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How 9/11 Changed the Movies: the Tony Scott Barometer by E. Deidre Pribram

Living History

In an essay written some years ago on the 1945 film, *Mildred Pierce*, Linda Williams raises the intriguing question, why does the narrative frequently allude to but refrains from ever specifically mentioning World War II (22)? Williams' assessment is that certain films are capable of addressing the most significant political events of the era in ways they could not have had they chosen to use direct depictions (24). Released in October 1945, following the end of U.S. involvement in the war, *Mildred Pierce* coincided with a period of demobilization and the economic and social reintegration of the returning American, largely male, fighting forces. Considering the specific issue of gender, Williams argues that *Mildred Pierce* is able to address a "wartime female consciousness that could never be permitted in a film that directly inscribed the war" (25).

A wife and mother, when Mildred Pierce (Joan Crawford) and her husband separate, she works as a waitress and subsequently opens a restaurant to support herself and her two daughters. Her business ultimately becomes a chain of successful restaurants. Remarried, Mildred's second husband leads her to economic bankruptcy. When he is found shot to death, it appears Mildred may have committed the crime.

Specifically, Williams points to the expanded life experiences available to women during the war, most notably due to increased economic opportunities and, with them, developing feelings of independence, new challenges and, in some cases, a previously unknown sense of freedom. For example, Williams describes "exhilaration" as one of the potential emotions experienced in response to these kinds of changes, one she believes is evident in *Mildred Pierce* (25). The dilemma is that pleasure or exhilaration are hardly appropriate social responses to the war.

Women's participation in the war effort on the home front was positioned, in political and ideological terms, as a sacrifice. One a lesser scale to that of the fighting soldier, but a sacrifice nonetheless, undertaken in the name of pulling together for the sake of wartime unity and the national greater good, whether it be on the war front or the home front. The notion that women, in some cases, might be finding pleasure in some of their wartime activities could quite easily be regarded as a betrayal of the nation's enlisted heroes who regularly faced ongoing death, danger, and deprivation. The war effort was meant to be a story of sacrifice on the part of everyone, not a story of liberated femininity.

Although *Mildred Pierce* is clearly set primarily in the first half of the 1940s, Williams concludes that the film is “most evasive about that historical moment” because doing so enables representation of both the difficulties and pleasures “of female bonding and economic independence against a *non-specific* context of a never-mentioned war” (21, 22; emphasis in original). Abstention from direct reference to the political context in which a film’s events occur may permit the expression of feelings that otherwise might be culturally or ideologically taboo. Such a strategy also creates aesthetic space for the expression of ambiguous or contradictory sentiments that attend any significant historical juncture. Although a social collective may know how they are supposed to feel about major public events, these do not necessarily constitute the only prevalent emotional responses. Surely, the majority of women viewed the end of WWII, and the safe return home of those who had survived, with relief. But demobilization also signaled the end of a newly established way of life, as soldiers returned to their pre-war jobs and many women moved from the workforce back to the domestic front. It is reasonable to suppose that, along with relief and joy, the end of WWII also raised some regrets, perhaps even resentment, for a life-altering era that was coming to a close. Such mixed feelings are real and important aspects of momentous events as we live them. Yet sometimes, especially in the circumstances of national exigencies, it may seem a betrayal or unpatriotic, for example, to admit to or express these contradictory emotions. In this essay, I argue that popular film is one site in which such mixed feelings can be exercised, much like the contradictory sentiments expressed in *Mildred Pierce* which are only possible due to the absence of any overt reference to WWII.

Williams observes that it is a mistake to assume that one emotional experience brought into play, as part of a contradictory set attached to significant social or political events, will triumph by the end of popular films (27). It remains as likely that the ambiguities and contradictions engaged will persist, without a perhaps longed-for clarifying resolution, because such clear, unambiguous solutions are difficult to find with regard to historical events.

In this chapter, I apply Williams’ perspective to the historical episode of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent events that came to be known as the War on Terror, as they are presented in popular films. More specifically, I consider popular films that tacitly allude to but are not immediately *about* those events. It is important to note that the War on Terror encompasses not only the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq but, also, the U.S.A PATRIOT Act, the Department of Homeland Security, the Bush Doctrine, the 9/11

Commission, Guantánamo Bay, Abu Ghraib, CIA renditions, and the use of torture, all of which are referenced in the films I consider.

In particular, I look to actions films, that most popular group of genres. For a variety of reasons, discussed in the next section, action cinema is well suited to implicitly reference important public developments or contexts. My key examples are a trilogy of films directed by Tony Scott: *Enemy of the State* (1998), *Man on Fire* (2004), and *Déjà Vu* (2006). The purpose of these case studies is to assess how Hollywood films made before and at two different points in time after 9/11 represent political issues and public mind-sets in competing ways. However, this is not an attempt to attribute a certain political perspective to Tony Scott, the individual.¹ Rather, I regard Tony Scott as a successful producing and directing entity of mainstream action films that originate within and emerge from the Hollywood industry. As a producing entity, Tony Scott potentially includes hundreds of people, among them producers, writers, actors, below-the-line personnel, and studio officials, all of whom participate in shaping the contours of the final product—the released film.²

I discuss Tony Scott as a singular, identifiable producing entity to avoid slipping into the tendency to analyze films from the conjectured political perspective of individual directors, whether of purported liberal or conservative leanings. That Tony Scott can be regarded as a relatively consistent producing entity, across films of varying perspectives released at different moments in time, makes it more likely that modulations in standpoint from project to project are responses, at least in part, to changing political, social, and cultural circumstances.

Finally, I evaluate these films in relation to 9/11 and the War on Terror within the conceptual frame of *public sentiments*. As in the case of *Mildred Pierce*, pleasure, exhilaration, resentment, and regret may all have been experienced by women on the home front in 1945. A different set of emotions, but still a range of feelings, has been experienced collectively in the aftermath of 9/11. The concept of *public sentiments* highlights the strong emotional aspects of collective political opinions and feelings that popular film is able to make evident and put into play for its audiences. I am concerned not simply with a film taking up, or failing to take up, a clear-cut political policy or ideological position, but with its capacity to explore the felt experiences of what it has been like to live through an era of historical significance. In other words, what it might mean to live history. Additionally, that they are *public* emphasizes that these are

not individual, privately-held emotions but, rather, collectively shared structures of feeling. In this sense, public sentiments are sociocultural events that point to the emotional tenor of life at a certain historical moment in time in a specific geographical location. As public, these specific sentiments provide an alternate way of thinking through the politics of an era because the public emotions are themselves political events.

The Politics of Ambiguity

Action cinema, as Yvonne Tasker observes, is often viewed simplistically as “politically reactionary,” “dumb-fun spectacle” (“Introduction” 2, 6). With her, I agree that this underestimates what action films do, and disregards some of the important reasons for their abiding popularity (Tasker 3, 8). Indeed, action cinema is largely synonymous with the rise of the blockbuster, standing as principal “exemplar of the box-office triumphs of modern Hollywood” (Purse 3). Lisa Purse suggests that part of the action genres’ “cultural and commercial resilience” can be attributed to the form’s “adaptability” (1). Such structural flexibility includes the ability to explore “deeply felt socio-cultural desires and anxieties,” wherein films may speak to their contemporaneous historical moment (Purse 5). Tasker expresses a similar idea in citing action cinema’s “ambiguity,” which renders these films both versatile and malleable and, as such, they offer up an array of plausible interpretations (*Spectacular* 91).

Addressing action cinema’s multi-genericity, Tasker delineates “three broad generic groupings,” consisting of crime and urban action, fantasy (science fiction, horror), and war movies (“Introduction” 4). I focus on the first grouping, crime and urban action, which commonly features police officers, private investigators, criminals, government agents, and other characters drawn from similar milieus, whose stories regularly concern the boundaries and behaviors consonant, or dissonant, with the rule of law.³

Prior to considering some of the ways crime action films incorporate and respond to the American political and cultural climate following 9/11, I turn to the pre-9/11 film, *Enemy of the State*. I do so for two reasons: first, is to undertake a closer examination of how crime action genres function; second, is to establish a barometer of what might have been permissible prior to 9/11, in order to subsequently consider how political and cultural expression has changed in the wake of the events of the fall of 2001.

Enemy of the State takes place in the narrative context of impending legislation that will restrict individual privacy rights in order to provide U.S. governmental agencies with drastically heightened legal powers of surveillance over its citizenry. The fictitious bill in question, the Telecommunications Security and Privacy Act, is about to be voted on by Congress. The film stars Will Smith as Robert Clayton Dean, a respectable but rather naïve labor lawyer. At the opening, a Republican congressman strongly opposed to the legislation is murdered by order of a no-holds-barred proponent of the bill, NSA official Thomas Reynolds (Jon Voight), who has no qualms about using murder and other illegal tactics to safeguard the passage of the Security and Privacy Act. In a pre-smart phone era, the murder is unintentionally videotaped by a wildlife researcher. Later, the researcher is on the run from the NSA and happens to encounter Robert Clayton Dean; the researcher slips a digitally scrambled copy of the highly incriminating videotape into the unwitting labor lawyer's shopping bag.

The NSA embarks on a full-fledged attack on Dean in order to get him to surrender the videotape, which for much of the story he is unaware is in his possession. Additionally, the NSA takes drastic action because they believe it is *possible* Dean has the videotape, but they are not certain. Nevertheless, the NSA's tactics include searching and ransacking his residence, tapping his phones and those of his colleagues and friends, planting video and audio surveillance equipment on his person and in his home, implicating him in leaking classified government documents, freezing all his bank accounts and credit cards and, finally, framing him for murder. Dean's life is destroyed, both professionally and personally—he loses his job and his wife. Thus, Dean becomes immediate witness to the dangers of overzealous, covertly operating government agencies. The film's audiovisual techniques highlight the intrusiveness of the government's surveillance capabilities through phone tapping, installation of tracking devices, and satellite and computer technologies. Significant portions of the film are shot from the grainy perspective of publically located cameras (CCTV), aerial views, and telephoto lenses, mimicking the extensive capacity for spying attributed to the government, in what might be considered either a paranoid aesthetic style or, in the term the film uses, the look of a “surveillance society.”

Ultimately, Dean is able to stave off the NSA with the help of one of their own former, top-level communications analysts, now using the name Brill (Gene Hackman). Brill lives completely underground because he knows first-hand the power and corruption of the NSA. At the end of the film, the bill fails to

gain passage and Dean, as an individual, is exonerated of all trumped-up criminal charges and reunites with his wife and young son. But the NSA's illegal activities remain concealed from an unsuspecting public and the agency is never brought to account.

At the time of its release, *Enemy of the State* earned over \$100 million at the domestic box-office but was reviewed as far-fetched, much like another film that appeared in 1998, *The Siege*, with its portrayal of the imposition of martial law in response to terrorism on U.S. soil. Janet Maslin of *The New York Times* describes *Enemy of the State* as having “huh?” moments, including the notion that one piece of legislation would set a government agency into such a frenzy, or that the technology depicted could operate in such a pervasive and rapid manner (E1). Yet, when reread retrospectively in light of post-9/11 events, the film resonates quite differently. The fictitious Telecommunications Security and Privacy Act conjures up the real world U.S.A PATRIOT Act, passed in October, 2001.⁴ The Patriot Act gave “law enforcement agencies unprecedented powers with minimal judicial oversight” (Holloway 34), including the authority to search individuals' homes and places of business without the owners' knowledge or permission, the right to monitor phone calls, emails, financial, and other records with no court orders—or with those that were secretly obtained,—an enhanced capacity to conduct foreign intelligence gathering in the U.S., and a much expanded, unclearly delineated definition of what constitutes “terrorism.” As Zedner notes, the Patriot Act brought to the fore conflicting issues of “collective security against terrorism” versus “individual security against the state” (507).

Enemy of the State's more aptly named legislation, the Telecommunications Security and Privacy Act, in contrast to the inexplicit nomenclature of the Patriot Act, retrospectively points to the larger public debates concerning the perceived necessary trade-offs between *security* (national) and *privacy* (individual or civil rights) that have accompanied the War on Terror. Additionally, the purposeful destruction of Dean's career, personal life, and credibility by vindictive government forces operating without limit, carries echoes of the illegal “outing” of CIA agent Valerie Plame in July 2003 (Isikoff; Corn). Revelation of her status as a covert CIA agent was ordered and carried out at the highest levels of Vice President Cheney's office, in retribution for her husband's published editorials denying that Iraq sought to purchase from Niger, materials for weapons of mass destruction, a contention key to the Bush administration's rationale for invading Iraq.

While there is no doubt that *Enemy of the State* can be read as foreshadowing future events, especially the increased right of government and law enforcement surveillance over Americans, I raise two connected issues surrounding films like *Enemy of the State* because they relate directly to the sociocultural purposes and possibilities of the crime action genre. The first has to do with the perceived prescience of a film like *Enemy of the State* when read retrospectively, in critical accounts. The second issue concerns plausible interpretations of such films and, therefore, their presumed politics.

A number of critical retrospective readings of pre-9/11 films describe them as prescient in some way. Thus *Panic Room*, released in March 2002, has been viewed by some as displaying “an impeccable sense of timing” (Markowitz 221), while the book, *Reframing 9/11* (Birkenstein), devotes an entire section to what it entitles, “Prophetic Narratives,” including *Brazil* (1985), *Minority Report* (2002), and *28 Days Later...* (2002).⁵ Similarly, Douglas Kellner provides a detailed analysis of *The Siege* (1998), which he describes as containing “astonishing anticipations,” and a story whose “warning was prescient” (18, 22). We may be inclined to ask, then, if the appearance of *Enemy of the State* and *The Siege* in the same year, both cautionary tales of impending loss of civil liberties and constitutionally-guarded rights, was coincidental. The notion of prescience appears grounded in the belief in fortunate happenstance. Instead, I suggest that issues of public interest versus private rights, struggles over what is legally and morally correct in the face of threats, and the ways in which justice can possibly be meted out in a compromised world, are frequent themes engaged by the contemporary action genres.⁶

Such a trend is exemplified, for instance, in the number of action films in which U.S. government agencies or agents have surfaced, and continue to serve, as the text’s villainous forces in recent decades. Sánchez-Escalonilla notes that 1990s films featuring, “villains proceeding from the [U.S.] state apparatus itself” include, along with *Enemy of the State* and *The Siege*, *Under Siege* (1992), *The Rock* (1996), *Broken Arrow* (1996), *Conspiracy Theory* (1997), and *Wag the Dog* (1997) (14). To this list I also add more recent, post 9-11 films and, in parentheses, the corrupt governmental or law enforcement bodies that constitute the film’s depicted threat to society and civil rights: the *Bourne* trilogy (2002, 2004, 2007; CIA), *The Bourne Legacy* (2012; CIA and Dept. of Defense), *16 Blocks* (2006; police), *Shooter* (2007; military, Congress), *Safe House* (2012; CIA), *Broken City* (2013; mayor, police), *White House Down* (2013; Secret Service, Congress).

The politics of action cinema in many of these films involves only so-called rogue or renegade factions within government and law-enforcement branches, in addition to the notion that stability and civil liberties are restored at the narrative's resolution through the depicted self-correcting nature of democratic institutions. Yet the frequency with which governmental agencies or agents serve as villainous forces across action films seems to indicate a systemic problem within government offices, in that they are portrayed as so easily liable to rogue or renegade appropriations. At the least, the popularity of administrative villains indicates a suspicion of big government and the ethics of contemporary politics.

In the case of *Enemy of the State*, the rogue element is not a single individual but a substantial team, the members of which either have full knowledge of the NSA's illegal activities or are willing to participate in those illicit behaviors without asking questions. The film also depicts the conspiracy carrying across government institutions to encompass both the NSA and Congress. While it is true that most of the villains by film's end are dead and gone and equilibrium is restored for Dean's character, significantly, the resolution remains incomplete. The danger of covertly operating and corrupt government agencies is far from eradicated, portrayed by the failure of bringing the NSA to account. At the film's conclusion, the FBI is unable to piece together the NSA's machinations because the surviving members deny they have any knowledge of the operation. All evidence of the NSA's initial murder of the congressman has been destroyed and we have no reason to believe that the case will ever be "solved," in the genre's usual depiction of justice as prevailing. Although the Telecommunications Security and Privacy Act fails to pass, the Congressional sponsor of the bill, whose affiliation with the NSA conspiracy has not been unearthed, tells voters: "The issue is still very much alive, I assure you. Unless no one worries about national security anymore." This statement indicates that although they have missed the opportunity to pass this Act, with its strict measures of surveillance, they will continue to pursue such bills until one does pass.

The versatility and ambiguity of action cinema renders a number of its films open to multiple, competing interpretations. *Enemy of the State* is an intriguing example in this regard given that Tony Scott films have never been praised, or blamed, for being particularly liberal in their politics. In this sense, Tony Scott as a production entity does not represent unusual or remarkable examples within the action genre. Yet, *Enemy of the State* can plausibly be interpreted in relatively traditional liberal terms as a cautionary tale about the dangers of overzealous, overly powerful governmental forces and the need to protect hard-

won, fragile civil liberties and individual rights. For this reason, Dean's naiveté as a character stands as an important aspect of the narrative. While it is obvious the NSA is out of control, the principal lesson to be learned by Dean, the film's protagonist, is that such naiveté, political and worldly, can cost one dearly.

Dean's general disinterest in the bill, and his docile faith that it has been crafted with good intentions in the interests of national security, exist in sharp contrast to the greater savvy displayed by Brill and by Dean's wife, Carla (Regina King). An ACLU lawyer, Carla rails against the legislation early on and at several points during the film. Ultimately, Dean's lesson is to acknowledge that she has been correct all along. A plausible reading of the film, in a genre widely regarded as conservative, is that it is crucial for citizens to stay aware and vigilant with regard to their government's actions, rather than maintaining unquestioning trust. The film creates a space in which it remains possible to be both heroic and patriotic by taking up a position as an enemy of the state.

The plausible interpretations for a given film are very much a function of the historical context in which they appear. Arguably, films of the 1990s can be regarded as more open to criticisms of the government than those immediately following 9/11. Here, I turn to another Tony Scott film, 2004's *Man on Fire* which, with little effort, can be read as a political and cultural retrenchment, certainly in comparison to *Enemy of the State*. However, while the malleability of *Man on Fire's* interpretations clearly diminishes, its politics of ambiguity does not disappear entirely.

Mixed Feelings

Bob Rehak notes that, due to the lag time between a movie's production and the date of its release, 2003 was the first year in which "films that originated after or whose production substantially overlapped" with the events of 9/11 became the majority in distribution (87). Thus *Man on Fire*, released in April 2004, can be located within the early years of the War on Terror. The film serves as a barometer for the political and cultural retrenchment, and widespread anger and fear that followed 9/11. Appearing after the still recent invasion of Iraq in March 2003, and Bush's May 2003 premature declaration of "mission accomplished" in that foreign territory, *Man on Fire* tells the story of John Creasy (Denzel Washington), a burnt-out, disillusioned former member of the American military's counter-terrorism division. His specialty was carrying out illegal, and certainly morally unsavory, covert international assassinations.

Near the beginning of the film, and now an alcoholic, Creasy manages to land a job in Mexico City as the bodyguard for nine-year-old Pita Ramos (Dakota Fanning), the child of a wealthy Mexican father and an American mother. Creasy's relationship with Pita returns a certain pleasure to his existence. However, meaning and purpose reenter Creasy's life only when Pita is kidnapped under his watch and, he and the audience believe, is killed. Coldly and professionally, Creasy sets about tracking down and assassinating everyone involved in or profiting from her disappearance. It is this mission that provides him with his reason to live.

One way to interpret Creasy's mission is as a struggle for the redemption of his national identity, because his journey entails active engagement once more as an American—citizen, soldier, agent. Simultaneously, it is also the story of the redemption of a nation in which the United States must become an entity worth fighting for again. The narrative makes clear that Creasy's dysfunction and despair at the outset of the film are a direct result of his previous existence as an assassin for the American government, acts for which he now feels deep remorse and self-loathing. Adrift in Mexico, it is significant that Creasy's country has not rejected him; rather, he has abandoned his country because of the actions he has committed on its behalf.

Mexico, depicted as lawless, corrupt, and violent, serves as allusion to Iraq. In the terms of the film, in order to achieve redemption as an American, and for America, Creasy must once again take up his gun and ply his profession on the guilty landscape of Mexico. His redemption, embodied by Pita, an American in threatening international circumstances, rests in coming to understand and accept the ostensibly justifiable reasons, as viewed in retrospect, that led him to serve as an agent of extralegal force for his government and nation. The film's narrative centers on finding renewed meaning in being American, and to see that the United States is worth fighting for, despite the sins of its past and present.

Interpreting *Man on Fire* as an allegorical justification for the United States' actions during the War on Terror, and in particular those of the Bush-Cheney administration, is a straightforward endeavor. After all, *Man on Fire* is a vigilante film in which Creasy embarks on a revenge spree, capitalizing on a post-9/11 public discourse demanding vengeance for the attacks. Additionally, Creasy's mission reads like plays taken from what has become known as the Bush Doctrine, the administration's War on Terror policies as initially outlined in the *National Security Strategy* (NSS) documents, issued in September 2002.

The Bush Doctrine prioritized the notion of “national security” through policies of regime change in foreign countries perceived as rogue states, and justified unilateral U.S. military action without abiding by international laws. In the name of “homeland security,” the *NSS* statement also advocated policies such as those contained in the Patriot Act.

In particular, *Man on Fire* appears to portray, and carry out the implications of what the Bush Doctrine labeled “pre-emptive war.” Within the terms of the United Nations Charter and, therefore, international law, pre-emptive war, defined as “self-defensive action taken to address an imminent threat, or clear and present danger” is considered legal (Holloway 45-46). In contrast, “preventive war,” “fought to prevent the emergence of threats in the future,” is regarded as an act of illegal aggression against a sovereign state (Holloway 46). Although the Bush administration labeled its policy as pre-emptive war, when the *NSS* document speaks of the U.S. acting “against such emerging threats before they are fully formed...even if uncertainty remains as to the time and place of the enemy’s attack,” they are referring, by definition, to preventive war (*NSS* qtd. in Holloway, 46).

Believing Pita to have been killed as the direct result of her abduction and ransom gone wrong, Creasy systematically hunts down and executes all those who took *any* part in the kidnapping process, some of them in ways peripheral to her death (for example, involvement in the theft of the ransom money which Creasy believes causes Pita’s release to fail). Creasy’s is not a search and rescue mission, conducted because he thinks he can still save Pita. Instead, his are acts of vengeance, conducted without material proof of Pita’s death or minimal legal standards of evidence that those he executes are guilty of participating in her kidnapping. In these terms, the assassinations Creasy carries out as he moves up the kidnapping chain, *after* he has received the information he wants from the individuals concerned, can only be motivated by the desire for revenge or as preventive acts against future kidnappings and deaths.⁷

Moreover, as an apology for the policies of the Bush administration, *Man on Fire* deals with the issue of torture, carried out by Creasy blatantly and without remorse. In one instance, he captures a corrupt police officer, Jorge Gonzalez (Mario Zaragoza), involved in Pita’s initial abduction. In order to get information that will lead to the next link in the chain of kidnapers, Creasy cuts off two of Gonzalez’s fingers and his ear. Once he has obtained the information he seeks, Creasy kills Gonzalez anyway, abruptly shooting him in the head in what, we realize, has been his intention all along. In another instance,

in one of the film's most shocking and best-known sequences, Creasy abducts Victor Fuentes (Jesús Ochoa), the leader of a group of corrupt police officers whom Creasy has discovered have stolen the ransom money intended for Pita's release. Off-camera Creasy has tied Fuentes to his car, dressed only in underwear and socks, after having inserted a time bomb into his anus. Telling Fuentes the bomb is set to explode in five minutes, Creasy obtains the information he desires but he does not stop the timer or remove the bomb. Instead, he calmly and dispassionately walks away, turning his back as man and car blow up, an image used in the marketing of the film.

The treatment of al-Qaeda, Taliban, and Afghani military captives transported to the U.S. naval base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, became a public issue as early as January 2002, with coverage of the Bush administration's attempts to circumvent the Geneva Conventions which expressly protects captives from torture or other cruel, inhumane, or degrading behaviors (Reid A15; Seelye A6). Members of the administration insisted that, as terrorists, the Geneva statutes and other laws did not apply, thereby allowing U.S. officials greater "flexibility in interrogation" (Seelye A6). By December 2002, the *Washington Post*, for example, was writing about reports of alarming "stress and duress" techniques in use at the CIA interrogation center at Bagram air base in Afghanistan, as well as "extraordinary renditions" of prisoners to third countries known to practice torture (Priest A1). Creasy's behavior in *Man on Fire* might certainly be viewed as condoning the administration's stances on torture.

However, having argued that, in many ways, *Man on Fire* can be viewed as an exemplary post-9/11 film, in representing a drastically conservative political and cultural retrenchment, and serving as a grim apology for elements of the Bush Doctrine, I suggest that the film also raises certain complexities around these issues. My concern is that a number of post-9/11 films that allude to those events indirectly have been analyzed and deemed successful, or more often found wanting, based on very narrow political criteria. For instance, Holloway acknowledges that "Hollywood sometimes managed to provide a critical distance on contemporary events that often seemed missing" in journalistic accounts (80). Yet he goes on to criticize Hollywood's post-9/11 output, referring to its entirety as "allegory lite," because it has failed to overtly deal with the War on Terror, in contrast to independent films and documentaries of the same time period (83). As a consequence, Hollywood offered up "politically incoherent films" (84). *The Manchurian*

Candidate (2004), for one, was “ill-defined, if not willfully incoherent” because it could be construed as aiming its censure at both George W. Bush and John Kerry (82-83).

Holloway attributes the flawed political quality of Hollywood’s take on the War on Terror precisely in its tendency to go “out of its way to encourage other ‘readings’ that seemed equally plausible” to a critique of the Bush administration and its policies (82). *The Village* (2004) circumvents “any real political intent or commitment” because viewers have the capacity to interpret events from the perspectives of both the village government and its citizens (Holloway 90). The muddled politics of such films, due to their multiple plausible readings and shifting audience identification, create a complexity Holloway equates with evasion, equivocation, and confusion (90-91, 95). In *War of the Worlds* (2005), viewers might identify with “both invaders and invaded” and *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) renders “barbarism a Western value as well as a ‘Muslim’ one” (96).

Dana Polan recognizes that popular cinema which tackles its subject matter obliquely rather than directly may not “offer overly specific reference to punctual concerns of the moment,” but it can sometimes “resonate with broader issues of the day” (223). Yet, when discussing specific films, Polan too finds them largely unsuccessful. While *Public Enemies* (2009) engages with the topics of torture and governmental ethics, “it does so with little consistency or clarity of political purpose” (Polan 223). For its part, *Avatar* (2009) refuses clarity on the political issues it takes up, instead hedging its bets by “yoking together seemingly incompatible impulses” (233).

Yet, combining “incompatible impulses” may well be what popular cinema does habitually, as part of its cultural purpose and appeal. The presumed confusion generated through multiple, plausible interpretations as well as shifting points of identification exist as one of action cinema’s aesthetic and narrative strategies. At any historical moment, contradictory impulses are in play; popular cinema secures its economic and cultural position by engaging with that very incompatibility. Further, specific films that may appear internally incoherent in rationally intellectual or ideologically political ways, may not necessarily be so in emotionally experiential terms, as the expression of contemporaneous public sentiments. Public sentiments that take shape as incompatible impulses may manifest in popular culture, via the linked concepts of morality and emotionality, in order to raise certain questions: How ought we feel about current events, times, or policies? How might we be feeling, although reluctant to acknowledge or

admit it? How do we move toward feeling otherwise? None of these questions around the public sentiments of a time can be divorced from the specific politics of that era.

Interestingly, Douglas Kellner uses similar analytic criteria to Holloway and Polan but reaches quite different conclusions. Kellner's perspective is that

Hollywood could stand relatively tall and proud. Its cinematic visions in the 2000s included a large number of films critical of the Republican administration and its policies and ideologies (239).

Although Kellner considers films that appeared at the same time as those discussed by Holloway and Polan, his strikingly different views remain attributable to the multiple, simultaneously available interpretations of popular film in general and action cinema in particular.⁸ Many genre films provide moments of agreement and disagreement with the events and decisions of an era. Most pertinent here, such films are able to both validate and critique dominant sentiments.

Kellner observes that popular film can “tap into the events, fears, fantasies, and hopes of an era and give cinematic expression to social experiences and realities” (4). Still, his analysis of films considers them largely in the manner of Holloway and Polan, as specific allegories for the Bush-Cheney administration, albeit as more successful. Thus, all three writers view post-9/11 films as attempted allegorical critiques of the policies of the government of the day. The principal difference is that Kellner is able to read them in liberal or even radical terms while Holloway and Polan view them as dominantly conservative and muddled; but, all three tend to treat post-9/11 popular films as attempted, indirect substitutes for administrative positions or policy statements.

The issue here isn't whether the War on Terror was wrong. I agree with these authors that it was, calamitously so. My concern is that their narrowly defined criteria for political allegory underestimates what action cinema is capable of doing, and how it goes about its practices. To understand how action films might give “cinematic expression to social experiences and realities,” and resonate with “the broader issues of the day,” it is important to consider how “the movies” represent public emotions that have enabled the War on Terror in the first place. Further, those widespread, socially shared sentiments have changed

over time, as reflected in popular film, so that the policies of the War on Terror have been eventually denied by a substantial portion of the public, signaled by Obama's election in 2008.

Returning to *Man on Fire*, I ask how and why it complicates the issues it presents, and what this indicates about the aesthetic strategies of action cinema. Here, I address the multiple, malleable, even contradictory interpretations that the action film regularly renders possible. I am proposing that the complications in *Man on Fire* parallel the equally malleable, conflicting opinions and feelings experienced by many Americans during the early years of the War on Terror. For example, *Man on Fire's* portrayal of torture is decidedly graphic. There is no doubt that Creasy's mission is one of revenge, carried out as vigilantism well outside the realm of judicial oversight or constraint.

On the one hand, Creasy is the main character and apparent hero of the film. Therefore, we might expect audiences to feel supportive to some degree – perhaps even entirely – for how and why he conducts his vendetta. On the other hand, it remains likely that some portion of the film's audiences would have found its depiction of torture disturbing, in the extent of its violence, and in the coldness with which it is carried out. Additionally, those tortured were not directly implicated in Pita's death, and Creasy assassinates them despite having attained the information for which he ostensibly carried out the torture in the first place. This is not a Dirty Harry situation in which the protagonist asks a perpetrator to “make [his] day” by drawing a gun first so that he has the legal right to shoot him, that is, as a response of self-defense to an imminent threat. Instead, through Creasy, *Man on Fire* provides an intentional portrait of illegal, excessive use of force.

Creasy goes about his business with frighteningly cold-blooded, meticulous professionalism, never flinching, never doubting that what he does is correct, even righteous, and never expressing any remorse. To whatever degree the narrative works to justify Creasy's acts, they are also intended to be shocking. In murdering people who have provided him with the information he wants, and who have not been directly responsible for Pita's death, Creasy effectively enforces the death penalty on individuals whose crimes would not qualify as capital punishment cases, even in the United States. The question, then, is what might be the purpose of depicting such a harrowing display of torture and execution if the film's intention is to, in effect, sell the Bush Doctrine?

If the primary purpose of *Man on Fire* is to present a political parallel to governmental positions at that moment in time, then the most expedient course would be to avoid such narrative excesses and complexities. While the plot of the film resonates with aspects of the Bush Doctrine, Creasy's character does not. At the time of the film's release, the administration's public posture on torture was that it was an unpleasant, regrettable, but necessary element of the War on Terror. Creasy certainly regards torture as necessary, but neither particularly unpleasant nor regrettable. Instead, *Man on Fire* addresses the emotional and political conflict of audience members, if not of Creasy, some of whom feel revulsion at the prospect of torture even as they are being assailed with arguments about its necessity for national and homeland security.

Similarly, in order to support the concept of preventive or pre-emptive war which served to justify the U.S. invasion of Iraq a year before the film was released, expediency would avoid narrative inclusion of past American excessive and illegal uses of force on foreign territory, as embodied by Creasy's previous clandestine activities which had caused him to reject both country and profession on moral grounds. Rather than depicting the U.S. as correct and justified all along, once again, the film chooses to dwell in the space of the audience's potentially mixed feelings by referencing previous American foreign political and military debacles. Additionally, in keeping with the ambiguous attribute of action cinema discussed earlier, *Man on Fire* does not take a clear-cut stance on the issues it raises, or on the multiple sentiments associated with those issues. The film avoids seeking to resolve their contradictory nature, which is exactly the point. Rather, it purposefully foregrounds simultaneously plausible mixed feelings on the part of its audience.

For example, although Creasy's revenge spree is motivated and supposedly justified by Pita's murder, later in the film he learns that Pita remains alive. Thus Creasy, by acting unilaterally, prematurely, and outside of legal constraints, has carried out acts of retribution for a crime that was never committed. In this light, his actions parallel the unfounded accusations of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, used to justify invasion of that country. However, an alternative, equally plausible reading is that although Creasy's intention has been vengeance, because Pita remains alive he has conducted a search and rescue mission to save her after all, even if unwittingly and only in retrospect. In a socioemotional sense, films like *Man on Fire* are able to position the audience in situations that resemble the political atmosphere contemporaneously. In the case of *Mildred Pierce* and WWII, this may involve women's mixed emotions

about the cessation of a new set of life experiences. For its part, *Man on Fire* can be said to address an audience struggling with a strong desire for, as well as an emerging realization of the horrors attendant to, vengeance in the years immediately following 9/11. None of this is to suggest that the desire for revenge, or the War on Terror's specific means of attaining it, is justified. However, it is to say that such contradictory, often unpleasant sentiments existed in the public mind at the time the film was released.

Public Sentiments

By November 2006, when *Déjà Vu* premiered, the American political and cultural climate concerning the War on Terror had modulated. In April and May of 2004, the Abu Ghraib prison scandal broke. In June of 2004, a series of "torture memos" prepared by the White House, the Justice Department, and the Department of Defense, which attempted to legally justify the use of torture, were first leaked and then officially released. And, in October of 2004, the CIA released a report acknowledging that Iraq never had weapons of mass destruction.

The news in 2005 was dominated by "revelations about government snooping without court warrants, controversial CIA interrogation practices, 'renditions' of suspected terrorists into secret prisons" (Mitchell). Throughout 2006, as fighting and violence in Iraq and Afghanistan continued to escalate, resulting in mounting civilian as well as military deaths, it was clear that the U.S. "mission" in these countries was far from accomplished.

Set in New Orleans in August of 2005 in the wake of 9/11, the War on Terror, and Hurricane Katrina, *Déjà Vu* features Denzel Washington as Doug Carlin, a former marine and current agent with the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms.⁹ *Déjà Vu* combines two of Tasker's subcategories for action cinema: crime and, in its science fiction elements, fantasy. At the opening, a large number of Navy personnel, families, and groups of children board a ferry in Algiers, Louisiana to cross the Mississippi for a day of Mardi Gras festivities in New Orleans. The morning is sunny and the revelers in high spirits, as they set out on their excursion with no hint of the horrific event that will soon occur, all of which recalls the bright, ordinary morning of 9/11. Minutes after the ferry departs from its dock, an enormous explosion takes place, killing most of the people on board—543 of them. Carlin, an explosives expert, rapidly confirms that this was not an accident but "a deliberate act of terrorism," triggered by a car bomb on the

ferry. That the opening of the film is intended to evoke the events of 9/11 is indicated by the staggering numbers killed in a single act of, in this case, domestic terrorism. But the striking visual effect of so many U.S. sailors in uniform—the military personnel represent the majority of the ferry’s passengers—alludes to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as well.

The burned body of a young woman, Claire Kuchever (Paula Patton), washes up on shore too soon to have been killed on the ferry. Carlin realizes that tracing Claire’s recent past will lead him to the bomber. Working with a special investigative team from the FBI, Carlin finds he is able, at any moment, to see four days and six hours into Claire’s past through high-tech surveillance equipment that, he is told, operates by means of seven satellites and can access all surveillance footage captured by any government agency. The theme of intrusive surveillance arises as Carlin and the FBI team watch Claire over several days in the privacy of her home. During this process, and by connecting with her plight as an impending murder victim, Carlin falls in love with Claire.

In fact, through the complex Sci-Fi aspects of the film, the surveillance process is a portal to the immediate past. Ultimately, Carlin is transported into that past in order to save Claire and the 543 ferry passengers. The film ends with a return to the identical footage of upbeat, happy sailors, families, and children boarding the ferry which appears at the opening. But instead of meeting their doom, a different, more desirable outcome occurs. *Déjà Vu* isn’t particularly concerned with the logical plausibility of its Sci-Fi aspects, such as the ability to alter past events. Rather, it deals with the fantasy of *Déjà Vu*, an exercise in wishful thinking, of witnessing the “already seen” with a better ending.

The identity of the bomber, Carroll Oerstadt (Jim Caviezel), is determined, and he is arrested and confesses, at a mid-point in the film rather than at its conclusion, as is the norm in crime action films. The balance of the story is preoccupied with changing the course of events to provide the longed-for resolution. Indeed, the pivotal concept which moves the film forward hinges on the dissatisfaction and inadequacy of justice defined as apprehension of the perpetrator. The FBI special investigative team that surveils the immediate past is officially disbanded with Oerstadt’s arrest, confession, and the gathering of sufficient forensic evidence to ensure his prosecution. One of the team’s FBI agents describes this, specifically, as “mission accomplished.” Carlin objects that this is not the case because they have done nothing to rescue Claire and the ferry passengers. At this point, the narrative must turn to its Sci-Fi fantasy elements in order

to exceed the parameters of the crime action formula's capabilities, which manifest as Carlin's journey to the immediate past to alter the course of future events.

While Carlin's actions most overtly represent the regret over, and the desire to amend the losses that occurred on 9/11, they also encompass the inadequacy and wrongheadedness of the methods taken to address those losses, specifically, aspects of the War on Terror enacted in the spirit of revenge. This accounts for the striking presence of so many sailors, as well as civilians, who die when the ferry explodes. The film was released at a time of growing dissatisfaction with the wars, anger for the duplicitous ways they were undertaken, especially in Iraq, and distress over their steadily increasing casualties. Thus, apprehending the bomber provides Carlin with little or no satisfaction, in that it does nothing to make up for the losses already incurred.

In this regard, the character of the perpetrator, Oerstadt, becomes important. For, if he is meant to reference the crazed, villainous terrorist, he also evokes the Bush administration. Bearing tattoos of the words "courage" and "honor" on the back of his neck, and an American flag on his arm (as well as a "support our troops" sticker in his home), the interrogation scene between Oerstadt and Carlin becomes a confrontation over the meanings and excesses of patriotism.

Oerstadt bears himself like a member of the military, for example, addressing Carlin as "sir," although he was rejected from the Marines and the Army on the grounds of psychological instability. Describing himself as a "patriot," Oerstadt is associated with a zealously hawkish military stance. When Carlin asks him why he chose to use explosives against the U.S. Navy, Oerstadt corrects him, insisting his actions were taken against the U.S. government. Here, Oerstadt fails to see the individuals involved because of his obsession with perceived rogue governance at the level of the nation. Carlin emphasizes the issue of standpoint when he explains,

It's like the Revolutionary War, you know what
I mean? One man's terrorist is another man's
patriot, isn't it?

In this sentiment that would have been extraordinary in a popular film two or three years earlier, the inverse also is intended to apply: one person's patriot is another person's terrorist. Oerstadt's response echoes rationales used by the government in the War on Terror: "Sometimes a little human collateral is the cost of

freedom.” Oerstadt asserts that, for him, the people who died on the ferry were “war casualties.” He adds, “To you they were just evidence,” calling law enforcement to account which, as the film proceeds, Carlin must prove is not the case. Compared to *Man on Fire*, *Déjà Vu* serves more as an indictment of, rather than apology for, the Bush Doctrine and the War on Terror.

However, *Déjà Vu*'s assessment of contemporaneous times does not take shape in the form of a policy statement. Both Oerstadt and the film's political positions can accurately be described as incoherent. Instead, the film is an exploration of altered public sentiments, which must come to terms with the jeopardous actions taken in the spirit of retribution. Despite the lengths to which the film goes to rewrite—and so, right—history, in addition to its nostalgic longing for a pre-9/11 world, *Déjà Vu* is permeated with feelings of guilt, regret, and remorse. For example, Carlin is retroactively responsible for his ATF partner's death by inadvertently sending him into a situation that causes his demise. His partner is the one murder victim—a government agent, not a civilian like Claire—whose death Carlin cannot undo.

Tony Scott's three films—*Enemy of the State*, *Man on Fire*, and *Déjà Vu*—may be regarded as ongoing, modulating narratives, embodying similar aesthetic strategies adjusted to altering extratextual events and the cultural climates in which they occur. Popular genres like the crime action film may express and reflect contemporaneous sentiments in order to explore what can or ought not be felt at a given historical moment. That which is expressed in such films may well occur in contradictory or ambivalent terms, reflecting what audiences—the public—are experiencing: conflicted, uncertain issues of who and where we are. Social experiences and realities, as expressed through emotionality linked to morality, engage with how to live in a particular era.

Many in film studies attribute the multiple, available readings in blockbuster films like these, to economic exigencies, in particular the broad public appeal a movie must garner in order to reach its mandate of blockbuster revenues. In order to do so, action movies are viewed as attempting to avoid alienating any segment of their potential audience by “hedging their bets” on depicting political perspectives, making it possible for audience members to interpret the film from the standpoint of their own already-held positions. While the economic structure of the industry greatly informs the films produced, and the final shape those films take, the multiple, plausible meanings are also part of action cinema's

aesthetic strategies, which constitute its significant, coherent cultural purposes. To ignore these strategies is to disregard the seeming incoherence of mixed emotions belonging to the audience-as-public.

Incompatible impulses may not be resolved neatly in action cinema or other forms of popular culture. This enables mainstream films to satisfy their economic mandate but it also serves as recognition that contradictory impulses exist, that they need to be acknowledged and, perhaps, worked out. Viewer-citizens may seek to recognize and express those mixed feelings, or desire that they are expressed on their behalf. In the case of *Mildred Pierce* and WWII, the realities of how some people felt may have involved a certain sadness that the war years were ending, along with joy and relief. For post-9/11 films, anger, fear, and the desire for revenge have been prominent public sentiments, subsequently giving way to regret or remorse for the consequences of those emotions. Something vital and moving is gained when we respond to these films in terms of the socioemotional aspects they capture.

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¹ Scott died on August 19, 2012, at the age of 68. His remaining films after 2006's *Déjà Vu* were *The Taking of Pelham 123* (2009) and *Unstoppable* (2010).

² Below-the-line personnel refers to a film's usually extensive crew who, in manifestations such as cinematographer, art designer, or editor would have sizeable impact on the outcome of the final film as aesthetic text.

³ For more on what I have elsewhere referred to as "the justice genres," see Pribram, 2011.

⁴ U.S.A PATRIOT is an acronym for Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism. The legislation is more commonly referred to as the Patriot Act.

⁵ Films released in 2002 are often cited in the prescient category because they would have been shot prior to September 11, 2001.

⁶ As the tagline in a 2013 ad for the BBC series, *Luther*, puts it: "What use are rules in an imperfect world" (*Guardian* 6). While this essay focuses on film, the treatment of similar subject matter in current popular television, especially dramas, should not be overlooked.

⁷ Mexico is portrayed as a place of widespread, uncontrollable kidnappings for ransom, just as Afghanistan and Iraq were depicted as breeding grounds for terrorism.

⁸ The specific films Kellner discusses include *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Batman Begins* (2005), *V for Vendetta* (2005), *No Country for Old Men* (2007), *There Will be Blood* (2007), and *The Dark Knight* (2008).

⁹ While beyond the scope of this discussion, it is worth noting that all three Tony Scott films have African-American leads. The effects of these casting choices vary from film to film. For example, had Creasy been European-American, *Man on Fire's* depiction of an American agent invading a nation of racial Others would have proven an even more unpalatable act of imperialism.