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Bleed Together, Die Alone: Community and Individuality in American Film after 9/11

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In a glorious scene from *Game of Thrones*, the cunning Petyr Baelish claims that "Chaos isn't a pit. Chaos is a ladder." Allow me to briefly reuse his metaphor for my own purposes. Writing a doctoral dissertation is, indeed, chaos. Mountains of books pile up around you; you create hundreds of folders in your computer with tons of articles, interviews, and videos; and you end up scribbling an endless number of notes (unreadable more often than not). And, sooner or later, you have to transform all of that into a coherent text. If you are lucky enough to surround yourself of wonderful people, as in my case, then the chaotic process of writing your thesis does become a ladder (steep, tortuous, and really hard to climb sometimes) and not a pit. Many have helped me over the years by leaving steps along the way with their work, effort, and love.

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Men are so simple-minded and so controlled by their present needs that one who deceives will always find another who will allow himself to be deceived.

Niccolò Machiavelli

1. Introduction

In February 2008, George W. Bush sat down with Fox News journalist Chris Wallace to comment on his presidency and the ongoing primaries that would end up pitting Republican John McCain against Democrat Barack Obama. Amid growing hostility towards the Bush Administration, quagmire in Iraq, and a faltering economy, Bush gave a long vindicating statement when Wallace asked him whether the future Republican presidential nominee would be able to disengage from the disheartening legacy left by the outgoing cabinet. Deliberately or not, Bush synthesized in just a few lines the most prominent features of the historical span this PhD thesis takes as object of inquiry:

> [T]here are two big issues. One is who's gonna keep your taxes low? Most Americans feel overtaxed and I promise you the Democratic Party's got a field of candidates that says "I'm not gonna raise your taxes." They're gonna say "Oh, we're only going to tax rich people" [...] we've been through this drill before. "We are only going to tax the rich" and all you have to do is look at the history of that kind of language and see who gets stuck with the bill. And the other one: this is a dangerous world! Americans understand it's dangerous. They understand that we are under threat of attack and whoever our nominee is is gonna have to convince them that we will take whatever measures are necessary to protect us. [...] 'Cause there has been an attack and 'cause we are on the offense. We didn't wait for international approval to, you know, make our decisions. [...] But there is some kind of attitude that says "Well, let's wait and hold back and hope that...we'll all hold hands and head out together". America's gotta be on the lead if you wanna deal with these threats. [...] We believe that our intelligence officers ought to have all the tools they need to protect the American people [...] But there is a big part of the Democratic Party that is against giving our intelligence officers the tools necessary to protect America.

A brief look into the quote elicits a number of questions which will be addressed throughout the following pages. What concept is being laid out in terms of the relationship between the individual and the state? To what "history" is President Bush referring that proves his reluctance to see the state as a meaningful actor in economic decisions? What legitimacy is being given to the rule of law in such a context? Is safety being defined as a matter of accepting a form of non-accountable partisan leadership? Do dissidence and disagreement count in the definition of "protection of the homeland" he is so insistently proposing? By 2008 the Bush Administration's political and rhetorical lines had been either decried or ignored in the public arena. But for at least four years it was a project –faithfully condensed in that lengthy quotation– which conditioned virtually all vocabularies, categories, national conversations, and contexts constituting American politics and culture.[1] In the United States, the first decade of the 21st century was, beyond a shade of a doubt, the Bush Era, a stint keenly and indelibly determined by a very particular political and cultural climate.

This PhD thesis seeks to articulate a theoretically rich and thematically delimitated analysis of American cultural and political discourse after 9/11 through American film. Given the potentially endless range of topics and approaches from which 9/11 can be debated, an overarching notion has been established that structures and demarcates this inquiry: the dichotomy between individualism and community. The notions of individualism and community have been both ideologically malleable constructs and central principles of American culture, mobilized by 17th century Puritans and modern-day social conservatives; by frontier heroes and by libertarians; by leftists and by staunch anti-Communists. In his authoritative reader on American politics and society, political scientist David McKay writes that "[n]othing more accurately seems to represent Americanism than a stress on individual rather than collective action". Yet, McKay also recognizes that "collectivist thinking often influences Americans [...] there is no shortage of examples of Americans moving, sometimes blindly, in masses" (11-12). He establishes that, within that friction between individualism and community, "it should always be remembered that, no matter how fierce the ensuing ideological battles, almost all the protagonists believe that their positions are true to essentially *American* political values" (17). In other words, what is supposed or meant to be American is always caught up between competing discourses which claim for themselves its authenticity.

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[1] Between 2001 and 2003 George W. Bush achieved between 90% and 70% approval rates according to Gallup polling. From 2003 onwards, his popularity waned to reach the historic low of 28% in 2007 (McKay 238).

If two fundamentally different discourses such as individualism and community can penetrate the same symbols and values of the national, the logical conclusion is that neither of those constructs is historically immutable or monolithic. Individualism and community, we are to assume from McKay's point, are contingent notions which are politicized and ideologized depending on the actors involved, the available discursive materials, and the historical conditions. In the wake of such a disruptive and epoch-shifting event as 9/11, it seems worth interrogating the way in which the political arena and cultural products have signified such two volatile concepts as individualism and community.

The guiding hypothesis of this PhD thesis is that there exists a cycle of American films which deals with individualism and community in a way that is characteristically post-9/11. This post-9/11 articulation of individualism and community rests on four core themes. Firstly, the policies and laws enacted after 9/11 that granted extraordinary degrees of autonomy and power to President Bush provoked an identitary line which linked American character to a sense of über-individualistic leadership, independent of any oversight including the rule of law so constitutive of American political culture. Secondly, a vision of the American community was established on the basis of fashioning and signifying 9/11 as a grand tragic event whose only admissible public response was mourning the victims. The collective was thus constructed on the basis of spurning any reaction which assigned 9/11 any other meaning that was not human tragedy and victimization of the American homeland. Thirdly, and as a direct consequence of the previous point, patriotism came to be identified with embracing the political projects and rhetoric of the Republican operatives, dismissing debate, ideological clash or strategic differences as central values of democratic life. Fourthly, the three previous debates were developed during the high-water mark of neoliberalism, which contributes with yet another discursive dimension: the neoliberal subject. This is a form of individualism that upholds empowerment through a more and more deregulated market which heightens the individuals' potentiality for improvement and personal responsibility and in which freedom is conceptualized as a slashing of the state. Additionally, these four interlocking discursive trajectories are regarded as a continuation, exacerbated by the contingencies of 9/11, of entrenched practices in American culture – fundamentally originated in the rise of the modern right between the 1960s and the 1980s.

This individualism-community approach allows delimiting the research in two crucial ways: it codifies the myriad of potential topics opened up by 9/11 into a specific range of thematic concerns and it makes a certain number of films more appropriate and pertinent for the research. There is a number of specificities (ideological, identitary, political) contained in the above reading of post-9/11 American culture which limit the number of film texts available and particularize the analytical logic of this dissertation. The focus is not on all discursive forms of individualism and community but on the concrete way these two are marked off after 9/11. On the one hand, the individualisms examined in the primary sources are intertwined with the conflict between legality vs. a sense of "real justice" outside of the law, the question of patriotism as subjugation to established powers and nationalistic topoi, the excoriation of the state, and the extolling of the market as instrument for personal fulfillment. On the other, the representations of community articulated in the film texts selected are linked to the political regulation of fear and grief, the description of democratic life as a matter of unity and cohesion, and the depoliticization of tragedy and its projection as an exclusively moral and sentimental phenomenon (deprived of geopolitical and historical contents). The texts chosen as primary sources specifically address these issues.

In order to bring to the surface those thematic concerns, I will lay out a critical framework (comprised of Marxist and Post-Marxist categories as well as postcolonial notions about the national construct) which helps characterize post-9/11 American historical circumstances as a discursive terrain. That is, the critical framework employed here describes American culture and politics as a contested locus wherein different discourses aim to signify social phenomena in accordance with their own purposes, agenda, and projects. At the same time, these theoretical categories also clarify how the individualism-community discourse generated after 9/11 was articulated on the basis of already-constructed and already-normalized ideological constructs. In doing so, I aim to practice a form of textual analysis that engages thoroughly with the films' discursive properties and strategies, revealing ties and connections to their sociohistorical contexts and former cultural and political heritages. I will also examine how the films interact by ratifying and/or rebutting each other's arguments and subtexts.

There has been an attempt to have a representative selection of this cycle of films, with some texts clearly praising the policies and rhetoric of the Bush Administration and other contesting that same agenda. The fourteen films taken as primary sources are but one possible corpus. The research has yielded many more analyses than the ones included in these pages. Reducing the number of primary sources to a manageable set of texts permits both in-depth textual analyses and a cohesive chapter structure (something an all-embracing macro-perspective renders infeasible). Another central issue regarding the primary sources is their time span. Given its topicality and historical importance, it is clear that the cultural climate of 9/11 is not fully extinguished. There are, indeed, films released in these very last few years that would have been excellent material for this work. However, the film texts here examined range from 2002 to 2009 –the stint in which 9/11 and its political and cultural consequences monopolized national conversations and public debates. From 2009 onwards, with the election of Obama and the Great Recession, other grand discourses have emerged. Including post-2009 films would have necessarily entailed a different perspective, further contextualization, and investigating other cultural and political trajectories. Films from 2002 to 2009 are particularly and distinctively invested with the political and cultural languages of 9/11 era, whereas Great Recession or Obama era films may "deform" such languages by incorporating their present-day concerns. In addition, cinematic quality has not been a criterion for including filmic texts (critically acclaimed films are combined with, admittedly, failed and mediocre ones).

The ever-increasing body of scholarship on the intersection between 9/11 and American film has nurtured two different kinds of approaches. There has been a set of texts more preoccupied with compiling virtually all filmic manifestations on 9/11 and the Bush years than with performing in-depth analyses of a concrete number of film texts with a clear critical framework and with a particular thematic focus within the context of post-9/11 American culture. Texts like Wheeler Winston Dixon's *Film and Television after 9/11* (2004), Stephen Prince's *Firestorm: American Film in the Age of Terrorism* (2009) or John Markert's *Post-9/11 Cinema: through a Lens Darkly* (2011) provide a clear example of that tendency, merely listing and anthologizing a host of visual texts linked to 9/11 without really performing close or thorough readings. Douglas Kellner's *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era* (2009) contains, albeit less saliently, that same compilation-driven tendency. However, Kellner lays out a methodological framework and offers textual analyses so as to bring up the ideological and political functionalities of film texts –although the author often tends to label some films as allegories of 9/11 without offering a textually centered justification. Whatever inconsistencies Kellner's book may have, his is an effort to present American film after 9/11 as a multilayered locus where competing discourses clash, refute each other, or merge (a critical position fully supported in this dissertation). *Cinema Wars* can be seen as a middle-ground volume, containing both the simplistic penchant to compilatory description and the textually based and thematically oriented dimensions of other (more illuminating) scholarly literature that I shall now comment on.

Guy Westwell's comprehensive *Parallel Lines: Post-9/11 American Cinema* (2014) emphasizes the ideological disputes carried out in the filmic arena after 9/11. Of particular interest is the book's interrogation of the way film texts signify the national and the collective within the discursive traits brought about by 9/11. In a similar line, *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and the "War on Terror"* edited by Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula, and Karen

Randell (2011) feature several articles which exemplify the type of reading practice espoused in this PhD thesis: a clear theoretical framework and a close textual analysis focused on specific thematic concerns within the wide array of discourses which constitute the post-9/11. In my opinion, Dan Hassler-Forest's *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age* (2012) is the most consistent piece of scientific literature published so far concerning American film and 9/11. Not entirely focused on 9/11 as such, Hassler-Forest draws from a variety of theoretical fields (Marxist and Post-Marxist theory, structuralism, theories of space, postmodernism) and restricts his inquiry within the limits of the superhero genre. In so doing, Hassler-Forest presents a reduced number of primary sources which are scrutinized from various theoretical points of view, while widening the political and historical framework that informs those readings as the book integrates both the discourses of the Bush Doctrine and the politics of neoliberalism. The stress on neoliberalism as a core constituent of post-9/11 discourse (an element virtually non-existent in literature on American film and 9/11) opens up a much more interesting and comprehensive discussion on the political, cultural, and historical meanings of American film during the Bush Era. For that reason, Hassler-Forest's approach has been enormously influential for the goals pursued in this dissertation. Of notable influence has also been Linnie Blake's *The Wounds of Nations: Horror Cinema, Historical Trauma and National Identity* (2009). Notwithstanding the cross-national perspective of the book, Blake's section on post-9/11 horror film explores the issue of national signification and the weight of common-sense discourses in shaping the historical and cultural conditions upon which 9/11 was to be politically seized.[2]

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[2] Also worth mentioning are two additional books (rather detached from my thematic

My project addresses a series of current gaps in the body of scholarship on 9/11 and American film. There is no inquiry on American film that analyzes 9/11 through the themes of individualism and community, let alone in the terms these two elements are here articulated (as nodal points which condense a significant cluster of discursive lines defining American culture and politics in the wake of 9/11). Consequently, this PhD thesis comments on a number of films (clearly tied up with post-9/11 through the individualism-community duality) which have not been evaluated and examined to date. In addition, very little interrogation has been carried out on the weight of neoliberalism in the post-9/11 American filmic corpus. This inquiry sees the ethos of neoliberalism as having an instrumental role in defining the historical, material, and symbolic conditions of the period analyzed here. Similarly, the importance of the conservative movement (its messages, its rhetoric, and its narratives) in order to understand the Bush Doctrine (and the film texts addressing it) has been largely underestimated in existing research. The textual analyses offered in this dissertation will demonstrate that all those discursive materials from conservatism are central to some post-9/11 texts for articulating their discourses.

The thesis is divided in seven chapters. After these introductory pages, in chapter two I develop the critical framework, which draws on main notions within Marxism and Post-Marxism, as well as on some categories from

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concerns) on 9/11 and film: *Terror and the Cinematic Sublime: Essays on Violence and Unrepresentable in Post-9/11 Films* (2013) edited by Todd A. Comer and Lloyd Vayo, and *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11* (2008) by Jack G. Shaheen. The former investigates the interrelation of 9/11 and horror film through a varied host of reading strategies (trauma theory, the Lyotardian sublime, and the postmodern), while the latter is a thematically-centered and consistent discussion on cinematic portrayals of Arabs after 9/11. Shaheen compiles all post-9/11 film texts featuring Arab and/or Muslim characters gauging whether filmmakers have offered a balanced depiction.

postcolonial studies. In chapter three I analyze the historical contexts of 9/11, mapping out a set of political and cultural languages ranging from the rise of modern conservatism to the Bush Era. The resultant theoretical and historical discourse forms the basis to then approach the analysis of the filmic corpus. Chapter four delves into film texts which represent individualism in light of the discourses of hyper-leadership promoted and institutionalized by the Bush Administration in the wake of 9/11, bringing to the fore a number of interrelated subject matters: the tension between the law and an individualistic sense of justice, the issue of the Iraq War as either reassertion or questioning of mandatory forms of nationalism and individualism, and the vision of the state and lawmaking as being fundamentally at odds with the individual's safety and well-being. Chapter five surveys five narrations reflective of the communitarian values which arose from 9/11. This section interrogates the texts' conflicting takes on the channeling of fear and grief as socializing and cohesive devices, the diverse forms of refashioning of patriotism and dissidence, and the deproblematization and alleged depoliticization of the discourse of democracy and conflict. Chapter six tackles the imaginaries of neoliberalism. The five texts under scrutiny investigate the discursively varied strategies by which American identity is conflated with the philosophical bases of neoliberal thinking (personal responsibility, suspicion of the state, the innate superiority of the market, the fragmentation and acceleration of productive exchanges), while redeploying and rearticulating some foundational American cultural imaginaries. Finally, in chapter seven I compile, analyze, and draw a number of conclusions from the different discursive lines examined in the filmic texts.

All in all, this dissertation identifies and characterizes a number of discursive ties between a specific historical span (post-9/11 United States) and a set of filmic texts created during that time and, therefore, shaped and conditioned by the policies, laws, and rhetoric of post-9/11 American culture. In so doing, I intend to articulate a textually centered and historically and theoretically informed approach that may contribute to a better understanding of an extremely recent period of American culture that still needs to be thoroughly revised and examined.

2. The Battle for Meaning: Gramscian Hegemony and the Widening of Cultural Materialism

> *To continue to take inspiration from a certain spirit of Marxism would be to keep faith with what has always made of Marxism in principle and first of all a* radical *critique, namely a procedure ready to undertake its self-critique. This critique* wants itself *to be in principle and explicitly open to its own transformation, re-evaluation, self-reinterpretation.*
>
> Jacques Derrida

> *Only if we renounce any epistemological prerogative based upon the ontological privileged position of a 'universal class', will it be possible seriously to discuss the present degree of validity of the Marxist categories.*
>
> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe

2.1. Some Preliminary Notes on Cultural Materialism

Cultural materialism, the Marxist branch of cultural analysis, zeroes in on the study of culture as a contested object, constantly subjected to signifying practices exercised by both material and symbolic agents. Within this paradigm, culture is neither a mere reflection of the material forces and relations of production, nor does it remain impervious to them (Dollimore and Sinfield viii). My approach is in keeping with such framework: texts should be examined in their socio-political and historical contexts so as to foreground how cultural products are bound up with competing ideologies, whether dominant or subordinate (Wilson 35). Cultural texts are, therefore, constitutively ideological loci. Nonetheless, my inquiry also comprises other concepts that not only acknowledge the existence of dominant and subaltern ideas, but also seek to gain insight into the articulatory practices that signify ideas as dominant and subaltern.

Cultural materialism, and perhaps Marxism at large, might still invoke some sense of analytical rigidity, if not inflexible orthodoxy or even stagnation. These are, by all means, regulating principles to eschew in any critical reading of cultural products. In order to widen the analytical scope of cultural materialism, the selection, structuring, and deployment of theoretical notions in this PhD thesis have sought to present a comprehensible and anti-essentialist critical framework, fundamentally indebted to Marxism yet sensitive to theoretical vocabularies that may address its shortcomings and inefficiencies.

My overarching notion has been that of cultural hegemony as authored by Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci's texts have been the object of innumerable revisions and compilations, as well as his formulation of hegemony[3] –a category with a longstanding tradition within Marxism and that, since Gramsci, has penetrated various areas within the social sciences and the humanities (Anderson, *Antonimias* 11, 23-31). Gramscian thinking serves as the conducting element to develop a conceptual framework adequate to identify and explain cultural struggle and the articulatory forces and actors that intervene in it. In articulating and organizing the explanation of the Gramscian categories, I also incorporate later contributors to this form of heterodox Marxism. My inquiry is informed both by British Marxism –Terry Eagleton, Stuart Hall, and Raymond Williams–, the Althusserian notion of interpellation, and what has been called post-Marxism –Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Slavoj Žižek. I also insert Homi Bhabha's take on the national, as well as Arjun Appadurai's concept of locality –these being concepts that operate in mapping out hegemonic constructions. I bring in these notions so as to open up any potential analytical limitation that an exclusively Marxist framework may produce.

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[3] Most of Antonio Gramsci's texts are scattered around the internet. In order to have a bibliographically clear management of Gramsci's production, I have resorted to a reduced number of primary sources which compile and organize his work. For this project, the source to quote from Gramsci's fragmented writings has been the famous compilation by Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. This volume is the most frequently quoted title on Gramsci within American Studies. Gramsci's thought has been thoroughly revised by Spanish political scientists and cultural analysts. I would like to highlight the work by Rafael Díaz-Salazar, who has rigorously anthologized and examined Gramscian thinking. Also, political scientist Iñigo Errejón Galván's PhD Thesis provides an illuminating and rich account on the notion of hegemony from the standpoint of political science.

Gramsci's research ushered in a form of Marxist praxis that conceives subjects as collective wills and not just as by-products of social classes (Errejón-Galván and Mouffe 33). Gramscian Marxism supplies analytical tools to explain the cultural fabric as a construction modeled by competing ideologies, institutions, and individual agents, that is, Marxism as a means to emphasize that "[a] major characteristic of all discourses is its constructedness over history and social groups by means of complex processes of reappropriation and reinscription of meaning determined by particular reigning ideologies" (Darias-Beautell 22). In so doing, this form of Marxism acknowledges that "ideas are continuously submitted to the test of emerging new sociohistorical conditions" (Salamini 371). This is not tantamount to claiming that all refashioning and shift are possible at any time within the social. Rather, it points out that articulatory practices, contextual factors, and material conditions work together to "produce discontinuous series of hegemonic formations or historical blocs" (Laclau and Mouffe 71). The underlying principle, not far from a post-structuralist subtext, is that social practices are governed by a "meaning [which] is always ideologically–

historically, politically, culturally– determined" (Darias-Beautell, 41). Therefore, as Eagleton claims in his analysis of Gramsci's texts, ideas gain currency "in so far as they serve to cohere and promote those forms of consciousness which are in the tune with the most significant tendencies of an era. [...] A universal consensus might always prove retrospectively to have been false" (121).

The institutionalization of cultural materialism has often provoked over-deterministic, sometimes fossilized approaches to analyze cultural phenomena. Marxisms originated from or redolent of the Second International have remained anchored in a form of "essentialist apriorism, the conviction that the social is sutured at some point, from which it is possible to fix the meaning of any event independently of any articulatory practice" (Laclau and Mouffe 177). The challenges brought by post-structuralism and the postmodern have irremediably reshuffled the very grounds and terms of contemporary cultural analyses. The resulting epistemic relativism should strip cultural materialism of its analytical tendencies to "economic reductionism [....] positivism, empiricism and objectivism" (Hall, "Gramsci's" 419-420). For instance, we should remain cautious when a brilliant author such as Perry Anderson underscored, back in the 1970s, the universal and scientific potentialities of Marxism:

> Marxism aspires in principle to be a universal science -no more amenable to merely national or continental ascriptions than any other objective cognition of reality [...] Lack of universality is an index of deficiency of truth.
>
> [...]
>
> Marxism has in this sense perhaps yet to take with all due seriousness its claim to be a 'science of history'. For the proud title of historical materialism can only be earned by a modest respect for the reality of its two terms. (*Considerations* 94, 111)

The theoretical framework here propounded has been tailored on an opposite conception of what cultural materialism ought to be: more flexible, methodologically interdisciplinary, and aware of the contingencies around which knowledge is formed. In his revaluing of Gramsci's work, Leonardo Salamini identified Marxism as a methodology particularly well suited for contextualizing the formation of knowledge and ideas within their specific coordinates:

> [W]hat is the historical process if not the joint activity of individual wills transformed into 'collective will'? [...] [Marx] also believed that the specific mode of socialist transformation, as well as the time in which it would take place, would be dependent primarily on the full development of political consciousness among the masses. This 'human element' was completely lost after Marx.
>
> [...]
>
> In its very essence Marxism is 'absolute historicism' and 'absolute humanism' [...] *[it] is the process of historicization of human thought, which relocates ideas and ideologies in their specific and concrete historical framework*. (362,371; emphasis added).

One key corollary may be extracted from Salamini's words: Marxism functions as a historicizing force that defines human thought as swayed by contingent and contextual factors. Gramscian thinking repackages and rekindles Marx's often forgotten notion that individuals do make their own history and ideas but always under inherited conditions (Hobsbawm, *Change* 316). Gramsci explicitly contended that Marxism encapsulated just the right methodology to make the contingent and multilayered complexion of "history" come into sharper focus. "[T]here is no abstract 'human nature', fixed and immutable (a concept which certainly derives from religious and transcendentalist thought)". Instead, he argued, "human nature is the totality of historically determined social relations" (Gramsci 331).

By understanding cultural materialism in this fashion I aim to build a comprehensive framework for studying the elements which constitute post-9/11 discourse and its contexts, while being aware of the contingent and historically-specific nature of these very elements. I consider this non-essentialist form of Marxism especially suitable for the goals pursued in this research. By utilizing categories which bring forth the articulatory and constructed condition of meaning-making and identitary production processes, I can appropriately determine the way post-9/11 American film texts operate in a discursive terrain that is the result of previous and present ideological currents, conflicting political conceptions, and cultural sediments constructed over history. Gramscian hegemony brings to the surface, precisely, that discursive struggle and its different constituents.

2.2. Culture as Fighting Pit: Gramscian Hegemony

First and foremost, cultural hegemony has less to do with a fixed normative category than with an all-encompassing framework, relational and renewable, that operates at multiple human strata. As Eagleton succinctly defined it, cultural hegemony makes reference to "a whole range of practical strategies by which a dominant power elicits consent to its rule from those it subjugates" (116). This simple definition addresses the most fundamental traits of the concept: its pervasive nature, its practical dimension, the centrality of consent, and the importance of summoning legitimacy. Thus, the use of hegemony as a methodological instrument entails a transient and flexible perception of cultural struggle –one that pervades the realms of politics, economics, and ideology. Manichean or dichotomous approaches should be dispensed with when unpacking the internal structure and functioning of hegemony, as Hall brilliantly noted: "[c]ultural hegemony is never about pure victory or pure domination [...] it is never a zero-sum cultural game; it is always about shifting the balance of power in the relations of culture; it is always about changing the dispositions and the configurations of cultural power not getting out of it" ("Popular Culture" 471).

It is acknowledged that societies are indeed comprised of dominant and subaltern identities, ideas, and classes. However, hegemony emanates from and operates, in varying degrees, in virtually all areas constituting society:

> The philosophy of an age is not the philosophy of this or that philosopher, of this or that group of intellectuals, of this or that broad section of the popular masses. *It is a process of combination of all these elements*, which culminates in an overall trend, in which the culmination becomes a norm of collective action and becomes concrete and complete (integral) "history". The philosophy of an historical epoch is, therefore, nothing other than the "history" of that epoch itself, nothing other than the mass of variations that the leading group has succeeded in imposing on preceding reality. (Gramsci 658-659; emphasis added)

From a Gramscian perspective, a given cultural narrative cannot be fruitfully studied as a clash between dominant and subaltern worldviews, in which the former simply annuls the later, nor can we think of cultural identities as merely superimposed narratives. "Social forces which lose out in any particular historical period", as argued by Hall, "do not [...] disappear from the terrain of struggle; nor is struggle in such circumstances suspended" ("Gramsci's" 423). On this matter, Gramsci resorted to Machiavelli. Gramsci deployed Machiavelli's image of the Centaur to clarify the inherently constructed and dialectic nature of culture:

> Another point which needs to be defined and developed is the "dual perspective" in political action and in national life. The dual perspective can present itself on various levels, from the most elementary to the most complex; but these can all theoretically be reduced to two fundamental levels, corresponding to the dual nature of Machiavelli's Centaur—half-animal and half-human. They are the levels of force and of consent, authority and hegemony, violence and civilisation, of the individual moment and of the universal moment ("Church" and "State"), of agitation and of propaganda, of tactics and of strategy, etc. (Gramsci 385-386)

Machiavelli's metaphor of the Centaur addresses Gramscian dichotomies in manifold ways. All of them though reinforce one basic premise: the cultural fabric must be understood within the tension between human-based actions and superstructural or formal apparatuses. On the one hand, a given culture and its social life are based on the immediacy of daily practices –the human part of the Centaur. On the other, social life is also conditioned by historically constructed customs and contracts, that which exceeds human action and constricts people's agency –the beast part of the Centaur. It is within that space (determined by material conditions and yet open for competing agents to transform it) that hegemony is fought for.

Therefore, in order to use hegemony as a methodological tool, the focus cannot and must not be just on how elites execute coercive actions, nor can we comply with classical liberalism and its understanding of society's crises as unfathomable. Gramsci referred to the latter as fetishist reading of culture, a view by which society functions by itself, attached to no specific actors or material agents thereby legitimizing social passivity (Díaz Salazar 146-147). Critical engagement ought to be on how a given discourse comes to be formed; in what ways ideological foundations are refunctionalized and recontextualized; how customs, traditions, slogans, or historical figures and events are appropriated for certain causes; and what legitimizing mechanisms operate to sanction certain narratives and omit or puncture others.

In his research on the impact of Gramsci's thought on ethnicity and the subaltern, Hall clarifies the main points of the Gramscian conception of ideological signification. Hegemony, says Hall, is a multilayered, negotiated, and complex dispute on the terrain of ideology that crystallizes out of an interactive and generative process that is never preordained:

> In recognizing that *questions of ideology are always collective and social, not individual*, Gramsci explicitly acknowledges the necessary complexity and inter-discursive character of the ideological field [...] The object of analysis is therefore not the single stream of 'dominant ideas' into which everything and everyone has been absorbed, but rather the analysis of ideology as a differentiated terrain, of *the different discursive currents, their points of juncture and break and the relations of power between them*: in short, an ideological complex, ensemble or *discursive formation*. (434 "Gramsci's"; emphasis added)

In Gramscian terms, culture is to be thought of as a relational and non-teleological fighting terrain in which the terms of signification are constantly negotiated. A cultural discourse is then "a process which has no particular end, and which can never be supposed at any time to have finally realized itself, to have become complete" (Williams, *Resources* 37). Much of this conception is grounded in Gramsci's notion of civil society, which denotes in turn a flexible depiction of the state, not merely circumscribed to political institutions:

> For it should be remarked that the general notion of State includes elements which need to be referred back to the notion of civil society (in the sense that one might say that State = political society + civil society, in other words hegemony protected by the armour of coercion) [...] It is possible to imagine the coercive element of the State withering away by degrees, as ever-more conspicuous elements of regulated society (or ethical State or civil society) make their appearance. (Gramsci 532)

As part of this reflection, one of Gramsci's most prominent subject matters became the conception of the State[4]. In his research, Gramsci concluded that the persistence of the capitalist mode of production could not be exclusively linked to a matter of coercive domination. For Gramsci, the survival of capitalism depended on the complexity, strength, and resistance of its entrenchment in civil society (Díaz-Salazar 210). Therefore, political action, inasmuch as power management, does not and cannot be solely confined to state-based institutions. The fight for cultural validation and ideological primacy exceeds far beyond the limits of prototypical political spaces. The political is not to be found in the State and its institutions (as argued by liberalism) or in the State as institutional mechanism derived from and subservient to the economic order (as advanced by certain forms of Marxism) (Iglesias-Turrión 19). According to Gramsci, the state also encompasses the terrain of civil society –hence his insistence on the importance of culture as a fundamental locus for hegemonic struggle (Anderson, *Antonimias* 33-36). The institutions and practices we all engage with in our daily socialization are indeed spaces for power management (Díaz-Salazar 222). In accordance with this, and as advocated by Williams, "there is not a special class, or group of men [sic], who are not involved in the creation of meanings and values" (*Resources*, 4). For any discourse to be hegemonic, a handful of formal institutions are not sufficient. A project of social channeling and legitimization needs to be advanced. Gramsci's understanding of the State involves engaging with civil society which, in turn, implies acknowledging culture as placeholder for political intervention and mobilization.

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[4] Many of Gramsci's texts were written in his imprisonment at Bari under strict censorship and in terrible living conditions. These circumstances led to Gramsci's characteristic linguistic elusiveness and metaphoric argumentation, as well as to certain fragmentation and contradictoriness (Anderson, *Antonimias* 9). Consequently, his take on the state is sometimes hard to follow to the extent that he sometimes uses the terms "state" and "civil society" to mean relatively similar things (Anderson, *Antonimias* 21-22,; Gramsci 445-449). I follow the "State = political society + civil society'" scheme for it is coherent with Gramsci's understanding of hegemony as part of and emanating from all layers of society.

Cultural practices are hegemonic as long as they are rooted in civil society, that is, as long as they are buttressed by popular forces and not only by dominant institutions. As Díaz-Salazar notes, the main innovation brought about by Gramscian thinking, in relation to other forms of Marxism, lied in the thesis that hegemony hinges on civil society and its apparatuses (the media, religious and educational institutions, cultural products [235]). Being aware of these mechanisms for creating cultural imaginaries supportive of specific ideologies permits to understand and analyze culture while conceptualizing the state as a wider, more pervasive framework of representation. Therefore, hegemonic operations pertain to civil society, this being an integral part of the state as well as the locus from which reigning cultural formations attain grassroots power. As specified above, studying hegemony entails evidencing and showcasing the political and ideological functionalities interred within culture.

Gramsci's formulation of hegemony arises from an etymological understanding of the term. He emphasizes the original Greek sense: guiding or leading. Gramsci singles out the notion of hegemony from the idea of domination. Hegemony is a matter of producing consensus, of gaining political, ideological and moral direction, which ultimately must be combined with an inevitable element of domination (Díaz-Salazar 228). Gramsci's hegemony branched off from previous vocabularies and practices within Marxism in that it privileges and foregrounds the centrality of appropriating grassroots meanings and perceptions in the cultural terrain. Departing from

Russian social-democrats and from economicist and aprioristic tenets of Marxist orthodoxy, and rearticulating Lenin's ideas[5], Gramscian hegemony is fundamentally a cultural operation: "[a] social group can, and indeed must, already exercise 'leadership' before winning governmental power (this indeed is one of the principal conditions for the winning of such power); it subsequently becomes dominant when it exercises power, but even if it holds it firmly in its grasp, it must continue to 'lead' as well." (Gramsci 212)

It is only after a continued work of cultural negotiation and transformation, of construction of common sense values and consent that a social group, a set of policies or an identitary discourse may actually set the terms of social debate, alter the material conditions of a given culture and thus become hegemonic. The acquisition of this cultural centrality, nonetheless, must be supported by a degree of domination and material base.[6] In his much known and quoted piece "Analysis of Situations. Relations of Force", Gramsci spells out the formation of hegemony:

> [O]ne becomes aware that one's own corporate interests, in their present and future development, transcend the corporate limits of the purely economic class, and can *and must become the interests of other subordinate groups too.* This is the most purely political phase, and marks the decisive passage from the structure to the sphere of the complex superstructures; it is the phase in which *previously germinated ideologies become "party", come into confrontation and conflict, until only one of them, or at least a single combination of them, tends to prevail*, to gain the upper hand, to propagate itself throughout society — bringing about not only a unison of economic and

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[5] In relation to this, Gramsci acknowledged that "it was Lenin who revived Marxism as a creative philosophy [inasmuch as it] reaffirmed the importance of hegemony in his conception of the State and gave the cultural front as much emphasis as the economic and political fronts" (Cammett 205). In addition to this, and despite the historical usages of the term, it was Gramsci who developed hegemony as a theoretical unit (Anderson, *Antonimias* 23).

[6] Although the focus of this project is cultural hegemony, it must be noted that Gramsci was well aware that hegemony needed to be coupled with a solid material, that is, economic basis (Díaz-Salazar 236, Gramsci 373).

> political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity, *posing all the questions around which the struggle rages not on a corporate but on a "universal" plane*, and thus creating the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate groups. (405-406; emphasis added)

According to Gramsci, a discourse obtains hegemonic dimension insofar as it operates transversally and is able to project its own ideas as universal, as taken-for-granted. As this process solidifies, it amalgamates other groups as subordinates to its worldview. In so doing, such cultural discourse is enabled to set the very grounds on which ideas, debates, and projects are conceived of, that is, is capable of presenting and circumscribing the terms of discussion within coordinates that best cohere with its own functioning and interests. As commented above, any discourse is a composite, constructed artifact that comes to existence out of socio-historical and cultural processes. Hegemony implies inscribing interest-driven and partial discourses and modes of thinking within the social and cultural fabric with the guise of a given, natural thing. Thus, a hegemonic discourse manages to make citizens experience its practices and values as just an indistinguishable fact of social life, and not as the result of an ideological struggle and a historical process which is, in turn, naturalized and normalized.

This process of naturalization and universalization, what is generally referred to as consent in Gramscian thinking, is a pervasive and far-reaching exercise that penetrates much of social life and transforms sectional interests into a collective will. "The dominant power", writes Eagleton, "is subtly, pervasively diffused throughout habitual daily practices, intimately interwoven with 'culture' itself, inscribed in the very texture of our experience from nursery school to funeral parlour" (114). The examination of cultural products, coupled with historiographical research and close textual analysis, help ascertain and examine those practical strategies that constitute hegemony and its daily diffusion. "[H]egemony" thus "supposes the existence of something which [...] is lived at such a depth, which saturates the society to such an extent, and which, as Gramsci put it, even constitutes the substance and limit of common sense for most people under its sway" (Williams, *Problems* 37).

In order to have that totalizing capacity to universalize a given ideological construct, hegemonic discourses need to have what Slavoj Žižek has termed ideological readability. In keeping with Gramsci, for Žižek the ultimate goal of an ideological and political hegemony is to appropriate all those concepts that are spontaneously lived as apolitical at the level of society (Žižek, *Defensa* 15). Moreover, Žižek indicates that this process by which specific ideological constructs become the regulating principles of the social requires providing citizens with orienting notions and rationales. A discourse (be it about national identity, gender, race, or sexuality) is hegemonic insofar as it supplies people with ideas, moorings, and grounds through which they can understand and "read" their daily experiences thus grafting citizen's reality onto the hegemonic framework (Žižek, *Defensa* 17). In this sense, ideology is a discursive mechanism that bridges the gap between people's isolated actions and the constellation of social factors that constitute public life.

In this light, hegemonic discourses are to be studied as complex cultural scaffoldings. They operate along long stretches of time, crystallizing out of sustained and long processes that build up consent. Producing consent as bedrock for hegemonic discourses is also intimately bound to the idea of common sense. In Grasmci's terms, common sense needs to be read literally – it has to do with the sense shared by the majority:

> What Gramsci calls 'common sense' (defined as 'the sense held in common') typically grounds consent. Common sense is constructed out of long-standing practices of cultural socialization often rooted deep in regional or national

> traditions. It is not the same as the 'good sense' that can be constructed out of critical engagement with the issues of the day. Common sense can, therefore, be profoundly misleading obfuscating or disguising real problems under cultural prejudices [...] Cultural and traditional values (such as belief in God and country or views on the position of women in society) and fears (of communists, immigrants, strangers, or 'others') can be mobilized to mask other realities. (Harvey, *Neoliberalism* 39)

For Gramsci, common sense is a "fragmentary collection of ideas and opinions" (634), a social construction to be capitalized by competing ideologies. Framed within the narrative of hegemony, common sense has less to do with a coherent agenda than with a composite and often ungrounded and un-reflexive grouping of cultural traces, mingled together to be politically and ideologically funneled. "Why [...] is common sense so important? Because it is the terrain of conceptions and categories on which the practical consciousness of the masses of the people is actually formed" (Hall, "Gramsci's" 431). The analysis and historiographical research of common sense is absolutely central to fully understand hegemony. As argued by Williams, "[i]n a society as a whole, and in all its particular activities, the cultural tradition can be seen as a continual selection and re-selection of ancestors" (*Revolution*, 52).

In dissecting the common sense values that structure the cultural narratives of 9/11, it is essential to investigate how deposits or residues from American history (expressions, mottos, ideas, values or customs) are utilized to create a common identifiable ground that may be "readable" in public debates. In gauging the internal structure of common sense, we may see the historical trajectories of its different constituents and thus analyze how competing ideologies shape and (re)articulate national values and traditions. Common sense, therefore, "tells not one narrative, but several conflicting 'stories' stitched together [...] Bits and pieces of ideas from many sources –

what Gramsci calls ‘stratified deposits’ – [which] have slowly settled or sedimented, in truncated and simplified forms, into ‘popular philosophy’, without leaving behind an inventory of their sources” (Hall and O’Shea 2-3).

Within the conceptual narrative of Gramscian hegemony, it seems appropriate to bring in the notion of interpellation as authored by Louis Althusser (*Lenin*, 170-177). Not only does the concept help gain additional insight into identitary formations, but it also anticipates the interdisciplinary approach devised by Post-Marxists such as Laclau and Mouffe. In Althusserian terms, interpellation is conceptually and semantically analogous to the act of hailing someone (i.e. a person calls somebody in order to address him or her or to call his or her attention). Althusser uses this sense of the word to illustrate how ideological signification works.

In ideology the subject is the minimal operative unit. The subject is, however, inherently ideological –the notion of subject *per se* is always a discursive formation wrought by diverse historical contingencies. Given the constructed and articulatory nature of the subject, the act of interpellation can be defined as a range of “rituals of ideological recognition” (Althusser, *Lenin* 172) through which discourses “recruit” individuals, integrating them into a given ideological field and providing them with specific discursive attributes (i.e. a discourse “hails” subjects, thereby signifying them in a particular fashion and placing them in a given ideological space). For Althusser, interpellation is, therefore, a mode of recognition which defines and constitutes a type of subject within the social. For instance, in the following chapter I shall mention that the rise of the new right consisted in formulating a new identitary interpellation in American public discourse –meaning that a new conservative discourse was articulated that tried to signify the American citizenry along different ideological coordinates, constituting a new subject (a subject who felt himself/herself addressed and who accepted the values and the identitary traits attached to such addressing). Whenever I deploy the term I invoke such a meaning: interpellation as being tantamount to ideological recognition and signification, the transformation of disaggregated individuals into a subject who feels integrated and becomes part of an identifiable ideological constellation.

2.3. The Radicalization of Gramscian Hegemony: Laclau's Populism

If Eagleton, Hall, and Williams devote much of their intellectual efforts to clarify and expand Gramscian thinking, the work of Laclau and Mouffe can be seen as a radical push of Gramsci's hegemony to new limits, historical experiences, and theoretical contexts.[7] Laclau and Mouffe address a linkage I have previously intimated, that of post-structuralism and Gramsci.[8]

In itself, the concept of hegemony is nothing but a more or less systematized formulation to unpack and make sense of the web of practices that mutate certain cultural worldviews into both common-sense, legitimate values and the gravity center through which the social must be thought of and mapped out. Taking the cue from Gramsci's emphasis on the constructed and negotiated nature of culture, Laclau and Mouffe focus on the notions of articulation and contingency, stressing that the social is always open to forge new channels of signification:

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[7] After all, Laclau's and Mouffe's refashioning of Gramsci is not different from the shift Gramsci himself applied on Marx. As Hall has it, Gramsci "understood that the general framework of Marx's theory had to be constantly developed theoretically; applied to new historical conditions; related to developments in society which Marx and Engels could not possibly have foreseen" ("Gramsci's" 412).

[8] See for instance Laclau's comment on the political functionalities of deconstruction:

> "Deconstruction is a primarily *political* logic in the sense that, by showing the structural undecidability of increasingly larger areas of the social, it also expands the area of operation of the various moments of political institution. [...]The central theme of deconstruction is the politico-discursive production of society" ("Deconstruction", 61).

> The general field of the emergence of hegemony is that of articulatory practices, that is, a field where the 'elements' have not crystallized into 'moments'. In a closed system of relational identities, in which the meaning of each moment is absolutely fixed, there is no place whatsoever for a hegemonic practice. [...] It is because hegemony supposes the incomplete and open character of the social, that it can take place only in a field dominated by articulatory practices. (177)

The action of hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe aver, presupposes the non-articulated and not-yet-signified nature of some areas of the social, hence the tendency in post-Marxism to think of society as aggregates rather than totalities (Barrett 65). The fact that not all elements within the social ensemble are perfectly defined and sutured opens up the possibility of a discursive articulation that may link different identities to create new hegemonic blocs (the Reagan Revolution, as I shall explore in the next section, is a clear example of how articulatory practices may discursively unite social bodies long considered as separated or even antagonistic). As part of this theoretical crisscrossing, Laclau's formulation of populism in *On Populist Reason* (2007) seems extremely useful to apprehend certain dynamics in contemporary American politics on which the post-9/11 experience rests.

As Laclau repeatedly points out, populism should be conceived neither as a damaging remark nor as an ideological typology. Instead, populism is, first and foremost, "a particular political logic [...] a series of discursive resources which can be put to very different uses" (*Populist* 7, 176).[9] Populist strategies can be conflated with any sort of ideological content from the political spectrum. In order for populism to operate, a stark discursive dichotomization of the social space must be instituted:

> [A] frontier of exclusion divides society into two camps. The 'people' [...] is something less than the totality of the members of the community: it is a partial component which nevertheless aspires to be conceived as the only legitimate totality. [...] In order to have the 'people' of populism, we need something more: we need a *plebs* who claims to be the only legitimate *populous* –that is, a partiality which wants to function as the totality of the community. (Laclau, *Populist* 81)

As one route towards hegemony, populism entails invoking and addressing "the people". This group is endowed with the traits of legitimacy, moral authority, and authenticity –and whoever is able to claim to be its representative, or to arrogate to himself/herself its legitimizing attributes, is on the process of a hegemonic construction (Errejón-Galván 136). For example, when imagining the national, it is often the case that "the true sense of the nation" is assigned to the people of populism. Therefore, as Laclau notes, a section within society is projected and enshrined as placeholder of the totality; it is "a part that claims to be the whole" (*Populist,* 83).[10] As consequence of this dichotomization and discursive institution, another group is cast out of the community.

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[9] I wish to state that whenever I make use of the term populism or populist I will be sticking to Laclau's definition. At no point of this PhD thesis is the term meant to bear derogatory connotations but only a specific form of discursive arrangement.

[10] In this sense, Laclau's formulation of hegemony has a strong linguistics-inspired component typical of deconstructive practices: "An act of hegemony is a moment when a contingent or metonymical segment within the non-totalized, heterogeneous whole takes upon itself the task of representing the whole, in a movement which might be defined topographically as a step by which a contingent metonymy becomes a synecdochic metaphor, part standing for whole and acting politically in the name of the whole toward a better future" (Hillis Miller 220).

For the people of populism to be established though, Laclau argues that, on the one hand, some signs within the populist discourse need to be in place that make the different aggregates that constitute the people cohere. On the other, the social and political context must be plunged into some form of instability or crisis. Laclau talks about the necessity of having certain signifiers that create a bond between a variety of subject positions. When there is a series of urges or anxieties that remain unaddressed within the social (what Laclau calls "demands"), "an equivalential bond between them" must be laid out that internally fixes the construction of the people (*Populist* 86). Although the demands will surely be different from one another, a populist strategy should create and/or retrieve

> some privileged signifiers [which] condense in themselves the signification of a whole antagonistic camp (the 'regime', the 'oligarchy', the 'dominant groups', and so on, for the enemy; the 'people', the 'nation', the 'silent majority', and so on, for the oppressed underdog – these signifiers acquire the articulating role according, obviously, to a contextual history). (Laclau, *Populist* 87)

When constituting the people of populism, these privileged signifiers unite the set of unfulfilled demands. The demands remain diverse. And yet, they are all equally summoned and mesh with these privileged signifiers. Therefore, these privileged signifiers conduct two simultaneous operations. They first dichotomize the social (for instance people vs. elites). And then, they establish an equivalential and linking chain that binds together the different demands of the people, which remain clustered around those privileged signifiers –and stand against that segment of society that is outside of the people. Laclau differentiates between empty and floating signifiers (*Populist* 133). For him, when the populist dichotomization is perfectly demarcated we talk about empty signifiers. When the dividing frontier is more porous and unstable and the signifier can be (re)appropriated by either of the competing discourses, we talk about floating signifiers. As I will explain in the next section, populism and floating signifiers (such as "freedom" or "government") function as key mobilizing elements to understand contemporary American culture and politics and the identitary struggles at their core.

2.4. The Liminal Nation and the Fortified Neighborhood

As part of the theoretical framework here espoused –in which the national, the collective, and the individual stand as key premises, and the negotiated status of cultural symbols is considered a centerpiece argument– I will now focus on reading practices which conceive of the nation and the national as fundamentally articulatory terrains. As has been said earlier, hegemony is largely disputed and constructed by refashioning and recasting the nation's past and values.

A close examination of the State, the Nation, and the Nation-State is far beyond the scope of this dissertation. I do find it useful and pertinent though to complement my conceptual framework with critical vocabularies that help express the nation as, indeed, a historical and material process, but also as a discursive space that requires and is conducive to totalizing dynamics and representational partialities –main ingredients, as explored early in this section, in establishing and securing hegemony.

Despite the necessary and ready problematization brought by postcolonial studies and postmodernism to the imaginaries of the national, as well as the dismantling effects of neoliberalism and globalization, the nation still "provides a certain ontological and epistemological security, a geographical and historical mooring and a legal, political, and institutional complex which incorporates (and excludes) individuals as national subjects" (Edensor 29). Acknowledging such grounding, I am particularly interested in the functioning of the nation "not only [as] a political entity but [as] something which produces meaning – *a system of cultural representation* [...] *a discursive device* which represents difference as unity or identity" (Hall, "Question" 292, 297). In this sense, I am indebted to Homi Bhabha's postcolonial take on the nation. In this view, the nation has less to do with the image of a purportedly organic community (Bhabha, *Location* 5) than with an ambivalent cultural construction to which is assigned an artificially primordial nature and which is, more often than not, enacted and deployed as a totalizing construct –that is, as a tool for hegemony which "rationalize[s] the authoritarian, 'normalizing' tendencies within cultures in the name of the national interest or the ethnic prerogative" (Bhabha, "Introduction" 4).

The study of ideologically saturated conceptions of the nation (which abound in post-9/11 American culture) reveals that the modern image of the nation has occluded its contested and unstable identity. Benedict Anderson famously speaks of the nation as a "secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning" (11) and formulated his notion of the "imagined community" to refer to the national construct. Nations are inherently founded upon an element of high abstraction and openness. "[T]he members of even the smallest nation" writes Anderson "will never know most of their fellow-members" (6), which brings to the fore the importance of finding unifying and binding narratives to establish points of union and convergence among an inescapably heterogeneous social body. Simultaneously, the nation also entails a community because "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 7).

Articulating the national operates so as to unify and de-pluralize extremely multi-faceted social realities. Such articulations would always hinge on distinct historical, cultural, ideological, and political constructions and interpretations, wrought by hegemonic operations. Within this constructing and articulating, it emerges that the images and words deployed to express the nation are contextually and historically dependent. Therefore, the very edifice of the national construct is, as the terrain of hegemony, a locus for (re)appropriation, signification, and channeling:

> The creation of national identity [...] involves a continuous flow between individuals and symbols, in the sense that *individuals do not merely have to accept already established symbols, but rather have constantly to re-create them and attribute to them new meaning* according to the changing circumstances through which the life of the community develops. *Tradition has to be reinvented and persistently actualized*. (Guibernau 84; emphasis added)

I find it necessary to exemplify this point by inscribing it within a specific historical space and a specific national symbol subject to different ideological articulatory practices. It suffices here to think of different historical uses of the American flag and the linkages these evoke. We can see the flag inscribed in some of the iconographies of the 1969 Woodstock concert (Fig.1), an event which symbolically bound together different left-wing anti-establishment movements of the decade. The very same flag is displayed in virtually every anti-abortion demonstration –expression of another agenda, that of a diverse range of right-wing religious groups (Fig.2). These (re)appropriations point out that the national and its symbols are an inherently contested arena, one that constitutes identities on the basis of other identities, generating larger signifying frameworks that belong to none of those identities. The self-proclaimed pro-life demonstrator and the Woodstock attendee use the flag for radically different purposes.

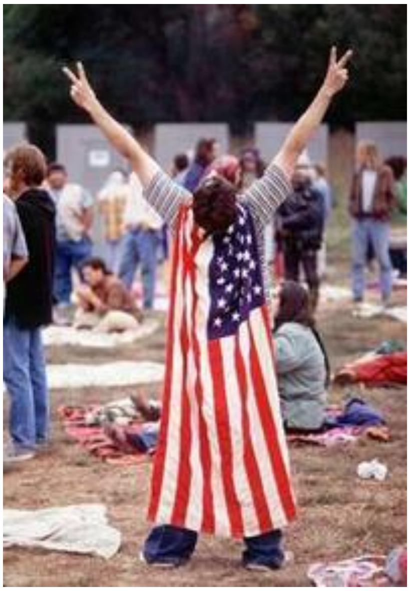

Figure 1: Man at Woodstock

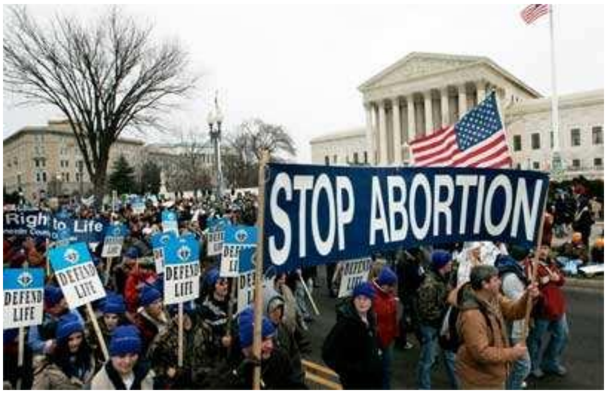

Figure 2: March for Life in Washington D.C. (2012)

However, they are both trying to symbolically attach a host of ideological and political traits to the idea of "Americanness". In aiming to separate the flag from other ideological stances and embed one's discourse into such a symbol, they tacitly engage in a dialogue with each other.

This example hopefully certifies the plasticity of cultural identities and how homogenizing national discourses disregard the nation's dialectical structuring, something clearly visible in the malleability of the national symbol. The films analyzed in following sections exemplify such malleability. In the primary sources studied, the American flag becomes a contested symbol as different characters in a number of films utilize it to articulate totally different worldviews and outlooks.

Bhabha puts this issue at the core of his argument. Informed by postmodern and post-structuralist reading practices, he lays out an elaborate critique of cultural essentialities and centrisms, contending that

> the attempt to dominate in the *name* of a cultural supremacy [...] is itself produced only in the moment of differentiation [...] The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that that these two places be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space. (*Location* 34-36)

A given discourse comes to existence, attains signification, and is endowed with identitary properties once it differentiates itself from others. Therefore, the substance of a discourse emanates precisely from these others' identities.[11] This is the basis for Bhabha to claim that "the locality of culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself" (Bhabha, "Introduction" 4). As we have just seen with the "two" American flags, the resultant overall signifying system which is the American flag exceeds essentialist origins, and becomes something larger, different. "What emerges as an effect of such 'incomplete signification'", Bhabha theorizes, "is a turning of boundaries and limits into the *in-between* spaces through which *the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated*" (Bhabha, "Introduction" 4; emphasis added).

Regarding the specific subject matter of the nation, Bhabha establishes two types of attitudes within civil society that might complement Gramsci's and his concept of fetishist relationship. For Bhabha, people can either act as historical objects or as historical subjects within the narrative of the nation.

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[11] In the following explanation of deconstruction, the concomitances between Bhabha's system of cultural signification and post-structuralist practices are quite visible:

> Deconstruction implies, *in the first* place, the question of the origin, which is also the questioning of the center and of all privileged terms in the system of binary oppositions on which the metaphysics of presence is based [...] [Derrida's] readings prove how it is on the effaced term that the privileged one depends and without which the latter's identity could not be affirmed. If the principle of difference is to be taken seriously, it is impossible to conceive of the idea of originality without the idea of a copy [which] reveals the impossibility of a *pure*, *unchangeable* origin and renders the hierarchical opposition baseless. (Darias-Beautell 44-45)

"[T]he people [can be] the historical 'objects' of a nationalistic pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin or event" ("DissemiNation", 297). In this line, the nation as a construct is validated in an essentialist manner, as if its symbols and traditions were sacrosanct and inherent. As opposed to the pedagogy of the nation, "the people are also the 'subjects' of a process of signification [...] by which the national life is redeemed and signified as a repeating and reproductive process" ("DissemiNation" 297). For Bhabha this is the "performative", which "introduces a temporality of the 'in-between' through the 'gap' or 'emptiness' of the signifier that punctuates linguistic difference". The ambivalence between both forms of agency opens up the liminality of the nation, which "would ensure that no political ideologies could claim transcendent or metaphysical authority for themselves" ("DissemiNation" 299).

Linked to Bhabha's rumination on the nation's ambivalent nature, Arjun Appadurai has extensively reflected on globalization from the field of ethnographic and anthropological research. Within this line of discussion, Appadurai has devised an especially productive notion: the idea of locality. For Appadurai, locality is an "inherently fragile social achievement", a rather "relational and contextual" construct (178-179). Locality is of interest insofar as it can be used to explain identity as contiguity between practices and spaces (an element that might help us understand a film such as *The Village*, a key post-9/11 text). Thus, the local subject is one whose civic life is intertwined and regulated by ritualized routines and perfectly delineated and identifiable iconographies which bind him/her to the surrounding material context:

> [S]pace and time are themselves socialized and localized through complex and deliberate practices of performance, representation, and action. [...] One of the most remarkable general features of the ritual process is its highly

> specific way of localizing duration and extension, of giving these categories names and properties, values and meanings, symptoms and legibility. (180)

The local is, therefore, that social relationship by which the interaction between material conditions and the subject is as fluent as possible and is not perceived as being mediated or politically and ideologically driven.

Framed in this form of heterodox or interdisciplinary Marxism, the critical framework proposed here places the focus in mapping out the formation of cultural and political meanings and legitimacies as well as the complex ways by which these are transformed into hegemony. However, this set of reading practices is not exclusively designed for the analysis of the primary sources. The critical framework is also deployed to approach and categorize some of the discursive and identitary bases of modern American politics and culture.

3. Origins and Characteristics of the Post-9/11 Cultural and Political Discourse

A nation is a choice.

Lerone Bennett Jr.

History is not a frigid museum; it is the secret trap we are made of, time.
In today lies the yesterdays.[12]

Jorge Luis Borges

There is very little doubt that the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon are the most important and defining historical event of the 21st century in the United States. It is a far more complex task to establish some appropriate and concise socio-historical coordinates to gauge why and how political and cultural debates, policies, and discourses developed the way they did from 9/11 onwards. It is tempting to conceive 9/11 as the result of a number of interlocking historical threads. It seems equally suggestive and pertinent for the purposes of this inquiry to revisit how community and individualism have been discussed at different points of American history so as to know how previous values and events have conditioned post-9/11 culture and politics (the Puritan communities, frontier rhetoric, the transcendentalist imagination, the Populist movement, the Popular Front and the Great Depression, or the Civil Rights Movement might be, among others, the most significant episodes in this regard).

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[12] "La historia no es un frígido museo; es la trampa secreta de la que estamos hechos, el tiempo. En el hoy están los ayeres." My translation.

Nevertheless, the following pages do not seek to carry out such a wide-scope survey. Instead, this section zeroes in on the rise of contemporary American conservatism –its main arguments, identitary narratives, and key political vocabularies. In order to characterize the Bush Doctrine and its narratives of individualism and community, it is imperative that I examine the hegemony upon which all of its legitimacy and line of argument rest. It is equally important also to briefly sketch (by comparison) the hegemonic bloc modern conservatism stood against and delegitimized: Cold War liberalism. As I will try to show, the Bush Era is just a sublimated expression of an already deep-seated hegemonic complex.

As Žižek has written, "[w]hen the normal run of things is traumatically interrupted, the field is then opened up for a "discursive" ideological competition" (*Tragedy* 17). The 9/11 attacks qualify, indeed, as such a traumatic disruption. Likewise, in the context of post-9/11 United States, the ensuing discursive competition that Žižek refers to was to be had in a political and cultural terrain where modern conservatism had previously legitimized its rationales and preferred categories within American public discourse. In other words, when it got to articulate the Bush Doctrine, the Bush Administration operated in a social landscape discursively favorable for its core ideas. "Any articulatory practice operates with 'preexisting' elements or 'raw materials' [...] which are the sedimented result of previous practices of attribution of meaning to social phenomena" (Errejón-Galván 228).[13] This section aims at characterizing the most immediate and visible "raw materials" through which the conservative Renaissance was mounted since these are the very discursive sustenance of the Bush Doctrine. In this sense, this strengthening of the current hegemonic bloc that occurred after 9/11 falls in line with Žižek in that

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[13] "[L]a labor de articulación trabaja con elementos 'preexistentes' o 'materias primas' que [...] son el resultados sedimentado de prácticas anteriores de atribución de sentido a hechos sociales." My translation.

> [w]hile crises do shake people out of their complacency [...] the most spontaneous first reaction is panic, which leads to a "return to the basics": the basic premises of the ruling ideology, far from being put into doubt, are even more violently reasserted. (*Tragedy* 18)

Therefore, to analyze in depth post-9/11 culture and its filmic manifestations entails, by definition, to delve into the most prominent discursive lines of modern American conservatism, given that such lines paved the way decisively for the articulation of individualism and community during the Bush Era. In the analyses of the primary sources it will be made clear how the films, by operating in the post-9/11 context, cannot but deal with some of the identitary elements of the larger framework of conservative hegemony.

Thus, this section has a dual purpose. On the one hand, there will be a survey, sustained by the theoretical categories laid out in the previous chapter, describing the founding consent-building narratives of the modern conservative hegemony: the definition of individual freedom as an economic trait, the assessment of liberalism and liberals as soft on crime and unable to cope with violent aggression towards the homeland, the evisceration of state structures as tantamount to liberty, and the populist assumption that there exists a real America whose traditionalist values (which retain the true sense of the national) need to be protected from both treacherous outsiders and insiders. On the other hand, an analysis will be laid out which delineates the Bush Doctrine as an exacerbation of the core constitutive elements ingrained in modern conservative.

3.1. The Construction of "the American People": the Rise of the Modern American Right

It does not seem farfetched to claim that the rise of the New American Right was the work of right-wing Gramscians, that is, people well aware that collective wills are not a given but that they need articulation and intervention in all levels of society –from academia to neighborhood associations. "It is amazing", contend Micklethwait and Wooldridge, "both how organized conservatives have been and how focused on the importance of ideas" (382). Modern right-wingers embarked in a decades-long dispute for terms and words; they struggled for dominating and gaining the upper hand in the terrain of culture, resignifying concepts and narratives, carrying out intellectual debate through "political action committees, volunteer operations, radio talk shows, think tanks" (Zelizer, "Establishment" 8), and addressing unfulfilled hopes and frustrations of the population at grassroots levels –whether actual or perceived.[14] Conservatism managed to construct, as George Lakoff's research has shown, the frames through which every issue of consequence has been debated for the last decades (14-15). Although Ronald Reagan was and is still considered the unifying figure of modern conservatism, major articulatory practices were undertaken prior to his election which took the Republican Party from being perceived as the party of the privileged few and corporate interests (Kazin 186) to become the platform for the common American.

The surge of this new brand of conservatism was carried out against the backdrop of another hegemonic bloc: Cold War liberalism. The United States lived through a period of stable wealth creation and economic prosperity ranging from the postwar period to the early 1970s, an era historian Eric Hobsbawn once defined as the Golden Years (*Extremes* 257-286). The enduring legacy of the New Deal coalition –the Keynesian triad of "organized labour, large corporate capital, and the nation state" (Harvey, *Condition* 133)– not only generated unprecedented rise in purchasing power for large sectors of American society (Berman 13). It also solidified the narrative that Americans stood at a "vital center", as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., famously claimed, consisting of liberal democracy and regulated capitalism, estranged from the excesses of Communism and Fascism (1949). This political, economic, and identitary discourse generated around its policies and narratives such consensus and popular consent that it developed a highly uncontested hegemonic compact. Gramsci defined hegemony as the capacity of a group to make its own terms, premises, and projects the established and taken-for-granted terrain on which meanings and debates are articulated. The almost three-decade long bipartisan liberal consensus remains a glaring example of hegemonic practice. For instance, from 1943 to 1951, Republican statesman Robert Taft –an outspoken critic of both the New Deal and Franklin D. Roosevelt– advocated federal assistance in terms of medical care, housing, and education, demanded minimum-wage laws, acknowledged the necessity of some form of labor organization, and accepted the usefulness of gradual income taxing (Hofstadter 97-98). In order to intervene politically, conservatives had to accept a language, engage in specific debates, and participate in certain political objectives that belonged to the adversary. That hegemonic compact started to crack in the 1960s, barely survived during the 1970s, and finally dissolved as the decade wore on. Despite being superseded as the hegemonic discourse in American identity, it has been such a fundamental underpinning of contemporary politics and culture that there will be some of the primary sources examined which, in order to validate a political argument or elaborate a socio-cultural critique, will resort to Cold War liberalism, whether to vindicate it, as in the case of *The Assassination of Richard Nixon*, or to criticize it as in *American Gangster*, *The Pursuit of Happyness* or *Law Abiding Citizen*.

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[14] In this sense, modern right-wingers managed to (re)orient and intervene in ideology in Althusserian terms, that is, in the rather affective way people "live the relation between them and their condition of existence" (*Marx* 234).

A number of critical events in the 1960s (the protest of the Civil Rights Movement, the desegregation of the South, the enlargement of the welfare state Lyndon B. Johnson launched through his Great Society reforms, the movement against the Vietnam War, and the seemingly endless and fruitless involvement of American troops in South East Asia to defeat Communism) coalesced into a vivid and tumultuous historical outlook that did not sit well with some significant white working- and middle-class portions of the American public, nor with some flourishing conservative scholarship circles and business sectors.[15] "It is safe to say" writes scholar Robert B. Horwitz "that a mutually constitutive relationship evolved among an embryonic grassroots conservative populism, an invigorated anti-establishment conservative intellectual movement, and a talented, funded, cadre of right-wing political activists and entrepreneurs in the early 1960s" (47). Infused in a self-proclaimed sense of dispossession (Hofstadter 23), these groups not only thought of the Great Society programs as too interventionist, burdensome, and overprotective of racial minorities –especially African Americans– and the poor.[16] They also felt that the nation was in the brink of losing its traditional values and its moral fiber. In the background of liberal American hegemony, a certain narrative, albeit still secondary and seen as a fringe movement, started to operate which assumed that the material well-being and social stability earned during the postwar boom were "under siege both from liberal authorities and angry minorities" (Kazin 223).

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[15] As Micklethwait and Wooldridge report, five benefactors have generously funded the rise of conservative think tanks and associations: Joseph Coors, Richard Mellon Scaife, the Koch family, The Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, and the John M. Olin Foundation (77-79). The rise to hegemony of modern conservative cannot be fully understood without the economic muscle it relied on.

[16] As of the 2000s, historian Thomas Frank still identified dispossession and victimhood as primary traits for the ideological narratives of the right (119).

3.1.1. The Journey towards Legitimacy: Goldwaterism and the Silent Majority

1964 stands as a watershed for the modern Right. It launched the first attempt to tap into that fermenting vein of grassroots and intellectual discontent against the liberal consensus. Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, a staunch conservative hawk, captured the Republican nomination for president and mounted an aggressive campaign against President Johnson, the Democratic Party, establishment Republicans, and liberal thinking at large. Unlike other conservative voices, Goldwaterism represented the first official counterhegemonic attack ever waged against the liberal "vital center" in that it refused to construct its messages from the legitimacies and current common-sense categories of the time. Goldwaterism interpellated American citizens to see themselves as being oppressed by the very institutions and rationales that undergirded postwar liberalism. Much as it turned out to be a massive electoral failure (Johnson was elected by an outstanding landslide), Goldwater's campaign forwarded a series of messages that paved the way for later conservatives to take away from liberals the authority to speak in the name of the American people.

The political and cultural project of Goldwaterism could be outlined as a strenuous and continued effort "to redefine Republicanism as an anti-government philosophy" (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 9), a feature that would henceforth become a conservative article of faith and, eventually, an almost inescapable element for any subsequent actor trying to summon popular consent around itself (as the films discussed in the chapter devoted to neoliberalism attests).[17] In Goldwater's discourse, government is no longer considered a mechanism which guarantees decent living standards and political stability. On the contrary, the federal leviathan functions as an oppressive, elite-based instrument that fosters collectivism and inaction, and which transforms entrepreneurship into stagnation. In his vocabulary, freedom was projected in purely fiscal terms. Taxes, instead of a wealth leveling tool, were tantamount to state-sponsored theft.[18] In this sense, Goldwater brought to the fore the work of some organic intellectuals on the right, especially the thoughts of Friedrich Hayek, who had been theorizing since the 1940s that central planning, welfarism, and popular sovereignty would erode, in the long run, the legal foundations of the nation and property rights in a manner similar to European totalitarianisms. For Hayek, Keynesianism and the New Deal entailed an inexorable loss of freedom (Anderson, *Spectrum* 27-30; Bosch, *Historia* 476). That assimilation of freedom to the absence of government regulation that Goldwater channeled through Hayek and others would play an instrumental role in the hegemonic displacement that would sweep in in the 1970s and 1980s.[19]

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[17] In American politics, the word "government" is much more frequently used than "state" but both terms refer to the same institutional reality. I will use both to signal the same concept.

[18] Programmatically, these discursive lines entailed the slashing of middle-class entitlements, the scrapping of federal spending for minorities, the advance of the flat tax, and the empowerment of states against the federal government (a strategy that would allow certain territories to repeal Civil Rights legislation) –in other words, a call for a profound overhauling of the New Deal guidelines for economic growth and political management (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 59; Bosch, "Conservadurismo" 19)

Tapping into the rich anti-statist vein of American culture (Lipset 20), and informed by a sense of entrepreneurial frontiermaniship (McGirr 132), Goldwater appealed to the idea of Americanism as a quintessentially individualistic notion. He employed those historical common-sense values to translate politically the idea that liberals at Washington plotted to "take their [Americans'] money and control their minds" (Kazin 173). As he declared in his 1964 acceptance speech, Americans "have lost the brisk pace of diversity and the genius of individual creativity. We are plodding at a pace set by centralized planning, red tape, rules without responsibility, and regimentation without recourse" (Goldwater). In the search for establishing a truly conservative anti-hegemonic message, the Goldwaterite discourse sought to reclaim "American" common-sense values for the right (self-confidence, individualism, entrepreneurship, risk-taking), cultural sediments upon which some legitimacy could be built up.

As part of this attempt to undermine the institutions of American liberalism, the Goldwater platform did more than anyone else to associate crime, riots, and any form of urban unrest and civil mobilization to liberals' indulgence and negligence. That idea struck a mighty chord in the 1960s United States. With the images of the Civil Right movement demonstrations and the anti-war marches at the core of public discourse, the Goldwater platform portrayed liberals and the Democratic Party as excessively permissive regarding social mobilization –whether this was directed to enlarge the civil liberties of African Americans or to express dissenting views towards American military involvement in Vietnam. The secular views of modern liberalism, as well and its insistence on social engineering and public investment, conservatives argued, debilitated discipline and social order, eliminated traditional values of respect and peaceful coexistence, and cared more "for the criminal than for his victims [...] frowns on the policeman and fawns on the social psychologist" (Hofstadter 117-118). By linking "real Americans" to a normative frame of conservatism and traditionalism, he amalgamated all progressive social mobilization and dissent as an un-American rabble. Thus, Goldwater "aggressively exploited the riots and fears of black crime, laying the foundation for the "get tough on crime" movement" that would found the basis of the latter War on Drugs (Alexander 42). Goldwater's call for a pedagogy of the nation, in which the masses are not to contest national integrity via social protest, will form the basis of a central feature inscribed right down to the to the very last gesture and detail in modern conservative discourses: the idea that liberals are "soft on crime" and act with laxity towards anti-patriotism and aggression (a rationale which would be of extraordinary importance for the Bush Doctrine and its conception of American democracy as a necessarily conflict-free process).

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[19] Kazin (171) and Horwitz (38) summarize the different streams of scholarship critique towards liberalism. Also, see Heilbrunn (31, 49, 68-9, 165), who chronicles the decades-long intellectual work of neoconservative intellectuals.

The failure of the Goldwater ticket revealed that American society still clung to the liberal promise. However, the Goldwater platform infused some narratives that would subsequently gain currency and become the centerpiece argument of Nixon's Silent Majority and, most importantly, of Reagan's

Revolution[20]: government was the nodal point from which current social malaises originated, federal structures anesthetized the American spirit of individualism and self-government, and social fracture stemmed from a soft liberal elite more concerned with the poor and the racial minorities than with real hard-working Americans and their security on the streets and abroad.[21] The fact that Goldwater's discourse was legitimized after his presidential bid bears out how ideas, as we examined through Salamini, are continuously tested by changing socio-historical trends. He left a few promising cultural and political sediments for the right to tap into: an intellectual agenda, a series of narratives to render the national situation readable to people, and a series of unarticulated and still discursively dispersed social groups with unfulfilled desires and demands. A possibility was on its way to construct a new "American people", a new grassroots legitimacy that could speak in the name of a large majority estranged from the liberal consensus –a project furthered and retooled by the Nixon Administration.

Admittedly, Richard Nixon's five-year presidency has been overshadowed by executive excesses and historic wrongdoings. The Nixon Administration, though, won the 1968 and 1972 elections by conjuring up a discourse that toned down the aggressive rhetoric and extremely partisan agenda of Goldwater, as well as that of George Wallace.[22] His appeal to the Silent Majority remains a populist benchmark that, along with Goldwaterism, formed the basis for conservatives to claim that they were, essentially, a tool for people's empowerment. Nixon can be seen as a middle-ground passage between Goldwater's extremism and Reagan more sanitized and optimistic approach.

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[20] Reagan adamantly endorsed Goldwater's campaign. See his 1964 speech "A Time for Choosing".

[21] Likewise, grassroots support for the Goldwater campaign was surprisingly high with 3.9 million party volunteers (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 60) and his success in the hitherto Democratic Deep South (McGirr 143) prefigured the demographical change in voting tendencies that was about to come, turning the South into a Republican stronghold.

[22] The segregationist Alabama governor ran as third-party candidate in 1968 and won 10 million votes and 13,5 % of the electorate –the best result of a third-party ticket since 1924 (Bosch "Conservadurismo" 21). The potency of the white grassroots backlash was evident.

In a context of social weariness over the Vietnam war and the government's secrecies and immoralities in conducting it, social resentments, and inflation (Baritz 156; Berman 6; Hamby 260), Nixon managed to capture many former New Deal coalition voters weary of liberal projects to address social justice for minorities and institute legal mandatory changes over states' rights (Bosch, "Conservadurismo" 21). Embedding conservatism and the Republican party within the working- and middle-class ethos, and taking some of Goldwater's most mobilizing core values, the Nixon administration enshrined the discourse of "morality", "law and order", "welfare chiselers", and "liberal pervasiveness" as the political and cultural gravity center of the right and rode a wave of popular middle-class and lower-middle-class resentment against the social change of the decade" (McGirr 210-211). "In this narrative" writes Jones "middle class people are cast as innocent victims who work hard and are preyed upon by shiftless, dirty criminals who come out of the alleys and dim recesses of the urban sprawl" (73). Nixon's discourse managed to provide, as Goldwater had not managed to do, a set of coordinates through which a majority of Americans could read and make sense of the political turmoil of the time. Urban riots, social spending, cries for racial equality, and "permissiveness in language, deportment, and sexuality" (Horwitz 60) were fundamentally at odds with a non-complaining and hardworking majority of Americans that constituted the real backbone of the country (prefiguring some of the slogans and messages of Reaganism).

Nixon managed to deploy the metaphor of the Silent Majority as common-sense repository of Americans' work ethics, desire for social order, and respect for (white) traditional values. After a long association by which the promise of liberalism was tantamount to the American people, the postwar consensus had lost its representative grassroots power. Breaking a sociological barrier in place since the Great Depression, the discourse of conservatism ceased to be linked to corporate interests and upper-class status, and came to be recognized as the folk and ordinary vocabulary by which the people could express their worldview against a socially sedating entitlement mentality and an increasingly imposing and fiscally burdensome federal government[23]. Kazin brilliantly summarizes the key cultural and political sways that I have been examining and that Nixon intervened in so decisively. The commentary is worth quoting in full:

> The labor-liberal alliance forged in the 1930's was the victim of its own success. The social programs and long-term union contracts that, in the context of the postwar boom, had enabled millions of white working people to enjoy a measure of job security to afford homes of their own also made possible a new coalition that demolished the New Deal order. By the end of the 1960s, whether one earned a wage or owned a small business, carried a union card or chafed at the restrictions imposed by labor was often less important than *a shared dislike of a governing and cultural elite and its perceived friends in the ghettos and on campus.* (246; emphasis added)

It should be pointed out though that the narratives endorsed by Nixon did not correlate with his actions. Much as he kowtowed to traditional values and groups, he made thorough use of the liberal playbook protecting social security, expanding regulation of workplace safety and the environment, proposing an ambitious anti-poverty scheme, and even trying to introduce universal health insurance (Anderson, "Homeland" 8; Krugman 81; Walker 232). So although liberalism and its most significant symbols and procedures – state intervention, labor unions, moderate redistributive policies, and aid to the needy– were the object of excoriation –and narratives to exercise so had been delivered by conservative intelligentsia, politicians, and footsoldiers– its programmatic underpinnings were still practiced by politics on the right. The real hegemonic displacement was to be executed by Ronald Reagan.

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[23] Nixon's landslide victory against George McGovern in 1972 speaks volumes for the breakdown of the liberal compact.

3.1.2. The Populist Strike: the Discourse of Reaganism

I resorted early on to Laclau to explain the populist logic. Goldwater and Nixon may very well fit that label. Reaganism, however, accommodates itself exactly to the populist reason and its categories. For as much as those forerunners of the right-wing modern hegemony touted a two-camp vision of American society, there were still no signs of acute structural crisis as they campaigned and they did not actually reverse, in any form, liberal policies. This outlook morphed as the 1970s dragged on –social climate became ripe for introducing, not just one more attack on the liberal ethos, but an attempt to undo its institutional and social achievements. The years between Watergate and the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, when postwar liberal imaginaries floundered, fits Gramsci's notion of crisis of authority or organic crisis, a moment when "the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously" (Gramsci 556).

The rise of Reaganism crystallized in a moment in which the Fordist-Keynesian paradigm came to a grinding halt and gave way to what has been termed late capitalism (Jameson), flexible accumulation regime (Harvey, *Condition*), or neoliberalism (Dardot and Laval; Harvey, *Neoliberalism*).[24] This is the element of crisis that Laclau, in his explanation of populism, sees as essential in order to articulate a new "people". It was in such historical interregnum between Keynesian capitalism and neoliberalism that Reaganism stepped in:

> [T]he legitimation of state power depended on the ability to spread adequate health care, housing and educational services on a massive scale but in a human and caring way. [...] Only in that way could Keynesianism welfare statism be made fiscally viable. [...] It was not until the sharp recession of 1973 shattered that framework that a process of rapid, and as yet not well understood, transition in the regime of accumulation began. (Harvey, *Condition*, 139-140)

The Reagan Revolution soared in context most pertinent for a populist outbreak: the uneventful Ford Administration, the withdrawal from Vietnam, the bitter experiences of stagflation and economic crisis (Derbyshire 40), and a shared sense of "limits" as the defining trait of the era (Depoe 102) set the scene. The presidency of Jimmy Carter remains the tellingly bleak epilogue of the liberal edifice –with its unappealing call for restraint and austerity (Farber 18), his terrible public image (Schulman 132; Wilentz 96), and his critique of the consumerism and violence that had characterized recent American history (Graebner 158-159).[25]

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[24] A clarifying linguistic note needs to be included at this point. In American English liberalism alludes to the political left whereas for Europeans liberals are advocates of anti-statist laissez faire. The widespread term neoliberalism encapsulates the latter. Thus, Ronald Reagan and Barry Goldwater are conservatives in the United States, but had they been British politicians, they would have been called neoliberals. Also, in the United States neoliberal policies have been usually referred to, rather, as deregulation or trickle-down economics.

[25] Carter's presidency was already symptomatic of the demise of the liberal hegemony and prefigured the policies and discourse Bill Clinton would have to implement in the 1990s. Carter had to embrace projects and ideas from the conservative field such as federal cutting, increasing defense budgets, and the curtailing of labor rights (Aronowitz, *Promises* 417-418; Brenner 44; Ribuffo 445).

Reagan synthesized, exacerbated, and racially sanitized the narratives of Goldwater and Nixon. He established an equivalential chain through two potent floating signifiers that condensed the unfulfilled demands of all those who had deserted or thought about splitting off from the spirit and promise of liberalism. Modern conservatives managed to construct a new "American people". Reaganism was an updating, more perfected catalyst for all the continued hegemonic work laid out by conservatives of all kinds since the 1960s. By the late 1970s, conservative diagnoses about what was happening in the nation were popular talk; they provided ideological readability to understand American politics and culture.

Reaganism capitalized on perceived shortcomings and injustices wrought to "Middle America" by liberal planning, basing its discursive strategy in nurturing and channeling the "discontent of those who had felt disempowered during the 1960s" and attacking "welfare freeloaders [and] unpatriotic critics" (Morgan 270). But unlike recent historical episodes, the recession of the 1970s enabled conservatives to link more cohesively people's demands and daily concerns with right-wing narratives.

Reagan's condemnation of "welfare queens" and "criminal predators" (terms that evoked strong racial appeals) helped him win large masses of disaffected whites from poor and working class backgrounds who saw themselves as the collateral damage of racial integration, indulgence towards crime, and welfare (Alexander 48-49). It was argued that it was this amorphous Middle America proclaimed by conservatives that had to cope with the costs of big-government programs while the very liberals who enacted

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such programs remained "sheltered, in their private lives, and largely immune to the costs of implementing minority claims" (Edsall and Edsall 12-13). The political conflict therefore seemed to lie "between bureaucrats greedy to enhance their power and a hard-pressed majority tired of paying for welfare program it neither wanted nor needed" (Kazin 263) with the conservatives being the stand-bearers for the average American.

So by the 1970s, the liberal leviathan was perceived not merely as careless and soft on crime. It was blamed for overtaxing and overregulating Middle America to support welfare-dodgers (Kemp 207), which had resulted in the 1970s recession. The potency of this narrative underwrote Reagan's famous statement that "we don't have inflation because the people are living too well; we have inflation because the government is living too well" (1980).

As a parallel legitimizing discourse, Reagan re-invoked the Puritan ethics of individualism and success as an essentially American feature (Bercovith xxxvii), thereby assigning government planning –in the form of welfare, business regulation, and taxation– traces of un-Americanism and oftentimes Sovietization which hindered individual initiative and risk-taking (Wilentz 136). The inflections of Hayek's ideas are here evident. Flatly condemning the New Deal achievements, Reaganism characterized government assistance as somewhat detrimental to what Americans were supposed to stand for. Goldwater's failed discourse of freedom as shorthand for eradication of government regulations resurfaced with brand new grassroots legitimacy.[26]

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[26] During the 1980s, as Sugrue points out, "behavioral and cultural explanation of poverty moved mainstream" as right-wing intelligentsia became more and more influential. "The cause of contemporary poverty, they argued, could be found in family breakdown, out-of-

The very concept of the federal government as an inefficient elite-base cadre, insulated from peoples' interests and national traditions, and that implements changes without being affected by those very changes (Garry 167) became a paradigm-shifting narrative, as well as an enduring cornerstone argument of Reaganism. It smoothed the way for a fundamental mainstay of modern right thinking that rang especially true in American culture: the contention that taxes and government intervention are synonyms with repression and that "individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade" (Harvey, *Neoliberalism* 7) thereby redefining individual freedom as an economic one, as a matter of property rights.[27]

Therefore, the two floating signifiers which underpinned the construction of the "people" of Reaganism were "government" and "freedom".[28] Implementing Gramsci's thesis that subjects are collective wills, these two signifiers united the disparate constituencies that had voiced discontent and anger during the tail end of liberal hegemony:

> Protestant evangelicals infuriated by what they considered to be an immoral liberal minority's assault on American values; blue-collar Catholics frustrated

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wedlock childbearing (the old-fashioned term "illegitimacy" moved back into popular currency), welfare dependence, and a new, violent youth culture" (246). The most popular exponents of this line of thought were Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein. Their book *The Bell Curve* (1994) became a milestone for conservative intellectuality.

[27] Note Reagan's words in his 1989 Farewell Address: "'But back in the 1960's, when I began, it seemed to me that we'd begun reversing the order of things–that through more and more rules and regulations and confiscatory taxes, the government was taking more of our money, more of our options, *and more of our freedom*. [...] And I hope we have once again reminded people that man is not free unless government is limited. There's a clear cause and effect here that is as neat and predictable as a law of physics: *As government expands, liberty contracts.*" (emphasis added)

[28] I opt for the term "floating signifier" because the idea of government has been hegemonized by different ideologies throughout American history. We need only to see the way government is talked of in the line of Goldwater and Reagan and the way FDR or LBJ did to realize how, as a political and cultural signifier, it has been the object of highly different interpellations.

> that the Great Society did not help them as the New Deal had helped their parents; southerners estranged from the Democrats' civil rights agenda; neoconservative intellectuals[29] alienated by the sixties' legacy and fearing Soviet expansion; corporate leaders dumbfounded by the Democratic addiction to big government and hostility to big business; homeowners crushed by the double whammy of an eroding dollar and soaring property taxes; and residents of the Sun Belt fed up with high taxes and burdensome regulations. (Gill 37)

However different these groups' demands were, for all of them "government" equally signified some of these elements: insecurity on the streets, permissiveness towards crime and foreign aggression, secularism, complicity with anti-patriotism, loss of values, and massive appropriation of their hard-earned salaries to be spent on fruitless welfare programs. For all of these groups, government signaled a malfunction –be it economic, cultural, or political. Likewise, more "freedom" –understood as a matter of economic and property rights and, therefore, as a dismantling of the New Deal– appeared as the overarching solution to address their necessities despite their different incomes, social statues or specific beliefs. For instance, freedom meant more assets and economic resources for a middle-class or even working-class family; for traditionalist communities it meant applying certain values and norms via laws despite what the federal government thought about it.

This narrative interpellated cohesively the widely heterogeneous aggregates, to use the post-Marxist lexicon, of disgruntlement and frustration that had been accruing since the Goldwater years. Conservatives had now, as Laclau would say, a *plebs* that could operate as the legitimate *populous.* The dichotomization was structured as follows: the hardworking American people would stand against the treacherous liberal elites and welfare freeloaders both equally eroding the American spirit of individual effort and work ethics. It was through this discursive strategy that the New Deal coalition was finally put to rest.[30]

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[29] Neoconservatism is a very loose group within the heterodox body of American conservatism. Mostly made up of former Democrats of Jewish origin, their advocacy for unilateralism, preemptive strikes, and expansionism is worth mentioning, since most of that agenda was coopted by the Bush Administration.

As a consequence, from Reaganism onwards, the policies and ethos of liberalism were thought to be an anathema in American political discourse (Depoe 100). No issue of consequence has remained untouched by conservatism. Just as Robert Taft had to participate in the liberal project back in the postwar years, in the 1990s Bill Clinton had to operate within the margins set up by Reaganite populism. In many ways, Bill Clinton was to Ronald Reagan what the Labour Party under Tony Blair was to Margaret Thatcher.

In a context of intense political polarization and hatred towards the very existence of the federal government (Wilentz 347-348, 352), the Clinton presidency is a clear epitome of how profoundly Reaganism had become hegemonic. Adversaries had to deploy conservative idioms and co-opt conservative policies so as to carry out their own projects. As Gramsci would put it, all questions were posed on a universal plane appropriated and signified, in this case, by conservative thought. Under the Clinton Administration the Glass-Steagall Act (one centerpiece element of the New Deal economic policies) was severed, thereby deregulating the banking industry, the get-tough-on crime narrative and policies were largely endorsed (Alexander 56-57), and progressive politicians were urged to “triangulate” –an euphemistic term which implied that they had to move towards the right so as to “appeal to corporate interests while keeping a working-class and liberal voting base” (Nichols and McChesney 32). The famous culture wars of the 1990s were, in essence, an acknowledgement that the only ideological struggles that could be waged were about affirmative action, gay rights or gender issues. Reaganite populism and the larger discourse of neoliberalism had been normalized and taken for granted as the very texture of politics and culture. The fall of the Soviet Union only seemed to bear out the then-celebrated Francis Fukuyama’s end of history thesis (1992) whereby capitalism and western liberal democracy had been revealed as the only viable socioeconomic and political order.

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[30] The literature on Reaganism is immense and ever-increasing. See the levels of income inequality and the deregulation of the 1980s in Aronowitz, *Promises* 415-416; Derbyshire 115; Garry 77; Gill 168, 227; Kemp 222, Nadel 26-28; the process of deindustrialization in Aronowitz, *Class* 25; Ehrman 64, 104-105; Kemp 202, Schaller 69-70; deunionization and precariousness of jobs in Aronowitz, *Promises* 411; Davis, *Prisoners* 139; Derbyshire 208; Ehrman 107, Rogers and Teixeira 13, Zweig 65-66; and Reagan's more aggressive approach to foreign policy in Kuznick and Stone 421-462.

The most iconic moment of how Clintonism had internalized the lines of Reaganism took place in the 1996 State of the Union Address when the president announced that the era of big government was over (Clinton), using the very anti-government rhetoric at the heart of the conservative movement. It should be no surprise that one of the main organic intellectuals of Cold War liberalism, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., said that he really doubted whether President Clinton, who had claimed to represent Schlesinger’s vital center, knew what the concept really stood for.

3.2. The Bush Era: the Post-9/11 as Discursive Complex

When George W. Bush narrowly defeated Al Gore in the highly contentious 2000 presidential election, his project was to be developed in a cultural climate and a political spectrum significantly tilted to the right. Public debate and political discussion could hardly be articulated outside of the margins established by the policies and rhetoric of populist conservatism.

The Bush-Cheney ticket ran on a campaign which rotated around realism and containment in foreign affairs and "compassionate conservatism" at home, with a focus on increased funding for education and transferring welfare competences to churches and private institutions (Anderson, "Homeland" 16; Micklethwait and Wooldrige 38; Ricks 24). But it was the terrorist attacks of September 11th 2001 that really kick-started the Bush Era and its epoch-defining political lines. The anxieties and demands wrought by 9/11 were met by radicalizing the hegemonic political culture of conservatism. The Bush Era can be broadly divided into two sections. We can see a span of political success and popularity from 9/11 to, approximately, 2004 –when the Supreme Court undermined some of its core policies. What followed was a severe erosion of the Administration due to the ill-prepared reconstruction of Iraq, the disastrous management of the 2005 New Orleans humanitarian crisis after Hurricane Katrina, and financial corruption, topped off dramatically by the bailout of the banking system in the fall of 2008 (Brenner 34; Rich 177; Zelizer, "Establishment" 11; Zelizer, "Conservatives" 35). Throughout this period a set of intertwining and mutually constitutive narratives about individualism and community arose, associated with their corresponding policies, laws, and rhetoric.

3.2.1. The Man in the Oval Office: Individualism and Executive Power in the Bush Doctrine

In the light of 9/11, the Bush Administration considered that, in order to tackle the dangers of international terrorism and protect the homeland, the contemporary procedural mechanisms to wage war and operate politically from the executive branch fell short. This proposition led to a legally controversial series of actions which "engineered the biggest shift of power from the congressional to the presidential branch in a generation" (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 132). The political clock was turned back almost four decades. The Bush Administration reestablished the executive agency once constrained by Congress after the untrammeled trespassing of Johnson and Nixon during the Vietnam War (McKay 239-240, Schulman 48).

Legal teams within the White House drew inspiration from the constitutional abuses made by Abraham Lincoln and FDR in their executive praxes during the Civil War and World War II, respectively. But unlike Lincoln and Roosevelt, the Bush Administration claimed that, as Commander in Chief, the president was vested with the constitutional authority and the legitimate right to act unilaterally in the context of warfare regardless of what the other two branches or international law might express to modify or limit the executive will (Mayer 47, McMurtry 130, Pfiffner 94-95). Against the backdrop of a conflict alleged to have no end in sight (as Vice President Dick Cheney reported a few days after 9/11)[31], the cardinal implication of the so-called Bush's unitary executive paradigm was that the president was no longer bound to execute the laws faithfully insofar as the threat of terrorism existed (Pfiffner 28). The exceptionality of the emergency state morphed into the normative frame of policymaking with the president being the "occupant of a position that was not subject to the rules [he] must protect" (Pease, "Afterword" 211). Thus, the Bush Doctrine made its centerpiece legal argument that neoconservative thesis which argues that containment, treaties, and legal due process are futile against rogue regimes and Islamic fundamentalism (Heilbrunn 227; Micklethwait and Wooldridge 212).[32]

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[31] See his comments on the *Meet the Press* five days after the attacks.

No national conversation was held as to how profoundly such arrangements departed from the checks-and-balances and law-oriented principles of American political culture, or to what extent such type of governance led to the kind of tyranny abhorred by the founding fathers (Pfiffner 239). No public or substantial enquiries were initiated so as to ascertain whether the Bush Doctrine reflected strategic geopolitical interests.[33] And this was so because of two aspects: a discursive terrain hegemonized by conservative categories and a historical period of anxiety and fear.

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[32] This unitary executive theory by which Bush got unchecked powers to wage the War on Terror formed the blueprint for two of his most controversial actions: the illegal enemy combatants status –depriving war enemies of the protection of the laws of war and the writ for habeas corpus (Dudziak 44-45, Stolberg)– and the euphemistic government-sanctioned use of torture under the suspension of the Geneva Convention (Altheide, "Language" 18; Kuznick and Stone 504; Pfiffner 145-165, Weiner 555-556). It took nearly four years for the Supreme Court to deny the constitutionality of the Bush Administration's decisions regarding war prisoners' status and their legal treatment (Mayer 299-300; Naftali 81-82).

[33]. The main lines of action of the Bush Doctrine had already been advocated by certain lobbying groups such as the Project for the New American Century before 9/11. The PNAC used to count as members would-be top Bush Administration officials such as Vice President Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy Paul Wolfowitz, among others. Since 1997, PNACers had been pressing for more military spending and overseas expansion so as to erect the United States as the world's hegemon (Altheide, *Fear* 164; Heilbrunn 218; Kuznick and Stone 490-491; Ricks 17). They claimed that for this to happen in a foreseeable future "some catastrophic and catalyzing event – like a new Pearl Harbor" was requisite (Donnelly 51). 9/11 turned out to be the turning point that facilitated the materialization of the PNAC's agenda.

In his vitriolic study of the media after 9/11, essayist Frank Rich described the national mood after the attacks as one of befuddlement and helplessness: "the country wanted desperately to rally around a leader–any leader. We needed someone to root for. We needed someone to take charge. We needed someone to protect us." (23). "[T]here was," Rich wrote, "a vacuum of leadership in defining what form [...] patriotism might take" (38). The Bush Doctrine, with its emphasis on empowering the presidency and granting the executive branch an above-the-law status, can be regarded, precisely, as a way to fill up that vacuum, to channel a very specific kind of patriotic and nationalistic fervor. In this sense, conferring President Bush such all-embracing powers helped constitute a framework which equated national identity with a support of leadership (Altheide, *Fear* 102). Especially in the first term of the Bush's tenure, and clearly informed by a sense of frontier outlaw heroism, Americanism tended to be projected as a form of expansive, if not rugged, individual action embodied by the president and his rhetoric: "Some of our opponents are skeptical that the war on terror is really a war at all. They view terrorism more as a crime –a problem to be solved with law enforcement and indictments. [...]. *After the chaos and carnage of September the 11th, it is not enough to serve our enemies with legal papers*" ("Republican Governors"; emphasis added).

Bush's "monarchial prerogative", as legal scholar James Pfiffner defined it (54), and his call for doing what is necessary in the name of national security, reinforced that idea that rough individual action –even if it meant crossing legally established and collectively constructed frameworks– was to be seen as the legitimate, patriotic, and dutiful thing to do in a moment of exception. Such message could be successfully disseminated because of the decades-long get-tough-on crime narratives. The common-sense notion that violent crime ought to be punished –no matter what a lax or incomplete set of laws may say– paved the way to secure post-9/11 American society's willingness to embrace extreme forms of unchecked individualism and leadership as the legitimate means to cope with the trauma wrought by 9/11: the contemporary hegemonic categories were simply reinforced in the wake of 9/11. A number of films engage in these debates, presenting American individualism after 9/11 as being caught between an anesthetizing sense of the legal and a morally imperative urge to do "the right thing" or "whatever needs to be done", which invariably implies flouting the rules.

This reinvigoration of the get-tough-on-crime narrative through the discourse of aggressive individualism was bolstered by an expedient political vocabulary of urgency. There was a government-spawned penchant to define key political decisions such as the invasion of Iraq or the passing of the USA PATRIOT ACT as ticking-time bomb contexts. Consequently, debate and reflection were rendered dangerous –as well as unpatriotic. This narrative was best exemplified through the smoking gun metaphor, shorthand for the immediacy of potential danger gearing up against the US (Wilentz 443). High-ranking members of the Bush Administration deployed the image as the clamor for war intensified:

> "America must not ignore the threat gathering against us. Facing clear evidence of peril, we cannot wait for the final proof –the smoking gun– that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud". (Bush, "Iraqi")
>
> "The problem here is that there will always be some uncertainty about how quickly he [Saddam Hussein] can acquire nuclear weapons. But we don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud." (Rice)
>
> "Another question that's been asked is, where's the smoking gun? Well, the last thing we want to see is a smoking gun. A gun smokes after it's been fired. And the goal must be to stop such an action before it happens." (Rumsfeld)

In spite of different phrasing and rhetorical nuances, these three extracts share a distinctive logic. By signaling an inescapable coming threat, they all work to naturalize the express need to implement military action in Iraq. The smoking gun image is a hegemonic trope insofar as it determined the way through which political discussion was to be waged in the post-9/11 United States, despite its being just one given assessment of the geopolitical situation.[34]

The retooling of a widely accepted hegemonic narrative conducive to popularly backed retaliation (the get-tough-on-crime discourse) and a historical episode of anxiety and fear as 9/11 enabled the approach of across-the-board individualism in the form of presidential authority as the American response to the current circumstances. This correlation of forces also served to accommodate or deproblematize the explicit contradiction between the overt expansion of government power (the unitary executive theory) and the conservative urge to slash federal government. The notion of support of leadership as identity, as authored by Altheide, is a key trait of post-9/11 culture –one that I will both expand in ensuing sections and be particularly attentive to in the close analyses of the films selected.

3.2.2. Mourning and Pain: the Construction of Community after 9/11

News coverage and media portraits decisively shaped Americans' perception and response towards 9/11. In a symbiotic way, the first two and a half years of the Bush Administration saw the advance of its most defining policies and political undertakings: the declaration of the "War on Terror", the Homeland Security Act, the USA PATRIOT Act, the proclamation of the "State of Emergency", and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. During this period, the Bush Administration received vigorous approval from both the American public and the press (Wilentz 434). Large sectors of the American public deemed a moderate curtailment of civil liberties as well as a heightened pace of militarization necessary.

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[34] There is extensive literature on the inconsistent intelligence used by the Bush Administration to build its case for the Iraq War. See, to name a few, Greenberg (216), Heilbrunn (241), Mayer (134-135), Ricks (46), or Kuznick and Stone (514-520).

This social landscape reveals an identitary tendency which made it mandatory to publicly react to 9/11 on the basis of "[s]orrow, suffering, empathy and pain [...] merged with fear and vengeance" (Altheide, *Fear* 110-111). 9/11 became, as Jeffrey Melnick put it, a sort of "cultural Esperanto: our language of grief and anger, of loss and steadfastness" (7). In the context of a potentially long-term state of exception, a significant bulk of political and cultural discourse was deployed as the cohesive element which legitimized the notion that unity and conformity were equivalent to national safety, dismissing other (less passive) forms of intervention and thought as deleterious to that consensual safety (Maggio 816-821). The political channeling of mourning and suffering as national bonding forged the founding principle on which the hegemonic reading of 9/11 was to be established –that of understanding 9/11 solely and exclusively as a tragic point of rupture, a "primal event [...] by which the nation's body politic was to be governed" (Wolin 6). The rhetoric and agenda of the Bush Administration and the narratives disseminated by media outlets made it possible to create an ideologically readable narrative in which a significant majority of Americans could inscribe their experiences after 9/11. American identity was fused together with rituals of collective sorrow and shared pain.[35]

The hegemonic mode by which 9/11 was supposed to be interpreted was largely generated and diffused into popular culture in the very aftermath of the attacks. News coverage saturated "everyday life with uniform images of the second plane crash, the firebomb, and the towers' collapse was transformed itself into the uncontested meaning of the event" (Heller 7). The continued and homogeneous focus on micro-narratives of personal tragedy and the images of the heroic New York blue-collar first responders – firefighters, police, and rescue workers– coupled to form a potent, victim/attacker, easily digestible iconography that would both foreclose broader critical perspectives and empty out the events of any geopolitical content (Hassler-Forest 28-29; Klein 297). This constant foregrounding of Americans' suffering proved to be politically fruitful in order to articulate a sense of national community. This can be best explained through Judith Butler's reflection on the grievability of life and the mobilization of affects:

> The differential distribution of grievability across populations has implications *for why and when we feel politically consequential affective dispositions such as horror, guilt, righteous sadism, loss, and indifference*. Why, in particular, has there been within the US a righteous response to certain forms of violence inflicted at the same time that violence suffered by the US is either loudly mourned (the iconography of the dead from 9/11) or considered inassimilable (the assertion of masculine impermeability within state rhetoric)? (24; emphasis added)

The immediacy and thoroughness with which the human tragedy of 9/11 was made visible closed down any other reading or interpretation of the events which did not highlight grief or the victimization of the nation. The emotional mobilization arising from such saturation of loss and death rendered the events "unrepresentable and therefore as eliciting only 'proper' nationalistic sentiment rather than historical knowledge" (Foster 255). A framework of grievability was thus constituted which vested full legitimacy to the American victims and exhorted the population to be empathetic and to understand the tragedy in terms of emotional engagement and fraternity –9/11 could not be thought of outside those discursive margins. Subsequently, this outlook prefigured a legitimization of military reprisals. This framework institutionalized that famous statement by Bush in which he claimed that "the murder of innocents cannot be explained — only endured. And though they died in tragedy, they did not die in vain" ("Pentagon"). Thus, as the horrors of September 11 were presented in full detail in the media, Al-Jazeera TV would be condemned as complicit with terrorism for showing the human and material devastation caused by U.S bombing in Fallujah (Žižek, *Violence* 45).

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[35] Rich (56-91) documents how American mainstream media corporations fell in line with most of the White House talking points and intelligence gatherings in the run-up to and the conducting of the Iraq War, showing little if no critical engagement with the decisions taken by the Bush Administration.

This dynamic was heavily invested with historically legitimizing icons of sacrosanct episodes of American history. Much of the visual construction of 9/11 drew semiotic similarities with the coverage of World War II –especially Pearl Harbor and Iwo Jima. "[T]he Iwo Jima-style image of the three firefighters who raised the flag over the rubble at the Lower Manhattan side [...] was [...] emblazoned across the front pages of the nation's newspapers" (Willis 121). The use of such symbolically charged images transmuted as readable and historically cogent the challenge opened up by 9/11. Such choice shows the will of reporting 9/11 as an act of war and not a criminal one. Selecting Pearl Harbor is also a way to demand a similar response to the one FDR gave to the Japanese attack –a call to war. And to extend the analogy to Iwo Jima entails expecting a similar denouement: total victory over the enemy

(Chéroux 52). If, as was explained in the previous section, Guibernau argued that the national is always open to be reinvested and reimagined, here we can see how 9/11 came to be signified as the commencement of war by invoking (and trying to appropriate) the legitimacy of past military efforts.

The corollary of all these arguments resulted in a powerful discourse: Americans' response to the attacks should be neither reflection nor intellectual engagement as to the clarification of what specific causes led to certain forms of terrorism to attack the homeland. Instead, a narrative was consecrated that signified 9/11 as an emotionally charged event, a tale of traumatic aggression. In a context of fear and apprehension, a mixture of mourning and retaliation needed to be acknowledged and embraced as the regulating principles to make sense of 9/11 –as the American way to cope with the current events:

> September the 11th brought out the best in America, and the best in this Congress. And I join the American people in applauding your unity and resolve. Now Americans deserve to have this same spirit directed toward addressing problems here at home. I'm a proud member of my party – yet as we act to win the war, protect our people, and create jobs in America, we must act, first and foremost, not as Republicans, not as Democrats, but as Americans. (Bush, "State")

Thinking or acting against such discourse –and, by extension, confronting the Bush Administration's policies– would entail either betraying or dishonoring the victims. After all, the victims have been portrayed, along with the perpetrators, as the sole actors of the events within a context of emotional mobilization which helped reinforce the ties of the imagined community that is the nation. The public's wide acceptance of such a narrative for, at least, the first term of the Bush tenure further proves that open grieving, when bound up with outrage and unbearable lost, contains significant political potential (Butler 39).

Community after 9/11 then came to be defined as a matter of nationalistic pride through shared mourning and craving for paying back, as well as an outraged denial of any political or historical root for the events of 9/11. This vision of community effaces, in terms of the nation/narration terms of Bhabha, the performative and intrinsically dialectic nature of the national, fully normalizing and homogenizing the body politic in the name of a so called national unity.

3.2.3. No Questions Asked: Dissidence and Patriotism after 9/11

Concomitant to that construction of community as a process of national unity through mourning, concepts such as dissidence and patriotism were the subject of intense ideological dispute during the Bush tenure. In the very days after 9/11, a narrative with strong identitary overtones emerged about patriotism and dissidence –and by extension about the ideal of individualism– that would condition public discourse for the entire decade. It consisted in deeming debate futile and disrespectful, giving as a result a form of patriotism which views opponents as rather illegitimate, if not un-American.[36] There was a particularly paradigmatic example of such discourse just forty-eight hours after 9/11. A heated conversation took place in the Fox News political talk show *The O'Reilly Factor*, conducted by conservative pundit Bill O'Reilly (an important organic intellectual for the American right). In the midst of a panel discussion about likely reactions to the terrorist attacks, activist Sam Husseini weighed in to comment on how this form of violence against the United States called for certain preliminary historical and geopolitical coordinates so as to be fairly assessed. This interpretative frame was immediately decried by O'Reilly. The exchange is worth quoting:

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[36] It is arguable to see post-9/11 demonization of dissent as an updated form of earlier similar historical episodes such as the Espionage Act of 1917, the Palmer Raids, McCarthyism, or Nixon's attacks on anti-government groups.

> -Husseini: "Bill, we have a history of this, I mean, Colin Powell [Secretary of State for the Bush Administration from 2001 to 2005] advocated, apparently, during the build-up of the Gulf War, flooding Baghdad and possibly killing four million people. Papers are now coming out in a magazine called *The Progressive* that we intentionally took out their water, their electrical facilities and [gets interrupted]"
>
> -O'Reilly: "I'm not getting your point here Mr. Husseini. I'm not getting your point at all. If you're gonna say...If you're gonna start to justify this kind of atrocity with past atrocities, I'm gonna pull a plug on you."

That automatism by which explaining 9/11 as historically and geopolitically motivated operation was considered equivalent to justifying the deed would be an element engrafted onto the very cultural texture of American public debates.

In his critique of the post-9/11 world, philosopher Richard Bernstein elaborates on the partisan usages of "the evil". Bernstein has it that talking about the evil as if its meaning were crystal clear and needing no further analysis or commentary is quite dangerous. Evil tends to be employed in an excessively vague fashion in order to condense what one specific person or group may abhor. There is no need to think or ponder since, it is assumed, that the meaning of evil is self-evident (Bernstein 163). This alleged obviousness and acontextuality is quite troublesome. As I have previously explored, signifiers like freedom and government may encompass widely diverse contents in accordance with historically-specific conditions and competing discourses. Bush openly accepted, however, this premise that Bernstein sees as problematic: "Some worry that it is somehow undiplomatic or impolite to speak the language of right and wrong. I disagree. Different circumstances require different methods, but not different moralities. Moral truth is the same in every culture, in every time, and in every place" (Bush, "Commencement").

That being so, 9/11 became an unthinkable phenomenon unfitting for discussion or analyses and only susceptible to a moral condemnation which automatically shut down the possibility of political or cultural inquiry. Through such premise the Bush Doctrine managed to hegemonize the very notion of patriotism. When the hijackers and 9/11 were successfully cast as an unfathomable entity bound to no narrative other than the good vs. evil parameter, not a single debate or national conversation could be had without recourse to the vocabulary and the starting point (a sort of historical void) emanated from the Bush Doctrine narrative. A form of common sense had been articulated. The identitary lines that emerged after 9/11 established American patriotism in terms of how much of an adherent to the Bush compact citizens were willing to be. More or less direct indictments within this dissident-patriot paradigm nurtured in the Bush years were plentiful. [37] Lynn Spigel has denominated as "infantile citizenship" all those discursive practices which signified 9/11 as a good vs. evil conflict that only offered binaries and ahistorical essentialisms to the American public (128).

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[37] TV hosts Phil Donahue and Bill Maher lost their shows for voicing anti-establishments points of views (Altheide, "Language" 16-17; Hedges; Kuznick and Stone 521); FBI agents contacted American citizens to enquire about their political leanings (Chang 94-95; Goodman 46-58); congress passed pleas to institute mass recitation of the 'Pledge of Allegiance' and the display of 'God Bless America' signs in public schools (O'Leary and Platt 173); two conservative think tanks closely tied to the Bush Administration –Victory Over Terrorism and the American Council of Trustees and Alumni– issued reports listing commentaries made by members of different universities describing them as anti-patriotic and stemming from a "hatred for the American ideals of freedom and equality" (Chang 99-100); and a media company–which owned 1200 radio stations– sent around a list of "inappropriate music" in the lead-up to the Iraq Invasion including several anti-war anthems such as "Blowing in the Wind' or "Imagine" (Roberts).

Standing against the terrorists and supporting the government in annihilating them became the discursive lifeblood of the Bush Administration. These guidelines were articulated in a stark dichotomization that rendered any form of dissent burdensome and rather illegitimate:

> In his address to Congress just after the attacks, the president had gone out of his way to sound reasonable and fair-minded as well as strong. [...] But Bush also began speaking in more Manichean and even messianic terms, of leading what he called his "crusade" against the "evildoers". He declared, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists"–suggesting that any disagreement with the administration's policy was anti-American and pro-Al Qaeda. [...] A spirit more akin to that of Joseph McCarthy and Richard Nixon than of Ronald Reagan –flatly equating partisan loyalty with patriotism– dominated the administration's rhetoric. (Wilentz 440-441)

In varying degrees of explicitness, the Bush Administration fixed the discursive lines that would regulate identitary conceptions of Americannes during the War on Terror as follows: the immanent and unfathomable evil of terrorism vs. the masses of united Americans:

> Bush defines the response to 9/11 as one that requires solidarity, a fundamental unity. In this unity rests the security of the nation. Hence, to the extent that people act outside of the consensus, they are acting against the national unity. In the moment of the "state of exception," Bush attempted to define unity as a key to democracy. Of course, this misses an essential element of democracy: disagreement and conflict. (Maggio 821)

Propelled by the neoconservatives' gloomy view on foreign affairs, the Bush Doctrine established that the attempt to explain evil rather than fight it was a despicable position (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 214). In the 9/11 context of fear and pain, this rationale managed to "establish an alliance between national security and the aggressive drives of the US people so as to incriminate dissent as a minor form of treason and to eliminate any loyalty that was more cosmopolitan than the defense of the *homeland*" (Pease, "9/11" 422).[38] By enshrining resolve and unity as the only instruments to secure the nation, as well as the real American way to resolve the threat of terrorism (Bush, "State"), there came the possibility of "[p]lacing virtually all 'opposition' forces in the terrorist camp" (Altheide, *Fear* 108).

Bereft of counter-arguments and intellectually dismantled, liberal thinking and its representatives offered little discursive opposition to the guidelines of the Bush Doctrine. Susan Sontag wrote a powerful article on September 24th presciently criticizing the discursive ensemble that was to appropriate 9/11 for the conservative cause:

> Where is the acknowledgment that this was not a "cowardly" attack on "civilization" or "liberty" or "humanity" or "the free world" but an attack on the world's self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions? [...] *Let's by all means grieve together. But let's not be stupid together. A few shreds of historical awareness might help us understand what has just happened, and what may continue to happen.* (emphasis added)

As early as November 2001, Noam Chomsky also compiled a series of materials to assess 9/11 as a historical and geopolitical phenomenon bound to be understood in a larger framework of power relations. Both manifestations try to point out, as Perry Anderson has recently written, that 9/11 cannot be appraised without factoring in the United States' long-standing propping up of Middle East tyrants beneficial to American interests, the adamant support of Israel, and the perennial presence of American troops across the Middle East (*Imperium* 130-134). None of these argumentative lines were seized to uphold dissidence as a valuable American principle in order to discursively fight the moral dualities of the Bush rhetoric or reevaluate the post-Cold War world. As Rich has astutely commented, there was little if no discussion to examine American relationships to Saudi Arabia (the country that had nurtured most of the hijackers)[39], nor did the costly funding of the Iraq War (while simultaneously cutting taxes) spur scrutiny or alarm (38). No counterhegemonic discourse was laid out against the right. On the contrary, the Bush Doctrine fuelled to a further degree the common-sense values of hegemonic conservatism.

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[38] In various public polls, roughly two-thirds of the population asked supported the actions of the administration. A quarter stated that President George Bush and Attorney General John Ashcroft have not acted in a sufficiently aggressive manner (Thomas 95).

One of those hegemonic values exploited by Republicans after 9/11 was the narrative of liberalism as being soft on crime. Karl Rove, Bush's Senior Advisor and a key player in the Bush Administration, was well aware of how ingrained such belief was in American popular imaginaries when he claimed that "[w]e can go the country on this issue because they [Americans] trust the Republican Party to do a better job of protecting and strengthening America's military might and thereby protecting America". The advocacy of due process and public deliberation was projected as harmful for national security. This even led to correlate the adherence to current laws to the terrorists themselves: "Our strength as a nation state will continue to be challenged by those who employ a strategy of the weak using *international fora, judicial processes, and terrorism*" (United States' Department of Defense 5; emphasis added). The proclaimed necessity of acting unilaterally to protect the nation and the foregrounding of such agenda as the only possible instrument to save America legitimized to great extent this two-camp strategy. This is what facilitated Attorney General John Ashcroft's famous comments on December 2001 responding to early critics of the Bush Doctrine:

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[39] Michael Moore made this particular point a central concern of his acclaimed *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004)

> We need honest, reasoned debate; not fear mongering. To those who pit Americans against immigrants, and citizens against non-citizens; to those who scare peace-loving people with phantoms of lost liberty; my message is this: Your tactics only aid terrorists for they erode our national unity and diminish our resolve. They give ammunition to America's enemies, and pause to America's friends. They encourage people of good will to remain silent in the face of evil. (Ashcroft)

Bringing attention to the Administration's empowerment of the executive or criticizing the preemptive strategy were tantamount to indirectly aiding the terrorist or, at least, being victims of their terror by not acting in a sufficiently expedient manner. The Hitler-Saddam analogies also started to abound in the run-up to the Iraq Invasion with the intention of showing doubters as weak "Neville Chamberlains versus the Winston Churchills who were ready to face the truth" (Fallows). As Bush said the day in which the first American troops were deployed in Iraqi soil, "no act of theirs can alter the course or shake the resolve of this country" (Bush, "Saddam").

Faced with this discursive ensemble, the Democratic Party showed scarce opposition to the Bush Administration. Just as President Bill Clinton had to incorporate the get-tough-on-crime vocabularies and policies into his political project so as not to be labeled soft on crime, Democrats after 9/11 massively yield to the conservative narrative of patriotism by supporting many of Bush's main political points. The main legislative response to 9/11, the USA PATRIOT Act, was passed with unprecedented rush and secrecy as if putting it to scrutiny was suspicious of un-Americanism:

> It is a monster piece of legislation amounting to 343 pages, covering 350 subject areas, encompassing 40 federal agencies and carrying 21 legal amendments. [...] It became law on October 26 [of 2001]. This was a record-breaking activity made possible only by forcing the pace to the point where *serious debate and discussion was made impossible by the restricted timescale and the public demand for political action*. [...] [F]ew members of Congress had

> time to read the summaries of the Bill let alone the fine print of the document that was passed in such haste. (Thomas 94-95; emphasis added)

Such was the process of foreign policy decisions like the Iraq Invasion in which "Congress asked very few questions and didn't offer any challenge to the administration" (Ricks 85-86). Among Democrats supporters were would-be 2004 presidential candidate John Kerry and Senator Hillary Clinton. The vigorous hegemonic dimension of conservatism was made clear in the run-up to the Iraq War. Political adversaries of the right had to participate, to some extent, in the policies and lexicon established by the Republican Party. From 9/11 on, and almost until the end of the Bush tenure, Democratic representatives were haunted by the fear of being conveyed as soft on terrorism and were well aware that the historical contingencies and the right-wing hegemonic discourse made almost any anti-terrorist measure advanced by Bush seem required and justified (Mayer 329; Ricks 88-89).[40]

3.2.4. Life, Liberty, and the Purchase of Happiness: The Neoliberal Subject

The Bush years saw further institutionalization of the Reagan Revolution as industrialized countries continued towards the full-fledged consolidation of neoliberalism as the regulating principle of their economies.[41] The common-sense values of free market freedoms, the sanctity of property rights, and popular capitalism remained not only central but were exacerbated throughout the post-9/11 era. In hindsight though, the Bush years have come to be associated with a series of disastrous economic policies for the middle class and poor neighborhoods (Formisano 53-54, 123), bringing forth a number of uncomfortable by-products of neoliberal management which materialized in the government-funded bailout of the bank system in the fall of 2008.

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[40] In the Senate, the vote in favor of the USA PATRIOT Act was 98 to 1 (all Democrats in favor) in the House of Representatives and 356 to 66 (145 Democrats in favor) in the Senate. The vote to authorize the use of force in Iraq was less overwhelming but still had significant support from both sides of the aisle: 296-133 (81 Democrats in favor) in the House of Representatives and 77-23 (29 Democrats in favor) in the Senate (Chang 43, Kuznick and Stone 518, Mckay 283).

[41] Jamie Peck offers a wide-ranging take on neoliberalism –its fluid usages, its international contexts; its intellectual points of origin; its contradictory nature; and its different articulations across nations (1-38).

The economic agenda of the Bush Administration promoted a sense of individualism caught up in a problematic combination of vectors: the rise of acute income inequality, a pervasive discourse of entrepreneurialism, property rights, and ownership, and the strengthening of the corporate sector's political powers.

Bush pursued a decisively Reaganite path getting passed a large regressive tax cut passed that "redistributed wealth upward to the wealthiest Americans" (Wilentz 436). But just as in the 1980s when Reagan's 1981 Economic Recovery and Tax Act cut down taxes for the wealthiest, the resultant windfalls were used in both cases "for conspicuous consumption [...] or for stock exchange speculation rather than productive investment" (Kemp 221; Patterson 122-123). Bush's policies were, therefore, as much his own responsibility as a continuation of the political tradition instituted by the Reagan Administration. This de facto reenactment of Reaganomics deepened a series of socioeconomic dynamics at play since the 1980s. Income inequality soared, reaching "a level in 2005 equal to that of the late 1920s, in large part because of extraordinary income gains amassed by the super-wealthy in the previous three years" (Patterson 130). The skyrocketing of economic asymmetries during the Bush Administration has questioned, yet again, the myth of the classless society, as extensive research shows that upward mobility is much more of an oddity in the United States than in almost any other advanced industrial country (Formisano 30). Bush's Hayekist idioms and the Reaganite vocabularies of deregulation and low taxes contrasted with a rather unpublicized shrinking of the middle-class and the impoverishment of the working-class analogous to the Gilded Age or the Roaring Twenties (Tabb 36-37).

Conflating the Puritan linkage of wealth and worthiness (Broncano 91) with the hegemonic rhetorical toolkit of the right, Bush appealed repeatedly to the ideal of freedom as fashioned by the conservative revolution. In this line he proposed his notorious and, in retrospect, failed concept of the ownership society as the quintessentially American ethos of economic management and prosperity:

> Part of being a land of opportunity means that we must continue to foster what I call the ownership society, to encourage value and honor, owning – people owning their own business or owning their own home, maybe some day owning their own pension plan in the Social Security system, having the right to make choices in the health care sector. The things that make America strong and unique is [sic] not only that we are a hopeful land and a diverse land, but we're a land that honors ownership. (Bush, "New Jersey")

It is self-evident how, in this regard, the Bush Administration represents a culminating point for the hegemony of the right in American politics as it deepened and radicalized the premises of neoliberal thinking. All social interactions, as Bush claimed in this speech, can and must be thought of from the categories of private ownership; the collective is to be constructed on the basis of each individual's material wealth (ignoring whether the market may benefit those with more agency or be biased in favor of certain groups).

That notion by which the market is an aseptic terrain that empowers the individual by granting him/her full responsibility for his/her goals and actions (Dardot and Laval 105) reveals the hegemonic dimension of neoliberalism, which has managed to transform the United States from a "market economy" to a "market society" (Formisano 164). The Bush Administration intensified the process of metabolizing the categories and philosophical sustenance of neoliberalism into the identitary lexicon of Americanism.

Projecting the accumulation of property –be it real estate, health care, a pension plan, or a business– and omitting the federal government as a meaningful decision maker seems totally consistent with the neoliberal thesis that "markets and market signals can best determine all allocative decisions" thus assuming that "everything can in principle be treated as a commodity" (Harvey, *Neoliberalism* 165). This is one key determinant shaping the neoliberal subject:

> It is precisely in such a context that possessive individualism and creative entrepreneurialism innovation, and speculation, can flourish, even though this also means a proliferating fragmentation of tasks and responsibilities, *and a necessary transformation of social relations to the point where producers are forced to view others in purely instrumental terms*." (Harvey, *Postmodernism* 103; emphasis added)

The subsequent demand for outsourcing and privatization, that is, the search for the acceleration of turnover, has implied the necessity of advancing competition as a primary virtue and behavioral norm (Dardot and Laval 4; Harvey, *Neoliberalism* 64-56). As opposed to the postwar boom era of pattern wages (Krugman 138), in which jobs "tended to homogenize the workforce by creating a community of fate along a linear lifecourse pegged on the '40-50-60' schema: 40 hours of employment per week for about 50 weeks of the year until one retires at age 60", neoliberalism "no longer supplies a common temporal and social framework because the terms of the labour tenures are shorter and unstable, and a growing number of positions do not entail a collective mechanism against material deprivation" (Wacquant 267). From these conditions arises a sense of disposability of labor that has come to define the neoliberal subject (Harvey, *Neoliberalism* 169).

The historic levels of income disparities, as well as the instrumentalization of social and labor relationships, appear to be at odds with the post-9/11 call for collectivist mourning and national solidarity –with the top one-tenth of 1 percent of Americans earning as much as the bottom 120 million (Reich). As historian Richard Formisano has recently written:

> What sense of national community exists between an employee working two-minimum jobs and a hedge-fund manager? Across most of the bottom half or more of the socioeconomic spectrum, images of separation and distance are replacing a sense of unity. Hence the ties that bind a nation together, the imagined community, dissolve. (8)

Moreover, economic inequality did not easily correlate with the vindication of individualism in the economic realm when, simultaneously, dissenters were deemed detrimental to the American spirit in the political arena. In the light of the different discursive threads studied in this section, it is arguable that post-9/11 narratives of mourning and grief can very well be seen as making up for a gradual erosion of socioeconomic unity among Americans. The discourse of the national was thus deployed so as to erase the idea of cohesion around issues of economic justice among Americans or equal opportunity.

Similarly, the Reaganite narrative of freedom rang rather incoherent when confronted with the prevailing class-skewed interventionism of the Bush

Administration, making corporate power its absolute stronghold. [42] The Bush White House embodied what Naomi Klein has termed the corporatist state, that is, a process by which state competences are transferred to the corporate sector (15). In the case of the Bush Administration, the funneling of tax dollars from the Pentagon to the big corporations seemed bottomless.[43] This close-knit conjunction of corporate power and the federal government called into question the freedoms and competitive spirit that neoliberalism is supposed to uphold. What seems to occur is not a reduction of the state but rather a change in the nature of this intervention – further strengthening its class character (Navarro 22) and thereby creating a situation in which one specific group (the corporate sector) has unparalleled lobbing and leverage power. Harvey has pointed out this as typical of neoliberalism: "[b]usiness and corporations not only collaborate intimately with state actors but even acquire a strong role in writing legislation, determining public policies, and setting regulatory frameworks (which are mainly advantageous to themselves)" (*Neoliberalism* 76-77).[44]

During the Bush Era, the Republican White House proffered a serious of mismatched discursive lines. It touted the neoliberalized notion of freedom as passionately as Goldwater and Reagan ever did, endorsing property and consumption, while worsening, to a historic degree, the conditions for the American public to have decent levels of purchasing power. The neoliberal subject is then positioned in locus of precarious labor conditions and scarce collective aid, while encouraged to make use of his/her freedoms at the market to succeed –all of it in the context of an increasingly growing coalition between corporate power and government. The texts analyzed in the sixth chapter will mostly rationalize neoliberalism, narrativizing its philosophical thrusts and merging them with American identitary totems while excoriating or omitting the legacies of central planning, regulatory frameworks, and labor organization left by the postwar liberal consensus.

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[42] This overall right-wing swing of the entire spectrum of American politics that I have been analyzing is aptly summarized by Robert Brenner: "In terms of its programme and its central social base it [the Bush Administration] has brought the agenda of Barry Goldwater, considered extremist in its time, into the US mainstream" (55).

[43] Klein documents and quantifies this staggering redistribution of public assets and capitals into the corporate sector (301). The most spectacular of those was the $130 billion transfer to private contractors derived from the creation of the Department of Homeland Security (more than the GDP of Chile or the Czech Republic).

[44] The K Street Project faithfully encapsulated the marriage between the federal government and corporate America. The Republican Party at large engaged in creating this revolving-door pathway which turned former members of Congress into well-paid lobbyist for different companies (pharmaceuticals, oil giants, real-estate brokers, arms dealers, even foreign dictators), ultimately allowing corporate power to write GOP legislation (Davis, "Democrats" 18).

In the cultural and political context of post-9/11 United States, individualism and community were, therefore, two identitary vectors fraught with contradictions and unresolved tensions. The politics of hyper-leadership and executive reinforcement constituted a form of individualism which brought back the frontier-tinged ethos of justice over due process and the discourse of "get-things-done". Under the shelter of that political cult to individualism and American unilateralism, communitarian values came to be associated with mourning and victimization of the homeland, disparaging those individuals who engaged in exploring 9/11 as more than a tragic apolitical cataclysm and, therefore, marginalizing individualism when channeled to contest the government-sanctioned policies and narratives on nationalism, patriotism, and foreign policy. Nonetheless, the neoliberal vocabularies of freedom and individualism (in the form of competitiveness, entrepreneurship, search for success, and autonomy) remained a sacrosanct motif in the American self-image and the nationalistic language, whereas community values were utterly belittled and seen as a self-deprecating drive.

Thus, the individualistic and the communitarian take on different types of politicizations and ideological significations depending on the discursive level on which they are situated.

The following filmic corpus shows how a cycle of American films function to support, legitimize, question, or challenge individualism and community along the coordinates described and examined throughout this section.

4. Violence, Lawfulness, and Legitimacy: The Politics of Individualism under the Bush Era

I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice! And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue!

Barry Goldwater

We also have to work, though, sort of the dark side, if you will. We've got to spend time in the shadows in the intelligence world. A lot of what needs to be done here will have to be done quietly, without any discussion, using sources and methods that are available to our intelligence agencies, if we're going to be successful. That's the world these folks operate in, and so it's going to be vital for us to use any means at our disposal, basically, to achieve our objective.

Dick Cheney

One day humanity will play with law just as children play with disused objects, not in order to restore them to their canonical use but to free them from it for good.

Giorgio Agamben

Five films are closely analyzed in the following pages. Notwithstanding significant differences in terms of content, style, and ideology, they all deal with individualism as a means to explain, critique, and endorse post-9/11 American culture. In this set of narrations, individuals are the very placeholder and embodiment for political and cultural discussion regarding a fundamental national conversation arising after 9/11 and over which neoconservative intellectuals had long brooded: whether American unilateralism may legitimately outweigh the operative law and institutions in trying to maintain homeland security (Horwitz 24-25). Therefore, I shall explore and account for the discursive struggles the films engage with regard to such a contention.

In these films, individuals function as the rationalization of hegemonic meanings and narratives or as counterhegemonic loci where cultural sediments might be the object of close examination. The films selected do not simply show individualist characters or plots which revolve around a clear main leading protagonist (an endless number of films would qualify for that). Instead, these texts feature protagonists whose practices are tightly anchored to centerpiece elements of the Bush Era: legality as a burden on American resolve, violence outside of the law as a legitimate course of action, the ideological redeployment of national symbols on the part of conservatism, or the discourses of American perfectibility. The films examined tackle these concerns in varying forms and degrees and in more or less complicit ways with hegemonic meanings and hegemonic values.

4.1. The Rightful or the Legal: Individualism and the Bush Doctrine in *Mystic River* and *Gone Baby Gone*

Mystic River (Clint Eastwood, 2003) and *Gone Baby Gone* (Ben Affleck, 2007) adapt two homonymous novels by Dennis Lehane –published in 2001 and 1998 respectively. Set in Boston, both films share, among other thematic concerns, one particularly pertinent issue with regard to post-9/11 imagination. Despite their pre-9/11 literary origins, *Mystic River* and *Gone Baby Gone* help work out and negotiate discursive trends and cultural meanings inscribed at the very core of the Bush Era and equally anchored in notions long hegemonized by conservatism. The two films push their leading characters into situations in which they are compelled to act outside the law, bringing to the fore the underlying question of whether it is admissible to ignore due process in moments of exceptional anxiety or fear.

Mystic River centers on three former childhood friends: ex-convict and small business owner Jimmy Markum, police officer Sean Devine, and introspective and ill-fated Dave Boyle. Their lives (and the film) are framed by two tragic episodes: Dave's kidnapping as a child, during which he was sexually abused, and the murder of Jimmy's daughter Katie decades later. These two events constitute the first act of the film. In the highly intricate crime plot that ensues, Jimmy ends up being fully convinced that it was Dave who murdered his daughter. Despite this not being true, Jimmy kills Dave. The central interest of analyzing *Mystic River* arises from its effort to deal with human grief and loss and how such bulk of emotions may be channeled to embrace and legitimize violence. In turn, we can evaluate such actions in light of post-9/11 discourse and its state-sponsored urge to sideline the law so as to protect the homeland in times of imminent threat.

Eastwood's film develops an iconography of community akin to the one I will explore in the following chapter. As neighbors come together in reunions to help out Jimmy and his family, communal mourning becomes the sustaining social underpinning that secures group unity and cohesion throughout the film –especially in its first half. The unifying vector for community strengthening and socialization turns out to be a shared sense of pain and grief. Attuned to the hegemonic narrative of national sorrow, the film explores the idea of monolithic unity spurred since 9/11 in that, however fragmented or alienated the social body may have come to be in the past, there is the express need to come together in the face of human loss and sweeping tragedy. As Dave eloquently says, "took something like this [Katie's murder] for me and him [Jimmy] to become friends again" (min.56). Social bonding is therefore deemed a form of solidarity founded upon mutual grieving.

However, the narrative of the community is gradually overshadowed by a far gloomier exploration of individualism. As the investigation moves forward, Jimmy grows impatient and decides to take justice into his own hands: [talking to his daughter’s corpse] “I’m gonna find him Katie. I’m gonna find him before the police do. I’m gonna find the man, and I’m gonna kill him” (min. 64). At first sight, Jimmy’s attitude and actions seem much more related to vigilante retribution or frontier violence than with a symbolic embodiment of the Bush Doctrine. And yet, the political and cultural subtext of the film emerges towards the very end, when a justification is offered as to why Jimmy’s wrongdoing might be overlooked or minimized. As he confesses Dave’s murder to his wife Annabeth, the internal logic of neoconservatism and realpolitik surfaces to grant legitimacy to his actions:

> JIMMY: I killed Dave. I killed him, and I threw him in the Mystic. But I killed the wrong man. This is what I've done and I can't undo it.
> ANNABETH: Shhh, Jimmy. Shhh. I want to hear your heart. Last night, when I put the girls to bed I told them how big your heart was. […] I told them how much you loved Katie because you created her and sometimes your love for her was so big, your heart felt like it was going to explode from loving her. I told them their daddy loved them that much, too […*] And that their daddy would do whatever he had to for those he loved. And that is never wrong. That can never be wrong, no matter what their daddy had to do.* […] *Their daddy’s a king. And a king knows what to do and does. Even when it’s hard. And their daddy will do whatever he has to for those he loves. And that’s all that matters. Because everyone is weak, Jimmy. Everyone but us. We will never be weak. And you…you could rule this town*. (min. 129-132; emphasis added)

Annabeth’s rationalization engages with specifically foundational messages of the Bush Doctrine. Violent practices and actions may very well be acceptable in so far as they are carried out in order to protect a cherished space. In this case she refers to family life, but the logic seems easily transferrable to homeland protection. Using the scene’s premise, if the ultimate task in question is safeguarding the nation, any sort of measure or procedure might be utilized for there is no inherent malpractice in sheltering the national soil. This ends-over-means maxim is deeply linked to the basic guideline of the Bush Doctrine: the get-things-done rationale by which the nation is encouraged to espouse violence and even undermine consensual frameworks such as the law if the final goal is the preservation of the sacrosanct space of the home(land).

At no point of the story does the film show Jimmy's actions as being representative of a particular ideological agenda; nor does the narration entice the audience into validating Jimmy's violence –it is hard as a viewer not to feel empathetic for the tragic outcome of Dave Boyle. But the way Annabeth defines her husband's actions as essentially wholesome, despite their undeniable immorality and cruelty, is a prescient representation of the way Bush Administration tried to normalize lawlessness as a last-resource yet necessary tool when the integrity of the home(land) is at stake.

Taking the political subtext of *Mystic River* to a further degree, and in the context of a poverty-stricken Boston neighborhood, *Gone Baby Gone* focuses on the abduction of four-year-old Amanda from her careless drug addict mother Helene. Private eyes Patrick Kenzie and Angie Gennaro carry out an investigation only to discover a troubling and morally vexing situation. The kidnapping of Amanda was orchestrated by her uncle, police detective Remy, and police captain Doyle so as to save the little girl from her (undoubtedly) negligent mother. Within these thematic and narrative parameters, the film remains geared to question the limits of law-sanctioned actions as an effective means to deliver real justice. In so doing, not only does the film establish a number of dramatic events in which breaking the law is represented as the right thing to do. The storyline pivots on restricting social life and social realities into a plot grounded on moral binaries and fixed categories that leave very little room for more pluralistic or problematic perspectives.

For more than half of the plot we see Patrick and Angie put the different pieces of the investigation together. In the course of their inquiry, Patrick is forced to consider due process as deterrence for executing actual justice. In a particularly brutal scene, Patrick breaks into a child molester's house where he finds a little child murdered. Patrick guns down the molester after which he is encouraged and praised:

> ANGIE: "They told me what happened. I'm proud of you. That man killed a child. He had no right to live." (min. 68-69)
>
> […]
>
> PATRICK**:** My priest says shame is God telling you what you did was wrong.
> REMY: Fuck him.
> PATRICK: Murder's a sin.
> REMY**:** Depends on who you do it to. (min. 69)

Although *Gone Baby Gone* is not nearly as radical as *Law Abiding Citizen*, it does participate in the common-sense narrative of get-tough-on-crime. Affleck's film sets up a narrative reality where law-enforcement individuals can hardly operate outside of a context of primal social evil and insufficient rule of law wherein only legal laxity is the way to proceed, as Remy bluntly puts it: "You gotta take a side. You molest a child, you beat a child, you're not on my side. If you see me coming, you better run, because I am gonna lay you the fuck down!" (min. 72). Thus, the narration packages an image of individualistic extra-legal violence that seems congruous with conservative assumptions – in such an environment of moral decay and deprivation, stepping out the legal system seems the only feasible option. The individual is therefore caught up in a situation that, regardless of his/her moral compass, obliges him/her to stop "playing by the rules" thereby touting or, at least, tacitly accepting the rationale of the Bush Doctrine, especially Cheney's remark that in conducting the War on Terror it is inevitable to go into the "dark side". The underlying premise the film sponsors, just as the Bush Administration advocated, is that accountability and legal texts are, at certain given points, an obstacle and not a device to bring forth justice.

The last act –when Amanda's abduction is revealed as forgery– exacerbates the discourse developed hitherto. Patrick and Angie find Amanda living with Captain Doyle. The child is, beyond a shade of doubt, much better off with the caring Captain Doyle than with her irresponsible mother. The exchange between Doyle and Patrick makes even more explicit the friction between the rightful and the legal:

> PATRICK: Does it make you feel better? Telling yourself you did it for the right reasons? That you took her to be saved, from her own mother?
> DOYLE: We're just trying to give a little girl a life.
> PATRICK: Wasn't your life to give. Helene's her mother. If you thought she was a bad mother, you should've gone to Social Services. Short of that, she's her mother, and that's where she belongs.
> DOYLE: You turn around. You go back to your fucking car, and you wait 30 years. You don't know what the world is made of yet.
> PATRICK: I'm calling state police in five minutes. They'll be here in ten.
> DOYLE: Thought you would've done that by now. You know why you haven't? Because you think this might be an irreparable mistake. *Because deep inside you, you know it doesn't matter what the rules say*. When the lights go out and you ask yourself, "Is she better off here or better off there," you know the answer. And you always will. You... *You could do a right thing here. A good thing*. Men live their whole lives without getting this chance. You walk away from it, you may not regret it when you get home. You may not regret it for a year, but when you get to where I am, I promise you, you will. (min. 96-97; emphasis added)

The climax validates the overall discursive proposition of the film. Strict and sustained adherence to the law –at all times and in all of its form–is made tantamount with long-term irresponsibility, futility, and naiveté. Again, the film should not be pigeonholed as a partisan statement supportive of conservatism or the Bush Doctrine. For instance, *Law Abiding Citizen* unapologetically reinforces such ideological coordinates, as do *We Were Soldiers* and *The Alamo*. The cornerstone argument to consider the film as siding with certain conservative common-sense values is its systemic representation of due process as a fundamentally insufficient and faulty mechanism for providing justice and security. Not a single scene or line in the film is devoted to widen the critical menu so as to present laws as a lesser-of-two-evils element, let alone an efficient organizing institution to arbitrate social conflict. It is that type of restrictive narrativization and subsequent limited narrative scope that aligns the film with the sustaining basis of the Bush Doctrine: that the efforts to implement justice and maintain safety cannot be exclusively articulated on the grounds of legal papers. Affleck's film condones (much more tacitly than actively) the hegemonic narrative of laws and lawmaking as somewhat soft or too lax at given points, endorsing the notion that individuals ought to sidestep the rules every once in a while in order to have real justice. Patrick's decision to call the police and return Amanda to her mother is seen by Angie as an outrageous deed. Even the film itself makes the point that Patrick committed a mistake, as Doyle had warned him. In the very last scene, Patrick babysits Amanda since Helene is about to leave on a date and had planned to let her daughter home and have a neighbor check on her, showing that Helene is likely to continue with her careless parenting.

What both films discuss –with different degrees of support and ideological bias– remains crucial for any cultural debate regarding post-9/11 American imagination since it taps into central aspects of conservative hegemony. Through convoluted crime plots and the tough decisions their leading characters face, both films negotiate the extent to which citizens are urged to see the margins of legality as too restrictive. In such a depiction, the political culture of conservatism soars, certifying that the hegemonic narratives of get-tough-on-crime and the theses of the Bush Doctrine are deeply inscribed in any take on the intersection between individualism, justice, and the law.

4.2. The Old Man and the Cowboy Soldier: Hegemonic and Counterhegemonic Individualism in *In the Valley of Elah* and *The Hurt Locker*

In the Valley of Elah (Paul Haggis, 2007) and *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008) explore a fundamental aspect of American self-image: the military and the soldier. Haggis's and Bigelow's films were among the first high-profile endeavors to depict the Iraq War –arguably the most enduring and important legacy of the Bush Administration. Both films may open up a fruitful discussion on individualism in the Bush Era.

In the Valley of Elah demythologizes some topoi and rationales around the Bush Doctrine, signaling through its protagonist Hank Deerfield the creeping realization that the Iraq War and its patriotic interpellation might have been propped up by immoral violence and inhuman treatment of the enemy. In many aspects, the film's discourse articulates the sense of national uneasiness and anxiety sparked by the scandals of Abu Ghraib, Bagram, and Guantanamo. The individualism portrayed in the film is an interstitial and anti-essentialist one, geared towards the revision of the sustaining myths of the national. In contradistinction, *The Hurt Locker* is a "micro-narration" which does not depart from the subjectivities of its three main characters. It would certainly be a stretch to aver that Bigelow glorifies the Iraq War. However, a close textual analysis of the narration reveals that the film either agrees with or tacitly promotes certain informing frameworks and legitimizing narratives of the Bush Doctrine. Subsequently, the film fashions a sense of individualism linked to fixed certainties and, in some ways, to certain nationalist axioms as tailored by the Bush Administration.

Haggis's film follows retired military investigator and Vietnam veteran Hank Deerfield in his search for his son Mike –gone missing after returning from a military tour in Iraq. Constantly meddling with the police investigation, Hank's worldview (about the army, the Iraq invasion, and the national) is gradually shattered. His son's body is eventually found –mutilated and burnt. As the story unfolds, Hank manages to discover that his son took drugs on a regular basis, tortured innocent Iraqi civilians, and ran over and killed an Iraqi child. On top of all these egregious revelations, the police, along with Hank, uncover the truth of Mike's murder. In a night out gone awry, Mike started a quarrel with his troop friends that escalated into a serious fight. One of them, Penning, in order to stop Mike, stabbed him to death, after which it was agreed by the rest of the gang to dismember and burn Mike's body and draw a veil over the whole incident. It is clearly indicated that the absurdity and random violence of the killing is a byproduct of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Unlike its counterpart *The Hurt Locker*, *In the Valley of Elah* does not shy away from presenting the political terrain upon which the reigning ideological coordinates of the War on Terror were articulated and promoted. The very opening informs us that the narration starts out on November 1, 2004 –just one day prior to the general election in which George W. Bush was given his second term over John Kerry. As a matter of fact, the first half hour is peppered with speeches from both candidates. Choosing such a specific and significant date, as well as including contextual information so noticeably, reveal the film's intent to signal the political foundations of the current historical time. That is, the plot is immediately located against a backdrop modeled by identifiable actors and concrete policies –not in a sort of historical vacuum as it occurs to a considerable extent in *The Hurt Locker*. Given the post-9/11 grand narratives of essentialist ahistoricity and suspension of political debate that came to dominate American imagination, it is arguable that the film espouses a sense of counterhegemony by explicitly delineating the historical and political conditions under which the characters live, showing the events as being part of an overarching historical and political architecture.

In this sense, the early stages of the narration indicate that Hank's worldview is in sync with conservative hegemony. In one of the Bush speeches featured in the film, the president celebrates the Iraq Invasion as a freedom-spawning campaign: "Freedom is on the march, and we're safer because of it. Iraq is still dangerous, it is dangerous because that society is becoming more free [sic] and heading toward democracy" (min. 2). Just two minutes later, Hank is appalled at an American flag waving upside down in a school yard (Fig.3; Fig.4). He is so upset that he steps out of the car and teaches the janitor how he is meant to hoist it –incurring in a kind of nativist patronizing:[45]

> HANK: You don't wanna let it touch the ground.
> JANITOR: OK.
> HANK: Where you from?
> JANITOR: El Salvador.
> HANK: Do you know what it means when a flag flies upside down?
> JANITOR: No.

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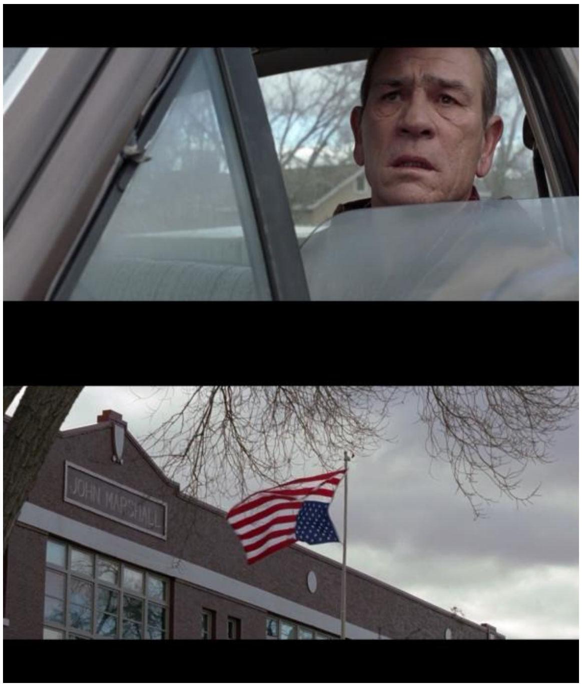
[45] Later on, Hank will confront a suspect of his son's killing (a Mexican colleague of Mike) calling him *chico* and wetback. Notwithstanding his sober and introspective character, he is also prone to racist remarks.

> HANK: It's an international distress signal.
> JANITOR: No shit?
> HANK: No shit. It means we're in a lot of trouble, so come save our ass because we don't have a prayer in hell of saving ourselves.
> JANITOR: It says a lot.
> HANK: Yes, it does. (min. 4-5)

Soon after this exchange, Hank makes use of the talking points of the Bush Administration with extraordinary accuracy when trying to have the police start the investigation on his missing son: "[M]y son has spent the last 18 months bringing democracy to a shithole and serving his country. He deserves better than this" (min. 18). Hank's words parallel those of Bush's as both equate the Iraq invasion with the expansion of freedom.



Figures 3 and 4: Hank's outrage

What these scenes lay out is the protagonist's adherence to the pedagogy of the nation, to the understanding and deployment of national symbols and national identitary narratives as dictated and naturalized by conservative hegemony. Whether by paraphrasing the Bush Administration's agenda or by treating the American flag as an untouchable element, Hank's actions reinforce the normalizing tendency of the national construct insofar as the country's symbols and the patriotic discourse totalize and universalize a particular, constructed worldview of what the national is supposed to stand for –in this case the immutability of symbols and the outright defense of American retaliation as a noble crusade. In this sense, Hank acts as a historical object, as Bhabha would put it, accepting the normative frames of what American nationalism ought to be while excoriating other manifestations outside of those frames. In addition, Hank's characterization of Iraq as a "shithole" confirms Butler's take on affect mobilization and its political channeling. As a social entity (the American community) is foregrounded as a grievable one worthy of empathy and visibility, its counterpart (the Iraqi citizenry) is cast as an ungrievable and opaque group whose suffering may be the either blurred or go unrepresented –rendering violence and retaliation against the latter legitimate. Hank's worldview (i.e. the hegemonic discourse of conservatism and the Bush Doctrine) is thoroughly revised as the film moves forward.

A key critical discourse upheld by the film is militarism as a form of American (male) individualism. Having found his son's body, Hank calls his wife Joan to inform her –to make matters more dramatic, it has been previously disclosed that they had already lost another son turned soldier years ago. The exchange points out the corrosive linkage between the military and masculinity:

> JOAN: I seem to remember me being the one saying no and you saying it'd be good for his character. Who won that argument, Hank?
> HANK: Mike was the one who wanted to join. I sure as hell didn't encourage it.
> JOAN: *Living in this house, he never could've felt like a man if he hadn't gone*. Both of my boys, Hank. You could've left me one. (min. 36-37; emphasis added)

The film indicts the closed certainties of Hank (which are those of conservative hegemony) by making the point that the myth of robust military masculinity has less to do with the sanitized Cold War iconography enshrined in cultural imagination than with a psychologically problematic and painful identitary tradition. The film claims that conceiving militarism as placeholder for masculinity and American identity generates an essentialist idea about manliness, univocally associated to violence. Hank's assured belief in the army as space for comradeship and belonging persists though. When it becomes clear that Mike's friends have been lying about them not being involved in Mike's killing, Hank remains confident about some sort of tacit army loyalty:

> HANK: I don't know why they lied about not being with him, but they didn't do it.
> DETECTIVE SANDERS: They were fighting in the parking lot.
> HANK: They were blowing off steam. You have not been to war so you won't understand this. You do not fight beside a man and then do that to him.
> DET. SANDERS: That's quite the world you live in.
> HANK: Find out why they lied! There'll be a reason. (min. 69)

Hank's take seems bound to a pre-Vietnam War perfectible imagination whereby the army cannot be thought of as either an institution riddled with problems or as bearer of values and conducts frowned upon by society. This prescriptive vision of the military as inherently benign runs in parallel with Hank's acceptance of the hegemonic interpellation as regards the army – constantly praised but rarely the object of analysis let alone streamlining.[46] Hank's reluctance to see any wrongdoing in the military can be seen as the consequence of conservatism's decades-long stress on the legitimacy of American foreign policy actions, consistently defended as freedom campaigns. Consequently, in this hegemonic logic, the American military and their actions embody freedom, a proposition hard to criticize – despite the fact that such identitary linkage is not some preordained American identity but a political position that responds to specific interests and goals. Thus, Hank interacts with the American symbols and thinks of American institutions (the army) along coordinates and meanings set up by the current hegemony.

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[46] During the Bush's tenure military spending skyrocketed to reach $700 billion (Kuznick and Stone 542).

The investigation into the military ultimately operates as the plot arrangement to undo the hegemonic narratives around the Bush Doctrine. By retrieving images and videos from Mike's cellphone, Hank gains insight into some disquieting aspects of his son's deployment in Iraq such as disrespecting dead bodies or torturing a wounded Iraqi in the midst of his platoon's laughter –all of it clearly influenced by the dark iconography of the Abu Ghraib accounts. As it becomes clear that Mike's troop murdered him, Hank's findings also reveal that Mike killed an Iraq child while driving a Humvee. The film actually jumps into Iraq to demonstrate what the cellphone footage had merely suggested, showing the Iraq child lying dead on the road (Fig. 5). As has been explicated, Butler talks about the frames of war as a dividing line between populations recognized as livable civic entities and, therefore, grievable as opposed to those represented on opposite grounds (obliterated from discourse, less perceived as livable and thus more easily subjected to oppression or structural violence). Through the image of the murdered Iraqi child, the film reverses or at least problematizes such a divide insofar as it narrativizes American violence in a very specific context being executed against the Iraqi people – the "shithole", as Hank had called it,

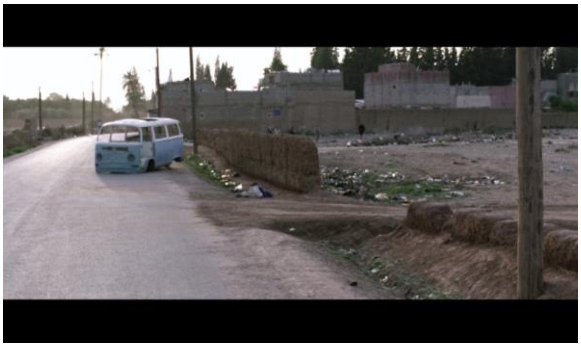
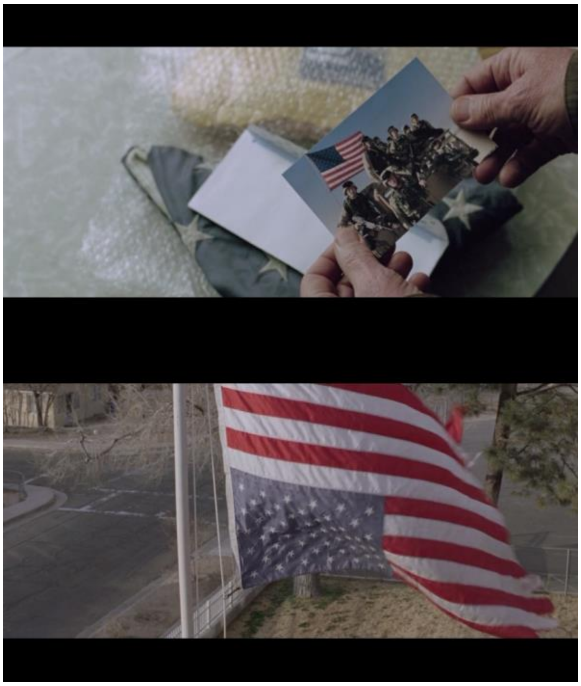


Figure 5: Iraqi Child

becomes a livable space inhabited by innocent civilians worthy of empathy.[47] So if, as Butler has it, war frames "structure modes of recognition [...] but their limits and their contingency become subject to exposure and critical intervention" (24), it is arguable to claim that *In the Valley of Elah* tries to signal and work against Bush's own war frame, disavowing moral binaries and the notion of American foreign policy actions as sanitized freedom campaigns.



Figures 6 and 7: Symbolic Reversals

To this breakup of American perfectibility and its legitimizing narratives, the latest stages of the narration provide an additional message of extraordinary symbolic potency, bringing to fruition the film's discourse on individualism. Having returned home, Hank sees a package Mike had sent from Iraq with a photo of his platoon (the same ones who murdered him) and an American flag (Fig. 6). After the disruptive events that have unfolded, the symbols of the national (the military, foreign policy narratives, and the sacrosanct flag) take on new meanings –they are no longer moorings for an unproblematic national self-image but a cause for reevaluation. Hank fetches the flag and drives to the same school yard of the beginning of the film but now encourages the janitor to hoist the flag upside down (Fig. 7).

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[47] It is also fair to say that the Iraqi people are not given an actual voice in the film, remaining a subaltern entity, recognized and valued indeed, but still lacking agency or a discourse of its own.

The early Hank who took for granted the meanings and rationales of conservative nationalism and its resultant patriotism is now substituted by an individual who deploys the nation's symbols to express a dissenting view. He has veered away from the pedagogy of the nation to act out as a historical subject, able to perform a different identity through the nation's symbols. Thus, the American flag becomes a fluid third-space locus through which different forms of affiliation to the homeland may be articulated. In light of this, patriotism is not signified as automatic support for ideological constructs naturalized as prescriptive nationalism but as a process of reflection and pondering about the meaning and responsibilities of the nation-state.

On the whole, *In the Valley of Elah* reflects a type of individualism permeable to counterhegemony. In a sort of *bildungsroman* progression, the film is ultimately about a citizen who grows aware of the gulf between the hegemonic complex (its meanings, its values, and its nationalistic interpellation) and his own reality, developing a new ideological readability – more critical and more diverse in its usage of the surrounding identitary raw materials.

Despite a series of critical elements, *The Hurt Locker* is a filmic reply to the discourse upheld by *In the Valley of Elah*, sidelining some core arguments of Haggis's film while elaborating a set of portraits reminiscent of the logic, rhetoric, and values of the War on Terror.[48] *The Hurt Locker* is set in 2004

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[48] Both films are in many respects representative of two filmic currents. While *In The Valley of Elah* repackages the critical revisions of the Bush Doctrine of films such as *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, 2004), *Redacted* (Brian de Palma 2007), *No End in Sight* (Charles Ferguson,

Baghdad, a city ravaged by war where three soldiers working in a bomb-disposal unit try to survive as they march around carrying out a set of highly risky missions. The film zeroes in on the individualistic and reckless William James and how his behavior disrupts his two unit partners' more systemized and collaborative ways. The film's critical positioning remains middle-ground. There are a handful of sequences devoted to exploring the soldiers' anxieties and the psychological traumas wrought by warfare. At no point does the film glorify war violence and seems rather invested in portraying it as a greyish phenomenon, deeply dehumanizing for those who happen to witness or carry it out. Yet, the representation of individualism (through James's bold macho attitudes) and the depiction of Iraq are a far cry from the transformative pondering of nationalism and patriotism discussed in *In the Valley of Elah*. Whether purposefully or not Bigelow's story seems to connive with certain common sense ideas of the Bush Doctrine.

Such connivance is visible in the first sequences of the film. During their first mission together, James defuses a bomb but ignores the usual security protocols the unit has established to minimize danger. Seen as an exhibitionist by his unit team, he takes things further in their second operation. Having found an enormous quantity of explosives allocated in an abandoned car, James takes off his bomb-suit with a dialogue line worthy of an action film hero: "There's enough bang in there to send us all to Jesus. If I'm going to die, I wanna die comfortable" (min. 34). He even tosses out the radio headset through which he communicates with the rest of the unit while operating on

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2007), and *Taxi to the Dark Side* (Alex Gibney, 2007), *The Hurt Locker* continues the line opened by *World Trade Center* (Oliver Stone, 2006) and sublimated by *Zero Dark Thirty* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2012) in which there is a focus on micro-perspectives that excise an evaluation and critique of the political and historical bases of post-9/11 state of affairs –in the case of *Zero Dark Thirty* in such a way that borders on the justification of torture.

the bomb disposal. Much as his bold cowboy-like attitude spurs suspicion, he does manage to prevent the explosion of both bombs. The film seems to suggest that playing by the rules, as well as following agreed-upon guidelines when hitting the enemy, is insufficient to confront the dangers of the War on Terror. James's get-things-done attitude –regardless of whether it falls under mutually established regulatory frameworks– encapsulates the internal logic of the War on Terror: pre-emptive war, even outside of the rule of law and deprived of oversight, remains a perfectly usable tool. Thus, James's actions become an apt placeholder to rationalize a sense of individualism that bears the values of the Bush Era: in war times it is somewhat acceptable for certain individuals to act more expeditiously and aggressively than usual.

James's operations take place in an Iraq whose depiction turns out to be quite problematic. Baghdad is presented as a hostile environment (as indeed any war zone is) populated by a native people who function as a faceless background element.[49] There are numerous interspersed images showing Iraqis as inconsequential bystanders (Fig. 8) or as insurgent agents that besiege American troops (the latter

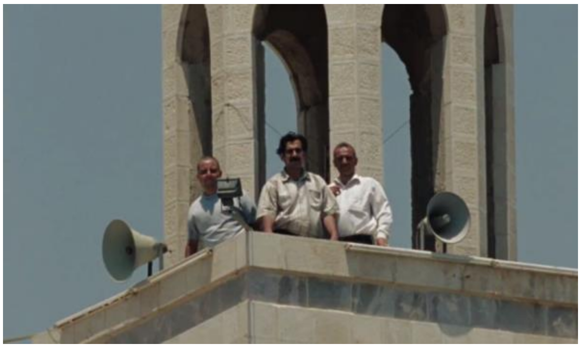

Figure 8: Iraqi Bystanders

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[49] James becomes familiar with a child from whom he buys DVDs on the base. Towards the end, he breaks into a house where he meets an educated and polite Iraqi professor fluent in English. These two instances manage to provide a more pluralistic view of Iraq –not just as a barren, violence-ridden place. However, the film's overall presentation and its tendency to exclude any reference to the origins and bases of the Iraqi campaign, as well as its refusal to include American-spawned violence, makes it difficult to think of the film as being discursively balanced or critical.

only represented through ominous point-of-view shots [Fig. 9]). The most dramatic moment regarding this comes halfway into film as James's team patrol a building where they find bomb making materials. Along with the explosives, they discover the body of a child stuffed with bombs. Not only does this disturbing scene enhance the image of Iraq as a unitarily evil place but it brings to the fore the violence of Iraqi forces (the building is used by insurgents).

Figure 9: Iraqi Insurgents

Failing to portray American and Iraqi violence as equal or, at least, comparable (the former is scarcely represented) reveals a tendency to characterize the American invasion as a fundamentally benign involvement (soldier's psychological stress being the unfortunate byproduct of it). Hardly an innocent victim featured in the film can be linked to American forces (the child turned into a body bomb, the fallen soldiers, the Iraqi civilians killed by bombs, all killed by Iraqi insurgents). That rather inconsistent geopolitical formulation seems complicit with the totemic assumption sponsored by conservatism about the sanctity of American foreign policy. In this sense, the film remains in sync with the hegemonic vision of the military by not widening the narrative scope beyond the subjectivities of the soldiers –unlike the fairer assessment of *In The Valley of Elah* where American policies and cultural trends are gauged in light of a broader political and historical perspective. Unlike Haggis's film, *The Hurt Locker* does not engage in pointing out or explaining the contours and bases that constitute the historical event it is narrating, thus effacing and, in turn, naturalizing common-sense values about the American military under the rubric of conservative hegemony.

In the climatic last sequences, it is made evident that James continues to embody the main premise of the Bush Doctrine –that in the face of evil and danger there is utter need to get things done with dispatch despite what established rules may claim. After a suicide bomber detonates an explosive in the Green Zone, James encourages the team to go after one of the surviving terrorists no matter what the military procedures state:

> JAMES: A really good bad guy hides out in the dark, right? Right here. The perfect vantage point outside the blast radius to sit back and watch us clean up their mess.
> ELDRIDGE: Wanna go out there?
> JAMES: Yes, I do.
> ELDRIDGE: I could stand to get in a little trouble.
> SANBORN: No, man. This is bullshit. Look, you got three infantry platoons behind you whose job it is to go haji hunting. That ain't our fucking job.
> JAMES: You don't say no to me, Sanborn. I say no to you, okay? You know there are guys watching us right now. They're laughing at this. Okay, and I'm not okay with that. Now, turn off your goddamn torch, because we're going. (min. 101-102)

Yet again James's words and actions encapsulate the values underpinning the Bush Doctrine. In both cases, when the moral imperative and the danger are all too evident, abiding by the rules is just an obstacle to be suspended in order to sort out problems swiftly. Thus, James is less a militant figure in favor of conservatism than an individual plunged in hegemony, complying with its meanings without these being the object of conscious revision.

In the film's epilogue, we see James failing to accommodate to life as a civilian and coming back for a new tour in Iraq. Such bleak final image points out the fact that Bigelow does not tap into the idea of war as a wholesome activity. The film's emphasis on soldier's suffering and the portrait of Iraqi civilians as victims of warfare makes it contentious and simplistic to argue that the film is pro-Bush Administration. However, it would be equally remiss not to assess the way the film does show a certain tendency to side with some of the Bush Doctrine guidelines. Despite all of his psychological wounds, James shows no critical engagement with his actions nor does he or the film seem invested in analyzing or mentioning the reasons and causes of the Iraq invasion. Unlike Hank Deerfield, whose experiences in *In the Valley of Elah* lead him to revise the hegemonic meanings and the informing agents of American culture, James's closed certainties and moorings with regard to the national remain intact (by dint of shutting down or eluding any sort of examination of Americans symbols and patriotism). As part of the same discursive ensemble, the violence depicted in *The Hurt Locker*, much as it renders the Iraqi people grievable, is usually attributed to insurgent Iraqis and shadowy forces and is hardly ever suggested that it may originate from American-sanctioned actions. Such a worldview seems not only at odds with the factual reality of the Iraq war. It is, frankly, an indulgent discourse when compared to *In the Valley of Elah* and its exploration of the very well documented malpractices carried out by the American army under the aegis of the Bush Administration.

In *In the Valley of Elah* individualism is a narrative vehicle to make sense of and critique Americanism as a form of perfectibility and pedagogy of the state. Thus, in Haggis's film cultural meanings are shown as the consequence of a hegemonic struggle where a given political agenda appropriates the universal dimension of certain values (the homeland, the masculine, the patriotic, the national). *The Hurt Locker* resorts to individualism as assertion of hegemonic values of nationalism, depicting aggressive macho individualisms as a troublesome yet arguably legitimate position.

4.3. (Un)Due Process: Conservative Populism in *Law Abiding Citizen*

In 1967 the would-be president of the United States Richard Nixon wrote an impassioned article pondering on the origins of the urban riots that soared during that year. The text is undergirded by what was to become a cornerstone line of argument of modern conservatism: (liberal) authorities had been regularly too soft when implementing the law and maintaining security. Nixon wrote: "[o]ur judges have gone too far in weakening the peace forces as against the criminal forces. Our opinion-makers have gone too far in promoting the doctrine that when a law is broken, society, not the criminal is to blame". *Law Abiding Citizen* (F. Gary Gray, 2009) is profoundly informed by this cultural heritage. Gray's film remains an excellent case of study to interrogate and discuss some fundamental principles of contemporary American conservatism.

Reminiscent of serial killer thrillers and the vigilante film, the story explores the dissonance between justice and the legal system privileging a set of values and cultural meanings substantially akin to the competing narratives of Reaganite populism and The Bush Doctrine. The motifs and themes of *Mystic River* and especially *Gone Baby Gone* reappear in *Law Abiding Citizen* in a much more direct and textually evident fashion. The plot focuses on Clyde Shelton, a gifted engineer who witnesses the vicious murder of his wife and daughter. Although the killers get caught, Clyde's lawyer Nick Rice decides it is best to make a deal –the actual perpetrator, Darby, receives just a five-year sentence and his accomplice, Ames, ends up on death row. It is likewise suggested that Nick proceeds in such manner to maintain his high conviction rate. Feeling betrayed by both Nick and the legal system, Clyde takes justice into his own hands. After a ten-year-long preparation, he executes an extremely thorough plan to, according to himself, deliver actual justice: he manipulates Ames's execution so that the latter suffers terrible pain before passing, tortures and dismembers Darby, assassinates various justice members involved in his case, and terrorizes the whole city.

Shutting down more nuanced or ideologically diverse worldviews, the film narrativizes just two realms of action. On the one hand, it depicts a series of government-run institutions engrossed in serving ineffectual justice and unfit to provide security to its citizens. On the other, the story foregrounds the surge of a destructive force (Clyde's plan of revenge) which lays bare that out-of-the-law actions are all but mandatory when the system fails to secure justice and protect the community. Not only does this thematic articulation rationalize the foreign policy strategies instituted by the Bush Administration in the wake of 9/11. The film also resorts to conservative identity politics in order to explain characters' motivations and storyline twists, drawing inspiration from foundational common sense ideas of Goldwaterism, Nixon's law-and-order messages, and the Reagan synthesis. Thus, the film has a double purpose. Firstly, it legitimizes the main talking points of the Bush Doctrine. Secondly, it reinvigorates some identitary narratives upon which hegemonic conservatism rests. In addition, *Law Abiding Citizen* is set in Philadelphia thereby giving the narration a symbolic edge. The film locates its indictment of the justice system as a hollowed-out institution in the very same place where the American Constitution was signed –that is, in the city that saw the establishment of the nation's legal apparatus.

The film's opening, with the murder of Clyde's family, is structurally and conceptually analogous to the very hegemonic narrative of 9/11: a vicious and irrational episode of uncalled-for violence carried out by immoral agents in which the victims have done nothing to unleash such an aggression. The sacrosanct space of family life is brutally destroyed by evil outsiders, just as the homeland was in 9/11. The ensuing plot is thus constructed from such primal point of disturbing cruelty and undeserved suffering.

On the basis of the defilement of the home(land), the plot consistently portrays the notion that the legal system is either too constrained by futile technicality or excessively indulgent with the criminal and unmerciful with the victim. This is clearly exemplified in the way Nick handles Clyde's case:

> NICK: You know what I learned in Fordham night school? *Law school's got nothing to do with law*. [...] All I need is a jury to like me. Isn't that what you told me, Jonas?
> JONAS: The Shelton case, where are we?
> NICK: It went sideways last night: Judge Burch.
> JONAS: Bad news. What now?
> NICK: Let's make the deal.
> JONAS: They killed a little girl, Nick.
> NICK: It's an imperfect system.
> JONAS: And we its imperfect servants. However you could win this case.
> NICK: No, can't take that chance. *Some justice is better than no justice at all*. (min.5; emphasis added)

Instead of trying to win the case, Nick proceeds as a pragmatic technocrat and negotiates an indisputably unfair deal with one of the perpetrators. The scene paves the way for the film's overall discourse –that the justice system is timorous and indifferent in the face of obvious crime. Due to a problem with the evidences, Darby is given a five-year sentence while the whole burden of the crime falls upon Ames. The film presents right off the justice system not as provider of decent and fair ruling but as a faulty mechanism rich in loopholes and ill-mean ambiguities favoring criminals. Therefore, the film suggests, a system essentially inclined to protect individual rights is often an obstacle when it comes punishing evildoers. This argumentative line is clearly in sync with the way the Bush Doctrine infringed many legal staples in the course of the War on Terror. But furthermore, by presenting an unproblematic twosided portrait of unpunished crime and neglected victims, the film also participates in the hegemonic Republican narrative of get-tough-on-crime which, since the 1960s, has systematically equated justice with harsh sentences, punitive measures, and expeditious law-enforcement.

Further into the film, Clyde is arrested after Darby's body is found grotesquely mutilated. When enquired about whether he is responsible for Darby's murder, Clyde deploys equivocal phrasing and unclear expressions so as to avoid being charged with the crime, thus paralleling the same legal paradigm and reasoning that Nick used to justify his deal with Darby:

> CLYDE: None of these are an admission of guilt, Nick. You might want to check the tape.
> NICK: We know you did it.
> CLYDE: Well, it's not what you know; it's what you can prove in court! Didn't you tell me that once? (min. 37)

Acting as if educating Nick on the futility of the rule of law, Clyde tries to prove that the legal edifice is less an organizing tool for social interaction than a sclerotic leviathan unable to enact actual and fair punishment. In this exchange between Nick and Clyde we see the get-tough-on-crime narrative surfacing once again. By painting a monochromatic situation where certainties and moral acts cannot be channeled and actualized through the law, the film endorses that conservative narrative whereby the justice system seems more preoccupied with adhering to formalistic rituals and procedural frameworks than with punishing those who flout the rules. Clyde's discourse smoothly weaves together the founding narratives of law and order and crack-down-on-crime with the rationales of the War on Terror by which compliance with international and domestic law seemed to be a burden on American resolve.

These two instances, and a few more to come, indicate the film's reluctance to widen its critical scope leaving off the narrative menu more problematizing outlooks on the tension between justice and the workings of law-enacting.[50] In providing such restricted representational parameters the film seeks to naturalize conservatism's decades-long critique of lawmaking as being often too soft and understanding with evildoers, prioritizing conformity with legal texts and objectified evidences over acting swiftly upon all too evident crime. This worldview reveals two deeper interrelated thematic orientations. Firstly, the film embraces an ontological logic of binaries and discrete oppositions repudiating any de-centering discourse and enshrining a clear "sense of the self". Secondly, this essentialist position is inscribed in the rhetorical practices of the Bush Doctrine and its insistence on clear-cut identitary divisions –foe and ally, good vs. evil, patriot and non-patriot. Some sequences later, Clyde spells out these thematic concerns. He sends a videotape of him torturing Darby to Nick's house. By chance, Nick's daughter and wife watch the footage:

> NICK: I saw a movie today [...] My daughter saw the same movie.
> CLYDE: Well, you taught your daughter about good versus evil?
> NICK: I don't have to.
> CLYDE: Well, that's what this movie was about: good conquering evil, the righteous prospering, the wicked suffering. (min. 46-47)

These sequences merge together Clyde's payback motifs with the ideological and political underpinnings of the Bush Doctrine, promoting that grand narrative that, at some critical points, out-of-the-law violence carried out by ordinary individuals is both necessary and inevitable in order to fight crime in equal conditions. The film will later exacerbate this premise even more unambiguously.

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[50] For example, as of 2008 the United States had the highest rate of incarceration in the world, a consequence of the conservative narratives of get-tough-on-crime and the War on Drugs, instigated by Republicans and backed by large constituents of Democrats. This phenomenon of mass incarceration has also proved to be a broad-scale mechanism for racial discrimination and disenfranchisement (Alexander 1-177). This would be the other side of the discussion, one the film fails to mention, let alone address.

Throughout these examined scenes the film articulates a discourse that indicts state institutions for being inoperative and reified. There is a particularly telling sequence which sublimates such discourse and that brings the political and ideological bases of the narration into sharper focus. In the first hearing of his case, Clyde pretends to be innocent and comes up with an impeccable legal justification as of why he must not be kept in prison without bail. However, he is only doing so to prove his point about the futility of the legal system:

> CLYDE: Your honor, I'm a law abiding citizen. I'm just a regular guy. I am not a flight risk. And this is my first alleged offense. And the prosecution has not presented one single piece of evidence against me. Now in these circumstances, unless the state has obtained some new piece of information relating to my involvement in the matter in question, then I find it highly prejudicial, even constitutionally offensive, to keep me detained without bail. It's a slippery slope, Your Honor. Haven't we seen the result of such violations, both internationally and domestically? Case in point would be Day v. McDonough, docket #041325.
> JUDGE: I am actually inclined to agree with you, Mr. Shelton. [...] the state has failed to establish a compelling basis for its motion, and I will grant bail in the amount of...
> NICK: Your honor, I would caution you not to do that.
> CLYDE: Thank you!
> JUDGE: Excuse me?
> CLYDE: No, I don't think I will excuse you. You see, this is what I'm talking about. You were about to let me go. Are you kidding me? This is why we're here in the first place. You think I don't remember who you are, lady? [She is the judge from his family's murder]
> JUDGE: I would tread carefully, Mr. Shelton.
> CLYDE: Well, how carefully should I tread? Because apparently I just killed two people, and you were about to let me walk right out that door! How misguided are you? I feed you a couple of bullshit legal precedents, and there you go, you jump on it like a bitch in heat. *Folks, you all hang out in the same little club. And every day you let madmen and murderers back on the street.*

> *You're too busy treating the law like it's a fucking assembly line! Do you have any idea what justice is? What ever happened to right and wrong? Jesus Christ, what ever happened to right and wrong? What ever happened to the people? Whatever happened to justice?* (min. 44-46; emphasis added)

Clyde's words now fully resemble George W. Bush's rhetorical insistence on right and wrong categories and atemporal moral truths, as well as the president's assertions that violence against the homeland cannot be confronted with legal papers. Clyde's stress on the estrangement between morality and law is complemented with an ever sharper message. Clyde's rant proves to be an unapologetic right-wing critique of liberalism's soft-on-crime policies. At first sight, the most obvious reference is his claim that, because of excessive permissiveness, crime is not properly eliminated given that "madmen and murderers" do not receive the harsh punishment they deserve – a common-sense argument running in political discussion since the Goldwater campaign and Nixon's sweeping Silent Majority messages. But at a more subtextual level, Clyde's speech also shows the ideological readability of Reaganite populism, that is, his message conforms to the orienting principles and political interpellations that articulated modern hegemonic conservatism. In keeping with the dichotomization typical of populist logic, Clyde establishes a two-fold distinction positioning "the people" and "the state" in two antagonistic terrains. He rhetorically asks what has happened to the people while accusing the judicial system of being an isolated entity, ineffective and oblivious to society's needs. It is therefore propounded that there exists a gulf between state and society, in which the former's functioning and existence curtails the latter's well-being. He explicitly blames government for people's problems thus reigniting conservatism's main hegemonic narrative: the state as the nodal point from which all social breakup originates and spreads.

The passages analyzed so far amount to approximately the first half of the narration. In diverse ways they all equally operate to present and legitimize categories and narratives pertaining to hegemonic conservatism. The second half of the film seeks the same goals although it deploys the figure of Clyde in a different manner and engages more specifically in promoting the guidelines of the Bush Doctrine. In the first part of the film Clyde is shown as a charismatic villain eager to tell some ugly yet necessary truths to mainstream powers. In the second part, and in a way not dissimilar to propaganda films, Clyde's actions to take down the system encourage and finally convince law-enforcement figures of the need to trespass the law in order to retaliate against him efficiently.

Firstly, it is one of the detectives conducting the case along with Nick who sees no other alternative but to resort to harsher measures: "I tell you, l got a game plan. Give me five minutes alone with him and l'll cripple the fucker. l don't give a shit what happened to his family. lt's no excuse" (min. 58). Right after this scene, a former associate of Clyde claims that the only way to stop him is "walk into his cell and put a bullet in his head" (min. 64). As Clyde continues to assassinate more people involved in his case, the mayor of the city clearly advocates some form of legal laxity:

> I don't care how we do it, or *what kind of obscure legal justification we have to invoke, gentlemen. l don't care what laws we have to bend*. I am sure that there is a provision of the Homeland Security Act that we can activate. Just get him out of here by tomorrow". (min. 104; emphasis added)

Eventually Nick himself endorses the notion that only outside the margins set by the law will it be possible to confront Clyde. Suspecting that Clyde has been secretly sneaking in and out of the prison, Nick can only know for sure by illegally breaking into one of Clyde's real estate properties. When questioned about Clyde's civil rights, Nick replies "Fuck his civil rights" (min. 92). In the end, Nick locates in Clyde's room a bomb the latter had previously planted in the town hall, certifying that the only way to defeat him is to reciprocate with his own tactics.

It seems evident that there is a concerted effort on the part of the film to rationalize and naturalize the Bush Doctrine and its message of preemptive war and state of exception. By dint of narrativizing a number of closed certainties, monochromatic binaries, and looming danger, the film systematically portrays suspending current laws as the most viable and safest of options for the characters –just as the Bush Administration touted the ticking time-bomb scenario and the iconography of the mushroom cloud to convince public opinion of the need to weaken international and domestic law so as to wage war against terror effectively. With very little room for irony, critical distance, or some form of counterhegemonic discourse, the film relies heavily on the thesis that, when fighting against rogue criminals, individuals have to disengage from current legal frameworks to be functional. It is obvious that the discourse upheld by *Gone Baby Gone* seems timid and watered-down compared to the clear-cut political and ideological discourse of *Law Abiding Citizen*.

Under the guise of the exploitation film lies a hardcore plea for conservative identitary lines. There are very few examples of a post-9/11 film text complying so tightly with the meanings of the state and the law as hegemonized by modern conservatism. The film carefully expunges ideological alternatives and political plurality transforming reality into a sectional space where only a limited set of truth-value options operates: the advocacy of a sort of individualistic frontier justice over an unfair administrative state-run apparatus and the projection of the notion of the state as a sluggish and bureaucratized mechanism.

5. Microcosms of Fear and Sorrow: Images of the American Community after 9/11

We must delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body.

John Winthrop

We must act, first and foremost, not as Republicans, not as Democrats, but as Americans.

George W. Bush (January 2002)

We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature.

Roland Barthes

The five films under scrutiny in this section have as their guiding motif the community. These films take place in tightly limited spaces: a military base, a fortress under siege, a small countryside village, the rubble of the World Trade Center, and a grocery store attacked by Lovecraftian monsters. Different as these microcosms may be, this set of films describes, negotiates, endorses, and criticizes some of the defining lines of cultural and political identity in post-9/11 America, all of them tied up to the ideal of the community. What specific appeals to coming together do these film present? By trying to address this question, I will be looking at the array of strategies through which the American community remains the placeholder for hegemonic struggle.

Specific attention will be paid to how American traditions, heritages, and common-sense attitudes are articulated and intermingled with other sectional discourses. In order to grasp the functioning of hegemony, the textual analyses will examine the narrative and thematic practices that transmute partisan messages into the national, the patriotic, the unifying. I have chosen an ideologically diverse host of films. My focus will be on the legitimizing and occluding mechanisms that represent the national as an organic and essentialist entity and not as a contingent discursive ensemble wrought by different competing ideological interpellations and identifiable agents.

5.1. It's Mourning Again in America: Iconographies of National Unity in *We Were Soldiers* and *The Alamo*

In his study of the cultural and political functionalities of the super-hero film, Hassler-Forest writes that *Black Hawk Down* (Ridley Scott, 2001) was the first film that distilled the still inchoate discourse of 9/11 into a cinematic narration. Originally scheduled for the spring of 2002, *Black Hawk Down* was released in December of 2001. The film encompasses the hegemonic interpellations that came to constitute the way by which 9/11 was to be politically and culturally signified. Scott's film chronicles the 1997 American military raid on Mogadishu, suppressing much of the geopolitical context and constructing an Orientalist narration solely grounded on the American privates' point of view. The film, Hassler-Forest argues, renders historical processes an exclusively subjective first-person experience: "the characters who died in the film were the victims of unfathomable forces beyond anyone's control, allowing the events to leave in their wake only two kinds of subjects: victims and heroes"

(33). It is my contention that the discourse of *Black Hawk Down* is repackaged and reformulated in the two films examined in this section.

We Were Soldiers (Randall Wallace, 2002) and *The Alamo* (John Lee Hancock, 2004) deal with two disparate historical spans: the Vietnam War and the iconic Battle of the Alamo respectively. The former follows the heroic deeds of Lieutenant Hal Moore's platoon in the ill-fated battle of Ia Drang in 1965; the latter recreates the most famous episode of the Texan Revolution in 1836. Despite their differences, both films are rationalizations of the Bush Doctrine and its main underpinnings. By means of different discursive practices, this pair of films works to narrativize and naturalize as apolitical and ahistorical a number of cultural meanings and political arguments constituting the identitary narrative of the Bush Administration: war involvement as inevitable, a simplification of geopolitics that renders the United States the victim of soulless aggressions, the subsequent need for all-out military action in the face of a lawless enemy, the understanding of American democracy as a fraternal conflict-free social arrangement, and mourning as a mechanism for national unity.

Since both films articulate their respective stories through the political categories, common-sense values, and identitary narratives set up by the Bush Doctrine, the analytical focus must center on the diverse strategies by which the films reconstruct past legacies and historical accounts using the hegemonized meanings and narratives of modern day conservatism. Thus, there must be a clear scrutiny of the type of homeland iconography, patriotic mobilization, and ideal of democratic polity fashioned in these two films so as to bring up the underlying hegemonic worldview that legitimizes such binding discourses.

We Were Soldiers tells the story of a newly formed patrol unit assigned to carry out a highly dangerous mission on Vietnamese soil. The plot revolves around both domestic life at the military base and the soldiers' deployment and fighting on the front, reprising the Vietnam War as means for communal heroism and conservative vindication. In many aspects, Wallace's film departs from mainstream representations of the Vietnam War such as *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986) or *Born on the Fourth of July* (Oliver Stone, 1989) –films that have approached the American military campaigns in South East Asia as a demythologizing and fundamentally wrongheaded historical experience that undermined the exceptionalist identity of the nation.

In fashioning this reideologization of American military involvement in Vietnam, the film draws influence from the rhetoric and practices of the immediate post-9/11 discourse. The film premiered in March 2002, in a political climate shaped by some of the major (material and symbolic) decisions of Bush's first term: the declaration of the "War on Terror", the passing of the USA PATRIOT Act, the military intervention in Afghanistan, and the famous "Axis of Evil" speech during the January 2002 State of the Union Address.

By sanitizing and deproblematizing the historical period to a significant degree, the film's nationalistic interpellation not only claims legitimacy for a culturally frowned upon war. Its discursive line taps into the fermenting and growing support for the Bush Administration's talking points in the early stages of the War on Terror: the inevitability of military effort in the face of a ruthless enemy, the importance of coming together in the name of national security (a stand publicized as neutral but partisan in essence), and a sense of communal bonds maintained by grief and common sorrow. It would be remiss though to disregard the fact that *We Were Soldiers* is not an all-out far-right film along the same line as, for example, *The Green Berets* (John Wayne and Ray Kellogg, 1968) –the quintessential pro-Vietnam film. Albeit timidly, the film does include some geopolitical contents as to why the Vietnam War came to be fought and a few sequences are devoted to providing insights into the North Vietnamese Army.[51] Nonetheless, in its effort to narrativize as legitimize the rationale for the War on Terror, the film emanates an understanding of American values and traditions which inscribes conservatism in the discourse of the national and the way this is to be thought of.

A forty-minute first act characterizes American life in a 1965 training military base as an arcadia-like experience of family values, military comradeship, racial diversity, and civic freedoms, virtually untouched by any form of internal discord –an account in stark contrast with the significant and thoroughly documented turmoil of the LBJ years. In this aspect, the film contains a Nixonian perspective insofar as it presents the social body as a normative, quiet, and non-protesting entity –similar to the Silent Majority touted by the Nixon platform. This outlook also allows the film to incorporate the Bush Administration's line of argument that deemed post-9/11 American democracy an aseptic and (supposedly) apolitical process of automatic agreements wherein antagonisms are seen as unnecessary or vexing.

This unproblematic vision of American life can be best exemplified in two particular instances. In an idyllic scene of domestic life, Moore and his children start praying together but we see that the mother, Julie, restrains from doing so as she is a Methodist –a fact that is casually accepted by the family members. A bit later we see black and white citizens (soldiers and their wives) socializing with no racial resentment surfacing whatsoever. Moreover, one of the white women is outraged by the fact that one public laundry only allows white people in. This concatenation of images –systematically avoiding the social unrest of the time– shows an ideal of the American community attuned to the Bush Doctrine: Americans are a united people who enshrine liberties, multiculturalism, and religious diversity, and it is in the name of such values and their preservation that military action against other entities is justified (a discourse that *El Alamo* will exacerbate and deepen). In so doing, the film naturalizes an idea of the American identity which sees conflict as pernicious and harmful, upholding unity as the sustaining element of the national. This view of the social body seems totally consistent with the notion, at the core of the Bush Doctrine, that democracy is, first and foremost, a question of unity (a unity, nonetheless, ideologically and politically conditioned by Republican theses about social and foreign policy, excluding other, less comforting dissenting worldviews).[52] The film's intervention upon the cultural iconography of the 1960s reveals an attempt to reideologize such events into more conservative coordinates, bearing out Guibernau's and Bhabha's contentions that national traditions and imaginaries are constantly being renegotiated.

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[51] It is also fair to say that this does not qualify *We Were Soldiers* as ideologically balanced given its marked insistence on portraying American society as united and fraternal, as well as the film's overall embrace of the American perspective. For instance, a considerably more balanced narration is the 2006 duo of *Flags of our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (Clint Eastwood), a cinematic enterprise that chronicles the involvement in WW II from the standpoint of both the American and the Japanese armies.

As the prospect of being deployed to Vietnam becomes increasingly likely, the film engages in spelling out the hegemonic narrative of post-9/11 more emphatically. In accordance with the Bush Doctrine, the film argues that involvement in the war is not the consequence of strategic decisions in a web of opposed geopolitical interests but just a tragic disturbance. A telling sequence of family life forwards such notion. As Moore tells his daughter a bedtime story, she posits the following question:

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[52] This vision of American democracy –much more preoccupied in identifying identitary uniformity than contradictions and conflicts– seems reminiscent of the postwar "consensus" interpretation of American history, which regularly approached class, race, and gender issues as marginal debates in the construction of the American identity (Junco-Ezquerra 15-16).

> CECILE: "Daddy, what is a war?"
> MOORE: "A war is a...well, it's... It's something that *shouldn't happen, but it does*. And it's when some people in another country or any country try to take the lives of other people. And then soldiers like your daddy have to, you know... It's my job to go over there and stop them."
> CECILE: "Are they gonna try to take your life away, Daddy?"
> MOORE**:** "Well, yes, Cecile, they're gonna try. But I'm not gonna let them" (min. 24-25; emphasis added).

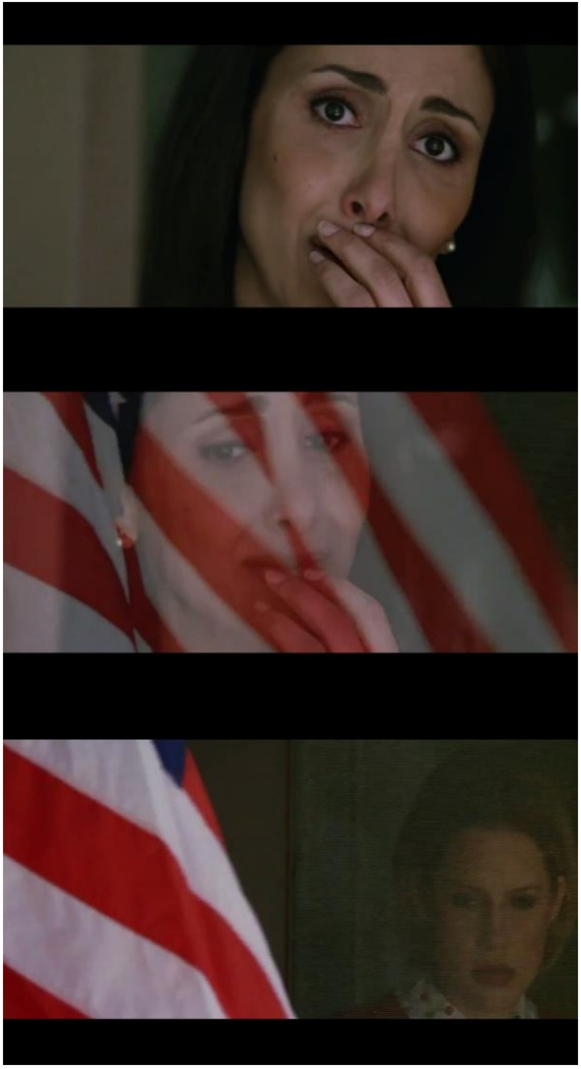
The film conforms to Spiegel's notion of infantile citizenship whereby the American public after 9/11 was given an ahistorical and apolitical discourse with regard to the role of American foreign policy in world affairs, rendering the United States a victim of immoral agents who despise their democratic values and civil liberties. The scene plays out this hegemonic vision of American expansionism by exposing the rationale of war to an innocent little girl. In Moore's words, war is an ineluctable incident that has less to do with political wills or strategic interests than with a moral sense of protection for the homeland. The film thus displays the fully hegemonized version of national security as authored by the Bush Administration: the aggression to the American soil arose out an entrenched and preordained hatred towards American liberties and not from previous foreign policy actions nor from geopolitical tensions. The father-daughter moment is a perfect example of hegemonic mobilization (strengthening both the Bush Doctrine and the narrative of American exceptionalism). The family life dimension of the sequence facilitates the inclusion of a political argument reinforcing the premise that American military involvement responds either to a measured containment strategy or to a justified retaliation due to previous uncalled-for attacks. Thus, the film brings up the memory of hawkish Cold War anticommunism to legitimize the present day War on Terror campaign.

When Moore's platoon is informed of their deployment to Vietnamese soil, he offers a confident and reassuring speech to both his soldiers and their families, touting, yet again, the values of the Bush Doctrine:

> MOORE: "Look around you. In the 7th Cavalry we got a captain from the Ukraine, another from Puerto Rico. We've got Japanese, Chinese, Blacks, Hispanics, Cherokee Indians, Jews and Gentiles, *all Americans*. Now, here in the States, some men in this unit may experience discrimination because of race or creed. But for you and me now, all that is gone. We're moving into the valley of the shadow of death, where you will watch the back of the man next to you as he will watch yours. *And you won't care what color he is, or by what name he calls God. They say we're leaving home. We're going to what home was always supposed to be*. So let us understand the situation. We are going into battle against a tough and determined enemy." (min. 32-34; emphasis added)

Moore's blend of military comradeship and ethnic and religious pluralism appears to be in lockstep with Bush's own perspective on multiculturalism and politics: "Bush was comfortable with diversity, bilingualism, and cultural pluralism, as long as members of America's ethnic and racial subcultures shared his patriotism, religious faith, and political conservatism" (Gerstle 253). What is more, the film engrafts the main identitary logic of the Bush Administration into this climatic moment: a multicultural community is perfectly possible because there is a grand binding national narrative, that of the opposition to the enemy. Attachment to the homeland comes from a set of values (solidarity, steadfastness, and teamwork) and not just from mere a territorial ascription (Moore suggests that "home" is unity among soldiers because, according to him, they are not leaving home but heading towards it). The assimilation of Americanism to close-knit communitarianism bespeaks the film's adherence to the identitary blueprint of the Bush Doctrine –that is, post-9/11 American identity is defined by tight acquiescence in the Republican thesis of political monolithicism and suspension of critical debate. We can thus see how patriotism and Americanism are equated with a political discourse and a vision of history which pivot on the meanings of the national hegemonized by conservatism.

Past these moments, the narration splinters into two strands –one in Vietnam, one on the military base. While the former showcases generic carnage-filled battlefield action (with occasional displays of conservative patriotism and some deromanticizing images of warfare violence), the latter reveals much more fruitfully the political and cultural contents of the story. As the war drags on, most of the women at the base start receiving telegrams informing them of their husbands' deaths on the front. Julie, Moore's wife, decides she will have all telegrams delivered at home so she herself can give the news to the women of the fallen. The narration is subsequently filled with images of shared sorrow. In a very eloquent moment, the film



Figures 10, 11, and 12: Flag and Grief

shows a slow-paced montage sequence of young grief-stricken widows –made of close-ups and accompanied by a funeral military march. There is a transition moment in which the American flag serves as element of visual continuity (Fig. 10; Fig.11; Fig. 12). Thus, the film presents a unified country in their shared pain, devoid of partisan interests or internal fracturing.

This representational strategy signals both a sanitized take on the social landscape at the time (which was actually quite divided) and a compliance with Bush Doctrine values (in times of war, empathy and common sorrow are desirable, while critiques of government seem inappropriate, if not unpatriotic). The film characterizes the way the conservative discourse has come to hegemonize what American patriotism ought to be: full adherence to war efforts, omission of historical engagement with the causes of military invasion, and a resultant logic by which criticizing American war involvements is equivalent to disparaging the fallen soldiers, the nation, or national security (or all of them). It is this sense of patriotism, the film suggests, what holds the community (the nation) together. In addition, it is worth noting that the narration femininizes most of the expression of grief. Women's only mobilizing effort is to reinforce communal bonds by sticking together and providing solace. No other meaning, orientation, or ideological tinges are attributed to their husbands' deaths.

The story finishes in a rather understated and low-key epilogue – Moore returns, with much of his platoon lost in Vietnam, and with a final endorsement of military comradeship, way less propagandistic or bombastic than expected. Despite some well-meaning attempts to avoid ideological bias or nativist nationalism, the film clearly favors and participates in the hegemonized meanings of community, patriotism, and national interpellation constructed and spread by conservatism and exacerbated by the Bush Doctrine.

The string of motifs laid out in *We Were Soldiers* reappears in *The Alamo*. Hancock's film reconstructs the famous Texan standoff in which a small battalion stood and died outnumbered by Mexican troops. What makes *The Alamo* a text worthy of close examination is the remarkably accurate way in which it narrativizes the ideological readability provided by the War on Terror. Nine days after 9/11, George W. Bush gave a speech in a Joint Session of Congress. With a nation still in shock, the president offered a soothing explanation as of why the attacks had taken place: "Americans are asking 'Why do they hate us?' They hate what they see right here in this chamber: a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other". This pattern of ahistorical moral duality (democracy vs. tyranny) and victimization of the homeland is systematically narrativized and endorsed in *The Alamo*.

The film opens with a foreshadowing montage sequence, accompanied by a melancholic tune, which displays the dead American troops who have defended the Alamo. Many of the protagonists we will see for the next two hours lie dead on the ground. Filling the screen with dead American bodies, their faces, and their personal tokens, the emphatic visual devices used reinforce the post-9/11 normative frame of grievability, that which granted full visibility to American tragedies thus mobilizing affect and predisposing public opinion to retaliation. The film establishes a familiar orientating vector through which the coming images are to be thought of: the defilement of the nation as the point of origin. This is the emotional and empathetic mooring the film offers right off to frame the narration (even before the very title of the film comes in). In this sense, the film will embrace the vision of history hegemonized after 9/11 by the Bush Administration: a conventionalized account that constrains the explanatory course of events to a primal sorrowful origin (the attack on the national soil). Both the narrative of *The Alamo* and the Bush Doctrine guidelines opt for that sanitized, self-indulgent version of the historical processes. And such is the starting point to fashioning a sense of polity and of community.

The characters entrapped in the Alamo configure an apt microcosm to present and discuss the vision of the national proposed by the Bush Doctrine and the political categories of the War on Terror. Likewise, sequences devoted to gaining insight into the Mexican side of the story reveal a tendency to represent the enemy as an exploited people ruled by untrustworthy, immoral, and despotic leaders –transferring the traits of Islamic terrorists to the Mexican troops. The stark disparities between both communities are constantly emphasized by means of an expedient and precise use of editing.[53]

Within the Alamo different sensitivities clash only to bear out how entrenched democratic values run in the community. Much of the conflict comes from the relationship between the seasoned and popular James Bowie and the newly promoted and considerably less cherished William Travis. When the latter tries to discipline Bowie's men and the disagreement between both appears to be intractable, it is mutually agreed that the conflict be sorted out by a democratic vote. Americans, the story exposes, develop wills and partisan loyalties –and appoint the leaders to materialize them– on the basis of democratic accountability and collective engagement, while contrasting worldviews can freely coexist. In contradistinction, the Mexican army is shown as totalitarian and ruthless in tackling internal strife. Unlike the democratic American polity, dissent is punished with death on the Mexican side. While Americans exercise their freedoms, a group or Mexican rebels are executed in breach of the traditional custom of sparing a few of them. Not only is this carried out to discipline the Mexican troops, their tyrannical leader (General Santa Anna) claims he has proceeded in such manner to be remembered. This thematic and narrative organization normalizes that longstanding hegemonic version of America as a diverse yet united nation free of significant structural problems, which stands against a vile enemy lacking in codes and values. Much as the film hints at the violence exerted on Native Americans and the issue of slavery, these two issues do not constitute a substantial concern of the narration.

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[53] The otherness-based discourse, in which Americanism is signified as being against an immoral antagonistic group, is a long-standing identitary line in American cultural history. See Junco-Ezquerra (20-63).

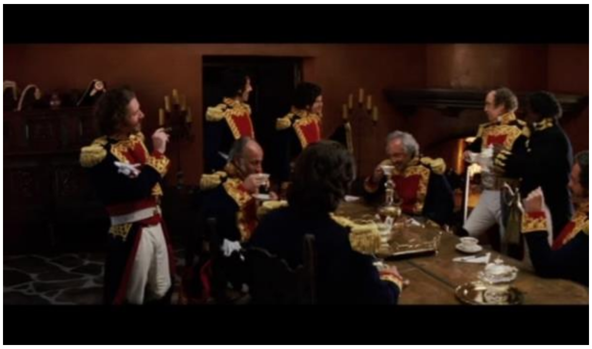

Figure 13: Mexican Troops

A bit further into the film, the same clash is enacted again. We see Mexican soldiers transport General Santa Anna's personal belongings as one superior warns them: "Careful! This is the General's crystal! For each piece broken, a broken bone" (min. 38-39).[54] The scene plays out and the camera moves into a luxurious salon, where the military bosses are having coffee (Fig. 13; Fig. 14). By comparing the idle and well-off elite with the mistreated Mexican troops, the film also endows the Mexican army with a sense of class distinction and social hierarchy that strengthens the undemocratic nature of their community. The contrast is pushed forward via editing, which immediately jumps into the Alamo to show images of Americans doing manual work – smiths, butchers, soldiers– suggesting the Americans take part in a much more egalitarian and meritocratic community. The feudal-like organization of the Mexicans is contrasted with the myth of the classless American society.

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[54] Mexican characters speak in Spanish. All quotations from Mexican characters have been taken from the English subtitles of the film.

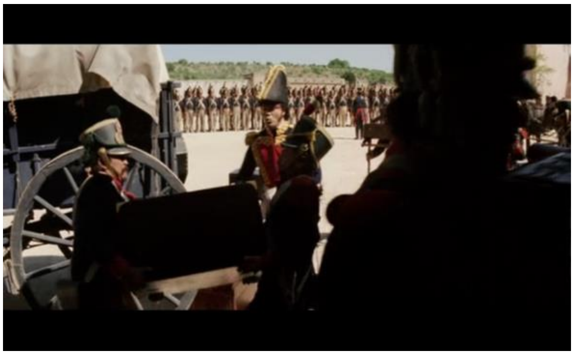

Figure 14: Mexican Elite

This discourse is finally enshrined in the first combat scene. A Mexican cannonball is fired into the fortress but does not explode. The unpopular Travis mandates that the ball be taken out but all soldiers refuse, which leads him to take the cannonball in his hands and remove the fuse. Not only does this segment vindicate personal freedoms (American soldiers do not blindly submit to their superiors), it also showcases the importance of leadership as stemming from grassroots level. The soldiers and militiamen are willing to follow Travis freely, once he has earned their respect with his courageous and bold action. Thus, the American side is associated with work ethics and democratic unity through participation whereas Mexicans are to be ruled and exploited by a bigoted, unelected privileged class. This dichotomization buttresses the totalizing political categories and rhetoric of the War on Terror, where the United States remains a beacon of democracy and freedoms standing against a repressive and intolerant enemy.

Notwithstanding all these endorsements of the Bush Doctrine and the overall narrative of American exceptionalism, the most evident case made in favor of the War on Terror comes in the second half of the narration. Both armies await combat engagement –one in which the Mexican army has every chance to win. However, Santa Anna wants to strike one final and unexpected blow that, nonetheless, posits some ethical problems:

> CASTRILLÓN: Our 12-pound cannons arrive tomorrow. Why sacrifice our soldiers trying to take a wall that can be demolished?
> SANTA ANNA: General Castrillón, what are the lives of soldiers but so many chickens?
> CASTRILLÓN: And if they [the Americans] surrender?
> SANTA ANNA: They are pirates, not soldiers. Take no prisoners.
> CASTRILLÓN: There are rules governing…
> SANTA ANNA: I am governing! And you, sir, understand nothing of the difficulties that entails! My mission is to preserve the integrity of the national territory. […] Without blood, without tears, there is no glory. (min. 89-91)

The sequence only seems to state what has been obvious for the entire film: the tyrannical nature of the Mexican leader Santa Anna. By representing an enemy unwilling to adhere to the rules of war and basic ethics, the film vindicates the Bush Administration's neoconservative theses that helped build up the case for state-sanctioned torture and the anti-constitutional enlargement of executive powers. The film suggests that, when faced with this type of enemy, an all-out expeditious military strike is the only sensible strategy. The famous David Crocket dies at the end of the film, savagely bayoneted by Mexican privates, in spite of having shown pity and empathy for a fallen Mexican soldier just a few sequences before. In the style of a cautionary tale, there is a concerted effort to uphold and legitimize the idea that deterrence, truces, and diplomacy are sterile, if not dangerous when confronting a rogue nation –a stand largely in sync with the foreign policy basis of the Bush Administration: "Facing a dangerous world of rogue states run by irrational dictators, and of failed states wherein terrorists fester, the United States will act both preemptively and preventively against immediate security threats" (Horwitz 143). Thus, the film inadvertently transforms the preemptive strike rationale of the War on Terror into a commonsensical and legitimate route of action. By sketching a cinematic framework of duality between good and evil, freedoms and bigotry, the film is allowed to boost the hegemonized notions of patriotism and nationalism: attacking in order to protect the country, unity in the homeland, and no concessions given to the enemy due to his lack of humanity and values.

The final upshot is a narration in which the historical time of the Texan Revolution is flattened out. The purpose is to tailor an easily digestible identitary narrative that holds that American military retaliation is always an act of self-defense to preserve its national integrity and its freedoms. Underwritten by the neoconservative assumption that "there [is] no real distinction between defense and offense" (Heilbrunn 106), *The Alamo* ultimately rationalizes Bush statement where he claimed "[w]e are staying on the offensive, striking terrorists abroad so we do not have to face them here at home" ("Acceptance").

Despite some attempts to widen their critical scope, both *We Were Soldiers* and *The Alamo* work to naturalize the discourse of the War on Terror and its subsequent identitary guidelines as the normative way to understand Americanism and patriotism in the wake of 9/11: the conception of history as a sanitized and simplified account that starts out with the aggression of the homeland, the enshrining of unity as the totalizing national trope, the victimization of the American homeland, and the memory of the fallen ones as a cohesive device for national strength. This discursive complex reveals the hegemony of certain cultural meanings over others, as the films obviate or lessen an array of other concerns: dissent or historical knowledge as key part of the discussion, the use of victims as deterrence for self-criticism, and the understanding of foreign policy and homeland security as a political and intellectual exercise which responds to strategic partisan interests and not just as an allegedly apolitical or non-ideological defense of the country.

5.2. Those We Don't Speak of Did it! The Discourse of Fear and Grief in *The Village*

The Village (M. Night Shyamalan, 2004) stands as one of the key post-9/11 allegorical texts in American cinema. Set in the small and isolated 19th century countryside village of Covington Woods, the local population lives an austere pastoral experience under a nonetheless foreboding pact: the townspeople are prohibited from entering the surrounding woods, inhabited by mysterious creatures that, in return, do not trespass on the village. In this social complex tightly regulated by a web of fear-spawned habits and institutional secrecy, villagers are disciplined to enact normative rituals of consensus and compliance with the community's values.

As the plot moves along though, the routines constituting social life in the village are gradually and dramatically upset. In the end, a plot twist reveals the real nature and intention behind all the preceding narration: the actual historical time is the present day. The village is buried deep in the heart of a wildlife preserve strategically located to go unspotted. And, most problematically, the creatures that hold the community together do not exist – the elders (the founding elite of the village) have been clothing themselves for years in monster costumes to suppress any desire from villagers to abandon the little town. The elders, it turns out, were attendees of sessions in a counseling center –all of them had lost family members in randomly cruel and gruesome crimes. They then decided to build up a secluded and violence-free community. The emphasis of the film on social fear and mourning rites as strengthening and structural pillars of community might help us identify and exemplify identitary discourses arising from 9/11 that bound together group interaction, grief, and the national. The film's metaphorical engagement with the post-9/11 context shows a critical take on the hegemonic meanings and tropes developed and praised in *We Were Soldiers* and *The Alamo.*

In the first stages of the plot, the film swiftly composes a set of portraits of community typical of the hegemonic narratives of the national after 9/11. The depiction of Covington Woods literalizes some topoi attributed to classical American exceptionalism and the Winthropesque image of the city upon a hill –an innocent and insulated land devoid of vices and wrongdoing, a newborn social experiment afar from material corruption, and a sense of mutual affection and solidarity among a polity of white Caucasians. These Puritan resonances conflate with political and ideological concerns pertaining to later-day American culture.

The film opens up with the burial of a seven-year old child and a solemn gathering around it. The very first image of communal cohesion we see is one in which sense of belonging and grieving merge –a continuity enhanced via mise-èn-scene and framing (Fig. 15). Rituals of group mourning and congregation will be repeatedly performed throughout the film. Most importantly, we will witness this kind of commemoration in two crucial points later in the narration, when one of the protagonists, Lucius Hall, is stabbed by the mentally impaired

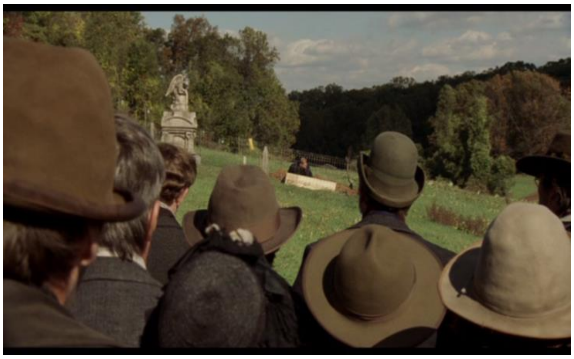

Figure 15: Group Mourning (1)

Noah (Fig. 16) and in the very last moments of the film, when the community and its values are finally reinstated (Fig. 17). The film's iconography of unity through mourning bears deep conceptual similarities with the saturation of grief images in post-9/11 meant to galvanize the American public into a monolithic unit. The film shows a social body that automatically adheres to group conformity in the face of human loss while failing to become involved in the public sphere beyond such pre-established parameters of gregariousness.[55]

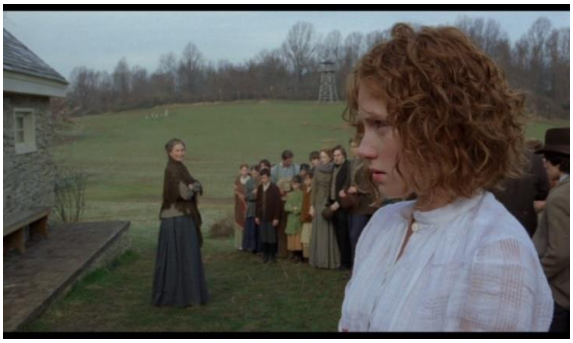
Figure 16: Group Mourning (2)

Collective mourning seems to be a matter of status quo compliance, with emotional response being automatized as reinforcement of the hegemonic complex of the village. In sync with the climate of induced fear and uncertainty of the post-9/11 years, and borrowing Butler's terms, the film shows that enshrining sorrow as the preferable response for human loss establishes a framework of grievability that, on the one hand, precludes citizens from expressing other (dissenting) views and that, on the other,

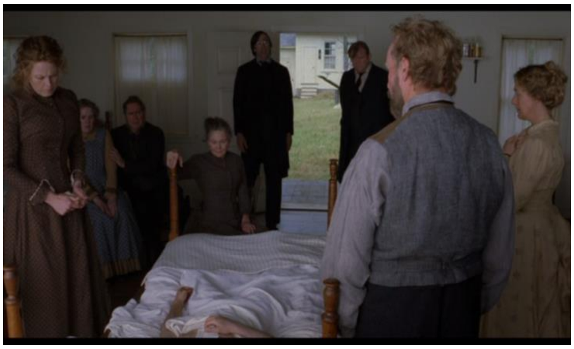
Figure 17: Group Mourning (3)

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[55] Likewise, the film's opening is structurally and conceptually analogous to those of *Law Abiding Citizen* and *The Alamo* in that all of them show decontextualized human loss as the originating point of the story.

lessens their ability to assign other meanings to human tragedy other than lamentation.

Grieving as a form of social bonding is nonetheless inextricably interwoven and is secondary to the film's most critical thematic concern: fear as means for community cohesion. On this particular subject, it is productive to bring in Appadurai's rumination on the production of local subjects and the neighborhood. Appadurai contends that local knowledge is actualized in neighborhoods. Such actualization though necessitates constant enactment, material grounding on the places constituting the neighborhood (Appadurai 179). For the long-term existence of a neighborhood to be secured, there must be a "seamless interaction of localized spaces and times with local subjects possessed of the knowledge to reproduce locality" (Appadurai 181).

Figures 18 and 19: Practices of Fear

That seamless interaction required for the neighborhood to persist is evident in the depiction of social attitudes in the village. In one early segment of the film, two girls see a red flower and rapidly root it off and bury it (Fig.18) –the red color, we will be informed, is supposed to entice the beasts. In the very next scene, men are shown patrolling the border of the village cloaked in yellow uniforms (Fig. 19). These activities homogenize the social landscape of the village, superimposing local seamlessness onto public attitudes and spaces. These ritualized and conventionalized social procedures that configure the village's identitary narrative reveal an internalization of local knowledge that borders on indoctrination. Such visible and tacit agreement with institutional protocols of sameness is in keeping with much of the American public discourse in post-9/11, which unilaterally fell in line with the talking points and agenda of the Bush Administration showing little room for dissidence. In both cases –the villagers of the film and significant parts of the American public– tractability and gregarious obedience remain the most salient features of the social body. Likewise, these sequences rich in metaphorical and allegorical meaning bear out the Gramscian proposition that hegemony penetrates the very texture and material grounds through which life is experienced.

Shyamalan's film displays more explicit forms of hegemonic control via ritualization and enactment of locality. The *de facto* head of the village Edward Walker (also the town's teacher) encounters a group of children staring at a grotesquely skinned rabbit. Walker has a conversation to soothe the children, not accustomed to witnessing violence. The exchange becomes a parable for mainstream civic attitudes in post-9/11 American culture:

> STUDENT 1: "I inspected it carefully. Its head was twisted back and much of its fur removed."
> EDWARD: "I see."
> STUDENT 2: "It was murdered."
> EDWARD: "But who is the culprit? Who has done this heinous act?"
> STUDENT 1: "Those We Don't Speak Of killed it!"
> EDWARD: "There it is. Why would such a notion come into your mind?"
> STUDENT 3: "They are meat eaters."
> STUDENT 4: "They have large claws."
> EDWARD: "Children, Those We Don't Speak Of have not breached our borders for many years. We do not go into their woods; they do not come into our valley. It is a truce. We do not threaten them. Why would they do this?" (min. 7)

The hegemonic political reading of 9/11 and its rationale resurfaces in the way the conversation is laid out and framed. The teacher makes rhetorical questions aimed at eliciting specific answers and responses that can be easily grafted onto the prevailing worldview that dominates life in the village –that is, there exist outer creatures we need not interact with and civic duty calls for remaining within the safe margins of the village and enacting its mandatory customs. The way the exchange takes place reminds us of Spiegel's notion of infantile citizenship –something already latent in *We Were Soldiers*. A closer look into the internal logic of the sequence provides a more profound linkage between the film and the post-9/11 context. As representative of hegemony, Walker posits that security exists insofar as there is obedience to the manners and customs by which the village is run, just as the Bush Administration defined American unity and safety as adhering to the Republican theses regarding foreign policy and domestic surveillance. What persuades the villagers (and the American public) into accepting such premises is less an actually unbiased conversation than a fear-based appeal against an otherized unnamable entity. The community is therefore a mere historical object subsumed in a pedagogy of the nation in which the masses remain an uncritical recipient in power relationships.

This landscape of social homogeneity is nonetheless problematized. The introspective and severe Lucius seeks permission from the elders to go into the forbidden woods and obtain medicines in nearby towns in the hope that premature deaths might be prevented. Notwithstanding his innocent and non-defiant attitude, Lucius's proposal symbolizes a break from the hegemonic discourse of consensus and communal passivity. He does not comply with the numbing sense of mourning inscribed in the community's practices –he actually seizes the little child's death as an opportunity for sparing suffering to future generations. In the face of this challenge, the elders enhance the binding practices of fear and grief. Alice, Lucius' mother, appeals to human loss and tragedy to discourage her son from entering the woods:

> ALICE: "We shall speak of the town, just this once, and we shall never speak of it again. Your father left for the market on a Tuesday [...] He was found robbed and naked in the filthy river, two days later."
> LUCIUS: [sobbing] "Why would you tell me this blackness?"
> ALICE: "So you will know the nature of what you desire." (min. 22)

The hegemonic voice (Alice is member of the elders) deploys communal pain and death to curb a civil urge to explore and understand why the margins and arrangements of the polity are set up the way they are. The sequence allegorizes the way post-9/11 victims and their memory was channeled to justify and secure the agenda of the Bush Administration in that the pain and human suffering of other citizens is employed to draw attention away from structural factors, strategic decisions, and political actors. Undeterred by social pressure, Lucius starts stepping into the woods to see whether his plan is feasible. After these (physical and symbolic) breaches of the village's margins, the elders decide to stage a monster attack to terrorize the villagers and subdue Lucius's plans. The very next day, a meeting is held in which the elders sanction yet again the narrative of fear and cohesion: "[b]y the markings we find this morning on our homes I feel they were warning us. They acted as if threatened" (min. 33-34). A disheartened Lucius seems to confirm the validity of such thesis. This passage allegorizes how the cultural narrative of 9/11 was conceptually fashioned and spread. Identitary formulations of Americanism consisted in redefining safety as synonym for unity around the Republican policies –neoconservative recipes abroad and Reaganite populism in the homeland. This resulted in an identitary discourse in which departing from such agenda was not only unpatriotic (the film does not hint at this) but as fundamentally dangerous as this undermines the nation's resolve. Lucius' actions encapsulate the latter meaning. However well-meaning their intentions may be, their plans to destabilize the hegemonic narratives and practices of the village entail danger. Therefore, the more strictly citizens abide to normative ideology, morals, and attitudes, the safer the entire community is –regardless of whether such communal bases are ethical or respond to sectional interests.

Yet, the restoration of social order in the village is short-lived. Noah (in a child-like game fashion, we are to assume) skins some more livestock and marks houses with the red color –upsetting the elders, who ignore who may know their secret. A bit further into the film, the narration reaches its most critical moment. The energetic Ivy (Edward Walker's blind daughter) and Lucius fall in love and decide to get married. This news affects Noah terribly, as Ivy is his best friend, wounding Lucius almost to death. It is then that Ivy takes up Lucius's failed plan to explore the woods for medicines.[56] This outburst of violence hastens a major revision in the structural arrangement of the village. Edward decides to tell his daughter the true underpinning that holds the community together –that the creatures are a fabrication of the elders:

> EDWARD: "What do you know about your grandfather?
> IVY: "He was the wealthiest man in the towns?"
> EDWARD: "That he was. He had a gift for that. If he was given a dollar, in less than a fortnight, he would have turned it into five. You do not know of money. It is not part of our life here. Money can be a wicked thing. It can turn men's hearts black – good men's hearts. My father could not see this. For all his gifts, he was a poor judge of a man's character. Your grandfather was a good man, Ivy. He had a laugh that could be heard three houses away. He used to hold my hand as I hold yours. He taught me strength and showed me love, and told

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[56] It seems worth noting that only "impaired" characters such as Ivy and Lucius (an extremely introspective and timid man) are the ones who actually transcend the superimposing homogenization of the village and its communal practices.

> me to lead when others would only follow. Your grandfather, James Walker, died in his sleep. A man put a gun to this head and shot him while he dreamed. *I tell you this so you will understand some of the reasons for my actions, and the actions of others*." (min. 59-60; emphasis added)

Edward's impassioned speech sublimates the thematic concerns and allegorical meanings the film has so far developed. First of all, for all the film's metaphorical texture, the narration does not caricaturize the elders as evil. In this case, his justification as of why the village is run on the basis of fear is based on a Puritan and Jeffersonian-like indictment of urban civilization and moneyed interests. Nevertheless, a deeper examination of Edward's speech and its arguments does offer powerful points of concomitance between the village's foundations and post-9/11 United States. The entire existence of the polity (both the village and post-9/11 America) is articulated through a collective commemoration of mourning over loved ones who have tragically passed away – that is the primal event that sets off the institutional organization of the community establishing the ideological readability, explanations, and customs shaping social attitudes. The monster costume comes to metaphorize the politics of fear and media-spawned anxieties that the film addresses (Fig. 20). Thus, the identitary foundation of both communities is a historical experience of shared pain resulting, in turn, in a tight ritualistic pedagogy of the national/the local characterized by unity and monolithicism. Just a few sequences after this scene, Edward's foregrounds even more clearly this discourse of dominance:

Figure 20: Monster as Metaphor

> EDWARD: There is no one in this village who has not lost someone irreplaceable, who has not felt loss so deeply that they questioned the very merit of living at all. It is a darkness I wished you would never know. *Forgive us our silly lies, Ivy. They were not meant to harm*. (min. 69; emphasis added)

In spite of these counterhegemonic breaches, a series of happenings in the last third of the film enable the hegemonic complex to prevail. In her quest for the so called towns, Ivy steps out of the reserve and manages to get the medicines for Lucius. But prior to his, he is attacked by Noah, clad in the monster costume, who dies in the midst of the confrontation. Noah's death is rapidly seized by Edward to reignite the narrative of grief and fear as unity: "[w]e will tell the others, he [Noah] was killed by the creatures. Your son has made our stories real. Noah has given us the opportunity to continue this place" (min. 95-96). The film is quite open-ended (we ignore whether Lucius will survive) and shows that hegemony may be contested or challenged (e.g. Lucius's and Ivy's quests for the medicines) –just as in the post-9/11 there were a few voices that brought attention to the masses' inaction and to the Bush Administration's various controversial and problematic political decisions. And yet, we see that the hegemonic compact utilizes the two key lines of its discursive blueprint (fear and grief) to secure the bases of the project.

The Village is a critical political allegory of post-9/11 United States. The film engages in spotting and characterizing, through local portraits, the construction of a hegemonic discourse of unity and solidarity on the grounds of sociological panic and ritualized forms of mourning. These traits can be found at the core of post-9/11 hegemonic identitary narratives –a culture of commemoration, an all-out saturation of grievable images, and a nationalistic logic that made unity tantamount to following the Republican agenda. By rendering visible the way hegemony regulates political categories, establishes the ideological coordinates through which social life ought to be mapped out, and conditions cultural symbols, *The Village* undoes essentialist and allegedly preordained narratives about the national. The community is thus shown as a terrain for articulatory practices since, as the film clearly points out, identitary narratives are the result of political decisions, ideological guidelines, and cultural orientations. Through allegory, metaphor, and symbol, *The Village* makes explicit the political functionalities of grief and fear in maintaining the hegemony of the Bush Doctrine. Very few films in contemporary American cinema have reached such a level of discursive precision in analyzing the political, ideological, and cultural bases of post-9/11 United States.

5.3. Bleed and Grieve Together: Communal Ties in the Reenactment of 9/11 in *World Trade Center*

World Trade Center (Oliver Stone, 2006) is the primary source most self-evidently engaged with 9/11 in that it reenacts the attacks on the Twin Towers and the succeeding hours of mayhem, adapting the patterns and idioms of the classical disaster film to dramatize the horrors of that day. Based on a true story, the narration follows first responders John McLoughlin and Will Jimeno, two Port Authority policemen rescued by some of their colleagues after spending the entire day of September 11th stuck under the debris of the World Trade Center. Stone reconstructs the events of that day from a two-fold perspective. On the one hand, the story focuses on McLoughlin's and Jimeno's struggle to stay alive while overcoming excruciating physical pain and mental exhaustion. On the other, the film explores their families' mounting anxieties as an outpouring of media accounts fail to inform them as to whether or not their loved ones have survived the attacks.

The analysis of this text poses a series of complexities and ambiguities that problematize its fair and contextualized assessment. *World Trade Center* is not as easily identifiable ideology-wise as the rest of the texts belonging to this section. The story is intended to be a heartfelt tribute to the, indeed, heroic first responders to 9/11, which explains why the film has a spatially and narratively tight structure and range (virtually confined to the very aftermath of the attacks and the perspective of those directly involved). Such homage is paid by a filmmaker, Oliver Stone, whose work can very well be seen as the most sustained and incisive corpus of political films on recent American history –absent the kind of digestible and self-indulgent slant of *We Were Soldiers* or *The Alamo*. In fact, it is fair to say that Stone is the left-wing intellectual filmmaker of his time, having written and directed an array of highly critical films on American foreign policy –*Salvador* (1986), *Platoon* (1986), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), *Heaven & Earth* (1993)– and on domestic issues –*Wall Street* (1987), *JFK* (1991), and *Nixon* (1995).

It is therefore hard to pin down *World Trade Center* as a conservative vindication or legitimization of the Bush Doctrine, given Stone's public persona and unconcealed political views.[57] The reduction of the whole American experience of 9/11 to the immediate following hours of 9/11 seems less an ideologically driven decision than an attempt to distill the human suffering undergone by first responders and their families. And yet, it would be analytically remiss not to address the fact that the film leaves untouched an overarching imaginary of the communitarian closely tied up with the hegemonic meanings of 9/11. Whether intentionally or not, providing the film with such a particular narrative structure, the emphasis on the human dimension of the tragedy, and one specific subplot of the story regarding the military feed into a series of common-sense values instituted by the Bush Doctrine. Kellner is accurate when he says that *World Trade Center* is "the ultimate un-Oliver Stone film" (104). Stone's version of patriotism in this film, intended as low-key, respectful, and understated, does not in any shape or form contest or confront the hegemonic discourse of the Bush Doctrine, nor does the film's lack of a slightly macro-perspective on the events, which is particularly noteworthy coming from a filmmaker who has made historical research and political discussion the integral part of his filmic signature. The consistent decision to transform the film's discourse into a conventional first-person disaster account causes a few climatic sequences to be impregnated with a clearly conservative subtext. The hegemonization of 9/11 on the part of the Bush Doctrine makes it impossible not to regard the film as tacitly sanctioning, by lack of a clearer political engagement, the legitimacies and consensuses established after 9/11 which mandated the event to be conceptualized as a tragedy-based ahistorical occurrence.

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[57] In *The Untold History of the United States*, Stone and historian Peter Kuznick entitle the chapter on the 2001-2009 period "The Bush-Cheney Debacle" (499-548). The section is an extraordinarily critical and data-driven account of the Bush Administration. There ought to be very little doubt that Stone himself is profoundly opposed to the policies and rhetoric of the Bush era.

The film addresses a number of imaginaries that, albeit circumscribed to the very September 11th, would end up dominating the political landscape of the ensuing years. As the narration scans the daily routines of New Yorkers just before the attacks, a scene (through a swift close-up montage) shows the faces and names of the policemen who would be later involved in trying to evacuate the Twin Towers (one of leading protagonist, Jimeno, and two of the policemen who will die under the rubble of the World Trade Center). This brief visual arrangement (aesthetically detached from the overall low-key mise-èn-scene) highlights Stone's acceptance of the culture of commemoration that has underpinned post-9/11 debates (Fig. 21).

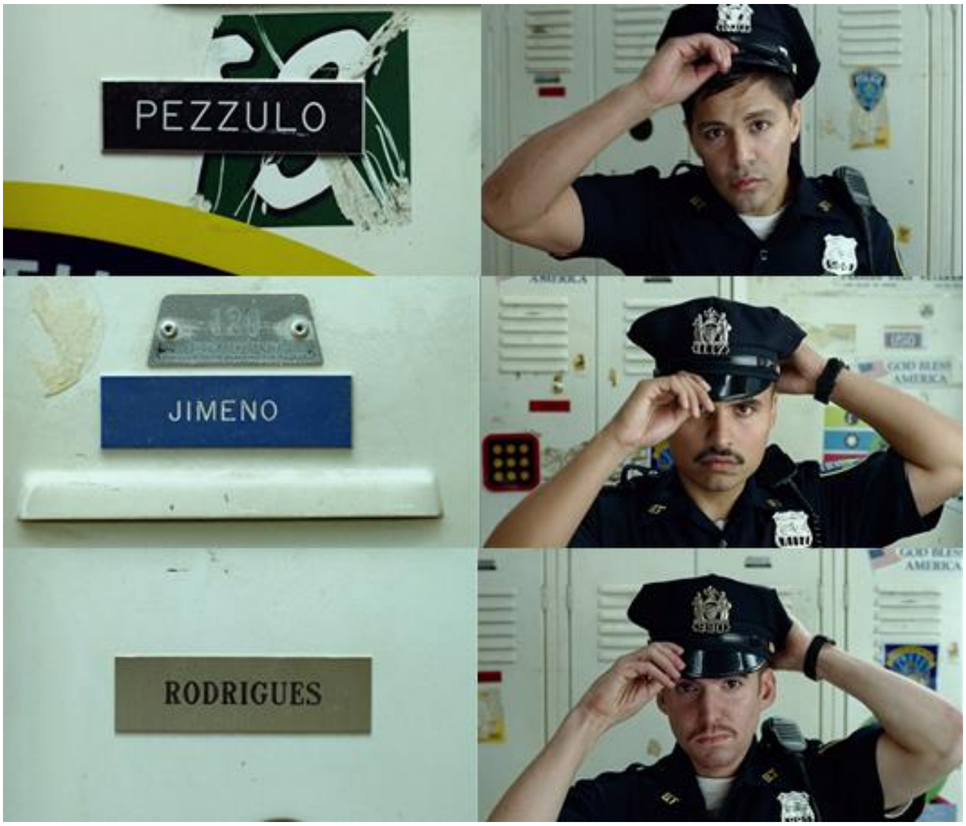

Figure 21: First Responders as Framework

As Butler has written, "[a]fter the attacks of 9/11, we encountered in the media graphic pictures of those who died, along with their names, their stories, the reactions of their families. Public grieving was dedicated to making these images iconic for the nation" (38). In a sort of metonymic way, the scene, as the whole narration does, elevates the figure of the first responder to the (well-earned) status of tragic figure drawn into mayhem and chaos by external unfathomable forces. But just as Butler points out, such an iconography (one-sided, uncomplicated, and, indeed, humane) can be easily mobilized so as to be projected as the narrative for the national: the suffering and badly hurt first-responder as surrogate for the country and, in consequence, its status as wholesome, innocent. Since the film does not widen its range of narrative micro-subjectivities, it is not hard to see how the plot perpetuates the grievability frameworks that naturalized the Bush Doctrine guidelines, with the American fallen consecrated and enshrined as symbol of national heroism and the foregrounding of their suffering as the filtering element through which all reading of 9/11 ought to be formulated.

This idea of 9/11 as a unifying vector of grief and loss runs through the entire narration but it is metaphorized towards the end of the film with great symbolic potency. When the protagonists are finally rescued, McLoughlin's wife Donna rushes to the hospital. While waiting, she strikes casual conversation with a woman whose son is missing and who cannot hold back her tears as she tells Donna of her last exchange with him. Both women hug and cry together, each gripped by their own anxieties but united by a communal sense of (possible) loss which is, simultaneously, personal and national. The intangible ties of the national become visible and are incarnated in the women's grieving, the national imagined community turns into a palpable physical unity by means of a mutual sense of empathy and solidarity. This climatic sequence dramatizes the political meanings of 9/11 as projected by the Bush Administration. However fragmented or alienated American social bodies may have been in the past, 9/11 effaces the differences between diverse constituencies of the American polity for there is a shared sense of pain and loss that can only be alleviated by national empathy and consensual mourning. No unity

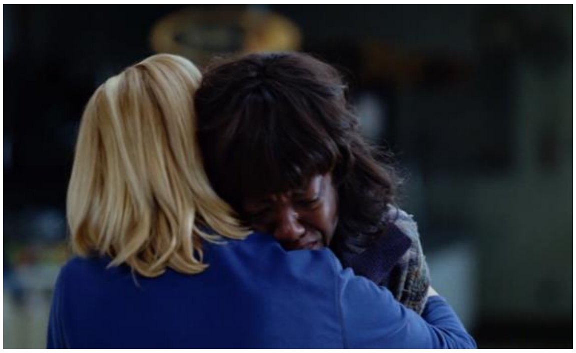

Figure 22: Post-9/11 Unity

or internal discord is possible (and this is eloquently stressed through the multiracial embrace of a Caucasian and an African-American) (Fig. 22). Stone's depoliticized approach here permits the hegemonic discourse of conservatism to fully penetrate the message of the film.

BREAKING NEWS
AMERICA UNDER ATTACK

Figures 23 and 24: TV-saturated Reality

In less pro-establishment terms, Stone also recreates a key trait of post-9/11 imaginaries: the fashioning of community via media. There is a significant bulk of sequences riddled with the incessant outpouring of images of the smoking towers and the fear-stricken masses of American bewildered by an unprecedented first-person violent experience. This faithful reconstruction of the media-saturated texture of 9/11 allows us to see how a sense of community came to be instituted from vicariously experiencing the attacks. The media-driven homogeneity in building up the visual iconography of 9/11 (later consecrated and normalized throughout the Bush period) solidified the notion that "the widely seen (and repeatedly replayed) visuals of the Twin Towers' destruction became an icon of membership in a common victimization and, ultimately, that 'all' who viewed/cared/opposed destruction could fight back" (Altheide, *Fear* 88-89). The film's stress on the penetration of 9/11 imagery as a cohesive signifier for national unity articulates Altheide's point. Albeit timidly and not deliberately, the film does reflect how television forged the visual iconography that bound together and generated a sense of post-9/11 community on the basis of a shared experience of televised fraternity (Fig. 23 and Fig. 24).

But there is one narrative thread in the film which really poses the question of whether Stone yielded to the then-hegemonic political climate. Interspersed with both McLoughlin's and Jimeno's suffering and their families' anguish, the narration features accountant and ex-Marine Dave Karness, a man deeply affected by the images of the attacks on New York. After hearing President Bush's first words after the attacks, he claims, "I don't know if you guys know it yet, but this country's at war" (min. 47). He quits his jobs, attends an evangelical church, and heads for Ground Zero saying to his pastor "I've spent my best years with the Marines. God gave me a gift to be able to help people, to defend our country. And I feel him calling on me now for this mission" (min. 48). Ultimately, Karnes plays a crucial role in rescuing McLoughlin and Jimeno. It would be up for discussion to what extent this subplot condones the War on Terror rationale had the film being limited to just these actions. But towards the very end, Kerness voices a genuinely Bush Doctrine maxim as he avers, "They´re going to need some good men out there to avenge this. We´ll see" (min. 116). In the credit titles, we are informed that Karness re-enlisted in the Marines and served for two tours in Iraq (min. 120).

No critical distance or irony is shown, nor does the film incorporate the slightest counter-discourse to this crystal-clear endorsement of the foreign policy guidelines of the Bush Doctrine. By not including a shred of contextual information or political counterargument to Karness' story, the film leaves untouched his attack-counterattack logic, that is, that 9/11 had to be reciprocated militarily. In the context of affects mobilization the film is steeped in, the get-things-done subtext of Karness' last words, as well as the credit title information, seems to justify the Iraq War as a proportionate response to 9/11, a sort of payback. Moreover, Karness' attitude bears kinship with the post-9/11 urge to act first and foremost rather than to deliberate, a type of reasoning which shaped defining political decisions such as the hasty passing of the USA PATRIOT Act. Here we may see reflected Žižek's criticism of the mandatory urgency-based response to violence in the Western world, something the Slovenian thinker associates with left-humanitarianism but which can be easily applied to the Bush Doctrine: "[t]here is a fundamental anti-theoretical edge to these urgent injunctions. There is no time to reflect: we have to *act now*" (*Violence* 6). By inserting Karness' urge to "do things" in a filmic world where no preliminary information is given and no geopolitical moorings are laid out, Stone normalizes the political culture of post-9/11 which rendered strategic discussion and public debate unnecessary if not disrespectful in the face of human loss and imminent danger.

The last sequence encapsulates the conflicting meanings that inhabit the entire film. Just as in previous stretches of the narration, despite being an attempt to celebrate first responders the scene is so ideologically bland and their depoliticization is so conspicuous that the discursive overtones of the Bush Doctrine cannot but penetrate part of its subtext and logic. The film finishes two years after 9/11, with McLoughlin and Jimeno recovered and received as heroes in a barbecue party thrown on their behalf. As these celebratory images mark the epilogue of the film, we hear a brief voice-over comment on the part of McLoughlin: "9/11 showed us what human beings are capable of, the evil, yeah, sure. But it also brought out a goodness we forgot could exist: people taking care of each other for no other reason than it was the right thing to do. It's important for us to talk about that good, to remember" (min. 118). McLouglin's words are aimed at vindicating post-9/11 solidarity and human kindness. But in its formulation, the message can be (and indeed was) easily mobilized for the conservative cause. Just as there is an undeniable humanistic edge to McLoughlin's message, his appeal to the American community not to forget about all that social bonding is at the very core of the rationale to go to war espoused by Karness and much of the Bush Doctrine rhetoric (the victims ought to be properly avenged, those Americans did not die in vain). As there is no other perspective than those of the directly affected by 9/11 and no other wider historical vision than that of September 11th, Stone's tribute to first responders cannot but tacitly express its points through the sedimented vocabularies of communitarianism forged by the Bush Doctrine.

World Trade Center highlights two interrelated hegemonies. Firstly, the film shows how the discourse of community based on grievability frameworks and mourning was so all-embracing and consent-building that barely an author could escape from it.[58] Not even a sharply left-wing filmmaker such as Oliver Stone who, in order to give his account of 9/11, participates in the discursive limits and subsequent symbols and imaginaries established by the Bush Doctrine. The hegemonization of 9/11 by conservatism could not be clearer when a leading voice on the American left deployed the identitary lines set up by right-wing discourses. Secondly, and on a grander scale, *World Trade Center* also indicates the intellectual dismantling of American liberalism, unable or unwilling to seize 9/11 in order to signify it along lines different from those of conservatism.

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[58] Here it is worth mentioning Stephen Gaghan's 2005 film *Syriana*. Although the film does not address 9/11 as such, it features a multi-strand transnational plot that gets to portray terrorism as, indeed, a personal and wrongheaded endeavor that is, nonetheless, fuelled by the economic immiseration wrought by geopolitical asymmetries. The film presents terrorism "as part of a history of unequal relations –unequal distribution of power and wealth, unequal access to global resources, and unequal representations" (Duvall and Marzec 2). It is arguably one of the very few political films whose theses are fully estranged from the hegemonic categories of the Bush Doctrine.

5.4. The Invisible Counter-Hegemony: The Community of Terror and Inaction in *The Mist*

In an excessively mechanistic approach to *The Mist* (Frank Darabont, 2007), one could argue that the reactionary forces presented in the story (embodied by the religious bigot Mrs. Carmody) epitomize the most outlandish and fundamentalist voices that rallied behind the conservative movement since the Reagan coalition was instituted. For example, it is striking to see the similarities between Mrs. Carmody's eschatological rants and Moral Majority icon Jerry Falwell's famous comments two days after 9/11:

> Mrs. Carmody: "Don't you know the truth? We are being punished. For what? For going against the will of God! For going against his forbidden rules of old! Walking on the moon! Yes! Yes! Or, or splitting his atoms! Amen! Or, or, or stem cells and abortions! And destroying the secrets of life that only God above has any right to! Amen! Amen! Yes, I know! It is true! And now we are being punished. The judgment is being brought down upon us." (min. 92)
>
> Falwell: "Throwing God out of the public square, out of the schools, the abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked and when we destroy 40 million little innocent babies, we make God mad. I really believe that the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union], People for the American Way, all of them who try to secularize America. I point the thing in their face and say you helped this [the 9/11 attacks] happen." (*The 700 Club)*

Notwithstanding the possibility of that analytical take, *The Mist* does address the political and cultural issues of its time but not in such clear-cut and unambiguous terms. This sci-fi horror tale is less a one-to-one narration with specific characters corresponding to public figures than an examination of the ways conservatives hegemonized the idea of community in the wake of 9/11, providing certainties and rationales to the American citizens, while left-leaning, progressive, and pacifist actors remained paralyzed and/or intimidated.

After a terrible storm hits a little town in Maine, a large number of people crowd a local grocery store to get supplies. A mist starts surrounding the entire town and a band of people gets trapped in the store. They will remain there for a few days, succumbing to mayhem and horror as the mist unleashes blood-thirsty creatures that repeatedly besiege and penetrate into the store, terrorizing and killing some of the customers. In this context of shock, two groups are formed inside the store: on the one hand, Mrs. Carmody commands a creeping majority preaching that these supernatural horrific events forego the Apocalypse, on the other a sort of "enlightened" group stands together, composed by decent and sensible people reluctant to participate in Mrs. Carmody's delusions. While the former consists of characters stereotypically presented as weak-minded and yokel, the latter is made up not only by the protagonist and the main supporting characters but by those who hold "intellectual" status in society –the charismatic leader David is a painter, there are two teachers, and the remaining ones (blue-collar and civilians) show lucidity and calmness in facing supernatural horrors.[59] The disparity between the two groups (one coarse, paranoid, and violence-prone; the other cool, reflexive, and pragmatic) is founded both on their contrasting worldviews and practices and on the way they both interact with the social environment generated within the store.

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[59] One of them, an elderly school teacher even voices an unexpectedly politically-charged commentary before the major events of the plot develop: "You'd think educating children would be more of a priority in this country, but you'd be wrong. Government's got better things to spend our money on, like corporate handouts and building bombs" (min.10). No other commentary of the sort –clearly aimed at the neoliberal state and Bush's military spending– will be made throughout the film.

As terror and uncertainty grow inside the store, Mrs. Carmody lays out her Biblical reading of the events, announcing carnage and death. Incidentally, she is not attacked by the creatures as the store, just as she had foreseen, gets viciously raided by grotesque monsters. Her linking of the ongoing supernatural events with an Armageddon-like process is, in the first instance, repudiated but it is gradually accepted and endorsed by certain people. After one particularly horrifying attack, one person at the store voices incipient support for Mrs. Carmody's hitherto deranged eschatological harangues: "She was right. She said that it would happen like this. She said that they would come at night. She told us someone would die" (min. 63). As people become more anxious for security, the "progressive" group sticks together, looks for medicines for the wounded, and ignores Mrs. Carmody's fringe ideas. As her force soars though, they decide it is best to leave the store:

> DAVID: "Want another reason to get the hell out of here? I'll give you the best one. Her. Mrs Carmody. She's our very own Jim Jones. I'd like to leave before people start drinking the Kool-Aid."
> OLLIE: "He's right. Flakier people get, the better she's gonna look."
> AMANDA: "No, I don't buy that It's obvious she's nuts. Look, a few people maybe, but..."
> DAVID: "No, I count four. She's preachin' to 'em right now. By noon, she'll have four more. By tomorrow night, when those things come back, she'll have a congregation, and then we can start worryin' about who she's gonna sacrifice to make it all better. You, Amanda? My little boy?"
> [...]
> AMANDA: "My God, David, we're a civilized society."
> DAVID: "Sure, as long as the machines are workin' and you can dial 911, but you take those things away, you throw people in the dark, you scare the shit out of them, no more rules. You'll see how primitive they get."
> DAN: "You scare people badly enough, you can get 'em to do anything. They'll turn to whoever promises a solution." (78-79)

At first, this instance addresses the linkage between sociological fear and obedience, a likely allusion to the politics of fear practiced by the Bush Administration. However, the passage might be more fruitful if it is seen as an unambiguous moment in which the protagonists realize Mrs. Carmody's ideas have a pernicious influence upon the social fabric. Indeed, my contention is that the overall narration may very well be seen as a left-leaning allegorical indictment of post-9/11 American society (a social body which either clings to fringe ideas in the face of horror and anxiety or departs from public debate). What is clear from this sequence is that the progressive voices of the story do not engage, at any point, in publically disarming or contesting Mrs. Carmody's ideas when edginess and mayhem rise to a point that might lead to internal violence. Albeit through reactionary demagoguery, Mrs. Carmody's speeches supply the terrorized people of the supermarket with rationales for the horrific events. When she deploys familiar Christian imageries and symbols to indoctrinate her fellow citizens, she is providing them with certainties and moorings through which they might make sense of their experiences and find grounding and orientation (in other words, she is giving the population ideological readability). Unopposed and with a context ripe for manipulation, she fights for the people's common sense by bringing them all around to a cohesive set of ideas –that is, she is the only one who creates an actual discourse of community and sense of belonging despite their being constituted by extreme Christian orthodoxy and pleas for communal violence against paganism.

The progressive bloc disengages from that battle of ideas, taking civil society for granted and restraining from tailoring a counter-discourse against Mrs. Carmody's grassroots mobilization. For sure, the politics of fear underpins much of the narration. Yet, the way the progressive voices in the film respond with discursive inaction to Mrs. Carmody's rise opens up a much more productive line of analysis. Thus, the film explores the inability of progressive caucuses to fight against and refute the different brands of extremist discourses supportive of the War on Terror.

The last segment of the film sublimates this discourse on liberal and progressive paralysis in the wake of 9/11. At the onset of the film, when the mist begins to envelop the store, a desperate woman begs for help to return home since she has left her children unattended. The people at the store respond with fear-ridden silence (Fig. 25). The woman leaves the store anyway. As the film unfolds, the audience forgets this incident. Towards the end of the film, Mrs. Carmody has brought everyone on their side –to the point of committing a lynching-like murder sparked by her comments. In a tense scene, the protagonist group gets to break free from the store, gunning down Mrs. Carmody. After driving for a few kilometers in an eerily post-apocalyptic landscape they run out of gas. The five remaining characters decide to use the last four bullets to commit suicide, with David being the sole survivor. Traumatized and desperate, he steps out of the car and, all of a sudden, the mist recedes revealing that the army has

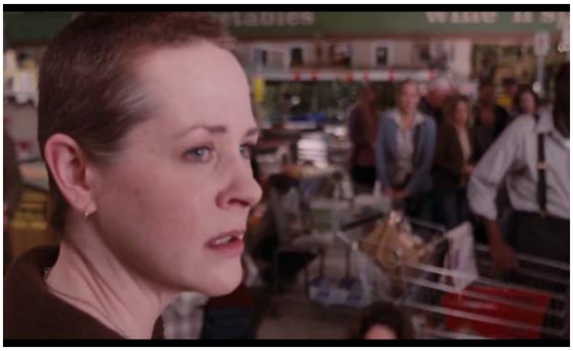

Figure 25: Fear and Social Paralysis

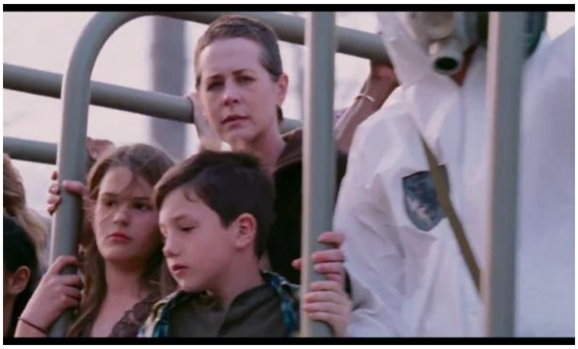

Figure 26: The Survivor

begun to restore order. In one of the army truckloads, we see that one woman who left by herself, alive and unscathed with their two children (Fig. 26). The only person who managed to depart from fear mongering was the one who survived. The film thus indicts the entire polity, not just the demagogues and those gripped by fear, but the whole community and its drives towards gregarious inaction, insulation, and oppressive paranoia.

6. Market Heroes: The Neoliberal Subject

What integrates the individual's action into the whole of the social system of production is the pursuit of his own purposes.

Ludwig von Mises

We have won the war of ideas. Everyone –left or right– talks about the virtues of markets, private property, and limited government.

Milton Friedman and Rose Friedman

There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families. And no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first.

Margaret Thatcher

Neoliberalism has been the hegemonic force modeling American economy and political culture since the Reagan decade. As explicated in the third chapter, the post-9/11 years accelerated and reinvigorated a series of practices and discourses already operative and hegemonic in both collective imaginaries and the economic and political arena since the 1980s. It is only logical, then, that a series of American films released during the 2000s have narrativized and aestheticized the way neoliberalism has infused its ideas into the symbols and traditions that express the American identity. If hegemony is to be understood as the ability to attribute specific meanings to social phenomenon and determine the frameworks and categories through which we map out reality, this section seeks to examine in Gramscian terms cinematic representations of neoliberalism. That is, the cycle of American films examined in this chapter transmute a sectional take on individualism, society, and the state into the universal –into that which is supposed to be innately and primordially American.

This chapter comments on four films that zero in on the way neoliberalism has permeated cultural imaginaries about the national, about what American citizens ought to be, and about the common-sense limits that underpin national identity. Whether the films travel back to the Great Depression, the troubled decade of the 1970s or the Reagan years, I shall try to ascertain in these aesthetically and narratively diverse titles a shared pattern of ideological readability that renders the neoliberal agenda commonsensical, legitimate, a provider of meaningfulness and identitary grounding. By performing close textual analyses, I shall focus on the way these four cinematic narrations engage in a struggle to discursively unify the practices of neoliberalism with American identity.

6.1. Death of an Anticapitalist Salesman: Hegemonic Neoliberalism and the Demise of the Fordist-Keynesian Paradigm in *The Assassination of Richard Nixon*

The Assassination of Richard Nixon (Niels Mueller, 2004) takes places between 1973 and 1974: the Nixon Administration crumbles in the midst of Watergate, the tail-end of the Vietnam War, and the beginning of the end of postwar prosperity. The story focuses on Sam Bicke, a bleak and crisis-prone salesman weary of American society, who utterly fails at pulling his life together: unwillingly separated from his wife, underperforming in a job he loathes, and unable to secure the funds to open his long-sought small tire business. This gloomy outlook, and the different setbacks he must endure, will lead him to suffer from paranoia and homicidal anxiety. In the end, he will prepare a failed plan to hijack a plane and crash it into the White House –an endeavor in which, after killing two people, he will lose his own life.[60]

The central interest of the film lies in the way its self-evident political content, albeit situated in the 1970s, engages in characterizing meanings and practices instrumental in neoliberalism. I shall offer a reading by which the film presents two different discursive lines. One is concerned with seizing the historical context –in which the certainties, values, and ethos of the Fordist-Keynesian complex were losing traction– to critique latter-day American neoliberalism and two of its most salient features: workers' deprivation and competition as behavioral norm. The other, less prominent yet equally significant, tackles the notion of personal responsibility –a discourse in which social failure is seen as the consequence of individuals' decisions, (mis)calculations, and attitudes thereby positioning political and economic conditions as important yet secondary explanatory forces.

The film articulates Sam's bitter experience to adjust to a system that, to his mind, is essentially corrupt and perverse. Throughout the entire film he espouses a decidedly anticapitalist agenda: "There are times that I have felt alone on this planet. And that's how they want us, isn't it? *Alone, divided, weak*" (min. 6; emphasis added). Sam explicitly defines the status of workers as insulated units, this being according to him the consequence of a general process of disenfranchisement. Sam's words allude to the gradual fragmentation of the neoliberal workplace by which labor is no longer a socializing or collective task, nor does it offer a sense of grounding and place, as it once did in the Fordist-Keynesian era. A more poignant reference to neoliberalism comes right after this passage. Jack Jones (Sam's overbearing boss) lectures Sam on the essentials of selling, illustrating his points through Richard Nixon's two victorious presidential campaigns:

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[60] The film explores the motifs of a number of late 1960s and 1970s titles such as *The Arrangement* (Elia Kazan, 1969), *Save the Tiger* (John G. Alvidsen, 1973), and *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976), all of them equally dominated by a bitter and depression-led political disclosure and a sense of masculinity in crisis.

> JACK JONES: "*I can believe in anything.* [...] You want to know who the greatest salesman in the world is? That man, right there [he points at Nixon speaking on TV]. He sold the whole country: 200 million people on himself, twice. And what was Nixon's sales pitch in '68? [...] He said he would end the war. He would get us out of Vietnam. And what did he do? He sent another 100,000 troops and then he bombed the living shit out of them. That's what he did. Now, what did Nixon run on last year? Ending the war in Vietnam. And he won...by a landslide! That is a salesman. He made a promise. He didn't deliver. And then he sold us on the same exact promise. All over again. *That's believing in yourself*." (min. 7-8; emphasis added)

In addition to the characterization of capitalism and democracy as a flow of shallow commodities, a link is established between self-confidence and the ability to secure a sell. Success in the sales business is essentially a matter of proactivity and will –in the neoliberal lexicon, a question of individual self-government. This idea is immediately expanded and reinforced as his boss hands Sam a couple of books and audio tapes to introduce him to positive thinking and selling techniques that repeat similar talking points: "The salesman who believes is the salesman who receives. Remember, power is a state of mind. You have as much as you think you have. If you don't think you have any, you don't [...] The salesman must see himself as a winner." (min 8-9).

These aphorisms and slogans are an extension of the philosophical foundations of neoliberal thinking, ringing especially true in American culture and its narratives of the self-made man and rugged individualism. Sam's boss sponsors the narrative that it is ingrained in the individual's capacities the potential to prosper and that, if the right strategic decisions are taken, success will eventually materialize. No outcome will be beneficial unless the individual self-vindicates as a winner, as possessing power, perpetuating the identitary lines of success as a matter of personal autonomy, sacrifice, and effort –and failure as lack of thereof. In this sense the rationales of neoliberalism are intermingled with the traditional values of Americanism as a form of optimism and self-validation. Here the film touches upon one basic consent-building mechanism by which neoliberalism won the battle of ideas, as Milton Friedman accurately claimed. With its underscoring of personal empowerment and seductive individualism, neoliberal rhetoric lends itself easily to be conflated with quintessential cultural myths of individualist (white male) Americanism –the frontiersman, the hard-working and pure Jeffersonian husbandman, or Jacksonian democracy. Thus, the neoliberal subject is presented as a new actualization of long-standing common sense values of American culture, gaining legitimacy by equating its philosophical ingredients (search for profit, energetic individualism, and competition) with totemic common-sense sediments engrafted in popular imagination.

This point is furthered afterwards into the film. Sam is about to make a sell when his boss calls him and scolds him for excessively cutting down the price of the product –the sequence is provided with added symbolic significance through the inclusion of the American flag in the background as Sam's boss tells him off (Fig. 27). Finally, Sam is forced to make the sell for an allegedly marked down price. Shortly after, his boss congratulates Sam. His boss'

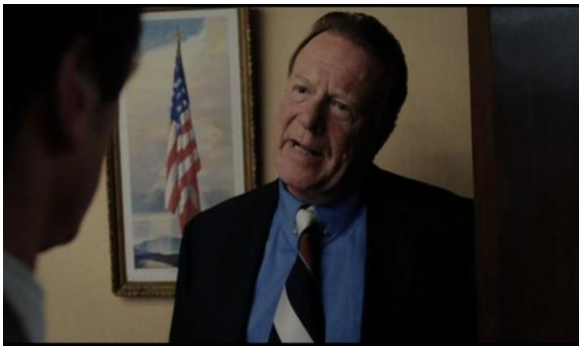

Figure 27: Authority and the Flag

violent rant, we are to assume, was some form of teasing to stimulate him into getting the best sale possible –the other employee of the firm (the boss' son) says "He did it to me, we do it to you" (min 17). The film depicts a workplace in which it is believed that the obstacles and pressures brought to bear onto a worker –as part of a sort of formative process– have direct bearing on his or her productivity thereby legitimizing the neoliberal maxim that "[i]t is not by 'nature' that man [sic] knows how to conduct himself; it is thanks to the market, which constitutes a process of education. It is by invariably placing individuals in a market situation that they will be able to learn to behave rationally" (Dardot and Laval 107). This premise will be powerfully reasserted by one of the many interspersed Nixon's TV speeches that pervade the narration: "A nation, like a person, has to have a certain inner drive in order to succeed, in economic affairs that inner drive is called a competitive spirit" (min 49). We see reinforcements –both in civil and institutional spheres– that define the American character as being intimately interwoven with competitiveness and self-assurance.

Oftentimes Sam delivers his criticism of capital accumulation and the competition-ridden nature of business culture by conveying a longing for a less Darwinist socioeconomic arrangement. He rarely does this out loud but through voice-over soliloquy-like reflections. Whilst listening to Walter Cronkite detailing massive Wall Street earnings, Sam bitterly complains: "What happened [...] to the land of plenty? When there's plenty for the few, and nothing for the plenty? Is that the American dream?" (min.14). Much as a number of Americans did experience economic distress at the time, Sam's indictment of American society, emphasizing a plutocratic dynamic towards massive impoverishment and income inequality, seems much more illustrative of the economic asymmetries of modern American neoliberalism than of the last throes of the Fordist-Keynesian model.[61] Later on, in an exchange with his friend and potential business partner Bonny, Sam objects to the way labor is organized and treated:

> BONNY: "But this guy's your boss. If he wants to be an asshole, you might just have to let him do."
> SAM: "But, Bonny…"
> BONNY: "There's no 'but' Sam."
> SAM: "What about my rights?"
> BONNY: "You've got a right to be mad, sure."
> SAM: "Exactly. That's what I'm saying, partner. That's all I'm saying."
> BONNY: "Sam, it's a job."
> SAM: "This is what I mean. A man doesn't give up his rights at a job. A man doesn't give up his rights anywhere." (Min. 18)

Sam yearns for a set of workplace rights that do not yield labor disposability and competition-based tendencies. He takes this point ever further later on in the film: "You don't have any idea what it's like to work for somebody else like some kind of a slave. But I'm telling you, slavery never really ended in this country. They just gave it another name: employee [voice-over commentary]" (min. 34). Once again, Sam's harsh take on reality seems less a faithful representation of an overall socioeconomic trend entrenched in the early 1970s than a critical engagement with the practices at the core of neoliberal thought. At certain points, Sam's critique becomes significantly more explicit and clearer in locating and addressing the concrete causes for his unrest: "*All I want is a little piece of the American Dream. Like my father and his father*, is that too much to expect? This is a good country […] filled with good people. But what good is good…in times like these? [voice-over commentary]" (min. 20)

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[61] Recent research shows, for example, that the top 5 percent own 72 percent of all wealth in the United States, while growth after World War II was a process of economic democratization that incorporated working class families into an increasingly large middle class (Formisano 15; Krugman 41-42; Stiglitz 50).

Sam longs for the fading certainties of the postwar boom and all the material conditions that came by it –ones that he lacks in his life: the nuclear family, stable ownership, and labor security, a whole range of elements that the majority of the preceding generations of white middle-aged men had acquired during the New Deal consensus era. That desire for regaining the prosperity of the Fordist-Keynesian years is encapsulated by Sam's resentful references to the image of the Cadillac. In a very telling sequence, Sam goes to a Blank Panthers headquarters to make a donation. When he is reminded of his privileged status as a white man he replies that he is not the man in the Cadillac, associating his social identity, not with a well-off position within the class structure, but with that of the disenfranchised, the downtrodden. A symbol of wealth, industrial might, and the Fordist mode of production, the Cadillac becomes a sense of middle-class grounding and respectability that, in contrast, exacerbates Sam's gradual drifting apart from the imaginaries of postwar economic affluence

On the whole, all of Sam's grievances and the fact that his (social, cultural, and political) environment cannot cater to his identitary and material needs are just the byproduct of a hegemonic shift. Sam seeks a series of political and cultural bases, narratives, and symbols that have faded away or that, at least, do not constitute the organizing core of American society –the taken-for-granted middle class status, fluid social mobility, collective identities anchored on the New Deal coalition, a regulated consumer society that might oversee market injustices. What the film points out is that the gravitating and modeling center of American culture is no longer inscribed in the familiar coordinates and categories of the Fordist-Keynesian paradigm. On the very contrary, Sam now perceives the American identity as being sustained by a series of notions he despises –entrepreneurship, rivalry, competition, profit over social justice– and that are conceptually tied up to the master "equation of 'Free Market = Freedom of the Individual'" (Hobsbawn, *Extremes* 271). It is this set of values and principles (and not the postwar ethos) that has been naturalized as the American way. The neoliberal mind, to Sam's despair, is now the vocabulary of the national; it is the sectional worldview that has come to occupy the universal status – in other words, the hegemony.

For nearly half of the film, the narration presents a politically-minded character clearly affected by and highly sensitive to what he sees as a broken-down system. At the same time, Sam is also perceived as terribly insecure, weak, and easily bullied. It is about halfway into the film when his actions start to be less defensible, and his discourse becomes considerably more spurious. The ideological disclosure of the film is equally reframed along different coordinates. One major subplot describes Sam's project to set up a business with his African-American friend Bonny, for which he applies for a government loan. He is ultimately turned down. However, as he impatiently awaits an answer from government agencies, he decides to initiate his business as soon as possible. He then tries to pull off a scheme to have a load of tires diverted for himself from his brother Julius' successful tire business – assuming that his brother will be reimbursed once he has received the government funds.

The confrontation between the two brothers is, by far, the most problematizing moment of the entire narration, and incorporates a different ideological viewpoint from the one presented hitherto in the film. The exchange is worth quoting in full:

> JULIUS: "You're a very strange man, Samuel. I've always known this. I've always tried to help. So why would you steal from me, your brother?"
> SAM: "I didn't steal..."
> JULIUS: "You did. I had to bail your friend, Bonny, out of jail this evening. [...] For receiving stolen goods. My goods. Did you think Roger Zeffler wouldn't

> become suspicious of your friend? That somehow this delivery was kosher? That 550 tires belonged to that address?”
> SAM: “Roger Zeffler is a racist.”
> Julius: “Perhaps that's so. Shame on Roger Zeffler. But you are a crook. So, you tell me, Sam…which shame is greater?”
> SAM: “I am not…”
> JULIUS: “Look at me. This is your brother. Your brother. Do I deserve this now, for you to lie to me?”
> SAM: “Please, Julius, please.”
> JULIUS: “No. No "please, Julius". No! No! I have been to the police begging forgiveness for a mistake that was not a mistake *because I took responsibility, Samuel: responsibility*, so that no one would go to jail. So that this man, Bonny, your friend, would not go to jail. And my family caused this. So you must tell me, Sam, please…which is the greater shame?”
> SAM: “I'm sorry, Julius.”
> JULIUS: “What is your name?”
> SAM: “I had an idea for a tire business. Like you. I wanted to get a head start until my loan came in, and my loan was denied because they're racists. Nixon….all of them! Like Zeffler! I didn't get the money because my partner is black. I was gonna pay you back. I'm just trying to keep my family together. And the little guy just can't do it anymore. Because there's a cancer in the system. The whole system has a cancer, and I'm being punished because I resist. But somebody has to resist. You're my brother.”
> JULIUS: “As of this moment, Samuel… I wash my hands of you. No more. That's it. Nothing. And if you steal from me again, brother or no brother…I will send you to jail.” (min 65-69; emphasis added)

Unlike previous stretches of the narration, in which Sam is represented as a troubled citizen oppressed by the system, in this particular scene he is held accountable for actions that can hardly be understood as the consequence of some form of societal injustice. Instead of projecting Sam's downfall as being embedded in a net of socio-economic and political vectors, the film now highlights Sam’s shortcomings and miscalculations. (This swing –the emphasis on individual actions rather than on the social, the economic, and the political– will be much more salient in *Cinderella Man* and *The Pursuit of Happyness*).

Firstly, Sam denies having stolen the tires. When Julius pushes him harder, he deflects the accusation by claiming that Roger Zeffler (the man whom he contacted to divert the tires to him) is a racist – still denying his engagement in any illegal activity and putting the blame on a third party. It is then than Julius sternly makes use of the concept of "responsibility", dismissing any alleged forms of systemic discrimination, and forwarding that had it not been for his help both Bonny and Sam would have been convicted of a crime. Julius's words put Sam's experience in a new perspective: he appears to be less an honest and tragic underdog than a reckless man. Such perception is promptly bolstered by Sam's reply. Instead of acknowledging any liability or fault of his own, Sam incoherently rants about his misfortune, considering it to be solely motivated by his resilience against a corrupt system and his intention to partner up with an African-American. While part of it may very well be true, it is equally undeniable that Sam's business plan and timing, character, and individual decisions explain to a far greater extent his failure to accommodate social and working life. As opposed to his brother Julius, he takes no personal responsibility for his deeds and ascribes his failures to a structural and systemic malfunction all alone.

On the whole, *The Assassination of Richard Nixon* is a difficult film to pigeonhole ideology-wise. It does show, however, how notions of American self-image and identity are the subject of acute ideological dispute. In such articulatory terrain, the conception of American individualism is linked to two different narratives: an anti-establishment view longing for the postwar ethos of stability encapsulated in the fading promises of Keynesian capitalism; and an atomized urge that rekindles the notions of self-validation and radical individualism in which the citizen, in and by him/herself, is to be held accountable for his/her life projects and strategies.

6.2. A New New Deal: The Ideological Repackaging of the Great Depression in *Cinderella Man*

Cinderella Man (Ron Howard, 2005) is set in the hardest years of the Great Depression and follows the rags-to-riches story of Jim Braddock. A well-established and promising boxer in the late 1920s, Braddock and his family are driven into poverty by the meltdown of the American economy. As the plot unfolds though, Braddock will make his way to the top again, defeating seasoned and younger boxers –while simultaneously working as a longshoreman– and ultimately becoming the heavyweight champion. Estranged from the unvarnished and unapologetic left-leaning worldviews of John Steinbeck or John Ford (or even Frank Capra), this new take on the Great Depression is informed by the rationales and common sense keynotes of neoliberalism. In many respects, the film espouses an anachronistic logic: the Great Depression is reconstructed through the vocabularies and certainties of the neoliberal imagination, utilizing the past to reinforce the hegemony in the present.

The Great Depression spurred grassroots collectivist efforts, concerted large social majorities in favor of state-interventionism, and rekindled class consciousness. *Cinderella Man* transmutes that cultural and sociopolitical landscape into a Horatio Alger story where social distress is straightened out by an individual's resolve and will. In an ideological paradox, the film legitimizes a political and cultural stance more akin to Herbert Hoover's Darwinist rugged individualism than to the actual class-based and anti-establishment values and practices that flourished during the 1930s. Although the film timidly addresses the roots of the Great Depression, the narration systematically pays attention to the individualist dimension of the experiences and crises that constitute the story and its historical context.

As indicated above, the cinematic and literary imaginaries of the Great Depression are dominated by *The Grapes of Wrath*, both in the form of the hard-hitting and raw prose of Steinbeck and the grim black-and-white images of Ford. These classical accounts of the Great Depression are equally underpinned by the prominence of the community as the last defense mechanism against the structural violence wrought by the destruction of the economy. As opposed to such a framework, *Cinderella Man* presents a silenced body of workers. At several moments in the film, Braddock goes to the docks along with many other men to be randomly picked up for shifts as longshoreman. In all of these sequences the masses of workers are depicted as an impersonal background rabble, as consequential and functional to the overall narration as the décor or the setting (Fig. 28). The disgruntled and impoverished American society serves as the backdrop against which the protagonist's story is laid out, but no meaningful agency is actually granted to the working class. In actuality, the only images portraying communal comradeship and bonding among workers appear when Braddock's fights are broadcast in the radio (Fig. 29). Social cohesion is thus shown as being the consequence of an individual's quest but not of a collective

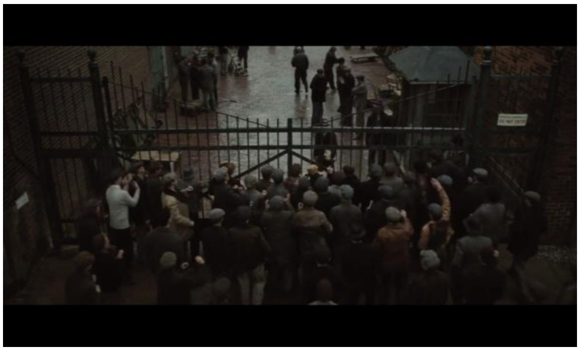

Figure 28: Working Class (1)

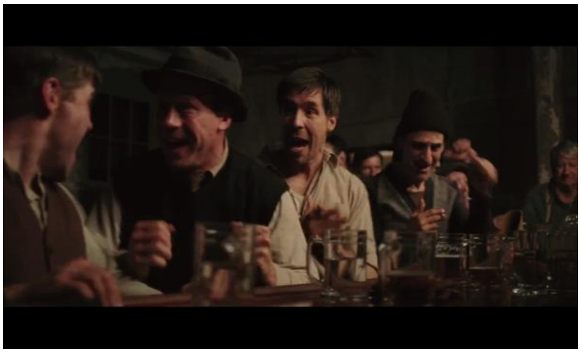

Figure 29: Working Class (2)

effort.[62] In a very telling sequence towards the climax, a church is full of people praying for Jim to win the final combat: "They all think that Jim's fighting for them" (min 107). The masses, the film indicates, only rally once there is a sense of individual heroism that sparks and incites them to come together. However, such galvanization is not to be carried out collectively or by means of social and political protest, but through adherence to a heroic figure. Here we see a clear-cut compliance with the neoliberal way of making sense of social phenomena in that the Great Depression is turned into a heroic individual struggle in which socioeconomic difficulties are finally overcome –any question as to whether unadulterated capitalism might be as a system prone to inequality is entirely deflected. Therefore, in order to project the binding unifying narrative of the national fabric, that is, in order to give the imagined community its own identitary coherence, the film portrays the working class of the Great Depression as a historical object that passively inscribes itself in the course of history and performs no role in affecting the material conditions of the epoch.

What these sequences and their subtexts express is that Gramscian notion of culture as a fighting pit, as a non-teleological struggle for the appropriation of symbols and the power to attribute sectional and expedient meanings to social phenomena. We see how the film tries to work against and efface the association of the Great Depression with an indictment of financial greed, the surge of class warfare, and the figure of the state as a functional political actor. The film upholds a discourse that tries to align the memory of the Roosevelt years with the conservative agenda and with the philosophical background of neoliberalism. The plot downgrades issues of social justice and working class mobilization and narrates the Great Depression from the standpoint of individualism, depicting economic downturn as a nebulous phenomenon with no clear origins. What comes to the surface is the functioning of hegemony, that is, the struggle to define historical and cultural imaginaries on the basis of certain politically and ideologically determined rationales.

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[62] This discourse of messianic individualism has been frequently upheld and glorified by the ever-growing superhero cycle –arguably the most popular subgenre of the 2000s. Hassler-Forest has thoroughly examined the superhero figure as placeholder and rationalization of the values of neoliberal capitalism in all of its cultural dimensions.

This representational strategy, in which the working class holds a rather peripheral position, is exacerbated and endorsed by means of one key secondary character: Mike. Portrayed as a radicalized and unbalanced man, he is the only direct reference to workers' mobilization and unionization (central features in the political culture of the Great Depression). Mike's reckless and unstable character is contrasted with Braddock's abnegation and sense of sacrifice. This ideological clash is made evident in a critical instance to make out the film's adherence to the philosophical thrusts of neoliberalism and conservatism:

> MIKE: "You know, there's people living in shacks in Central Park. Call it the Hooverville. This government's dropped us flat. We need to organize, you know? Unionize. Fight back."
> JIM: "Fight? Fight what? *Bad luck? Greed? Drought? No point punching things you can't see. No, we'll work a way through this. FDR, he's gonna handle it*."
> MIKE: "Screw FDR. FDR, Hoover, they're all the same. I stand in my living room and between the mortgage and the market and the goddamn lawyer that was supposed to be working for me it stopped being mine. It all stopped being mine. FDR ain't given me my house back yet." (Min 31; emphasis added).

Braddock depoliticizes the historical context – which is per se a highly politicized take on the ongoing social conflict. On the one hand, Braddock sees labor organization as too much of an abstract and futile battle. On the other, he addresses the causes of the economic downturn as if they were inevitable or, at least, as if it was impossible to insert those in an interpretative scheme where such causes may be ascribed to specific practices and arrangements. Further into the film, Braddock will restate such a perspective through a clear-cut metaphor claiming that, unlike in real life, in the ring at least he knows who is hitting him (min. 66). Yet again, the miseries of the Great Depression are thought of as a weather-like catastrophe whose points of origins and causes remain unbeknownst to the population. The protagonist here indulges in a fetishist reading of social life which, as Gramsci argued, facilitates a vision by which society operates as an autonomous and unfathomable entity. Braddock ultimately alludes to FDR as the solution to the nation's problems thereby dismissing that a problem-solving project engineered from grassroots mobilization can produce a source of help or empowerment. The only route towards recovery, we are to assume, is optimism, belief in the system, and hard work. The way Braddock reacts to Mike's class-consciousness, forwarding optimism and unwillingness to discern the socioeconomic origins of the meltdown, signals an attempt to reideologize the historical context. The audience is thus encouraged to imagine moments of crisis, not as historical opportunities to intervene on structural malfunctioning, but as situations that demand abnegation, personal restraint, and sacrifice. This ideological tenor is far more attuned to the discourse of the Reagan Revolution and neoliberal individualization than to the revitalized working class ethos of the Depression years.

The underlying premise of this conflict between Jim and Mike (where the former is a responsible, fair-minded citizen and the latter is a pessimistic agitator) will be duly legitimized. Some sequences later, we see that Mike is an irresponsible drunkard who cannot provide for his family. He seems to be more focused on activism than on his domestic life, as his wife reproaches him: "Every day 'fix the world'. How about fixing your family?" (min. 45). Halfway into the film, Mike will die trying to get people organized in a Hooverville, after having been fired due to his constant talk about workers' rights. In the fashion of a cautionary tale, this subplot configures the idea that it is not through political contestation and class warfare that American citizens should make sense of the social (as Mike's death warns us). The American character is, on the contrary, constituted by self-reliance and determination (as Jim's deeds and final success illustrate), a discourse in line with the grand narrative of personal responsibility and self-government of neoliberalism.

As part of this vindication of the individualist aspect of the Great Depression, the film cannot circumvent the issue of the federal government – both an indispensable element during the 1930 and the main object of criticism in the agenda of neoliberalism and American conservatism. Much as the reduction of government is a touchstone argument for the entire spectrum of the right, it would be extraordinarily difficult to make the case against the New Deal ethos and its aggrandizement of governmental power as a safeguarding strategy against massive social marginalization. Furthermore, the New Deal tradition is such an important cultural and political heritage, and its hegemony was so enduring and long-lasting, that the film cannot but participate in some of its underpinnings and critiques. In a couple of sequences, the protagonist criticizes the wealthy for being careless and removed from the daily hardship of working people (see min. 16-17 and min.95). Because of the common sense potency of the New Deal as an identitary trait of American culture, the film offers a middle-ground positioning regarding the federal government that fits its overall ideological disclosure and does not come to attack Roosevelt's sacrosanct legacy. In a moment of great need, Jim obtains some financial aid from the Emergency Relief Administration –a social service reinvigorated by the New Deal investment. A humiliating moment for the protagonist, he is even recognized by the clerk who hands him the money (min. 39). While it would be farfetched to pin down this sequence per se as an indictment of the welfare system, it is later on when the film discloses its centrist message. When he has recovered financially, Jim returns the money to the treasury. In a public interview, when questioned about this issue he answers as follows:

> -REPORTER: "Two days ago, we ran a story about you giving your relief money back. Can you tell our readers why?"
> -JIM: "I believe we live in a great country. A country that's great enough to help a man financially when he's in trouble. But lately I have had some good fortune and I'm back in the black. And I just thought I should return it." (Min. 89)

The ideological ambiguity of this narrative strand reveals a discourse that merges two different standpoints. There is the recognition that some form of welfare coverage is legitimate and necessary in certain moments of extreme social and economic peril. However, parallel to that moderate celebration of the New Deal policies, the protagonist's returning of the money suggests that accepting such aid as a legitimate right would be somewhat detrimental –participating in a discourse more aligned to neoliberal thought than to the Rooseveltian 1930s. Fully accepting that money would have been a way to normalize government-sponsored charity and paternalism –thus incorporating the assumption that government assistance, albeit imperative at very specific times, ought not to be a normative model of action as it would generate a sort of “culture of entitlement” (Horwitz 120). Clearly, *Cinderella Man* is not a Rooseveltian text. New Deal institutions and their political culture are not really celebrated, nor do they seem to be shown as fully legitimate. Howard’s film belongs to an era in which liberalism is no longer hegemonic. It is a text attuned to a third-way Clinton era ethos. The legacy of liberalism is certainly not flatly disavowed in an explicitly conservative fashion. However, liberal policies, institutions, and narratives are not taken as an orienting and organizing political and cultural corpus.

Cinderella Man is a reideologization effort geared to integrate the narratives of neoliberalism into a period of central significance for the American left and working class. By stressing individualism, resolve, and ambition as the key basis of Americanism, while minimizing class solidarity, unionism, and the urge to bring in the state to control the market (core constituents of the New Deal ethos), the film tries to reconceptualize the existing iconography and discursive lines of the Great Depression. Thus, the ideological readability of the film appeals to the audience to make sense of the Great Depression through the notions of hardworking individualism and the neoliberal subject. The film deploys latter-day neoliberal maxims to approach the historical context of the 1930s. In so doing, *Cinderella Man* constructs an ideological framework that diminishes the explanatory importance of systemic elements and promotes individuals’ responsibility as the main driving force that brings about solutions. The way the film approaches history encapsulates exactly what Guibernau and Bhabha mean when they define the creation of national identity as a non-teleological articulatory process always open to be actualized and reinvented according to specific political agendas and historical circumstances.

6.3. All Hail the Market! The Reaganite Citizen in *The Pursuit of Happyness*

The Pursuit of Happyness (Gabriel Muccino, 2006) intensifies the ideological and thematic concerns developed in *Cinderella Man*, taking the discourse of personal responsibility and individual potentiality to a more celebratory level. *The Pursuit of Happyness* is also a cinematic reply to *The Assassination of Richard Nixon* in terms of political and ideological disclosure. Both films revolve around salesmen in situations of distress but while Mueller's film features a joyless man constantly complaining about the socio-economic and political system he has to live in, Muccino showcases a tenacious citizen who overcomes all barriers and succeeds by fully accepting the functioning, rules, and preferred attitudes constituting the system.

The title of the film (a misspelled allusion to the Declaration of Independence) provides a ready key to make sense of the discourse tailored and touted throughout the narration. The thinking of Thomas Jefferson has been often interpreted as an anti-statist and pro-individualistic philosophy (Kazin 18). The film draws common sense legitimacy by making reference to the third president of the United States and his notorious phrase at the beginning of the Declaration of Independence. In so doing, the film tries to embed itself in an identitary line that conceives of Americanism as an ingrained vindication of the individual. The allusion to the Jeffersonian pursuit of happiness aims at associating the unflagging and self-sacrificing quest of the protagonist with an ideal at the very heart of American cultural history. The film is likewise ridden with a host of references that point out a head-on adherence to the philosophical and attitudinal tenets of neoliberal thought and, more specifically, the culture of Reaganism. There is, therefore, an attempt to fuse the Jeffersonian heritage and its emphasis on an austere state with modern American conservatism and the overarching hegemony of neoliberalism –thereby signaling that the all-American pursuit of happiness primarily entails extreme resolve and sacrifice as the protagonist's ultimate success attests.[63]

Set in 1981 and inspired by real life events, the film follows the vicissitudes of Chris Gardner, a salesman who invested his family savings in a batch of costly scanner devices he is currently having enormous trouble putting on the market. Beset by debt, Chris will try to continue selling the scanners while working as an unpaid trainee in a Wall Street firm called Dean Witter – in the hope that he may be at the top of the training program and be elected for a job position. His life will be plagued with numerous setbacks: he is unfairly fined and taxed, his wife abandons him and his five-year-old son, minor mishaps will have him arrive late to appointments, and a myriad of other difficulties. Nevertheless, as Jim Braddock in *Cinderella Man*, the protagonist's unbreakable resolve and energy will bring him a well-deserved success. At the end of the film, Chris finally secures a position as stockbroker and overcomes his bad luck. Just as it was shown in the analysis of *Cinderella Man*, the central interest of the film stems from the way the Horatio Alger rags-to-riches plot is sustained by the idioms and narratives of neoliberal thought.

The narration pivots on the centerpiece argument of individual entrepreneurship and personal responsibility. The film fully embraces the neoliberal core value of "radical individualization that leads to all forms of social crisis being perceived as individual crisis and all inequalities being made the responsibility of individuals" (Dardot and Laval 277). Chris's problems are represented as the proportionate consequence of misfortune, of his own business miscalculation (i.e. his unsuccessful scanner business), and of unjust state intrusion.

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[63] Kazin has written that Jefferson's idea of a frugal government was meant to criticize that Federalists' pomp and ceremony, a line of thought that many have historically read as promoting the idea that the state was something Americans ought to mistrust (18).

Figure 30: Reagan's 1981 Speech on Economy

The film begins the very year Ronald Reagan entered the White House after defeating incumbent president Jimmy Carter in the 1980 election. The cultural and political dimension of that year is underlined very early in the film by featuring a particularly sharp section of Reagan's 1981 "Address to the Nation on the Economy" (Fig. 30), an eloquent encapsulation of Reaganomics and its attached cultural values:

> REAGAN: "A few days ago I was presented with a report I'd asked for a comprehensive audit, if you will, of our economic condition. You won't like it. I didn't like it. *But we have to face the truth and then go to work to turn things around. And make no mistake about it, we can turn them around. The federal budget is out of control.* And we face runaway deficits of almost $80 billion for this budget year that ends September 30th. That deficit is larger than the entire federal budget in 1957.And so is the almost $80 billion we will pay in interest this year on the national debt. Twenty years ago, in 1960 our federal government payroll was less than $13 billion. Today it is 75 billion." (min. 8-9; emphasis added)

Reagan's comments on the overblown federal leviathan are merged with Chris trying to solve the Rubik's cube – and allegedly impossible task, as is stated repeatedly in the film (Fig. 31; Fig. 32). This scene sets the ideological tone of the narration. The federal government is to be thought of as a sclerotic and burdensome structure, strengthening the neoliberal notion that freedom is inextricably interwoven with the curtailing of public funds. Reagan's optimistic

Figures 31 and 32: Chris's Will and the Rubik's Cube

appeal to the individuals' potentiality to overcome difficulties, to "turn them around" is visually emphasized by Chris' attempt to solve the Rubik's cube –a univocal symbol of his determination to get things done. After all, he is trying to succeed in an activity constantly defined as impossible. Both Reagan's conservative message (and his overall political persona as embodiment of "popular capitalism") and Chris's will to solve the Rubik's cube clearly identify the ideological compromise of the film, one which will be dutifully promoted throughout: a person's will is, regardless of social, political, and economic factors, the sole element that enables human progress.[64]

The very next sequence perpetuates the individualistic ethos of the film and makes reference to another central element in the culture of Reaganism and neoliberalism: the world of finances. As Chris walks down the street, he runs into a well-suited and unmistakably well-off stockbroker with whom he strikes a brief and friendly conversation:

CHRIS: "Had to go to college to be a stockbroker, huh?"

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[64] In fact, in a subsequent scene Chris will actually solve the Rubik's cube in front of his amazed boss, clearly signaling the toy as a metaphor for Chris' unflinching will.

> STOCKBROKER: "You don't have to. Have to be good with numbers and good with people." (min. 9)

The corollary of the exchange advances the idea that material success is neither bound to good luck nor randomness. It is not even directly connected to a costly education or academic training, let alone socio-economic status. The film unambiguously extols the myth that American society is a classless one, where individuals leave the lower socio-economic rungs through hard work and talent. In a de-problematizing depiction of social and labor life, it is claimed that upward mobility is a mere extension and consequence of personal solvency. In this sense, the pro-business nature of the film is evident throughout the narration. Wall Street and the world of finances are portrayed as a place of comradeship and well-being – Chris's bosses are friendly, understanding, and boost fair competition while no reference is made to the malpractices of Wall Street that would become all too evident from 2008 onwards.[65]

As he tries to makes his way into the idyllic world of Wall Street, Chris's resolve will be tested over and over in a Murphy's Law-type of fashion. Constantly undermined by his unsupportive wife, he will stick to his plan to sell the scanners and work for no salary as an intern. Undeterred by the intensifying gravity and frequency of the setbacks, Chris' determination and resourcefulness remains unchanged. When he is about to be evicted, he manages to save some time painting the apartment for his landlord; when he realizes he will not be paid a salary he reorganizes his life schedule so as to meet the job's requirements; when he is finally evicted and forced to sleep in a public bathroom he will paint the situation to his son as being an adventure, and so forth. Amid all these crisis-ridden episodes, Chris makes explicit the underlying ideology of the film in a particularly important dialogue with his son:

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[65] The sympathetic portrait of Wall Street featured in *The Pursuit of Happyness* represents a far cry from post-bailouts releases such as *Inside Job* (Charles Ferguson, 2010), *Margin Call* (J.C. Chandor, 2011), or *The Wolf of Wall Street* (Martin Scorsese, 2013) which will delve into the corruption and unethical practices of the world of finances.

> CHRIS: "Don't ever let somebody tell you you can't do something. Not even me. All right? You got a dream you gotta protect it. *People can't do something themselves they wanna tell you you can't do it*. If you want something, go get it. Period." (min. 55; emphasis added)

Articulated as an emotional and climatic moment, Chris's appeal to the individual's potential for his/her own betterment hides an evident political content. The extolling of the individual's fulfilling his/her dreams (a statement purportedly deprived of political connotations) runs in parallel with the indictment of all of those who cannot meet their ambitions, those who tell you "you can't do it" (pessimists such as Chris' wife) who talk down citizens willing to materialize their hopes. We can see Reaganite populism unapologetically surfacing: there is a legitimate and optimistic *plebs* –eager to utilize their skills and resources to have the American dream, irrespective of socio-economic factors– as opposed to another complaining and discouraging mass of population. Wish-fulfillment is here deployed as the instrument that naturalizes and embellishes the neoliberal refashioning of individualism by which social and economic deprivation is to be seen as the consequence of the citizens' own failure to bring to fruition his/her aspirations.

This enshrining of the individual does not include any reference to race as an issue of consequence –which seems fully consistent with the film's fetishist reading of social life. The political and cultural subject the film fashions is a (purportedly) aseptic one, in the sense that Chris' life is neither hindered nor ameliorated because of class, race, or gender since equal opportunity is provided to all social actors. The film univocally shows that the fact that Chris is African-American does not account for any of his misfortunes. The narration, by omission, disavows claims of the market and its social relationships being subjected to or conditioned by racial or class-based prejudices or any form of structural asymmetries –a representation that seems, at least, quite contentious given how the practices of Reaganism and neoliberal hegemony have affected African Americans.[66]

On top of all of his misfortunes, Chris is bedeviled by a malfunctioning federal government. In keeping with the neoliberal excoriation of the state (one which Reagan's speech had previously pointed out), Chris' hard-earned progresses and efforts are thwarted by a set of unjust public institutions. The afternoon before he is to have his first interview at Dean Witter, and because of a strict bureaucratic timeline, he is unnecessarily held up a whole night in prison for unpaid traffic tickets, forcing him to attend the interview in a totally inappropriate outfit (min. 43) –although he manages to be accepted as an intern due to his energetic and witty explanation as of why he appeared in the meeting with such ill-suited clothes (Fig. 33). Such representation of state

Figure 33: Chris at the interview

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[66] The Reagan Administration's rollback in regulations and cuts in assistance to the poor proved to be specially damaging for African American communities, ushering in new era of immiseration with nearly half of all African American children living in poverty and African American unemployment rates three times higher than white unemployment –it had historically stood at twice higher until the 1980s (Davis, *Prisoners* 268).

organizations as a sluggish bureaucratic leviathan fundamentally alien to people’s needs is bolstered a bit further into the film:

> CHRIS: “It seemed we were making it. [...] It seemed we were doing good. Until one day. That day, that letter brought me back to Earth. This part of my life is called "Paying Taxes”. If you didn't pay them *the government could stick their hands into your bank account and take your money*” [voice-over commentary] (min. 75; emphasis added).

Both episodes in which Chris must interact with the federal government differ profoundly from the other incidents he must cope with. Whether he gets one of his scanners stolen or is thrown out of his house for not paying the rent, these mishaps are represented as if they were unfortunate incidents (with no structural point of origin) or, at least, as part of Chris’ inability to function in the market –a form of narrativizing social conflict present in *Cinderella Man*. But unlike those passages, when Chris stumbles upon the federal government, there are clearly identifiable agents causing the problems. In this last quote, taxes are flatly equated with a government-sanctioned form of robbery. Yet again, the conservative subtext of the film is brought to the fore. Taxation is not a form of wealth distribution nor is it an instrument to provide basic services but a way to limit people’s productivity and financial ability. The film clearly aligns its discourse with the neoliberal and conservative narrative whereby heightening people’s freedom is directly proportional to slashing the competences of the federal government.

Towards the very end of the film, the boardroom executives inform Chris he will be on the payroll of Dean Witter. During the sequence there is an extremely eloquent instance which symbolically encapsulates and enhances the discourse of the film. Some sequences before this climatic moment, one of Chris’s bosses loses his wallet and begs Chris to lend him a five-dollar note–which is all the money Chris has on him–to pay a cab ride. Subsequently, Chris will not be able to pay the bus ticket, having to walk all the way to a welfare association that offers shelter to the homeless only to find that there is no room for them. Chris and his son will have to spend the night in the public bathroom of a train station. When Chris is granted the job position, his boss hands him a five-dollar note (Fig. 34; Fig. 35). The symbolic resonance of the sequence is all too evident: the enormous sacrifices and harsh living conditions Chris has endured ultimately paid off. And, by extension, when a citizen makes the most of his/her potentialities the market will finally offer a corresponding reward.

Figures 34 and 35: Chris's reward

The film intermingles the American values of hard-working optimism and individualism with the market glorification typical of neoliberalism and Reaganite conservatism, offering an ideological readability that repackages a politically-biased narration as a feel-good film. Thus, the film espouses that attitudinal tenet by which "[s]ickness, unemployment, poverty, education, failure and exclusion are regarded as consequences of bad calculation" (Dardot and Laval 180) and are, in no way, the result of larger structural conditions. In an apparently aseptic and deproblematizing fashion, Chris's modus operandi is inscribed into that mindset, at the core of the Reagan Revolution, that promotes that "[t]he only dependable route from poverty is always work, family, and faith" (Gilder 102). The film upholds the perennial myth of the classless society, just as the very plot exposes: individuals may, indeed, find it hard to provide for themselves (as the most dramatic stretches of Chris's experience prove) but this is just a transitory and surmountable stage of social life. After all, Chris' downfall is due to his miscalculation of the market signs (his ruinous scanner sales plan) whereas his rise to the top is boosted by his sturdy resolve, his love for his child, and a robustly optimistic worldview. We can see the way the core maxims of neoliberals are cloaked in the legitimizing ethos of Jeffersonian individualism, actualizing the values of the market and extreme competitiveness through cherished common sense images of American cultural history.

6.4. What Ever Happened to Vito Corleone? The Rise of the Neoliberal Mobster in *American Gangster*

American Gangster (Ridley Scott, 2007) is the latest epic tale touching upon the interrelation between American identity and organized crime. A depiction of the rise and fall of African-American crime kingpin Frank Lucas, the film's approach to the gangster world is evidently conditioned (iconographically and thematically) by canonic classics of the subgenre –the most notable being *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) and *The Godfather II* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974). Nonetheless, *American Gangster* manages to contribute a new characterization of the gangster that departs conceptually from previous cinematic and identitary imaginaries. The very title indicates that the central figure of the film (Frank Lucas) embodies a form of gangsterism associated with the national; that is, Frank Lucas epitomizes a specifically American way of conducting organized crime. The American gangster the film constructs is paradigmatic of the values and business mindset of neoliberalism, a full-fledged incarnation of its most defining identitary lines.

Classical gangster films usually deliver the message that crime-based success ultimately leads to personal downfall (Hayward 174). The grand modern mafia films from the 1970s onwards, however, have reinforced the image of the business and family community as quintessential for the imaginaries of the filmic organized crime.[67] Despite the bloodshed, treasons, and mayhem that characterize films like *The Godfather*, *The Godfather II* or *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, 1990), there emerges a similar pattern in all of them. The social and business environments these narrations outline are tightly regulated and controlled economies, run by different agents (the so called "families") who compartmentalize the market into different spheres of influence, setting the distribution of goods and their prices. A most paradigmatic instance of this social, economic, and cultural structure is the Cuban subplot in *The Godfather II*. When American crime organizations decide to invest in Cuba, they do not set out to operate independently, leaving the market forces to determine the outcome of their business plans. On the very contrary, they establish a highly controlled flow of capitals and neatly divide the competences and market responsibilities of each of the agents involved. Thus, contemporary filmic portraits of gangster life have much less to do with dynamic entrepreneurialism and rugged individualism than with an entrenched form of Keynesian crony capitalism.[68] *American Gangster* explicitly taps into that seeming contrast. Although Frank does embrace certain community values (family, religion, solidarity amongst African-Americans), there is a constant juxtaposition between his business philosophy (shaped by the values of neoliberalism) and that of his adversaries (still anchored in a notoriously uncompetitive sense of capitalism).

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[67] Mark Fisher claims that Francis Ford Coppola's and Martin Scorsese's takes on the Mafia can be very well seen as being representative of a sense of Fordist capitalist culture and local color that contrasts with the sanitized films of Michael Mann such as *Heat* (1996) (31). I would also make reference to *Collateral* (2004) in which we can see a neoliberalized representation of the hit man: ungrounded, aseptic, and with no fixed or distinctive characteristic.

[68] Extreme individualists are typical of Great Depression gangsters –see *Little Caesar* (Howard Hawks and Richard Rosson, 1932), *Scarface* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1931) or *The Rise and Fall of Legs*

The Vietnam War (the symbol of the breakup of Cold War liberal consensus and the so called "American Century") serves as the backdrop against which the story is laid out. The narration initiates with Frank being the personal driver and right-hand man of Bumpy Johnson, the African American crime kingpin of Harlem. Bumpy's appearance in the film is short-lived (he dies from a heart attack in one of the earliest sequences). But his figure as the embodiment of classical mobster practices will resonate powerfully when compared to Frank, who will become Bumpy's successor. Just moments before passing away, Bumpy voices deep-seated discontent with what he sees as new destabilizing and depersonalizing market forces:

> BUMPY: The grocery store on the corner is now a supermarket. The candy store is a McDonald's. And this place, a super-fucking discount store. Where's the pride of ownership, huh? Where's the personal service? [He enters the store] You see what I mean? [Pointing at the imported goods] Shit. I mean, what right do they have, of cutting out the suppliers, pushing out all the middlemen, buying direct from the manufacturer? [...] You can't find the heart of anything to stick the knife. (min. 2-3)

Bumpy's last words suggest a longing for the uniformity, intelligibility, and hierarchies that defined the Fordist-Keynesian years where ownership and material possessions were not subject to the fluid and short-tenured exchanges of the neoliberal age (Fig. 36). In Bumpy's mindset a stable set of

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Diamond (Budd Boetticher, 1960). However, Frank's emphasis on actualizing individualism through market signs is, indeed, rather unprecedented.

Figure 36: Frank and Bumpy

regulative frameworks do not entail stagnation; intermediary processes in the flow of capitals are not to be thought as onerous red tape, and the rapid exchange of goods and services expresses a disquieting loss of identity and an intense sense of epistemological and existential uncertainty. His worldview encapsulates that notion, typical of the transition between Fordism and post-Fordism, that the "the more flexible motion of capital emphasizes the new, the fleeting, the ephemeral, the fugitive, and the contingent in modern life, rather than the more solid values implanted under Fordism" (Harvey, *Postmodernism* 171). Frank will replace Bumpy as Harlem crime kingpin implementing exactly the type of practices and philosophy that his mentor despised so profoundly.

Adhering to a seductive brand of dynamic individualism and entrepreneurship, Frank will carry out a successful business plan articulated through two guiding principles: cutting the middleman and buying the product from the source –both previously vilified by Bumpy. By denying the very business culture upheld by crony capitalists like his former boss and his adversaries, he will outflank them deploying the discourse of neoliberalism on an extraordinarily consistent basis.

Frank decides to innovate in the procedures and mechanisms by which heroin is produced, distributed, and finally introduced in the United States. Instead of adapting to the already-existing terms and conditions, he analyzes certain market signs and intervenes in them in way his competitors had never thought about. After hearing about the low price of drugs in Vietnam, Frank flies there and makes a deal with his cousin Nate (an American soldier posted there) and manages to contact a source, deep in the Vietnamese jungle, which will provide Frank with a 100% pure heroin. Frank does not cease to repeat that the key point of the operation is the absence of middlemen in it:

> NATE: "Frank, ain't nobody I know can get you that much [heroin] personally, all right? You're gonna have to piece it together from several sources, and it's not gonna be 100% pure.
> FRANK: I don't want that."
> NATE: "I know what you don't want, Frank, but look, what you're gonna need is to get to the Chiu-Chou syndicate, all right? Cholon, Saigon. If they're gonna deal with you at all."
> FRANK: "I understand that, but by then it's gonna be too late. It'll be already chopped up. I wanna go get it where they go get it from. I wanna go to the source." (min. 27)

It is noticeable here Frank's interest for the distribution process to be as streamlined as possible, highlighting the fact that the success of the enterprise is irremediably dependent on cutting out intermediate steps. This passage emphasizes Frank's nature as that of the neoliberal individual, the entrepreneur. He no longer attaches his business organization to a collectivity or to a larger association with other business people –when bargaining the drug deal, the Vietnamese supplier asks him who he works for, to which he succinctly replies "Me". As Dardot and Laval have written, "[t]he pure dimension of entrepreneurship – alertness to business opportunities – is a *relationship of self to self*, which underlies the critique of interference. We are all entrepreneurs, or, rather, we all learn to be; we train ourselves exclusively through the play of the market to govern ourselves as entrepreneurs" (112). Frank faithfully complies with this discourse. Not only does he show sharp alertness to opportunities (he will see the cheap Vietnamese drug as a unique chance for taking over the market). He also dismisses any interfering element and trusts exclusively in his analysis of the market signs. He comes to embody the neoliberal subject in a much more faithful way than virtually any other cinematic gangster has ever done –he wholly devotes himself to the correct exploitation of market signs allocating the necessary resources to do so and forging no dependence on other productive agents or social forces.[69]

Using the coffins of dead American soldiers, Frank smuggles the drug into the United States and becomes a vastly rich man with an ever-increasing organization. His heroine, nicknamed "Blue Magic", turns out to be such a success that Frank ends up ousting all of his competitors. Given the growth of his business, Frank brings his family to New York to work with him as associates. When he tries to explain the way he has amassed such wealth the dissimilarity between Bumpy and Frank –and their corresponding values– resurfaces again:

> FRANK: The man I worked for, he had one of the biggest companies in New York City. He ran it for more than 50 years. Fifteen years, eight months and nine days, I was with him every day. I worked for him, I protected him, I looked after him, I learnt from him. Bumpy was rich, but he wasn't white man rich, you see? He wasn't wealthy. He didn't own his own company. He thought he did, but he didn't, he just managed it. The white man owned it, so they owned him. *Nobody owns me, though. That's 'cause I own my own company, and my company sells a product that's better than the competition, at a price that's lower than the competition*. (min. 51-52; emphasis added)

Unlike Bumby, who was subsumed in a tightly uncompetitive environment, Frank is a real individualist (and a real neoliberal indeed). He sees the traditional socio-economic structure of the Mafia as a web of power mechanisms that has pushed African Americans to peripheral positions. Frank represents a form of gangsterism far more paradigmatic of the values of capitalism and its vocabularies of competitiveness. It is through the market –

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[69] In contradistinction to Frank Lucas, Depression Era gangsters, despite their uber-individualism, do not grant such importance to strategic market decisions and productive exchanges, nor do they employ the vocabularies of entrepreneurship and innovation.

by examining its signs and making appropriate decisions– that individuals acquire tools for empowerment and means to alter the sluggish circles of the crony Keynesian capitalism. Frank's success is in no way the consequence of collectively constructed and controlled business frameworks. On the contrary, his success comes from the way he alters such frameworks utilizing his entrepreneurial and individualistic potential. In addition, his rhetoric about self-empowerment through the market is so potent and rebellious against the established powers that he manages to transform the neoliberal lexicon into a means to subvert white racism. Taking his cue from *The Pursuit of Happyness*, Frank exemplifies the way neoliberalism –because of its philosophical underpinnings and talking points – can be easily espoused by groups that might be ultimately hit by its policies, as Harvey has contended:

> Any political movement that holds individual freedoms to be sacrosanct is vulnerable to incorporation into the neoliberal fold [...] Neoliberal rhetoric, with its foundational emphasis upon individual freedoms, has the power to split off libertarianism, identity politics, multiculturalism, and eventually narcissistic consumerism from the social forces ranged in pursuit of social justice through the conquest of state power. (*Neoliberalism* 41)

Frank utilizes neoliberal vocabularies in an almost revolutionary way, as a way to entice African Americans into empowering themselves, not through the usual channels of mobilization and protest, but through the market.

Despite Frank's low-key public persona, his rise does not go unnoticed. Long-established mobsters will consider that their way of running business is being eroded by Frank's purportedly aggressive and unfair takeover. Frank will eventually arrange a meeting with Dominic Cattano, the top mobster of the Italian Mafia set in New York (Fig. 37). Their conflicting views on the new outlook of the heroin market underscore the clash between Fordist-

Keynesianism and the neoliberal subject, bringing the discussion to a more particular and explicit level:

> DOMINIC: "What do you think of monopolies?"
> FRANK: "You mean like the game?"
> DOMINIC: "No, I just think monopolies were made illegal in the country, Frank, 'cause *nobody wants to compete, you know. Nobody wants to compete, not with a monopoly*. I mean, you let the dairy farmers do that, half of them would be out of business tomorrow."
> FRANK: "Just trying to make a living."
> DOMINIC: "That's your right, I mean, it's everyone's right. *It's America. We just can't do it at the unreasonable expense of others. 'Cause then it becomes un-American*. That's why the price we pay for that gallon of milk could never represent the true cost of production 'cause *it's got to be controlled. It's gotta be set. It's gotta be fair*."
> FRANK: "*Gotta be controlled by who? I set a price that I think is fair.*"
> DOMINIC: "I don't think it's fair."
> FRANK: "You don't?"
> DOMINIC: "I don't think it's fair."
> FRANK: "I think it's fair."
> DOMINIC: "I mean I know your customers are happy, Frank, bunch of fucking junkies that they are. But we fellow dairy farmers out here, Frank, are you thinking of us? You thinking of them?"
> FRANK: "The dairy farmers? I'm thinking of them, Dominic, about as much as they've ever thought about me." (min 71-72; emphasis added)

Figure 37: Two Forms of Capitalism

The striking thing about the exchange is Dominic's reluctance to grant full legitimacy to Frank's position as businessman which, in turn, opens up a suggestive identitary discussion about the national. Dominic –here clearly the incarnation of Keynesian capitalism– is all for capitalism and its attached notions of competitiveness and individualistic dynamism as long as these drives and values conform to agreed-upon structural bases that channel productive efforts and generate a moderately balanced revenue stream. The idea of transforming such status quo is not only seen as corrosive bad business, says Dominic, but is incongruous with American national identity. Here we see a discursive effort, reminiscent of the political culture of the postwar boom age, which fuses American identity with a form of modulated and domesticated capitalism. Thus, identitary common-sense beliefs on the national as being tantamount with rugged individualism, the competitive spirit, and the self-made man are disavowed.

Dominic's discourse about the national, however, stands opposite to Frank's counterargument –once again his being the stand-bearer for neoliberal principles. Frank repositions the framework by which the conversation is taking place. While Dominic defines regulation as a necessary medium to prevent the market from going awry, Frank dismisses such conception by asking who is to control capital flows and price-fixing. To Frank's mind, setting the terms and flows of the markets implies that certain agents (those with the power to fix such terms and flows) will always configure the system in a self-serving fashion. It is not by being part of a cadre of crony capitalists but by seizing market opportunities and reading market signs appropriately that Frank achieves power –after all he drives out competitors by offering a far more competitive product. The neoliberal values of competition are here restated as a means of individual empowerment to alter a sluggish business culture run by an insulated and non-innovative elite. What the dialogue shows is the fight over hegemony, the struggle between two socioeconomic worldviews (the fading Keynesian capitalist and the soaring discourse of individualistic neoliberalism that has hegemonized, since the 1970s, the reigning political and cultural categories of public discussion).

In the end Frank will be convicted for his wrongdoing and the film will not cease indicating Frank's symbolic dimension as an entirely different gangster figure. Towards the epilogue, Richie Roberts (the cop chasing Frank for the entire film) articulates this overall thematic concern of the film:

> RICHIE: "They [the Italian Mafia] hate what you represent."
> FRANK: "I don't represent nothing but Frank Lucas."
> RICHIE: "You sure? A black businessman like you? You represent progress. The kind of progress that's going to see them lose a lot of money. With you out of the way, everything can return to normal." (min. 126)

The American gangster the film tailors is not only innovative for being African-American. Frank incarnates a real and consistent neoliberal gangster, an individualistic entrepreneur who embraces market freedoms and market signs as the sole guiding principle for productive exchanges. That "return to normal" that Richie refers to is nothing more than the regulatory ethos of postwar capitalism –one represented by the old patriarchs who loath Frank. On the whole, Frank's rise to the top of American gangsterism is achieved by being a more unadulterated version of capitalism than his predecessors and rivals ever were.

The epilogue also gives away a sort of comradeship between Frank and Richie. Both characters show uncompromising commitment to untrammeled individualism and deep-seated suspicion towards their environments – somewhat reigniting the spirit of transcendentalist self-reliance, inner voice, and reluctance to be deterred by either tradition or society. Just as Frank operates by a whole different set of rules, Richie is equally shown as a true individualist: he refuses to accept bribes, sacrifices his private life to be an honest cop, and distrusts his corrupt coworkers. Impressed by Richie's determination, Frank ends up collaborating with Richie to convict corrupt policemen, for which his prison sentence gets reduced to fifteen years. The tone of amiability between Frank and Richie in their final exchange posits whether the film is excessively sympathetic towards Frank –a hit man and kingpin who flooded the streets of New York with drugs. By showing them as two sides of the same coin (two mavericks that revolutionize their stagnant worlds) the film waters down Frank's most problematic aspects and ultimately enshrines the discourse elaborated throughout the story: the celebration of the individual against society, of the revolt against established arrangements and customs.

7. Conclusion

What has been laid out in the preceding three sections is a wide discursive arena, a "battle of ideas" where different lines (embodied by the fourteen primary sources) have clashed, merged, or supported each other. My purpose has been to present and analyze the textual corpus in sync with the Gramscian critique explained in chapter two. I have proposed a textual examination that accounts for ideological struggles just as Stuart Hall advocated, this is, "as a differentiated terrain, of the different discursive currents, their points of juncture and break and the relations of power between them" ("Gramsci's" 434). The three subsets of texts, and the analytical approach applied, foreground the guiding premise of this work: that there are certain discursive lines linked to individualism and community through which the politics of the Bush Era and of hegemonic conservative can be identified, categorized, and discussed.

Chapter four has examined five texts which thematize the politics of individualism inscribed in the Bush Doctrine. *Mystic River* and *Gone Baby Gone* do not seek to celebrate uniformly and adamantly the narratives constitutive of the Bush Doctrine. Rather detachedly, *Mystic River* offers a harsh message of realpolitik and unilateralism unveiling the Bush Doctrine as a form of hyper-leadership that sees the law as fundamentally burdensome. Its counterpart *Gone Baby Gone* engages differently with these political contents, reproducing or, at least, helping rationalize the get-tough-on-crime narrative and the Bush Doctrine practices. The plot transforms social life into a binary microcosm where characters are pushed into extreme situations in which breaking the law strikes them not only as attractive but as fair. The combined analysis of both texts reveals a shared interest in exploring the way the rule of law is, at some points, intrinsically at odds with the implementation of satisfactory justice.

This line of argument studied in *Mystic River* and *Gone Baby Gone* is absolutely pivotal in *Law Abiding Citizen* –clearly a right-wing populist text; a kind of filmic collage made up of founding discursive materials of modern conservatism. The analysis shows a concerted and sustained effort on the part of the film to validate and legitimize both hegemonic conservative narratives and the underpinnings of the Bush Doctrine, denouncing, on the one hand, the rule of law as an obstacle for meeting social demands for justice and, on the other, government as an ineffective mechanism for social order (in the tradition of both Goldwaterism and Reaganism). Thus, what *Mystic River* reflects, *Gone Baby Gone* tacitly excuses and *Law Abiding Citizen* unapologetically upholds is a very specific identitary narrative about individualism. This narrative is deeply linked to the political language and rhetoric of the Bush Era: American individualism as a symbol of necessary outlaw violence, detachment from the rule of law, and suspicion of state institutions (thus disregarding any reference to the United States as a "land of laws" or to the Lockean checks-and-balances bases of the nation).

The comparative analysis of *In the Valley of Elah* and *The Hurt Locker* has situated the discussion on individualism and the Bush Doctrine in the Iraq War. In this case, the figure of the soldier and the dimensions attached to it (nationalism, patriotism, masculinity) has enabled me to examine the hegemonic meanings of post-9/11 political culture. *In the Valley of Elah* is the counterhegemonic text: historicist, politicizing, performative when it comes to articulate nationalistic and patriotic symbols, and equipped with a geopolitical perspective that undoes the grand discourses of American victimization and dehistoricization. *The Hurt Locker* is a "centrist" text. Despite a few critical gestures, the film reinforces the hegemonic patterns of the Bush Doctrine. Circumscribed to first-person accounts, *The Hurt Locker* perpetuates the perspective of ahistorical vacuum and the heroic outlaw-like leadership so central to the narratives of nationalism of the Bush Era. The film fails to transcend the hegemonic discursive limits, uncritically narrativizing the geopolitics of American legitimacy for expansionism. The "dialogue" between the two filmic texts points out two ways of conceptualizing the national in the wake of 9/11. In *In the Valley of Elah* the national works from the bottom to the top in that the protagonist ends up seizing the symbols of the country to express dissent, to ponder and thus undo the prescriptive norms to profess affiliation to the homeland. There is a realization that there always exists an incomplete signification in the national construct, as Bhabha claims, given its dialectical nature, and so the signs of the national are open for new political contents. It is, in turn, individualism as a means to negotiate and even contest the hegemonic patterns. In *The Hurt Locker*, much as it displays individualism through a potent leading character, the national operates from the top to the bottom –the hegemonic narrative remains untouched and not discussed and the individualism of the film normalizes the attitudes and meanings set up by the Bush Doctrine.

The study of these five texts has enabled me to signal the first dimension of post-9/11 individualism. Essentially, the type of individualism the chapter reflects –in varying degrees of support and criticism– is an identitary narrative linking the American self with a political and cultural iconography which renders outlaw violence ineluctable, just, and, therefore, fundamentally legitimate.

In chapter five, I have scrutinized the imaginaries of the post-9/11 community. In my interrogation of *We Were Soldiers* and *The Alamo*, I have argued that both texts operate as cautionary tales that legitimize core values of the Bush Doctrine and the conservative movement. *We Were Soldiers* deprives the context of the mid-sixties of its array of social tensions and political turmoil, presenting an idyllic polity of freedoms, peace, and fraternity where political discussion around the meanings and signification of war is suspended. The close textual analysis performed has revealed that the forms of Americanism and patriotic appeal espoused in the text transforms war into an inevitable event, projecting the American nation as either a victim or as a responsible international actor that intervenes in the name of the general interest. This blend of social passivity, ahistoricity, and geopolitical self-vindication makes it clear that the film becomes a very conscious political film in favor of the Bush Doctrine. This post-9/11 imaginary of the American community as a unified and conflict-free social body is refined and deepened in *The Alamo*, which merges the discursive lines of the War on Terror with classical topoi of American exceptionalism. The events of in *The Alamo* leave in their wake two perfectly differentiated polities. The American community is regulated by meritocracy, diversity, democratic deliberation, and freedoms; whereas the Mexican people remains an oligarchical an undemocratic microcosm run by an elite lacking in values and moral codes.

As both analyses have tried to prove, the iconographies of community articulated in *We Were Soldiers* and *El Alamo* represent clear ideologically-driven efforts to vindicate the political lines of the Bush Administration. I have claimed that, although both texts may appear to be light commercial historical reenactments, they are, by no means, politically innocent. Both films construct a form of patriotism and of identity politics profoundly shaped by their historical context and guided by the cultural and political hegemony of conservatism and the Bush Doctrine. Interpellations to national unity, as these two film show, can never be "apolitical"; they always participate of some pre-existing discursive materials.

The Village develops a significantly different approach to the communitarian –much more critical and less attuned to the Bush Doctrine. I have argued that *The Village* allegorizes some of the most substantial discursive traits studied throughout this work. The (literally) fake community of Shyamalan's film can be seen as being reflective of the very post-9/11 American community. In this text, the construction of the community is based on a synthesis between the politics of fear and the exaltation of mourning. In turn, this identitary line, highly ritualized and normalized, is deployed to shut down any likely negotiation of the power relationships that regulate the village –a way to articulate the polity strongly tied up to the anti-dissidence discourses constitutive of the Bush Doctrine. The film, however, brings to the fore these hegemonic frameworks, rendering visible how fear and mourning are indeed mobilized by social actors so as to homogenize the body politic and neglect discussion on the way power relations are being managed. Furthermore, the text also showcases that these terms might be contested by other agents within the social. Thus, *The Village* politicizes, through allegory, its historical circumstances, making explicit the material and symbolic processes through which the Bush Doctrine discourses gained hegemonic dimension.

In similar fashion, *The Mist* utilizes allegorical strategies to address the interstices of the post-9/11 community. The film highlights how right-wing discourses, not progressive or left-leaning, managed to appropriate the cultural languages and idioms of the American community. In this reading, the progressive field is seen as inoperative in terms of discourse, unable to fight back in the battle of ideas. Throughout the narration, it is only the extreme right-wing discourse that provides the social body with ideological readability, that is, with discursive materials to make sense of the events. In the text, the communitarian is fully appropriated by extreme conservatism while what can be called "the left" remains silent and takes the discursive struggle for granted.

Both *The Village* and *The Mist* do not use the community as assertion of hegemonic conservatism and its values, as do *We Were Soldiers* and *The Alamo*. On the contrary, both texts seize the post-9/11 imaginaries of the community to interrogate their foundations and their logics and thus make visible that those imaginaries are not "natural" iconographies of the homeland but the result of a specific political and ideological agenda. While *We Were Soldiers* and *El Alamo* articulate a prescriptive and homogenizing representation of the national, in *The Village* and *The Mist* there is a clear will to investigate and pose questions around the meanings and nature of the national, thus formulating a much more performative vision of the national construct and the notion of community.

The incapability of progressive voices to operate in the post-9/11 era is one of the central issues discussed in the analysis of *World Trade Center*. Oliver Stone's tribute to New York's first responders cannot but feed into a variety of narratives of the Bush Doctrine: the depoliticization of 9/11, the grievability framework of American victimization, and the reluctance to see political deliberation as functional or necessary in order to assess the terrorist attacks. There is a celebration of community far closer to the self-indulgent *We Were Soldiers* and *The Alamo* than to the critical *The Village.* The most significant finding here is that a key figure of the American left, as Stone is, seems either unwilling or unable to transcend the hegemonic discourse of conservatism and the Bush Doctrine when addressing 9/11. The film's disclosure is extraordinarily more normative than one would expect from the author of *Platoon* or *JFK*.

These five films have disclosed the second discursive dimension sought in this work: the post-9/11 community, a discursive formation constituted by dehistoricization, politics of fear, the culture of grief and mourning, and the effacing of debate as an instrumental element of democracy.

Chapter six examines, through four filmic texts, the neoliberal subject and the transformative ways by which neoliberal thinking has penetrated and hegemonized the categories of the American self and the national. In *The Assassination of Richard Nixon* two parallel discourses coexist. The film merges the urge to recuperate the narratives and certainties of the postwar period with the all-embracing discourse of competitiveness and entrepreneurship ingrained in neoliberalism. The ideological ambiguities that run through this narration are all but missing in the other three texts pertaining to this chapter. *Cinderella Man* represents a consistent endeavor to project the historical experience of the Great Depression through the rhetoric and practices of neoliberal thinking. The film enshrines resolve, abnegation, and political passivity as the fundamental bases of American individualism, somewhat contesting the canonical cultural and cinematic imaginaries of the Great Depression. The historical period is thus reconstituted ideologically, presenting it as an individualistic quest and not a socializing, community-based experience. Through this strategy, viewers are compelled to make sense of a quintessentially liberal or left-leaning historical period through the political lenses of the neoliberal paradigm.

The Pursuit of Happyness amplifies the subtexts of *Cinderella Man*, sponsoring a form of radical individualization which sees society in a

Thatcherite-like fashion –that is, as being regulated by the choices and strategies made by people in the market. The discourse elaborated in the film, as the analysis has shown, is profoundly informed by the narratives of Reaganite populism. The market is glorified as an ideology-free and apolitical space bound to no injustices and prone to no asymmetries. The only dysfunctions are wrought by government. In a very shrewd way, the film interweaves the tinges of the Jeffersonian self with Reaganism and the neoliberal condition. In the analysis of *American Gangster*, I have argued the film articulates a rather unique version of this totemic cultural and filmic archetype: the neoliberal gangster. The protagonist obtains power, not via bloodshed or bullets, but through a business mindset based on entrepreneurship and a detailed and thorough study of the market. The neoliberal rhetoric is thus invested with a self-empowerment and revolutionary dimension. The construction of this American/neoliberal gangster contrasts with the old patriarchs ensconced in the Fordist-Keynesian system. Thus, the film pivots thematically on the juxtaposition of two political and economic cultures, two identitary interpellations: the rising and dynamic neoliberal paradigm and the receding postwar regulated capitalism.

The analyses performed in chapter six reveal the articulation of a hegemonic subject that has penetrated the vocabularies of the national: the neoliberal subject –the third discursive dimension studied in this work. In varying degrees, the four texts share a similar discursive line built around a set of mutually constitute elements: the market as an aseptic, unbiased, and enriching locus for individual empowerment; the culture of entrepreneurship and self-government; a fetishist reading of society that individualizes success and failure; and a sustained attack on government and, by extension, on liberalism and the Fordist-Keynesian paradigm. Unlike the film texts of chapter five, communitarian structures or community-based values do not operate in the context of neoliberal individualism, nor do they seem to bear any legitimacy. In the neoliberal texts, appeals to the community or communal solidarity are likened to forms of stagnant crony capitalism (*American Gangster*) or dangerous and inefficacious unionism (*Cinderella Man*). Except for *The Assassination of Richard Nixon*, none of the films address the dynamic towards inequality and disenfranchisement typical of neoliberalism (something, nonetheless, quite frequent in pre-Great Recession cultural products). There is a consistent intention in *Cinderella Man*, *The Pursuit of Happyness*, and *American Gangster* to reflect the neoliberal practices as self-empowering, legitimate, and inherently American.

The sixth chapter has demonstrated how, in the wake of 9/11, the construction of American individualism has been articulated by incorporating the pervasive logics and identitary lines of neoliberalism. We may see now how neoliberal individualism runs at odds with the post-9/11 ethos of close-knit communitarianism of texts such as *We Were Soldiers*, *El Alamo* or *World Trade Center*. Untrammeled individualism (whether more passionate or technocratic) and its dynamics towards inequality and fragmentation (something mostly ignored by the texts here studied) do not fit well with the appeals to solidarity and mutual affection touted by the films on community. This seeming contradiction, albeit exacerbated throughout the 2000s, has long been self-evident in American conservatism. As Harvey has noted "[t]he anarchy of the market, of competition, and of unbridled individualism [...] generates a situation that becomes increasingly ungovernable. It may even lead to a breakdown of all bonds of solidarity and a condition verging on social anarchy and nihilism" (*Neoliberalism* 82). Some of the texts studied here have further problematized this tension.

Thus, the analysis of the filmic corpus indicates that there is, indeed, a post-9/11 paradigm which, underpinned by already-existing hegemonic constructs, has rearticulated the individualism-community dualism, creating a set of conflicting narratives about the self and the collective –a sense of über-individualism that seeks to transcend the limits of the law if need be; an ahistorical, grief-based, and anti-dissent discourse of the close-knit community; and a sweeping new atomized subject knowing no legitimacy but that granted by the market. The primary sources have made these narratives visible as well as the corresponding discursive struggles for acquiring legitimacy and common sense.

It is also worth highlighting that this work seeks to open new research possibilities on 9/11 and its filmic representations. The fourteen primary sources and the critical framework chosen for this dissertation do not constitute, by any means, the only available analytical approach.[70]

There is a number of films that could have been incorporated as primary sources such as *Take Shelter* (Jeff Nichols, 2011), *Zero Dark Thirty*, and *Killing Them Softly* (Andrew Dominik, 2012), as well as other visual texts –canonical TV series such as *24* (Cochran and Surnow, 2001-2010), *The Sopranos* (Chase, 1999-2007), *The West Wing* (Sorkin, 1999-2006), and *The Wire* (Simon, 2002-2008). Much as this host of films and TV series would have been excellent texts in order to further examine the core themes of the dissertation, I decided not to include them due to practical reasons (e.g. privileging in-depth readings over more superficial macro-analyses; being consistent with regard to the time span [2002-2009]; selecting the most representative primary sources).

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[70] In this line, I would also like to point out that there have been recently released volumes on 9/11 and American film that I regrettably could not access such as Paul Petrovic's *Representing 9/11: Trauma, Ideology, and Nationalism in Literature, Film and Television* (2015) and Terence McSweeney's *The 'War on Terror' and American Film: 9/11 Frames Per Second* (2014). The post-9/11 paradigm is so newly-formed that upcoming perspectives and approaches will surely expand the existing academic work.

Likewise, the theoretical categories deployed throughout this work could be further enriched with contributions from trauma and affect theory – given the emphasis and focus I have placed on the intersection between mourning, grief, and the national. For instance, the use of Judith Butler's affect mobilization and national grieving could be expanded by trauma theorists' interest on the (im)possibilities of representation and on mourning processes as either addressing or effacing of the national wounds. Similarly, the ideas developed in this dissertation on affective engagements as triggers for political interpellation can be enhanced through other approaches that may fully tap on how affect mobilization has operated in post-9/11 films, thus bringing in Gayatri Spivak's proposition regarding the political and identitary functionalities of terror: "Where 'terror' is an affect the line between agent and object wavers" (382). Gramscian hegemony, with its emphasis on identitary formation and the production of meaning, may be further refined with these additional perspectives from affect theory. In so doing we could gain deeper insight into the role post-9/11 films have played in order to deal with the hegemonic discourses of the War on Terror.

As I have repeatedly pointed out, Reaganism far outlived the Reagan Administration. Indeed, 21st century American politics has still been swayed by many of the common sense values of conservative hegemony. Nonetheless, the Bush Doctrine, insofar as political climate and discourse, did not outlive the

Bush Administration, much as some of its political architecture has continued to shape American culture and politics.[71]

The political and cultural lines encapsulated by the post-9/11 filmic corpus powerfully contrast with Barack Obama's internationalist and toned-down rhetoric. Obama, indeed, displayed a number of "qualities that made him seem the antithesis of Bush" (Kuznick and Stone 549). His sweeping and euphoria-led 2008 campaign was bolstered by an uplifting message projecting the American nation as an imperfect work in progress energized by collective wills and sacrifices. As Michael Eric Dyson has very recently written "[t]hat is a far cry from the 'my country right or wrong' credo that confuses blind boosterism with authentic loyalty" (Dyson 122) and which decisively underwrote American national conversations during the Bush Era. It is equally unthinkable to imagine George W. Bush making a statement, as Obama did few months into his presidency, like the following: "I believe in American exceptionalism, just as I suspect that the Brits believe in British exceptionalism and the Greeks believe in Greek exceptionalism." And it is highly unlikely to think of the unilateralist Bush Administration favoring diplomatic endeavors such as the recent Iran Nuclear Deal and the thaw in the US-Cuban relations.

The languages of individualism and community, as shaped and touted by the Bush Administration, do not seem to have exercised much influence during the Obama years. And yet, just as Perry Anderson has remarked, the

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[71] Note this significant detail: many high-ranking members of the Bush Administration (President Bush himself, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Karl Rove, Colin Powell, and House Majority Leader Tom DeLay) did not attend the 2012 Republican National Convention in which Mitt Romney was chosen as the party's presidential nominee. This shows, as comedian and political commentator Bill Maher caustically commented, to what extent the Bush Administration has gone down in political history as a rather unappealing legacy for the Republican Party to promote (*Real Time with Bill Maher*).

Obama Administration has not fundamentally undone the policies of the American empire, nor has it really dismantled the infrastructures of the War on Terror (*Imperium* 141-142). The rise of drone warfare has become as much a political signature of the Obama presidency as the now remote "Yes We Can" motto that drove him into the White House, the Affordable Care Act, the Dodd-Frank Act, or the Iran Nuclear Deal. In the midst of unprecedented levels of institutional gridlock[72] and extreme of partisanship –sometimes accompanied by nativist and racist attacks and slurs (Dyson 138-141)–, Obama has not fulfilled that idea many progressives held when elected that he "would become the heir to a tradition represented by Franklin Roosevelt and Henry Wallace and by the post-Cuban Missile Crisis John F. Kennedy" (Kuznick and Stone 550). Notwithstanding his being labeled by right-wing media outlets as an extremist of all sorts, his political project has been a "relatively tame" one (Dyson 109, 129), a pragmatist, centrist, and moderately neo-Keynesian agenda informed and guided by establishment politics and Washington insiders (Palacio 27-38). Although the individualism-community paradigm of the Bush Era was flatly repudiated in some respects, the Obama age has not represented a radical break from conservative hegemony.

Another phenomenon of the Obama years, the rise of the Tea Party in 2009, has indeed drawn enormous influence from some of the discourses studied in this work. Made up of predominantly white well-educated middle-aged citizens infuriated by Obama's 2009 stimulus package (Horwitz 169), Tea Partiers have nudged the political axis of the Republican party further towards the right, espousing an agenda of unapologetic Darwinistic capitalism, nativism, and enraged forms of grassroots intervention. Even though deregulation lied at the core of the Great Recession, the Tea Party has exacerbated the themes of the neoliberal subject to its maximum extreme, retrieving a sense of ultra-laissez faire that dwarfs Reaganite populism and that denotes some links with Goldwaterism. Just as in the onset of right-wing populism back in the 1960s there was a sense of dispossession, Tea Partiers similarly screamed mottos like "We want our country back" and denounced Obama's policies as socialistic, revealing an understanding of politics and of American identity in which "taxation beyond some very restricted level of collective security is [...] illegitimate, theft even, which makes the entire thrust of twentieth-century progressive politics essentially criminal" (Horwtiz 159, 174-175).

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[72] See Sarah Binder's article "Polarized We Govern?'", a data-driven study that measures the ever-increasing levels of legislative obstructionism.

During the Obama age, where the racial divide, income inequality, political polarization, and disillusionment have been in the front line, there has been a set of filmic texts that both tackle the most prominent issues of their time and tap on the post-9/11 narratives scrutinized in this dissertation.[73] Throughout the Obama period, and despite the rise of the Tea Party, the neoliberal subject has lost the uncontested hegemonic status of the Bush years in the face of the 2008-2009 bailouts and growing income disparities. Post-Great Recession films such as *99 Homes* (Ramin Bahrani, 2015), *Margin Call*, *The Wolf of Wall Street* or even the rather tame *The Company Men* (John Wells, 2010) dismantle the legitimacies of unfettered capitalism as being tantamount to personal freedoms, as well as *Killing Them Softly* which, additionally, demystifies Obama's hope campaign and the narratives of national unity and solidarity I have studied in chapter five by provocatively stressing the nature of the American dream as a fundamentally capital-driven venture –and not a collective project. Unlike the neoliberal texts of chapter six, this post-Great Recession films operate in the midst of a crisis of hegemony, where the rationales and legitimizing strategies of neoliberalism had started to fail. Moreover, dystopian narrations like *The Purge* (James DeMonaco, 2013) and its sequels have engaged in explicitly satirizing the geographies and imaginaries of inequality and social fragmentation, calling into question the very notion of *America* as a functioning and sustainable polity given its internal political and economic polarization. In this sense, the iconographies of conflict-free, close-knit communitarianism of chapter five have fully vanished from collective imaginaries. All in all, the (filmic, cultural, and political) post-9/11 narratives on individualism and community have lost the ground they had during the Bush Era. However, they have not been fully exhausted as some films from the Obama era attest.

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[73] It is all too obvious that one major factor in the Obama age is race –an element that a number of American films have engaged with and on which film scholars have started to work (see Izzo).

The Obama age has yielded yet another populist moment, a moment to create a new people and a new self. Different discursive lines have been laid out in these past months as the 2016 presidential election got closer and closer: the establishment politics of Hillary Clinton; the historic rise of Donald Trump and his blend of anti-trade deals protectionism, strongman politics, nativism, and unprecedented incendiary rhetoric; and the no less groundbreaking grassroots platform of Bernie Sanders, which has brought back the long gone Rooseveltian language of class, social justice and progressive populism to the Democratic Party.

I hope the study of post-9/11 film has shown how important it is to understand the symbols and vocabularies that regulate and signify both the individual and the community as well as the multiple ways filmic texts can operate as discursive fighting pits that render intelligible and commonsensical specific and expedient ideological narratives. Both the analytical tools employed in this project and the individualism-community paradigm here espoused could prove a useful approach to analyze the films that continue to tap into the struggles over cultural and political hegemony in the American imaginaries.

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