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*How the Iraq War and George W. Bush sent the movie industry back to its favorite era—the 1970s*by **Ross Douthat**

# The Return of the Paranoid Style



Illustration by Steve Brodner

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Ross Douthat looks critically at the film industry's response to the Iraq War.

**L**ess than two weeks before the United States and its allies invaded Iraq, in March of 2003, Sony Pictures released a war movie called *Tears of the Sun*. The director was Antoine Fuqua, fresh off the success of 2001's *Training Day*; the star was Bruce Willis, playing a Navy SEAL lieutenant whose platoon is assigned to extricate an American caught up in a Nigerian civil war. The plot was a straightforward brief for moralistic interventionism: Willis and his men flout the orders of their caution-minded superiors and take on an army of Muslim rebels who are raping and pillaging their way through the African countryside. "For all the years that we have been told to stand down and stand by," one of the soldiers says as they lock and load. "For our sins," Willis's lieutenant agrees. Then they sweep in, guns blazing.

*Tears of the Sun* was a relatively modest film, budgeted in the tens rather than the hundreds of millions, but it was significant even so for being precisely the sort of movie 9/11 was supposed to spawn: righteously patriotic, confident in American might, and freighted with old-fashioned archetypes, with the rugged Willis saving the helpless Africans (and the lissome Monica Bellucci) from a horde of machete-wielding savages. It represented the kind of culture-industry sea change anticipated by the *Vanity Fair* editor Graydon Carter's famous remark that 9/11 had slain irony. It seemed to vindicate the conservative columnist Peggy Noonan's prediction that the attacks would resurrect the spirit of John Wayne. And it was the sort of movie the left-wing critic Susan Faludi presumably had in mind when she lamented, in her recent book, *The Terror*

*Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*, that “the cultural troika of media, entertainment and advertising declared the post-9/11 age an era of ... redomesticated femininity, and reconstituted Cold War manhood.”

Nothing in this commentary, however, bears much resemblance to the way American popular culture actually has evolved since 9/11. The latter-day cowboys have conspicuously failed to materialize: in the past six years, the movie industry has produced exactly zero major motion pictures dedicated to lionizing American soldiers fighting on the ground in Iraq or Afghanistan. *Tears of the Sun* proved to be an outlier; more typical of our cultural moment are the movies that its director and star turned out early last year. In Fuqua’s *Shooter*, a redneck sniper goes up against a conspiracy that’s headed by a villainous right-wing Montana senator (who happens to be a Dick Cheney look-alike) and aimed at covering up an oil company’s human-rights abuses. In Robert Rodriguez’s B-movie homage, *Planet Terror*, Willis plays another military man, but this time the plot, such as it is, turns on a zombie-creating nerve agent that may have been tested on Willis and his soldiers, the movie hints, as punishment for their having killed Osama bin Laden when the government wanted him kept alive and at large.

Such self-conscious nods to contemporary controversies should be taken, in part, as proof that our popular culture is more impervious to real-world tragedy than most critics would care to admit. The machine that churns out Hollywood blockbusters grinds on remorselessly, and nothing so minor as a terrorist attack is going to keep the next *Pirates of the Caribbean* from its date with box-office destiny.

But it wasn’t just the reassertion of America’s usual frivolity that caused the 9/11 moment to be stillborn; it was the swiftness with which the Iraq War replaced the fall of the Twin Towers as this decade’s cultural touchstone. It’s Halliburton, Abu Ghraib, and the missing WMDs that have summoned up a cultural moment in which bin Laden is a tongue-in-cheek punch line for a zombie movie and the film industry’s typical take on geopolitics traces all the world’s evils to the machinations of a White Male enemy at home.

Conservatives such as Noonan hoped that 9/11 would bring back the best of the 1940s and ’50s, playing Pearl Harbor to a new era of patriotism and solidarity. Many on the left feared that it would restore the worst of the same era, returning us to the shackles of censorship and conformism, jingoism and Joe McCarthy. But as far as Hollywood is concerned, another decade entirely seems to have slouched round again: the paranoid, cynical, end-of-empire 1970s.

We expected John Wayne; we got Jason Bourne instead.

**T**he Bourne movies are the first major action franchise of the new millennium; they’re also the highest-grossing example of the revival of the paranoid style in American cinema. Matt Damon’s Bourne marries the efficiency of James Bond to the politics of Noam Chomsky. He’s imperial overreach and blowback personified—the carefully brainwashed product of a covert CIA program who goes off the reservation and starts taking down his superiors, a succession of jowly, corrupt agents of the American empire. The Bourne saga’s anti-government paranoia reached its peak in last year’s \$227 million-grossing *Bourne Ultimatum*, which exposes the CIA as an all-powerful bureaucracy that can track anybody, anywhere, and is comfortable wiping out journalists, innocent bystanders, and even its own agents in the service of dubious war-on-terrorism aims. “Where does it end?” the lone free-thinking spook, Joan Allen, demands of her superior. “It ends when we’ve won,” he snaps, before ordering up another execution.

Such “fear thy government” anxieties are always laced throughout American pop culture. But they belong most of all to the 1970s, when the one-two punch of Vietnam and Watergate sparked recurring visions of isolated Americans trapped in the gears of an irreducibly complex conspiracy: Gene Hackman’s surveillance expert in *The Conversation* (1974), tearing up his

apartment in search of proof that his every move is being watched; Robert Redford's CIA agent in *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), forced to go on the run from shadowy forces within his own government; Warren Beatty's reporter in *The Parallax View* (1974), manipulated by a sinister corporation to become the "lone gunman" patsy in its latest bought-and-paid-for assassination.

Now they belong to us as well. Hollywood's highest-profile conspiracy theorist is, of course, Michael Moore. But the more telling figure is Stephen Gaghan, the screenwriter for Steven Soderbergh's Oscar winner, *Traffic* (2000), who moved on to script and direct *Syriana* (2005), the first major Middle East movie released after the invasion of Iraq. *Traffic* and *Syriana* are superficially similar, offering kaleidoscopic visions of American policy that rove across borders and multiple points of view. But whereas the former takes care to present the architects of our failed drug policy as decent (if misguided) people struggling with the moral compromises required in a fallen world, *Syriana* eschews nuance entirely, tracing all the ills of Mesopotamia to a malign nexus of Texas oilmen, neocons, and a trigger-happy CIA, and culminating with the agency ordering a missile strike on an inconveniently liberal Arab leader to preserve an American oil company's bargaining position.

The same paranoia about sinister forces behind government conduct pervades Hollywood's recent backward glances, from the McCarthy era of George Clooney's *Good Night and Good Luck* (2005) to the secret history of the CIA unveiled in Robert De Niro's *The Good Shepherd* (2006) to the bleak, wilderness-of-mirrors portrayal of Israel's 1970s war on terrorism in Steven Spielberg's *Munich* (2005). It's been woven into futuristic dystopias (2006's *Children of Men* and *V for Vendetta*) and into anti-corporate thrillers (last fall's *Michael Clayton*, 2005's *The Constant Gardener*). And although the paranoid style is most prevalent in prestige movies, it's shown up in more-escapist fare as well, from the hit TV show *Prison Break*, which cross-pollinates *Escape From Alcatraz* with *The Parallax View*, to J. J. Abrams's *Mission: Impossible III* (2006), whose villain is an overzealous neoconservative bent on provoking a terrorist attack.

Even what seems to be the great exception to this pattern, the TV thriller *24*, turns out not to be so exceptional after all. Yes, the show's Jack Bauer is in certain respects the anti-Jason Bourne, with his unyielding, torture-happy pursuit of America's enemies. But Bauer's ass-kicking takes place in a landscape straight out of the '70s, in which America's terrorist enemies are enabled by (in no particular order) a cabal of businessmen hoping to foment a Middle Eastern war and benefit from skyrocketing oil prices; a group of hawkish Cabinet officials who plot to remove from office (or assassinate) their dovish superiors; a Nixonian chief executive who permits terrorist attacks on American soil as a pretext for U.S. military intervention in Central Asia; and an endless host of traitors inside America's antiterrorism outfit.

*24* is unusual, in the current pop-culture context, in that it allows that America does face terrorist enemies. But because it intimates, again and again, that the terrorists are creations of our own corrupt elites, it's actually typical of our neo-'70s moment.

**T**he ultraviolent genres of the 1970s are enjoying a renaissance as well. The modern slasher flick was born in the aftermath of Vietnam, in shocking, deliberately nihilistic films such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). Beginning in the mid-1980s, the genre took a detour into increasingly comic territory, with the semi-laughable Nightmare on Elm Street series giving way to outright farces like the *Scream* films. But now the old nihilism is back. Some of the modern gore-fests, such as *The Hills Have Eyes* (2006), recapitulate or just remake '70s splatter pictures; others, such as the *Saw* tetralogy, break new ground in so-called torture porn. And a subset of the genre—Eli Roth's *Hostel* (2005) and its sequel, *Hostel: Part II* (2007); John Stockwell's *Turistas* (2006)—might be described as "blowback horror," films in which feckless young Americans are trapped in overseas abattoirs that evoke al-Qaeda's execution videos.

The slasher renaissance has been joined by a revival of zombie films. The Vietnam era was bracketed by George Romero's

*Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), and the Iraq era, too, has its defining undead: the fast-moving zombies of Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002) and its sequel, *28 Weeks Later* (2007). (The latter doubles as an explicit Iraq War allegory, featuring marines operating from a London "Green Zone" while they try to reestablish order in a zombieified Great Britain.) There's been a broader Romero revival as well, encompassing 2004's *Dawn of the Dead* remake and its zombie parody, *Shaun of the Dead*, and Romero's own return to zombieland, in *Land of the Dead* (2005) and this year's *Diary of the Dead*.

As with slashers and zombies, so with vigilantes. The '70s had *Dirty Harry* (1971), *Walking Tall* (1973), *Death Wish* (1974), and all their sequels, with *Taxi Driver* (1976) thrown in for good measure. The '00s have served up a slew of remakes and imitators—as though the two decades were “twin dark alleys in the American imagination,” Eric Lichtenfeld wrote recently in the online magazine *Slate*—culminating in the release last fall of *The Brave One*, a self-conscious homage to the *Death Wish* movies, with Jodie Foster filling Charles Bronson's shoes as a violated New Yorker looking for payback.

To all these '70s revivals we can add yet another: the rebirth of tragic realism. The most talented directors of the Vietnam era set about reworking and darkening archetypal American narratives—the detective story in *Chinatown* (1974) and *The French Connection* (1971); the gangster saga in *The Godfather* (1972); the war movie in *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979); and the western in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* (1971) and the blood-soaked films of Sergio Leone. The Iraq era has produced a similarly gritty revisionism. The past year of cinema alone saw David Fincher's *Zodiac*, a deliberately inconclusive procedural about a real-life serial killer from the '60s and '70s; James Gray and Ridley Scott channeling Scorsese and Coppola in *We Own the Night* and *American Gangster*, respectively; and Sidney Lumet channeling, well, himself in *Before the Devil Knows You're Dead*.

But the new realism finds its principal home on pay cable, a more expansive—and explicit—medium than the Coppolas and Lumets and Altmans and Scorseses had to play with. Three HBO shows led the way—*The Sopranos*, *The Wire*, and *Deadwood*, each offering a bleak revision of a classic American genre. (Tony Soprano's famous whine, “Whatever happened to Gary Cooper?,” is a grim counterpoint to the post-9/11 fantasies of a John Wayne revival.) They've been joined by lesser lights such as *Brotherhood* and *The Shield*, and by the first great revisionist sci-fi serial, *Battlestar Galactica*, helmed by an ex-*Star Trek* writer and featuring enough sex, violence, and religious fanaticism to set Gene Roddenberry spinning in his grave.

Insofar as American foreign policy impinges directly on these worlds, it provides ironic context to events on the home front. On *The Wire*, the beleaguered cops of Baltimore find that their city's bloody drug wars are near the bottom of a terrorism-obsessed FBI's list of priorities. The commentary in *The Sopranos* is more pointed still: midway through the final season, Tony's hapless son, A.J., abruptly decides to join the Army and ship off to Afghanistan, in search of the moral purpose that's eluded him as a mobster's son in suburban New Jersey. His horrified parents quickly buy him off with a fancy new car and a movie-business job—not because that's what a Mob family does, the show suggests, but because that's what almost any upper-middle-class American parents would do. For the Sopranos and their law-abiding neighbors alike, the wars that followed 9/11 are for other families to fight.

**T**his last reality brings us to the question of how authentic our back-to-the-'70s moment really is. The Vietnam War was a cultural phenomenon in part because it couldn't help being one—there was no way for Americans to keep the war at arm's length, not with more than 50,000 dead, a million deployed over the course of the war, and every able-bodied teen and twentysomething at risk of conscription. In contrast, the Iraq War, a lower-casualty conflict fought by an all-volunteer military, takes place at a greater distance from the everyday lives of those Americans who don't have a family member deployed overseas. The objective correlatives needed for a truly pessimistic era simply don't exist for

many Americans today. The last time around, we were participants; this time, we're voyeurs.

This doesn't mean that the current paranoid, doom-ridden mood in cinema and television was manufactured in Hollywood and foisted on an unwilling public. Up to a point, at least, Hollywood is meeting Americans where they are. Mistrust of government and disquiet about the country's future have risen to Vietnam-era levels, and reviving '70s-style paranoia and pessimism is a natural way for the culture industry to connect with a public coping, once again, with a military quagmire, rising oil prices, prophecies of ecological doom, and corruption in high places.

But the '70s revival isn't simply a case of supply responding to demand; it's also a case of Hollywood giving the audience what Hollywood *wants* to give it. The '70s were in many ways dreadful years for America, but they're remembered much more fondly in the film industry. There's no surer way to establish your artistic (and political) bona fides than to name-drop a '70s movie—whether it's George Clooney bringing up *All the President's Men* (1976) while promoting *Michael Clayton*, or Stephen Gaghan remarking that of course he was “thinking about *The Parallax View* and also *Three Days of the Condor*” while making *Syriana*. The suggestion is always the same—that the age of leisure suits and sideburns was also the high tide of politically engaged filmmaking, before the studios embarked on the relentless pursuit of the blockbuster and the Reagan reaction pushed American culture steadily to the right.

This is a self-serving story line, but it contains an element of truth. The changing economics of the business, and the changing public mood, did make the '80s a more middlebrow, conservative decade in pop culture. After out-of-control projects such as Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* and Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate* (1980), the film industry grew wary of auteurs and their excesses and used box-office hits such as *Star Wars* (1977) and the *Indiana Jones* saga as its templates. On television, *All in the Family* and *Maude* gave way to *Full House* and *The Cosby Show*. The Oscars that had gone to *The Godfather* (1972) and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) went to *Chariots of Fire* (1981) and *Gandhi* (1982) and *Out of Africa* (1985). Eighties Hollywood was still grappling with the Vietnam War—in *Platoon* (1986) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), among other films—but the rumpled liberal truth-seekers who raced, wide-eyed, through the thrillers of the '70s were increasingly replaced by the likes of Tom Cruise dogfighting with Russians in *Top Gun* (1986) or Patrick Swayze leading his “wolverines” to victory against Soviet invaders in *Red Dawn* (1984).

During the '90s, the expansion of cable TV and independent filmmaking began to change this middlebrow-or-bust equation: HBO's *Oz*, the brutal prison drama that paved the way for *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*, debuted in 1997; the “indie” craze kicked off by Steven Soderbergh's *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989) built steadily to 1996, the Year of the Indie, when four of the five Best Picture nominees were produced outside the major studios. But the thing that actors and directors seemed to miss the most about the 1970s—the mood of the decade, the mix of paranoia and pessimism and ambivalence about America itself—made for a poor fit with the optimism of the Clinton boom. What nihilism there was came across as winking rather than bone-deep—Tarantino, not Polanski—and even the strongest forays into subversion and social criticism, such as David Fincher's *Fight Club* (1999) and David O. Russell's Gulf War tragicomedy *Three Kings* (1999), felt somewhat weightless.

The age of George W. Bush and the Iraq War meshes much more neatly with the industry's '70s nostalgia. Just not quite as neatly, perhaps, as Hollywood seems to think. As we've seen, the broad-brush similarities between the two decades have been used to impressive cinematic effect. But because the two decades don't map precisely onto one another, the '70s revival is more successful, both artistically and at the box office, when it's intimated than when it's made explicit. And the closer a movie hews to real-world events, the greater the strain of making the Vietnam-era mood fit the Iraq-era facts.

The paranoid style of filmmaking, for instance, is defined in both its Vietnam- and Iraq-era incarnations by the insistence that villains at home are more dangerous than any enemies abroad. This was a plausible point of view when the enemy

abroad was Ho Chi Minh: the Vietnam War didn't begin with "Charlie" bombing downtown Manhattan, and there was little chance that VC cadres would follow America back home. It's a tougher sell in the age of Osama bin Laden, and as a result an air of omission, even denial, hangs over this genre's contemporary incarnations.

Consider, as a telling example, Jonathan Demme's remake of *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004). The brilliance of John Frankenheimer's original lay in its willingness to conflate threats domestic and foreign, by featuring a buffoonish, demagogic Joe McCarthy figure who himself turned out to be a pawn of Communist agents (his wife chief among them). The obvious way to update the story would have been to portray a Cheney-like politician being manipulated by an al-Qaeda sleeper cell. Instead, Demme replaces the Red Menace with an evil corporation, in the process transforming a brilliantly murky story in which even paranoiacs turn out to have enemies (a fairly accurate take on the McCarthy era, as it happens) into a predictable rant against corporate power, in which the only thing America has to fear is Halliburton itself.

Islamist terrorism has made occasional small-screen appearances, on shows like *The West Wing* and Showtime's *Sleeper Cell* as well as on *24*. But as far as the movies are concerned, the events of 9/11 have proven far less influential than the demands of the paranoid style. (Or the fear of Muslim backlash, perhaps, whether in the form of overseas riots or press releases from the Council on American-Islamic Relations.) More big-budget movies featuring Islamist villains were released in the 1990s than in the seven years since 9/11, and apart from docudramas like *United 93*, last fall's *The Kingdom*—released to hand-wringing over its supposed jingoism—was the first major studio release to feature Muslim terrorists since 1998's *The Siege*.

Even in films that aren't taking thinly veiled jabs at the Bush administration, terrorist baddies turn out to be Eurotrash arms dealers (2006's *Casino Royale*), disgruntled hackers (2007's *Live Free or Die Hard*), a sinister air marshal (2005's *Flightplan*), or the handsome white guy sitting next to you in the airport lounge (2005's *Red Eye*). Anyone and anybody, in other words, except the sort of people who actually attacked the United States on 9/11.

The new wave of vigilante films suffers from a similar detachment from certain on-the-ground realities. Whereas the original *Dirty Harry*-style movies emerged in response to an enormous rise in violent crime, today's vigilante films are being made in a country where the crime rate has been dropping steadily for 15 years and where ordinary people are safer from violence than at any point since the early 1960s. During the decade of *Taxi Driver* and *Death Wish*, New York City averaged roughly 1,500 murders a year; the New York of *The Brave One* had fewer than 500. (Jodie Foster's gun-toting avenger alone would have been responsible for more than 1 percent of the city's annual killings.) Likewise, the slasher films of the 1970s corresponded with a succession of high-profile serial murderers, including Ted Bundy and Son of Sam, the Hillside Strangler and John Wayne Gacy, and of course the Zodiac killer. No such epidemic exists today: the *Hostel* films may nod to al-Qaeda's execution videos and Abu Ghraib, but the *Saw* films and the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* remakes and all the rest are pure spectacle, an homage to yesterday's fears rather than an expression of today's.

This sense of homage runs through many of the neo-'70s offerings, as though Hollywood were going back to the same creative wells rather than drilling new ones. It isn't just the run of remakes and revisions, or the too-obvious attempts to imitate Alan Pakula or Scorsese; it's the slew of projects, such as *Munich* and *Zodiac* and *American Gangster*, that are actually *set* in the '70s, as though our own era can't quite sustain the bleakness that a '70s revival requires.

Nowhere is this problem more apparent than in last fall's trio of anti-war "message movies," all of which seemed incapable of seeing the current conflict through any lens except that of Vietnam. Brian De Palma's *Redacted* takes the plot of his 1989 melodrama, *Casualties of War*—in which American grunts commit rape and murder in the Vietnamese highlands—gives it a "found footage" spin, and comes out with a story in which American grunts ... commit rape and murder in Iraq. Paul

Haggis's *In the Valley of Elah* portrays a Vietnam vet dad (Tommy Lee Jones) investigating the death of his Iraq War vet son and encountering a cocktail of wartime trauma and home-front disintegration familiar to anyone who's seen *The Deer Hunter* (1978). And Robert Redford's *Lions for Lambs* ham-handedly evokes Vietnam in no fewer than three intertwining narratives. In the first, two working-class marines, one black and one Hispanic, are sent to certain death in Afghanistan; in the second, a Boomer journalist (Meryl Streep) quotes the Who's "Won't Get Fooled Again" to a hawkish GOP senator (Tom Cruise) who's trying to sell her on a new military strategy; in the third, an idealistic professor (Redford himself) exhorts a spoiled student to live up to the standard of protest and political engagement set by, yes, the Vietnam generation.

The point is not that similarities don't exist between that conflict and this one—the Iraq War has more than its share of follies in high places, wartime atrocities, and home-front miseries. (De Palma and Haggis both drew on real-life incidents for their films.) But the entertainment industry, in its haste to re-create the '70s, hasn't come to terms with the differences. The differences in our war aims, for one thing. The differences in the enemies we face, for another. The differences in our military—not only in its composition, morale, and leadership, but in the way it's regarded by civilians back home. Nor has the industry come to terms with what this last distinction says about the impact of the Iraq War on the American psyche—namely, that although the conflict has made us doubt our leaders, it hasn't made us doubt ourselves.

**T**hat is, in the end, the key distinction. The Vietnam War was a bipartisan fiasco that took place amid profound social disarray, and everyone was understood to be complicit—Democrats as well as Republicans, ordinary citizens as well as politicians, the soldiers on the ground as well as the Best and the Brightest shipping them overseas. The conflict in Iraq is occurring during a time of relative domestic peace, and as a result the pessimism it's produced, though real enough, hasn't shaken our civilizational confidence in nearly the same way.

The difference is readily apparent in our politics. The Vietnam era had riots and rallies, the Weathermen and the Symbionese Liberation Army, because the rot seemed to go so deep that only desperate measures were worth contemplating. The resistance movements of this era, by contrast, spend most of their time raising money for Democratic candidates, because it seems to many people that winning a few elections could make the nightmare go away. And what's true for MoveOn.org is true for the entertainment industry. The popular culture of the 1970s reflected the widespread sense that only a revolution could set things right. But nobody's going to write a 21st-century version of Peter Biskind's *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* (1998), a book about the revolutionary spirit and countercultural excesses of '70s Hollywood stars; this generation of stars is too busy fund-raising for Hillary and Obama.

All of this suggests that the '70s revival, though pervasive at the moment, may not have that much staying power. The original decade of nightmares didn't end when the Vietnam War did; it persisted through Ford and Carter, oil shocks and stagflation, and the Iran hostage crisis. The new '70s may go out with George W. Bush.

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