This paper begins with the premise that Hollywood blockbusters, that most global of film forms in terms of box office and rental numbers, can help us understand the nation, nationalism, and the place of the United States in the globalization era. Many of these films focus on US domestic issues or even on US world leadership—an amazing fact when you consider the importance of international markets especially since some Hollywood films make 90 percent of their profits overseas (Maltby 36). Think of gargantuan-grossing films of the post-Gulf War ‘90s like Forrest Gump, Independence Day, Armageddon, Deep Impact, and most importantly for this paper, Air Force One. Most of these films are among the top 100 box office draws of all times (including the film we’re discussing today). Such films present, as much as help to initiate, a postnational US nationalism. Indeed, they set up a framework in which we can read blockbusters as allegories for the political and cultural formations of the New World Order, where we can see them as forums for confronting post-nationalism and the unique role of the US.

Certainly, we can’t ignore the privileged position of the United States. Indeed, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s Empire, arguably the most important theoretical text on globalization, posits a pyramidal shaped power structure with the US in the position it held since WWII: at the top. From there it has assumed a pivotal role in shaping global economics, politics, and culture. At the large base of the pyramid structure stands the multitude—what in the modernist, nationalist era might have been called the people, though the multitude is unbounded by geographic and ethnographic parameters. In between, the great variety of sovereign formations operate; that is, other nation-states, supranational policy groups, corporations, NGOs, multi- and transnational corporations, the like. According to Hardt and Negri all of these forces have taken juridico-economic power away from the nation-state causing a shift in its sovereign position. Nevertheless, the result of the new arrangement has not been a simple decline of the nation state; it has led in fact to the full realization of the relationship between the state and capital. In other words, the political has no autonomy from the economic.
A new sovereignty, the eponymous Empire emerges as the center of power relations. To maintain its authority it “deploys a powerful police function against the new barbarians and the rebellious slaves who threaten its order” (20).

The old barbarians in the pre-Empire, Cold War configuration, the socialist states of Eastern Europe have largely been neutralized. Yet despite their seeming acquiescence to the capitalist world, through the 1990s many of the nations of Eastern Europe continued to occupy the role of barbarians at the gate.

It seems, the West had assumed that a desire for market capitalism and democracy was just lying in stasis in Eastern Europe, waiting for the end of communism. But what arose in many nations after the Berlin Wall’s fall was sheer ethnic terror, sprouting quickly as if it had been germinating beneath the Cold War surface.

Michael Mann points to the global diffusion of the ideal of ‘rule by the people’ as problematic in an environment where ‘the people’ is prone to be defined in ethnic or religious terms (62). He argues that when ethnic/religious difference combines with economic failure brought on by the economic dominance of the industrial countries, ethnic cleansing can emerge as what he calls “the dark side of the democratization process” (62).

Ethnic cleansing ended the West’s enchantment with the post-Cold War East. Slavoj Zizek theorizes this past interest as a kind of mirroring effect:

It is as if democracy, which in the West shows more and more signs of decay and crisis and is lost in bureaucratic routine and publicity-style campaigns, is being rediscovered in Eastern Europe in all freshness and novelty….The real object of fascination for the West is thus the gaze, namely the supposedly naïve gaze by means of which Eastern Europe stares back at the West, fascinated by its democracy. (200)

The emergence of ethnic violence breaks the “narcissistic spell of the West’s complacent recognition of its own values in the East: Eastern Europe is returning to the West the ‘repressed’ truth of its democratic desire” (Zizek 208).
From this perspective we can speculate on a noteworthy development of the late ‘90s-early 2000s: a flowering of WWII interest. Given that WWII was the moment the US could look to as having been the hero of democracy, this interest reinforces the message that the US is the good guy. Consider Stephen Spielberg’s schmaltzy *Saving Private Ryan* (followed just a few years later by Michael Bay’s *Pearl Harbor* extravaganza); a heavily promoted movement to fund a national WWII memorial, an HBO mini-series, and the most fawning tribute, Tom Brokaw’s *The Greatest Generation*.

In this light, it should strikes us as no coincidence that the 9/11 attacks were frequently compared to the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, a comparison that ideologically reinforces the role of the US as innocent victim—not that such reinforcement was needed in the popular consciousness. But, of course, the differences between the events is key. Japan was a nation. Al Qaeda is obviously not; its identity is very much supranational. And though Al Qaeda’s assault on the Pentagon may have resembled Japan’s attack—it was directed at a central and potentially crippling US military target—the planes crashing into the World Trade Center targeted much more than the United States. Given that it was the WTC attacks that were most fatal, most dramatic, and which represented unfinished business for Al Qaeda terrorists (recalling the 1993 WTC bombing attempt), we have to see those attacks as particularly meaningful and emblematic. When the planes struck the towers, they were attacking more than the US; they were taking on Western neo-liberal capitalism itself. Which leads to the central question: what are the parameters of the relationship between Western neo-liberal capitalism and the US state?

For Joseba Gabilondo, the attacks on the WTC have led to the articulation of a unique North American, neo-liberal hegemony. Indeed, he argues, “bin Laden has become the condition of possibility that holds the global capitalist system together to the point that as a result of his action, ‘we all now have become global capitalists.’ We are now ‘subjects’ of the new global symbolic order managed by North American politics” (61).

In other words, the strikes on the twin towers opened up a new chapter of the global neo-liberal hegemony of the US. Gabilondo argues that the attacks initiate the US into a so-called “New
History”. And in this return to historical awareness, the US has interpellated the non-Muslim-fundamentalist world. Within the Muslim fundamentalist sphere, Osama has assumed the interpellating position. Anything outside these parameters has almost disappeared off radar or gets positioned in the rhetoric as being on one side or the other. Thus, George W. Bush’s “Axis of Evil” bands together old enemies Iraq and Iran and (odd man out) North Korea in some kind of terror clique that only remotely makes sense within the post 9/11-North American ideological framework. And like bin Laden, Saddam strengthens his strategic standing by positioning himself against the US, just as the US uses him as a means to shore up its self-appointed title as global “protector of freedom.”

In Air Force One Saddam rears his unpopular head, this time challenging the US’s military blockade of Iraq. In response, the President directs a few barbs at Saddam and then orders a carrier group into the region. The scene lasts about three minutes, but it’s a crucial strategy for establishing the film’s President as presidential. It reinforces the US role constructed by North American/global ideology. That is, the position of world cop, a title which allows the US to exercise violence, which in turn re-authorizes its role as world cop, which in turn reauthorizes its use of violence. Many ‘90s Hollywood blockbusters took for granted that US role, but Air Force One foregrounds it making it a central narrative point.

Harrison Ford stars as United States president James Marshall who must save the passengers of the presidential airplane—especially his family—from hijackers who have commandeered the plane. The hijackers, described as “Russian ultra nationalists,” capture the first family and the president’s staff (they had hoped to take the president, but he apparently escapes from the plane). They aim to force the US government to obtain the release of General Radek—the ruler of Kazakhstan and a communist involved in genocidal ethnic cleansing—who was abducted by US special forces deployed by President Marshall. What the hijackers don’t know is that the president actually remains on Air Force One, and aided by his military training—he was a decorated Vietnam
war hero—kills the hijackers one by one until he secures the plane, ends the threat from the nationalist forces in Russia, and makes Eastern Europe safe for capitalist democracy.

The President gives us the logic underlying the narrative in his opening speech at a Russian celebration honoring him for his action against Radek:

Radek’s regime murdered over 200,000 men, women, and children, and we watched it on TV. We let it happen. People were being slaughtered for over a year. We issued economic sanctions and hid behind the rhetoric of diplomacy. …. Tonight, I come to you with a pledge to change America’s policy. Never again will I allow our political self interest to deter us from doing what we know to be morally right. Atrocity and terror are not political weapons. And to those who will use them, your day is over. We will never negotiate. We will no longer tolerate, and we will no longer be afraid. It’s your turn to be afraid.

Here the President outlines his political perspectives: self interest is positioned as a binary opposite of morality—a traditional moral stance—but where in the previous era the hegemonic understanding of nationalism saw it as a sign of fellow-feeling and unselfish concern, the New World Order’s understanding of nationalism sees it as a kind of self interest. It represents an unwillingness to cooperate in the global plan.

In order for globalization’s logic to work, we must begin to believe at some level that strict adherence to national sovereignty will lead to violence and privation—at least outside the US. Hence the President’s promise to militarily overturn any regime that uses terror to further its national interest. Empire has made the violation of state sovereignty under the banner of humanitarianism standard practice. In Air Force One, as in the ruling ideology of globalization, nationalism is increasingly anachronistic. Instead, the film offers US-led interventionism as compensation for the growing ideological illegitimacy of nationalism. The film entices its audience then with a popularly satisfying vision of a resolute US guided by a firm, even willful commander-in-chief. The popularity of the image of such a strong leader may well point to a fundamental skepticism about the chances of contemporary democracy successfully operating in the expected channels of negotiation,
compromise, and struggle, that is, of politics. Unlike the classic trope of the reluctant leader who takes up the sheriff’s badge or the gun after spending much of the film avoiding it (e.g., *Destry, Tin Star, Key Largo*), President Marshall (arguably the personification of the US) willingly sports the global sheriff’s badge.

9/11 has affirmed the film’s rhetoric as an ideological reality. Any political violence not in alliance with the US is labeled as terrorism. But now terrorism has become equated with Islamic fundamentalism so that the idea of Russian nationalists as terrorist enemy seems almost outdated. Yet from a post-national perspective, the film got it exactly right. For nationalism is the big other of both US-dominated globalization—which prominently includes Hollywood—and Al Qaeda-style religious supranationality. Aligning Hollywood with Islamic fundamentalism makes for an ironic twist, (for many reasons) not least of which is Hollywood’s participation in the war effort, including a November 11, 2001 meeting that senior Bush advisor Karl Rove held with high-level Hollywood executives. Rove “offered” several points that the White House would like stressed in films and TV shows such as, the war is against terrorism and evil, not Islam; Americans should heed the call to national service and support the troops; and the war is a global undertaking. The collaboration between government and cultural producers conjured up images of Hollywood propaganda films of WWII, but Rove reassured his audience that instead of propaganda, the Bush administration only wants the narrative of the war effort to be told with “accuracy and honesty.”

Entertainment Weekly covered the event proclaiming “Hollywood Marches Toward a New Patriotism.” This cover article also asked Hollywood’s elite to weigh in on the effects of September 11 on the industry. Randall Wallace, the writer and director of *We Were Soldiers*, stated: “Immediately afterwards a lot of people were scared. But that time has passed. I don’t think there’ll be a long-drawn-out period of mourning in movies. Americans will be Americans.”

What does this mean: “Americans will be Americans”? Does it mean that Americans are resilient people who will rebound from the terrorist strikes? Or does it mean that Americans suffer
from such cultural amnesia that the shock of the events will soon be or already are forgotten? What then is the relationship between the cinematic image and historical consciousness?

According to Gabilondo, the effect of watching the 9/11 attacks in the global media has turned the North American individual into “the subject of history.” The North American individual is the subject of interpellation by being subjected to representation as a helpless victim of global violence in the instantaneous and global media. This representation in turn makes the North American individual the “ideological subject of globalization and late capitalism.” Though Gabilondo sees this entry into history as a result of 9/11, I have to ask if in fact the cinematic representation of what we can call national violence (like the hijacking of the president and his staff) had already begun the work of creating the North American ideological subject of globalization.

If we take seriously this suggestion then we may reconsider the common reaction to the footage of the crashes into and the collapse of the twin towers. That is, we would reconsider the typical reaction, “It seemed like a movie.” On a basic level that reaction expresses a feeling of unreality. But on another level perhaps that it's-like-a-movie reaction demonstrates that the North American subject has felt the eyes of the world for sometime, has some familiarity with being the object of violence and the interpelled subject of the media—even if both come in the form of blockbuster film. In short, Hollywood has prepared the way for the American subject’s entry into history.
Bibliography


