

THE NARRATIVE  
RECONSTRUCTION OF  
9/11 IN HOLLYWOOD  
FILMS:  
INDEPENDENT VOICE OR  
OFFICIAL INTERPRETATION?

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**Abstract**

This study examines the relationship between Hollywood and American Politics by analysing two significant films about the September 11 attacks: *United 93* and *World Trade Center*. The Bush Administration was undoubtedly aware that cinematic versions of history endure in

the memory of people far better than other modes of historical explanation. In November of 2001, they sent Karl Rove, President Bush's well-known political advisor, to Los Angeles to meet with Hollywood filmmakers. Rove clearly articulated the official, Washington DC, version of these attacks to his elite audience: the war should be fought on both a "military" and an "idea" front; the global problem of terrorism requires an international collaborative response; the principles of freedom and democracy must be heard over the totalitarian ideas of Islamic fundamentalists; and we are fighting against militant factions, not against Islam itself. The authors compare the official "narrative" expressed by Rove with the narratives of *United 93* and *World Trade Center* in order to evaluate whether Hollywood echoed the voice of the Bush Administration or exhibited independence in their interpretations of September 11.

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In November of 2001 President Bush's advisor, Karl Rove, met with Hollywood producers and executives in Los Angeles to discuss the September 11 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York and on the Pentagon. His purpose was to inform the film and television industries of the government's aims in their fight against Al-Qaeda and how these aims should be transmitted (Cooper 2001). Although Rove, as those present later reported<sup>1</sup>, did not intend to give orders, his message on the interpretation of the "War on Terror" was quite clear: its objective was to fight terrorism, not Islam; it was a war of Good against Evil; the conflict was of global dimensions and required a global answer; and the American people should support the troops and thus guarantee a safe future for their children. Rove's final proposal referred to the dissemination of these ideas: instead of a propaganda offensive, he suggested using transparent, honest language (Cooper 2001).

Whatever his intentions may have been, Rove was clearly advocating for the American government's post 9/11 policy. The Bush administration believed that the "War on Terror" should be fought simultaneously on two fronts: the armed front, with military action against those groups and countries that endangered peace domestically and internationally; and the "idea" front, defined by the struggle to broadcast principles of freedom and democracy as opposed to the totalitarian principles of Islamist fundamentalists (*National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, September 2006).

There is no doubt that political interests saw Hollywood film production as a particularly efficient weapon to spread these ideas. The Bush administration was undoubtedly aware that cinematic versions of historical events reach and endure in the memories of people far better than other modes of explanation making them a decisive means of shaping history. Narrative reconstructions, in particular, can deal with the "inner workings" of an event, placing it in a larger framework that helps audiences make sense of a reality that is overwhelming in its complexity (Muntean 2009). With the intervention of a political advisor, the US government was seeking to ensure the version of the Al-Qaeda attacks passed on to future generations would correspond to its own vision and interpretation.

Because the time frame for feature film production is generally between eighteen months and three years, any cinema response to Rove's meeting could only happen in the mid- to long-term. In contrast, television producers could react immediately with both direct and indirect actions.<sup>2</sup> Film producers moved cautiously, first focusing on documentaries and later on docudramas for television.<sup>3</sup> Not until 2003 did Hollywood begin movie projects that reconstructed the 9/11 attacks. The first of these features to premiere, in April and August of 2006 respectively, were *United 93* (Universal) by the British director Paul Greengrass and *World Trade Center* (Paramount) directed by Oliver Stone. Besides its closeness, both films have in common that they seek to tell facts as they happened, are based on victims' personal experiences, and have been produced under the auspices of the Hollywood industry.

The present study focuses on these two features as unique expressions of Hollywood's "take" on 9/11. Our objective is to examine the main elements of their context and narrative in order to evaluate how they reconstruct the events and to what extent they interpret the Al-Qaeda attacks. More specifically, we ask how these films compare with the official Bush Administration version that explains the so-called "War on Terror." Obviously, there have been other films produced

that refer to September 11 and/or deal with the event as metaphor (see Boggs and Pollard 2006; Sanchez-Escalonilla 2010); but they do not focus on the narrative reconstruction of events. They more appropriately belong to the category of “post 9/11 films,” dealing with the social, political and military consequences of the attacks.<sup>4</sup> While certainly of interest, an analysis of these productions is beyond the scope of this project.

We present first a short summary of research on the social impact of cinematic histories, followed by a discussion of Rove’s “official line” as synthesised in his above-mentioned speech in Los Angeles and a review of salient issues in U.S. strategies for public diplomacy. We then offer a qualitative content analysis of *World Trade Center* and *United 93*, focusing on the main elements used to create particular images of 9/11. Lastly, we compare the content of these two films with the official government version of events and evaluate whether and how far Washington D.C. politics may have influenced Hollywood’s cultural products.

## History on Film

With the power cinema receives from images, fact-based films do not simply “present” actual events – they give the impression of showing them as they happen. On screen we see settings, objects and characters that fit the historical time and place. Unless audiences have previous firsthand knowledge of these elements, they are likely to take the film representations as reliable. But reconstructions of the past follow the rules for narrative fiction. As Rosenstone (2006) reminds us, together with the historical data, there are other elements that belong to the art of storytelling, which add logic and emotion that may be greater than the event itself. The result is a coherent, complete portrayal of what happened, with many integrating elements, in which pure history is less important than extracting a truth from history. To paraphrase Toplin (1996), there is always an interpretative aspect of history or events. Moreover, as Ferro (1988) argues, historical representation in film tends to fix the facts and characters in the public imagery in such a way as to make them difficult to change, even with expert argument.<sup>5</sup> It is easy to see how present-day generations imagine Ancient Rome as described in classics such as *Ben-Hur* or *Quo Vadis*, the violence of the Vietnam War as reflected in *Apocalypse Now* or the Nazi genocide as seen in Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*.

But the influence of cinema is not limited to representing the past: it reflects the present and gives a sense of direction for the future. According to Andrew Tudor (1999), films provide us with a cultural “map” to interpret the world: they tell us what is and what is not licit; which behaviour is admirable and which is reprehensible; which attitudes are demanded or desirable. Cinema production suggests behavioural norms, codes of conduct and systems of values, which partly reflect and consolidate what already exists in society, and partly create and legitimise new ways of thinking and acting. It is also true, as Burgoyne (1997) indicates, that historical events are often used in the present to reflect, contrast, or bring about dialogue on values that are acquiring social validity in a nation or community. He casts narrative film as a “privileged discursive site in which anxiety, ambivalence, and expectation about the nation, its history, and its future are played out in narrative form (Burgoyne 1997, 11). Thus, it can be said that cinema is, simultaneously, a *mirror* and *shaper* of social reality.

Despite potential misgivings about entertainment dealing with such essential issues as a country's historical past, films can contribute positively to the instruction and education of the audience on issues which, otherwise, would be ignored or remain unrecognised. As Pierre Nora (1996) states, the visual presentation of the facts favours historical memory and helps in understanding and situating events in their proper place: knowledge of history does not mean a simple list of facts, but rather being capable of contextualising them, recognising relationships between the environment where they occurred and other events of that period. This is also the opinion of Guynn (2006), Carnes (1995) and Ferro (1988). Indeed, according to Moran (2006) and Toplin (1996), when the facts dealt with in a film are particularly relevant for a country, cinema is the best way to transform the historical event into a true myth, or to make it reflect some basic myths (see Susman 1985). The 9/11 events fit perfectly into this category.

The attraction of this influence on popular perception for the powers-that-be is understandable. In effect, Hollywood has the ability to construct "civic memory" (Jordan 2008). Interest in having a certain view prevail and transmitted to future generations explains why governments have used media as a propaganda tool. Beginning with the early work of Laswell (1927), there have been numerous studies on these issues. For a specific perspective on relationships between the U.S. Government and Hollywood action in wartime,<sup>6</sup> the works of Valantin (2005), Gianos (1998), Nornes and Yukio (1994), Fyne (1994) and Culbert (1990) are particularly noteworthy. Although the 9/11 events cannot truly be considered a classic military battle, political rhetoric has interpreted them as "acts of war."

## American Public Diplomacy

As mentioned above, the Bush administration decided on a series of principles to both interpret the 9/11 events and promote favourable international opinion of US security policy. These principles were very clearly expressed by Karl Rove in his meeting at Los Angeles:

- The objective of the war was to combat terrorism, not Islam. The enemy is an international terrorist movement, which spreads its ideology of hatred, oppression and death. The terrorists are enemies of Islam also, because they pervert the values and beliefs of Islam for their own benefit.
- It is a war of Good against Evil. The aim of Evil is to implant a totalitarian system, which denies fundamental rights and freedom, disguised as religious thinking, by means of violence even against innocent civilians. It is an attack on humanity.
- The conflict has global dimensions and requires global response. The war is of global importance and threatens all societies equally.
- Americans must support the troops and guarantee a safe future for their children. Our cause is just: we will defend the peace; we will preserve the peace; we will extend the peace across the globe (Rice 2002).

This was, then, a summary of the official version of 9/11. We use it as a touchstone to evaluate the correspondence between D.C.'s content preferences and Hollywood's creative products.

Since 2002, the U.S. has developed several projects for the development of American public diplomacy. The main plan was designed by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and put into practice by the Undersecretary of State for Public

Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Karen Hughes. Rice's proposal meant an in-depth transformation of mentalities and attitudes towards the US. This intention, which might be considered excessively pretentious, was balanced out by a desire for greater collaboration with the citizens of each country: a goal described as "work with partners around the world to build and sustain democratic, well-governed states that will respond to the needs of their people and conduct themselves responsibly in the international system" (Rice 2006). This policy was based on concepts expressed by the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy (ACCD). The committee's 2004 report defined cultural diplomacy as "the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples in order to foster mutual understanding." The situation for the U.S. was aptly summarised by Advisory Committee member John Marrill: "If you don't have a cultural presence, the only way for people to judge is on politics. And in the Middle East particularly, we will always lose on politics. If at this juncture we cannot self-correct, then the consequences could be more dire than they already are" (University of Iowa News Release 2005).

According to the ACCD, the specific contribution of cultural diplomacy on Rice's project would include the creation of a climate of confidence, which would persuade foreigners to, at least, give American politics the "benefit of the doubt"; a demonstration of noble values to counteract a generalised view of American culture as superficial, violent and secularist; efforts to convince other countries of the similarity of values and interests and to create joint action platforms which would give impulse to a positive cooperation agenda; the establishment of common fields for action in neutral areas, such as those which favour culture (Report of the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy 2005). Obviously, Hollywood is relevant to this effort because it is the greatest source of cultural production and entertainment in the US and the one that reaches the farthest (*PR Newswire*, November 11, 2001). This explains Karl Rove's interest in talking to executives from major American media groups. In fact, according to *Vaucher*, several meetings were held between experts in public diplomacy and Hollywood producers and scriptwriters in 2001 to explore the possibility of writing and producing stories which would fit in with the Bush government's world vision (*Vaucher* 2001).

## Hollywood's Take on 9/11

This study focuses on the feature films *United 93* and *World Trade Center* as proxies for "Hollywood's interpretation" of the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. We use a qualitative content analysis to compare Hollywood's popular culture version of 9/11 with Washington D.C.'s "official version" as outlined in Karl Rove's address to filmmakers. We identify originality of interpretation in each source and analyse the similarities and differences among the histories. Our heuristic is structured by Rove's articulation of the political discourse used to defend President Bush's "War on Terror":

- Definition of the situation.
- Characterisation of the enemy.
- Cause of the attack.
- Consequences or repercussions of the attacks.
- Characterisation of American citizens and values.

To this we add one additional category not found in the official version: personal and/or systemic failures in responding to the crisis.

In order to assess how these categories were portrayed in the films and to what extent they reflected official discourse, we analysed contextual, formal and narrative parameters of content. Following Vanoye and Goliot-Lété (1992), Marzal and Gomez Tarin (2007) we focused first on objective descriptive elements such as synopsis, scenarios and production context. These elements reveal the initial position of the director – how he frames the story and what he wants to transmit with the production. They also shed light on production demands shaped by corporate interests and government stakeholders (Chapman and Cull 2009). Secondly, we discuss interpretative narrative elements and formal expression such as structure, characters and story design. Importantly, these factors include the characterisation of victims, families of the victims, political and military authorities, terrorists, and regular American citizens.

### United 93

**Descriptive Elements.** This film re-creates what may have happened to the 40 passengers of United Airlines flight 93, which was hijacked by Al-Qaeda on its way from Newark Airport to San Francisco. According to the conclusions of the 9/11 Investigation Commission, the passengers on this flight heard news of the attacks on the Twin Towers and realised that were the victims of a hijack whose most likely aim was another suicide attack, specifically on the White House. Some of the passengers made a series of phone calls to their families and said they were going to confront the terrorists. Apparently thanks to them, United 93 did not reach its terrible target and finally crashed in open land near Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

There are two points that must be emphasised in the film production beginning with the way it was undertaken. Universal Studios did not take the initiative as would be expected on such a controversial and delicate matter. Instead, producer Paul Greengrass suggested making the film and got permission to proceed from the studio. As an independent European filmmaker, Greengrass was tried and tested as a historical documentary-maker for British television. His proposal was very different from the norms of commercial cinema entertainment which we have come to expect from Hollywood.

The second important point is the genre of the film chosen by Greengrass – a docudrama, like *World Trade Center*, that tells a real story as part of the general events of 9/11. This allows the director to show the human side of the episode while simultaneously sticking to the facts and adapting them to the narrative, thereby giving a strong sense of reality. However, Greengrass uses different means to achieve it: he turns to the official version of the events (the 9/11 Commission Report), and avoids other non-verified possibilities; he uses interviews, meets the families of the victims and receives precise documentation and documentary support from them; he adopts some typical traits of the historical account, such as the strict timescale of facts and abundant contextual details; he plays with the reproduction of the events in real time: the film is the same length as the period between the takeoff and the downing of the plane; he applies the techniques and style of realist cinema in the use of a hand-held camera with little stability, dynamic editing, and the choice of little known actors. These realist strategies almost make the viewer forget that the film is a fictional recreation of events for which there are no living witnesses.

**Interpretive Elements.** Above the realistic style of *United 93*, interpretative traits can be inferred from the story design. This is composed of an omniscient point of view, which jumps from one to another perspective given to three groups of principal characters - the hijackers (as antagonist force), the passengers (as heroes) and the authorities (as allies or supporting force) in a chronological and lineal exposition of events. While Greengrass avoids a particular and subjective focus to tell the story, this design with multiple protagonists and multiple perspectives allows him to contrast attitudes and create implicit conflicts and comparisons between groups. Precisely these internal connections are the arena to collect ideas and interpretative material to be analysed.

First, unlike *World Trade Center*, *United 93* depicts the attackers as characters in the drama, even though they are still obviously the antagonists. Following his realist approach, Greengrass shows a human view of the enemy, allowing the audience to gain insight into the sentiments, reasons and fears that fill the terrorists' hearts and minds. The religious intentionality that moves them is underlined, as during the hijack they murmur prayers in an attempt to stifle their logical fears. The opening images are particularly evocative, as they contrast the fanatics' religious motivation with the hectic American lifestyle. The film emphasises the illogical nature of the religious fundamentalism that moves the terrorists. The fact that the uninterrupted praying of the suicide terrorists receives no answer and that their mission is a failure, is of great narrative importance. That the common sense and reasoning of some of the passengers wreck the Al-Qaeda action is equally expressive.

Second, the real protagonists of the affair are the passengers on the plane, according to the film's story structure. This movie means to exalt the memory of those who flew on United Flight 93 because they showed collective heroism. It is interesting that the director does not explicitly use any of their names, as their individuality is less important than the joint contribution they make to the defence of the nation. However, with the documentary help of the victim's families, Greengrass does show the character traits of those that best complement each other and emphasises the professions and skills that the passengers use to serve the whole.

Third, in its portrayal of the authorities as supporting characters, the film stresses their inability to act efficiently in a coordinated manner when confronted with an unforeseen and far-reaching event. Surprise affects them all badly and puts them to the test. On the one hand, the professional proficiency of the air-traffic controllers is never in doubt, but their efforts to connect with the State forces (either political or military) are in vain. On the other hand, the military authorities have the worst role in the film, which underlines their lack of coordination, slow reactions and even their blunders when the wrong orders are given at moments of maximum alert (the fighter planes head off in the opposite direction from their targets). Finally, the image of the political authorities is also damaged. Thanks to a comment by an air traffic controller, we discover that the President has taken a flight at the moment when there is the greatest confusion in the air. Also, the government is shown to be almost unreachable. The White House authorisation for the take-off of the fighter planes comes far too late.

Thanks to the aforementioned design, in *United 93* the lack of organised action by the authorities to check the 9/11 attacks is subtly connected with the positive action of the passengers. Precisely because they are directly involved in the events, they

manage to organise a defensive counterattack and carry it out quite systematically. In the end, they are more logical and effective than the powers-that-be.

To sum up, despite realist style and quasi-documentary technique of *United 93*, this film shows an interpretation of the events, which goes beyond the events themselves. In a later interview, the director suggests that Western society should re-open the debate with a more rational commitment on the 9/11 attacks and how they were dealt with. He believes that this is possible if a collective memory is built of the events and his contribution is *United 93*. In the end, as Greengrass explains, the passengers on the hijacked plane were the first to take joint decisions after the attacks on the Twin Towers. *What happened? Why did it happen? What can we do now?* They asked themselves these questions before anyone else and had to find an answer in the most frightful circumstances (Carnevale 2005).

### World Trade Center

**Descriptive Elements.** Oliver Stone's film focuses on 9/11 from the perspective of first responders who become victims of the attack on the World Trade Center. Port Authority of New York and New Jersey police officers John McLoughlin and Will Jimeno enter the Twin Towers with their colleagues shortly after the attack. While they search for survivors, the towers collapse and they are buried under the rubble. McLoughlin and Jimeno watch their colleagues die as they struggle to stay alive themselves and to help each other hang on to life. The film dramatically re-creates the agonising hours the victims spend waiting to be rescued and the emotional and psychological suffering of the families who wait to hear news of their loved ones. In the end, the officers become two of only twenty people who were pulled out alive from under the buildings' ruins.

Like *United 93*, the film draws on real events and personal experiences. Andrea Berloff's script is based on autobiographical writings by the two survivors and their wives, and on several interviews with them. However, there are many differences between the two features. *World Trade Center's* origin is much more conventional: a proposal made by producers, bought by Paramount, with a higher budget (US \$ 65 million). The project attracts A-list director Oliver Stone and actor Nicholas Cage.

If we bear in mind Stone's earlier filmography, the critics' surprise at the results of *World Trade Center* is understandable. The film does lack the committed and critical tone of some of his other projects, such as the Vietnam War dramas *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July* or the highly praised *JFK* with its Kennedy assassination conspiracy theory or the political drama *Nixon*. As Stone himself commented, *World Trade Center* was designed to be apolitical; its main goal was to praise the reactions of average individuals affected by the attack. In his opinion, the time had not yet come to make a critical film on events that were not yet clear and still hurt like an open wound (Jaafar 2006).

**Interpretive Elements.** The style of *World Trade Center* also differs decidedly from *United 93*. Compared to Greengrass's realism, *World Trade Center* is a highly subjective and personalised story, told from the perspective of the two survivors and their families. Thus, the film is a more classical narrative and is highly emotional.

McLoughlin and Jimeno, as Port Authority of New York and New Jersey police officers with little power and limited public order responsibilities, belong to a corps that is practically unknown to the world in general. They are not part of the well-



recognised “official” heroes like Fire fighters. Consequently, they come to embody all the ordinary people who suffered the attack of 9/11. The first minutes of the film reinforce this interpretation as different views of New York show people walking towards their jobs, driving or taking the metro, etc.

Three groups of secondary characters enter significantly into the narrative structure of the film. We can classify them as direct victims, indirect victims and the rescue teams that arrived later to Ground Zero. Until the towers collapse *World Trade Center* focuses on the direct victims of the attack: those who were in the buildings, the colleagues of the policemen and the volunteers from other security corps. They don't yet know what is happening, nor do they realise the true scope of the event. We see the evacuation of many people of different races from the Towers, which suggests the universality of the direct victims. This central theme, used several times, suggests that the attacks on the World Trade Center were an attack on humankind as a whole.

The second part of the film focuses mainly on the indirect victims, portraying the anguish of families waiting to hear news of their missing loved ones. Among the main characters in this group are Donna and Olivia, John and Willy's wives respectively. The film's conclusion pays tribute to those individuals who participated in the rescue effort, either voluntarily or because of their professions, often travelling from far-away parts of the country. In short, the story of John McLoughlin and Will Jimeno allows the director of *World Trade Center* to explore the most positive side of the tragedy by bringing together a cast of secondary characters who illustrate the compassion and benevolence that the tragedy produced on September 11. In fact, Stone's movie associates the following values to them:

- Spontaneous and generous solidarity. The immediate reaction is to help. And every individual does what he/she can, and what each one can is priceless: the work carried out by the special corps and by ordinary people is equally important.
- Equality in adversity. The rescuers are very different people who are ready to obey whoever takes command. There is no pre-ordained structure.
- The value of each individual. This is constantly underlined by desperate bosses who have lost some of “their” people; in the attention paid to each family; in the rescuers' struggle to save each life; in the long chain of people who bring out the stretchers with the injured, with words of encouragement for each.
- Family unity: The families of the victims are immediately surrounded by relatives and close friends who spend the long hours with them, trying to cheer them up, giving their help and running errands. This is also the main topic of conversation for the two injured men under the rubble: their wives and children are the only reason for surviving.
- A sense of forgiveness. The tragedy brings about the recognition of acts that have harmed others and a desire to rectify the situation. This can be seen above all in the personal stories, both in John McLoughlin's last words and in other secondary characters (the doctor who compensates for his addiction by risking his life to save others, or the mother who regrets having been angry with her son, who is now missing).
- Their patriotism, indirectly present in the movie through the constant presence of red, white and blue in the movie frames, and the use of American flags waving in the shots.

Precisely because the perspective of the victims dominates the storyline of *World Trade Center*, there is hardly any time for other approaches. For example, there is no direct portrayal of the enemy or mention of their motives or aims. But the dreadful results of their action are recorded. Nor does the film give importance to political analysis or the response of the State authorities, although the shadow of Iraq and the question of the “War on Terror” do loom. These issues are linked to the Karnes character. His figure, based on that of the real ex-marine who found the missing two Port policemen, has been controversial. On the one hand, he assumed some of the traits that have been said about Bush pejoratively: defence of his “war against terror” with quasi-religious, visionary arguments. He is the only character who uses the words “war” and “revenge.”

On the other hand, the role of Karnes in the *World Trade Center* story is essential and positive for the outcome, as thanks to his tenacity the protagonists are finally saved. He could be taken as implicit backing for the presidential policy. However, taking into account Oliver Stone’s public opposition to the Bush Administration, it would be more logical to suppose that this figure was designed following his narrative role. As Stone himself comments, the true character of the ex-marine has been respected, as he represents all those Americans who accepted the President’s message on the day. Moreover, the character’s religious motives connect with the sense of divine providence felt by the two police protagonists, which has its echo in the film.

## Interpretation of 9/11 in the Cinema

Based on our analysis of the earliest narrative reconstructions of 9/11, we conclude that Hollywood does have a voice that is independent of the official government interpretation of events.

However, although we see clear dissent between the two versions in some aspects, we must state that there are also some points of agreement. Dissent with reference to the specific political ideas proposed by the Bush administration, specifically those related to foster a belligerent spirit among citizens (such as the enemy as a powerful international terrorist movement, the war as a struggle of Good against Evil, or the conflict as a global attack that requires global response). Nevertheless, there is some agreement with the official version (particularly, with the cultural diplomacy strategy) that can be seen through the highlighted goodness of the American values and in the portrayal of the sense that those values belong to all human being.

We will now analyse these points in depth. Let us start by drawing conclusions to prove independence from the political version.

Although the films described are different, both in their style and narrative conception, their focus is similar: revival of 9/11 from the perspective of the victims, disregarding the political authorities. This independent standpoint is echoed in the protagonism given to the victims, in its desire to reflect true events, in critical representation of the powers-that-be, together with its treatment of the terrorists, the cause of the attack and involvement in war.

First, the films coincide in giving the protagonism of 9/11 to the public. The main victim of the Al-Qaeda attack is not the US, nor the Western world, nor the international community. It could be any man or woman on this earth, whatever

their nationality. However, both in *United 93* and in *World Trade Center*, the ordinary people are not just attacked; they are also the heroes who confront and control the situation. There are the passengers, police forces, the volunteers who react and organise the rescues, who decide how and what to do, who protect others.

Second, coupled with the previous point, these films pay homage to the dead and missing without any ulterior motives, keeping away from the way they were used in the political message. There is a tacit intention of not muddying the event with political interpretations, by sticking to the facts: They want the victims' own version to live on. Both films try to show what happened. They demonstrate an objectivity and respect, which can be found in the prior research the filmmakers carried out: they are backed by public research sources, interviews, or personal documents that the victims' families have kept. Whether their style is quasi-documentary (*United 93*) or bibliographical and therefore more subjective and emotional (*World Trade Center*), both films are set at the time and place of the terrorist action, before the political manoeuvres could begin.

Third, the independence of these films can also be seen in the way they portray political and military powers. In the two Hollywood productions we find reproachful references to the surprise effect the attacks had on the American security forces: *United 93* shows the lack of coordination and speed in the White House decisions and those of the military commanders; and *World Trade Center*, although the censure is more subtle, puts it in the comment of the protagonist lieutenant as they head towards the Twin Towers: "We are ready for anything, but not this, not for something this size." In addition, both films refer indirectly to how far the President was from the events: the political leader is merely a media presence, in Bush's first TV speech.

In fourth place, and connected with the previous point, the portrayal and treatment of the "enemy" in the two Hollywood movies differs from the official image broadcast. In general, the edge is taken off the terrorists' cruelty, although the enormity of the attacks is seen. What are avoided are portrayals which could lead to hatred or the desire for revenge. In *World Trade Center* the enemy is, in fact, noted by their non-appearance. Only the results of their actions are seen. They are not even mentioned by the characters who, swamped by the effects of the impacts and destruction of the Towers, do not consider either the cause or the people responsible. Oliver Stone's film avoids a direct and negative portrayal of the terrorists, and although the paradox is not meaningless, underlines the integrity and heroism of the victims. In *United 93*, on the contrary, Greengrass does portray them and gives them protagonism. But in contrast to what one would expect, they are not depicted as individuals who are sure of themselves, nor do they behave savagely. He suggests they suffer from interior contradictions, move fearfully and indecisively and try to control their nerves by unconsciously reciting passages from the Koran. This is the director's way of emphasising the irrationality of their religious cause, and is as unintelligible for the modern world as the verses repeated in a tongue that most of the audience does not understand.

The cause of the attacks and the motives of the terrorists are a fifth point that demonstrates the above-mentioned independence. *United 93* and *World Trade Center* again choose neutrality on the issues that are being debated publicly: neither of the two gives a precise explanation. *World Trade Center* ignores this point, whereas

in the Greengrass film religious fanaticism is given as the driving force for the UA F93 hijackers. None of the films specifically calls the acts of violence “terrorist acts,” nor are those who carried them out deliberately called “terrorists.”

The sixth point refers to these descriptions of the victim, enemy and cause, and makes us wonder about the justification of the use of war that is found in these films. What is their opinion of the official policy on the “War on Terror?”

We must admit that in both cases the word “war” is mentioned, at least once, as a definition of the terrorist attack. However, the contexts in which it is pronounced revokes its meaning of a “formal declaration of war,” with the potential military response of the US. In *United 93* the term “war” is used by Ben Sylney, Head of the Air Traffic Control System Command Center. He uses it thoughtlessly, in anger, when the military forces do not respond: “They are declaring war on me, and they (the Armed Forces) don’t answer.” In *World Trade Center*, the vision of a world at war corresponds to a very specific character: a visionary, an ex-marine who feels driven to go to New York by an inner voice. He is the only one who believes that the way to “fix this” is through the force of arms: “They’re going to need me,” he says to someone on the phone. We must not forget that this character is based on the real man who found the survivors and ended up serving in Iraq. However, as the director explained later, in the film he embodies one of the immediate reactions found among American patriots, but always in the first few hours after the attack, without time for further consideration. In short, and although the image of the former marine is somewhat repaired at the end of the plotline, his characterisation and the context in which he is placed, discredits the option of the recourse to war.

Before conclusion, we should briefly remark to what extent *United 93* and *World Trade Center* could have served to the American cultural diplomacy’s objectives.

In contrast with what we have stated above, the US movies appear to be responding to some of the cultural diplomacy requirements. It is in contradiction with those individualist values that are so often used to describe American citizens, and the arrogance of a nation that is accustomed to achieving its demands. As part of the objectives of public diplomacy is to transmit an image of the US people that goes beyond classic prejudices, in order to favour a climate of confidence and to demonstrate how different cultures concur in their values, by creating areas for common action. A united position at the expense of one’s own life, concern for others or the responsibility of decision-taking, among other traits, undermine the vision of an individualistic society, which is only interested in personal success or in covering necessities. Together with the preceding traits, the importance paid to the family, the value of pardon, the desire to understand and forgive, touches on values that are greatly appreciated in other societies.

In addition, the films’ own interpretation of the global impact of the conflict, which fits perfectly with the aim to emphasise similarities with other cultures and empathy with Americans: what happened to these American people, ordinary people, could have happened to anyone. The terrorist threat, which explodes unexpectedly and destroys lives and families, is a global one. Any individual in the world may be a victim of an attack of this kind.

To sum up, we can conclude that both films coincide in excluding political debate and leave the protagonism and authority to interpret the events in the hands of the first victims of the attacks.

## Notes:

1. Jack Valenti, Director of the *Motion Picture Association of America*, insisted that neither cinema nor TV content were a matter for debate and that no one had even vaguely suggested that Hollywood should begin pro-war propaganda action. And Bryce Zabel, director of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, stated that it was not a matter of censorship or propaganda, but of "advocacy," of defending a set of ideas. Cf. Cooper, M. 2001. Lights! Cameras! Attack! Hollywood Enlists. *The Nation*, December 10. <[www.thenation.com](http://www.thenation.com)>
2. Cf. Chambers, David. 2002. Will Hollywood Go to War? *TBS Journal*, 8 (Spring-Summer). <<http://www.tbsjournal.com/Archives/Spring02/chambers.html>>; Spigel, Lynn. 2004. Entertainment Wars: Television Culture after 9/11. *American Quarterly* 56, 2, 235-270.
3. Cf. Vaucher, A. R. 2001. Arab, Terror Docus Heat Up the Market. *Variety*, October 10; and Learmonth, Michael and Dempsey, John. 2006. TV Takes on Terror. *Variety*, August 13. <[www.variety.com](http://www.variety.com)>
4. Cf. Scott, A. O. 2007. A War on Every Screen, *New York Times*, October 28. <[nytimes.com](http://nytimes.com)>; O'Donnell, Marcus. 2004. Bring It On: The Apocalypse of George W. Bush. *MIA Culture and Policy*, 113, November, 10-22.
5. Cf. Ferro, Marc. 1988, *Cinema and History*. Wayne State University Press: Detroit.
6. Although the 9/11 events cannot truly be considered a classic military battle, political rhetoric has interpreted them as "acts of war."

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