Warrior geopolitics: Gladiator, Black Hawk Down and The Kingdom Of Heaven

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Abstract

The “war on terror” and remilitarization of political anxiety in the aftermath of September 11th in the West, is both facilitated and challenged by representations of geopolitical danger and the supposed necessity for warriors to fight wars in distant lands. Ridley Scott’s three movies, Gladiator, Black Hawk Down and most recently The Kingdom of Heaven explore the morality and identity of warriors. They do so in exotic landscapes and settings that emphasize the confrontation with danger as external and frequently unknowable; political violence is presented as something that has both simple and very complicated geographies. The public discussion of the necessity for warfare and “intervention” in Western states is enmeshed in discourses of moralities, rights and “just war”. The professional Western warrior, whether a special forces operative or garrison soldier in peacekeeping mode, is a key figure of the post September 11th era, physically securing the West, and simultaneously securing its identity as the repository of virtue against barbaric threats to civilization. These themes are key to Ridley Scott’s work. Analyzing them in terms of the warrior, empire and the particular geographies of combat adds a specifically military dimension to the critical geopolitical literature on war and representation.

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Contemporary geopolitics

The “war on terror” and the remilitarization of political anxiety in the aftermath of September 11th in the West, is both facilitated and challenged by representations of geopolitical danger
and the supposed necessity for warriors to fight wars in distant lands. The conduct of the war directly challenges conventional assumptions of state centered social thinking and war relating to territorial integrity and suggests once again, not only the obvious importance of extraterritoriality in contemporary geopolitics, but the necessity of engaging the representations of warriors and warfare in the discussions of global politics. From the putative left in the case of Michael Ignatieff in the *Warrior’s Honor* (1998) and *Empire Lite* (2003), or the right in the case of Robert Kaplan’s *Warrior Politics* (2002) and *Imperial Grunts* (2005), the public discussion of the necessity for warfare and “intervention” is enmeshed in discourses of moralities, rights, “just war” and discussions of modes of behaviour appropriate for the contemporary warrior (Burke, 2007).

At least as far as global capital was concerned, once the cold war ended much of the world reverted to the economic patterns of globalization which had been interrupted by war in 1914, protectionism, depression, and war again in 1939 and its aftermath. So too much of the discourse of immigration, multiculturalism and fears of culturally different others reverted to themes that at least loosely parallel the pre World War One discussions of inter-racial relations (Vitalis, 2006). In this sense, at least 9/11 marks a watershed because the inadequate spatial categories of cold war politics and international relations are now unavoidable (Sparke, 2005). Hence, in part, the importance of challenging the taken for granted spatial assumptions of politics by engaging explicitly with the more complex and nuanced formulations in the debate about empire (Dalby, 2005). But as the critical literature in international relations in the last decade has made very clear, all this also requires different topics for scholarly attention and a different vocabulary for analysis, one which can usefully draw on cultural studies (Falk, Ruiz, & Walker, 2002; Debrix & Weber, 2003; Shapiro, 2004). Popular representations of warfare in movies, novels, computer games and numerous media are part of the current discourse of danger, terror and intervention as the literature of critical geopolitics also recognizes (Debrix, 2008; Power & Crampton, 2007).

Geopolitics is now also in part an engagement with the discussions of empire (Dalby, 2007a, 2007b; Ferguson, 2003; Harvey, 2003). There is little agreement on what kind of empire, the possibilities of successful policing or a carefully worked out grand strategy, but the theme of empire is now unavoidable. With it goes the imperial functionary, the moral discourses of civilization and the figure of the professional Western warrior. Whether a special forces operative or garrison soldier in peacekeeping mode, these warriors are key figures of the post September 11th era, physically securing the West, and simultaneously securing its identity as the repository of virtue against barbaric threats to civilization. But this virtue is compromised by precisely the supposed need to act in very uncivilized manners in fighting the war on terror (Hannah, 2006). Hence, the importance of discussing the moralities of warfare and the key contextualizing tropes that supposedly offer the alibi of exceptional places and circumstances requiring exceptional license.

Dangerous spaces that need the heroic deeds of champions and defenders to keep their hazards at bay are also a recurring theme in popular culture, whether in the antics of comic book heroes who explicitly invoke tropes of empire (Dittmer, 2005), or in the adventures of latter day warriors in the form of secret agents who nonetheless reprise themes of imperial mastery even while lampooning them on screen (Dodds, 2003). Dangerous distant places also structure both the official documents of the Bush administration’s formulations of the war against terror (Dalby, 2006, 2007a), and the popular articulations of the rationale for this war in Tom Barnett’s *Pentagon’s New Map* (2004) and the *Blueprint for Action* (2005). In this sense, Derek Gregory’s (2004) book title captures the essence of our geopolitical times in specifying matters as *The Colonial Present*. 
In the discussions of empire, the histories of imperial conquest and more recently the themes of post-coloniality in geography, the figure of the warrior has received much less attention than others. Contemporary landscapes of warfare are populated with warriors now widely understood, once again, as doing the business of empire, although with a few notable exceptions (Dodds, 2003; Ó Tuathail, 2005; Woodward, 2008), contemporary geographical scholarship hasn’t engaged the theme of the warrior in detail. Neither, until recently (Graham, 2004, 2008; Gregory & Pred, 2007; Woodward, 2004) has contemporary geography paid much attention to military landscapes or the terrains of combat and the increasing importance of urban settings of violence (Davis, 2006). As such, this paper is both a preliminary engagement with the theme of the warrior and imperial landscapes of combat as well as an extension of recent work in critical geopolitics on film. “This involves a recognition that cinema provides an important space of confrontation and encounter for viewers and the recognition that the reception of filmic meaning is far from passive. … Thus film is important in the study of critical geopolitics because it represents a constitutive element in the production of political geographies and because political spaces and landscapes are implicit tools in the production of film.” (Power & Crampton, 2005: 197).

Selecting an appropriate lens through which to explore the geographical moralities of empire presents the critic with a methodological difficulty due simply to the proliferation of so much material germane to the theme. Rather than follow Gregory’s (2004, 2006a) focus on particular places and their representation in contemporary political discourse, the device used here, to keep the whole analysis manageable within the bounds of a single paper, is to focus on popular culture, and three of Ridley Scott’s more recent movies, and examine the figure of the warrior in various landscapes. Specifically, this paper reads Gladiator, Black Hawk Down and The Kingdom of Heaven to examine this figure of the warrior and how moral codes are related to extreme circumstances. The paper looks to these codes and links them to discussions of interventions and imperial practices, and the fraught discussions of appropriate conduct in the confused spaces of contemporary violence where 20th century distinctions between nation states and between civilian and combatant no longer seem to hold (Gregory, 2006b).

Empires, warriors, and moralities

More specifically, of late, combat movies have been an integral part of the production of geopolitical spaces which construct identities of heroes and villains on the one hand but also provide both fictional and mimetic discourses of the terrains of danger on the other (Debrix, 2008; Der Derian, 2001). Well before 9/11, in his discussion of cultures of war, Michael Shapiro (1997) argued that while the normal focus was on the matter of interstate violence in international relations the simple fact is that much of contemporary political violence simply doesn’t fit this state cartography. This poses questions of the larger canvass of political order, the role of troops in exotic places, how imperial operations are to be understood and crucially how the phenomenology of perception constructs arenas of combat (Shapiro, 2005, 2007). Shapiro’s (2005) key Kantian point about how the fog of war presupposes a given clarity that is obscured by fog, rather than being a matter of the categories that are brought to bear on the construction of objects that can be observed, is especially applicable to the delicate art of film criticism where the categories brought to the cinema are key to understanding the subsequent texts.

Crucial among these categories are geopolitical assumptions about war, battles and appropriate modes of conduct for soldiers. Ironically, as this paper suggests in particular in the
discussion of *Black Hawk Down*, the very specific geographies of combat, where the codes of the warrior play out in violence, death and mutilation, have usually been overlooked by critics in their focus on Orientalism and the criticism of “war movies” as propaganda in the service of American imperial actions. Given the complex attempts to constrain and limit the violence of humanitarian interventions, the invocation of Geneva conventions and rationalizations for “just war”, this paper suggests both that the figure of the warrior (and not just the professional “soldier” Woodward (2008) discusses) is worthy of further attention by geographers, and that attention to the specific arenas of combat and the tactics and weapons used there, is a necessary addendum to the existing scholarship on ethics, war and morality in the “violent geographies” of the present (Gregory & Pred, 2007).

This paper suggests in part that what makes the drama of the warrior, and the moral dilemmas and choices facing those warriors, so compelling is the settings in which these dramas unfold. Precisely because of this geography of extreme conditions, set in exotic locales beyond the mundane, the routine and the quotidian, the staging offers dramatic possibilities. The importance of context to the operation of morality is key, albeit its a topic that contemporary discussions of codes of ethics and the establishment of universal rules or morality, whether in the discussions of international politics or elsewhere, frequently occlude (Burke, 2007). Warfare makes these matters clearer than most venues of human conduct. Chivalry between knights, and King Henry V’s despair at the violation of the warrior’s code when the French slaughter the personnel in the baggage train in Shakespeare’s rendition of the battle of Agincourt are emblematic. But a more contemporary account of American troops in Western Europe in the Second World War is clearer on the applicability of particular codes in precise geographical circumstances: “It should strike everyone as funny that armies at war are insane institutions devoted to two quite contradictory operations, both brought to the highest technological standard. One operation requires bringing death to people with the highest efficiency. The other is rescuing people from death with the greatest efficiency. And those rescued are, crazily, not just members of the familiar, homegrown army but the despised enemy as well.” (Fussell, 2003: 115). The codes that apply on the battlefield are neatly reversed in the nearby field hospital and the prisoner of war camp.

Locale is thus crucial in this conduct of warfare, or at least it is commonly understood to be in this rendition of warfare according to the Geneva conventions, where combat is limited to specific arenas and the distinction between combatant and civilian is relatively clear most of the time. This distinction still frequently dominates the modern military imaginary even when it is ignored in practice (Gregory, 2006b). It was key to the reconstruction of a professional ethos in the American army after Vietnam which repudiated counter-insurgency actions given that they had violated all such distinctions in South East Asia. Instead, the focus on combat and decisive victory constructed a technologically capable combat machine designed nearly exclusively for fighting other regular armed forces. The legacy of this professionalization of the armed forces in part explains why that army went to war in Afghanistan and then Iraq without any doctrine or training to deal with insurgencies (Aylwin-Foster, 2005; Vest, 2005). An institution constructed to fight a conventional modern war between states found itself doing something very different, fighting an unconventional foe. But then most imperial wars are “unconventional”, a point that the American forces fighting in Iraq have learned the hard way once again in the last few years (Ricks, 2006). As Graham (2008) notes, many of the technological advantages American forces possess are of little advantage in densely populated urban areas; urban insurgencies neutralize many of the combat advantages of the revolution in military affairs.
The warriors live out the codes that simultaneously produce violent places in need of taming, the virtuous warriors who are the bearers of civilization, and its peaceful places in need of protection (Gregory, 2004). As Edward Said (1978), the theoretical inspiration for Derek Gregory and many of the texts of critical geopolitics long ago argued, these simultaneous productions are key to the mutual constitution of the Occident and the Orient. The dualism is immensely productive. It is a matter of culture at the most basic, as the construction of the ontological categories of politics, the geo-graphings that map the basic order of the world in ways that make it meaningful to its citizens (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Sparke, 2005). On this stage, the dramas and storylines of political activity are played out in the cultural productions of modern colonial identities and the legitimizing moral codes of its protagonists. This happens in culture, fictional and otherwise. The cultural repertoire spills over this divide; movies provide many of the metaphors and the imagined landscapes that are used in political discourse, regardless of the stated intentions of director, actors or producers (Gogwilt, 2000).

As Dodds (2006) argues, the visual representation of “pathogenic places” and the reassertion of national identities in the war on terror is an especially important facet of any analysis of popular geopolitics after September 11, 2001. The numerous comments about the attacks on 9/11 being like a movie, or constituting a moment that had apparently already been seen, confirm the cinemagraphic imagination brought to bear on political discussion, hence the appropriateness of investigating the contemporary cultural imagination of empire through the lenses of contemporary movies (Carter & McCormack, 2005). Film thus also provides a moral vocabulary, and with it implicitly the geographical metaphors and the contextualizations into which narratives of right conduct and the justifications for violence are situated.

**Ridley Scott’s imperial visions**

Two interconnected themes run through many of Ridley Scott’s “big” war and science fiction movies; first his fascination with making worlds, constructing believable universes for cinema audiences; and second, questions of moral codes, or in the case of The Kingdom of Heaven, questions of “right conduct” in those landscapes he constructs. In the case of Gladiator, the figure of Maximus is used to re-ask Marcus Aurelius’s (1997) stoic questions concerning the nature of a moral man and the necessary virtues that make one suitable to rule. The other two movies, more obviously loose reinterpretations of historical events, also pose the questions of conduct in battle in faraway places where codes and cultures clash in ways that are sometimes bizarre, frequently violent, and usually require dramatic moral choices in the face of danger and imminent death. All three movies pose the questions that are in circulation in the aftermath of September 11th about the geopolitical contexts of violence, the appropriate conduct of soldiers and how, in the salutation used repeatedly in Gladiator, strength is to be linked to honor. They also pose numerous questions about war and its conduct far from home, a central concern of geopolitics.

Scott works closely with Hollywood which makes his movies part of the American industry, but the fact that he is not an American, frequently uses actors who are not Hollywood stars, and works in England as well as in Hollywood, dilutes any claim that this is an investigation of a specifically American movie phenomenon. It works to add to the argument in this paper about the ambiguous spatialities of empire; the British have an imperial history par excellence, and contemporary writers including those as different as Niall Ferguson (2003) and Robert Fisk (2006a) continue to self consciously invoke imperial themes to explain contemporary events. Scott might be understood loosely in common with this theme, one that makes the problematic
of empire something that cannot be constrained within discussions of specifically American practices.

These three movies straddle the 9/11 period, *Gladiator* was released in 2000, *Black Hawk Down* late in 2001, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, although it was made prior to these events, while *The Kingdom of Heaven*, which investigates so many of the themes of the clash of Christianity and Islam came later in 2005, after the invasion of Iraq. Given the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the persistent dangers of an escalation to directly include Iran, the interpretations of crusades through contemporary lenses is inevitably a dominant motif in the commentaries and criticisms of the movies; which is of course precisely what makes them especially interesting as a lens through which to begin to unravel the debates about the spatialities of global politics, and the tropes of empire, obligation and the suppositions of civilization, that are invoked in discussions of foreign policy, right conduct and war.

None of what follows imputes particular motives to Scott; this paper is not an exegesis of some hidden meaning, intentional or not, in the three movies. They do however have some important commonalities of theme, and its in the shared concern with warriors in extreme and exotic circumstances that the larger geopolitical problematic of empire emerges. Because in constructing locales for the drama, and in doing so in three historical periods, the end of Marcus Aurelius’s wars in Germania, the third crusade in Palestine a millennium later, and the “intervention” in Somalia, not quite a millennium later again, the spatialities of politics are implicitly in question just as soon as political questions are asked concerning the lessons that might be learned. Asking questions about right conduct, and the knights’ obligations to protect the poor, the questions of war, violence and the appropriate modes of conduct in various arenas, pose the situational contexts for ethics and moral codes more clearly than most.

In the aftermath of 9/11, all these themes are all woven through the complex cultural debates about appropriate modes of masculinity, the gender debates concerning who can fight, and the reassertion of warrior masculinities (Braudy, 2003; Faludi, 2007). The interminable cultural struggle over the legacy of Vietnam in the United States is an especially important backdrop here. The soldiers and warriors, when they become veterans, are also subject to abjection. They are so in part because of the multiple abjections through which militarism is viewed, not least the most important one in which all war is denigrated by those who understand its violence and its frequent futility. Warriors are inside, but not inside, of us, but an uncomfortable reminder of complicity in acts that are unworthy, a guilty reminder of that part of the body politic that civilized society has supposedly transcended. The counter part to this abjection is the simplistic glorification of war; Robert Kaplan’s (2002) *Warrior Politics* is condemned by Debrix (2005) in just these terms.

Thus, the difficulties with thinking about imperial wars, their landscapes and the moralities invoked to justify warrior identities in these circumstances are not trivial. This paper builds on a considerable literature in critical geopolitics dealing with popular geopolitics and cinematographic representations. Dodds (2003, 2006) and Ó Tuathail (2005) have looked at portrayals of the secret agent and the downed airman, respectively, confronting perils in strange lands, and in the process reasserting the identity of the imperial culture that sends them into harm’s way. But this paper also explicitly extends Woodward’s (2008) argument that the motivation of soldiers often is much more “for the regiment”, “mateship” or for one’s comrades than it is in any way a practice of national citizenship. In the context of a professional class of warriors, and the codes of a volunteer army in the case of American forces since the 1970s, frequently stationed in distant outposts very far from home confronting societies very different from their own, these codes are especially important in constructing contemporary military identities (Kaplan, 2005,
All these themes are in *Gladiator*, a movie made and released prior to 9/11, but one that has all the themes concerning warriors and their codes that were to be reworked subsequently in *Black Hawk Down* and in *The Kingdom of Heaven*.

**Gladiator**

*Gladiator* begins on the battlefield, in a lull in combat operations while the legions await the return of an envoy sent earlier to treat with the barbarians. The Roman general, Maximus Decimus Meridus enjoys a moment of quiet pastoral reflection in contrast to the horror and violence he soon discovers he will once again be called upon to set in motion. Viewing the return of the body of the decapitated envoy, sent back to Roman lines tied to his horse, Maximus’s subordinate Quintus, opines that a people should know when they are conquered. Maximus in turn wonders aloud if Quintus, or he himself, would acknowledge the fact if they themselves were conquered. One of the movies’ key themes is thus introduced as the legions make their final battle preparations. Fighting in the face of impossible odds and refusing to be conquered are key to many aspects of the warrior’s trade and to the violence of empire.

In his *Meditations* (1997: 19), Marcus Aurelius formulates the stoic virtues in terms of, “justice, truth, temperance and courage”. These structure the narrative of the movie in providing the second key theme of the plot — the appropriate code of morality for a ruler and for a warrior fit to serve Rome. When Maximus as a gladiator is faced with the decision as to whether to fight in the arena he decides to do so when Proximo invokes the stoic formulation which states that a man may not choose his death, but may choose his manner of meeting it so as to be remembered as a man. This reprises Maximus’ earlier instructions to his own troops prior to the battle at the beginning of the movie and is apparently a key to resolving Maximus’ hesitation. Later, given the possibility of journeying to Rome, and the admittedly extremely unlikely chance of vengeance against Commodus, and hence also the possibility of carrying out his duty to rid Rome of his violent rule, Maximus once again takes on the role of the warrior. Apparently, Maximus too doesn’t know when he is conquered. He wins the admiration of the crowd when his combat skill and leadership of a group of gladiators is key to a most unlikely combat victory over the charioteers sent into the arena to kill them.

Strength and honor is both the tag line for the movie and the salutation between legionaries and gladiators; the warrior code of respect transcends the social circumstances of slave and soldier. Slaughter and the entertainment of the masses in the Coliseum is understood as key to the survival of imperial power; the spectacle and the ability of the political class to provide this undergirds the legitimacy of power. The extreme affluence of the ruling class premised on the violence and abjection of much of the empire, a social arrangement explicitly presented in the arena where the subjection of human and beast to violence is presented as entertainment to maintain order. In the words of one senator about Commodus and the Roman mob: “‘Conjure magic for them and they’ll be distracted. Take away their freedom, and still they’ll roar. The beating heart of Rome is not the marble of the Senate. It’s the sand of the Coliseum. He’ll bring them death... and they will love him for it.’”

The radical contingency of slavery, and the violent infrastructure of empire is taken literally to its centre in the Coliseum in Rome. The contrast between the extraordinary architectural power of the arena and the contingency of combat was a device used to emphasize the power of empire, and a theme that Scott exploits fully to tell his story of Maximus and Commodus. Power is simultaneously asserted and legitimated by spectacle, and crucially of course by victories. But even in the prison that is the gladiators’ compound, there is a social order and
appropriate codes of conduct among those about to die, as well as unavoidable moral choices in accordance with the tag line from the movie which is also the salutation used by the warriors, “strength and honor”.

The gladiators and warriors perform their tragic and heroic deeds in exotic landscapes and settings that emphasize the confrontation with danger as external and frequently unknowable and political violence as something that has complicated moral geographies both on the periphery and at the heart of empire in the arena of entertainment. Because empire, and its legitimation is very much about spectacle, as the “Retort” (Retort, 2005) authors have reminded us all again recently, or as its referred to in Gladiator, a matter of “fear and wonder”. But as the figure of Commodus makes abundantly clear, spectacle may induce awe and fear, but it doesn’t necessarily command obedience among those it should supposedly subdue.

While this movie is a reinvention of the sword and sandals genre from an earlier Hollywood era, and not an historically accurate narrative of Aurelius and Commodus (see Winkler, 2004), it is an investigation of the stoic code of the warrior, the applicability of morality in the face of violence and imminent death and an investigation of resistance in the face of apparent defeat and impossible odds. Read as a critique of the spectacles of violence implicit in empire, it also has obvious intertexts with violent sports and the contemporary consumption culture and the celebration of imperial power in the age of globalization. Likewise, the computer generated effects that make possible the cinematographic representation of Rome and the Coliseum in particular are a celebration of the Hollywood technology too. As such, it is replete with numerous American themes, but also suggests an imperial sensibility in the culture in the 1990s where power and affluence were juxtaposed with abjection and poverty on the fringes. Above all, its rendition of empire as violence combined with affluence and the spectacles of violence as key to its mode of rule caught the mood before the events of 9/11 shattered the complacency (Dalby, 2003). It’s especially relevant to the analysis in this paper because it poses most bluntly the matter of a warrior code operational both in the extremities of imperial warfare subduing distant people in the opening scenes, and in the case of the abjection of slavery in later scenes, in violent combat in the Coliseum at the heart of that empire. But, it too explores the theme of using violence to overcome the evils unleashed by powerful leaders willing to use violence as a mode of rule, a parallel with the motif that dominates Black Hawk Down’s exploration of how good intentions in contemporary humanitarian interventions can go terribly wrong.

Black Hawk Down

Black Hawk Down’s release was accelerated by 9/11, which raised the ire of many critics of militarism convinced that this was some combination of a propaganda movie for the Pentagon or a crass cashing in on potential increased revenues by the studio, or both. While the critics might or might not be correct on both grounds, they mostly missed the more subtle geographies of the intervention, and the key points about the tactics used, and the applicability of a strategy of leadership “decapitation” to resolve civil wars. They also failed to grapple with the implications of the warrior’s code and the tag line for this movie “leave no one behind”, a phrase that implicitly constructs the warrior in imperial mode operating far from home.

While Black Hawk Down has powerful affective motifs that undoubtedly tie into the remilitarization of American politics in the aftermath of 9/11, it also however tells a more complex tale of morale and the related matter of morality among the warriors caught up in the violence. In places, this ultimately reverts to classic discussions of soldiers whose only loyalty in a crisis is to each other, to ensuring their survival if possible, to making every possible effort to assist
one’s comrades, and if that fails to ensure the return of their remains “home” no matter what, “leaving no one behind”. The theme runs back to ancient Greece and the reinvention of the quasi-mystical links between the bodies of previous generations of soldiers and current casualties. The fascination with memorials and military cemeteries has increasingly shaped contemporary Western military practice, becoming part of the contemporary soldier’s code (Samet, 2005). This warrior ethos elides the specificities of place invoking a widely understood military code of practice that applies to all battlefields, and the very different behaviours appropriate to a professional not involved in combat, that have powerful morale building functions. It also, in the case of Black Hawk Down, is premised on the merely temporary presence of strangers in a, to them, very strange land, an insistence on post combat relocation to maintain the integrity of the social entity on whose behalf combat is undertaken in the first place.

As Carter and McCormack (2005) note, the movie does not go into the details of the larger geopolitical contextualization of the intervention in Somalia. There are nonetheless some key contextual comments within the opening credits of the movie that situate the intervention and complement the opening scenes which do very clearly set up the geopolitics of the narrative if one watches the movie sensitive to questions of military strategy. Near the beginning of the movie, one scene invokes the complexity of the rules of engagement and the apparent incoherence of the American task. Watching as Aidid’s militia drives up to a food aid distribution point and then machine gun the crowd while appropriating the food, the helicopter crew radios to base explaining what is going on. They are refused permission to open fire on the militia because they themselves are not being fired on; the rules of engagement must be observed given the specific parameters of the mission. The disgust on the part of the crew at their helplessness in the face of militia violence is clear. Slightly later, helicopter borne troops ambush and capture one of Aidid’s aides, one Mr. Atto, and bring him back to the American base at Mogadishu’s airport. The ensuing dialogue with the American commander, general Garrison, includes the telling exchange where Atto expresses his contempt for the American presence. He suggests the absurdity that after just 6 weeks in Mogadishu, Americans think they know enough to stop the fighting by arresting key supporters of Aidid. Atto points out that they will never understand the local society, and then bluntly suggests that the Americans leave, because it’s not their war, “its our war”, a matter for Somalis alone.

Carter and McCormack (2005) suggest that the theme of the movie picks up Mark Bowden’s (1999) discussion of how unreal, or movie like, many of the American soldiers understood the whole episode to be. Ridley Scott’s fascination with “making worlds” and his acumen with the technologies of special effects then reprises this theme in his retelling of the story. But it works to explore the phenomenology of combat in a way that also requires the decontextualization of the exotic locale of “intervention” as the necessary backdrop to the examination of the warrior’s code. It also emphasizes the great fear expressed by a number of the soldiers that in the moment of supreme danger they will not live up to their obligations to the code, so they will not be remembered as a competent soldier. While the Rangers never actually say “strength and honor”, the theme is ever-present in the combat scenes; in one poignant scene a dying Ranger’s final request is only that his parents be told that he fought well.

The reviewer of Black Hawk Down in Diplomatic History likened the movie not to other American war movies, but rather to the 1963 British movie Zulu. “In both, a small self referencing body of professional soldiers stands off an overwhelming enemy in an alien land for reasons never given. “Why us?” asks a young and bewildered Tommy. “Because we’re here, lad” replies the grizzled color-sergeant. “No one else. Just us.”” (Showalter, 2002: 651) The parallel is drawn with the comment in Black Hawk Down from the Delta Force soldier
“Hoot” played by Eric Bana: “Once the first bullet goes past your head, politics and all that other shit goes right out the window.” Later Hoot also explains that people who have never been in combat cannot understand why soldiers do it. The logic is sufficient to itself, the meaning comes from the code of leaving no one behind; honor is served, and the quasi-mystical continuity of the martial traditions of the service maintained by acting according to the code.

As Lacy (2003) notes, things go wrong and violence results when the Rangers swoop down on a meeting of Aidid’s aides, but few commentators seem to note that the specific forms the violence takes are in part as a result of the Ranger code of leaving no one behind. While Carter and McCormack (2005) emphasize the importance of the theme of the code, and the fact that this matter of warrior morality is frequently discounted in discussions of intervention and the geopolitical affects, they don’t note that it is ironically key to the scale of the violence that happened in Mogadishu in October 1993. Neither do many of the commentaries and criticisms that Lisle and Pepper (2005) carefully survey, which suggest variously that this is a glorification of war, or America, or American armed forces. The movie’s release as American forces were fighting in Afghanistan at the end of 2001 suggests an obvious “support the troops” function as war propaganda. Ironically, the theme of spectacular violence legitimating imperial power, and Maximus’ disgust at his martial talents being put to use in the arena in Gladiator, is put to work criticizing Scott’s subsequent film.

The supposed lack of a conventional movie narrative in the battle sequences suggested this glorification of war to critics. In part, this is because the commentators don’t engage the movie in explicitly military terms. The tactical decisions taken are rarely discussed, the focus of the analysis is on the Orientalisms and the violence, the role of American power in a globalized world, and the moral justifications of this, rather than on the very specific geographic contexts in which the fighting happens. In the movie, Atto’s vehement criticism of the naïvety of American attempts to stop the war by using helicopter borne snatch squads to capture warlords and their aides condemns the folly of the strategy. The tactical dangers are revealed as the subsequent operation goes wrong when the Black Hawks are shot down.

Watching the movie closely, and allowing considerable license in how the movie dramatizes the events, its not after all a documentary, the key point about why this episode was so violent comes from considering the microgeography of combat and listening to what the American commander General Garrison in particular says in various scenes. Once the first helicopter is shot down, and Garrison makes the key decision to re-route the convoy to get to the crash site and “secure” the wounded or dead crew, he recognizes that he has lost the battlefield initiative. The plan for a quick raid that will not allow time for opposition to organize is abandoned, but he accepts this implicitly as the consequence of living up to the code’s requirements. The militia converge on the helicopter crash site and a very confused battle ensues to extract all the Americans, alive or dead. When a second helicopter is shot down, two Delta snipers volunteer to go to that scene, and to their almost certain death. They do indeed die, although not before killing many Somalis, protecting the site and the injured pilot Mike Durant. Indeed their death and the success of the Somali fighters in capturing the bodies from this site lead to the subsequent television pictures of American bodies being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu, scenes that dominated much of the subsequent discussion about the appropriateness of American interventions (Dauber, 2001).

The discrepancy between the firepower available to the Americans and the Somali militias is part of the story about the carnage in Mogadishu. The American way of war is about superior firepower, and the use of technological capabilities to defeat conventional military foes. But then, professional militaries with state of the art weaponry are always unevenly matched against
local militias (Boot, 2006). Garrison laments the absence of the appropriate equipment, armored personnel carriers, and C-130 airborne gunships, that were not sent to Somalia as part of his mission on the grounds that they were too provocative. (In early 2007, such a gunship was used in unsuccessful attempts to kill some Al Qaeda operatives in Somalia; numerous Somalis died once again under American fire.) But nonetheless, the violence unleashed by this substitute equipment completely outclasses anything in the Somali militia arsenal. But the Somali militias are apparently willing to take huge casualties in this fight. Perhaps, to return to the opening scenes of Gladiator, people simply don’t know when they are conquered. Spectacular violence in this case, as with Maximus in the arena in Gladiator, simply fails to intimidate.

At the end of the movie, another scene emphasizes the geography of this combat too, and reprises the theme of the rules of engagement in such circumstances. As the surviving American soldiers run out of the zone of combat towards the UN compound in the stadium, a soldier watches through his gun sights as a woman runs towards a fallen Somali man. Anticipating that the woman plans to pick up the fallen man’s weapon and fire at the Americans, he says to himself, “don’t do it, don’t you do it” hoping she will not reach for the weapon and hence force him to shoot her. She reaches for the weapon and is shot. The rules of engagement in these circumstances once again apply; don’t shoot unless being shot at. The attempts to impose a moral order on all this once again remind the viewer that this is not a traditional “good war”, but an imperial war in which the division between combatants and civilians is at best obscure, and the tactical doctrines and weapon systems designed for conventional warfare may be much less than appropriate for humanitarian intervention and peacemaking.

The complex, and to the American troops, bizarrely impenetrable landscape of Mogadishu, is rendered all the more surreal when they finally escape to the sports stadium which houses the UN forces who were unable to help in the combat the previous day but ultimately came to their rescue. While the intervention isn’t empire in straight forward terms of territorial conquest, the presence of foreign troops policing Somalia has many of the characteristics of imperial power. Imposing order as the first priority and using force to do so prior to political discussions and accommodations, mirrors at least some imperial practices of the past. It makes the ethics of “intervention” much more complicated than the arguments about “the responsibility to protect” suggest they should be (Bain, 2006; Kernot, 2006). The military attempt at imposing order by removing a few warlords, and avoiding direct administration not least because it might look like imperialism, is key to what happened; critics might do well to focus more on this theme, and on the implicit geopolitical view of Somalia as a failed state, and hence a place amenable to such interventions in the first place (Hagmann, 2005). The mapping of peripheries in the global political economy in these terms (see Galgano, 2006) is key to the logic of the contemporary American national security strategy (Dalby, 2007b).

The Kingdom of Heaven

The notes accompanying the director’s cut DVD version of The Kingdom of Heaven quote Ridley Scott from an article in Time magazine on October 11, 2004 saying “What really interested me was something that seems to have disappeared from our vocabulary, which is the notion of grace and chivalry – right action. I think right action is what it is really all about.” The theme for the movie is the Knight’s oath, one which governs their conduct, and which shapes the decisions of Balian, the central Christian character in the drama once he has taken it in the presence of his dying father: “Be without fear in the face of your enemies. Speak the truth, always even if it leads to your death. Safeguard the helpless, and do no wrong. That is your oath.”
Given the opening scenes where Balian kills a priest and then flees to join his father on crusade, the movie is also very much about individual redemption for this leading character. (These themes are explicated in much more detail in the much longer DVD director’s cut version; some of the harsh criticisms of the cinema version are clearly because the narrative is truncated to fit within movie theater schedules.) But the flight to a distant land, and the adventures that befall the blacksmith become knight reprise the theme of imperial adventure as well as numerous genres of quest, coming of age and proving oneself. Exotic settings and moral codes are key to adventure, and to the romance of the knight. This movie too is mostly fiction, and intended to be so despite the presence in the movie of various historical characters from the period.

This is an obvious point that at least one reviewer, caught up in listing the historical “inaccuracies” of the movie when judged in a literalist mimetic mode, completely misses in claiming the fictional back-story renders Balian’s actions defending the city “nonsense” (Aberth, 2005). But subsequently in reflecting on the historical parallels with contemporary times, this reviewer comes to a compelling and sobering conclusion:

“In one scene Scott seems very much in tune, if not with the historicity of the Middle Ages, then with the prevailing historical winds of his own time. Guy instructs Reynald to “give me a war,” which reminded me of nothing so much as George W. Bush asking Donald Rumsfeld to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The Kingdom of Heaven seems to be warning here that a fragile peace can be all too easily torn asunder by crusaders blinded by ideology and zealotry. Given the ongoing and unmitigated string of catastrophes coming out of the United States’ current intervention in the Middle East, this may be the most prescient and coherent message of this film.” (Aberth, 2005).

Allegory is alive and well at the movies, rarely more so than in Scott’s work. The historical analogies with contemporary events in the region, the presence once again of “Christian” forces in “Muslim” lands and George W. Bush’s initial formulation of the war on terror as a crusade, make this movie especially germane to geopolitical commentary and criticism.

The portrayal of Islamic characters is made more believable by their being played by actors from the Arab world. In Robert Fisk’s (2005) terms: “But there is an integrity about its portrayal of the Crusades which, while fitting neatly into our contemporary view of the Middle East — the moderate crusaders are overtaken by crazed neo-conservative barons while Saladin is taunted by a dangerously al-Qa’ida-like warrior — treats the Muslims as men of honor who can show generosity as well as ruthlessness to their enemies.” Fisk (2005) goes on to reflect on the irony that this movie was so unfavorably reviewed in the West: “Here is a tale that - unlike any other recent film - has captured the admiration of Muslims. Yet we denigrated it. Because Orlando Bloom turns so improbably from blacksmith to crusader to hydraulic engineer? Or because we felt uncomfortable at the way the film portrayed “us”, the crusaders?”

He leaves those questions unanswered but the meshing of historical cinema and contemporary geopolitics is confronted directly as Fisk (2005) discusses Ghassan Massoud the Kurdish actor who plays Saladin in The Kingdom of Heaven. “Massoud, who is a popular local actor in Arab films — he is known in the Middle East as the Syrian Al Pacino — in reality believes that George Bush is to blame for much of the crisis between the Muslim and Western world. “George Bush is stupid and he loves blood more than the people and music,” he said in a recent interview. “If Saladin were here he would have at least not allowed Bush to destroy the world, especially the feeling of humanity between people.” “The historical and the real are once again interwoven when Fisk meets Massoud in a café close to Saladin’s tomb in Damascus:
"Massoud leans back in his chair opposite me, recalling the “civil society” and the friendship towards the West shown by former Iranian president Mohamed Khatami. “Ah, what a mistake Bush made in not making a dialogue with Khatami. America wasn’t interested in this man. And so they got (the new president) Ahmadinejad. And now what do we hear? ‘Look at the Iranians, they are fanatics — they elected Ahmadinejad!’” (Fisk, 2006b).

But the point about Balian, the one-time blacksmith become crusader, become commander of the Christian defenders of Jerusalem, is precisely that he is not a fanatic. Living up to the knight’s code is what allows him to treat with Saladin and come to a resolution of the war that prevents the whole scale slaughter of the population in Jerusalem. Resolute action, innovation and political savvy allow the redemption of Balian and the peaceful surrender of Jerusalem, a surrender made inevitable by the prior hasty vainglorious ambition of the “neo-conservative princes” determined to impose their will by violent means, and who legitimate their war by invoking divine sanction: “God wills it!” is the chant of their supporters in the crucial meeting. Their ambition leads the army into inhospitable terrain far from essential water supplies and thus, dying of thirst, makes them vulnerable to Saladin’s army waiting for the logical military consequence of the Crusader’s arrogance in ignoring the essential strategic geography.

**Violent landscapes**

The analysis in this paper suggests that a focus on the warriors, the landscapes of combat, and the specific moral codes that operate in these extreme circumstances needs further attention in the analysis of movies in popular geopolitics. In part, this is because Western publics are frequently no longer willing to countenance violence in distant places; the juxtaposition of civilization and barbarism suggests that “we” should not behave like “them” when that “we” intervenes in distant lands (Hannah, 2006). The supposedly superior morality that legitimates intervention in the first place is quickly punctured if the intervening forces behave in “un-civilized” manners which obviously violate the supposed ethical justifications for intervention (Debrix, 2008). But insofar as interventions require the use of force, the ambiguities about the political use of violence for peaceful ends unavoidably return once again in the public discussion of legitimate foreign policy, and in the spaces where intervention puts troops on the ground, in complicated attempts to construct rules of engagement that clarify how and when force is legitimate.

This reading of these three films, first in terms of the imperial theme, second in terms of the neglected dimensions of the geography of combat, and finally in terms of how historical analogies suggest contemporary relevance, emphasizes the imperial contexts of debates about contemporary violence but also suggests that a focus on human geography is key to disentangling the contradictions in these discussions of violence, combat and morality. Each movie poses questions of moral codes which legitimate particular forms of violence, and appropriate roles for warriors. *Gladiator* emphasizes the warrior codes that shape the behaviour of warriors in extreme danger as well as the necessities for resistance in the face of the usurpation of legitimate power. It looks to a warrior code that links strength directly with honor, and how that honor is to be maintained even after death in part by the judicious use of strength while alive. *Black Hawk Down* foregrounds the complex contradictions between the warrior code and the rules of engagement in an imperial intervention in a thoroughly alien landscape. *The Kingdom of Heaven* looks to the possibility of right conduct despite the vainglorious ambitions of those who invoke divine justifications for violence while not taking seriously the practicalities of
strategy. In this, the parallels with theological criticisms of the Bush doctrine are especially clear (Northcott, 2004).

So too the final scenes of The Kingdom of Heaven suggest that it is also the rejection of her role as Queen, and her implicit repentance for her earlier vanity and misdeeds, that allows Balian’s lover Sybilla to survive and join him as he eventually resumes his interrupted career as a blacksmith. One cannot help but wonder whether Fisk’s puzzlement over why Westerners panned the movie might not be in part about the implicit necessity to set aside the certainties of the neo-conservative world with its aspirations to use military force to remake the Islamic world and the related imperial identity politics of the war on terror. Black Hawk Down shows how difficult remaking societies may be, especially so when the imperial logocentrism of American power once again, as in the failed intervention in Vietnam a generation earlier, seeks a simple and decisive victory as the key precursor to remaking a space that doesn’t fit its cultural categories (Spanos, 2000). But this history too reminds us, in the words of the opening scene in Gladiator, that people frequently don’t know when they are conquered and hence resist in the face of apparently impossible odds.

In these circumstances, the distinction between civilian and combatant are unclear, frequently deliberately muddied in the disrupted social spaces of postmodern warfare which is usually much more about struggles for political support and economic advantage than it is about either battlefield supremacy or the physical control of territory (Kaldor, 2007). Good wars are those that are modern where death follows the codes of combat. Bad wars are those were the distinctions blur and the criteria for judging actions are less clear; the rules of engagement are fuzzy in contexts where missions are ill defined precisely because of the social ambiguities inherent in using conventional forces to fight unconventional wars, build nations, or police UN sponsored ceasefires of contemporary “civil wars under the hegemonic shadow” (O’Loughlin, 2005). All this was the case in the American intervention in Mogadishu in 1993, where American soldiers found themselves in a situation where friend and foe were nearly indistinguishable and combat capabilities designed for one mode of war led to massive casualties when applied to another mode, in the urban spaces of a failed humanitarian intervention (Bowden, 1999).

As Lisle and Pepper (2005) suggest, the movie Black Hawk Down is not a simple matter of America understood as a nation state confronting the rest, it’s a matter of Empire, or post politics, or in their terms, meta-sovereignty where more complicated geographies than those encapsulated in simple formulations of national interest or sovereignty are involved. But reading Black Hawk Down as one of the larger corpus of Scott’s combat movies suggests a broader spatial canvas tied into the complicated geographies of empire and the peculiar dangers associated with interventions in the post cold war world of global violence that is frequently, as Kaldor (2007) suggests, also very specifically local. Clearly, it’s the very specific geography of combat in Mogadishu and the attempt to live up to the warrior’s code in that urban terrain that is key to the death of at least a 1000 Somalis and 18 Americans. Where leaving no one behind is the primary concern of expedition commanders, serious escalation of violence is always likely once combat begins. Which reinforces the doubts about the utility of foreign, casualty averse high-technology armed forces in solving problems in such circumstances; the violence in Mogadishu in part explains the American military’s subsequent attempts to prepare more directly for warfare in cities (Graham, 2008).

Hence, the continuing importance of critical geopolitics in challenging the presupposition that such circumstances are amenable to military action in the first place, and in tackling the colonial mapping of wild zones as in need of military interventions (Dalby, 2007a). Because
in Derek Gregory’s (2004: 262) words, “… [i]n order to conduct ourselves properly, decently, we need to set ourselves against the unbridled arrogance that assumes that “We” have the monopoly of Truth and that the world is necessarily ordered by — and around — Us.” Reading the metaphors in contemporary movies in terms of the geopolitical categories that structure their narratives is part of this task. But the moral codes of violence, the importance of particular geographical settings, and the decisions made by actors in those specific settings must also be incorporated into the analysis to understand the crucial links between the conduct of specific warriors and the grand legitimizing narratives of geopolitics that justify putting them in harm’s way in the first place.

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References


Further reading