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Swarthy Hordes and Other Aliens

For centuries the land, labor, and resources of peoples in Asia, Africa, and Latin America have been forcibly expropriated by European and North American colonizers. To justify the violence and pillage that have long been a necessary part of these undertakings, defenders of colonialism and neocolonialism have either denied that such crimes ever occurred or have portrayed the victimized populations as the victimizers. Thus, for generations it was taught that darker-skinned peoples were prone to savagery and violence, were incapable of self-governance, and were in need of the White man's uplifting rule. For centuries such images of Third World peoples have been propagated in Western society. In North America, racism was embraced by the early Puritan settlers who slaughtered Native American Indians in order to consign their souls to what the Puritans felt was their proper place in hell, thus clearing the land for incorporation by the Puritan leaders and the settlers who followed.[1]

Colonialist atrocities were going on for many centuries before the invention of cinematography and television. The racist images of Third World peoples found in the entertainment media, therefore, cannot be seen as the cause of the atrocities. But in their relatively short history, the media have done their part in making Western imperialism seem like an okay thing.

The Wagon Circle

Over the decades, first the motion-picture industry and then television have produced a wide variety of action-adventure films that contain the same basic scenario. The enemies are Indians on the American plains or

Africans and Asians in the jungle or alien monsters from outer space or Communist terrorists from Russia or ethnic criminals in the inner city. The homeland, the safe place, is American White Anglo-Protestant, or at least White. It is inhabited by people who are sane and care about life. The enemies are maniacal and careless with lives, including their own.

In a wonderful article entitled "Ambush at Kamikaze Pass," Tom Engelhardt notes the underlying common theme of the cowboy movie, the war movie, and the adventure film. They all portray the non-Caucasian world through the lens of the colonizer, offering us an archetypal scene: a circle of covered wagons or sometimes a fort or camp wherein humanity rests warm and secure. Suddenly, on the periphery emerge the screeching savages to kill the humans for no reason other than to quench their own bloodthirsty propensities. The White men, be they cowboys or cavalry, ready their rifles, knowing what to do: exterminate the attackers. This scenario "forces us to flip history on its head. It makes the intruder exchange places in our eyes with the intruded upon."[2] In real life, of course, the Indians faced ruthless invaders who were ready to exterminate them. But in these films, it is the Indians "who must invade, intrude, break in upon the circle—a circle which contains all those whom the film has already certified as 'human.' "[3]

For several decades this script, in different costume, was reenacted in movies dealing with Third World peoples. Whether in the Amazon jungle, the North African desert, the Sudan, the Transvaal, the South Pacific, or Indochina, the scene is the same: a group of Whites (usually Americans) fight off the swarthy hordes, killing enormous numbers of (Red, Brown, Yellow, Black) "devils," while, to the tune of plaintive music, losing but a few of their precious own. The swarthy hordes throw themselves against vastly superior firepower, not out of any desperate concern to defend their homelands and their people, but because they are propelled by a fanatical lust to kill and destroy. As Engelhardt notes: "It is not even 'bravery' as we in the West know it (though similar acts by Whites are portrayed heroically)."[4]

Lacking a normal range of human sensibilities, the enemy has no regard for its own lives. This is made clear to us in flicks like *The Halls of Montezuma* (1950): a captured Japanese officer is implored by U.S. Marine hero Richard Widmark: "You have a future—to rebuild Japan—to live for." But the smirky Nipponese, immune to the lures of tomorrow's Toyota market, replies: "Captain, you seem to have forgotten, my people for centuries have thought not of living well but dying well. Have you not studied our judo, our science . . . We always take the obvious and reverse it. Death is the basis of our strength." And to prove his point he commits hara-kiri first chance he gets.[5]

Meanwhile, Back at the Reality

. . . We came in sight of the camp of the friendly Indians aforementioned, and we were ordered by Colonel Chivington to attack the same, which was accordingly done. . . . The village of the Indians consisted of from one hundred to one hundred and thirty lodges, and, so far as I am able to judge, of from five hundred to six hundred souls, the majority of which were women and children; in going over the battleground the next day I did not see a body of man, woman, or child but was scalped, and in many instances their bodies were mutilated in the most horrible manner—men, women, and children's private parts cut out, etc. . . .

When it was day the soldiers returned to the fort—considering that they had done a deed of Roman valor, in murdering so many [Indians] in their sleep, where infants were torn from their mothers' breast and hacked to pieces in the presence of their parents and the pieces thrown into the fire . . . and other sucklings then cut, stuck, and pierced.

The memoirs of an American soldier quoted in Irving J. Sloan, *Our Violent Past* (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 17, 20–21.

Imperialism has never recognized the humanity of its victims. By treating the colonized as subhuman, the colonizers can more easily justify exterminating them. John Wayne summed it up in one of his horse operas, *The Searchers* (1956): "There's humans and then there's Comanches." In World War II films, Japanese soldiers, played by Chinese-American actors, were portrayed as pitiless, sadistic demons. Hence, killing them posed no great moral problems. As the sergeant in *Guadalcanal Diary* (1943) explains: "Besides, they're not people." In that same film, one Marine asks about the enemy soldiers: "Where are the rest of the seven dwarfs?" Another answers: "They live in the trees like apes."[6]

In earlier times, imperialistic extermination could assume a more endearing form. In *Wee Willie Winkie* (1937), little Shirley Temple asks her grandfather, the British colonel, why he was mad at Khoda Khan, leader of the "warlike" tribes on India's border. "We're not mad at Khoda Khan. England wants to be friends with all her peoples. But if we don't shoot him, he'll shoot us," the colonel tenderly replies.[7]

In *The Real Glory* (1939) Gary Cooper plays an Army doctor who solves all the medical and military problems in the Philippine islands in the wake of the Spanish-American War. The movie offers not a hint of why the U.S. Army was in the Philippines, and nothing about how U.S. forces invaded the islands—crushing the Filipino liberation army that was fighting for independence, and killing hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children in the process—thereby paving the way for the takeover of the land, labor, and natural resources by U.S. firms. Instead, we get a benign image of U.S. imperialism in which the victimizer is transformed into the culturally superior benefactor. Perhaps only coincidentally, this film enjoyed a heavy television rerun in various cities in October 1990 at a time when President Bush was building up his interventionist forces in the Middle East, and again in January 1991 when the U.S. war against Iraq began.

The arrival of television by the early 1950s in almost every American home gave new life to old war films and even more so to the cowboy movies and matinee serials of the 1930s and 1940s. With their simple action plots and minimal picture frames, these relics were easily and inexpensively recycled for television. In short time, one of these heroes, Hopalong Cassidy, was featured in a new made-for-TV series that also generated a lucrative spin-off market for "Hoppy" toys, clothes, and other items. Hopalong's success cleared a trail to television for other movie and radio cowboy heroes, including Gene Autry, the Cisco Kid, and the Lone Ranger.[8] These juvenile westerns usually were free of the gore and savagery of the more adult cowboy-and-Indian slaughter flicks. But they were far from being merely entertainment. They supported such values as nationalism, conventional gender roles, and a particular view of law and order. Some of the commandments in Gene Autry's "Cowboy Code" (sent to little wranglers who watched him) were:

> A cowboy is a good worker.
>
> A cowboy respects womanhood, his parents, and the laws of his country.
>
> A cowboy is a patriot.

The statement of standards put out by the production company that gave us "The Lone Ranger" said in part:

> The Lone Ranger is motivated by love of country—a desire to help those who are building the West. . . . Patriotism means service to a community; voting; . . . the development of schools and churches. Patriotism includes also an obligation to maintain a home in which good citizens may be reared. Patriotism means respect for law and order, and the selection of officials who merit such respect. Patriotism consists of the preservation of the things for which our ancestors fought and died.[9]

George Trendle, creator of "The Lone Ranger" program, sees the masked rider as a patriotic, clean-living, God-fearing preserver of traditional values.[10]

Tonto, Gunga Din, and All That

In his struggle against evil and in his campaign to promote the work ethic and "build the West," the Lone Ranger was never without his trusty Indian sidekick, Tonto. Occasionally Tonto displayed a certain native resourcefulness, as when arriving in the nick of time to rescue his boss from a dangerous predicament. But Tonto (whose name means "stupid" in Spanish) rarely had an idea of his own that reached beyond the concerns of his White boss. His response usually consisted of a deep-voiced, monosyllabic concurring grunt: "Nnnnnnnh," not unlike the mooing of a steer. It would have been unimaginable for him to suggest that he and the Lone Ranger devote effort to righting the terrible wrongs committed against Tonto's people by those who were "building the West." When the dynamic duo took off across the wild brush with a hearty "Hi-Yo Silver," it was Tonto who swallowed dust, riding several paces behind his boss, on a horse that looked almost lackluster compared to the Lone Ranger's utterly magnificent steed.

In real life, the imperialists often manage to win the collaboration of some indigenous peoples. Because of the bleak options facing them, poverty, displacement, or tribal rivalries, the colonized can sometimes be coerced or bribed into joining the colonizer's ranks. In other words, instead of killing all the natives, the White conquerors use some in struggles against other segments of the native population.

The Lone Ranger and Tonto offer us a familiar media prototype of that kind of domesticated imperialist relationship. When Third-World people are not portrayed as heartless savages, they are cast as devoted subordinates, finding fulfillment in selfless service to or loving association with a White "superior," elevated to dependency upon that superior.[11]

Frequently the swarthy sidekick sacrifices his life for his White companion at the appropriate moment. The pathetic little hero of *Gunga Din* (1939) is shot to death while blowing his bugle to save the

The patriotic, clean-living Lone Ranger "builds the West" and vanquishes evil with the assistance of his faithful Indian companion, Tonto, who always rides several paces behind his White boss.

British imperialist troops from an ambush by his own compatriots. The Black trainer in *Body and Soul* (1947) gives his life to prevent his White boxing champion from throwing the big fight. The Mau Mau member falls on Punji sticks to save the child of his White friend in *Something of*

Value (1957). A Black officer in *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982) kills himself rather than harm his leader, Captain Kirk.

Usually, the darker peoples are used as little more than a background against which the White principals engage in their adventures. "The indigenous population served as nameless bearers to lug the imported paraphernalia of civilization along jungle trails," observes Robert Hart. "When the story needed to be invigorated by vignettes of incidental action, one or another of the expendable porters would topple off a cliff or be eaten by crocodiles, whereupon the foreign explorers would glance down and commiserate: 'Poor devil—what was he carrying?' "[12]

The numerous Tarzan movies of yore featured a Caucasian who lived like a native rather than a colonizer, albeit with a civilized White wife who had acquired a taste for roughing it. Yet Tarzan was unlike any native. He was a jungle superhero who outdid the savages single-handedly. And he did it all without a dark-skinned sidekick to assist him, at least without a human one. For Tarzan did have Cheeta, the chimpanzee who was allowed to display a bit more independence and pizzazz than Tonto. On occasion, Cheeta and a whole phalanx of other wild animals, including elephants, would respond to Tarzan's call and join him in a frontal assault upon his adversaries. Why these animals felt so partial toward Tarzan as opposed to other Homo sapiens was never made clear. Perhaps one is to understand that creatures of whatever species are happy to serve White superheroes.

In response to the protests of minority and progressive groups and the changing climate of opinion that came with the Vietnam era, the media began to offer a few improved scripts about Third World peoples. Films like *Little Big Man* (1970) and *Soldier Blue* (1970) and an occasional television drama actually showed sympathy for the Native American Indian and stood history back on its feet—for a few wobbly moments—by portraying the U.S. Army as the exterminating aggressors and the Indians as the victims. In *Soldier Blue*, the main protagonists are still White. In *Little Big Man*, a film about the plight of the Cheyenne, the hero is still a White man (Dustin Hoffman). In any case, Native Americans are portrayed as intelligent, human, and humane.

"Indian films" disappeared for the next twenty years, Hollywood having decided that the subject had no further commercial viability. In defiance of that market wisdom, Jim Wilson and Kevin Costner produced the three-hour epic *Dances with Wolves* (1990) about a Union Army cavalry lieutenant who finds himself drawn into a Lakota Sioux tribe and is condemned as a renegade by his army superiors. The script was written by Costner, who plays the White lead character. He is seldom off the screen and becomes tiresome in his omnipresence. Yet the film has some unusual and redeeming features: all the Sioux and Pawnee roles are played by Native American actors; the teepees and clothing are of authentic design; about one-fourth of the dialogue is in Lakota, with English subtitles; and the Sioux are portrayed as sympathetic human beings rather than screeching savages. (The Pawnee are the wicked ones in this film.)

Present-day struggles of Indians to retain control of their tribal life, reservation lands, and fishing rights have been accorded little attention by the make-believe media. The few exceptions would include *Loyalties* (1987), a Canadian film, which showed contemporary Native Americans to be imperfect but recognizable humans rather than either bloodthirsty or noble savages. It played well in Canada but could not get distribution in the United States. Similarly, *Powwow Highway* (1989) won a standing ovation at the New York Film Festival but no real distribution in the country.

More of the Same—With Some Exceptions

Whatever new developments in history, there is no shortage of the old colonial stuff in the make-believe media. Witness the way the motion-picture industry continues to treat Africa. There are a thousand fascinating stories that could be told about Africa. There are African mythologies and legends; Africans who built cities and empires long before the Europeans ever set foot upon their continent; Africans who suffered the loss of loved ones to slavers, experienced the destruction of their tribes and loss of tribal lands, and today face the famine and misery that is part of colonialism's legacy; Africans who have struggled with great courage for independence and revolution; Africans who try to hold their families and cultures together, confront generational and gender conflicts arising from changing social conditions, live in modern African cities and deal with the problems of urbanization, and fall in love and have dreams for themselves and their children; Africans who are underpaid laborers yet organize labor unions, churches, communities, and businesses, fight to get an education, and build mass political organizations under oppressive conditions.

A thousand powerful stories could come out of Africa, but when Hollywood finally did turn its attention to that land in recent years, all it could produce was *Out of Africa* (1985), a film that says nothing about Africans. *Out of Africa* is a major production about a minor literary figure, Isak Dinesen, an upper-crust Dane (Meryl Streep). It focuses on Dinesen's tribulations as owner of a plantation in Africa. She is surrounded by natives who—like so many Gunga Dins—seem only concerned with serving her, addressing her reverently as "Sahib." The heroine's lover, played by Robert Redford, shows her the "real Africa," the Africa he loves, by taking her up in his airplane. What we see is the same old safari-flick footage of herds of zebras and giraffes running across the plains. His real Africa has no Africans in it.

Several years later came *White Mischief* (1988), another film with an African setting, which concentrates on a decadent colony of rich English. This movie offers adultery, murder, and a courtroom trial. What it doesn't have is any Africans—except servants and other such human background fixtures. To judge from such media productions, Africans lead lives of little interest to anyone.

As with Africa, so with India: in the early 1980s a spate of dramas about colonial India were released, including the British-made motion picture *Passage to India* (1984) and the television series "The Jewel in the Crown," both of which also focus almost exclusively on colonial Whites as the principals. The Indians we see are usually members of unthinking crowds or, again, are mute servants and lackeys who compose the social scenery of imperialism. *Passage to India* does recognize that colonizers might treat indigenous peoples unjustly. But the injustice is confined to an atypical incident: an emotionally unstable English woman falsely accuses an Indian man of having raped her, a charge that is exposed as bogus in court. Given the history of British imperialism, with its forced destruction of India's textile and manufacturing industries and forced impoverishment of India's population; its expropriation of India's lands, labor, markets, and capital; and its executions and massacres of India's resistance fighters, one easily could have found a more substantial example of colonial injustice than the old sexist standby of a woman falsely accusing a man of rape.

In *Gandhi* (1982), directed by Richard Attenborough and distributed by Columbia Pictures, we have a film about India that actually focuses on Indians—in particular, a great Indian leader, the struggle he waged against British rule, and his attempts to maintain peace between Muslims and Hindus. Here is a motion picture of quality that is absorbing and at times even inspiring. It does not flinch from showing the brutality of British colonialism, including the unprovoked massacre of hundreds of peaceful demonstrators and, in another sequence, the bloody beatings of scores of nonviolent protestors.

But *Gandhi* fails to explain what the British are doing in India. The film never mentions that the imperialists are pillaging the country for the enrichment of western investors. It never suggests that the awful poverty of India is linked to the immense wealth being extracted from that country. One is left with the impression that (1) the British occupy far-off countries just so they might strut about with swagger sticks and lord it over other folks, and (2) they simply lack the decency to go home when asked to.

The film emphasizes Gandhi's nonviolence without mentioning that his movement failed to bring about the social revolution needed to wipe out the poverty that today is still the lot of multitudes in India. *Gandhi* gives little attention to the organized popular struggle that won India's independence. Instead, a single individual is made to be the architect of India's freedom. Gandhi is presented as something of a saint. Little is said about the curious forms of his asceticism and the problems created within the movement by his religious obscurantism and his oddly preindustrial vision of India's future.[13]

Another rare anticolonialist motion picture, also directed by Richard Attenborough, is *Cry Freedom* (1987), the story of a White South African journalist who sides with the antiapartheid leader Steven Biko. The oppressions and terrors suffered by Black protagonists, including Biko, are treated seriously in the film, though given far less attention than the lesser travails of the journalist and his family. Perhaps the best way to reach White audiences is by showing how apartheid oppresses White people of conscience as well as others. However, since Black South Africans have faced far greater risks with fewer material resources at their command, one might expect a well-intentioned film to make their struggle the dramatic focal point.

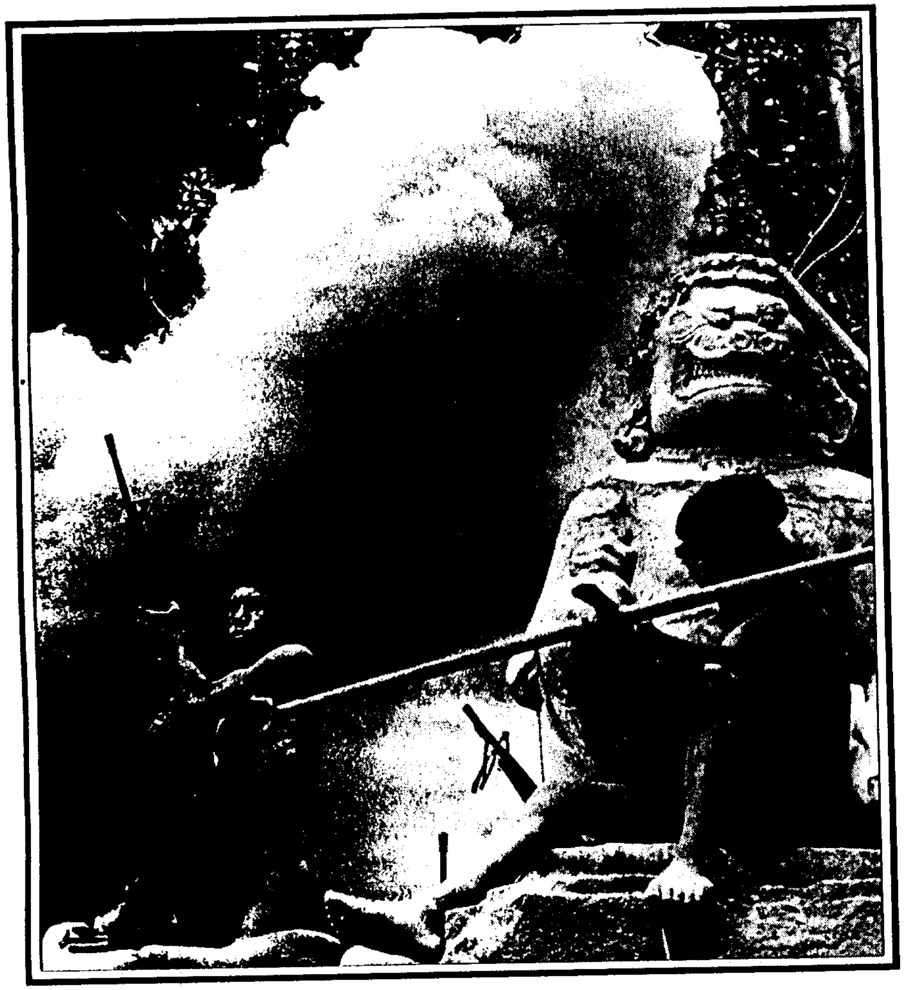
Another anticolonial motion picture, a British production, *The Mission* (1986), exposes the way European powers stole lands and destroyed indigenous people in South America during the late eighteenth century. The missionaries join ranks with the tribes (something missionaries rarely have done in imperialism's history) against the higher clergy, crown officials, and big landowners in an unsuccessful attempt to save the Indian communities from displacement and extermination. Again, the principal protagonists are Whites. The Indians are never more than a supporting cast. Perhaps the film makes its most pertinent thrust in the printed crawl that appears at the end, announcing that the forcible extermination of indigenous peoples in the South American rain forests is still going on today.

A truly uncompromising anti-imperialist motion picture was the Italian-French production of over twenty years ago, *Burn!* (1969), starring Marlon Brando. From a political standpoint, it left little unsaid, noting the economic interests that were behind Caribbean colonialism, the comparative gains to be made from exploiting slave and free labor, and the problems of insurgency and counterinsurgency—all set in a late eighteenth-century West Indies setting. The film's only defect was its portrayal of the Black revolutionary leaders as too inexperienced to rule once they seized state power. In real life, the difficulties of revolutionary rule are caused mostly by the economic legacy of underdevelopment and the drain imposed by counterrevolutionary destruction and encirclement. This aside, *Burn!* stands almost alone in its willingness to deal so explicitly and intelligently with imperialism's *economic* interests. It is difficult to believe that such a motion picture could play in commercial movie houses in America. In fact, *Burn!* did not reach many theaters, nor stay very long in those it did reach. Produced during the height of the Vietnam war, it was yanked out of circulation by distributors after an unusually brief run.

Hardliners and "Antiterrorists"

The post-Vietnam era saw a resurgence of racist and anticommunist stereotypes in the media. In Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), montagnard tribespeople gather worshipfully around a great White god in the form of a renegade U.S. Army officer, Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando). The colonel, a borderline psychotic, believes wars should be fought the old-fashioned way, without pity or limitation. The United States, it seems, failed to match the enemy's ruthlessness and terror. Such an opinion misrepresents the facts in what was the most murderous war ever waged by a large industrial nation against a small underdeveloped country. At one point Kurtz observes that the Vietnamese liberation fighters, the Vietcong, chopped off the arms of hundreds of children as punishment for receiving vaccinations from U.S. health officers. This atrocity never happened in real life but was accepted as true by some viewers in the theater I attended, judging from their audibly outraged reactions.

Apocalypse Now also introduces us to a degenerated John Wayne prototype—assuming that's not a redundancy—Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore (Robert Duvall), who wears a cavalry hat and uses helicopters instead of horses to ride into a Vietnamese village, shooting it to pieces. Like the hunters who kill animals from trains and planes, the helicopter gunners run down their prey. Targeting one victim who is racing away, a gunner exclaims that he got her "right up the ass." When one of his choppers lands and is blown away by the liberation fighters, Kilgore angrily remarks that the enemy are a bunch of "savages." In a more relaxed moment, he notes: "I love the smell of napalm in the morning."



A standard image of Third World people—primitive montagnards guarding the stronghold of their great White leader, a renegade U.S. Army officer in *Apocalypse Now.*

The character of Kilgore is played satirically and the slaughter is shown with a less sympathetic camera than might be found in a John Wayne flick, yet it is ambiguous enough for us to wonder whether the war is being condemned or celebrated. Without a clear critique woven into the subtext, "all film tends to argue *in favor* of the behavior shown."[14]

In Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978), Vietnamese liberation fighters gleefully force American prisoners to play Russian roulette with a loaded revolver. Cimino admitted that the episode was a purely imaginary one, but he saw nothing wrong with this since he was striving for narrative effect rather than historical literalness. One wonders what the response would have been if a movie depicting French resistance fighters happily torturing German prisoners during the Nazi occupation of France were defended on the grounds of artistic license. The portrayal of the Vietnamese in *The Deer Hunter* might best be described as racist.

Neither *The Deer Hunter* nor *Apocalypse Now* nor the more antiwar films like *Platoon* (1986) or the underrated *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) take much time to depict the awful impact of the war on the Vietnamese. *Platoon* successfully captures some of the terror of jungle fighting—from the GI's perspective. It also portrays the torching of a village by U.S. forces, an operation that appears relatively benign compared to the widespread village massacres conducted by U.S. forces during the war. In the film, the Vietnamese children are protectively carried away from the burning huts by U.S. troops rather than being shot dead as they were at My Lai and other places. *Platoon* has the virtue of making no attempt to glorify the war. It points out that poor boys are the ones who have to do the fighting, and it admits the reality, albeit not the magni-

Just Like in the Movies

War dramas in film and television may not create violence, but they seem to help define reality for the violent imagination. Hence, U.S. Marine Lance Corporal Eric Huffman enthuses:

"You know how in *Apocalypse Now* they go around putting aces of spades on the dead VC—well, that's where our squadron emblem comes from, from killing all those Vietcong. See, I double as door gunner when we rig for combat. I fire this .60 caliber gatling gun with six rotating barrels that can shoot off 4,000 rounds per minute. It's just like in the movie. I didn't like the last part of that film too much, but when they're flying into that village blowing all that shit away, I thought that was fantastic. I must have seen that movie about five times now."

When Huffman was asked about the possibility of war, he said, "Everyone's looking forward to it. I'd like to kick ass in Iran." What if we end up fighting elsewhere? "Any place is fine. I just want some action," he smiles with a sweet adolescent enthusiasm. "You see, they try and keep us motivated that way. It's all part of the plan."

Quoted in David Helvarg, "War Games," *In These Times*, June 4–17, 1980.

tude, of U.S. atrocities. At the same time, it offers unnecessary heroics and a final battle scene in which American soldiers wipe out a whole horde of attacking Vietcong, as they might Indians in a cowboy movie.

Casualties of War (1989) is unusual in that its central theme is built around a war crime. Some American soldiers abduct and rape a young Vietnamese woman. One of them is as willing and able a killer as the others but he is not a rapist. Bothered by the act, he informs his superiors who tell him to forget about it. To silence him, his comrades try to kill him at one point. Eventually a chaplain lends a sympathetic ear to the troubled GI, and the rapists are brought to justice. By focusing on this isolated crime and treating it as a deviant and aberrant act, the film implicitly invites us to overlook the fact that the entire war was a rape, involving indiscriminate mass killings and the systematic destruction of the Vietnamese countryside. If anything, the rape depicted in the film was unusual only in that it was prosecuted.

The 1970s and 1980s brought us movie director and writer John Milius, who dubbed himself a "zen fascist" and who wrote a number of war-and-gore scripts, including scenes for *Apocalypse Now* and *Jeremiah Johnson*, a 1972 release about a White hero who kills Indian after Indian. Milius's scenes had to be cut because they were too violent even for those films. Milius fit in well with the Reaganite cinema, declaring that, for the media, "I'm the Hermann Goering of my generation," and "There's something unspeakably attractive about war." To prove his point, he directed and cowrote *Conan the Barbarian* (1982), a movie that must have set a record for combat deaths by beheading, slashing, and bashing—delivered upon lesser mortals by the indestructible Aryan titan, Arnold Schwarzenegger.[15]

The military has always found a home in the entertainment media. In a more innocent day, we had the jingoism of John Wayne, who single-handedly won World War II—taking time off from killing Indians to kill "lotsa Japs" in *Back to Bataan* (1945), *The Fighting Seabees* (1944), *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), *Flying Leathernecks* (1951), and a dozen other flicks.

To say that Wayne won the celluloid war single-handedly is not quite true; he had the active support of the Pentagon itself. War films depend heavily on the military for expensive props, such as planes, ships, and tanks. Support is forthcoming only for scripts that fit the military's view of things. The films that fail to satisfy the Department of Defense's Motion Picture Production Board are denied equipment and banned from U.S. bases around the world, as happened to *Attack* (1956), *On the Beach* (1959), and *Steel Helmet* (1951). The latter's script called for the killing of an unarmed North Korean prisoner-of-war by a GI. The army refused to go along with such a portrayal. It would have us believe that American soldiers have never done such things. Several scenes in other films, including *From Here to Eternity* (1953), had to be rewritten before the Pentagon would cooperate.[16]

As with movies, so with television. The Pentagon has spent millions of dollars on TV recruitment commercials and has allowed Bob Hope to telecast highlights of his overseas military base tours. The military has provided bases, materiel, and personnel for entire television series. In 1958, the army lent soldiers to be used as extras in "The Big Attack," thereby incurring the ire of the Screen Actors Guild. The military cooperated in the production of "Men in Space" (1959–60), a CBS science-fiction series—for whose scripts the Pentagon had approval rights. Other series such as "The Blue Angels," "The Silent Service," "Flight," and "Steve Canyon" received military equipment and file footage—in exchange for a positive image of the armed forces.[17]

This cooperation between the make-believe media and what some called "Pentagon Productions" continued through the Vietnam war. The military assisted in every conceivable way in filming *The Green Berets* (1968), a story of how Special Forces killer John Wayne guns down hordes of Vietnamese just as he did Indians and Japanese in earlier flicks, thereby seeming to win the Vietnam war. The military's cooperation continued throughout the 1980s with cold-war propaganda movies like *Rambo III*, *Red Dawn*, and *Invasion USA*, discussed in the next chapter. In both *Top Gun* (1986), a film about young bucks at an elite naval aviation training school who vie for macho glory, and *The Hunt for Red October* (1990), about a diabolic Soviet submarine commander, the U.S. Navy cooperated fully, providing the jet-fighter planes, nuclear submarines, and technical advisors. Naval crews were used as extras. Navy officials inspected and approved both films and were pleased with what they saw: a glorification of militarism and high-tech weaponry.

There have been good antiwar films, but they have been few and far between. Dalton Trumbo's *Johnny Got His Gun* (1971) is a powerful, wrenching story about one of war's victims. *Coming Home* (1978) less directly and less painfully deals with the victimization endured by war veterans. *Paths of Glory* (1957), starring Kirk Douglas, is often cited as an antiwar film and concerns trench combat in World War I and the unjust execution of several soldiers for cowardice. This film is really against *inefficient* war, a critique directed at the stupidity of field commanders who allow their troops to be slaughtered in a hopeless battle and then try to cover up their mistakes. The film does not question war itself; it just argues for better generalship and fewer unnecessary casualties.

The Military-Media Complex

In addition to providing its own productions and file footage to private companies, the Pentagon lent military bases . . . for on-location filming. It also provided experts to check on the accuracy of everything from proper military formations to Phil Silvers' [comic] references on "The Phil Silvers Show." The Defense Department even offered its academic campuses. The U.S. Military Academy at West Point was used in producing the Ziv series "The West Point Story." The U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis was the site of many scenes in another Ziv product, "Men of Annapolis." In both cases, applications for admission to the academies rose as a result of these series.

J. Fred MacDonald, *Television and the Red Menace* (New York: Praeger, 1985), p. 119.

Standing almost alone as an antiwar film is *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), which offers a shattering, uncompromising depiction of the savagery of trench warfare. The effect on audiences is unambiguous. We have waited over sixty years for something that might come close to this classic. A fairly good remake of *All Quiet on the Western Front* did appear in 1979. In 1989 came Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July*, the true and moving story of Ron Kovic, a flag-waving, middle-American youth who joined the Marines and suffered a wound in Vietnam that left him paralyzed from mid-chest down. The film depicts the horrors of the VA hospital, Kovic's torturous struggle to convalesce and adapt to his paraplegic condition, and his transformation from militaristic superpatriot to peace activist. *Born on the Fourth of July* says little about the political issues behind the Vietnam war, but it strongly denounces the way war uses patriotism to victimize people, including the patriots themselves.

In the 1980s, the Reagan administration's "antiterrorism" hype helped the make-believe media in its endless search for villains. In 1984, while 17,000 Americans were murdered by their own compatriots (not counting the many other thousands wiped out by vehicular manslaughter), only sixteen U.S. citizens died in terrorist attacks abroad. In subsequent years, there were even fewer U.S. terrorist victims. Nevertheless, in 1986, many Americans canceled their plans for travel in Europe out of fear of terrorism.[18] During these years, hostage-taking and terrorism became a boom industry for Hollywood and television. Just a few examples should suffice.

In *Iron Eagle* (1986), a teenager purloins a U.S. Air Force F-16 and flies it from Arizona to the Middle East—nonstop—to kill an entire army of fanatical Arabs who are holding his dad as a hostage. In the course of this mission, the fearless lad takes full advantage of all the latest computer death technology, which makes the killing loads of fun. He also enlists the efforts of a retired colonel and Vietnam veteran, Louis Gossett, Jr., who is disgruntled about that no-win war but finds the promise of future victories in the killer instincts of a new generation. *Iron Eagle* makes explicit references to Reaganism. Thus, after his father is taken hostage, the young hero and his friends expect the government to do something. When one of them skeptically notes what happened to the hostages in Iran, another says: "That was different. Mr. Peanut [Jimmy Carter] was in charge. Now we got a different guy. Why do you suppose they call him Ronnie Ray-Gun?" As it turns out, even Ronnie Ray-Gun's government does not act, so the kid takes things into his own hands.

Delta Force (1986) shows us how really to deal with terrorists. Forget the tense, patient negotiations that freed the passengers of a number of hijacked airliners without loss of life. Send Chuck Norris, Lee Marvin, and other members of a U.S. commando team into Beirut where they can murder hundreds of Arabs and rescue all the hostages, losing only one member of their own team.

In *Death before Dishonor* (1987), the Marines are sent in to ease American frustrations about Qaddafi, Arab terrorists, and swarthy hordes in general. In this film, "the bad guys wear Vietcong-like black pajamas and the red-checkered *kaffiyeh* headdress usually associated with Palestinian nationalism. The good guys wear the camouflage jungle fatigues of the U.S. Marine Corps. It doesn't take long to figure out which side is going to win the shootout."[19] A Marine colonel is taken hostage by Arab terrorists. For sport, they disfigure him with a high-speed drill before he manages to plunge the whirring bit into the heart of his torturer. A beautiful woman, who ostensibly sympathizes with the Arab cutthroats, turns out to be an agent of the Mossad, the Israeli spy organization. She coordinates her efforts with the U.S. Marine Corps rescue force led by former Los Angeles Rams player cum actor Fred Dryer, who wastes dozens of villains with his automatic rifle. Indeed, just about every Arab in sight is killed before the last reel.

In an interview, Dryer noted that *Death before Dishonor* "is sticking to the American theme, which is the Marine Corps." His director, Terry Leonard, added: "I think a lot of America's frustrations will come out in this film. Americans are really fed up with this terrorism business. The hostages in Lebanon drive me nuts." To find relief, Leonard directed a

Israeli and Arab Featured as Cowboy and Indian

Beginning in the 1950s, a popular new cinema genre developed around the Arab-Israeli conflict. At least ten films were made on this theme in the 1960s alone. . . . In these war movies, Israelis and their American friends are played by popular actors such as Kirk Douglas, Yul Brynner, John Wayne, Frank Sinatra, Paul Newman, and Sal Mineo. The Arabs, on the other hand, are cruel soldiers, unseen or seen only from a distance. In *Exodus* [1960], for example, they brutally kill a fifteen-year-old refugee girl, played by Jill Hayworth, and in *Cast a Giant Shadow* [1966] . . . the Arabs leer and laugh as they shoot at an Israeli woman trapped in a truck. . . .

These movies present the Israeli-Arab conflict in much the same way as cowboys and Indians: the Arabs are always the bad guys, the Israelis, the good guys . . . Cinema should refrain from gross oversimplifications which distort history and interfere with understanding the Middle East. . . .

The stereotyping of Arabs in American cinema has continued into the 1970s and 1980s. Some examples:

Network (1977) has a bitter anti-Arab scene in which a crusading television news commentator . . . warns that the Arabs are taking control of America. He calls the Arabs "medieval fanatics" (mistakenly referring to the Shah of Iran as an Arab). The film won four Academy Awards.

Black Sunday (1977) . . . concerns an Arab terrorist plot to kill the spectators at the Superbowl—including the President of the United States—with a horrible device to be detonated in a television blimp over the stadium. An Israeli major is the hero and the Arabs are the villains. . . .

In *Rollover* (1981) "the Arabs" destroy the world financial system. In publicity interviews, Jane Fonda has made her movie's message explicit: "If we aren't afraid of Arabs, we'd better examine our heads. They have strategic power over us. They are unstable, they are fundamentalists, tyrants, anti-woman, anti-free press."

Laurence Michalak, "Cruel and Unusual: Negative Images of Arabs in American Popular Culture," *ADC Issues*, January 1984, pp. 14–16.

film that drives *us* nuts. Yet, in the next breath he professed no intention of conveying a political message, insisting that "this is entertainment, just cowboys and Indians in the Middle East."[20] A revealing comparison.

New York Times film critic Vincent Canby passes judgment on antiterrorist action films:

> The subversive thing about . . . films that exalt blunderbuss chauvinism is that, because they are action movies, they're very easy to sit through no matter what you believe in. Even as you're laughing at their absurdities and responding with acute dismay to their political subtexts, you stay in your seat to find out what's going to happen next.
>
> America, the humiliated giant whose patience is exhausted, is the true subject of [these movies. They go] . . . well beyond what might be called international justice to glorify a kind of violence that is as mindless and wasteful as it is fanciful. . . . such movies aren't intended to be reasonable. Rather, they mean to give the mind a rest by playing on one's prejudices and on one's gut reactions to scenes of sadism, heroism and spectacular special effects.[21]

With the advent of the 1990s, the Bush administration gave us more U.S. military interventions around the world, and Hollywood obligingly provided more films about them. For instance, *Firebird* (1990) offers an explicit blend of entertainment and political propaganda, with an opening screen quotation from President Bush announcing his dedication to the war on narcotics. In this movie, a South American drug cartel, abetted by Cuban arms and helicopter teams, faces off against the U.S. military with its new Apache attack helicopters. Much of the movie seems to be a promotional for the new chopper (which was used to kill people, including civilians, in Panama when the United States invaded that country). One officer says, "We'll confront the forces of evil and kill them deader than hell," and "Your job is to come out of nowhere and blow your enemy to pieces." There is a female helicopter scout pilot who has forsaken a personal relationship with the lead male character. He wanted her to stay home and have babies but she finds more fulfillment killing Cuban Communists in air-to-air combat. In reality, Cuban helicopter teams have not been involved in the narcotics trade, and the United States has not done much against the drug cartels. Most of the American-sponsored "war on drugs" in Peru and Colombia really has been a counterinsurgency against political dissenters and national liberation forces. Like others of its kind, *Firebird* is an unrelenting glorification of high-tech military violence and a gross distortion of political reality.

The antiterrorist films, if that's what they really are, have all the ingredients of the swarthy hordes flicks: (1) White humanity is threatened by barbaric forces; (2) the White heroes use superior intelligence, technology, and limitless bravery to rescue their own from alien clutches; and (3) in doing so, they kill large numbers of Third World only look forward to being either victimized by the menace or rescued from it. They are incapable of acting in concert against it. They spend most of their time screaming and fleeing for their lives, especially the women. Driven by panic, they sometimes get in the way of rescue efforts and are as much a problem as the invading creatures. The authorities themselves—police, military, scientists, and other community guardians—can also be part of the problem, as when they display an impenetrable skepticism that anything out of the ordinary is happening. Then it's up to the lone hero to vanquish the menace and show officials that he is not crazy.[23]

More sinister than the monster marauders with their easily identifiable antisocial behavior is the alien menace whose goal is to *take us over from within*. The big bug and lizard monsters want to lunch on us, but these diabolic infiltrators are aiming for totalitarian world domination. Not surprisingly, the witch-hunting, cold-war era of the 1950s provides us with some choice examples of this genre. In *Invaders from Mars* (1953), Martians lurk amidst us, taking control of distinguished citizens, parents, and even police by planting crystals in their brains and enslaving their wills. In *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956, 1978), plant pods from another world take possession of our bodies and convert us into obedient automatons. When the heroes try to sound the alarm, they discover that the authorities themselves have been invaded by the pods. The subversion is everywhere. No one is to be trusted. The survivors exclaim: "They're taking us over, cell by cell," and "It's a malignant disease spreading through the whole country."[24] Similarly, in *The Aliens Are Coming* (1980), extraterrestrial beings from a dying planet possess the bodies of earthlings.

It is not too difficult to see that the ideological underpinnings for these kinds of productions are drawn straight from the long-standing right-wing fear of how Communism will spread among us like a "disease," infiltrating our lives, subverting our nation, and turning us into obedient robots, dominating us for the sheer sake of domination.

The 1989–90 television season saw improvement in the extraterrestrial department. A new kind of alien made an appearance in the Fox network series "Alien Nation." Despite the show's title, these aliens are anything but a nation. Instead of being conquering monsters, they are integrated into earthbound community life, holding jobs, owning homes, attending school, and the like. They speak perfect American English and are quite human in appearance, except for some notable differences like large bald heads, no eyebrows, two hearts, and unusual markings on their heads and backs. These features cause them to be the objects of defamatory slurs and ill-treatment of a kind that is pointedly reminiscent of ethnic intolerance. "Alien Nation" might be better titled "Alien Minority." In any case, it represents an improvement over the dreary aliens-enslave-earthlings fare we are usually fed.

If evil extraterrestrial hordes threaten our world, then it is only natural for hero earthlings (Americans) to venture into outer space in order to rectify matters. The two earliest cowboy heroes in futuristic dress who rode spaceships instead of horses were Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers. Both appeared in movies during the 1930s and early 1940s and in television series in the 1950s. Buck Rogers protected Earth in the twenty-fifth century from such threats as the "Slaves of the Master Mind."[25]

During the 1950s, television gave us Captain Video, the intergalactic do-gooder who saved people and planets from evil characters with un-American names like Vazarion, Marcus Gayo, Mook the Moon Man, Heng Goo Seng, and Kul of Eos. Captain Video was introduced at the beginning of each episode as the "champion of Justice, Truth, and Freedom throughout the universe!"[26] As MacDonald points out:

> Such clashes between hero and tyrant were not meaningless excursions in entertainment. They were value-laden fairy tales delivered with impact. . . . They were stylized Cold War fantasies in which the champions of democracy triumphed over totalitarianism. Certainly not every show in the series treated dictatorial plots, but the theme of victory over despotism permeated the programs.[27]

The 1960s gave us the "Star Trek" television series, featuring a team of crusaders from Earth who trundle about the universe, fighting galactic bad guys. The heroes' spaceship, significantly dubbed the *Enterprise* is piloted by the all-American Captain Kirk, "the ultimate cosmic policeman/meddler," who, along with his crew, "spread truth, justice, and the American way of life, including a life of high technology and eternal progress."[28]

Many movies end up as reruns on television or are made available for home viewing on videocassettes. Some even become the inspiration for TV series. The usual flow is from movies to television; less frequently does it go the other way. Such was the case with the "Star Trek" TV series which served as the basis for a movie in 1979, *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* (with film sequels in 1982, 1984, 1986, and 1989).

In another series of motion pictures, *Star Wars* (1977), *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), and *Return of the Jedi* (1983), the subject is an evil cosmic power that is challenged by individualistic heroes. The heroes are obediently assisted by robots and "lower" nonhuman creatures

The NBC-TV sci-fi series "Star Trek" features intergalactic crusaders who explore the far reaches of the universe on their spaceship *Enterprise*, doing battle against creatures from other planets.

from other planets, high-tech versions of Tonto, Gunga Din, and Cheeta. As usual, right wins through might, with an assist from guile and technology. The evil military officers in *The Empire Strikes Back* have odd accents and wear Soviet-style uniforms; these touches earned the praise of right-wing commentators, who were pleased to point out the resemblances between the futuristic evil empire in the film and the 1980s evil empire in Moscow. A progressive media critic, Elayne Rapping, has this to say about the high-tech adventure genre:

> So much for political activity and democratic institutions. All is physical strength and technical trickery. . . . The films are anti-intellectual in their simplistic, often contradictory and loose-ended plots. They are antihuman in their total disdain for emotional sub tlety and personal relationships and problems, as well as their fascination with supernatural, magical, and spiritual explanations for their technically produced "effects." And they are . . . antidemocratic, specifically in their fascination with power, warfare, superior beings, and hierarchical class, sex, and race relations.[29]

In the White House, the State Department, and the Pentagon, on the big screen and the small screen, in real life and make-believe, the cowboy-explorer-soldier-space heroes guard us against alien threats.