

Introduction

AT THE BEGINNING OF THE twenty-first century, as the contradictions of capitalism became more apparent than they had been in the living memory of anyone born after the 1920s, numerous films gave allegorical form to the crises of contemporary capitalism. Some of the films were overtly political in nature, while others refracted the vicissitudes of capital in stories that did not, on the surface, have anything explicitly political about them. This book examines six particularly rich and thought-provoking films in this vein. Analyzing four movies from before the global financial crisis of 2008 and two that allegorize the financial meltdown itself, *Rumble and Crash* explores the ways that films as different as a bank-heist thriller like *Inside Man* and an intimate psychological drama like *Blue Jasmine* allegorize one of the defining crises of our time.

The films examined in this book are works by well-known auteurs such as Woody Allen, Spike Lee, and Martin Scorsese, international political thrillers by Stephen Gaghan and Fernando Meirelles, and a dystopian science fiction film by Alfonso Cuarón. What unites the films is not a particular genre, the shared cultural heritage of the filmmakers, or a common aesthetic, but their refraction of a common problem. Combining social history and political theory with detailed film analysis, this study situates the movies in their historical context and examines how they reflect recent sociopolitical and economic developments. It offers original interpretations of six culturally significant films released between 2005 and 2013 while showing how very different movies give narrative and audio-visual form to one of the most pressing issues of the twenty-first century.

The book is organized chronologically in the order of the historical moments that the movies allegorically evoke rather than by film date, spanning from the “war on terror” of the early 2000s and the US-led

invasion of Iraq in 2003 to the global financial crisis and the bank bailout of 2008. Its themes include globalization and its discontents, interventionist mapmaking in the Middle East, the rise of finance capitalism, and the ways that multinational corporations literally get away with murder in the developing world. Analyzing representations of both sides of the yawning class divide, it examines the class war between the super-rich and the rest of the world's population, and diverse ways that an international capitalist class is inadvertently digging its own grave. Although numerous books have appeared in recent years confronting these and related issues, no book-length study has analyzed the role of film as the platform and allegory as the narrative device used to express the increasingly pervasive sense that the economic system that we have known and accepted as inevitable and ubiquitous is riddled with self-destructive flaws.

Allegory

The term "allegory" implies a distinction between a work's manifest narrative content and its latent or implicit meaning. Thus Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006), for example, a science fiction film set in the year 2027, is ostensibly a movie about the future, but, like many sci-fi narratives, its vision of the future invites comparisons with the present. Similarly, Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) is explicitly the story of a dodgy stockbroker in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but it is implicitly a critique of the esteemed financiers of the 2000s who brought the global economy to the brink of collapse. Spike Lee's *Inside Man* (2006), set in the historical present, uses the bank-heist genre to allegorize class struggle, while Stephen Gaghan's *Syriana* (2005) and Fernando Meirelles's *The Constant Gardener* (2005) use the conspiracy-thriller genre as a vehicle to expose and critique the machinations of global capital. Finally, Woody Allen's *Blue Jasmine* (2013), which presents itself as a retelling of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, transposes the global financial crisis of 2008 onto the story of the meltdown and the subsequent bailout of a New York socialite.

The decision to examine allegorical refractions of recent sociopolitical and economic developments, as opposed to films that depict frontally the vicissitudes of contemporary capitalism, stems largely from the richness and diversity of films that have adopted the allegorical mode and the relative paucity of smart, engaging, and thought-provoking movies that have opted for a more straightforward approach. There are noteworthy exceptions, J. C. Chandor's *Margin Call* (2011) and Adam McKay's *The Big Short* (2015) among them, but by and large the recent movies that have thematized directly the fluctuations of contemporary capital have

been less compelling than the generally subtler, more engrossing, and further-reaching cinematic allegories that have come out in the past decade or so. I agree on the whole with Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle's overall assessment, in their analysis of films on the financial crisis of 2008, that "it will be necessary to take a far greater distance from capital's ubiquitous clichés than works 'about' the crisis and finance have done hitherto."¹ Too many of the recent films that address frontally the crises of capitalism offer versions of what Christopher Sharrett calls "Hollywood's false criticism." This form of criticism, which "prefers to place blame on a dubious concept of human nature rather than on political-economic frameworks," relies on the specious notion that "any answer to social disorder under patriarchal capitalism must be absolutely personal."² Although the films examined in this book occasionally fall prey to clichés of different sorts, they do not for the most part present managerial altruism, family values, or individual acts of charity as the key to overcoming the challenges posed by an increasingly virulent form of capitalism.

There may be historical reasons for the recent profusion, both inside Hollywood and out, of interesting allegories of capitalism. "In the simplest terms," literary theorist Angus Fletcher writes in his magisterial study, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, "allegory says one thing and means another."³ Rather than "saying what it means," allegory means something that it does not say. It offers an image of something—a person, an idea, a quality or characteristic, a process, or an event—that does not or cannot appear as such. Defined by the Roman rhetorician Quintilian as a "continuous metaphor," allegory lends itself particularly well to the figuration of phenomena that elude direct representation.⁴ As Rita Copeland and Peter Struck bring to light in their introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, one of the earliest allegorical studies, dating to the fourth century BCE, explicitly presents itself as a search for the concealed cosmological meaning of a poetic "enigma" (*aenigma*).⁵ In this context, the recent revival of allegory—a revival that is by no means limited to the cinema—beckons us to consider whether there is something peculiarly enigmatic about the present age. The title of David Harvey's *The Enigma of Capital* gives us an initial hint of what that "something" might be.⁶ Allegory had fallen out of fashion in the early nineteenth century. Its resurgence in recent decades gives pause for thought.

In his afterword to the 2012 edition of his book, Fletcher offers a fascinating interpretation of the popularity that allegory is currently enjoying. He begins his 2012 afterword by remarking that much has changed since 1964, when *Allegory* was first published. He then specifies for his reader the fundamental changes, as he sees them, that took place over this forty-eight-year period: "The rich countries want yet more

natural resources to support their standards of living, while the divided and hence troubled poorer nations have experienced sectarian religious wars characterized by chaotic internal power struggles.”⁷ The author goes on to enumerate further developments that typify the shift that took place over the preceding half-century. His examples include the Wall Street banks that were deemed “too big to fail” in 2008, the astronomical spending in recent years of political action committees (PACs) and so-called super PACs on political candidates (in particular, following the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Committee* [2010]), the resulting disenfranchisement of the working people that cannot afford to bribe politicians with substantial monetary gifts, and the concomitant demise of US democracy as a bona fide form of participatory government. In sum, capitalism has reached a new stage in its development, Fletcher proposes, with decidedly deleterious consequences for the majority of the people who find themselves on the socioeconomic and political margins of the system.

Fletcher calls this new situation a “crisis of scale.”⁸ He likens it to the phenomenon that philosopher Immanuel Kant dubbed “the mathematical sublime” in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790). “Recall that the sublime is whatever is too massive, often too monumentally impressive for our mind’s eye to hold,” Fletcher writes, glossing Kant.⁹ Similarly, Fletcher proposes, the “runaway expansion of the Numbers in society”—by which he means the billions of bits and bytes of information in our electronic devices as well as outsized multinational corporations, banks that are “too big to fail,” and the enormous sums of money that those institutions (legally defined in the United States as “people” with a right to unlimited “free speech”) give to lawmakers—inhibits the individual subject’s ability to form a mental image of the vast social structure in which she exists.¹⁰ We find ourselves immersed in a system too big and boundless for us to conceive of it as a totality.

Given the extent of the changes that Fletcher outlines, and the emphasis that he places on them in his 2012 afterword, the reader might anticipate an attendant change in the author’s appreciation of the narrative mode he analyzed nearly fifty years earlier. On the contrary: “When many years ago I began this study, the seeds of the present were in the ground or at least ready to plant, and for decades it seemed to me a foregone conclusion that not only in the West, but everywhere in the world, the allegorical mode would recapture the prominence it possessed during the Middle Ages, which in fact has transpired, as predicted.”¹¹ In sum, Fletcher concludes, making a broad claim for the relevance of his study: “My book . . . may illuminate the present and the oncoming global future.”¹² As long as global capitalism is allowed to continue on its

current trajectory of limitless expansion, Fletcher suggests, allegory—the mode of representation that corresponds to this monstrous system—will be in fashion.

I am struck by the resemblance between Fletcher's remarks here on the pertinence of allegory in the age of late capitalism and eminent Marxist critic Fredric Jameson's theory of "cognitive mapping." First developed in the mid-1980s, in the early years of the neoliberal onslaught (about which I have much to say in chapter 4), Jameson's proposed strategy of "cognitive mapping" would enable individual subjects to form a mental image of the vast nexus of global social relations.¹³ Derived from urbanist Kevin Lynch's studies of the mental maps that people make of cities by observing their surroundings, Jameson's concept of "cognitive mapping" extrapolates Lynch's analyses of the ways people unconsciously map urban space to "the realm of social structure, that is to say, in our historical moment, to the totality of class relations on a global (or should I say multinational) scale."¹⁴ Observing "a most interesting convergence between the empirical problems studied by Lynch in terms of city space" and French Marxist Louis Althusser's definition of ideology as "the representation of the subject's *Imaginary* relationship to his or her *Real* conditions of existence," Jameson proposes that "this is exactly what the cognitive map is called upon to do . . . : to enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society's structures as a whole."¹⁵ Unlike Fletcher, who proposes that allegory is the representational mode endemic to late capitalism, Jameson argues for the invention of a new aesthetic that would give form to this amorphous beast. Like Fletcher, he perceives that the "vast and properly unrepresentable totality" of capitalist globalization calls for an art form adequate to this sublime object.

As Toscano and Kinkle emphasize in *Cartographies of the Absolute*, the aesthetic that Jameson was calling for in the eighties did not exist, in the theorist's opinion: "He didn't announce its existence . . . but stressed instead the political need for its elaboration in both theory and practice."¹⁶ The latter specification—its elaboration *in both theory and practice*—is crucial. Whereas, according to Jameson, there were no cognitive maps of global capital in the realms of arts and culture, his own critical work in those areas constitutes a "cognitive map" in its own right. Jameson's numerous studies on an impressively wide array of media and genres—from postmodern historical fiction to cyberpunk novels, experimental video to the Hollywood retro film, avant-garde architectural designs to towering glass skyscrapers, hyperrealist sculpture to pop art—theoretically derive from the works the "cognitive map" of multinational capitalism that the artifacts cryptically encode.

Jameson explicitly calls his general approach to literary and cultural interpretation allegorical. "Interpretation is here construed as an essentially allegorical act," he writes, for example, in his preface to *The Political Unconscious*.¹⁷ Jameson's use of the term "allegory" here is different from Fletcher's acceptance of the term. Whereas, for Fletcher, allegories are things that artists produce, for Jameson "allegory" refers first and foremost to a way of interpreting cultural artifacts. For both theorists, the term designates artworks that say one thing but mean another, but they locate the moment of meaning creation at different stages in a work's production and reception. What Jameson designates by the term "allegory" is primarily a reading strategy, not a particular type of art.

These two meanings of "allegory" have a long history. As Copeland and Struck explain: "In its most common usage ['allegory'] refers to two related procedures, a manner of composing and a method of interpreting."¹⁸ The latter operation, called "allegoresis," is in fact the older of the two procedures, dating to the time of the ancient Greeks. "Allegoresis" designates what people *read into* a text, rather than what a given cultural producer meant to communicate in creating the work. It is more or less synonymous with "interpretation" in the broad sense of the term. If, as Copeland and Struck suggest, glossing an argument by deconstructionist Paul de Man, "all reading, all critical practice, is allegoresis, that is, allegorical interpretation,"¹⁹ it follows that any critical analysis that strives to do more than faithfully reproduce the source material (if such a procedure is even possible outside of the fictional world of Jorge Luis Borges)²⁰ is to some extent allegorical.

What I do in this book is cinematic allegoresis. Rather than making claims about what filmmakers intended to communicate in making their movies, I analyze the films themselves, placing them in their historical context and exploring the diverse ways that they synthesize and visualize that context, regardless of their creators' intentions. This disregard for the filmmakers' intentions enables us to view their movies as expressions of what Jameson famously called "the political unconscious" in his 1981 book of that title. Although I find Jameson's pronouncement that the political interpretation of texts is "the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation" hyperbolic, I agree with him that "the convenient working distinction between cultural texts that are social and political and those that are not" fails to account for the deep penetration of politics into private life.²¹ Such a distinction, which tacitly sanctions her idea that the individual artist or lone genius can somehow transcend her conjuncture, reinforces, intentionally or not, the fundamentally ideological idea that some of us are outside of ideology. In sum, I agree with Jameson that cultural artifacts, whether they are explicitly "political" or

not, can profitably be read as socially symbolic acts bearing witness to a “political unconscious.”

Jameson’s allegorical approach to cultural interpretation also resolves the apparent paradox of using a particularly capital-intensive and commodified art form to shed light on the prospective self-destruction of capitalism. Before getting into the ways that Jameson’s allegorical reading strategy enables us to “read into” (if not necessarily “against”) the cultural commodities produced by film studios, let us take a moment to consider how the motion picture industry works. This brief consideration, based in large part on philosopher-sociologists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s influential essay “The Culture Industry” and media analyst-*cum*-social activist Mark Crispin Miller’s piercing analysis of the entertainment industry (but see also Robert Sklar’s monumental *Movie-Made America*),²² provides a glimpse into the intricacies of capitalism and the movie industry. The image that emerges from these authors’ studies leaves little doubt as to the interests and motivations of movie studios’ boards of directors, making the idea that these industry leaders might produce cinematic works that undermine the basic tenets of capitalism seem far-fetched. I then turn to the work of film theorist Siegfried Krauer, which offers an implicit response to Horkheimer and Adorno, and finally to Jameson’s allegorical approach to film criticism.

Capitalism and Film

Film studios are, of course, major corporations. They are quintessential capitalist institutions. As Horkheimer and Adorno, prominent members of the “Frankfurt School” of social research, argue in their 1944 treatise on the culture industry—a treatise that remains as pertinent today as the day it was written—the Hollywood moguls obey the same rules as executive board members of the most powerful sectors of industry. “The captains of the film industry . . . accept only more or less ephemeral box-office success as evidence,” Horkheimer and Adorno assert. “Their ideology is business.”²³

Two important corollaries follow from this initial observation. First, the cultural commodities that film studios produce are as standardized and interchangeable as the articles coming off a factory assembly line. If a movie performs well at the box office, film producers are liable to replicate the formula in countless iterations in an effort to repeat the success of the earlier film. As a result, the differences between Warner Bros.’ movies and those produced by MGM are no more appreciable, in Horkheimer and Adorno’s eyes, than the “fundamentally illusory” difference between the models of Ford and General Motors.²⁴ A visit to the

local mall cinema or megaplex confirms the ongoing relevance of this observation in the twenty-first century.

Second, the chances that the products coming out of film studios might constitute an attack on the institution of capitalism are virtually nil. The tycoons of the culture industry are unlikely to yearn for the demise of the economic system that generates their wealth. Consequently, the films that they produce, which (in Horkheimer and Adorno's view) implicitly or explicitly reflect their class position, function to buttress rather than to erode the credos and institutions of capitalism. The authors could not be clearer on this point: "To impress the omnipotence of capital" on the viewer's heart "is the purpose of all films, regardless of the plot selected by the production directors."²⁵

Granted, the motion picture industry has undergone changes since the 1940s, when Horkheimer and Adorno penned their treatise. However, as Mark Crispin Miller shows in his incisive introduction to *Seeing through Movies* (1990), those changes have by and large been in the direction of increased monopolization and a more narrowly defined mission to maximize profits. Miller enumerates key transformations, both inside and outside the film industry, that account in various ways for this shift. In the 1980s, for example, a wave of mergers and acquisitions combined an array of diverse enterprises (TV production companies, cable distribution networks, record companies, theme parks, merchandising operations, and so on) into vast entertainment conglomerates. Many of those conglomerates' parent companies are not film studios at all but companies traditionally associated with selling soft drinks or managing investment portfolios. These corporate realignments enable synergies across sectors. The purchase of Columbia Pictures by the Coca-Cola Corporation, for instance, enabled wonderful new synergistic opportunities in the form of product-placement advertisements for Coke in Columbia-produced movies (the subject of Miller's own contribution to his edited volume). In sum, Miller concludes, sounding like a latter-day Horkheimer or Adorno taking stock of the changes in the culture industry that have taken place since the days of his predecessors, "the movies now are made deliberately to show us nothing, but to sell us everything."²⁶

Some of the elements discussed in Miller's penetrating critique of the entertainment industry have gone through further changes since his volume appeared in 1990. However, those changes have not altered the basic parameters of how the movies themselves movies are made. "Hollywood is, somewhat surprisingly, a remarkably stable industry," columnist Adam Davidson wrote in the *New York Times Magazine* in 2012. "Over the past 80 years or so, its basic model . . . has been largely unaltered."²⁷ Even Miller, who documents and brilliantly interprets the changes that

the entertainment industry has undergone since the heyday of studio filmmaking, sees these changes as simultaneously telling two different stories: one of transformation and another “of smooth continuation, of predictable fulfillment.”²⁸ In sum, the important changes documented by Miller notwithstanding, the contemporary film industry follows more or less the same dictates, if not the exact same procedures, as it did during Hollywood’s golden age. Horkheimer and Adorno, for their part, are quite clear about what those dictates are: “the general laws of capital.”²⁹

Published in 1947, Siegfried Kracauer’s *From Caligari to Hitler* offers an oblique but unmistakable response to the thesis that Horkheimer and Adorno put forward in the pages of “The Culture Industry.” Written at the suggestion of Horkheimer (a fellow Frankfurt exile), Kracauer’s *Caligari* book examines the ways that the cinema of the Weimar Republic (1918–1933) reflects social tensions in Germany over the course of a decade and a half. In his introduction to the book, in which he lays out his agenda and his premises, Kracauer justifies his investigation in the following terms:

The films of a nation reflect its mentality in a more direct way than other artistic media for two reasons:

First, films are never the product of an individual. The Russian film director Pudovkin emphasizes the collective character of film production by identifying it with industrial production: “The technical manager can achieve nothing without foremen and workmen and their collective effort will lead to no good result if every collaborator limits himself only to a mechanical performance of his narrow function.” . . .

Second, films address themselves, and appeal, to an anonymous multitude. . . . It has occasionally been remarked that Hollywood manages to sell films which do not give the masses what they really want. . . . However, . . . Hollywood cannot afford to ignore spontaneity on the part of the public. General discontent becomes apparent in waning box-office receipts, and the film industry, vitally interested in profit, is bound to adjust itself, as far as possible, to the changes of mental climate.³⁰

This justification responds virtually term for term to the central argument of “The Culture Industry.” Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Kracauer likens cinematic production to industrial production, but unlike his colleagues, who use the comparison to illustrate the intrinsic seriality of

Hollywood films (as well as other mass-produced cultural commodities), Kracauer makes the comparison in order to emphasize the inherently collective nature of filmmaking. Kracauer's second point, which moves from the context of production to that of consumption, similarly democratizes (or "massifies") the process. Rather than foisting their ideology onto the passively receptive masses, studio executives must engage in a process of negotiation with the public in order to respond to the multitude's desires. Kracauer is clear here that the movie magnates do not engage in this give-and-take with the audience out of respect for the latter's opinions but out of self-interest. Film studio executives seek, above all, to generate a return on investment. If a movie that "speaks to" the masses' concerns stands to turn a bigger profit than one that champions the corporate bosses' worldview, then the best way for those bosses to further their self-interests may be to make pictures that do not openly promote those interests. Indeed, in certain contexts, it may lie in condemning them. In the current context—a context in which wealth inequality is at its highest level in recorded economic history, in which the US government calls upon taxpayers to bail out the very banks that swindled countless investors of their savings, in which labor-saving technologies render redundant an ever-increasing number of workers, and in which multinational corporations restlessly shift operations from region to region in pursuit of lower taxes, weaker labor laws, and rock-bottom wages—the relevance of this argument is immediately apparent.

Kracauer subtitles his book *A Psychological History of the German Film*. However, he clarifies that this idea of "a psychological history" does not presuppose an essentialist determination of a people's national character but, on the contrary, implies a historical conception of collective fears and desires at a given moment in time: "To speak of the peculiar mentality of a nation by no means implies the concept of a fixed national character. The interest here lies exclusively in such collective dispositions or tendencies as prevail within a nation at a certain stage in its development."³¹ He speaks elsewhere of the "symptomatic value" of cinema, implying at once both film's capacity to express a society's unconscious desires and a distinction between a movie's "manifest" and its "latent" content.³² It is in this "psychological" sense that Kracauer's frequent references to films' ability to "reflect" or "mirror" historical and social events must be understood. The horizon of cinema is "a culture's unconscious."³³ Recurrent cinematic themes, motifs, and figures condense a society's anxieties and wishes at a moment in time into visual and narrative form. To conceive of movies as necessarily an expression of the ideological class position of film studio executives or the conscious intentions of the filmmakers whose work they bankroll is to fail to take into

account the larger sociopolitical context in which the cultural producers work. Intentionally or not, explicitly or not, in different ways and to varying degrees, filmmakers respond to what is happening in the world around them. The films that they make cannot fail to reflect in some way that larger context.

Fredric Jameson makes a similar point in the preamble to his exemplary allegorical reading of Sidney Lumet's *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975). Arguing that commercial film is the "medium where, if at all, some change in the class character of social reality ought to be detectable, since social reality and the stereotypes of everyday social reality are the raw material with which commercial film and television are inevitably forced to work," he writes:

This is my answer, in advance, to critics who object a priori that the immense costs of commercial films, which inevitably place their production under the control of multinational corporations, make any genuinely political content in them unlikely, and on the contrary insure commercial film's vocation as a vehicle for ideological manipulation. No doubt this is so, if we remain on the level of the intention of the filmmaker who is bound to be limited consciously or unconsciously by the objective situation. But it is to fail to reckon with the political content of daily life, with the political logic which is already inherent in the raw material with which the filmmaker must work.³⁴

In sum, Jameson suggests, whether or not they mean to and whether or not they want to, filmmakers—even the ones most beholden to the industry—allegorize to some degree the political content of daily life. It is, then, the critic's job to tease out the allegory embedded in the movies they make. That is, in essence, what I set out to do in this book.

Sources

As the above comments render obvious, the approach adopted in this book is indebted to Kracauer's allegorical approach to film criticism and Jameson's pioneering work on culture, politics, and economics. The study has also benefitted from the model that literary critic and film scholar Phillip Wegner provides in *Life between Two Deaths, 1989–2001: U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties* (2009).³⁵ Through bold interpretations of cinematic, televisual, and literary works made during the long decade of the 1990s, Wegner demonstrates that the period between the fall of

the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, constitutes a pivotal moment in US history. Wegner's virtuoso readings of the *Terminator* films and the movies *Fight Club*, *Ghost Dog*, *Independence Day*, and *Cape Fear* are breathtaking in their razor-sharp precision and their ability to generalize their conclusions. Although the present book is more narrowly focused on the particular phenomenon of global capitalism than Wegner's more broad-ranging study of US culture during the long nineties, it owes a great debt to Wegner's book in both its methodology and its overall structure. In many ways, the current project constitutes an attempt to extend Wegner's important work on films of the 1990s into the context of the twenty-first century.

The investigation has also benefitted from cultural theorist Mark Fisher's trenchant study of "capitalist realism" in his 2009 book of that title.³⁶ Fisher's short and powerful work persuasively makes the case that global capitalism has saturated the cultural landscape to such an extent in the twenty-first century that it is no longer possible even to imagine an alternative to it. The book evokes numerous examples from contemporary films in order to demonstrate this argument. However, although he frequently refers to movies in order to illustrate his points, Fisher does not analyze the films themselves. The methodology adopted in this book is the inverse of Fisher's. Whereas he refers to films in order to advance an argument about capitalism, I bring in theory and context in order to shed light on the films. I would make the same distinction between the approach here and the one adopted in numerous works by Slavoj Žižek, the Slovenian "culture mulcher" whose name appears in many chapters of this book.³⁷

The study has also benefitted from the aforementioned *Cartographies of the Absolute* (2015). Toscano and Kinkle's gripping page-turner draws upon an impressive array of material in its Jameson-inspired construction of a "cognitive map" of global capitalism. A good deal of that material is audio-visual. In addition to its theoretically focused chapters, *Cartographies* dedicates a full chapter to the film *Wolfen* (1981), a second chapter to the TV series *The Wire* (2002–2008), and a third—evoked above—to cinematic representations of the global financial crisis of 2008. However, in their chapter on the 2008 meltdown (the part of their book that engages most directly with the issues addressed in the present book), Toscano and Kinkle examine only films that depict the crisis directly, whereas I analyze allegorical refractions of the financial collapse. Moreover, my conclusions are almost diametrically opposed to theirs. Whereas Toscano and Kinkle see precious little critical potential in the cinematic representations of the meltdown that they analyze, I argue that even Martin Scorsese's seemingly jubilatory celebration of a stockbroker's excesses

and Woody Allen's not entirely unsympathetic portrayal of a smug New York socialite offer sharply critical perspectives on the debacle of 2008.

Another title that deserves mention in relation to the current project is Kirk Boyle and Daniel Mrozowski's edited volume, *The Great Recession in Fiction, Film, and Television: Twenty-First Century Bust Culture* (2013).³⁸ The volume's twelve contributors examine a wide variety of popular movies, TV shows, radio programs, literary works, and graphic novels made in the wake of the crash of 2008. The book offers diverse perspectives on what the editors call the "bust culture" of the early twenty-first century. However, the volume's strength, which lies in the diversity of both the material examined and the critical perspectives adopted by the individual authors, also accounts for its limitation. One wonders, in reading, how the various authors would develop their arguments in a book-length study on their topic. The current project proposes precisely the sort of sustained analysis of a tightly circumscribed topic that one craves when reading the individual chapters that comprise Boyle and Mrozowski's wide-ranging volume.

In addition to the interdisciplinary studies mentioned above, numerous monographs have recently appeared on the films or the directors analyzed in this book. Notable titles include David Sterritt's *Spike Lee's America* (2013), Todd McGowan's *Spike Lee* (2014), and Clint Burnham's *Fredric Jameson and "The Wolf of Wall Street"* (2016).³⁹ The current project has benefitted inestimably from the work presented in those books, but it is distinct from all of them. By organizing the study around a common theme that unites a wide variety of films, as opposed to examining one specific film or a particular director's oeuvre, this book enables the reader to grasp a cultural trend that transcends the work of a single filmmaker and to appreciate the ways that a heterogeneous group of films symptomatically reflects a common problem.

Special mention should be made here of Todd McGowan's analysis of Fernando Meirelles's *The Constant Gardener* in "The Temporality of the Real: The Path to Politics in *The Constant Gardener*." The essay appeared originally as an article in *Film-Philosophy* and then, with very minor revisions, as a chapter in McGowan's fascinating book on "atemporal cinema."⁴⁰ McGowan's penetrating insights into Meirelles's strategies of deception, his brilliant interpretation of the heroine's political stance, and his fine analysis of the main male character's "path to politics" strongly influence my reading of the film.

Finally, in addition to these sundry studies of directors, films, and culture more broadly, a wide array of social, political, and economic research has enriched this study. David Harvey's important work on contemporary capitalism informs my overall appreciation of recent global

economic developments. I cite his work, in this book, more than I do that of any other author. Without his keen insights into the dynamics of capitalism, the analyses that follow would have been significantly poorer. Walter Benjamin's highly original theory of allegory and Giorgio Agamben's provocative writings on the "state of exception" figure prominently in the analysis of *Children of Men*. Naomi Klein's critique of the so-called "model" theory for the Middle East and Harvey's interpretation of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 shape the interpretation of the film narrative in *Syriana*. Marcia Angell's illuminating study of the ways that multinational pharmaceutical companies operate in the developing world and Joel Bakan's documentary work on the corporation as an institution undergird the analysis of *The Constant Gardener*. Žižek's writings on violence and Giovanni Arrighi's reading of "the long twentieth century," along with Harvey's vital research on neoliberalism, shed light on the socioeconomic subtext of *Inside Man*. Michael Lewis's eye-opening account of the collapse of the US subprime mortgage bond market in 2007 provides a "master code" for the readings of *Blue Jasmine* and *The Wolf of Wall Street*. I also have recourse to Wendy Brown's incisive interpretation of neoliberalism and David Graeber's monumental study of debt in my analysis of *Jasmine*, and to Karl Marx's elaboration of "fictitious capital" in my reading of *Wolf*.

Chapter Outlines

Selecting the individual films for this study posed a formidable challenge. This challenge arose not due to a scarcity of films on the topic but, on the contrary, due to their abundance. Numerous apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives present themselves openly. Jameson's famous dictum that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism" implicitly casts all such contemporary narratives as allegories of the demise of capitalism.⁴¹ In relation to another popular genre of the early twenty-first century, Chris Harman's *Zombie Capitalism* encourages us to perceive the numerous zombie movies and TV shows of the past few decades as allegories of an "undead" system, "seemingly dead when it comes to achieving goals and responding to human feelings, but capable of sudden spurts of activity that cause chaos all around."⁴² Similarly, the vampire fad of the 2000s can be interpreted as a mass cultural symptom of a living-dead economic system that, as Karl Marx famously said a century and a half ago, "vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour."⁴³ Otherwise, films about upwardly mobile capitalists by day who are serial killers by night clearly allegorize an economic system that subjects the poor and the vulnerable to the whims of the rich and

powerful. The latter category would include such movies as Mary Harron's *American Psycho* (2000), Bruce Evans's *Mr. Brooks* (2007), and both Niels Arden Oplev's (2009) and David Fincher's (2011) adaptations of Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2008). These and countless other films could have found a central place in this book. The reader will undoubtedly have his or her own ideas about other films that would fit neatly in a study of this sort. I hope that this book stimulates readers to develop some of those ideas. The present investigation far from exhausts the subject.

The films examined in this book were selected for the light that they shed on a particular historical sequence, which runs from the immediate post-9/11 period to the global financial crisis of 2008. The thesis of the book is that the particular films chosen, in their chronological ordering, show an arc of popular resistance to global capitalism occurring indirectly in mass culture over the course of roughly a decade. The book develops this overarching argument through a series of detailed analyses of individual films. Each chapter takes as its point of departure a central insight into how a particular film encodes a moment in this historical sequence. In the final pages of this introduction, I propose to enumerate briefly the key insight at the core of each chapter and to sketch in broad strokes the book's overall trajectory.

The first chapter takes as its point of departure the hypothesis that Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* is a contemporary *Trauerspiel*. The latter term refers to a genre of German drama that came into existence during the tumultuous years of the Thirty Years' War that ravaged Europe during the first half of the seventeenth century. In his great study of this theatrical genre, philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) argues that these tragic dramas, which return obsessively to imagery of skulls and bones, remnants and ruins, fragments and shards, reflect the turbulent historical climate of their time. The *Trauerspiel*'s fixation on images of death and destruction represents one important commonality with Cuarón's bleak depiction of a near-future England—a depiction that, as many critics have argued, very much reflects the misery of our own time. However, a second characteristic of the *Trauerspiel* is equally pertinent to the analysis of Cuarón's film. In contrast to Fletcher, for whom allegory “says one thing and means another,” for Benjamin, the allegorical figures that appear in the *Trauerspiel* can mean “absolutely anything.”⁴⁴ This chapter argues that the movie's central metaphor—that of human infertility and the imminent extinction of the human race—is precisely such a multiplicitous trope. It conjures as much the death of democracy, the breakdown of social solidarity, the destruction of nature, and the manufactured redundancy of human labor as it does the end

of humanity. Above all, I argue, it evokes the prospective extinction of the political left as a vibrant counterforce to the destructive forces of globalization.

The disheartened reader will be relieved to learn at this point that Cuarón's pessimistic vision of a society on the verge of total collapse is not typical of the films studied in this book. The *Children of Men* chapter represents the first episode in a grand narrative sketched over the course of six chapters. The subsequent chapters generally become more hopeful (although "less hopeless" might be a better way to put it) as they progress. The disconsolate reader can therefore take comfort in the thought that, by beginning with the grimmest, most depressing, and least uplifting of the movies on the filmography, we can now progress only in the direction of more nuanced appraisals of the contemporary situation.

That being said, the second chapter is hardly cheerier than the first. It examines Stephen Gaghan's notoriously complex geopolitical thriller *Syriana*. The film interweaves narratives of a corporate merger in the US oil and gas sector, a political rivalry in an oil-rich state in the Persian Gulf, a CIA field operative trying to locate a US missile that went missing in the Middle East, and two unemployed migrant workers who use the missing warhead in a suicide attack on a Liquefied Natural Gas carrier stationed in the Persian Gulf. Part of what this chapter does is examine the ways that this film narrative allegorizes global developments at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The central allegorical figure around which the investigation is organized is the one that gives the movie its title. "Syriana," a word never uttered in the film, is an actual term used within right-wing political action groups during the early years of the twenty-first century, designating a hypothetical reconfiguration of the Middle East in ways that would further US interests in the region. According to Klein and Harvey, this conception of a reconfigured Middle East provided a strong impetus for the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq in 2003. I argue that the movie's ambiguous ending suggests two radically different visions of the map that might emerge from the chaos in the Middle East. One anticipates the conversion of the region into the "Syriana" of the film's title, while the other allegorically prefigures the creation of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

The third chapter shifts from East-West conflicts between the United States and the Middle East to North-South relations between the United Kingdom and sub-Saharan Africa, and from Big Oil to Big Pharma. The title of this chapter, "Corporate Murder," comes from a remark that a British spy stationed in Nairobi makes toward the end of Meirelles's *The Constant Gardener*. The spy uses this evocative expression to describe the assassination of a social activist who had uncovered how a

multinational pharmaceutical company was using unwitting patients from the slums of Nairobi as human guinea pigs for a new drug it was testing, but the phrase applies equally to the way that the corporation operates more generally in Africa. As the muckraking activist whose murder at the beginning of the film sets the plot in motion discovered, the drug company has been dumping the bodies of test patients who responded adversely to the drug into unmarked graves and covering them in quicklime. This chapter explores the various “corporate murders” that the movie’s fictional pharmaceutical company carries out, and the successive attempts to bring the murderers to justice.

The fourth chapter examines yet another corporate sector: the financial sector. This is the sector that, since the 1980s, has become the predominant force in the global economy. The central insight that animates the argument in this chapter is the revelation that the title character of Spike Lee’s *Inside Man* is neither of the film’s two main characters but their common enemy, a Wall Street banker who made his fortune in the vilest of circumstances. This chapter argues that this unsavory character represents the type of wealth accumulation that Harvey calls “accumulation by dispossession.” Taking my lead from the presence, in one of Lee’s famous “signature shots,” of a photograph of the Wall Street tycoon with President George H.W. Bush, I examine the three forms of “accumulation by dispossession” that the movie evokes. The first is the type of wealth accumulation associated with Bush’s father Prescott Bush, a man who allegedly made his fortune during the Second World War in circumstances not at all dissimilar to those in which the film’s eponymous “inside man” made his. The second is the recrudescence of “accumulation by dispossession” that the turn to financialization enabled during the political career of George H.W. Bush (first in his role as vice president under Ronald Reagan, then as president) in the long decade of the 1980s. The third is the profit that political and economic insiders reap from the systemic crisis that, according to sociologist Giovanni Arrighi, the switch from manufacturing to financialization invariably heralds. It is precisely such a crisis that the United States was undergoing when the film premiered in 2006, during the administration of the second President Bush.

Chapter 5 continues the line of inquiry begun in the preceding chapter. It reads Martin Scorsese’s *The Wolf of Wall Street* as an allegory of the financial shenanigans that, in 2008, produced the worst global financial crisis since the Great Crash of 1929. However, I argue, the film’s allegorical dimensions are as much a matter of form as they are of content. The movie plays us for a chump, I argue, even as it exposes how the wolves of Wall Street rip us off. In order to bring this self-reflexive

dimension of the movie into relief from the outset, the chapter begins with an examination of the film's duplicitous narrative strategy, which I then extrapolate first to the eponymous wolf's particular financial schemes and finally to finance capitalism more broadly.

The sixth chapter examines the financial collapse of 2008 from a different angle. The central insight that guides the reading of Woody Allen's *Blue Jasmine* is the homology between the title character's personal itinerary and macroeconomic developments that unfolded on a national scale in the United States during the late 2000s. In the film, Jasmine, a former New York socialite who finds herself suddenly reduced to poverty, suffers a mental breakdown and is then rescued from immediate ruin by her estranged working-class sister. However, despite her best efforts and the support she receives from her sister, Jasmine recovers neither her mental stability nor her financial standing. When the last of her attempts to regain her lost status fails and she suffers her final breakdown at the end of the movie, Jasmine goes into freefall. In sum, replicating in miniature economic developments in the late 2000s, the movie depicts a meltdown and a bailout, but—in contrast to the national narrative spun by media pundits following the crash of 2008—the bailout, in Allen's film, does not lead to a recovery. This chapter analyzes the ways that Allen's story of a woman's collapse, fragile recovery, and ultimate demise recasts and implicitly interprets the socioeconomic macro-narrative of the United States in the early twenty-first century.