

# Movie Rhetoric and International Politics

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In a classical essay from 1946, French film critic André Bazin wrote that one of the most important functions of art is to cheat death by creating immortality. Thus, he formulated the so-called “myth of total cinema” – which is also the title of the essay – a theory of aesthetic predestination according to which the movies might accomplish what no other medium had ever been able to do, namely to reproduce reality completely. In retrospect, it turns out that Bazin can be seen as both right and wrong in his prophecy; the medium of total cinema does indeed exist, but it is not film. Rather, it is life itself, which in turn seems to reproduce the movies, so that the boundary between cinema and reality is blurred once and for all. This is true not least of the political scene

In his book *Life: The Movie. How Entertainment Conquered Reality*, Neal Gabler takes up the Bazinian heritage in offering an analysis of the real accomplishments of Ronald Reagan’s presidency, which according to him are rather to be situated within the domain of movie rhetoric.

“In the first place, he [Reagan] made the movies the model for public policy. It was because Reagan had paved the way with science fiction movie plans like his ‘Star Wars’ antimissile system, and with B movie pronouncements like ‘They can run, but they can’t hide’, when Arab terrorists hijacked the *Achille Lauro* luxury liner and killed an American passenger, that House Speaker Newt Gingrich could talk seriously of solving the welfare problem by invoking the old MGM movie *Boys Town* or that George Bush, in accepting the Republican nomination for the presidency, could use Clint Eastwood’s line ‘Read my lips’ to swear that he would endorse no new taxes.” (Gabler 1998: 113)

It quickly became commonplace in media and cultural studies to interpret the Gulf War as formulated like a World War II picture from Reagan’s Hollywood heyday. Gabler characterizes it as “meant to be short and sharp”, with a clear narrative outline, with heroic heroes and a “mustachioed villain, Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, an evil mastermind right out of the hoariest anti-Nazi propaganda”. He also notes that the war, as broadcast by the conventional media, “even ended like a World War II movie, with the troops parading triumphantly down Broadway or Main Street, showered by confetti and basking in the gratitude of their fellow Americans while the credits rolled”. And the analogy could be drawn even further as the Gulf War, even after it was over, “like every blockbuster, had its ancillary markets: trading cards, T-shirts, videocassettes of the action.” (Gabler 1998: 113)

Many, media scholars and critical journalists alike, have also noted that the reports from the Gulf war and afterwards have increasingly become constructed like a television series, with different logo's and musical signatures. There is also a narrative construction communicated, for example, by different title cards, and the on-site reporters like CNN's Peter Arnett and NBC's Arthur Kent, or more recently Åsne Seierstad as Nordic reporter from the war in Iraq, have instantly been transformed into stars. Thus, war is turned into entertainment.

However, one important difference might be pointed out between these so-called war movies and the classical movies from World War II: that is that they were designed to mobilize support for a real war. But if the war itself is turned into a movie, what exactly is this war movie mobilizing support for? Neal Gabler suggests that Reagan, once again, provided the answer: it mobilizes support for itself. He argues that the real point of the Gulf War may not have been to liberate occupied Kuwait, insure the flow of oil or eliminate Saddam Hussein, each of which had been mentioned as possible objectives. Even though President Bush may not have realized it himself, and though it might discount the legitimate risks of the war to say so, the real point may simply have been to provide a narrative both for the nation and the international scene, provided with a happy ending. This, again, is traditionally the function of entertainment rather than of warfare:

Turning the presidency into a movie and policy into escapism are no small accomplishments, but Reagan's most enduring legacy may be that in doing so, he also wound up establishing a new measure of presidential success: the president's skill before the media. (Gabler 1998: 114)

And it has turned out that George Bush may be even more skilled than Ronald Reagan as a real-life actor. The Gulf War and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq also share the common features of using a kind of movie-like rhetoric, such as frequent dead-line settings. And Bush has also specialized in certain movie-like lines, making up the phraseology of the war, like his famous "Go out there and get them." But the movie rhetoric does appear not least in the very codenames of the operations – like *Desert Storm*, which rather seems to be the title of a Hollywood movie. And the fact that the first codename for the US operation against terrorists was *Infinite Justice* does indeed seem ironic. This name, taken seriously, is profoundly ambiguous. Either it means that the Americans must have the right to ruthlessly destroy not only all terrorists, but also all that gave them support: material, moral, ideological etc., and that, by definition, this process will be endless. Or it means that the justice exerted must be truly infinite. Later, a complaint from American Islamic clerics arguing that only God can exert infinite justice actually led to a change of the code name. But the strategy continues, as one of President Bush's later rhetorical accomplishments indicates – the utterly ambiguous "Bring them on" from a talk on July 2<sup>nd</sup>. This was immediately criticized by Democrat Dick Gephardt as "dangerous macho rhetoric", but it is only one example of Bush's long series of rhetorical statements that would definitely fit better in a B-movie than on the world stage.

However, perhaps the most decisive event in this evolution of political "lifies" was not staged by Hollywood, but imposed from the outside. September 11<sup>th</sup> marked a turning point, at least symbolically, which has invited not only responses in the form of *Infinite Justice* operations, but also in the form of infinite comments, interpretations and appropriations, summarized in the catchword: "Nothing will ever be the same after September 11<sup>th</sup>". The link between Hollywood and the international political scene was also confirmed in a unique way during the 'war against terrorism' that resulted from these events,

namely when the Pentagon decided to solicit the help of Hollywood in early October 2001. Then, a group of Hollywood scenarists and directors, specialists in disaster movies, was established at the instigation of the Pentagon, with the aim of imagining possible scenarios for terrorist attacks and how to fight them. And one month later, it appeared that these meetings continued. Now the aim was that of – as Žizek put it – “coordinating the war effort and establishing how Hollywood could help in the ‘war against terrorism’ by getting the right ideological message across not only to Americans, but also to the Hollywood public around the globe”. For good reasons, this has been interpreted by cultural theorists as “the ultimate empirical proof that Hollywood does in fact function as an ‘ideological state apparatus’”. (Žizek 2002: 16) Thus, it is only logical that, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July this year, Arnold Schwarzenegger went to Iraq to show *Terminator 3* to the soldiers, as part of his “Schwarzenegger for governor” campaign, which turned out so successfully.

I would like to take some of these comments as a point of departure for reflection, as they also take part in formulating a rhetoric on the significance of the political situation, the “before and after”. They may contribute to developing what Michael J Shapiro has aptly called a “cinematic political thought”. On the anniversary of the event, among many other things, a movie was made with the title *11'09"01, September 11: A Film*. Among the several directors are Iranian Samira Makmalbaf, Youssef Chahine from Egypt, Idrissa Ouedraogo from Burkina Faso, Ken Loach from the UK, Mira Nair, India, Sean Penn from the US, and Shohei Imamura, Japan; in other words, an impressive list of canonical art cinema directors. In the credits, the film is presented like this: “11 directors from different countries and cultures. 11 visions of the tragic events that occurred in New York City on September 11 2001. 11 points of view commenting their subjective conscience. Complete freedom of expression.”

The film is particularly interesting as a way of responding to this highly visual event within visual culture itself. Three books were also published by Verso on the same occasion, two of which had already appeared in French. It was Jean Baudrillard’s *The Spirit of Terrorism (L’esprit du terrorisme)*, which was later followed up by his *Power Inferno*, Slavoj Žizek’s *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, and Paul Virilio’s *Ground Zero*, published in French as *Ce qui arrive*. Each one of them in its own way also offers a highly visual or cinematic way of thinking.

Of the three authors, Paul Virilio is the one who has the largest grip on the event. One could start with a cinematic reference, to Fritz Lang, who in his films on Dr Mabuse describes the anonymity of the criminal, a new phenomenon in early modernity. The crime syndicate is well organized, but it finds its best support in the anonymity of the masses. Lang creates secret connections between the anonymous, organized criminals and politics, between science and terrorism. September 11 might be considered the final victory for this kind of anonymousness, privatized criminality that the iconoclastic high priests of development theory had dreamt of for centuries.

Virilio describes the ravages of iconoclasm during the reformation in Europe. As its basis in a Calvin or a Cromwell, the conviction of mankind’s negative predestination may be found, her involuntary submission to a world under the power of evil, where life may best be summarized as suffering, or, in E M Cioran’s words, as “the inconvenience of being born”.

This iconoclastic wave would sweep along whole cultures and nations. The Manichean ideas of the iconoclasts may also be found among the scientists who, during the twentieth century, argued for different evolutionary theories, theories of genetics, of

racial hygiene, of phrenology; in other words convictions that formed the ideological apparatus that founded the totalitarian systems of the twentieth century. Only progress may liberate humanity – this remains a favourite idea of the iconoclasts, summarized in François Raspail’s sentence, cited as a motto in *Ground Zero*: “Science, the only religion of the future”.

The dark history of the twentieth century remains for Virilio a kind of black hole in the idea of development, where the “philophobia” – the love for madness – of science and technology is born. In its extension, this seems to organize the self-destruction of a species that has become too slow, because it no longer succeeds in adapting to the general development.

Silvio Berlusconi’s role in international politics is significant: it points to a change from the classical left-right division to a new division between the political and the medial. The politically correct has been replaced by the optically correct. The parliamentary democracy, which in reality was secured by general elections, has in practice been replaced by the direct democracy of opinion polls, where the right to utter one’s opinion, to speak one’s mind in public – in other words, to enter into medial reality – also seems to guarantee citizenship. E-democracy on-line is the catchword of tomorrow.

And televisual reality, as represented by reality-TV (like in *Big Brother* or all its equivalents), has made its entrance into the world for real. According to Virilio, a straight line might be drawn from *Big Brother* by way of the Kosovo conflict to September 11 – they are all products of the same multi-medial image strategy. In *Big Brother*, there is the ambition to show real life and to democratize the star system. However, the real actors are not the locked up volunteers on screen, but rather all the millions of spectators taking part in the vote. All of a sudden, all possible means of communication are allowed: Hertz-TV, Internet, telephone, SMS – which in a way all aim at eliminating human relations.

In the Kosovo conflict, the ambition was to create a war with no losses, a war for specialists. Here, there was no longer dying in the camps any more, but rather the question of manipulating death machinery at a safe distance. The grand battles of history have been replaced by the world live, with its “*mort en direct*”. Here, Virilio meets Zizek, who states that:

...it is not only that Hollywood stages a semblance of real life deprived of the weight and inertia of materiality – in late-capitalist consumerist society, ‘real social life’ itself somehow acquires the features of a staged fake, with our neighbours behaving in ‘real’ life like stage actors and extras... Again, the ultimate truth of the capitalist utilitarian de-spiritualized universe is the dematerialization of ‘real life’ itself, its reversal into a spectral show. (Zizek 2002: 13-14)

Consequently, September 11 also presented a number of anonymous actors in what to many spectators at first seemed like a global super-production, where reality once and for all was lost in electronic nothingness; most TV spectators seem to have apprehended the images as fiction. French director Claude Lelouch takes this as a point of departure in his episode in the 110901 film. He tells the story of a deaf photographer visiting New York, whose boyfriend leaves in the morning on September 11 for his job as a guide in the World Trade Center. With the TV constantly on, she sits in front of the computer, writing a letter to him about the crisis in their relationship, telling him that she feels “lost in a talking picture”. Had she thrown a glance at the TV screen, it is obvious that she wouldn’t have reacted to the images, as the comments weren’t available to her.

That the events of September 11 reached most of us through the TV screen made it inevitable that, in retrospect, so many parallels were drawn to the long series of catastrophe movies in the history of Hollywood. In Žižek's words: "The unthinkable which happened was the object of fantasy, so that, in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and that was the biggest surprise." (Žižek 2002: 16) And these parallels to disaster movies occurred regardless of whether they were used to explain the event, as offering possible models of actions for the terrorists, or, as in Karl-Heinz Stockhausen's controversial statement, they just served to 'celebrate' the planes hitting the Twin Towers as the ultimate work of art. In Stockhausen's view, it is as if we had watched the most spectacular special effect ever made; the terrorist act itself was made to achieve this spectacular effect. And it was as if only after having seen this spectacle, the spectators became really able to experience the falsity of reality TV, where people play themselves and there is thus a certain enactment, despite the aspiration towards reality. But at the same time, the infinite repetition of the shots of the Twin Towers collapsing contributed to fictionalizing the event. When we see it over and over again, the experience of a real event is gradually weakened. At the same time, this fictionalization is part of a process of abstraction, which may serve to maintain a boundary separating us – as spectators – from them – those who were there in reality. Real life thus acquires a fictional dimension.

In his comment on September 11 in the episodic film, the one that deals in the most direct way with the actual events, Mexican director Alejandro González Inárrita refuses to take part in this process. The first part of his 11 minute long contribution starts with a completely black screen. On the complex soundtrack, several voices are combined which may be hard to discern: a monotonous recitation; the voices of reporters from all over the world talking in different languages about their first impressions of the event; cuts from talks on mobile phones from people in the Twin Towers. This is followed by a crescendo of the sound of the aircraft and then a complete silence, after which several images of the towers collapsing are cut in. But the soundtrack remains the most important part of the film. Towards the end, the shifting sounds are replaced by music, and then the image fades into white, with the final rhetorical question: "Does God's light guide us or blind us?" González Inárrita might be accused of mystifying the Other with the voices on the first part of the soundtrack, incomprehensible to most Western spectators. However, I find this film most interesting precisely because it almost entirely withdraws from the visual side of September 11. By its refusal to visualize the event as a whole, it also points to the very collapse of the visual order in the face of the unimaginable. This is probably as far away as one can get from traditional Hollywood movie rhetoric. But it is also a way of appropriating a political event through the art cinema institution, thus paradoxically creating a kind of alternative movie rhetoric.

As Jean Baudrillard has noted in his *Power Inferno* from October 2002, Slavoj Žižek – who in his turn refers to Alain Badiou and his book *Le siècle* – has identified the eschatological passion for the real as the key feature of the twentieth and early twenty-first century. It is a nostalgic passion for the Real as a kind of lost object, or at least a vanishing object. But this passion for the Real turns out to be deeply paradoxical, because it culminates in what seems to be its absolute opposite, namely *a theatrical spectacle*. The spectacular terrorist acts might, according to Žižek, be interpreted as a kind of climactic conclusion of this passion for the Real in twentieth century art:

If, then, the passion for the Real ends up in the pure semblance of the spectacular effect of the Real, then, in an exact inversion, the 'postmodern' passion for the semblance ends up in a violent return to the passion for the Real. (Žižek 2002:9-10)

What happens, then, to the real event, if the image – the fictional or the virtual – penetrates everywhere into reality? In the present case, there is a certain risk in considering the event as “real violence” intruding into a potentially virtual universe. In many comments, the end of postmodern virtuality was actually proclaimed. But does one here really see reality, or history, as surpassing fiction? One might instead say that a sort of duel is initiated between reality and the image, a duel concerning which event might be the most unimaginable. In the case of the Twin Towers’ collapse, the real adds to the image as the first and foremost among terrors. It is not only terrifying, but in addition, it is real. The image is here in the first place, and the real enters the scene in the second place. Something is added as yet another fiction, surpassing fiction itself. The real is here invented as the ultimate, and thus the most awesome fiction.

What happened on September 11 was that this fantasmatic screen apparition entered reality. It is not that reality entered the image, as many argued; on the contrary, the image entered reality, thus shattering it. That many blockbusters postponed scenes resembling the collapse of the Twin Towers must be read not only as a sign of respect for the victims, but first and foremost as a repression of the cultural fantasies that provided such a forceful background for the disaster. It is neither what Roland Barthes in his famous essay from the 1960s called *l’effet du réel*, but rather its inversion, *l’effet de l’irréel*, where – in Žižek’s words – “the Real itself, in order to be sustained, has to be perceived as a nightmarish unreal spectre”. Nor is it the often-posed imperative of not mistaking fiction for reality. Rather, it is again the opposite: the question of not mistaking reality for fiction, “but to be able to discern, in what we cannot but experience as fiction, the hard kernel of the Real which we are able to sustain only if we fictionalize it”. (Žižek 2002: 19)

The event in itself resists representation, firstly because it seems to absorb in itself imagination as such, and secondly because it doesn’t make any sense; these are precisely the two points that González Inárrita’s film underlines. The collapse of the towers did not bring about any collapse of the world order, neither politically, nor economically. But in a certain sense, it meant a certain bankruptcy of the image. Baudrillard has argued that the system cannot function if it cannot exchange itself against its own image, reflect itself as the towers in their perfect symmetry, or find its equivalent in an ideal reference. This is what makes the system invulnerable – and it is precisely this equivalence that was destroyed.

This terrorist violence, thus, is not a return of the flame of reality, neither of that of history. The violence is not “real”. In a certain sense, it is worse: it is symbolic. Only symbolic violence may generate singularity. And in this singular mixture, in this Manhattan catastrophic film, a meeting is staged between “the two major mass elements of fascination of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That is: the white magic – or the white light – of cinema, of the cinematic image, and the black magic – or the black light – of terrorism”, which is also staged symbolically in González Inárrita’s film. (Baudrillard 2002: 1: 40).

The search for an explanation, for any interpretation, of the terrorist act is in vain. Any massacre could be pardoned if it could be interpreted as having a historical sense. The very radicality of the spectacle lies precisely in this absence of possible interpretation or understanding. The spectacle of terrorism imposes the terrorism of the spectacle. In consequence, it might be argued that the idea that “terrorism would be nothing without the media” is illusory – because there is no possible good use of the media in reporting on the event, as the media cannot avoid becoming part of the event themselves. (Baudrillard 2002: 1: 41)

In the contribution to 11.09.01 made by Israeli director Amos Gitai, he comments precisely on this unavoidable intertwining of the spectacle of terrorism and the media. Everything starts as in an action film. First, the sound of a bomb covers the soundtrack on an image track still black. Then, a person dressed in military outfit cries out: "Clear the sector! There may be more explosives!" A couple of minutes later, a reporter enters the stage, and the genre seems to change to documentary. She wants to report live on the terrorist act in Tel Aviv, on Jerusalem Avenue; however, she soon realizes that she is cut off from her position "on the air", and this because of some event in distant New York: "Who gives the shit about New York?" When the somewhat hysterical reporter is forced to realize that an actual catastrophe is taking place there, she interrupts her list of events of what has happened historically on September 11 by stating that "two terrorist acts today stand against another". Tel Aviv versus New York: her statement shouldn't be as absurd as it might appear, as it contrasts a continual scene of terrorism to one single spectacular event.

The victory of terrorism is double: first of all that it allows for an outburst of repression, which is uncontrollable, which not least the actual situation in Israel/Palestine shows. Thus, in turn, it legitimates new terrorist acts *ad infinitum*. But this also brings about the effect that all other acts of violence may be appropriated by and to the terrorists. It has been called the "automatic writing of terrorism", nourished and sustained by the "unintentional terrorism of information", supported by movie rhetoric, with all the consequences of different kinds of panic. And war as response offers only a *déjà-vu* situation with phantom information and deceitful discourses – this is true of the Gulf war as well as the war in Afghanistan or the war in Iraq. (Baudrillard 2002: 1: 45) It is symptomatic that, when al-Qaida and the remaining Taliban forces unexpectedly fought back in March 2002, the event was treated in several media comments as yet another proof of their being terrorists: when fired on, they shoot back... That is, a basic principle had been violated: Žizek argues that far from pointing towards twentieth-century warfare, the Twin Towers' collapse was its most spectacular cry. What we are now getting is "war deprived of its substance – a virtual war fought behind computer screens, a war experienced by its participants as a video game, a war with no casualties" (Žizek 2002: 37).

In the new global order, there are no longer wars, at least not in the classical sense of regulated conflicts between sovereign states. There are "ethnic-religious conflicts" or attacks on the US – and when the US responds to these attacks, it has adopted the role of a sovereign mediating agent of peace and global order crushing particular rebellions. The opposition between war and humanitarian aid has been deconstructed – the two are now closely connected, because, as many did observe not least during the war in Afghanistan, the same aircrafts might drop either bombs or food packages. But the distinction between war and peace has also been blurred, as when President Bush, after September 11<sup>th</sup>, stated that "America is in a state of war". And the peace in Iraq, declared by Bush in May this year, has only been followed by more losses, both real and symbolical, on the US side during "peacetime" than during the actual war.

The wars in Afghanistan or in Iraq could also be defined as primarily directed towards "normalization", beyond any political and economical goal that may have been set up. The general idea behind this normalizing effort is globalization: to line up all territories, to bring them into alignment, to reduce any resistance to zone, to colonize any savage space, be it geographical or mental. Any resistance is thus by definition terrorist resistance. Modernity will not allow itself to be renounced in its aspiration towards globality. (Baudrillard 2002: 2: 76, 78)

In Spring 2002, the war in Afghanistan (and also to a certain extent the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>) was all of a sudden relegated to the background, and the focus of general attention shifted to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In Spring 2003, again, the war in Iraq took over as the main focus of interest, and what happened (and continued to happen) in Israel/Palestine faded away in the background. But at a certain point during the war, the opposite took place again. The conflict in Iraq became blurred, as Saddam Hussein appeared to have vanished into thin air and no chemical weapons were found, so that the narrative line all of a sudden was no longer as clear as a war movie in real life demands. Thus, a happy ending was provided, with the American liberators and happy Iraqi people in the streets, with some disturbing astonished comments about the Iraqi people not being grateful enough towards their liberators. Then, the focus shifted back to the suicide bombers in Palestine – as well as their Tjetjenian counterparts in Russia. And what has been happening in Iraq from May 2003 and onwards has obviously become a source of constant disturbance to the clear-cut conflict of the original “lifie” designed by President Bush & Co.

This media rhetoric and its changes of focus are obviously not innocent. Rather, it constructs over and over again the idea of a clash of civilizations, which by Samuel P Huntington has been designed as the main political struggle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – an idea, by the way, to which Michael J Shapiro has provided both energetic and sharp counter-arguments.

The ‘reality’ that Huntington assembles in his West versus the rest mapping of the globe constitutes a moral geography, a security-oriented ethico-political initiative aimed at protecting an enclave whose civilizational integrity is more a function of the way he tells the story of modernity than it is of discernable cultural or civilizational difference. (Shapiro 1999: 119)

This notion of the ‘clash of civilizations’ is indeed more mystifying than clarifying. The central clashes today seem to take place within each civilization, rather than between them. As a consequence of Shapiro’s critique, one might argue that these so-called clashes of civilizations today may be identified as clashes inherent in Western global capitalism. What we are witnessing is precisely a number of real-life clashes related to globalization. There is always an economic background to be revealed behind the conflicts: they turn out to be clashes of economic or geopolitical interests within Western capitalism itself.

What Jean Baudrillard attempts to do in his books is also precisely to consider the terrorist act as not only beyond the spectacular violence that it enacts, but even beyond Islam and beyond the US and any possible clash of civilizations. He sees it as an emergence of a radical antagonism at the very heart of the globalization process, of an irreducible force in the midst of this integral technical and mental achievement, which disturbs the seemingly inevitable evolution towards a perfect and complete world order. (Baudrillard 2002: 2: 36) It as if the world itself resisted globalization.

Globalization first of all touches the market, but it also affects signs and values in culture; thus, there is no longer any clear difference between the global and the universal. The so-called universal values have been globalized and circulate on the market like any product whatsoever. There is a deliberate confusion here between the two concepts of “global” and “universal”. Today, universality might, or should – as Žižek has argued – be defined as the impossible or at least infinite task of translation, which may create a shared space of understanding between cultures. But it is precisely this “universality”

that tends to be replaced by “globality”. The resistance to globalization should thus be seen not only as a rejection of the global techno-structure, but also above all as a refusal of the mental image structure imposed, which absorbs all cultures with the false pretension of regarding them as equivalent. To end where we started, and to paraphrase Bazin, it is no longer a question of the myth of total cinema, but rather of the myth of global cinema. This global cinema is being projected endlessly on our cultural screens, offering us again and again the same old story of global values, being threatened by some ominous agent from out there – different incarnations of the very figure of Absolute Evil that is so familiar to us movie-fans.

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