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## Social Memory and the Representation of 9/11 in Contemporary Hollywood Film

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Machtvolle Medienspektakel formen soziales Gedächtnis und beeinflussen die individuellen Perspektiven von Geschichte und gegenwärtige Realität. Über Images interpretieren und konstruieren Menschen ihre Sichtweisen der Welt, wie die allgegenwärtigen Bilder der in die Türme des World Trade Centers stürzenden Flugzeuge am 11. September 2001 verdeutlichen. Der vorliegende Beitrag beschäftigt sich mit den Modi der Repräsentation der Attacken vom 11. September im Hollywood Film und deren Gebrauch als politisches Instrument am Beispiel der Filme „United 93“, „World Trade Center“ und „The Path to 9/11“.

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The September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and on the Pentagon near Washington, D.C. were shocking global media events that dominated public attention and circulated spectacles of terror that generated fear and even panic. These media spectacles were intended to terrorize the U.S., to attack symbolic targets, and to promote Jihad against the West, as well as to undermine the U.S. and global economy. The World Trade Center (WTC) is an apt symbol of global capitalism in the heart of the New York financial district, while the Pentagon stands as an icon and center of U.S. military power.<sup>1</sup>

Powerful media spectacles help shape social memory, constructing individual's views of history and contemporary reality.<sup>2</sup> Resonant images help construct how people see and interpret the world, and the oft-repeated images of airplanes hitting the World Trade Center, the buildings burning and then collapsing, and piles of rubble left in their wake were among the most compelling images ever witnessed by global media culture. This

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1 The contextualization of 9/11 in this analysis draws upon Kellner 2003a and 2005.

2 On media spectacle, see Kellner 2003a and 2003b and 2005. The concept of “social memory” refers in this analysis to the socially constructed images of the past and present in a given society. In a media-dominated society, social memory is often constructed in terms of significant media spectacles, and the discourses, resonant images, and narratives that frame the spectacle. This is arguably so with the 9/11 terror attacks that continue to be a highly resonant and contested phenomenon in the contemporary moment. “Social memory” might be contrasted with “popular memory”, in which people's memories of struggle, resistance, and historical traditions are counterposed to existing cultures of domination and repression and constitute a resource for potential resistance and struggle. The notion of “popular memory” was associated with Foucault in France from the 1970s (see Foucault 1989), and during approximately the same period with radical historians in the United States and elsewhere who published in the *Radical History Review*. “Social memory”, by contrast, is constructed in part by media images, discourses, and spectacles that are parts of a dominant apparatus of power and domination.

chapter relates the mode of representation of the 9/11 attacks on the U.S. to the earlier wave of Hollywood disaster films, and the use of spectacles of terror as a political weapon. Focus is then on representations of 9/11 itself in some contemporary Hollywood films including *United 93*, *World Trade Center*, and *The Path to 9/11*. At stake is how cinematic culture deals with a catastrophic event like the 9/11 terror attacks, the politics of its modes of representation and effects, and how popular media shape social memory and perceptions of the recent past and present that are still alive in struggles of the day.

### 9/11 as Disaster Film and the Spectacle of Terror

While the Al Qaeda group had systematically used spectacles of terror to promote its agenda, the 9/11 attack was the most deadly strike on U.S. targets in its history, and the first foreign attack on the continental U.S. since the war of 1812, showing the vulnerability of the US to lethal force and the kind of indiscriminate violence suffered by much of the world. Spectacles of terror use dramatic images and montage to catch attention, hoping thereby to catalyze unanticipated events that will spread further terror through domestic populations. These made-for-media events become global spectacles that create fearful populations more likely to be manipulated by reactionary forces who give simplistic answers to contemporary anxieties and problems.

The live television presentation of the September 11 attacks and continuous replay of the spectacle in the following days made it appear like a disaster film, leading Hollywood director Robert Altman to chide his industry for producing extravaganzas of devastation that could serve as models for spectacular terror attacks. Indeed, was *Independence Day* (1996) the template for 9/11 in which Los Angeles and New York were assaulted by aliens and the White House was destroyed? The collapse of the WTC also had resonances of *The Towering Inferno* (1975) that depicted a high-rise building catching on fire, burning and collapsing, or even *Earthquake* (1975) that within the system, in portrayed the collapse of entire urban environments. For these two Hollywood disaster films, however, the calamity emerged from the case of the first, and from nature itself in the second. In the September 11 terror spectacle, by contrast, the assumed villains were foreign terrorists obviously committed to wreaking maximum destruction on the U.S., and it was not certain how the drama would end or if order would be restored in a “happy ending.”

The 9/11 terror spectacle unfolded in the cities of New York and Washington, that were among the most media-saturated in the world. For days, it played out a deadly drama live on television, capturing a global audience. The images of the planes hitting the World Trade Center towers and their collapse were broadcast repeatedly, as if repetition were necessary to master a highly traumatic event. The spectacle conveyed the message that the U.S. was vulnerable to terrorists who could create great harm, and that anyone at anytime could be subject to deadly terrorism, even in Fortress America. The suffering, fear, and death that many people endure on a daily basis was brought home to U.S. citizens. Suddenly, the vulnerability and anxiety suffered by many people throughout the world was also deeply experienced by U.S. citizens, in some cases for the first time. The terror attacks thus had material effects, attempting to harm the U.S. and

global economy, and psychic effects, traumatizing a nation with fear. The spectacle of terror was broadcast throughout the global mediascape, with the whole world watching the assault on the U.S. and New York's attempts to cope with the attacks.

The live real time "you are there" drama deeply involved spectators in the 9/11 spectacle. The images of the planes striking the Twin Towers, the buildings bursting into flames, people jumping out of the window in a desperate attempt to survive the inferno, and the collapse of the Towers and subsequent chaos provided unforgettable images that viewers would not soon forget. The drama continued throughout the day with survivors being pulled from the wreckage. The poignant search for individuals still alive and the attempts to deal with the disaster produced resonant iconic images seared deeply into spectators' memories. Many people who witnessed the event suffered from nightmares and psychological trauma, similar to soldiers' post-traumatic stress disorder. For many spectators, the spectacle provided a powerful set of images that would continue to resonate for years to come, much as the footage of the Kennedy assassination, iconic photographs and video of Vietnam, the 1986 explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger*, or the death of Princess Diana in the 1990s provided unforgettable imagery.

The 9/11 spectacle was a genuine disaster for the American people and would become a global catastrophe with the Bush administration "war on terror" mutating into a Terror War that included an invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, a disastrous clash between Israel and Hamas and Hezbollah, terrorist attacks all over the world, and general fear and insecurity on a global scale (Kellner 2005).<sup>3</sup>

### Representations of 9/11 in Hollywood Film: *United 93* and *World Trade Center*

While a large number of film and television documentaries, and some TV movies, dealt with the 9/11 events, *United 93* (2006) was the first major Hollywood film to deal with the catastrophe itself. The story recreated the hijacked flight where the passengers allegedly stormed the cockpit and forced the plane to crash in Pennsylvania. The narrative of the story was thus intrinsically both tragic and heroic, with a predestined tragedy in terms of the film narrative, and a heroic conclusion demonstrating American will and capability in a time of crisis.

Yet no Hollywoodesque individualized heroes emerged in the ultra-realistic, low-key, and understated portrayal of the hours just before and during the plane's hijacking, inexorably leading to the crash. Deploying hand-held and sometimes erratic camera movements, quick editing, and tight focuses on both the environment of the plane and the federal agencies monitoring air control, director Paul Greengrass deftly explores interior

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<sup>3</sup> Since the term "war on terror" is thoroughly ideological, enabling one to do and justify anything in the name of fighting terrorism and evil, the term "Terror War" best described the epoch from 9/11 to the present (see Kellner 2003b), a concept which includes Al Qaeda and Islamicist terrorism and the state terrorism of the Bush administration and Israel in their 2006 incursion in Lebanon.

spaces, social relations and group activities, and how individuals respond to crisis and catastrophe.

The four Muslim hijackers are introduced praying before their suicide mission, and throughout are shown fervently engaged in prayer, but they are also portrayed as conflicted and afraid. The passengers on the fated plane are presented initially as ordinary citizens, involved in the petty cares and mundane rituals of everyday life, as they fidget with their cell phones, exchange banalities with each other, and eventually become aware of the disaster unfolding.

Likewise, the pilots are shown as quite ordinary people, as are the members of the federal bureaucracies and U.S. military that responded to the day's calamity. Greenglass' focus in the film is on the institutional space of the airplane and federal bureaucracies, and the ordinariness of the people involved. He explores people interacting in public and bureaucratic spaces in airports and in an airplane, in air traffic control centers, and in the Northeast Air Defense Sector (NEADS), located in Rome, New York.

As the passengers board the United 93 flight, the scene cuts to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) air traffic control center at Hendron, Virginia, where the newly appointed head Ben Sliny (playing himself) arrives at work. The scene cuts back and forth from the airplane, whose take-off is initially delayed, to the air traffic control centers, as an alert controller overhears bits of a conversation on an American Airlines 11 flight that leads him to suspect that it was hijacked. Coworkers discuss the possibility, and FAA employees and then the NEADS center grapple with the possibility of catastrophe, as a plane hits the World Trade Center and others go missing on their radar screens.

The most critical aspect of the film presents the incompetence of the government agencies and military to respond quickly and effectively to the hijackings. While air controllers overhear conversations that suggest a hijacking in motion, they cannot seem to effectively communicate with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) or the military. Indeed, the narrative is one of inability of government bureaucracies to communicate and act, as the different agencies fail to see the big picture, seem to have no coordination, and are depicted as powerless spectators of the calamity. Especially disturbing, the military not only does not seem to have clear lines of communication with the various federal agencies, or the White House, but also seems not to have enough armed planes ready to deploy, and when they finally send up a plane, it is directed the wrong way!

Equally disturbing, the FAA starts off slowly, not reacting seriously to threats of an airplane hijacking, and then keeps losing track of planes, or tracking ones as hijacked which are not. Even after the two hijacked planes are shown crashing into the World Trade Center, the U.S. response seems chaotic and disorganized. Not only are the air traffic controllers and the military unable to communicate with each other, but they are unable to contact the president or vice-president, who are the only ones who can ratify military action. Thus, while the film in its low-key and understated style does not blatantly assert the failures of governmental systems, it shows a thoroughly dysfunctional government and air defense system in which all of the high-tech instruments and professionals were not able to address and prevent the catastrophe.

By contrast, the passengers on United 93 evidently grasp the magnitude of the event, as they learn from cell phone conversation with friends and loved ones of the WTC crashes, and organize to overpower the hijackers and storm the cockpit to seize control of the plane. The participants had previously been depicted as quasi-anonymous members of the crowd and none is presented as an individual hero in the traditional Hollywood sense. Collectively, however, they organize and fight the hijackers, causing the plane to crash.

*United 93* thus operates on the terrain of everyday life and institutional space, rather than in the Hollywood space of highly individualized characters and relations, using an aesthetic of naturalism rather than melodrama. The hijackers are portrayed as frightened albeit committed young Muslim men, and there is no comic bookesque caricature or demonization of Arabs and Muslims such as one finds in typical generic Hollywood thrillers (see Shahin 2001 and Seemerling 2006). Likewise, in this most un-Hollywood movie, it is ordinary people who are the self-organizing protagonists who stand in for their fellow citizens and take heroic action in the midst of hopeless adversity to attempt to crash the plane and to prevent it being used as a weapon (it is widely speculated that United 93 was headed for Washington and perhaps the Capitol or White House).

The subtext of *United 93* appears to be that U.S. citizens cannot trust their government for national security or to protect them from terrorist dangers. All of the government agencies portrayed in the film repeatedly got misinformation, made mistaken assumptions, and calls, and did not adequately communicate with each other. Higher government officials were absent from the film as they seemed to be during the day of the 9/11 attacks. Instead, the film suggests that groups of people must make a decision to protect themselves from threats and organize to fight for their own survival.

The Oliver Stone movie *World Trade Center* (2006) was also quite low-key in its depiction of Port Authority police saving the lives of victims of the twin tower crashes. In some ways, *World Trade Center* is the ultimate un-Oliver Stone film: restrained, understated, often slow and somber, sentimental, and conservative. The film is shamelessly sentimental, focusing on the heroism, entrapment in the ruins, and rescue of two ordinary working class policeman, who represent the common man and their families who bore the brunt of the 9/11 tragedy. It is conservative in following traditional Hollywood generic forms and story-telling, in failing to deal with the political context of the attack, and in developing several key themes that are engaged below.

Based on their true stories, the film opens with Port Authority police Sergeant John McLoughlin (Nicholas Cage) waking up, lovingly observing his wife and children sleeping, and dutifully going off to work. The *mis-en-scene* then depicts Latino Port Authority policeman, Will Jimeno (Michael Pena), leaving his modest home in New Jersey for work, with his radio blasting Brooks and Dunn's country and western song "Only in America" as he enthusiastically sings along, coding him as a working class patriot.

Opening scenes quietly depict the people of New York City beginning their workdays, showing butchers, fish sellers, and small businessmen opening their shops, workers cleaning up the streets, pedestrians on the way to work, subway riders bantering about baseball, and homeless people facing another day on the streets. Interspersed are iconic images of Wall Street, the Statue of Liberty, New York skyscrapers, and the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. The intensely populist focus of the movie encodes the

message that the victims of the New York 9/11 terror attacks were innocent people, comprising a variety of races and ethnicities, who would bear the burden of the horror.

*World Trade Center* suggests that terrorism, which senselessly and indiscriminately strikes civilians, is monstrous and that its victims are innocent people, trying to get on with their lives and raise their families. The film also shows families and communities pulling together in response to the tragedy, and discovering new resources of strength and capability, conveying the message that the United States will surely pull together to fight its enemies.

Stone's drama is perhaps too understated, failing to address even minimally the political context of the attack and the existence and strategy of the perpetrators. The Port Authority policeman gather at headquarters for a typical days work, in this case, looking for a young runaway at a bus station, when the catastrophe strikes. A brief shadow of an airline over a building denotes the attack, as Stone renounces showing the iconic pictures of the plane hitting the World Trade Center. Curiously, any mention of Al Qaeda or terrorism is absent from the movie, an omission that will have sinister connotations near the end of the film when one of the characters is cited as joining the military and going to Iraq in the aftermath, as if Iraq was involved in the attack.

The film draws on generic features of the disaster film as cinematic images show the people on the street reacting to the horror and TV images depict the event. Sent to Ground Zero to rescue workers, several of the Port Authority policeman are themselves trapped in the ruins and much of the film deals with how they cope with their plight, the effects on their family and friends, and their eventual rescue. The scenes of the multi-ethnic police volunteering for the mission and being chosen by the Sargent evoke codes of the World War Two film where ordinary soldiers become heroes or victims.

The slow-moving entrapment scenes evoke the horror of entombment, and as one policeman kills himself after obtaining a fatal injury, all but the two main characters disappear. Here, the film takes on aspects of the horror film with the trapped police facing gruesome and monstrous deaths.

*World Trade Center* shifts to family melodrama as focus moves to the effects on family members with typically emotional tear-jerking scenes. The eventual rescue takes on the triumphalist form of Hollywood happy endings, mediated by aggressively religious themes, and highly, and dangerously, conservative motifs that reproduce Bush administration discourses and ideology of the so-called "war on terror." A subplot deals with an ex-Marine Dave Karnes (Michael Shannon), an accountant watching the televised attacks on the WTC in his Connecticut office, who goes to his evangelical church to pray, gets a standard Marine buzz haircut, and travels to Ground Zero to engage in heroic rescue. Another young man, who volunteers to help save people lost in the rubble, reveals that he used to be a medic, and quickly becomes one, providing the possibility of redeeming himself with courageous action, as does the Marine. The Marine, already coded as devoutly religious, is linked to a vision of Christ, as the trapped Latino policeman Jimeno has a vision of Jesus, conveying the message, pleasing to Christians and conservatives, that Jesus himself is watching over America in its time of trouble.

There is thus an underlying Christian fundamentalist theme in the film, which was marketed aggressively to conservatives. Indeed, one leading rightwing columnist, Cal

Thomas, called it “one of the greatest pro-American, pro-family, pro-faith, pro-male, flag-waving God Bless America films you will ever see.”<sup>4</sup> To construct the Christian motifs, Stone deploys cinematographic chiasmo of light and darkness throughout, using shadowy and muted lighting to depict the entrapment of the police, although sunrays of hope sometimes burst through, punctuated with hellish fireballs that incinerate some of the trapped police and endanger the two protagonists. The eventual rescue shows light dispelling darkness, as the trapped men emerge alive with triumphalist music signaling the victory of valor and goodness in a kind of religious epiphany. Stone quickly cuts to more tragic motifs as the camera shifts to depict the smoldering, dark, smoky ruins of the buildings, while voices note the many who have died, illustrated by tracking shots of rows of photos in a hospital ward of those missing, many of whom were presumably dead, thus signaling the horrific number of victims who died in the attack.

The ex-Marine Karnes expresses a need to avenge the murders and closing titles indicate that he reenlisted and served two terms in Iraq. Such a linking of Iraq and revenge for 9/11 is doubly pernicious in that since Al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden are never mentioned in the film, the connection with Iraq helps reinforce the Big Lie that Iraq was involved in 9/11, which was covertly and overtly promoted by the Bush administration, and believed by an astonishing numbers of American people, even far beyond 9/11 and the disastrous Iraq invasion. The epilogue also supports the Bush administration position that the war in Iraq is part of the war on terror and connected to 9/11, assertions strongly debated and rejected by most informed people (Rosen 2006).

Stones’ film is thus deeply conservative, extolling the humanity and courage of ordinary Americans, while failing to explore the reasons for the attack. Moreover, Stone uses the most manipulative aspects of the family melodrama to elicit sympathy for the trapped policemen and their families who might be losing loved ones and at the same time ends with the triumphalist Hollywood ideology of heroism overcoming adversity, as the two main protagonists survive. The only footage of George W. Bush in the film shows him firmly and resolutely committed to fighting back and unifying the nation, precisely the image that the Bush administration wanted projected.

Moreover, *World Trade Center* also presents a questionable vision of American unity in which racial differences are overcome. One key focus is on the close bonding of the Anglo McLoughlin and the Latino Jimeno, whose pregnant wife in turn is Anglo (Maggie Gyllenhaal). In one poignant scene near the end, McLoughlin’s wife bonds with and hugs an African American woman in a vision of racial harmony overcoming divisions in the face of adversity. While this is a noble vision, it collapses existing racial divisions in the U.S. and the intensification of racism, mostly projected on Muslims and Arabs, since 9/11, who are constructed as enemies and threats.

In addition, all the heroes of the film are men, while women are assigned the stereotypical roles of wife and mother. The police are Men’s Men, strong and stoic, courageous and manly, although when threatened with death they are able to affirm their love for each other and the pain and fear allows the two trapped police to express their emotions to each other.

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4 Cited in Goldstein 2006

*Stone's World Trade Center*, coming after the financial and critical disaster of *Alexander* (2004), did strong box office, got some good reviews, but deeply disappointed some critics and his fans, who admired his socially critical and often unconventional works. While in principle it might have been salutary to have the 9/11 events dealt with in a non-partisan and non-political fashion, Stone's film helped promulgate the Bush administration version of 9/11 and failed to deal with the intense partisanship with which the Bush-Cheney Gang and their supporters exploited the 9/11 events to push through their own rightwing agenda, as we see in the next section.

Yet Oliver Stone remains Oliver Stone and seeking to redeem himself in Europe while promoting his deeply flawed work, Stone stated in a widely reported September 30, 2006, AP story that President George W. Bush has "set America back 10 years," and that the filmmaker is "ashamed for my country" over the war in Iraq and the U.S. policies in response to the attacks of September 11.

The same week in September 2006 *Washington Post* reporter Bob Woodward attempted to redeem himself after publishing two books that were widely read as apologetics for the Bush administration post-9/11 policy and Iraq invasion with his highly critical *State of Denial*, which exposed lies, flaws, and deeply dangerous failures of the Bush administration foreign policy and the utter incompetence and disarray in the White House. Redemption is obviously a major theme of Hollywood film, U.S. culture and everyday life, and those who exploited the tragedy of 9/11 to push through destructive rightwing and extremist policies, while viciously smearing critics as traitors and un/American, will have to do a lot of work to redeem themselves. The exploitation of 9/11 by the rightwing was most blatantly on display in *The Path to 9/11*, which is perhaps the most controversial and problematical TV-movie in recent U.S. history.

### Disney Television Republican Propaganda: *The Path to 9/11*

As the fifth anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks arrived, media culture in the U.S. presented a plethora of commemorative events. While images of the fateful attack were clearly inscribed in social memory, the meanings and background of the attack were not. The Bush administration had exploited the spectacle to push through a rightwing agenda, including a highly unpopular war in Iraq. Yet the origins, meaning, and effects of the initial attacks were not clear to the public at large, and were highly contested by different political factions. While resonant images like the planes hitting the World Trade Center and the traumatic aftermath were burned into the collective memory, no coherent mainstream narrative of the events was able to contextualize, explain, and allow the public to understand them.

Social memory is constructed by historical narratives and political discourses, as well as resonant images. In this context, a two-part ABC TV-movie, *The Path to 9/11*, scheduled to begin on the eve of the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 9/11 attacks and to conclude on September 11, 2006, became a pivotal event in the construction of the origins, meaning, and story of the 9/11 terror attacks.



In this section, I argue that *The Path to 9/11*, broadcast by the Disney-owned channel ABC, is a blatantly rightwing piece of political propaganda that blames the 9/11 attacks on deficiencies of the Clinton administration, while presenting the Bush administration as inheritors of a disaster which motivates them to heroic struggle and resolute action. We shall see that this event was orchestrated to showcase the Bush administration position on 9/11 for the upcoming 2006 Congressional elections, in which the Republicans were doing very poorly in the polls. *The Path to 9/11* was part of a Republican effort to counter the bad publicity for the failed Iraq invasion and failures of the Bush administration on multiple fronts, and to present an image of the administration as the most competent force to combat terrorism.

The two-part TV-movie can thus now be read as part of a campaign that presented the Bush administration as stalwart in the war on terror and the most reliable defender of the American people in a time of trouble. *The Path to 9/11* is written by a rightwing Iranian-American, Cyrus Nowrasteh and directed by David Cunningham, a longtime Christian conservative Hollywood activist. The narrative features the struggles against Al Qaeda by FBI agent John O'Neil (Harvey Keitel) and counter-terrorism official Richard Clarke. Both are portrayed as heroes, deeply worried about a terrorist attack by the Al Qaeda group, and who run into constant bureaucratic obstacles, when seeking to attack Al Qaeda or Bin Laden.

As revelations concerning the ultraconservative credentials of those producing the 9/11 propaganda film unfolded, and as rightwing groups began promoting it after receiving the prescreening DVDs, former members of the Clinton administration and progressive media activists intensified pressure on ABC to cancel the event. Responding to pressure, the Disney network made some minor edits, but basically aired the attack on Clinton and pro-Bush positioning on terrorism intact.

In response to the mounting criticism before the broadcast, ABC first claimed that the representation of 9/11 was "objective," and then asserted that the TV-movie was not a documentary, but a "dramatization, drawn from a variety of sources including the 9/11 Commission Report, other published material and personal interviews. As such, for dramatic and narrative purposes, the movie contains fictionalized scenes, composite and representative characters and dialogue and time compression."<sup>5</sup> Former Governor Thomas Kean, who was co-chair of the 9/11 Commission and an adviser to the series, claimed that the TV-movie was truthful: "This is the story of how it happened," Kean asserted and indicated that he corrected inaccuracies during filming.<sup>6</sup> As Joe Conason notes (2006), Kean's involvement with the TV-movie seriously discredited the former governor, and perhaps the 9/11 Commission he chaired, which was long under attack for not more vigorously investigating the 9/11 attacks.

Moreover, both before and after the broadcast, several real-life figures portrayed in the movie (Bill Clinton, Richard Clarke, Madeleine Albright and Sandy Berger) raised factual objections. Richard Clarke, a major advisor on terrorism to both the Clinton and Bush administrations, and portrayed as a hero in *The Path to 9/11*, strongly contested a

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5 Cited in Triplet 2006.

6 Cited in Conason 2006.

scene which showed U.S. soldiers on the ground in Afghanistan poised to attack and take Bin Laden, and then canceling the assault because of bureaucratic objections raised by Clinton administration national security advisor Sandy Berger. Clarke insisted that at no time were U.S. military or CIA personnel on the ground in Afghanistan where they reported actually seeing Bin Laden, as the TV-movie portrayed it. Clarke further insisted that, contrary to the movie, Afghan Northern Alliance leader and U.S. ally Ahmed Shah Masoud was never anywhere near the Bin Laden camp with CIA advisors, and never spotted or observed him as the TV-movie presented. Clarke explained that the CIA cancelled a proposed attack on the Bin Laden camp portrayed in the movie because there was only a single source for the report that Bin Laden was present and a small chance that a cruise missile shot at the area would actually hit him.<sup>7</sup>

The nearly four-and-a-half-hour two-part TV-movie presents an epic panorama of characters and places, from New York and Washington to Afghanistan and the Middle East. Often employing, jerky handheld camera shots, tight close-ups, and fast-editing, the film attempts to overwhelm the viewer with visual and audio techniques, and images in order to frighten the American and global public over the terrorist threats. This cinematic strategy is especially effective, given that these kinds of camera techniques and editing style are associated with documentary film and news broadcasting. Indeed, these techniques endowed the film with an aura of reality, as does the actual news footage interspersed throughout.

As well as blaming 9/11 on the Clinton administration, *The Path to 9/11* is deeply racist and sexist. Scenes portraying the Al Qaeda camps use red filters, so that the desert and buildings appear soaked in blood. The camera pans on terrorists training, intercut with shots of children shooting guns. Quick jump cuts move to show bomb-making, computers, and an assortment of weapons in the terrorist camp, with the fast editing and overload of images inducing fear in Western spectators confronted by an apparatus of terror and violence aimed at the West.

However, the terrorists who actually carried out the plane hijacking are portrayed in a surprisingly sympathetic fashion, and are depicted as serious and dedicated, perhaps rendering them even more frightening than standard Hollywood caricatures. Yet the visual framework for the film contrasts chaotic, disorderly, and violent non-Western scenes with the ordinary, modern, and "civilized" government buildings, apartments and restaurants of the West, producing a dialectic throughout of civilization against barbarism. The terrorists are presented in a way highly prejudicial to Islam. In one scene, in an Al Qaeda camp, "strange" music and sound effects punctuate the desert air with the sand filtered red. An erratic hand-held camera generates the appearance of chaos and disorder, as the image quickly cuts from one character to another. As some of the eventual 9/11 hijackers meet Al Qaeda figures, they repeatedly evoke "Allah," as if Muslims typically intone the magic name of "Allah" as they prepare for killing, and as if all they can do is chant rather than articulate arguments and make conversation.

Indeed, throughout the film, Muslims and Arabs are depicted in the most negative stereotypes, displaying an extremely racist, Manicheanist, and Orientalist Imaginary. The

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7 Cited in Barcella 2006.

heroes are the two white men featured as diligently fighting the Al Qaeda threat, FBI agent John O'Neil and counterterrorist official Richard Clarke, who are confronted with incompetent bureaucrats and aggressive and even sinister women. Madeleine Albright is represented as a clueless bureaucrat who does not understand the Al Qaeda threat, while the U.S. Ambassador to Yemen, Barbara Bodine, is depicted as an overbearing and domineering woman bureaucrat, aggressively preventing O'Neil and his FBI crew from going after the Al Qaeda suspects in the country. Even more revealingly, displaying the series' deep sexism, Condoleezza Rice is portrayed as sinister, as she holds back warnings about Al Qaeda attacks and does not cooperate with Richard Clarke. The actress who plays Rice (Penny Johnson) is well-known to U.S. TV audiences as the manipulative and evil wife of the (good) African American president on the TV-series *24* so the actresses' very presence creates unease for TV audiences who have been exposed to her character. It is as if it is the fault of one African American woman that the Bush administration was not more focused on Al Qaeda threats, thus taking other members of the Bush administration off the hook.

In fact, the only positive image of a major woman figure in the series is fictional agent Patricia Carver (Amy Madigan) who shares O'Neil's and Clarke's obsessive determination to stop Al Qaeda. Relentlessly Manichean, the film divides characters between the Westerners and terrorists, and then the Westerners between those who discerned the terrorist threat and acted accordingly contrasted to those craven bureaucrats who dismissed the terrorist threat. Of course, two white men are positioned as the heroes, while a score of female politicians are portrayed as major obstructions to stopping the Al Qaeda attack, as if women in politics constituted a danger to the nation.

On the whole, *The Path to 9/11* shows an incompetent Clinton administration that passed onto the Bush administration terrible terrorist threats, and portrays the Bush administration as resolute and committed to fighting terrorism. In fact, before the September 11 terrorist attack no major figure of the Bush administration had terrorism on their top agenda; the top Bush administration security "principals" group refused to meet with counterterrorist advisor Richard Clarke in the nine months before the 9/11 attacks and demoted him just before the attack. Moreover, Clinton's national security advisor Sandy Berger claimed that when he tried to impress upon Bush's national security team the dangers posed by Al Qaeda, they ignored him, as had Bush, who allegedly ignored Clinton when the former president warned Bush about Al Qaeda the day he left the White House. Indeed, the Bush administration ignored copious warnings from multiple sources in the days before the 9/11 attacks of imminent attacks from Al Qaeda via airplane hijacking.<sup>8</sup>

As argued, *The Path to 9/11* was positioned by Republican activists to aid the party in the 2006 Congressional elections with the message that 9/11 was the fault of the Clinton administration, that Democrats were weak in the "war on terror," and that Republicans were the strong and trustworthy party that patriotic Americans should support and vote

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<sup>8</sup> These facts were known right from the aftermath of 9/11 and are laid out and documented in detail in *The 9/11 Commission Report* (2004) and are discussed in Kellner 2003a and Kellner 2005.

for. Indeed, Bush himself interrupted the broadcasting of the second part of the *Path to 9/11* ABC network screening with a speech on terrorism commemorating the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, thus seamlessly segueing into the narrative that showed his administration as tough on terror, unlike the “wimpy” Democrats. The Bush-Cheney-Rove Gang had long planned a sequence of events publicizing their efforts against terrorism to carry them into the November 2006 congressional elections. These events would present them as the best group to fight terrorism, while arguing that the Democrats were deficient. *The Path to 9/11* was part of this campaign and conservative groups went all out to promote the event.

At the end of the day, however, the Republican project seemed to have failed. *The Path to 9/11* was strongly panned by critics, and the first part lost out in the ratings to a football game. The broadcasting deeply discredited the ABC/Disney network and everyone associated with it. Furthermore, in an interview on *Fox News* with Chris Wallace, shortly after the broadcasting of the film, Clinton fiercely defended his administration and sharply attacked Fox TV itself for their consistent attempts to blame 9/11 on his administration. Clinton defended his attempts to stop Al Qaeda and Bin Laden, while admitting his failure.

On the Fox TV interview, Clinton thus disrupted the Bush administration narrative that Clinton’s administration alone was primarily responsible for not stopping Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda. In the interview, Clinton angrily claimed that he tried his best to capture Bin Laden, while the Bush administration did nothing their first nine months in office to stop Al Qaeda before the September 11 terror attacks, despite copious warnings of the danger and imminent threats of an attack by U.S. intelligence agencies and others.

### Concluding Comments

In the 2006 U.S. Congressional Elections, the Republican party lost its control of Congress and the Senate, as well as many governorships in what was considered a major repudiation of the Bush administration, hence the attempt to play the terror card once again seems to have failed. It is obviously too soon to judge the effects of the 9/11 films and documentaries on U.S. politics, but it is safe to say that the artifacts examined here do not adequately deal with the catastrophe of 9/11 and its aftermath. *United 93* is an honest attempt to deal with a slice of the tragedy, but it is highly speculative and does not engage the broader contextual issues or magnitude of the tragic terror attacks and their terrible consequences.

Oliver Stone’s *World Trade Center* follows conventional genre codes and presents a conservative take on 9/11 that emphasizes American fortitude and unity in dealing with catastrophe, depicting common people grappling with the tragedy and trying to cope with the disaster. Like *United 93*, the film gets some solace in portraying ordinary Americans pulling together to maintain order and community in the face of disaster, but the limited focus of the film does not allow understanding of the enormity of the event or provide any particular insights.

While *The Path to 9/11* is a ludicrous and despicable piece of extreme rightwing propaganda, it tries, mendaciously and apparently unsuccessfully, to provide a narrative

of the events, with heroes and villains, and a sharply delineated Manichean universe divided between Good and Evil. Its manipulative aesthetic tries to overwhelm the viewer with images, characters, cuts from one part of the world to another, punctuated by hand-held camera moves, sometimes erratic, and fast-editing. *The Path to 9/11*, like classical tragedy, has heroes and villains, but the execution and message is so blatantly ideological and sharply contested that the propaganda piece does not come anywhere near the universality and tragic insight in classical tragedy. Yet, in retrospect, it can be seen as a bold attempt by the rightwing in the U.S. to hold onto power in the face of their systematic failures in governing and alienation from broad sectors of the public.

Hence, the two major Hollywood fictional 9/11 films to this date contained no political or historical contextualization whatsoever, while the TV-movie *The Path to 9/11* was pure rightwing propaganda. Perhaps Michael Moore's controversial *Fahrenheit 9/11* is the most successful attempt in U.S. culture to deal cinematically with the 9/11 catastrophe and its aftermath (see Kellner, forthcoming).

In the past years, there have been epic Hollywood political thrillers dealing with global terrorism like George Clooney's *Syriana* (2005) and Steven Spielberg's *Munich* (2005), which use conventions of the political thriller to deal with the complexities of Israel's attempts to deal with Palestinian terrorism. Hence, while Hollywood is attempting to represent problems of a post-9/11 world and the effects of the Bush administration, it has yet to come to terms with the events and effects of the 9/11 terror attacks. Hollywood film remains a hotly contested terrain in the era of Bush Junior, and during the past years there have been many anti-Bush documentary and fictional films addressing the conflicts and controversies of the George W. Bush era. But the attacks of 9/11 remain a scar on the national psyche that the cultural industries are not ready to engage.

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