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Introduction: the cultural politics of popular film

Going to the movies and mulling over power and politics are usually understood to be mutually exclusive activities. Movies are often thought to be escapist entertainments specifically removed from the world of power, politics, and social analysis. Yet even though movies may well be experienced as enjoyable flights of fancy, they are also thoroughly implicated and invested in power relations – they are part of the cultural and political landscape that both constructs and reflects social life. Movies and politics are in fact deeply enmeshed. Taking movies seriously does not have to mean forgoing their pleasures or limiting what we watch: indeed, understanding the cultural politics of film may even add to our appreciation of them. We aim in this book to provide a particular contribution to the field of ‘cultural politics’. This field investigates popular cultural forms not simply as entertainment or art, but rather as ‘political technologies’ – a term that will be defined shortly.¹ We focus on one cultural form as especially illustrative: popular movies. The global dominance of film as a cultural form throughout the world (Hodge, 2015: 36), particularly amongst young people (Aubrey, 2009: 42; Chandler and Munday, 2011: 148), and the global dominance of Hollywood filmmaking and distribution (Prince, 1992: 16; Balio, 2002; Silver, 2007; *inter alia*), mean that we focus on a large subset of mainstream popular films – namely, films which are made in the United States for a global mass audience. These are usually referred to as ‘Hollywood’ movies.

How are mainstream Hollywood movies ‘political’? Movies are sometimes overtly political – some, for example, are focused on political

figures, events, or themes. Movies about presidents, for example, have obviously political connotations (*Primary Colors*, 1998; *Frost/Nixon*, 2008; *Lincoln*, 2012). Similarly, where real-life events such as the Boston marathon bombing (*Patriots Day*, 2016), or the capture/killing of Osama Bin Laden (*Zero Dark Thirty*, 2012) are fodder for film plots, political weights are clearly attached to how those events are represented. Less directly, political themes that extend beyond an individual story or character study (*Thank You for Smoking*, 2006; *There will be Blood*, 2007; *Swing Vote*, 2008) nevertheless exhibit strong connections to the recognisably political world. Where there are clear and familiar political references in popular movies, we label these ‘capital-P’ political.

Hollywood films may also be ‘political’ in the related sense of being closely aligned with or, alternatively, dangerously removed from American government agendas. Similarly, movies which are controversial in some way, or subject to direct or indirect political/military pressure – over classification, objections to content, or the timing of their release, for example – can be readily understood to be ‘political’. Relations between the United States and North Korea were tested by *The Interview* (2014), for instance – a comedy in which two American journalists are recruited to assassinate North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. The controversial nature of religious representations in movies like *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) or *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) also arouses public-political interest (as do movies featuring explicit or unusual sex scenes, or drug use). Much more often, however, the political character of movies is more diffuse. To use Michel Foucault’s (1977) terminology, a culture industry like Hollywood film is not strictly a ‘disciplinary’ political technology like medicine or psychiatry – that is, movie entertainment is not a field strongly shaped by supervision, examination, and punishment. Nevertheless, Hollywood can be understood as ‘a system of signs’ completely enmeshed in ‘relationships of communication’ which ‘can have as their objective or as their consequence certain results in the realm of power’ (Foucault, 1982: 217). In this sense, Hollywood films may be identified as a form of ‘political technology’, or practice which produces and manipulates ideas, identities, bodies, and relational ‘flows’ (Burke, 2008: xxxiii–iv).

Even uncontroversial movies that seem to have few or no connections to the kind of politics we hear about in news and current affairs can be understood as political technologies. When we conceive of politics in this broader way, we see that seemingly unlikely films repeat socio-political ideas and assumptions on an almost infinite range of topics – justice, love, disability, shame, courage. It is this intersection of power relations with popular culture (in the form of Hollywood movies) that we understand as ‘cultural politics’. Political inflections are not limited to any particular genre or narrative categories. Cultural politics abide in all kinds of movies – including romantic comedy, westerns, horror, and children’s animations. Whether we watch movies about politics (with a capital ‘P’) or films that seem far removed from formal politics, we see the invocation of themes that are repeatedly disseminated globally, and thus have significant socio-political implications. In fact, if we understand ‘politics’ as, broadly, operations of power including government, *all* movies are political (see Comolli and Narboni, 1971: 30).² In this sense, popular film is by no means simply entertainment, leisure, diversion, or escapism, even though movies may offer any or all of those things as well. Rather, Hollywood films precisely generate and manipulate identities, bodies, and flows by giving cinematic flesh to certain characters and narratives. On these grounds, it is neither desirable nor possible to cocoon culture from power and the political.

Cultural politics, ‘soft power’, and hegemony

The cultural form of popular Hollywood film is ‘political’ in ways that resonate with Joseph Nye’s (1990) account of the dynamics of state power expressed in foreign policy, including the state power of the United States. State power is not merely tied to military force or economic coercion (‘hard’ power), but also strongly linked to co-option and attraction (‘soft’ power). Nye coined the term ‘soft power’ to describe modes of advancing national security, including foreign aid and diplomacy, by means that are indirect, and that encourage other countries and their peoples to admire, emulate, support, and acquiesce to such advancement (Nye, 2004). Soft power is the power to win ‘hearts and minds’ as well as wars (Ikenberry, 2004). The critical resources of soft

power lie beyond the direct control of national governments and may have their impact precisely because they seem to occur at a distance from naked state self-interest. As Nye notes, one of the main frames for soft power arises in relation to culture, and is of particular importance for the United States. In this context, Carnes Lord outlines the political significance of promoting the appeal of the USA:

[s]oft power has been a strong suit for the United States virtually from its inception—certainly long before the country became a recognized world power in the twentieth century. American ‘exceptionalism’—the nation’s devotion to freedom, the rule of law, and the practice of republican government, its openness to immigrants of all races and religions, its opposition to traditional power politics and imperialism—has had a great deal to do with the rise of the United States to its currently dominant global role. (Lord, 2008: 61)

Hollywood film is an important site for American soft power. It promotes the attractiveness of American perspectives and values to other nations, cultures, and peoples (Nye, 2002/03). Sometimes this link between national soft power agendas and Hollywood film is overt, as in the case of government-embedded funding to support the development of nationalistic films or films which offer a particularly American perspective (Alford, 2016). The movies *Top Gun* (1986), *Pearl Harbor* (2001), and *Black Hawk Down* (2001) are prime examples of this: all were filmed with the support and approval of the military (Robb, 2004: 95). This kind of direct collusion between Hollywood and the US military is not uncommon but neither is it necessarily typical. More frequently, it is simply that the point of view adopted in a film, along with the lifestyles and assumed values presented, are tied to conceptions strongly associated with the United States. We see this, for example, in the pointed emphasis on individualism in any number of children’s movies. Disney films often reiterate the desirability of self-belief and individual determination, as scenes from *Toy Story 2* (1999) and *Ratatouille* (2007) illustrate. In *Toy Story 2*, Rex the toy dinosaur urges ‘You just got to believe in yourself’, while Gusteau the chef (in *Ratatouille*) insists that ‘Your only limit is your soul’. Similarly, in the

Disney film *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), 'taglines' for the film include 'Believe in yourself' and 'Dreams do come true'.³

American individualism is championed, while other countries and cultures may be caricatured as strange. In *The Siege* (1998), for example, American CIA operatives and the FBI are represented in strongly positive ways, while Arabs are associated with excessive religiosity and terrorism. The same kind of partisan vision is revealed in *The Hurt Locker* (2008) in which the viewpoint is that of elite American soldiers engaged in bomb disposal during the Iraq War in 2004. The Iraqis are barely registered as present, let alone given any 'voice' – they are simply part of the dangerous landscape. In these movies and countless others, an American way of life or American viewpoint is self-evidently centralised and normalised. These representations have effects. They contribute to the establishment or strengthening of some religions and cultures as 'extremist' or 'radical', while others are excused or endorsed.

While this focus on soft power is consistent with at least some aspects of a cultural politics orientation to Hollywood films, cultural politics is itself much broader than Nye's specific approach. Soft power tends to presume a reasonably straightforward fit between national agendas, national interests, and cultural forms. While this notion certainly forms part of our theoretical armoury in this book, cultural politics can also be connected to Antonio Gramsci's (1992) broader conceptualisation of 'hegemony' (Howson, 2005; Howson and Smith, 2008). Gramsci uses the term to describe how rulers secure the complicity of those they subjugate. His approach offers a means to consider how social assemblages of dominant or emerging power relations contrive to achieve widespread consensus, rather than relying upon force or coercion for the maintenance of ongoing political control and stability.

There are clear connections between Nye's soft power and Gramsci's notion of hegemony. Both conceive of power as working at a distance from direct government control, and as not simply about dominating through violence or force. Moreover, Nye's concern with power as intimately linked with making particular agendas attractive parallels the emphasis on popular complicity in the vocabulary of hegemony. While both concepts help us to understand power as relating to legitimacy rather than simple force alone, hegemony's concern with gaining popular agreement provides a less narrowly state-oriented account of

a dominant social order than soft power. Like Nye, Gramsci conceives of culture as deeply implicated with power, but where Nye focuses on American power in foreign policy, Gramsci attends to the dynamics of power relations within a national social order (Bates, 1975; Gill, 1993). In this book, we draw on both approaches.

The field of cultural politics provides a useful context for analysing popular film, but this is not necessarily a straightforward exercise. It can be challenging to bring together the cultural and the political, especially where the two are understood as intimately and thoroughly connected, rather than as separate or even intersecting fields. For this reason, we develop and employ a somewhat novel methodological approach.

A cultural politics approach to popular (Hollywood) film

In this book, we draw on several fields of scholarship, including politics, cultural studies, film studies, gender studies, and sociology. Our enquiries draw us to these fields for several reasons. Firstly, as we have already signalled, we use cultural politics to consider how (supposedly non-political) culture is intertwined with power relations. This synthetic approach is promising on two related fronts. It may offer new ways of looking at and understanding the place Hollywood movies occupy in the global political landscape, and at the same time advance scholarship in this field. However, research comprising the broad church of cultural politics tends for the most part to emphasise either the ‘political’ or the ‘cultural’ – and both terms are usually rather narrowly defined.

cultural Politics

Where the ‘politics’ of cultural politics is emphasised, research tends to focus on government and the military – most particularly the US government or military – or, even more narrowly, on certain American presidencies. Relatedly, such scholarship sometimes discusses ‘political’ and ‘ideological’ messages in relation to history, propaganda, and political manipulation, classification and censorship, and government agencies and institutions. Examples of relatively narrowly political approaches within the field of cultural politics include Phillip L. Gianos’s (1998) *Politics and Politicians in American Film*; David L. Robb’s

(2004) *Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies*; and Ernest D. Giglio's (2014) *Here's Looking at You: Hollywood, Film and Politics*.

This field of research tends to assert, on the basis of its narrowed conception of politics, that most contemporary Hollywood film is *not* political, but simply 'entertainment'. Researchers within the field submit that films addressing political questions constitute a small and highly specialised band of Hollywood movies. Ernest D. Giglio's (2014) position perfectly illustrates this perspective. He states that the vast majority of Hollywood films are 'strictly commercial' entertainment, and estimates that only 5 or 10 per cent have any kind of 'political message' (Giglio, 2014: 1). Today, he says, 'political films' – that is, movies which deal with 'social and political issues' – are usually left to independent filmmakers outside of the Hollywood production system (Giglio, 2014: 12 and xiii). Commercial entertainment and the political are presumed to be mutually exclusive categories.

Another field of scholarship on politics in film has a strongly historical focus, and hence is generally less attentive to contemporary films. Thematically, this research concentrates on war, defence, political leadership, and political/party frameworks (including ideologies, or 'isms'): examples include Nora Sayre's (1982) exploration of films of the Cold War, Auster and Quart's (1988) book about film treatments of the Vietnam War, and Steven Ross's (2011) account of the political influence wielded by Hollywood movie stars. Often such studies restrict their discussion to a few exemplary or 'classic' film instances – for example, Shindler (1972 – war films made in and shortly after World War II); McNerney (1979/80 – films of the Vietnam War); Dick (1996 – films about World War II) – and, not surprisingly, pay limited attention to film/cultural theory. This form of analysis does, however, present films as socially relevant, and often connects films to their public impact in an accessible, readable fashion.

Cultural politics

By comparison, scholarship attending to the 'cultural' side of cultural politics is often conceived at some distance from the restricted conception of politics as concerned with nation-states and government, and instead is inclined to focus on modes of analysis usually associated with cultural

sociology and/or cultural studies. Cultural sociology, by Clifford Geertz's definition, is concerned with how meaning is framed. It is not limited to what people do, nor to particular institutional imperatives, but rather explores how culture, cultural forms, and cultural objects give shape to how people make sense of themselves, others, and the conditions of their lives (Geertz, 1973: 89; Alexander, 2003). While this cultural focus is not always or obviously associated with the field of 'cultural politics', we suggest that it should be.

Cultural studies, like cultural sociology, seeks to understand how meaning is generated, disseminated, and produced (Barker, 2012: 5–12). However, cultural studies as a scholarly field is perhaps more attentive to conceptions of power than is cultural sociology. For example, Mark Gibson (2007) notes that employing a cultural studies approach requires attending to both power and culture, such that cultural forms are often considered in the context of society-wide relations of power. This approach can be set against a more literary orientation which considers cultural forms in terms of their aesthetic or formal elements (Gibson, 2007: 1–5). Yet cultural studies, like cultural sociology, operates at a distance from the stricter conceptions of power as capital-P politics – in the sense of political movements, parties, parliaments, government, and governance.

The emphasis in both cultural sociology and cultural studies on meaning in the context of broad power relations, rather than more stringent understandings of power as capital-P politics, means that writers employing these approaches tend to analyse films as thematically concerned with identities – including, typically, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and sometimes class.⁴ Examples of research focused more heavily on the 'cultural' side of cultural politics include Robin Wood's (1998) *Sexual Politics and Narrative Film*; Barbara Creed's (2005) *Phallic Panic: Film, Horror and the Primal Uncanny*; Eric Greene's (2006) *Planet of the Apes as American Myth: Race and Politics in the Films and Television Series*; and Charlotte Brunsdon's *London in Cinema: The Cinematic City since 1945* (2007). The sweep of cultural sociology and cultural studies is usually more cosmopolitan than work exploring films explicitly focused on capital-P politics. This cultural sociology/cultural studies scholarship often speaks of matters beyond US-based concerns even when addressing Hollywood film, and devotes more

attention than those focusing on capital-P politics do to film theory (and cultural theory more broadly), sometimes concentrating on specific cultural institutions like Disney, or a particular film franchise (as against specific political institutions). However, while researchers in this field are certainly concerned with investigating popular films, they are also more likely to attend to idiosyncratic, specialist, or ‘highbrow’ films (that is, films typically seen by relatively small or elite audiences). Furthermore, these researchers are much more inclined to engage with in-house debates in cultural theory and address a highly knowledgeable readership. Such ‘cultural’ scholarship thus tends – by contrast with the ‘political’ film scholarship – to be presented in specialist and often highly abstract language.

Cultural Politics

Both orientations of cultural politics are important, and indeed both are employed in this book. We suggest, however, that the tendency to privilege one or the other – either the political or the cultural – invites certain limitations in approaching the terrain of cultural politics, and does not take best advantage of its synthetic possibilities. In short, both the ‘political’ and ‘cultural’ modes of scholarship tend to view the field of cultural politics through unnecessarily narrow lenses.

As Stephanie Schulte has acknowledged, ‘[q]uestions about film and politics are located in the articulation between political science and popular culture research and, therefore, rarely investigated in either field’ (2012: 46). There is nevertheless some research in the field which does attend to the interplay between politics and culture, and this research best represents the approach on which we build. This focuses on power and the political, but also mobilises broader understandings of politics that cross over into the preoccupations of the cultural, and refers to more expansive ‘social’ themes. In this category we would include, for example, Richard Grenier’s (1991) *Capturing the Culture: Film, Art and Politics*; essays in *American Film and Politics from Reagan to Bush Jr.* (Davies and Wells, 2002); Ian Scott’s (2011) *American Politics in Hollywood Film*; and Mark Sachleben and Kevan M. Yenerall’s (2012) *Seeing the Bigger Picture: American and International Politics in Film and Popular Culture*. Similarly, there are a number of cultural sociology/cultural studies-oriented titles that advance a more developed

awareness of the broader socio-political field. Among these, we include Jackie Stacey's (1994) *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*; Michael Shapiro's (1999) *Cinematic Political Thought: Narrating Race, Nation and Gender*; and essays in *To Seek out New Worlds: Exploring Links between Science Fiction and World Politics* (Weldes, 2003).

Even though such research gives more space to the interplay between politics and culture, scholarship attending to both aspects comprehensively and syncretically is not especially prevalent. However, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Ryan and Kellner, 1988) exemplifies an approach that does precisely that. Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner argue that movies are intimately connected to power and politics, and suggest that 'their political meaning may be more complex, contested, and differentiated' (1988: 2) than many critics suggest. For them,

[t]he political stakes of film are ... very high because film is part of a broader system of cultural representation which operates to create psychological dispositions that result in a particular construction of social reality, a commonly held sense of what the world is and ought to be that sustains social institutions. (1988: 14)

Our aim in this book is both to draw on and extend Ryan and Kellner's work. We intend, like them, to synthesise elements of political and cultural approaches. In so doing, we conceptualise power relations as deeply embedded in the constitution of social meaning and, at the same time, envision social meaning as highly political. At a pragmatic level, we pay attention to the traditionally political by considering nation, security, war, and social order, while also engaging with prevalent cultural sociology/cultural studies concerns regarding gender, sexuality, and similar axes of identity and power. We consider these themes in both national and international contexts.

In keeping with these aims, we also develop a methodology suited to the synthetic characteristics of the field. Our view is that in existing scholarship there is often a mismatch between a purported interest in the interplay of culture and politics, and a methodology that deals with only a few films and/or specialist films, frequently at length. This

methodology essentially reflects the legacy of literary analysis (Wan and Kraus, 2002: 419–20),⁵ and is often adopted despite the methodological uncertainties of assuming too much about the meaning/impact of individual films. Moreover, discussion of film in any given research is almost invariably anchored in a particular film genre. However, in considering contemporary popular film as politically engaged, rather than as an æsthetic endeavour or commercial entertainment, we find ourselves adopting a course that is somewhat different from many film analyses. In order to consider movies as a political technology we pay less attention to individual genres as such, and even less to the particularities of individual films, and much more to tropes reiterated in a very wide array of highly popular films.

The dynamics of power deployed in myths, identities, and relationships are discussed throughout the book within thematic as opposed to genre boundaries, even though these themes are sometimes reasonably and conveniently aligned with genre conventions. There is an almost infinite number of themes that could be identified and analysed. We have homed in on those that speak to us most obviously about the nature of collective identities and power relations, but our selection is by no means intended to be exhaustive. Our choices reflect, to some extent, our particular intellectual interests, and build on research each of us has undertaken both within and beyond the field of cultural politics. Broadly, we divide our analysis into three overarching themes: *security* (concerning order and disorder in the collective/nation), *identities and interconnections* – that is, *relationalities* (gendered subjects and their political relations with one another, particularly in love, sexuality, and friendship), and *flaws in the social fabric* (dealing with social problems, commentary, and dissent). These three overarching themes and their associated terminologies (for example, terms such as ‘fear films’) register our particular analytical language for exploring the cultural politics of Hollywood film. This orientation necessarily informs our methodology: rather than sifting through genres (such as action movies, romantic drama, animations, and so on) for their political characteristics or inflections, we explore how political ideas are repeatedly formulated and reformulated in popular films. In other words, we attend to selected themes (order, fear, intimacy, social criticism, and more) over genre categories. There is, nevertheless, some overlap: certain

political themes appear more often, or in their clearest iteration, in some categories of film.

Our central focus on the relationship between the political and the cultural in this book means that we are precisely concerned with cultural tropes that are not idiosyncratic but repeated and widespread.⁶ This calls for our attention to be trained on *popular* film. We discuss popular films produced by major Hollywood studios for mass global audiences rather than independent, art-house, or avant-garde productions.⁷ Indeed, the films at the centre of this book are mostly worldwide box-office hits that have been viewed by a very large number of people. Occasional comparisons between Hollywood and other national cinemas are intended to highlight the specificity of the former. In effect, we develop a specific methodology appropriate to our field of analysis – that is, we offer a contribution framed by the analytical focus of the field of cultural politics. This methodology both informs and explains the scope of this book.

Overview

Our focus is on how power and power relations are represented in dominant cultural forms across a wide range of genres within contemporary Hollywood film, drawing mostly on examples from the 1970s through to the present day. In this introductory chapter we have sketched our ‘cultural politics’ approach, showing how we both build on and depart from existing scholarship. In the chapter to follow, we begin by providing an account of the frameworks we use to define and identify political myths in Hollywood film, situating these in a schematic history. We argue here (and throughout) that popular film can be usefully understood as a political technology. Although our focus is contemporary Hollywood movies, to understand these some theoretical and historical context is essential. In setting out our approach and contextualising its critical analytical frameworks, the first two chapters offer a platform for the ensuing analysis.

Our exploration of security begins in chapter 3. Here, we examine the role Hollywood movies play in maintaining and representing national security. We argue that security has two faces: it is constructed and represented as ‘us’ (that is, as social/community/governmental *order*),

and as a response to ‘them’ (*disorder*). These facets of security can be investigated using selected approaches resonant with the key terms in cultural politics already outlined: ‘soft power’ (Nye, 2004) and ‘hegemony’ (Gramsci, 1992). In chapter 4, we narrow the scope of ‘security’ to demonstrate how political myths concerning security, social collectivity, and government play out in cinematic treatments of war. We identify the typical trajectories war films take, and consider their weight as reiterations of national political/military agendas over time. Our analysis suggests a continuing congruence – despite occasional, minor divergences – between Hollywood and US government security agendas. Locating and discussing historical trends allows us to show how Hollywood has mythologised war to present particular and consequential stories about the proper constitution and exercise of authority. In chapter 5 we turn to the other face of security – disorder. We introduce what we call ‘fear films’. As a discrete but broad category, fear films include but are not limited to stylisations of horror. Our analysis of fear films illustrates how movies not usually considered to be ‘political’ address power relations through their representations of threat and its containment. We discuss the history and meaning of ‘fear films’ across three categories of disorder: strangers, disasters, and monsters. In chapter 6 we flesh out the political significance of the monster category in more detail, focusing on zombies. Zombie movies are a political technology illustrating how fear inheres in category instability, and bear additional socio-political weight as both representations of and models for theorising power relations.

Romantic films are even less likely to be considered ‘political’ than disaster and monster movies. In chapters 7, 8, and 9, we turn from considering state–citizen relations to demonstrate how Hollywood films present opportunities for thinking about citizen-to-citizen political relationality and power relations. In this section, we scope the ostensibly ‘personal’ world of love and friendship to reveal its political contours, mainly in relation to gender. Of course, gender is not the only axis of collective identity in play at the movies, but it presents a number of distinct and pronounced instances for analysis. For this reason, in chapter 7 we begin by considering gendered representations and genres. Our enquiry draws on Allan G. Johnson’s (2014) tools for identifying the ‘patriarchal legacy’ in Hollywood, feminist research on ‘chick flicks’,

and the mythical place of fairy tales in representations of cinematic romance. In chapter 8, we continue our exploration by considering how two political myths – heteronormativity and hypermonogamy – play out in romantic movies. The term ‘heteronormativity’ refers to the ways that norms about gender and sexuality work together to make heterosexuality, gender polarity, and gendered power relations seem natural and innate. The myth of hypermonogamy pivots on the insistence that every person has a unique soul-mate, or that there is someone – one and only one special someone – for everyone (after Emens, 2004). We argue that Hollywood romantic comedy is a political technology for the anxious endorsement of heteronormativity and hypermonogamy, and reveal how these political mythologies are mobilised in a number of reiterative ways. The final chapter in our analysis of citizen-to-citizen political relationalities concerns fraternity, or masculine homosociality, and the significance it takes on in bromance. ‘Bromance’ is a relatively new term describing intense and affectionate yet non-sexual friendship between men. In this chapter, the myth of the fraternal social contract – a fundament of liberal-democratic political theory – and related hegemonic requirements regarding masculinity shape our analysis of the ways bromantic comedies treat gender and sexuality. Together, these three chapters offer a taste of how cultural vocabularies of relational interconnection produce and reflect power relations in Hollywood films.

While we understand all movies as political, some are more self-consciously political than others. In the third section of the book focusing on thematic reiterations in Hollywood film, we identify a spectrum of films that can be understood as engaging with social commentary or critique, and assess their capacity to offer counter-hegemonic visions. These ostensibly more serious movies generally aim for a closer connection to real life (as opposed to the more fantastic worlds of action-adventure and fairy tales), and often rely on dramatic realism to make those connections. In chapter 10 we outline the key characteristics and typical subject matter of socially critical movies. Surveying the broad range of films that can be understood as socially critical allows us to identify what is typically presented to us as worthy of serious attention. The promise that socially critical movies make is to show us flaws in the social fabric, and perhaps even to indicate

directions for their repair. While the category is apparently diverse, a number of threads dominate. In chapter 11, we summarise key debates concerning the political traction of socially critical movies. Exploring the typical trajectories of socially critical movies, we argue that warnings of one kind or another constitute the dominant narrative. While socially critical films might seem to offer more opportunities than other movies for counter-hegemonic social commentary, our analysis demonstrates that this is by no means decided.

Finally, in chapters 12 and 13, we draw together an account of the global dominance of Hollywood films, the political 'stories' they tell, and their potential global social impact, to consider questions of film policy and issues related to cultural and political diversity. Our aim, here and throughout, is to undertake critical analysis of the limits and possibilities of the ideas and identities presented to us in dominant cultural forms. To this end, we identify what 'choices' are made available in popular film; show how particular forms of conformity and rebellion are represented and legitimated; and consider whether cultural globalisation is a matter for concern. In a period in which it has become more important than ever for us to examine the question of American global dominance, it is a matter of some urgency to review the politics of culture. American power and influence are by no means just a question of military and economic might, but also involve the arguably more seductive charms of American culture and its global reach. Thinking about the cultural politics of film by no means obviates the pleasure we take in watching movies. On the contrary, when we take our seats in the multiplex, the critical framework and analysis presented here add flavour and substance to the cinematic popcorn we consume.

Notes

- 1 This kind of approach parallels Anthony Burke's (2008) analysis of how the notion of security is a political apparatus; see also Prince (1992).
- 2 We concur here with a general perspective outlined by – among others – Comolli and Narboni, who famously insisted that film is always political. This broad approach has been highly influential in Anglophone studies of film. Comolli and Narboni employed a particular version of linguistic and Marxist structuralism that they described as

'scientific criticism'. They undertook to identify how and to what extent films were 'ideological' by outlining seven categories which took realism to be a central feature of the 'ideological mainstream'. While we too start from the overall point that film is political, we depart from the theoretical and stylistic assumptions that were in circulation at the time this key scholarship was published.

- 3 A 'tagline' is an advertising device which involves a shorthand invocation of the crucial theme or appeal of the film. For example, the tagline for *Alien* (1979) is 'In space no one can hear you scream'. See chapter 2 for more detail.
- 4 Less frequently, but no less importantly, other markers of identity are identified and explored, including age (Harrington *et al.*, 2015) and disability (Shakespeare, 1994; Ginsburg and Rapp, 2015).
- 5 This tendency to a literary form of analysis is especially evident, for example, in psychoanalytic readings of films. See also Brant (2012: 121).
- 6 Repetition may be especially salient in the production of 'truth effects' (Fazio *et al.*, 2015; Fazio, 2016).
- 7 While the distinction between mass and art-house films is reasonably straightforward, the distinction between majors and independents is increasingly difficult to establish. Independent films can be bought by Hollywood distributors – *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), for example, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival but was snapped up by Fox Searchlight Pictures. The criteria for determining whether a movie is mainstream or independent are unclear: major Hollywood studios are attempting increasingly actively to capture specialised markets, cinematic 'styles' associated with 'independents' change, and some independent films (like *Fahrenheit 9/11* [2004]) generate both critical acclaim and significant box-office success (Giannetti, 1999: ch. 8; Zion, 2004: 10).