorist states”) and therefore outside of any legal international framework. This can be contrasted with the responses to domestic terrorism. According to counter-terrorism scholar William Rosenau:

[T]he U.S. government never waged a “war” against domestic terrorism in the years between 1970 and 1985. Rather than framing terrorism as an existential or civilizational challenge, policymakers stressed the criminal aspects of terrorist activities and their threat to public safety and security. (29)

The Reaganite framing of terrorism as war thereby implies that terrorism is exclusively committed by racialized and ideological Others. The term “war” overrides the dialectic relationships between domestic and international terrorism as it focuses on the latter with explicit semantic might (Barthes 142). In Reagan’s language, leftist and anti-colonialist violence is, therefore, invested with a fabricated potency that other forms of terrorism supposedly lack. Consequently, far-reaching measures against this form of violence are presented as warranted and necessary. Thus, Reagan inserts himself into existing debates on terrorism as a facilitator of extensive military and covert warfare projects, which are explicitly tied to counter-terrorism. In this sense, the “War against Terror” becomes an example of myth as “depoliticized speech”. Barthes states:

[M]yth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact. If I state the fact of French imperialism without explaining it, I am very near to finding that it is natural and goes without saying; I am reassured. (143)

As for making things “innocent,” it can be noted that waging war against terrorism is put forward as a noble and commonsensical endeavor. The phenomena of racialized and leftist terrorism can, thereby, be stripped of context and historical analysis, as the term “war” refers to the existence of “armies, a fight, a moral crusade...” (Lakoff, *Thinking Points* 29). Departing from the logic of winning “hearts and minds” that was nominally invoked during the Vietnam War, Reagan’s perspective returns to a logic of conventional warfare in which brief, but intense mass mobilization can yield direct results. In his 1986 address

on terrorism, Reagan presents addressing the grievances of the opposing side as an “unnatural myth”:

For too long, the world was paralyzed by the argument that terrorism could not be stopped until the grievances of terrorists were addressed. The complicated and heart-rending issues that perplex mankind are no excuse for violent, inhumane attacks, nor do they excuse not taking aggressive action against those who deliberately slaughter innocent people.⁶⁵

The utilization of the word “paralyzed” evokes able-bodied notions of inaction and inertia, associations that can be easily resolved by the terminology of war. In line with Lakoff's “strict father” model, President Reagan assumes the role of an initiator of necessary change in order to defend the “nation as a family” (which is understood to be composed of “innocent people”). In this respect, two developments are vital for the proposed “war against terrorism”: discounting any possible grievances violent groups may have and conferring executive powers to deal with such groups. The former accords with the recurrent theme of restorative, mythical conservatism. The implication is that previous administrations and public discourses were not sufficiently invested in the paradigms of patriarchal, hard-body assertiveness. Instead, they engaged in a complex search for the root causes of terrorist acts. This echoes Reagan's characterization of the Carter presidency.⁶⁶ Furthermore, it offers an “argumentative option for diffusing public frustration” (Winkler, *Presidents Held Hostage* 21) by tapping into existing sentiments regarding real-life acts of terrorism in the 1980s. Accordingly, this rhetoric assumes the role of a counter-myth, juxtaposing the “strict father” model with an alleged discursive regime of indecisive and ineffective liberal discourses. This insurgent quality of the “War against Terror” frame is vital to understanding the outsider status of characters like the Batman and the Joker in *The Dark Knight*.

65 Ronald Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on Terrorism” (May 31, 1986).

66 David C. Wills states that “[t]he Reagan team believed Carter had failed to deal effectively with Soviet adventurism, and had been especially weak trying to resolve the Iran hostage crisis. According to Robert Gates, then the CIA's Deputy Director for Intelligence, ‘weakness’ was the watchword applied to every aspect of foreign and defense policy, and intelligence, during the preceding four years. Consequently, the Reagan administration was very sensitive about any comparisons to the previous administration, and sought to differentiate itself by appearing to act with strength and dispatch in foreign affairs, with a special emphasis on responding effectively to terrorism” (3).

Mythical images of war are also present in Reagan’s postulations of primarily white and male heroism in the face of terrorism. In his 1983 radio address regarding the Beirut barracks bombings, Reagan paints a picture of an undeterred leader who will ensure the continued involvement of the United States in the Lebanese Civil War as part of a popular mandate:

They mistakenly believe that if they’re cruel enough and violent enough, they will weaken American resolve and deter us from our effort to help build a lasting and secure peace in the Middle East. Well, if they think that, they don’t know too much about America. As a free people, we’ve never allowed intimidation to stop us from doing what we know to be right. [...] We will not forget the image of young marines gently draping our nation’s flag over the broken body of one of their fallen comrades. We will not forget their courage and compassion, and we will not forget their willingness to sacrifice even their lives for the service of their country and the cause of peace.⁶⁷

The selection of these particular images reveals a desire to convey steadfastness, continuity, and the notion that the war is being fought by and on behalf of “regular citizens” (e.g. young marines), who have a personal stake and moral conviction in their mission (“cause of peace”). According to this rhetoric, their participation in this war did not have a mercenary or complex geo-strategic character. They died because of their “goodness,” which reinforces the “civilized versus uncivilized” binary. Social cohesion and unity within the established mythologies is presented as the appropriate response to terrorist violence. In this context, arguing against continued involvement in the Lebanese Civil War would mean rejecting national mythologies, as well as dishonoring the heroic images narrated by Reagan (i.e. reading the myth as “full signifier”). In this case, the heroes serve to extend the war and not to end it. Joseph H. Campos II remarks on the connection between “heroic imagery” in Reagan’s counter-terrorism language and the strengthening of the “national security state” and social control:

In the face of tragedy (violence produced by terrorism), the American democratic historical imagination provided, (and still provides) a spacio-temporal site for the production of heroes. This creation of heroism allows the discourse of national security to gain hold in the consciousness of the citizenry enabling continued manipulation and appropriation of terrorism. President Reagan cemented this celebration of heroism by again stressing the barbaric and vicious nature of terrorists, when he commented at a ceremony honoring the victims on 23 April 1983. (50)

67 Ronald Reagan, “Radio Address to the Nation on the Death of Federal Diplomatic and Military Personnel in Beirut, Lebanon” (April 23, 1983).

One reason why Reagan was in a unique position to tout this kind of heroic imagery and present it as an expression of undaunted triumphalism was his constant flaunting of the “hard body,” in particular his survival of an assassination attempt in 1981 (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 100) and the resulting mythology of Reagan being indestructible and supposedly destined for a higher purpose. Therefore, the implication that Reagan's body should be read as emblematic of the state of the nation reconnects the Beirut incident with right-wing notions of triumphalism and the “comeback of the hard body”—a resurrected sense of social cohesion centered on the traditional nuclear family. Drawing on the Hollywood mythology of movies like *Rocky* and *Rambo*, the stylized white, male “underdog” regained currency in 1980s political discourse. As in the movie *Independence Day*, it is through the application of the “underdog” status—and often a role reversal in the face of political realities—that this form of revisionist heroism becomes imbued with a sense of revolution against a mythical constellation of liberal power structures. Effectively, these cultural and political fantasies, by and large, served to uphold a status quo—within the United States and abroad.

Another vehicle for the creation of social cohesion in the face of terrorism was the externalization of violent threats along racial lines. The discursive integration of racist knowledge was in tune with the right-wing and evangelical segments of the population that Reagan spoke to. Moreover, it helped to create an atmosphere that legitimized physical and discursive violence against minority groups as a supposedly “counter-terrorist” measure (Spann 102–104).⁶⁸ Therefore, it is unsurprising that the Reagan administration strongly relied on the othering of terrorism to produce and sustain mass support for its policies. Secretary of State George P. Shultz defined terrorist activities as distinctly “un-Western” and embedded in a mindset that resides outside of conservative concepts of “Judeo-Christian civilization”:

But perhaps even more horrible is the damage that terrorism threatens to wreak on our modern civilization [...]. We have pulled ourselves out of a state of barbarism and removed the affronts to human freedom and dignity that are inherent to that

68 Girardeau A. Spann notes in his paper “Terror and Race” that “The concept of racial discrimination conveys the invidiousness inherent in the sacrifice of minority liberty for perceived majority security that might otherwise be mistaken for a mere convenient and justifiable differentiation based on citizenship. Most of the non-citizens who have had their fundamental liberties infringed by the war on terror are Arabs or Muslims [...] reflex submission to the lure of stereotypes is the hallmark of racial discrimination, and it seems to be a pervasive feature of the war on terror” (103–104).

condition [...]. Terrorism is a step backward; it is a step toward anarchy and decay. In the broadest sense, terrorism represents a return to barbarism in the modern age. (Shultz in Gunneflo 119)

In this speech, delivered at the Park Avenue Synagogue in New York City in October of 1984, Shultz reassures the Jewish-American community in attendance that a re-elected Reagan administration would continue to side unambiguously with Israel in its conflict with the occupied Palestinians. Terrorism is, therefore, presented as the product of only one side in a “civilizational struggle.” The “barbarism” commonly associated with terrorism is constructed as the exclusive product of a culture that is spatially and ideologically anathema to concepts of “white modernity.” Shultz’s use of “we” and “modern civilization” reproduces notions of Western superiority in this context and frames both sides as homogeneously committed to one set of goals with virtually no in-group variety or distinction. These mythical signifiers lend themselves to an imagination of terrorism as the exclusive domain of the Other (in this case Palestinians and Arabs/Muslims). This echoes Edward Said’s observation on the contrasting of the “Western man” with the irrational “Oriental Other” as a legitimizing measure for imperialist projects, as well as for cementing social hierarchies at home (Said 301–302). The mythical qualities of this construction are undergirded by what Roland Barthes has dubbed the principal figure of “identification” (152–153).

Within this figure, the Other is semiotically acclimatized into a logic of spectacle and mirroring, which assumes the dimension of a “scandal,” threatening the very essence of the *petit bourgeois*. This can be identified in Shultz’s language, which constructs a supposed “simultaneity of the non-simultaneous” (Bloch), pitting two different timelines against each other, with one of them being deemed illegitimate. This juxtaposition creates a symbolic tension geared toward “exoticizing” political violence, thereby predicating any discourses regarding such violence on the existence of the Other (i.e. terrorism is what the Other does). As Barthes remarks, “there is here a figure for emergencies: exoticism. The Other becomes a pure object, a spectacle, a clown. Relegated to the confines of humanity, he no longer threatens the security of the home” (Barthes 153). Thus, the spectacle aspect of terrorism is amplified through the utilization of racist and colonialist tropes, conducive to highlighting difference and projection.⁶⁹ In the context of technocapitalism (Kellner, *Media Spectacle* 15–17),

69 Richard Jackson highlights the Freudian quality of this kind of projection: “In Freudian terms, we might say that the barbarians are representative of the id force: libidinous, irrational, violent, and dangerous” (9). This understanding of

the reduction of complexity and the drive toward the spectacle are aided by new forms of dialectical narratives that reshape the dramas of everyday life (2).⁷⁰

In Barthes' discussion of the Other, the figure of the "clown" is also of importance. In Shultz's statement, it is telling that he speaks of "anarchy and decay," which are contrasted with terms like "freedom" and "dignity." Terrorism, in this sense, is devoid of rationality in all its forms, rendering it a semiotic space of aimlessness, inconsequentiality, and nihilistic self-abasement. The juxtaposition with "dignity" opens up a variety of interpretations, including the "surreal" nature of the spectacle, which exists primarily for amusement and to be looked at and lacks any rational agency or strategy. These parameters provide ample material for discussing the Joker as an "otherized" terrorist/entertainer in *The Dark Knight*.

In Reagan's construction of terrorism as a "racialized threat," the association between terrorism and communism and Middle Eastern regimes emerges frequently (Jackson 10). As previously stated, Reagan justified US involvement in Central America by explicitly tying communism to what he considered to be state-sponsored terrorism linked to various Arab nationalisms and/or Shiite Islamism in Iran:

Let's not kid ourselves; the Sandinistas are avowed, dedicated Communists. And Communists since the days of Lenin have advocated terrorism as a legitimate means to attain political ends. [...] If the Sandinistas are allowed to consolidate their hold on Nicaragua, we'll have a permanent staging ground for terrorism. A home away from home for Qadhafi, Arafat, and the Ayatollah—just 3 hours by air from the U.S. border.⁷¹

The assortment of competing regimes and ideologies reveals an attempt at obfuscation, through semiotically subsuming different agendas under a supposed

terrorism negotiates the innermost conflicts and unspeakable desires of the supposed civilized society.

70 With regard to the 9/11-attacks, Kellner opines that "[t]hese catastrophic events and their attendant instability and capriciousness assure a profitable futures market for investments in chaos and complexity theory, as well as arms and security industries. [...] There may also be a return to dialectical theory, as the interconnections between globalization, technological revolution, media spectacle, Terror War, and the domains of cyberspace and the Internet become central to every sphere of existence from the dramas and banalities of everyday life to the survival of the human species and life on earth" (*Media Spectacle 2*).

71 Ronald Reagan, "Remarks to Jewish Leaders During a White House Briefing on United States Assistance for the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance" (March 5, 1986).

ideological umbrella of non-white “anti-Westernism”—chiefly sponsored by communism. The vast schisms and the different ideological, spatial, and historical contexts that structure the aforementioned ideologies (Sandinista ideology, Khomeinism, Gaddhafism, Palestinian nationalism) are relegated to the background. In their place is a decontextualized, homogenic phenomenon whose only roots are attitudinal (“Communists since the days of Lenin have advocated terrorism as a legitimate means to attain political ends”).⁷² This can be further extrapolated to a denunciation of any opposition to capitalism as intricately linked to terrorism, which is of interest when examining the character of the Joker.

Subsequently, the “war” frame exacerbates the drive toward a military response and the securitization of public and private life at home, as it presents itself as commonsensical, thereby eclipsing competing frameworks of meaning. Lakoff remarks that the terminology of war “negates due process, because in war you assume that the enemy is guilty—you shoot to kill” (*Thinking Points* 30). Thus, fearing the Other and assuming the guilt of the Other appear to be not only rational, but also a duty in war. Accordingly, the alleged irrationality of terrorism can only be confronted through war and securitization as expressed by a “strict father.” These terms are laced with theological overtones in both Reagan’s (and later Bush’s) counter-terrorism rhetoric.

The analysis of Reaganite counter-terrorism rhetoric in this chapter uncovered the framing of “terrorism” within the context of neoconservative projects globally and domestically. Central to Reagan’s narrative construction of terrorism were certain aspects of the spectacle, which cast the terrorist challenges of the 1980s as unprecedented and a grave civilizational threat. This, in turn, set the stage for framing both terrorism and counter-terrorism as war, justifying equally far-reaching measures, as well as abuses of executive powers domestically and abroad.

The triumphalist undertone of post-Cold War neoliberalism, however, faltered during the final year of the Bush administration (around the time *The Dark Knight* was produced). This led to renewed doubts about the nature of “War on Terror” and the consequences of conservative neoliberalism. Therefore, echoes

72 Richard Jackson explains in this context that “[i]n this agent/act ratio, the character of the terrorists precedes their actions: the terrorists did what they did because it is in their nature to do so—they murdered because that is what evil, demonic terrorists do. It is a powerful discourse, and an act of demagoguery, which functions to de-contextualize and de-historicize the actions of terrorists, emptying them of any political content, while simultaneously de-humanizing them” (10).

of Reagan's rhetoric on entrepreneurialism in conjunction with defense will be explored in the next section.

The White Male Entrepreneur as Mythical Hero for the Nation

According to journalist John Berlau, Reagan used the term "entrepreneur" 186 times in presidential proclamations, radio addresses, and major speeches.⁷³ This comparatively high number is a testament to the centrality of white, male entrepreneurship within Reagan's presidential rhetoric. Given the focus on "small-government" neoliberalism, especially in his 1980 presidential campaign, the appeal to so-called "rugged individualism" in the marketplace was a fundamental feature of Reagan's economic vision. The preceding crises of stagflation and the lack of consumer confidence necessitated a reformulation of entrepreneurship within the emerging neoliberal environment, as New Deal capitalism was popularly associated with Fordist modes of production and consumption (Troy, *The Reagan Revolution* 31–52). This prompted the Reagan campaign to tout entrepreneurial virtues in growth industries, such as the information and service sectors, as well as instill post-industrial elements into imaginations of the restored white, male entrepreneur. Among these elements was a reimagined relationship between entrepreneurialism and national defense, wherein the businessman is constructed as an innovative disrupter within an antiquated defense apparatus. Moreover, Reagan's discourse on entrepreneurialism is pervaded by recycled foundational myths. These range from pop culture-inflected imaginations of the "Old West" (Smith) to the extolment of the masculine virtues of the entrepreneur as a naturalized expression of the dominance of the United States in a globalizing environment.

At the heart of Reagan's conception of entrepreneurial capitalism was the image of a white, male, able-bodied entrepreneur as the engine of the nuclear family, which is extended to the local community and the entire nation. While "big government" was characterized as intrusive and inept, entrepreneurs are described in heroic terms in the 1981 inaugural address:

73 John Berlau, "Yes, Reagan Loved Entrepreneurs—and Today's Conservatives Should, Too," *The National Review* (July 1, 2015). Accessed December 8, 2018: <<https://www.nationalreview.com/2015/07/ronald-reagan-entrepreneurs-supply-side-economics/>>.

You meet heroes across a counter, and they're on both sides of that counter. There are entrepreneurs with faith in themselves and faith in an idea who create new jobs, new wealth and opportunity. They're individuals and families whose taxes support the government and whose voluntary gifts support church, charity, culture, art, and education. [...] Their values sustain our national life.⁷⁴

Two central myths emerge in this statement that cast white, middle-class entrepreneurialism in the role of a provider for the family (and, by extension, the nation): 1) entrepreneurs create for the nation and 2) entrepreneurs give to the nation. In both cases, entrepreneurs act out of proper attitude and investment in spiritualized principles of success ("faith in themselves and faith in an idea"). Reading this as an empty signifier, the accessible and yet metaphorical language employed by Reagan has an instructive quality. Within the context of the "small-government" theme of the 1981 inaugural address, this instructive quality links up with the mythical restoration of a supposedly forgotten middle-class, commercial instinct. Reagan seeks to "remind" his audience that entrepreneurs operate on an efficient, self-confident basis and, thus, do a better job of performing many of the tasks that the previous administration has allegedly usurped ("whose voluntary gifts support church, charity, culture, art, and education"). Entrepreneurs emerge as the drivers of national strength and health ("whose taxes support the government").

The cautionary stance adopted reveals an acknowledgment of challenging narratives and competing viewpoints, thus demonstrating one of the Barthesian features of Reaganite mythology: "not to deny things, but to talk about things, to give them an air of innocence and to purify them" (143). Reagan enters into long-standing public debates about the role of the government and the role of the individual by taking a purist, market fundamentalist stance—shedding previous dialectics and contradictions. The axiomatic endorsement of individualist capitalism serves as a discursive reaction to existing counter-narratives. This points to an ongoing and noteworthy unease regarding the looming upward redistribution of wealth in the early 1980s.⁷⁵ The presentation of the

74 Ronald Reagan, "First Inaugural Address" (January 20, 1981).

75 Douglas Kellner puts forward the view that "this offensive of the right never really triumphed in the realm of culture, and culture itself has been a fiercely contested terrain for the past decades" (*Media Culture* 19). It should be noted that numerous pop cultural spaces have resisted the conservative onslaught of the 1980s or emerged in clear opposition to it (e.g. alternative music scenes like the grunge movement or independent film in the 1980s). Yet, Kellner is right to point out that the cementation of neoliberal individualism as a cultural regime has structured and informed the logic of mass media production across the entire globe (Kidd 67).

businessman as a supporter of communities serves as a rhetorical trope to calm such fears. Through Reagan's own acoustic and visual public performance, which has often been described as easy-going and reassuring for white and elderly voters in particular (Blevins 156), the reintroduction of corporate entrepreneurship as a focal point for national strength becomes intertwined with the performance of a pop culture-inflected form of succinct sound-bite politics. Gil Troy notes how the well-choreographed daily spectacles of cable networks like MTV and CNN facilitated the elevation of self-styled businessmen in the 1980s:

The entrepreneurs of the moment such as Lee Iacocca, Donald Trump, and Ted Turner would join President Reagan in elevating the pursuit of wealth, the compulsion to consume, and the desperation to succeed from selfish acts of individualism into altruistic acts of patriotism. The brazen ethos, along with the slick sensibility and colorful graphics of an increasingly wired world, would be part of the Big Chillers' "yuppie package." (*Morning in America* 117)

Building on the mythical qualities of this well-choreographed white, male entrepreneurship, Reagan's rhetoric intertwined the role of capitalist individualism with the defense apparatus. Although the administration consistently called for higher defense funding in its first term in office, the role of private-public partnerships in the rearmament of the United States was often touted within the neoliberal vocabulary of "innovation" and "efficiency." One such example is the appointment of David Packard, co-founder of Hewlett-Packard, as the chairman of a newly created bipartisan commission to redesign defense management in 1985. Reagan explained his appointment decision in his "Radio Address to the Nation on the Defense Budget" in 1986:

I chose Dave Packard, an entrepreneur and self-made man who started Hewlett-Packard in a garage in the 1930's and built it into one of our country's leading high-tech computer and electronics companies. Dave is world famous for his management skill, and his company is renowned for its efficiency and modern management techniques. The initial recommendations came in this week. They are a tremendous example of American know-how applied to an extremely complex and difficult problem. Their application, I'm convinced, would make every defense dollar more effective and make America stronger.⁷⁶

The laudation of the white male entrepreneur and his insertion into the defense apparatus exhibit certain themes that recur in Reagan's rhetoric: The entrepreneur is styled as a self-made businessman, whose business venture had humble beginnings (the spatial setting of the garage suggests a small-town or

76 Ronald Reagan, "Radio Address to the Nation on the Defense Budget" (March 1, 1986).

suburban setting). The common “rags-to-riches” myth fulfills several ideological functions, among them the legitimization of wealth and power disparities,⁷⁷ an underlying triumphalism by way of a linear narrative of material success and a reassuring reinforcement of the myth of meritocracy. Within the context of conservative backlash politics, the naturalized and seemingly depoliticized veneer of this story reveals the intersection of restorative imagery and a post-industrial neoliberal project. The mythical images of the past are evoked to pave the way for large-scale ventures aimed at privatization and monetization.

Another important theme in this passage is the presentation of the entrepreneur as a member of a public-private partnership. Using the terminological toolshed of “free-market” mythology (Lakoff, *Thinking Points* 72–77), Reagan associates the introduction of a stylized entrepreneur into a public structure with increased “efficiency” and “modern management.” It is important to note that, in this narrative, the entrepreneur remains a distinct entity and is primarily identified as a businessman. David Packard does not become a part of the public structure, but is, instead, called upon to contribute his perspective to it. Consequently, the suggested positive outcomes are discursively linked to a private intervention, giving the private element in public-private partnerships the narrative edge.

Yet another important theme is the rhetorical invocation of the media spectacle through references to futuristic technologies. The connection between stylized businessmen and military enterprise is frequently founded upon the celebration of state-of-the-art technologies that undergird the traditionally masculine quality of these partnerships. Akin to Reagan’s rhetoric on the SDI program, the defense spectacle rests upon accessible discourses of modern technology that have made their way into popular culture. Hewlett-Packard had already made a name for itself as one of the early introducers of inkjet and laser printers for home use in the 1980s. By tying military rearmament to the popular technological mass spectacles of the day, Reagan produces a language of purported synergies between capital and technology. At the same time, he declines to mention the dangers of automation, privatization, and a profit-oriented military-industrial complex, which became further entrenched under his tenure.⁷⁸ The mythical qualities of

77 Daniel P. Franklin notes that “[i]f, according to the rags-to-riches myth, all wealth is earned and thus deserved, then poverty is earned and deserved as well. This myth too is highlighted in American popular culture. Throughout American history, not just in the history of American motion pictures, the poor and oppressed are often depicted as deserving their fate” (27).

78 Ronald W. Cox states that “[i]n the development of the Reagan Doctrine, military contractors and oil corporations were well-represented through their influence in

the stylized, self-made, white, and male entrepreneur and the effects of his intervention in a government military apparatus feature heavily in *The Avengers*.

The intersection of white, male entrepreneurialism and national defense was also informed by a language of heroism in Reagan's rhetoric. In his remarks at the presentation ceremony for the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1983, Reagan summarized why engineer and businessman Simon Ramo was receiving the highest civilian award in the country:

As an engineer, businessman, physicist and defense and aero-space pioneer, Simon Ramo's career has been on the forefront of American technology, development and growth. The son of a storekeeper in Salt Lake City, Dr. Ramo built his business from a one-room office to a nationwide network of production plants. A shining symbol of American ingenuity and innovativeness, Dr. Ramo was also a distinguished author, philanthropist and civic leader. His life's work has strengthened America's freedom and protected our peace.⁷⁹

As previously observed, competitiveness in a capitalist setting is portrayed as having positive consequences for collective society, including enhanced safety and international standing. The representation of entrepreneurship and its contribution to the defense of the nation follows the same mythical patterns as the Packard Commission: Ramo is constructed as a self-made man from humble beginnings in a conservative, predominantly white, and relatively rural part of the country. The businessman's contributions to national defense fall under the category of post-industrial technocapitalism with a strong focus on outer space. This outer-space setting is one of the premier mythical sites of Reaganite defense policies and Hollywood filmmaking. The term "aero-space pioneer" is arguably conversant with foundation myths that cast colonial settlers as enterprising and daring—concealing genocidal acts against Native Americans and the ethical imprudence of the militarization of space (Lippman 177). The instructive nature of this ceremonial speech (the empty signifier in the Barthesian sense) presents the listener with an example of heroism through "free-market" success in space-oriented, high-tech defense industries. In the context of Ramo being awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, it can be inferred that such endeavors are worthy of emulation. This narrative lends itself

the conservative think-tank, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, which drafted an influential 1988 report advising the Reagan Administration to move toward war preparation for potential hostilities with 'maverick regimes' that constituted a new threat to US national security interests" (6).

79 Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Presentation Ceremony for the Presidential Medal of Freedom" (February 23, 1983).

to a science fiction–inflected conception of heroism in which escapist fantasies are seen as drivers of both individual and national success.

Within this framework, Reagan himself becomes an appropriate source of inspiration due to his self-conferred “foresight” in establishing the SDI program to compete against the Soviet Union.⁸⁰ Ramo’s modest upbringing is infused with an almost pre-modern, early twentieth-century aesthetic (“son of a store-keeper”) and then discursively connected to imaginations of “innovation” and “ingenuity” in a neoliberal, post-industrial environment. It is, therefore, important to note that the mythical, white, and rural conception of the “heartland” remains a staple in Reagan’s sermonizing regarding entrepreneurship. These characteristics are combined into a philanthropic personality, which echoes the notion that “entrepreneurs give to the nation.” This frequently employed trope tying the accumulation of wealth to national security and humanitarianism opens the ideological gates for a discursive synthesis of countercultural social concern and Cold War hawkishness. The benevolent philanthropist is simultaneously a hard-bodied, high-tech protector of the nation.

Lastly, the image of the “civic leader” re-establishes entrepreneurship as a central feature of social hierarchies and national identity. Within the context of spectacle-oriented technocapitalism (Kellner, *Media Spectacle* 11–15), the brand attains a discursive role in transmitting and dispersing images of entrepreneurial success. Effective branding in a diversified attention economy becomes a necessary mediator for the allocation of power.⁸¹ As Reagan suggests that Ramo was an entrepreneur first and a “civic leader” second (“Ramo was also...”), the convincing performance of entrepreneurialism is privileged in this construction of mythical heroism. The branded performance of success, the affiliation with space-oriented, high-tech adventurism, and the intervention of

80 Susan Jeffords concludes that Reagan’s space-age technological affiliation put him into proximity with well-known blockbuster figures of the 1980s, most notably Doc Brown of the *Back to the Future* franchise: “For who is Doc Brown other than Ronald Reagan himself? He has allied himself with technology in the name of progress [...] turned to science fiction tales for his inspirations (Doc’s childhood reading led him to want to build a time machine, Reagan’s viewing of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* led him to envision his own ‘Star Wars’ program)” (*Hard Bodies* 78).

81 Douglas Kellner maintains that “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* 3).

the entrepreneur in the defense apparatus are of critical relevance to the discussion of *The Avengers* in Chapter 6.

In the context of the conservative realignment in the 1980s, the inscription of entrepreneurialism in myths of national strength and defense is also in service of a re-narration of the nation's imagined past and future. The figure of the entrepreneur is a reliable constant in Reagan's vision of US history. For example, he frequently linked metaphors of national foundation and the nuclear family with global high-tech triumphalism in a neoliberal setting. In his radio address to the nation regarding small business in 1983, he draws a direct line from the rebellion of the Thirteen Colonies to the Moon landing and beyond:

Entrepreneurs have always been leaders in America. They led the rebellion against excessive taxation and regulation. They and their offspring pushed back the frontier, transforming the wilderness into a land of plenty. Their knowledge and contributions have sustained us in wartime, brought us out of recessions, carried our astronauts to the Moon, and led American industry to new frontiers of high technology.⁸²

This passage is exemplary of the patriarchal, racist, and settler colonialist underpinnings of Reaganite entrepreneurialism as it privileges codes of toxic masculinity.⁸³ The racial dimension of the mythical entrepreneur is made explicit by the reference to colonialist expansion in the so-called "American West." This expansion is construed as a venture of "pushing back"—reinforcing the discursive positioning of Reaganite neoliberalism as a literal "pushback." In this story line, the entrepreneur not only pushes back against external Others, but also against internal doubts and crises of confidence ("brought us out of recessions"), as well as big government ("excessive taxation and regulation").

The underlying mythical signification can be interpreted as a "mythical insurgency," which connotes Reagan's rhetoric on the entrepreneur as intricately intertwined with opposing myths of welfare/New Deal liberalism, as well as feminist and anti-racist discourses. Moreover, the physical imagery ("carried our astronauts") lends itself to an ableist construction of the entrepreneur, which is augmented by the hard-bodied symbolism of the white, male capitalist. The re-appropriation of the "frontier myth" in service of neo-capitalist ventures highlights the linguistic flexibility of the term "entrepreneur". Within this term, different historical manifestations of capitalism are naturalized along one timeline.

82 Ronald Reagan, "Radio Address to the Nation" (May 14, 1983).

83 For example, through references to war and rebellion, which become intelligible and legitimate through codes of hegemonic masculinity (Hutchings 400).

In this context of naturalized speech, Roland Barthes contemplates how myths “rob articulated language” and thereby empty the semiological language-object: “In fact, nothing can be safe from myth, myth can develop its second-order schema from any meaning and, as we saw, start from the very lack of meaning” (132). Language thereby becomes a repository for semi-otic arrangements through which the concept of the signified is “filled with a situation” (117). Thus, invocations of myths can utilize the same signifiers to describe and distort different realities. The implied connection between the capitalisms of the past and the space-age capitalism of Reagan’s neoliberal fantasies offers a variety of restorative qualities that square with the narrative foci of the Hollywood blockbuster era.

This is important for analyzing the glamorization of wealth and its discursive positioning within national myths in popular culture in the United States, as it can reveal the workings of an institutionalized imagery of success. This imagery empties discourses of class anxieties and social concerns that cannot be addressed by the market. Instead, selected national achievements are inscribed onto the gendered and racialized bodies of entrepreneurs, while notions of female domesticity and racialized subservience are re-inscribed into the concept of the nation. The notion of entrepreneurs “carrying astronauts” is of relevance here, as it implies male mobility and agility—as opposed to a lack of mobility outside of the entrepreneurial realm. In this context, Chris Jordan argues that the emphasis on male mobility in the MTV-inflected “music-video-movie” of the 1980s mirrored a “class-ordered dichotomy with a gender dichotomy that juxtaposes the freedom-loving, uninhibited male with a socially restrained, domesticating female counterpart” (106). With regard to *The Avengers*, it is important to explore the specific gendered expressions of Tony Stark’s high tech-powered “hard body” in conjunction with his entertaining and quippy demeanor.

In reference to Reaganite cinema, Susan Jeffords delineates the internal workings of the hard-body concept by outlining its focus on dichotomies:

In keeping with the logic of the Reagan hierarchy, any differences between relative successes within the Reagan system must be attributed, not to pre-existing racism, disproportionate allocations of social resources, or economic and class inequalities, but to personal inadequacies considered as internal *bodily* failures. In such a system, some men have earned their survival and others have not. And whereas weak men may not be actual enemies, they are nonetheless not entitled to the profits due to those whose strength insures the survival of the nation as a whole. (*Hard Bodies* 52)

The concept of the “hard body” can also be inverted to express that success and strength result from internal bodily fortitude. In terms of mythical signification, the celebrated and stylized entrepreneur is not only emblematic of success; it is also instantly embedded into the symbolisms of hegemonic physical capability. Whether this capability results from literal physical strength and a muscular physique or the skilled use of cognitive faculties is of little consequence in the Reaganite imaginary. For instance, despite being mostly associated with his “exaggerated musculature” (Jordan 108), John Rambo notably declares in *First Blood—Part II* (1985) that “I’ve always believed the mind was the best weapon.” The notion of the hard body is, therefore, tied not solely to physical strength, but rather to the pursuit of “mental as well as physical superiority” (Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* 40).

Again, Reagan’s own fascination with high-tech gimmickry provides ample material for accessible story lines that frame modern technology as a herald of an age of unlimited growth, unbound by natural restraints. In his 1988 address to Moscow State University, he expands on his vision:

Think of that little computer chip. Its value isn’t in the sand from which it is made but in the microscopic architecture designed into it by ingenious human minds. [...] In the new economy, human invention increasingly makes physical resources obsolete. We’re breaking through the material conditions of existence to a world where man creates his own destiny. [...] But progress is not foreordained. The key is freedom—freedom of thought, freedom of information, freedom of communication.⁸⁴

Imagined entrepreneurial genius is styled as the driver for ideological competitiveness and subsequent triumphalism, which is painted in futuristic terms. The national “hard body,” which can also manifest itself in skillfully arranged technology, is tied to myths of assertiveness in “free markets,” an assertiveness that derives from bodily fortitude. As frequently noted, these bodies are constructed as white, Christian, and male and characterized by a middle-class, small-town mindset (Jordan 110). However, this triumphalism is not inevitable (“progress is not foreordained”), which underscores the pushback quality of Reagan’s celebration of entrepreneurialism. Hence, the entrenchment of a neoliberal cultural regime forms the basis for the cultivation of this new post-industrial “hard body.” This requires the construction and simultaneous disavowal of a preceding metalanguage of “insufficient masculinity” in the form

84 Ronald Reagan, “Remarks and a Question-and-Answer Session with the Students and Faculty at Moscow State University” (May 31, 1988).

of the liberal welfare capitalism of the 1960s and 1970s. This is a metalanguage “which is trained to celebrate things, and no longer to act them” (Barthes 143).

Since entrepreneurs are inherently inscribed in mythologies of disciplined virtue and “proper character,” the government aims to step back and let them shape the body of the nation in their own way. Any further meddling by the state would disturb the naturalized unfolding of masculine strength in the economy and within the nation. This fully aligns with Lakoff’s delineation of the limits of the “strict father,” who separates “disciplined” children from “undisciplined” children (*Elephant* 41). It therefore stands to reason that the discursive treatment of entrepreneurialism and “free-market” mythologies in the dramatization of conflicts between masculine “hard bodies” and feminine weak bodies in the Hollywood blockbuster imagination also needs to be investigated. Particularly within a political climate marked by doubts concerning the effects of neoliberalism (Negra and Tasker 345–350), the negotiation of entrepreneurship on the big screen can yield valuable insights into the internal workings of major Hollywood filmmaking as it seeks to address such doubts.

In Reagan’s own narration, anxieties and doubts arising from the excesses of capitalism are incorporated and reframed in a rhetorical constellation in which the businessman is fashioned as capable of rescuing the nation, the local community, and the family from the “false prophets of collectivism” (Bailey 20). The overlap between concepts of the conservative “strict father” and Reagan’s narration of entrepreneurs as naturalized leaders of the nation has highlighted the accessibility of such myths for tales of branded individual success. This leads to questions of corporate self-narration in times of economic crisis within a branded, corporatized Hollywood landscape. These questions will be addressed in the subsequent chapters.

