

Media Culture, Politics and Ideology: From Reagan to Rambo

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Trwyddedwyd i'w ddefnyddio ar gyfer y cwrs HPHI5005 - How Soon is Then? Thatcher, Reagan and the Legacies of the 1980s

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Media culture, politics, and ideology

From Reagan to Rambo

In the following studies, I draw on a multiplicity of traditions to keep the project of cultural studies open, flexible, and critical, refusing to fix any orthodoxies, or to close off the field in any premature way. The excitement of cultural studies is that it is a new and open field in the process of making and remaking, and any interventions should merely attempt to offer some new perspectives or analyses and not to try to effect any theoretical closures. Indeed, cultural studies is a contested terrain open to multiple interventions and developments. As noted, some groups and individuals have been using cultural studies to celebrate the popular and to legitimate the academic study of "popular culture," while others use it to criticize existing inequalities and domination, or to advance specific political and cultural agendas. Conservative groups in turn attack it as subversive of educational orthodoxy (see the documentation in Aronowitz 1993) while education reformers attempt to use it to make contemporary education more relevant and attuned to the nature and vicissitudes of contemporary culture (Giroux 1994; McLaren *et al.* forthcoming).

Most recently, it is to feminist and multiculturalist theories of race, ethnicity, nationality, subalterneity, and sexual preference that we can turn for specific critiques of oppression and theories of resistance, and these groups have made important contributions to cultural studies. Their discourses root their theoretical perspectives in the struggles of oppressed people and thus politicize theory and critique with passion and perspectives from existing political struggles and personal experiences. Such perspectives enlarge the field of cultural studies and political struggle, expanding, for instance, the concept of ideology critique to include dimensions of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and other factors, as well as class – relations which I take up in this and the following chapters. They also infuse cultural studies with political passion and intensity, breathing new life into its projects.

Building on this work, I argue in this chapter for the need to deploy Marxian theories of class, feminist concepts of gender, and multiculturalist theories of race, ethnicity, sexual preference, nationality, and so on in order to articulate the full range of representations of identities, domination and resistance that one finds structuring the terrain of media culture. The forms of media culture are intensely

political and ideological, and thus those who wish to discern how it embodies political positions and has political effects should learn to read media culture politically. This means not only reading media culture in a socio-political and economic context, but seeing how the internal constituents of its texts either encode relations of power and domination, serving to advance the interests of dominant groups at the expense of others, or oppose hegemonic ideologies, institutions, and practices or contain a contradictory mixture of forms that promote domination and resistance. Thus, reading media culture politically involves situating it in its historical conjuncture and analyzing how its generic codes, its positioning of viewers, its dominant images, its discourses, and its formal-aesthetic elements all embody certain political and ideological positions and have political effects.

Reading culture politically also involves seeing how media culture artifacts reproduce the existing social struggles in their images, spectacle, and narrative. In *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (1988), Michael Ryan and I indicate how struggles within everyday life and the broader world of social and political struggles are articulated within popular film, which in turn are appropriated and have their effects within these contexts. We indicated how some of the most popular Hollywood films and genres from the 1960s to the late 1980s “transcode” contending social and political discourses and represent specific political positions within debates over the Vietnam War and the 1960s, gender and the family, class and race, the corporation and the state, U.S. foreign and domestic policy, and other issues which preoccupied U.S. society over the past decades.¹

For example, some 1960s films presented anti-war discourses and advanced the positions of the 1960s counterculture (i.e. *Vietnam: The Year of the Pig*), while others, like *The Green Berets* (1967) presented positive representations of the U.S. intervention in Vietnam and attacked the counterculture. Throughout the 1970s to the present, media culture in general has been a battleground between competing social groups with some artifacts advancing liberal or radical positions and others conservative ones. Likewise, some texts of media culture advance progressive positions and representations of such things as gender, sexual preference, race, or ethnicity, while others articulate reactionary forms of racism or sexism. From this viewpoint, media culture is a contest of representations that reproduce existing social struggles and transcode the political discourses of the era.

Furthermore, cultural studies examines the effects of media cultural texts, the ways that audiences appropriate and use media culture, and the ways that media images, figures, and discourses function within the culture. In the following pages, I articulate some theoretical perspectives on media culture, politics, and ideology which I illustrate with some examples drawn from Hollywood film in the Age of Reagan and Bush’s New World Order. I also examine some effects of these films and the ways that they intersected with the political debates and struggles of the period. In these analyses, I defend the centrality of ideology critique within cultural studies, yet specify some problems with the classical Marxian conceptions of

ideology and propose some perspectives that will help contemporary criticism overcome these limitations.

IDEOLOGY AND MEDIA CULTURE: CRITICAL METHODS

Within the Marxian tradition, Marx and Engels characterized ideology as the ideas of the ruling class which achieved dominance in a specific historical era. The concept of ideology set out in *The German Ideology* (in Marx and Engels 1975: 59ff.) was primarily denunciatory and was used to attack ideas which legitimated ruling class hegemony, which disguised particular interests as general ones, which mystified or covered over class rule, and which thus served the interests of class domination. In this view, ideology critique consisted of the analysis and demystification of ruling class ideas, and the critic of ideology was to ferret out and attack all those ideas which furthered class domination.²

The classical Marxism of Marx and Engels, the Second International, and the Third International tended to focus on the primacy of economics and politics and to refocus attention away from culture and ideology. However, during the 1920s, Lukács, Korsch, Bloch, and Gramsci emphasized the central importance of culture and ideology and the Frankfurt School and other versions of Western Marxism also took up the importance of the critique of ideology as an important component of the critique of domination.³ British cultural studies too, in its formative period, made the concept of ideology central to the study of culture and society and one of their early collection of texts was titled *On Ideology*.⁴

Yet there were problems within the Marxian tradition of ideology critique that needed to be overcome. Some Marxian traditions, including orthodox Leninism, the Frankfurt School, Althusser, and others, tended to presuppose both a monolithic concept of ideology and of the ruling class which unambiguously and without contradiction articulates its class interests in a dominant ideology. This concept reduces ideology to defense of class interests and is thus predominantly economic with ideology referring primarily, and in some cases solely, to those ideas that legitimate the class rule of the capitalist ruling class. Thus, in this conception, "ideology" is confined to those sets of ideas which promote the capitalist class's economic interests.

In the last two decades, however, this model has been contested by a variety of critics who have argued that such a concept of ideology is reductionist because it equates ideology solely with those ideas which serve class, or economic interests, and thus leaves out such significant phenomena as gender and race and other forms of ideological domination. Reducing ideology to class interests makes it appear that the only significant domination going on in society is class, or economic, domination, whereas many theorists argue that gender, sexuality, and race oppression are also of fundamental importance and indeed, some would argue, are entwined in integral ways with class and economic oppression (see Cox 1948; Rowbotham 1972; Robinson 1978; Said 1978; Barrett 1980; Sargent 1981; Marable 1982; Lorde

1984; Kellner and Ryan 1988; Spivak 1988; Fraser 1989; Eisenstein 1979; hooks 1990 and 1992 and Gilroy 1991).

Many critics have correctly proposed that ideology be extended to cover theories, ideas, texts, and representations that legitimate interests of ruling gender and race, as well as class powers. From this perspective, doing ideology critique involves criticizing sexist, heterosexist, and racist ideology as well as bourgeois-capitalist class ideology. Such ideology critique is multicultural, discerning a range of forms of oppression of people of different races, ethnicities, gender, and sexual preference and tracing the ways that ideological cultural forms and discourses perpetuate oppression. Multicultural ideological critique involves taking seriously struggles between men and women, feminists and anti-feminists, racists and antiracists, gays and antigays, and many other conflicts as well, which are seen to be as important and worthy of attention as class conflicts by Marxian theory.⁵ It assumes that society is a great field of struggle and that the heterogeneous struggles are played out on the screens and texts of media culture and are the proper terrain of a critical media cultural studies.

With this view, one needs to see the importance of a multitude of struggles between various groups, including struggles between dominant and subordinate groups and between class sectors for control of society. In the U.S., this has involved struggles between liberals and conservatives for hegemonic power and between a wide range of dominant and subordinate groups. On one level, ideology mobilizes sentiment, affection, and belief to induce consent to certain dominant core assumptions about social life (i.e. such as the value of individualism, freedom, the family, the nation, success, and so on). These core assumptions, the "common sense" of a society, are deployed by groups, whereby, for example, groups and forces in struggle tend to deploy discourses of democracy, freedom, and individualism which they inflect according to their own ideological agendas and purposes. Sometimes, for example, a concept like empowerment, which began as a critical concept in the 1960s among progressives ("Power to the People," the "empowerment project," etc.), is appropriated by opposing groups, as when conservatives during the Reagan/Bush era deployed the rhetoric of empowerment to support government regulatory agencies and policies to "empower" individuals against the state ("getting government off our backs").⁶

Thus, while there is no one unified and stable dominant ideology, there are core assumptions that different political groups mobilize and deploy. Indeed, contemporary democratic capitalist societies have been extremely divided during the past decades with competing groups and political parties struggling for control over society. For example, in the United States during the 1950s, moderate conservatives controlled the economy, society, polity, and culture, establishing a hegemonic project, overturning the democratic-liberal hegemony which had ruled since 1932 in the form of FDR's "New Deal." In the early 1960s, Kennedy liberals attempted to forge a liberal consensus and for some years their New Frontier was a successful hegemonic project until the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy (themselves victims of an attempt to re-establish rightist hegemony, if one believes, as I do, the

conspiracy theories). Thereafter, intense struggles between liberals and conservatives broke out, capped by the victory of Ronald Reagan in 1980, which established over a decade of conservative hegemony.

Reagan, in turn, redefined "common sense," producing a political rhetoric that is still operative during the Clinton era: government must be limited and taxes reduced; business must be strengthened to create jobs and increase national wealth; government "red tape" (and thus regulatory policies) must be eliminated; individual entrepreneurialism is the best road to success and producing a strong society, therefore government should do everything possible to encourage such business enterprise; life is tough and only the fittest survive and prosper. Yet on many political, social, and cultural issues, the conservatives failed to gain hegemony, to redefine common sense, and thus "culture wars" continue to rage with conservatives attempting to root out remaining liberal and radical conceptions, practices, and policies (see Hunter 1991).

Media culture, as well as political discourses, helps establish the hegemony of specific political groups and projects. Media culture produces representations that attempt to induce consent to certain political positions, getting members of the society to see specific ideologies as "the way things are" (i.e. that too much government is bad, that government deregulation and free markets are good, that protecting the country requires intense militarization and an aggressive foreign policy, and so on). Popular cultural texts naturalize these positions and thus help mobilize consent to hegemonic political positions.⁷

Criticizing hegemonic ideologies thus requires showing how certain positions in media cultural texts reproduce existing political ideologies in current political struggles, as when some films or popular music articulate conservative or liberal positions, while others articulate radical ones. Moreover, doing ideology critique involves analyzing images, symbols, myths, and narrative, as well as propositions and systems of belief (Kellner 1978, 1979, 1982). While some contemporary theories of ideology explore the complex ways that images, myths, social practices, and narratives are bound together in the production of ideology (Barthes 1957; Jameson 1981; and Kellner and Ryan 1988), others restrict ideology to propositions stated discursively in texts.⁸ Against this restrictive notion, I would argue that ideology contains discourses and figures, concepts and images, theoretical positions and symbolic forms. Such an expansion of the concept of ideology obviously opens the way to the exploration of how images, figures, narratives, and symbolic forms constitute part of the ideological representations of gender, sexuality, race, and class in film and popular culture.

To carry out a multicultural and figurative ideology critique of *Rambo*, for instance, it wouldn't be enough simply to attack its militarist or imperialist ideology, and the ways that the militarism and imperialism of the film serves imperialist interests by legitimating intervention in such places as Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Central America, or wherever. One would also have to criticize the discourses and figures that construct the text's gender and racial problematics to carry out a full ideology critique, showing how representations of women, men,

the Vietnamese, the Russians, and so on are a fundamental part of *Rambo* and that a key element of the text is remasculinization and re-establishment of white male power after defeat in Vietnam and assaults on male power by feminist and civil rights movements. Consequently, reading the ideological text of *Rambo* requires interrogation of its images and figures as well as its discourse and language across a range of problematics while inscribing these problematics within the context of existing political struggles. Such an analysis, as I will argue below, suggests that the figure of Rambo represents a specific set of images of male power, American innocence and strength, and warrior heroism which serve as vehicles of masculinist and patriotic ideologies which were significant during the Reagan era.

Such figural analysis is important because the representations of popular cultural texts constitute the political image through which individuals view the world and interpret political processes, events, and personalities. The politics of representation thus probes the ideological images and figures, as well as discourses, which transcode dominant and competing political positions in a society. In a mass-mediated image culture, it is representations that help constitute an individual's view of the world, sense of personal identity and gender, playing out of style and lifestyle, and socio-political thought and action. Ideology is thus as much a process of representation, figure, image, and rhetoric as it is of discourse and ideas. Moreover, it is through the establishment of a set of representations that a hegemonic political ideology is established, such as New Right conservatism. Representations thus transcode political discourses and in turn mobilize sentiment, affection, perception, and assent toward specific political positions, such as the need for male warriors to protect and redeem society.

Critical theories attempt to contribute to practice and a critical cultural studies seeks to empower individuals, by giving them tools to criticize dominant cultural forms, images, narratives, and genres. The studies in this book thus endeavor to teach how to read, deconstruct, criticize, and use media culture. It has been my experience in over twenty-five years of teaching that students and others are not naturally media literate, or critical of their culture, and should be provided with methods and tools of critique to empower them against the manipulative force of existing society and culture. On the other hand, many contemporary individuals have a deep involvement in the artifacts of media culture, are often eager to discuss their views, often have interesting insights, and should be encouraged to critically examine and analyze the culture in which they are so deeply immersed.

In line with this pedagogic intent, I am thus interspersing theory with concrete studies that illustrate my theoretical positions throughout the following pages. Indeed, I would hope that these studies contribute to the development of a critical media pedagogy that would empower individuals to discern the messages, values, and ideologies embedded in media culture texts.⁹ When individuals learn to perceive how media culture transmits oppressive representations of class, race, gender, sexuality, and so on that influence thought and behavior, they are able to develop critical distance from the works of media culture and thus gain power over their culture. Such empowerment can help promote a more general questioning of

the organization of society and can help induce individuals to join and participate in radical political movements struggling for social transformation.

Ideology assumes that "I" am the norm, that everyone is like me, that anything different or other is not normal. For ideology, however, the "I," the position from which ideology speaks, is that of (usually) white male, Western, middle- or upper-class subject positions, of positions that see other races, classes, groups, and gender as secondary, derivative, inferior, and subservient. Ideology thus differentiates and separates groups into dominant/subordinate and superior/inferior, producing hierarchies and rankings that serve the interests of ruling powers and elites.

Ideology is thus part of a system of domination which serves to further oppression by legitimating forces and institutions that repress and oppress people. Ideology itself forms a system of abstractions and distinctions within such domains as gender, race, and class, so as to construct ideological divisions between men and women, the "better classes" and "the lower classes," whites and peoples of color, "us" and "them," and so on. Ideology constructs divisions between "proper" and "improper" behavior, while constructing a hierarchy within each of these domains which justifies the domination of one gender, race, and class over others by virtue of its alleged superiority, or the natural order of things. For example, women are said to be by nature passive, domestic, submissive, and so on, and their proper domain is deemed to be the private sphere, the home, while the public sphere was reserved for, allegedly, more active, rational, and domineering men. People of color are often said to be lazy, irrational, and unintelligent, and thus inferior to the dominant white race.

Such sexist and racist thinking rests on a series of binary oppositions which a critical cultural studies attempts to subvert and undermine. The binary oppositions of ideology are rooted in a system of antagonisms between unequal forces and serve to legitimate the privilege and domination of the more powerful forces. The "norm" of ideology is usually white, male, and upper class and serves to denigrate and dominate non-white people, women, and working-class individuals. Ideology critique, however, interrogates the categories of whiteness, men, ruling class, heterosexuality, and other dominant powers and forms that ideology legitimates, showing the social constructedness and arbitrariness of all social categories and the binary system of ideology.

Thus feminism and the critique of racism is an integral part of a multicultural cultural studies. In the ideological operations which produce the likes of sexism, racism, and classism, we see *abstraction* at work: ideologies which legitimate the superiority of men over women, or of capitalism over other social systems, so as to attempt to justify the privileges of the ruling classes or strata – such patriarchal capitalist and racist ideologies abstract from the injustices, inequities, and suffering produced by the system of racist, patriarchal capitalism, such as the glaring inequities of power and wealth within a supposedly egalitarian society and the sufferings of subordinate groups and individuals.

Thus, abstraction is fundamentally related to the key features of ideology such

as legitimation, domination, and mystification, and the drawing of *boundaries* (between allegedly inferior and superior systems, groups, values, and so on) also plays a fundamental role in this process. Boundary maintenance (between men and women, capitalists and workers, whites and nonwhites, Americans and the rest of the world, capitalism and communism, and so on) serves the interests of social domination, as well as the functions of legitimation and mystification of social reality. Thus, I am proposing that the “distortion,” “mystification,” “masking,” and other occluding functions usually associated with ideology are related to a certain sort of abstraction and to a specific type of ideological boundaries, which legitimize the domination of ruling social groups.

A cultural studies that is critical and multicultural must therefore carry through a critique of abstractions, reifications, and ideology which traces reified categories and boundaries back to their social origins and which criticizes the distortions, mystifications, and falsifications therein. Thus, one of the functions of dominant media culture is to maintain boundaries and to legitimate the rule of the hegemonic class, race, and gender forces. Marxism, feminism, and multicultural theory, however, pursue a critique of boundaries, focusing on the binary system of oppositions that structure class, sexist, racist and other ideological discourses. All of these forms of critical theory are thus weapons of critique in the struggle for a more humane society and see ideology as providing theoretical underpinnings for systems of domination.¹⁰

Consequently, such variables as race, class, gender, sexual preference, and ideology are articulated in terms of the organization of the existing society and the struggles for power in the society. To illustrate such a multicultural approach and the need for expanding the concept of ideology critique, let us now undertake a reading of the Rambo films which emphasizes the ways that they transcode a certain Reaganite ideology and which analyzes the various dimensions and ideological strategies of the films, including their class, race, gender, and political ideology, as well as what I call the “Rambo effect.”

At stake is developing a media cultural studies that can analyze, first, how media culture transcodes the positions within existing political struggles and in turn provides representations which mobilize consent to specific political positions through images, spectacle, discourse, narrative, and the other forms of media culture. And then the actual social effects of the phenomena should be traced. In the following sections, I undertake this inquiry through a close reading of media texts and analysis of their possible range of effects. Then I work through a study of the Rambo effect in order to provide some examples of the nature, functions, and effectivity of media culture within contemporary society.¹¹

RAMBO AND REAGAN

The first Rambo film, *First Blood* (1982), presented the Vietnam veteran as a victim and merged an uneasy set of images that ascribed responsibility for his victimization to societal forces and that showed them driving him to violence. In the plot, Special



Forces veteran John Rambo (Sylvester Stallone) is searching for a member of his unit, who he discovers died of Agent Orange contamination, thus situating the Vietnam veterans as victims of their government. Unable to hitch a ride, Rambo walks into the small town of Hope, and is arrested by the sheriff who complains that he needs a haircut and bath. Mistreated by the sheriff and his deputies, Rambo escapes and wages war against the local and national guard law enforcement agencies, being positioned as a victim of oppressive authority and power. At the end, he surrenders to his former Special Forces commander Col. Trautman (Richard Crenna) and breaks down, crying that although he was a hero in Vietnam, he cannot even hold a job and is a figure of contempt and hatred, thus blaming all of society for making him an outcast.

In the second *Rambo* film (1985), Rambo is transformed into a superhuman warrior who rescues U.S. POW's still being held in Vietnam, thus transcoding the paranoia of contemporary conservatism concerning missing POW's in Vietnam.¹² The film is but one of a whole series of return-to-Vietnam films that began with the surprising success of *Uncommon Valor* in 1983 and continued with the three Chuck Norris *Missing in Action* films of 1984–6. All follow the same formula of representing the return-to-Vietnam of a team of former veterans, or a superhuman, superhero veteran like Rambo, to rescue a group of American soldiers “missing in action” who are still imprisoned by the Vietnamese and their evil Soviet allies.

In general, media culture forms a system of culture organized according to various industries, types, genres, subgenres, and genre cycles. It follows the model of industrial production and is divided into genres with their own rules, conventions, and formulas. Film for instance, is divided into genres like the horror film, war film, musical, comedies, and so on, with their own distinctive conventions, forms, themes, and the like. Popular genres tap into concerns of the present and give rise to genre cycles attempting to emulate the success of popular artifacts.

The film *Rambo* synthesizes the “return-to-Vietnam” cycle with another cycle that shows returning veterans transforming themselves from wounded and confused misfits to super warriors (i.e. *Rolling Thunder*, *Firefox*, *First Blood*). All of these cinematic attempts to overcome the “Vietnam syndrome” show the U.S. and the American warrior hero victorious this time and thus exhibit a symptom of inability to accept defeat. They also provide symbolic compensation for loss, shame, and guilt by depicting the U.S. as “good” and this time victorious, while its communist enemies are represented as the incarnation of “evil” who this time receive a well-deserved defeat. In these cinematic fantasies, it is always the “enemy” that performs vicious and evil acts, while the Americans are virtuous and heroic. Cumulatively, the return-to-Vietnam films therefore exhibit a defensive and compensatory response to military defeat in Vietnam and, I would argue, an inability to learn the lessons of the limitations of U.S. power and the complex mixture of “good” and “evil” involved in almost all historical undertakings.

On the other hand, *Rambo* and the other Stallone-Norris meathead-hero films can be read as expressions of white male paranoia which present males as victims

of foreign enemies, other races, the government, and society at large. The return-to-Vietnam films also exhibit an attempt at remasculinization, in which highly masculist male behavior is celebrated, as a response to feminism and other attacks on male power. In *The Remasculinization of America*, Susan Jeffords (1989) argues that Vietnam was a terrible blow to masculine pride, for which American males experienced great guilt and shame. A vast amount of Vietnam films and literature deal with this problem, she claims, attempting to heal the wounds and to reconstruct a damaged male psyche.

Yet the films can also be read diagnostically as symptoms of the victimization of the working class. Both the Stallone and Norris figures are resentful, inarticulate, brutal, and thus indicative of the way many American working-class youths are educationally deprived and offered the military, or activities like sports that channel violence into socially acceptable behaviour, as the only way of affirming themselves. Rambo's neurotic resentment is less his own fault than that of those who run the social system in such a way that it denies his class access to the institutions of articulate thought and mental health. Denied self-esteem through creative work, they seek surrogate worth in metaphoric substitutes like sports (*Rocky*) and war (*Rambo*). It is symptomatic that Stallone plays both Rocky and Rambo during a time when economic recession was driving the Rockys of the world to join the military where they became Rambos for Reagan's interventionist foreign policies.

The Rocky-Rambo syndrome, however, puts on display the raw masculism which is at the bottom of conservative socialization and ideology. The only way that the Rockys and Rambos can gain recognition and self-affirmation is through violent and aggressive self-display. And Rambo's pathetic demand for love at the end of the first two Rambo films is an indication that the society is not providing adequate structures of mutual and communal support to provide healthy interpersonal relationships and ego ideals for men in the culture. Unfortunately, the Stallone character intensifies this pathology precisely in its celebration of violent masculism and militarist self-assertion.

Reading *Rambo* politically

What is perhaps most curious, however, is how *Rambo* appropriates countercultural motifs for the right. On one level, the film is about the triumph of the individual over the system, continuing the dominant trope of individualism in American ideology, but giving the concept a particularly rightist and masculist twist after the 1960s appropriated individualism as social revolt and non-conformity. Moreover, Rambo has long hair, a headband, eats only natural foods (whereas the bureaucrat Murdock swills Coke), is close to nature, and is hostile toward bureaucracy, the state, and technology – precisely the position of many 1960s counterculturalists. This is an excellent example of how conservative ideologies are able to incorporate figures and fashion which neutralize and even reverse their original connotations as oppositional style and behavior. The film also incorporates radical anti-state discourses and images, for Rambo's real enemy is the "governmental machine, with

its massive technology, unlimited regulations, and venal political motivations. Rambo is the anti-bureaucratic non-conformist opposed to the state, the new individualist activist" (Berman 1984: 145). Thus Rambo is a supply-side hero, a figure of individual entrepreneurialism, who shows how Reaganite ideology is able to assimilate earlier countercultural figures, much as fascism was able to provide a "cultural synthesis" of nationalist, primitivist, socialist, and racialist ideologies (Bloch 1991 [1935]).

This analysis suggests that Reaganism should be seen as revolutionary conservatism with a strong component of radical conservative populism, individualism and activism, and that this fits in with *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, *Superman*, *Conan*, and other films and television series which utilize individualist heroes who are anti-state and who are a repository of conservative values. And, as Berman (1984) points out, this constitutes a major shift in the strategies of the culture industries which celebrated conformity and a beneficent state in the 1950s and which has shifted to valorization of nonconformity and individualistic heroism in the Reaganite age of entrepreneurial glory.

Yet the identification of Rambo with natural man against machine technology is problematized in that Rambo is also identified with technology, and specifically murderous military technology. Rambo's bow and arrow shoots missiles that explode with nuclear impact, thus merging nature and technology. Rambo's knife, a risible phallic symbol of aggressive masculinity, is also high-tech, enabling him to cut through barbed wire and to suture his wounds with a needle and thread conveniently stored in its butt. The knife also directs him with a compass, and, of course, provides him with a powerful weapon with which he can quickly and efficiently dispatch his adversaries. Moreover, Rambo is associated too with the power of helicopters, explosives, and other weapons, thus merging technology and nature in images of a pure "fighting machine."

Consequently, the images enact an implosion between body and technology, with the body itself, the figure of Rambo, being represented as a superweapon. "I am war," he says at one place and the cinematic images show him effortlessly gliding through nature, overcoming all adversity, and triumphing over his enemies. The spectacle of the film thus sutures the cultural opposition between nature and technology, via the lavishly displayed high-tech effects which overpower the spectator with sights, sounds, and the pleasures of the action/adventure genre. Thus, the technology appears to be a force of nature, just as Rambo appears to be war itself, rather than war, technology, and Rambo being perceived as socially constructed artifacts which are hardly "natural".

The film machine also mobilizes images and displays of gender and race to do its ideological work. In regard to gender, one might note that Rambo instantiates a masculist image which defines masculinity in terms of the male warrior with the features of great strength, effective use of force, and military heroism as the highest expression of life. Symptomatically, the women characters in the film are either whores, or, in the case of a Vietnamese contra, a handmaiden to Rambo's exploits who functions primarily as a seductive and destructive force. Her main actions are

to seduce Vietnamese guards – a figure also central to the image of woman in *The Green Berets* – and to become a woman warrior, a female version of Rambo, who helps Rambo fight the bad guys. Significantly, the only (brief and chaste) moment of eroticism in the film comes when Rambo and his woman agent kiss after great warrior feats, and seconds after the kiss (of death) the woman is herself shot and killed. This renunciation of women and sexuality highlights the theme that the male warrior must go it alone and must thus renounce erotic pleasure. This theme obviously fits into the militarist and masculist theme of the film, as well as the genre of ascetic male heroes who must rise above sexual temptation in order to become maximally effective saviors or warriors.¹³

The representations and thematics of race also contribute fundamentally to the militarist theme. The Vietnamese and Russians are presented as alien Others, as the embodiment of Evil, in a typically Hollywood scenario that presents the Other, the Enemy, “Them,” as the embodiment of evil, and “Us,” the good guys, as the incarnation of virtue, heroism, goodness, innocence, and so on. *Rambo* appropriates stereotypes of the evil Japanese and Germans from World War II movies in its representations of the Vietnamese and the Russians, thus continuing a manichean Hollywood tradition with past icons of evil standing in for – from the Right’s point of view – contemporary villains. The Vietnamese are portrayed as duplicitous bandits, ineffectual dupes of the evil Soviets, and cannon fodder for Rambo’s exploits, while the Soviets are presented as sadistic torturers and inhuman, mechanistic bureaucrats.

And yet reflections on the representations of gender and race in the film make clear that these phenomena are socially constructed, are artificial constructs that are produced in such things as films and media culture. The stereotypes of race and gender in *Rambo* are so exaggerated, so crude, that they point to the artificial and socially constructed nature of all ideals of masculinity, femininity, race, ethnicity, and other subject positions. These representations are presented in cinematic terms which celebrate the white male power of Rambo against women and other races. Thus, to fully explicate filmic ideology and the ways that film advances specific political positions, one must also attend to cinematic form and narrative structure, to the ways that the cinema apparatus transcodes social discourses and reproduces ideological effects.

Film ideology is transmitted through images, figures, scenes, generic codes, and the narrative as a whole. Camera positioning and lighting help frame Sylvester Stallone as a mythic hero in *Rambo*; an abundance of lower camera angles present Rambo as a mythic warrior, and frequent close-ups present him as a larger-than-life human being. Focus on his glistening biceps, his sculptured body, and powerful physique presents him as a male sexual icon, as a figure of virility, which promotes both female admiration for male strength and perhaps homo-erotic fascination with the male warrior. Slow-motion travelling shots code Rambo as a force of nature, effortlessly gliding through the jungle, while triumphant music codes his accomplishments as superheroic. His regeneration into superhero are presented in shots

where he magically leaps out of the water, purified and potent, poised to avenge and triumph.¹⁴

The action shots focus on his body as the instrument of mythic heroism, while the cutting creates an impression of dynamism that infuses Rambo with energy and superhuman power and vitality, just as slow-motion shots and lengthy takes which center on Rambo for long stretches of action tend to deify the character. When, by contrast, Rambo is tortured by villainous communists, the images are framed in the iconography of crucifixion shots with strong lighting on his head producing halo effects, as in medieval paintings, and the redder-than-red blood producing a hyperrealization, if I may borrow a Baudrillardian term (1983a), of heroic suffering. Close-ups on the communist villains focus on their sneering and sadistic pleasure in torturing Rambo, while the battle scenes depict the communists predominantly in long shots as insignificant and incompetent pawns in Rambo's redemptive heroism. And in one incredible scene, Rambo snaps off the head of the snake, evoking the myth of Adam and Eden, in which Adam cannot tame the serpent and must leave the Garden of Eden, whereby Rambo conquers it, demonstrating his power to rule the jungle.

William Warner (1992) has pointed out that the torture and suffering of Rambo, highlighted by the cinematography, enacts a sado-masochistic position whereby the spectator experiences the pain as just punishment for the guilt of the loss of masculinity and U.S. imperial power in Vietnam. Then, through a magical reversal, the subject attains the pleasures of the sadistic position by participating in Rambo's mastery and power over his adversaries. Such a scenario thus provides a psychic resolution to the trauma of loss in Vietnam and empowers spectators who are experiencing loss of power in the present hard times.

Jeffords (1994) reads the torture scenes in the *Rambo* films as demonstrating that the national body can recover from wounds and reconstitute itself as dominant, as powerful, as in control. The Rambo body also provides the norm of the powerful body that can protect us from harm and against which soft and weak bodies can be differentiated and seen as lacking. She argues that the inept sheriff and his deputies and the National Guard in the first *Rambo* represent the soft bodies that make the U.S. prey to foreign and domestic subversion. The Stallone, Norris, Schwarzenegger and other "Hard Bodies", by contrast, present the ideal man needed to preserve the existing society from its enemies and from internal decay and feminization.

In the case of Rambo, not only does the scenario of the film enact this redemptive drama of shame, humiliation, torture, and resurrection via an empowered subject, but the film spectacle enables the spectator to participate in the exciting experiences of Rambo effortlessly traversing the space of the jungle, blending in with nature. Spectators are invited to thrill in Rambo's destruction of his enemies, to experience redemptive violence, to triumphantly return with Rambo in a high-tech helicopter. Thus, the cinematic apparatus of spectacle contributes to the empowering experience. As with video games, the spectator is invited to achieve a position of mastery, to destroy enemies and to triumph over evil.

As Warner suggests (1992: 684–5), the spectacle of *Rambo* helps explain its

appeal with young and international audiences.¹⁵ Powerless spectators enjoy the thrill of identification with “natural” and technological power and magically overcome all adversity. The Hollywood special effects produce a spectacle whereby the audience is able to experience the power of decisively defeating evil. The spectacle thus empowers audiences, providing a momentary sense of mastery and power, compensating for the decline of power in everyday life. In addition, media spectacles hide the ideological content, whereby fast editing, dazzling high-tech images, and narrative excitement overwhelm the viewer’s critical faculties, thus subliminally conveying the ideologies through images and spectacle.

Furthermore, the “happy ending” closure situates the film as a return to the conservative Hollywood adventure tradition, and the victory over the evil communists codes *Rambo* as a mythic redemption of U.S. defeat in Vietnam by heroic action – a trope reproduced in the films of Stallone, Chuck Norris, and countless others, as well as in pulp novels and television shows. Such mythic redemption was carried out politically during the era in the actions of Ronald Reagan, Oliver North, and other “cowboys,” who supported violence to resolve political conflict (Jewett and Lawrence 1988: 248f.). Not by accident did both the Hollywood heroes and the Hollywood president and his cronies act outside the law to carry out “heroic” actions constrained by the legal and political order.

Consequently, although the U.S. was denied victory in Vietnam, it has attempted to achieve it in media culture. This phenomenon shows some of the political functions of media culture which include providing compensations for irredeemable loss while offering reassurances that all is well in the American body politic – reassurance denied in less conservative films such as Oliver Stone’s *Salvador*, *Platoon*, *Wall Street*, *Talk Radio*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Heaven and Earth*, and *Natural Born Killers*, which provide an instructive countercycle to the Stallone Rocky/Rambo cycles and which also testify to the conflictual nature of cinematic ideology in the contemporary period. For the Stone films demonstrate the pain of defeat and depict powerful institutions and social forces overshadowing individual ability to control the course of events. The conservative films, by contrast, celebrate the triumph of the will over adversity and their effects reveal the ludicrousness of claiming that the artifacts of media culture neither have powerful effects nor promote interests of domination. Instead, as the following study of the Rambo effect suggests, they are potent forces within contemporary culture that have a variety of discernible effects.

The *Rambo* effect

Rambo was one of the most popular films of its era. It opened at a record-breaking 2,074 theaters and had the third-largest opening gross in movie history – \$32,548,262 in its first six days (*New York Times*, May 30, 1985). *Rambo* quickly became the number one film in box office receipts:

In its first 23 days of release, *Rambo*, which cost \$27 million to produce, has

grossed a phenomenal \$75.8 million at the box office. Only two films in history, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and *Return of the Jedi*, have had more successful launches.

(*Time*, June 24, 1985)

By the end of the summer, it had grossed over \$150 million in the U.S. alone to become one of the most popular films of the day (*Business Week*, August 26, 1985). Moreover, it spawned a whole culture of "Rambomania" which:

is spreading faster than the fire storms set by the hero's explosive warheads. Hollywood megahits of summers past have flooded the market with such whimsical souvenirs as furry Gremlins and cuddly E.T.s. This year stores are stocking up with war paraphernalia: a \$150 replica of Rambo's high-tech bow and arrow, Rambo knives and an assortment of toy guns, including a semiautomatic job that squirts a stream of water 10 ft. Youngsters will soon be able to pop Rambo vitamins, and New Yorkers can send a Rambogram, in which a Stallone look-alike will deliver a birthday message or carry out a tough assignment like asking the boss for a raise. The U.S. Army has started hanging Rambo posters outside its recruitment offices, hoping to lure enlistees. Rambo fever is even spreading overseas. The film has already broken box-office records in Beirut and the Philippines, and 25 companies have signed contracts to distribute Rambo merchandise, even in countries where the film has not yet opened.

(*Time*, June 24, 1985)

Liberal critics described their horror over seeing the film with Rambomaniacs who cheered the human killing machine's every exploit.¹⁶ The film was quickly taken up by discussions and talk shows:

Even a panel of political journalists on "This Week with David Brinkley" last Sunday on ABC-TV pushed aside the President's tax plan, the SALT II negotiations and other heavyweight matters to talk about what the popularity of Sylvester Stallone's new action movie says about our national state of mind.

(*Chicago Tribune*, June 12, 1985)

The pundits concluded that its "message" was: "We should have won in Vietnam. We did win in Grenada. And now . . . on to Nicaragua!" (ibid.).

Columnist Ellen Goodman feared that Rambo's rescue of US POWs held in Vietnam would increase calls for military attempts to rescue hostages in Lebanon and elsewhere (*Chicago Tribune*, June 27, 1985) and soon after Ronald Reagan himself said:

"Boy, after seeing *Rambo* last night, I know what to do next time." Reagan's remark came as he was preparing to address the nation on the freeing of 39 American hostages in Beirut. They were among 153 passengers on a TWA (Trans World Airlines) flight hijacked on June 14 as it headed for Rome from Athens.

(*Reuters Ltd.*, June 30, 1985)¹⁷

Psychologists began describing war mania in young children,¹⁸ and posters of the film, images of Rambo, and references to him appeared everywhere. Indeed, the term "Rambo" soon became a synonym for tough, macho, patriotic, and Reagan himself used the term "Ramboing" to describe an aggressive response to provocation. The film was endlessly discussed as expressing the signs of the times:

Rambo has touched a raw nerve in America, a feeling that we should, in the words of Ronald Reagan, stand tall again. Ten years ago, after the collapse of Saigon and the anguish of the Watergate scandal, Rambo would have been laughed out of the movie theaters. The mood then was virulently antiwar, but today that's all changed.

(*People*, July 8, 1985)

On the other hand, Vietnam veterans protested against the film all over the country, claiming that it provided distorted representations of both Vietnamese and American vets, while promoting violence, and they picketed theaters that ran the film. But Rambo had become a major figure in popular and commercial culture "heating up the poster, button and bumper sticker market." By mid-summer,

more than 600,000 Rambo posters have been sold . . . There are 11 kinds of 'Rambo' buttons, with sales so far of 300,000. Next, bumper stickers. Among them: 'Need an Army? Hire Rambo'; 'Rambo - America's Newest Weapon'; 'Beware - This Vehicle Protected by Rambo'.

(*Chicago Tribune*, July 11, 1985)

A novel based on the film sold over 800,000 copies (*Reuters North European Service*, July 31, 1985).

T-shirts from *Rambo, First Blood, Part II*, have topped the 1.5 million mark (250,000 shirts). During the first five weeks of release, these shirts have outsold the previous record holder, the ever present M*A*S*H shirts Not only are millions viewing the film, but large numbers of viewers have decided to publicly identify and display themselves with an image of Rambo.

(*Business Wire*, July 18, 1985)

A large number of Rambo toys, weapons, clothes, and other consumer items also saturated the market, and the next year a Rambo cartoon show opened. The film also inspired bizarre actions throughout the United States. A Rambo look-alike messenger, dressed in army fatigues and carrying a fake gun to deliver a Rambo-gram, led a policeman to shoot himself in the foot in pursuit of the messenger (*Proprietary to the United Press International*, August 19, 1985). And:

Residents of a posh suburban Rochester neighborhood Thursday blamed a recent vandalism spree on "Rambo's Raiders," a group of adolescents emulating Sylvester Stallone's freedom-fighter movie character. Screens have been slashed, bushes and shrubs cut down and garden hoses turned on and aimed inside homes during the past few weeks in the Monroe County town of Penfield.

Sheriff's deputies said a group of teens who masquerade as Rambo in the quiet neighborhood may be responsible. Deputies this past weekend arrested two Stallone clones, who were dressed in camouflage fatigues, cut-off shirts and wore paint on their faces. "We understand that they wear army fatigues and carry knives," said JoAnne Cortese, whose home was vandalized. "It's almost like Rambo's Raiders. They feel that if Rambo can do it, they can do it."

(*Proprietary to the United Press International*, August 15, 1985)

Other reports surfaced of crimes, including murders, that were allegedly inspired by Rambo. The *Los Angeles Times* reported a murderer had used a knife like Rambo's and that the suspect was believed to have been inspired by the film (August 16, 1985).

A judge decried the glorification of Sylvester Stallone's Rambo film character in deciding the case against a 15-year-old boy accused of setting jungle-style booby traps in a park. Washington County Circuit Judge Jon B. Lund held Andrew S. Bene, Beaverton, accountable Tuesday on one count of recklessly endangering others but absolved him of three related weapons or assault charges.

(*Proprietary to the United Press International*, September 18, 1985)

And: "Police Monday charged a man with robbing a tavern and three customers while dressed as the movie character Rambo" (*Proprietary to the United Press International*, October 7, 1985). Most bizarrely:

A man who played a "Rambo" role for hero-worshipping teenagers was behind bars Saturday, accused of "brainwashing the kids" with commando warfare tactics and conspiring with one child to kill his parents. Wilmer Leonard McClinton Jr., 32, was held in the Mobile County Jail without bond on charges of selling firearms to minors, conspiracy to commit murder, criminal possession of explosives and contributing to delinquency of minors . . . Lee said raids Friday on McClinton's home in Satsuma and former residence in Mobile produced knives, gunpowder and exploding arrows. Police said he used weapons and live ammunition to teach commando tactics to boys aged 11 to 15. "He took some of the kids to see the movie *Rambo* 10 times," said Juvenile Unit Sgt. James Huey.

(*Proprietary to the United Press International*, November 9, 1985)

The release of *Rambo* on video cassette multiplied the Rambo effect with many people purchasing or renting the film. The cassette sold 425,000 units the first day that it went on the market, breaking previous records (*PR Newswire*, January 14, 1986). Stories continued to circulate concerning the Rambo effect: "A teenager who defense attorneys said was under the delusion that he was John Rambo, a fictional Vietnam War veteran played by Sylvester Stallone, has been convicted of stabbing his mother's best friend" (*United Press International*, May 22, 1986). A young man "told police he played 'Rambo' with his 15-year-old neighbor the night the boy was killed . . . [He] was charged with the multiple stabbing death" of the boy

(*United Press International*, April 15, 1986). And: "A teenager authorities said shot himself in front of two friends after watching two violent films starring actor Sylvester Stallone was in critical condition" (*United Press International*, May 5, 1986). Rambo had firmly established itself within US folklore and the Rambo effect continued to circulate violence and reaction.

I earlier suggested how the spectacle of *Rambo* attracted international audiences and acclaim and indeed the Rambo effect circulated through the world. Reuters reported that in war-torn El Salvador, the film

has broken box office records . . . where 20,000 people saw it on the day it opened . . . fights broke out among people lining up for tickets and [there were] several minor injuries after patrons stampeded to get in. Several officers and soldiers in the Salvadoran army have taken to wearing the same bandanna-style head-gear as the beefy, bare-breasted Rambo.

(August 2, 1985)

The film also broke "box office records in South Africa, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Venezuela and elsewhere. It has even broken box office records in Israel and Lebanon" (*Reuters North European Service*, July 31, 1985)

There were efforts to ban the film in Britain,¹⁹ but they failed and the film was also a great success throughout Europe.²⁰ "Rambo" thus became a figure of the global popular who mobilized identification around the figure.²¹ *Rambo* also became embroiled in world politics and the contradictions of the Cold War. An official Soviet publication attacked the film and concluded:

Rambo is not the only film of its kind. Similar Hollywood creations have been playing in American theaters for several years now. And many observers are forced to admit that this film serves another purpose—to influence public opinion in favor of military adventures, particularly in regard to Nicaragua. Even Stallone admitted in an interview that his film is 'a right-wing fantasy.' It would be more accurate to say that *Rambo* is a film that sows hostility and hatred. Its widespread popularity in America is lamentable.

(*The Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, August 14, 1985)

But *Rambo* received a favorable review in the *Peking Evening News*: "This is a serious film with healthy content, profound social significance and a high degree of artistic material. An outstanding work in recent American cinema" (*The Washington Post*, August 8, 1985). And China's showing of the first Rambo film broke attendance records and produced "a Rambo craze" in China (*Proprietary to the United Press International*, September 25, 1985).

Yet, "Rambo" also became a figure of contempt and a negative discourse, as well as a positive one, emerged. A "Rambo" was coded negatively as someone who was excessively masculinist, out of control, and potentially dangerous and violent. Feminists used the term to mock excessive male macho behavior and political liberals deployed it to attack the excesses of the conservative political establishment. The term became increasingly negative in political discourse, showing

how such popular figures are themselves contested, part of a socially and politically constructed political discourse. Indeed, "Rambo" is a polysemic cultural construct which can be appropriated by opposing sides in political debate and struggle.

And so "Rambo" became a contested figure in U.S. cultural and political iconography and discourse. On one hand, there were Rambo bars (in Houston), Rambo fashion, Rambo weapons, and iconic images of Rambo on posters and other commercial paraphenelia. A U.S. mercenary recruited to aid the Nicaraguan contras was shown in a TV interview with a massive poster of Rambo behind him and the figure Rambo was assimilated to the aggressive conservative attempts at remasculinization and the re-assertion of U.S. military power during the epoch. Yet there were frequent attacks on Ramboism in the press and Warner counted twenty articles that equated Rambo with Oliver North in the Iran/Contra affair, references that were mostly negative (Warner 1992: 686), signifying male aggression out of control and out of the bounds of democratic propriety.

The popularity of the film *Rambo* and the Stallone, Chuck Norris, and other "action-adventure" vehicles suggests that the Hollywood President and large segments of the country had assimilated a manichean worldview from Hollywood movies whereby "the enemy" is so evil and "we" are so good that only violence can eliminate threats to our well-being. Thus, Reagan's most "popular" acts were his invasion of Grenada and bombing of Libya – precisely the sort of "action" celebrated in *Rambo*, *Top Gun*, *Iron Eagle*, and the other militarist epics of the Reagan era. Hollywood films therefore provided iconography which helped mobilize support for conservative and militarist political agendas. The images of helicopters landing in Grenada and Panama carried the same positive and exciting charge as images of military action in the Hollywood militarist films.

Consequently Hollywood films of the 1980s provided the iconography for the positive reception of images of "real" (i.e. as brought to you by television) aggressive military action. The presenting of "enemies" as absolutely evil and necessary to eliminate codes such U.S. military aggression as "good." Military heroes replicate the heroism in the Hollywood military spectacles and are infused with the same popular adulation as the Rambos of the film world. Moreover, *Rambo* and the return-to-Vietnam films thus articulate conservative imperialist/militarist fantasies which in turn transcode Reaganite anti-communist and pro-militarist discourses. Indeed, Reagan constantly employed Ramboesque solutions to the political challenges of the day, fighting secret wars all over the world and engaging in overt military actions, suggesting that the Hollywood President really believed that violence was the best way to solve conflicts.²² Not by accident were Oliver North and other members of Reagan's secret government referred to as "Rambos" when they engaged in their illegal and criminal covert operations.

And so Hollywood film in the Age of Reagan enacted rites of mythical redemption in narratives which attempted to manage social anxieties, to soothe and alleviate the sense of shame associated with defeat in Vietnam, and to smooth away the rough edges of history (i.e. U.S. atrocities in Vietnam as depicted in *Platoon* and other antiwar films). In their mythical scenarios, Americans incarnate goodness

and innocence, while communists represent pure evil – precisely the fantasy of Ronald Reagan in his pre-detente incarnation and precisely the mindset of the classical Hollywood cinema which Reagan embodied. This Hollywood/Reaganite mindset was hegemonic politically and culturally during Reagan's reign and requires analysis of the contemporary political context of Hollywood film to fully capture its ideological effects.

TOP GUN: REAGANITE WET DREAM

The Reagan era was one of aggressive military intervention in the Third World, with an invasion of Grenada, the U.S.-directed and financed Contra war against Nicaragua, the bombing of Libya, and many other secret wars and covert actions around the globe. Hollywood film nurtured this militarist mindset and thus provided cultural representations that mobilized support for such aggressive policy. Reagan's policies were continued by George Bush, who undertook an even more large-scale aggressive military action against Iraq. As an example of a media cultural studies that situates film in its socio-political context, I will next undertake readings of a series of Reaganite fantasies that legitimated the aggressive militarist policies of the Reagan and Bush Administrations and that provide a pool of cultural representations which could be mobilized to generate support for Bush's war against Iraq – an event that I interrogate in Chapter 5 below.

Top Gun (1986) was one of a series of films during the 1980s that encoded the Reaganite ethos of militarism, advocating a strong military while celebrating conservative and military values. Like *Rambo* and the other return-to-Vietnam films, *Iron Eagle*, *Red Dawn*, and other Reaganite fantasies, *Top Gun* celebrates individualistic heroism, military valor, and conservative American values. Like these other films, it operates in a binary universe where there is a struggle between good and evil in which the enemy is absolutely evil and Americans represent the embodiment of "goodness." Coming at the tail end of the Cold War with the Soviet Union, *Top Gun* is not as fiercely anti-communist as some of the films just mentioned, but its "enemy" seems to be Soviet communists, though the foreign Other to the good Americans is indeterminate enough to encompass Soviet allies like Libya or Iraq (i.e. the "enemy" flies MIGs, a Soviet plane, but is not identified as Russian, though the MIG fighter pilots have red stars on their helmets; yet, since this was the epoch in which Reagan bombed Libya, to the delight of his conservative brethren, the film's enemy could be read as Arab nations using Soviet MIGs and no specific anti-Soviet ideology is articulated in the film).

In many ways, *Top Gun* thoroughly embodies the social attitudes of Reaganism. Appearing in 1986, before the Iran/Contra crisis, the 1987 stock market crash, and exposés of the Savings and Loan scandals, *Top Gun* represents the ascendancy of a triumphant Reaganism at its last moment of supremacy before its fall from uncontested hegemony (obviously Reaganism had its comeback with the triumph of George Bush, Son of Teflon – but that's another story told in Kellner 1990a). The film was the most popular box office draw of the year, suggesting that it tuned

into the social ethos of the epoch, and puts on display the central values of Reaganite conservatism.

Top Gun is primarily about competition and winning – women, military honor, sports, and social success. It unabashedly celebrates the value of being *top gun*, the elite, the best, the winner. The story features the exploits of Pete Mitchell, code-named Maverick, and winningly played by Tom Cruise in one of his string of Reaganite fantasies (*Risky Business*, *All the Right Moves*, *Cocktail*, and so on). Cruise's Maverick embodies the Reaganite/Yuppie values of winning at all costs, of putting competition at the center of life, and going all out to win in every domain of social existence from dating, to sports, to career.

The film opens with titles indicating that in 1969 the Navy Air Core set up a school to train elite aerial fighters, and in a later training session, it is announced that the U.S. needs to maintain its ratio of expert aerial fighter pilots in the contemporary world. The message is that even in a high-tech, computerized society, individual initiative and skill are crucial, indeed essential, to military survival. At one point, Maverick valorizes individual intuitive ability rather than cognitive abilities: "You don't have time to think up there. If you think, you're dead." The same anti-intellectual ethos pervaded the *Star Wars* films and inadvertently put on display the anti-intellectualism and thoughtlessness that was an essential part of Reaganism, promoted daily by President Feel-Good and by the commercial media which shared his values and anti-intellectualism (i.e. advertising, for instance, works by addressing and manipulating fears and fantasies, and not by utilizing rational discourse; Reaganism and media culture work, I suggest, in a similar fashion).

The opening title sequence through its montage of sound and images establishes the ethos of the film. As the titles cross the screen, eerie music provides a background to images of silhouettes slowly moving through a misty early morning dawn. The images of men are coupled with pictures of airplanes and the music shifts to more upbeat rhythms and the sounds of airplane motors and staccato radio messages produce a rich sound collage. A V-sign is flashed and a plane takes off from an aircraft carrier "somewhere in the Indian Ocean." The modernist image construction and collage of image and sound codes the fighter pilots with a mystical aura, drawing on the cultural codes of *Triumph of the Will*, which opened with a picture of an airplane magically moving through clouds to the accompaniment of martial music in a fusion of images of nature, technology, and clouds. *Top Gun* opens with a similar fusion and the project of the film will be to fuse high-tech imagery, mythical heroism, and masculinity into a figure of the "top gun" who succeeds in every walk of life and who will produce a proper role model for Reaganite youth.

The music track cuts to a rock background and two fighter planes and their crews take off for their daily mission. The fighter pilots and their planes have mythical names (Ghostrider, Merlin, Cougar, Maverick, and so on) and the image construction utilizes off-center framing, quick cutting, and high-tech sound montage to fuse the fighter pilots with awesome power and glory. Enemy MIGs suddenly appear

and after ritualistic dogfighting, one of the fighter pilots, Cougar, loses control and Maverick must risk his life to escort his dazed comrade back to the destroyer where the planes are based. Cougar decides to quit and loses his status as "top gun" fighter, ineligible to go to the elite training school. Instead Maverick and his co-pilot Goose get their chances to prove themselves and enter the competition for the best of the best. In the Reaganite universe, only the elite succeed and the faint-hearted must fall by the wayside, deprived of the success and honor reserved for the top guns and top dogs in the deadly competition for wealth and power in which only the winners succeed and everyone else is a loser.

The clouds, fog, shiny planes, high-tech control centers, and handsome and heroic young pilots in the opening sequence code the naval aviators as modern heros, as quasimythical embodiments of the mystery and power of modern technology. Here high-tech image construction with the best cameras, editing equipment, and personnel invest the figures with aestheticized glory and the dazzling fight scenes and gee-whiz sound effects likewise encode the flight and fighting scenes with the awe and power of aestheticized technology. As with fascism as a political movement (see Benjamin 1969), military films like *Top Gun* aestheticize war and thus provide soft-core propaganda for the military. Indeed, the credits at the end provide "special thanks" to the pilots of the U.S. Navy F-16 aircraft and credit a large number of military officials and pilots who participated in the film, thus certifying its credentials as official, U.S. government approved propaganda.

One wonders how many pilots and soldiers who joined the military and fought in the Panama invasion, the Gulf War, and other military escapades of the era were influenced by such cinematic propaganda. Hollywood film, like the Hollywood President, are not innocent entertainment, but lethal weapons in the service of dominant socio-economic forces. *Top Gun*'s ideological project is to invest desire in the figure of heroic fighter pilots and high-tech war which it does with attractive star figures, cinematic high-tech wizardry and special effects, rock music and the sounds of speed and power, and, of course, the sophisticated planes and military gadgets. As noted, the images and spectacles of high-tech entertainment are semiotic vehicles that subliminally transmit ideological effects. During an initial *Top Gun* training session, one pilot whispers to another, when watching a video of a high-tech explosion/kill, "this gives me a hard-on." Indeed, this is the project of the film itself which turns on the spectator to the thrill of technological death, fusing Eros and Thanatos, libidinal energy and destruction, in images of technowar,²³ thus helping to produce the psychological disposition to thrill to images of technodeath in events like the Persian Gulf War against Iraq.

The scene cuts to Miramar, California, home of "Fightertown U.S.A.," where the "top gun" school is found. Here, Maverick begins his competition with "Iceman," who is viewed as the top fighter pilot, the one to beat. Iceman and his partner "Slider" are your perfect all-American fraternity boy jocks, who reek with self-confidence, privilege, and the conviction that they are the best and deserve whatever they get. Maverick and Goose, by contrast, are more marginal characters and

vaguely working class; they are the underdogs who will fiercely compete to become top dogs, celebrating the values and lifestyle of the dominant elites by their single-minded pursuit of the same values and goals.

It is soon clear that success with women is part of what it means to be "top gun." After their initial orientation session, the pilots go into a local bar, filled with attractive women coming on to the largely military male clientele. As the spectator voyeuristically enters the bar, one sees representations of female flesh and flashing smiles, projecting images of erotic paradise for the technowarriors of the *Top Gun* school. Media culture produces images that mobilize audience desire into certain modes of thought, behavior, and role models that serve the interest of maintaining and reproducing the status quo. Showing the pilots with beautiful women helps to invest the images of the military with erotic energy and turns on female spectators as well to equate sexual excitement with the military and uniforms, thus helping to supply the actual would-be warriors with the sexual prizes that serve as part of the stimulant for military service and heroism. In addition, women are objectified as sexual commodities, valued for good looks and readiness to serve and gratify men.

The message of the bar scene for women is that military men are exciting partners, thus positioning women to admire men in uniform. The message for males is that if you join the military, wear the uniform, and exhibit the marks of rank and honor, you'll score with the women, that, in short, military guys get the girls. As he enters the bar, Maverick quickly spots an attractive woman and makes his moves, singing to her, clowning, and coming on to her. She rejects him for an older man, but he follows her into the women's room where he continues his pursuit; competition and entrepreneurship demand innovation and courage to score the big bucks, glory, and girls promised by the conservative ideology of the era.

The next day as he enters his flight class, Maverick sees that the woman is his flight instructor and he cowers down beneath his dark glasses. The woman, Charlie (Kelly McGillis), is the perfect Reaganite female: competitive, out for promotion, and proper in her behavior. She incarnates a conservative appropriation of feminism in which women compete as equals with men while retaining their "femininity." "Charlie" has a man's name, but thoroughly feminine looks, sensibility, and behavior. She also represents the new woman in the military, and during a period in which the volunteer army depended on women recruits, her image of a successful and attractive military woman provides free recruitment advertisements for the volunteer army; many women probably found themselves in the deserts of Saudi Arabia during 1990, awaiting a violent war, as a result of appropriating positive images of women in military life promoted by films like *Top Gun*.

Top Gun also replicates conservative Hollywood cinematic and ideological codes. It utilizes the conventions of romance to validate Maverick as the prototype of the successful male. In subtle ways, the film also reinscribes the domination of women by men and the conventions of male-dominated romance. At first, Maverick finds himself subordinate to Charlie: she is his teacher, who has a Ph.D. in astrophysics, and is a figure of the new woman authority figure who is a threat to male power and domination. As their relationship evolves, it is she who initiates

the romantic connection after his initial overtures. As the moment of their sexual involvement approaches, she states: "This is going to be complicated." By the end of the film, however, Charlie is rendered subordinate to Maverick. As he returns to the Top Gun flight school, a hero and now an instructor, the audience sees Charlie bestow upon Maverick an adoring glance; their eyes meet and this time it is Maverick who says, "This is going to be complicated," establishing himself as the initiator and the master of the relation. This narrative ploy not only utilizes the traditional Hollywood trope of the happy ending to mobilize audience pleasure in Maverick's total triumph, but also invests pleasure in his mastery of the strong woman.

The film provides as well positive images of family, father-son male bonding, and the continuity of generations – familiar conservative themes during an era in which such values had been strongly contested in the 1960s and 1970s. Maverick is the son of Duke Mitchell, a fighter pilot who had died under mysterious circumstances. In a key scene, Maverick visits Viper (Tom Skerritt) who tells him of his father's heroism and that his military record was stained because he, Viper, and others had strayed across the border to pursue the enemy (presumably in Laos or Cambodia) and thus had broken rules. Maverick talks of his family to Viper – presented himself as a good family man – and Viper comes to assume a surrogate father role to Maverick.

The images of Maverick's partner Goose also reinforce the family ideology. In one cafe scene, soon before Goose's death, Goose, his wife, and his children enjoy themselves with Maverick and Charlie. Goose plays the piano and sings "Great Balls of Fire," with the whole group energetically joining in. The singing of popular rock 'n' roll songs, and the ever-present rock soundtrack background, also invest the characters with positive energy, for their association with rock music associates them with the cultural signs of pleasure and sociality, aspects which are fused with images of family in this scene. The cafe scene ends with Goose's wife saying to him, "Goose, you great stud; take me to bed or lose me forever." For the top guns, therefore, marriage, good times, and intense sexuality come together in one convenient package and that package is marriage and family: the ultimate destination of Maverick and Charlie, with Charlie repeating the "take to me bed" phrase to Maverick soon after as they kiss on a moonlit night beside the bay as the scene cuts to black.

As in all good fantasies, the hero is tested and this happens when Maverick and Goose are engaged in a training exercise and their plane spins out of control; they are forced to evacuate and Goose is killed. Maverick feels guilty and resigns from the top gun school, though his father figure Viper talks him into returning to graduate. At the graduation ceremonies, there is a call for the top candidates to go immediately to a crisis assignment: Iceman, his partner Merlin, and Maverick are selected. The scene cuts to the "Indian Ocean, 24 hours later," where a communications ship is missing and must be rescued; MIGs are all around the area and there is a fear that the enemy will reach the ship first. Iceman and a partner and Maverick and the Iceman's former partner Merlin are sent out on patrol and encounter the

enemy MIGs. Maverick saves Iceman and manages to knock out a series of MIGs, thus becoming the hero of his military peer group. These final battle scenes celebrate the vital role of the military and military heroism: the *Top Gun* shows that he has “all the right moves” and in “risky business” with the enemy he triumphs, blowing away MIG after MIG to the delight of the audience (I still recall with horror that Saturday afternoon when I saw the film with a thoroughly enraptured audience which roared with every kill).

I am aware that this reading of the manipulative effects of an ideology machine like *Top Gun* goes against the current emphasis on the active audience, constructing their own (oppositional) meanings from cultural texts. But some blockbuster films like *Top Gun* are carefully constructed ideological machines that celebrate and reproduce hegemonic political positions and attitudes. *Top Gun* positions the audience in ways to induce spectators to identify or sympathize with its politics; while many of us may resist these positions and may not buy into their ideologies, we must actively resist the text itself. Sure, spectators can produce any number of “oppositional” or “aberrant” readings, but we should also distinguish between texts that invite or facilitate oppositional readings and those that resist them, and we should recognize that some films succeed in pulling audiences into their ideological projects while others fail. Moreover, cultural studies should promote critical media literacy to help audiences resist ideological manipulation and this requires understanding of the ideological operations and effects of films like *Rambo* and *Top Gun*.

Like *Rambo*, *Top Gun* was one of the most popular films of its time, grossing over \$130 million by the end of 1986, becoming the year’s top-grossing film (*Time*, November 24, 1986). Like *Rambo*, it provided role models for identification and helped promote conservatism and militarism. *Time* reported that: “Its glorified portrayal of Navy life spurred theater owners in such cities as Los Angeles and Detroit to ask the Navy to set up recruiting exhibits outside cinemas where *Top Gun* was playing to sign up the young moviegoers intoxicated by the Hollywood fantasy” (November 24, 1986). It was later reported that the film made high school students dream of military life and contributed to a big jump in applications to military academies. Many students mentioned the film in their applications and a West Point captain agreed: “It doesn’t hurt to have neat movies like *Top Gun* . . . I think everyone enjoyed the spill-off from that” (*The Washington Post*, January 19, 1987). A retired admiral noted that Tom Cruise and *Top Gun* “did a lot” for the Naval Academy. “They’re still standing in line to become Naval aviators” (*The Washington Post*, June 24, 1987). The movie continued to be popular and Tom Cruise was named by students in grades eight through twelve as the person they most admired, according to a poll by the *World Almanac and Book of Facts* (*United Press International*, February 4, 1988). The film eventually took in over \$350 million in box office receipts, had high video cassette rentals and sales, and entered U.S. folklore, with many Gulf War pilots and commentators referring to the film to describe U.S. military aviation exploits in the war against Iraq.

Such is the “genius” of *Top Gun* that it provides a relatively seamless narrative with few, if any, socially critical moments, polysemic meanings, discordant voices,

or critical, marginal elements. The film rigorously privileges the position of Maverick, with whom the audience is invited to identify, and affirms without question his values and goals. Tom Cruise, of course, infuses his character with a winning smile and he is invested with romantic charm and attractiveness as he pursues and wins the flight instructor Charlie. Images of him playing volleyball, or undressing in the locker room or bedroom, present his body as hard, well-sculptured, and athletic, precisely the dominant figure of male virility and attractiveness.

Top Gun draws on cultural imagery from the last several decades to encode its hero with glory and positivity, and works to decenter and marginalize all oppositional readings. For instance, Maverick wears a black jacket and drives a motor-cycle, the image of 1950s rebellion; his name replays a popular television hero who was something of an oppositional, non-conformist – but safe – figure on 1950s TV (i.e. the cowboy gamblers Bart and Brett Maverick, resurrected in a 1994 film). With the Tom Cruise Maverick figure, however, these symbols of rebellion become icons of male fashion and virility. The soundtrack plays 1950s and 1960s rock music, which the characters sing at key junctures in the film. Here too symbols of non-conformity and individuality become symbols of group identity and cohesiveness. In fact, Maverick's "individuality" is thoroughly consistent with military group cohesiveness and is even functional for military purposes.

Thus, *Top Gun* utilizes dominant cultural imagery of the past decades to present a cultural synthesis of the present as the embodiment of everything that was best in the past: all oppositional meanings to potent cultural symbols are shorn away and they serve to celebrate the conservative present as the best of all possible worlds. Consequently, while the films of Robert Altman deconstruct Hollywood genres, American mythologies, and dominant ideologies in order to produce a complex text that problematizes our relation to dominant cultural forms, *Top Gun* exploits the images, symbols, and forms of the past to privilege conservative ideological positions in the present.

Top Gun's take on race is nowhere near the virulent racism that infected *Rambo*, *Iron Eagle*, and many other political films of the era. The "enemy" is faceless and though it is dangerous and must be destroyed, it is indeterminate and unnamed. Indeed, only one significant scene involves race in the whole film and it is a mark of the subtle racism practiced by conservative politicians and filmmakers when they couldn't get away with more blatant racism. After his partner Goose's death, a guilt-ridden Maverick finds it impossible to fly at his usual heroic level and when his new black partner chides him for failing to adequately perform during a flight exercise, Maverick grabs the black and rather nastily tells him: "I'll fire when I'm ready to fire. Have you got that?" This singular eruption of violence, the only time that Maverick loses his cool, functions to put an uppity and too-ambitious black in his place and puts on display white fears of blacks taking their positions or outperforming them.

Previously, the black pilot was a silent figure, frequently on the edges of the frames picturing the top guns. As a faceless figure depicted as part of the military team, he appears as an icon of the integrated military, which provides equal

opportunity for whites and blacks and that provides blacks the possibility of advancement. Only in this one scene is the black given narrative prominence and here, he is coded negatively. Indeed, there is no reason why Maverick should have to remonstrate with a black partner, a white would have done just as well, except that the ideology machine *Top Gun* wants to exploit lingering hostilities toward people of color to gratuitously drive the audience to pity and sympathize with the temporarily limp hero.

Even more revealing, the black fighter pilot is the only main *Top Gun* trainee whose name is never mentioned or highlighted: his code name "Sundown" is faintly visible on the bottom of his helmet as he flies with Maverick, but his helmet is suddenly blank when he confronts Maverick on the ground, as if he has no personal identity and is merely a figure of the uppity black. Thus, while all the white pilots have their code names prominently displayed, the black is without significant identity. This omission (perhaps inadvertently) points to the inferior position of blacks who manage to become integrated into the white power structure and points to the complicity of popular Hollywood cinema in keeping blacks and people of color in a subordinate position. In fact, the codename "Sundown" connotes an absence of light, equating it with the color "black" that is negatively valorized in racist iconography. Indeed, *Top Gun* presents a primarily white elite, without the ethnicity that characterized the classical Hollywood war film or many contemporary war films (i.e. *The Boys in Company C*, *Platoon*, and *Heartbreak Ridge*).

Thus, through image and narrative construction, the Reaganism of the 1980s is ideologically infused with Tom Cruise's winning smile and military heroism is celebrated as the way to gain social acceptance and prestige. The military adventures of the Reagan and Bush regimes require willing accomplices and films like *Top Gun* help with recruitment and the production of proper attitudes. The society also needs highly competitive young people to spur the economy to new entrepreneurial heights and the film's celebration of competition and winning as the supreme value helps promote proper(ly capitalistic) social values, while perpetuating the myth of the American dream. Furthermore, it provides appropriate gender models too. Not surprisingly, Charlie appears back at the *Top Gun* school where the triumphant Maverick asked to be assigned after his heroic feats. They are obviously coupled at the end, so the narrative machine of the film satisfies all desire for closure: the hero wins his glory, gets the girl, and satisfies all of his goals. The traditional Hollywood happy ending thus serves to validate dominant sociopolitical values – as it always did. Conservative film form and conservative political values march together toward the American utopia that it was Reagan's political genius to sell to a public ideologically nurtured on Hollywood fantasies. Reaganite political discourse and Hollywood film thus provide complementary visions of a very specific ideological fantasy.

Thus, *Top Gun*'s conservatism is seamless and total: the film perfectly reproduces the conservative discourses of the period on winning and individual competition, the military, gender and heterosexual coupling, the family, patriotism, and race. The year's number one film thus allows analysis of the dominant ideology

of the period which it serves to reproduce and strengthen. One of a series of popular conservative films, it anticipated the bombing of Libya and the Gulf War, while replicating the heroic fantasies of military success exposed in the Iran/Contra scandal: the revenge of the real which punctuated the military fantasies of the Hollywood White House. "It'll make a good movie someday," Reagan wistfully informed Oliver North when he was forced to dismiss him as the Iran/Contra scandal was exposed, and unless Tom Cruise continues his trek to the left (i.e. *Born on the Fourth of July*, *A Few Good Men*) perhaps Cruise himself will star in *Ollie North*, *Top Gun*, a potential cinematic replay of "Hollywood Politics, The Movie."

TO THE GULF WAR!

Top Gun, however, is only one of a series of conservative military films of the era (see Kellner and Ryan 1988; Britton 1986). Together, these films prepared the country for the Gulf War by celebrating the virtues of high-tech weaponry and military heroism, creating an Arab enemy to replace the Soviet nemesis, and promoting the specific foreign policy agendas of Reagan and Bush. Thus, just as late 1970s Hollywood films prepared the country for the conservative hegemony of the 1980s and early 1990s, so too did films of the Reagan and Bush era produce attitudes that would support the conservative and militarist policies of the hegemonic Republicans.

Iron Eagle I (1985) and *II* (1988) presciently anticipated the turn from a communist enemy to Arab nemesis. Together, the two *Iron Eagle* films portray the move toward detente with the Soviet Union and the production of a new super-enemy which eventually found its incarnation in Saddam Hussein and Iraq, uncannily anticipated in *Iron Eagle I* and *II*. The *Iron Eagle* films contributed to the anti-Arab sentiments of the day by presenting negative images of Arab "terrorists" and regimes. The first *Iron Eagle* film was aided by the Israeli government which provided F-16s, Phantoms, pilots to fly the planes, and Israeli military advisors. The film was funded by a rich Texan who "had never invested in films before" and wanted "to make non-exploitation action films with pro-American sentiments", (*Los Angeles Times*, July 31, 1985). The film got poor reviews, but did well at the box office, leading to two sequels that also promoted anti-Arab politics. It is not by accident that Hollywood films follow the trajectory of U.S. foreign policy: films are highly capital-intensive and the producers of the culture industries closely follow political and social trends. They are especially sensitive to winds of change, so when detente with the Soviet Union appears as an important political development, Hollywood shifts its focus accordingly (leading to a box office problem for Sylvester Stallone's *Rambo III* which picked the Soviets as enemies in his Afghan epic at the very moment of detente). Yet Hollywood adventure films must have an Enemy, an evil "Foreign Other," and both Hollywood and Reagan and Bush turned to Arab "villains" for the political demonization necessary for the narratives of Hollywood film and U.S. politics at the moment

when the Soviet Union was turning to Big Macs, pornography, crime, and capitalism.

The first *Iron Eagle* is more of a teen fantasy film than a full-blown military propaganda film à la *Top Gun* or an exercise in conservative ideological masturbation à la *Rambo*. The film opens with a high-tech air war between MIGs and U.S. fighter planes with a U.S. pilot shot down. An unnamed Arab country claims that the U.S. planes violated their air space, recalling the dogfighting between U.S. and Libyan fighter planes when Libya claimed air space for itself which the U.S. argued went beyond that allowed by international law. But in this version of the incident, the U.S. government covers over the capture and trial of the U.S. pilot, allowing him to languish in an Arab prison.

The son of the pilot is a would-be fighter pilot himself, deeply disappointed that he did not get admitted into the Air Force Academy because he failed a high school course during the time that he spent in Air Force flight simulators. The boy, Doug McMasters, his teenage friends, and a black retired pilot Chappy Sinclair (Lou Gossett, Jr.) conspire to save him. They use their airbase connections to get intelligence on the prison where the father is being held, steal two Air Force planes, and the son and Chappy undertake the father's rescue. In an incredibly hokey and implausible scenario, they do just that, knocking out half of the Arab army in the process.

Iron Eagle is extremely racist, portraying Arabs as subhuman sadists and villains. The Arab leader, who looks a lot like Saddam Hussein, is vicious and dictatorial. Arabs torture the captured U.S. pilot and sentence him to death arbitrarily and without any due process. In the final duel scene, the Arab leader himself commandeers a plane to fight the Americans after they liberate the captured pilot and the audience is positioned to cheer when the young teenager blows the Arab leader away. This scene replicates a disturbing trope, dominant in Hollywood adventure films from *Star Wars* to the present, in which audience pleasure is mobilized by images of total destruction. Such an audience is being preconditioned to crave the total obliteration of enemy countries like Iraq and such scenes thus produce pleasure in mass destruction – pleasure that would be mobilized by the computer videos of high-tech bombing in the Gulf War.

Iron Eagle II (1988) is more serious and more politically interesting. It enacts detente with the Soviet Union and the turn toward the Arab enemy. While the villain in *Iron Eagle I* looked like Saddam Hussein, the Arab enemy is obviously Iraq in the sequel. The plot involves a joint U.S./Soviet project to knock out an Arab secret nuclear bomb installation, fictively replaying the Israeli bombing of the Iraqi nuclear installation of 1981. Indeed, the film's credits end by giving "special thanks" to "the Ministry of Defense in the State of Israel" and thanks the Israeli Defence Forces and the Israeli Air Force. The film is an Israel-Canada co-production and if *Top Gun* can be legitimately seen as U.S. military propaganda, *Iron Eagle II* can be seen as Israeli propaganda.

The dramatic tension in the film is built around the conflicts between the U.S. and Soviet fighters, their surmounting of their former hostilities, and their pulling

together to defeat the common enemy (a fantasy that Bush and his war team realized, with some success, in the war against Iraq). The successful conclusion is delayed by the machinations of a paranoid U.S. general who still hates and distrusts the Russians and who does everything possible to sabotage the mission (he attempted to ensure that the mission would fail initially by picking the worst possible misfits for the U.S. team). This general represents the lingering obstacle to detente and his defeat and humiliation represents the need for new military thinking, new enemies, and new strategies in the post-Cold-War world.

Not surprisingly, the Iron Eagle team triumphs, totally obliterating the Arab (read: Iraqi) nuclear installation, ending the threat of a sneak nuclear attack or nuclear blackmail. While the white and black Americans and Russians learn to work and cooperate together, they turn their hostility on villainous Arabs who are blown away with the body counts that Hollywood used to reserve for commies. In *Iron Eagle II*, however, the Arab enemies are voiceless and for the most part faceless, thus dehumanizing Arabs as ciphers who threaten, but are less than human.

Once again, Hollywood follows the trajectory of U.S. foreign policy, uncannily anticipating the war against Iraq. Indeed, in his Thanksgiving 1990 trip to visit the U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, Bush expressed his concerns that Iraq had a nuclear capability that might be operative within a year as a justification for U.S. military action. This line was repeated by his administration officials over the next two days, but was dropped when every informed official indicated that it would be at least five to ten years before Iraq could obtain a credible nuclear facility (see Kellner 1992b, Chapter 2).

Other anti-Arab films of the Reagan/Bush era include *The Delta Force* (1986) which uses the format of the disaster film to vilify Arabs in a fictional account of a Palestinian hijacking of a passenger jet: the "terrorists" are thoroughly villainous and the film uses comic-book exaggeration to sketch out pictures of "good" Jews, Israelis, and Americans, menaced by the "evil" Palestinians. *Death Before Dishonor* (1987) portrays Arab terrorism against Israelis and then against the U.S. embassy and U.S. Marines in a fictional country of Jemel, thus linking the U.S. and Israel as common allies against Arab terrorism. *Steal the Sky* (1988) also positively portrays Israel, idealizing an Israeli attempt to steal a Soviet MIG from Iraq in the mid-1960s.

An ideologically bizarre fantasy film, *The Retaliator* (1986), also known as *Programmed to Kill*, portrays vicious Arabs who kill young tourists and then kidnap and torture American youths. A woman Arab sympathizer (Sandra Berdahl) is captured by the U.S. forces and transformed into a robot, sent back to assassinate the Arab terrorist leader, her former lover. She does this, but then turns on the U.S. forces, obliterating several villainous Americans in a bizarre mixture of anti-Arab and anti-U.S. intelligence agency narrative. Such an ideologically contradictory scenario articulates populist fears both of evil foreign Others and of evil perpetuated by one's own government in a primarily paranoid imaginary that sees evil everywhere. It also displays fears of women getting out of control, in the image of the

killer woman robot, who systematically murders terrorists and U.S. government agents alike.²⁴

Navy Seals (1990) celebrates the high-tech commando forces which, according to one report, played a key role in the Gulf War (see *Newsweek* "Secret Warriors," June 17, 1991). Once again Arabs are dehumanized as fanatic terrorists, possessing deadly Stinger missiles which threaten innocent civilians. The SEAL team (named for their operations on SEa, Air, and Land) embody all the virtues of courage and efficiency and obliterate literally hundreds of Arabs, previewing the slaughter of the Iraqis by the high-tech military in the Gulf War. Like *Rambo*, *Navy Seals* and other anti-Arab films such as *Iron Eagle*, *The Delta Force* and *Death Before Dishonor* portray prolonged and detailed scenes of torture, to present Arabs as savage criminals and to position the audience against such villains.²⁵

All of these films dehistoricize actual historical conflicts and present struggles between Arabs and the West as a battle between civilization and barbarism in an indeterminate and mythical space. Prince (1993) documents how the anti-Arab thrillers "avoid locating the story in clear geographic terms" (ibid. 245). This indeterminacy functions to generally stigmatize Arabs and to provide villain scenarios that can be mobilized in any number of political interventions against, say, Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya, or whoever. As Prince concludes:

The vague geographical and political specifications accruing to the national and cultural conflicts dramatized in these films operates to render them in strongly ideological terms, in which the enemy occupies no terrain specifiable on a map's coordinates but is rather a hazy, nebulous, threatening Other, a projection of political and cultural anxieties that are stripped of their historical basis and are assigned to regions of the world in generalized, superficial and essentially mythological terms.

(ibid.: 246)

These representations of Arabs in the contemporary Hollywood cinema are extremely racist and are disturbingly similar to perceptions of Jews in fascist films. In a variety of 1970s political thrillers, Arabs are portrayed as fanatic "terrorists" who coldly murder innocent victims (*Black Sunday*, *Nighthawks*) and lack human feeling. In corporate conspiracy films of the 1970s and 1980s, they are presented, or are alluded to, as greedy capitalists (*Rollover*, *Network*, *The Formula*, *Wrong is Right*, etc.). Thus, Arabs are serving as new villain stereotypes in Hollywood films and by the 1980s were the privileged target of Hollywood manicheanism (see Shaheen 1984).

Such stereotypes obviously dehumanize Arabs, presenting them as violent and villainous. In general, the anti-Arab films of the past years combine racist and chauvinist ideologies that present Arabs as the incarnation of evil and Americans as the embodiment of good. This vision replays what Edward Said (1978) described as "Orientalism" which establishes the virtues of the West by means of delineation of differences between the "civilized" West and the "savage" Orient which was portrayed as irrational, barbaric, underdeveloped, and inferior to the rational,

refined, and humane West. In *Navy Seals*, the film opens with cuts between a terrorist attack on a U.S. Navy helicopter and a wedding scene in which a black member of the group is getting married. The images set the scene for contrast between representations of the civilized and personalized Americans and the savage and depersonalized Arabs. The black SEAL is killed and a long funeral underscores the value of life in the West, in contrast to the seeming disdain for life in the Middle East. The scenes also transfer racism from blacks to Arabs, presenting the black in positive terms against the viciously represented Arabs.

Arabs were thus the villain of choice for Hollywood adventure films and the conservative U.S. administrations. Hollywood orientalism helped produce negative images of Arabs that Bush could mobilize in demonizing the Iraqis in the Persian Gulf War. In these same adventure film scenarios, women tended to be decentered and a pornographic erotics of violence replaced sexual eroticism, much as the cool killers of the Persian Gulf War were shown pornography films before going out on their "turkey shoots" against the literally defenseless Iraqis, showering their bombs on military and civilian targets in spasms of ejaculatory violence lit up by flashing infra-red photos of anti-aircraft fire exploding in orgasmic splendor. This erotics of violence, visible daily in the Gulf War, was anticipated in the video games and war films of the preceding years and has helped produce a pornographic military culture that may produce even more monstrous films and foreign policy adventures in the years to come.

And yet critical examination of these pro-war and anti-Arab films exposes their simplicity and puerile childishness. *Iron Eagle*, for instance, is constantly deconstructing its conservative ideology. When the teenage son learns that his father is being held prisoner in the Middle East, his black teenage friend tells him not to worry, because "President Peanut" is out and the new President, "Ronald Raygun," will take decisive action and rescue his father. Well, the government does nothing, requiring the teen heroes to carry out the rescue mission themselves (the real Reagan would, of course, realize the fantasy of attacking Arab enemies in his Libya bombing of 1986). Thus the film inadvertently conveys the message that the current conservative government is incompetent and uncaring (approximately the truth in this case). Moreover, this rightist fantasy constantly portrays the military as a bunch of bunglers, who are constantly being manipulated by the teenagers who are able to steal crucial intelligence and two fighter planes for their mission.

Iron Eagle's scenario is so hyperbolic, so ridiculous, that it reveals itself as sheer nonsense, as a totally implausible teen fantasy picture that allows teenagers to be heroes, to identify with characters that carry out heroic actions that complacent adults are unable to do. This specific fantasy structure, though, limits its identity positions to teenagers and perhaps black men silly enough to identify with Cappy. No self-respecting adult, however, could identify with the fantasy or accept its narrative terms as plausible. *Iron Eagle* thus presents itself as an extremely limited teen fantasy, of limited ideological use.

Other anti-Arab films also deconstruct their own opposition between the "savage" Middle East and the "civilized" West. While the West supposedly values life

and the Middle East devalues it, the films indulge in the slaughter of countless Arabs. One is supposed to cheer such slaughter as a cleansing of irredeemable evil, but the brutality and repetitiveness of the high-tech massacres indicate that the true savages are those in the West who make such simplistic barbaric films, which prepare the way for real life high-tech massacres, as the genocidal U.S. war against Iraq.

Read diagnostically, even right-wing films can be seen to expose their contradictions and to undercut the ideologies that they affirm. One could do a deconstructive reading of the rightist fantasy *Red Dawn*, that features a Soviet-led invasion of the U.S., which shows the ludicrousness of right-wing anti-communist fears and obsessions (see Kellner 1991). Such ideological fantasies may be of sufficient complexity, or riven by internal conflicts, to produce oppositional readings against the grain, while more modernist films like *Nashville*, *Blade Runner*, *Do the Right Thing* or *Zelig* may require multivalent readings to do justice to their complexity.

A film like *Top Gun*, by contrast, is an ideology machine that mobilizes desire into certain ideological positions and utilizes narrative to privilege some positions (i.e. success, winning, romance), while negatively presenting other positions (i.e. quitting, losing, not being a team player, etc.). The narrative attempts to position the audience to identify with certain characters and then produces obstacles to their attaining the goal that the audience is positioned to want them to obtain (i.e. getting the girl, becoming top gun). When the narrative allows the audience desire to be satisfied by producing the romantic couple and military heroism at the end, the audience is positioned to experience these victories as good and to identify with the values and behavior celebrated.

Yet some qualifications should be made. The audience may resist the attempt at manipulation and the text may fail to obtain its ideological ends. A film like *Top Gun* is successful, however, as attested to by its box office reception and positive reception by audiences. Some films may be more conflicted and contradictory than a successful ideology machine like *Top Gun*. Indeed, many Hollywood films are neither "conservative" nor "liberal" because they want to play it both ways, to gain the maximum possible audience by offending nobody. Predominantly conservative texts may contain liberal features or deconstructively undermine their own conservatism, and liberal films during the 1970s were constantly reproducing conservative discourses (see the discussion of corporate and political conspiracy films and the Jane Fonda films in Kellner and Ryan 1988). In any case, the artifacts of media culture should be read in their specific social contexts to decipher their meanings and messages and to appraise their effects. I amplify this notion of a diagnostic and contextual cultural studies in the following chapter, where I will also more fully elucidate and develop some of the theoretical categories introduced here as well as my conception of cultural studies.

NOTES

- 1 The process of "transcoding" describes how social discourses are translated into media texts, as when *Easy Rider* transcodes 1960s countercultural discourses of freedom, individualism, and community in cinematic images and scenes, when, for instance, the bikers drive through nature with the soundtrack playing "Born to be Wild," or "Wasn't Born to Follow." See the explication and use of the term in Kellner and Ryan 1988.
- 2 John Thompson (1984, 1990) examines classical and recent theories of ideology and finds that many of them sever the link between ideology and domination, and therefore rob ideology of the critical edge that it had in Marx and other neo-Marxists. I would therefore agree with Thompson on the need to link the concept of ideology with theories of hegemony and domination, and thus to delimit its application to ideas and positions which serve functions of legitimation, mystification, and class domination that assure the domination of the ruling class, gender, and race over other classes and groups within society, rather than equating *all* ideas or political positions with ideology (see Kellner 1978 for an earlier presentation of this position).
- 3 Attempts within cultural studies to downplay the importance of ideology critique, such as Fiske (1993), play into the hands of an establishment that has for decades attempted to abolish the concept of ideology as too political and politicizing. The "end of ideology" debate within the social sciences and apolitical approaches to literature, philosophy, and the other humanities have all attempted to banish the concept of ideology. Given the centrality of the concept of ideology to earlier traditions of cultural studies, it is ironic that some of those identifying with cultural studies are now trying to put aside one of its central and defining concepts.
- 4 The collection was first published as part of the series of *Working Papers on Cultural Studies* 10 (1977) and then republished.
- 5 *Camera Politica* (Kellner and Ryan 1988) took seriously this full range of struggles and attempted to demonstrate how the current struggles of U.S. society and politics were articulated in popular film. We also stressed the need to see that conflicts between liberals and conservatives for the control over society are highly important, as are the class conflicts that were the focus of the earlier moment of Marxian ideology critique.
- 6 In the *New York Times* (November 27, 1993: A1), there is a story concerning the emergence of a new conservative cable TV network that is called "National Empowerment Television." The conservatives organizing this project prefer the term "populist" to that of "conservative," thus attempting to coopt another term once (and still) deployed by the Left and progressives.
- 7 For more detailed discussions of ideology as hegemony, see Kellner 1978, 1979, 1990a, and 1992b. My studies here build on this earlier work where I explicate these concepts in more detail.
- 8 Thompson (1984) examines a large number of contemporary theories of ideology which want to fundamentally define ideology in terms of language and a discourse theory. Against this position I wish to include image, symbol, myth, and narrative in the repertoire of ideological instruments, and thus combine discourse theory with myth-symbol criticism and narrative analysis in order to note the ways that images, scenes, and narratives attempt to convey ideology. A more recent move in cultural studies, influenced by some off-the-cuff remarks by Foucault and arguments of Deleuze and Guattari, would reject the concept of ideology altogether on the grounds that it is reductive, economistic, and of less importance than the apparatus of domination and control – which is then concluded to be the proper target of radical critique; Fiske (1993) takes up this argument. Although it is surely valuable to analyze such institutions and practices that reproduce social domination, simply throwing out the concept of ideology critique is theoretically disabling. Moreover, ideology is involved in the reproduction and functioning of precisely these institutions, discourses, and practices that Foucault

- and others wish to analyze. Instead of throwing the concept out, what is needed is reconstruction of the concept of ideology and expansion of ideology critique that traces its functions and effects in social life.
- 9 For recent works in critical pedagogy that stress the need for critical media literacy, see Giroux 1992 and 1994, and McLaren *et al.* forthcoming.
 - 10 John Fiske (1993) develops a peculiar critique of what he calls "ideology" theory that he argues covers over the fact that it is "power" that actually oppresses people and not ideology. In fact, as Gramsci, the Frankfurt School, British cultural studies, and others have argued for decades, it is a combination of overt power (i.e. forces of violence and oppression) and ideology that maintains the existing social order and that serves interests of domination and oppression. Indeed, ideology arguably has power effects and to exclude culture/ideology from power, or to too sharply distinguish between the two, seems perverse from the Foucaultian perspectives that Fiske is pursuing in his latest work. In any case, by attempting to exclude ideology critique from cultural studies, Fiske weakens the project, depriving it of a crucial weapon of critique. Furthermore, by uncritically adopting a "post-structuralist" position on power (which rejects structural perspectives), Fiske covers over the fact that there are obdurate and oppressive *structures* that oppress women, people of color, and other oppressed groups and that ideology covers over, idealizes, or naturalizes these structures. Thus, while post-structuralist perspectives on power, such as Foucault's, can contribute to a more sophisticated social theory and cultural studies, simply throwing out structural analysis and ideology critique undermines the project of cultural studies which should draw on structuralist *and* post-structuralist theory, ideology critique *and* analysis of the institutions and practices of power and domination.
 - 11 In some major recent examples of cultural studies published in the United States, one notes a dearth of close reading of actual media culture in Brantlinger 1990; Grossberg 1992; Aronowitz 1993; and Fiske 1993. There is almost no sustained reading of popular music in Grossberg 1992, despite the fact that the book purports to be about rock music; likewise Aronowitz's *Roll Over Beethoven* (1993) fails to concretely engage media texts in favor of discussion of theory and some of the theoretical and political debates around cultural studies. Although Fiske discusses the Elvis phenomenon (1993), he does not engage Elvis's music, nor does he really discuss the texts of media culture in any sustained fashion, or provide any close readings. Whereas decentering of textual analysis might be a useful corrective to cultural studies that in some forms were excessively textualist, I believe that it is useful to utilize textual analysis as an important part of cultural studies, and thus in the following chapters, there will be many close readings of cultural texts. I also attempt to illuminate the effectivity of media culture, whereas Fiske seems to think that media culture has no effects, that it is people's appropriation or use of media culture that is of crucial importance for cultural studies. I believe by contrast that analyzing the texts of media culture is useful in discerning their effects, though I admit that the audience is something of a sphinx and that it is impossible to ascertain precisely what effects the various domains and artifacts of media culture actually have on their audience. Moreover, general theories of media effects are probably empty and problematic, though one can trace the effects of some artifacts like *Rambo*, *Slacker*, *Beavis and Butt-Head*, rap, media representations of Gulf War, Madonna, and other key phenomena as I do in the following studies, in which I provide some new perspectives on the vexed question of media effects and a new research program to detect effects of media culture figures, texts, and spectacles.
 - 12 As late as 1992 or 1993, a disinformation campaign took place alleging that a KGB file contained documents indicating that Vietnam had indeed purposely held U.S. POWs hostage after the war, a myth perpetuated for decades by Ross Perot, other paranoids on the right, and those who wanted to block normalization of relations with Vietnam as

- revenge for U.S. military defeat in the region. For exposure of the 1992 disinformation campaign, see Bruce Franklin's article in *The Nation* (May 10, 1993: 616).
- 13 Jeffords notes that *Missing in Action* (1984) also shows the hero renouncing women and sexuality, inscribing the hero in the fascist scenario of sexual purity, subliminally identifying his efficacy with asceticism (1989: 132f.). Such representations point to parallels in Theweleit's analysis of male fascist warriors in Nazi Germany (1987).
 - 14 Jeffords (1989: 130ff.) notes that there are four scenes where Rambo emerges from water to accomplish heroic action, thus enacting mythic purification rites, primal images also present in the slow-motion climax of *Missing in Action*, when Chuck Norris emerges from water, machine-gun blasting, to destroy his enemies.
 - 15 "The Rambo films 'work' for American teenagers and children who have little or no knowledge or interest in its Reaganist statement. *Rambo*'s spectacular action seems, too, to have worked in tandem with its heroic masculinity in making it extraordinary popular from Iceland to Yugoslavia to Lebanon" (Warner 1992: 684-5).
 - 16 "*Rambo* is the biggest crowd-participation movie in a long while. Audiences really scream when Mr Stallone's John Rambo is tortured. They cheer and cheer when he embarks on his revenge" (*New York Times*, May 30, 1985). And: "in the Loop's United Artists theater I witnessed a cheering of human carnage that would have embarrassed the Romans" (*Chicago Tribune*, June 12, 1985). As the summer progressed, enthusiastic audience response seemed even to increase: "In movie theaters, young enthusiasts jump to their feet chanting 'U.S.A., U.S.A.' as Johnny Rambo blasts another batch of the enemy to the world beyond" (*Reuters Ltd.*, July 27, 1985). Liberal critics, by contrast, counted the acts of violence and attacked the film.
 - 17 In another 'sound-test warm-up for a radio address, Reagan had said: "'My fellow Americans, I am pleased to tell you I have just signed legislation which outlaws Russia forever. The bombing begins in five minutes.' The White House insisted that the quote was a joke and off-the-record. But press accounts of the comment infuriated Moscow, frightened Europeans and gave Democrats some unexpected political ammunition" (*Reuters Ltd.*, June 30, 1985).
 - 18 One psychologist noted:

In my psychiatric practice, I see more and more evidence among children of playing war. And I see more and more of it tied to television and the movies. I had a 15-year-old kid from Downstate Illinois in my office last week who'd seen 'Rambo' nine days in a row. He'd tried to sign up with the military, wearing a headband and an American flag like the character in the movie, and he was crushed when they wouldn't take him.

Chicago Tribune, June 16, 1985)

- 19 As it turned out, the film was not banned, but predictions of the film generating violence materialized:

A gang of youths fought with police inside a movie theater which was showing *Rambo*, police said today. About 50 youngsters forced their way into a theater in Gloucester, western England, through a fire exit. Fighting broke out when 22 police officers were called in to restore order, a spokesman said. Seven people were being detained, he added.

(Reuters Ltd., September 1, 1985)

20 *Rambo*

is proving as successful in France as it was last summer in the United States, breaking opening day records in Paris. . . . *Rambo* opened to 342,082 admissions in France on 340 screens, another opening day record for the territory. A spokesman for Tri-Star Pictures said *Rambo* was also breaking records in other countries where it has opened.

Proprietary to the United Press International (November 8, 1985)

21 Most curiously:

Pirated videos of *Rambo* circulating in the Middle East carry French and Arabic subtitles with a different storyline. Set in the Philippines in 1943, the subtitled version has Rambo returning, after escaping two years earlier, to rescue World-War-II POWs still held by the Japanese. All dates are changed accordingly, despite action scenes with rocket-firing helicopters and other high-tech weaponry. As a U.S. Soldier tells Rambo on the English soundtrack 'you made a hell of a reputation for yourself in 'Nam', the subtitles read: 'You made quite a name for yourself in Guadalcanal' (scene of a major pacific battle of World War Two). 'It's obviously been done for political reasons,' said a diplomat who viewed the pirated tape, noting that the subtitles delete all references to Vietnam and the Soviet Union. The manager of one of Cyprus' largest illegal video houses speculated the film had been 'sanitized' for distribution in Middle East countries like Syria which maintain close ties with the Soviet Union and might otherwise be offended by *Rambo*.

(Reuters North European Service, August 26, 1985)

- 22 I sometimes give a very short lecture on the mind of Ronald Reagan, in which I point to the ways that he assimilated the generic codes and worldview of the Hollywood western, war film, melodrama, and other genres, that dichotomized the universe into the forces of good vs. evil, which presented "us" as "good" and "them" as "evil," and which thus repressed any negative and aggressive inclinations in one's own country and psyche.
- 23 On the concept of "technowar," see Gibson's (1986) description of high-tech systems of warfare in Vietnam; I draw on this concept in Chapter 5.
- 24 Some of Steven Seagal's films also villainize American officials who are shown to be duplicitous and criminal, operating outside the rule of law and engaging in criminal activities. In *Above the Law* (1988), U.S. government officials are shown involved in the sale of drugs and involved in terrorism, while *Under Siege* (1992) shows renegade military and intelligence figures leading an effort to take over a U.S. nuclear submarine, while the government officials themselves are shown as duplicitous and amoral. Such films transcode radical critique of U.S. foreign policy and the U.S. government and serve as counterpoles to the conservative films. Both, however, operate with the same comic-book manicheanism.
- 25 *Not Without My Daughter* (1990) presents Iranians and the Iranian revolution in totally negative terms, featuring the story of an American woman who married an Iranian. Her husband turns into a monster during a trip back to Iran in 1984 and the wife undertakes the difficult task of escape from her husband to flee the country with her daughter.