Changes of Escapist Narratives in the American Films Before and After 9/11

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**Introduction**

 The film industry, especially nowadays, is competent enough to affect most layers of public conscience, in some cases even shaping it from scratch, developing an artificial discourse and simultaneously transforming itself from a mere entertainment form into a more sophisticated yet universal method, a medium of communication. In this perspective, the film studies could encompass the establishment of connection linking a film as a phenomenon with an individual who is affected by it disproportionally. My project will precisely target the identification and analysis of, let’s say, subgroup representative of this “person-film” long-lasting connection, a concept called escapism.

 Once the notion of escapism is briefly discussed, by examining the American film industry as a home and foundation of the field, I will be trying to illustrate its form before and after notorious events of 9/11. Therefore, the central theme of my project is the representation of prominent escapist movie genres that had been releasing with a prime need to serve the purgative needs of the U. S. citizens. Correspondingly, my project will include a depiction of three genres, the main attribute of which is escapism: terrorism, war, and superhero movies.

Summing up, my work is based on stressing the three genres above precisely because of their exquisite relevance to the American culture.

**Literature Review**

John L. Longeway’s The Rationality of Escapism and Self-Deception (1990) will be used to explain the notion of escapism. As my project is aimed at reaching to instead compiled conclusions on the basis of film genre as a bright example of a mass entertainment sphere, I would like to be assured that the reader does not get a superficial opinion interpreting the mere film as a pure entertainment tool, a joyful way to spend time with relatives and friends; Instead, by the example of the U.S. film industry, the project needs to make sure that the reader has comprehended that escapism, the idea of which had been ambitiously accelerated, is present almost everywhere and that its roots might originate from stories not as pleasant.

 After providing the reader with sufficient information about escapism*,* its emergence, and representation in cinema, the reader will be acquainted with three differing film genres. Consequently, each of these genres would be separated into two distinct representative films: one that came out before the events of 9/11, sort of a classic manifestation, and the second, which will be a post-9/11 example. By discussing these genres my project will be granting the reader with a distinguishing approach to each, pointing out the nuances and idiosyncratic aspects each of those periods had, thus making the unfolding of escapism in each apparent and smooth. Most of the material used for this project consists of continuous referrals to critics’ reviews, peer-reviewed articles, and books.

 The cinema displays both the political as well as prevalent cultural sentiment of the state it was produced in: “movies reproduce, charge, and disseminate interpretations, ideologies, and world views in contemporary society by constructing and filling an imaginary space, where the hegemonic constants of the public discourse come to life. Terrorism often described as the ‘scourge of our times’, is one of them and a reoccurring theme of American movies since the 1970s” (Riegler, 2010, p. 35).

 The importance of war films to the integrity of genres is irrefutable as they carry within themselves such a broad list of recollections of national grievances as well as stand for reminiscences of nation’s pride, unifying all layers of the society.

 Up to this point, as the project will be moving to discuss the situation of nowadays, it is believed that the concept of escapism is explained, thus comprehended by the reader. In this context, I move to the last part of the chain, the current era, which is notable by the immense popularity of superhero movies. The undebatable evidence of credibility and relevance of this genre in present-day circumstances is that its representatives periodically manage to swell the ranks of most-watched and highest-grossing representatives of the film sphere, concurrently pitching the broad masses rather subtext messages. The superhero movie genre is perhaps the only element out of two formerly mentioned that does not need a reaffirmation of the fact that its nature is escapist. Nevertheless, the evidence of this will also be provided, examining the interval in which the hype surrounding superheroes started to escalate, simultaneously addressing collective trauma discourse. To complete this observation, I will refer to Jeffrey A. Brown’s The Modern Superhero in Film and Television: Popular Genre and American Culture (2016) to mark the last transition point of escapism in the American movie industry. While studying the harmonic progressions present in superhero films, besides referring to Brown, I would incorporate various reviews and opinions to identify the nature of escapism behind them, draw conclusions, and to evaluate the current form escapism has taken.

 The corresponding inferences that are drawn studying modern superhero films will lead to a probability of making predictions regarding the further transformative stage of escapism. For this purpose, I will wrap up my findings to reach a particular deduction concerning the rather consolidated and shared version of escapism, its self-recovery abilities, and its vulnerability to external pressures.

**Research Question**

 The central research question of the project sounds as follows: How did the American films help the U.S. citizens to deal with their purgative needs? From the discussion of the original research, a couple of secondary ones arise, which ultimately impact the overall integrity of the central question. First one tries to understand whether escapism might obtain an all-inclusive form emerging as a response to collective traumatic events. Another research question that would be radically affecting, and at some point, mixing with the main question is to understand what makes specific films so popular, whether there is a canonical and cyclical tendency that changes with timelines, and which, once confirmed, could possibly assist the research in drawing particular inferences concerning the future of film industry.

**Methodology**

 Deriving from theliterature review section, as well as research questions’ prerequisites, it becomes apparent that the methodological approach towards conducting the research would be purely consisting of content analysis. That being said, as the prime research question of the project will be the identification and the discussion of transformation that nurtures escapism in consequent cycles of the American film history serving as a means to fight both personal as well as probably collective traumas spread amongst the population, it is important to, at first, have a glance at the theory of escapism. For the sole purpose of answering the original research question, from the methodological perspective, the work done for the project will be divided into three consecutive sections, all of which will be aimed at representing the rationality and the integrity of the leading research question, all of them being comprised of descriptive analysis. This is to be done on a chronological basis and as follows:

**Step #1**-Identification and explanation of the phenomenon of escapism in order to provide the reader with sufficient information on what will be discussed throughout the project.

**Step #2-**Marking a clear distinction point between the eras (starting from the end of 20th century up to nowadays), and proving the correspondence of each to a unique situation correlating with the realities of given years in order to support the argument mentioned in the previous step, as well as to prepare a ground for the final step. Last but not least, this step will summarize all of the earlier points reaching to a conclusion that embarks on the factual permanence and the exponential penetration of escapism narratives into American films, as well as will establish the methods that had been adopted by film producers to either ease the pain of the nation or try to escalate a particular predominant condition across it.

   Once done with a rather general portrayal of addressing the main research question, it is essential to focus on the discussion of each of the aforementioned steps separately and in detail. It would not be a surprise to mention that while analyzing something like escapism, phenomena that includes a psychological aspect in it, the best way to avoid indecisive inferences is to look at scientific and peer-reviewed articles and books. Precisely this belief pushed me to abandon examinations articulating film theory studies for a while, focusing on what some might consider as a stricter discipline, human psychology. Therefore, the tactics applied in data collection concerning the opening part of the discussion that leads to the subject of the research question have been simple; the two necessary components had been credibility and resonance supplemented by the modules of self-reflexivity necessary for the determination of the motives of escapism in human being as a whole. These specified elements are included in Longeway’s piece, a few points from which will be used. Concretizing, the first step necessary for the project would be the definition of the notion of escapism.

   The second step of the assessment leading towards the complete formulation and the illumination of the leading research question will originate from making sure that the reader understands that escapism has always been there. The further emphasis of this discussion is to pinpoint that due to many reasons, escapism, just like a textbook defense mechanism, had been evolving ever since. To prove this point, the project will be splitting American film history into three distinctive subgroups, all of which have been discussed in the literature review section. Consequently, articles the information gathered from which will be gathered, might help to highlight the escapism in selected films. As it concerns the periods in which the escapismwill be discussed, regarding all of the three genres, there is a canonical pattern. In all three periods, there is a classic representative of the genre (dating from the 1980s up to the end of 20th century) and a post-9/11 one, to emphasize the transformative impact of the time. Following the specified logic in a more detailed way, the first span addressed will be the terrorism movie genre that starting from the 1970s, became a conveyor of escapism. In this case, an in-depth analysis of *Die Hard* (1988) (as a classic representative of the genre), as well as *Olympus Has Fallen* (2013) (as a post-9/11 era film), will be conducted.

    The second subgroup discussing war films will be highlighting the traumatic effect that had emerged gradually after the day in which the U.S. declared war against international terrorism. Consequently, this method to fight cultural crisis happened after 9/11 resulted in a worried state of the nation, which in its turn led to the intensification of escapism. The rising popularity and the quantity of produced war-films directly correlate with rising national patriotism levels as well as the toneless involvement of the audience with the brutal essence of war. In this context, the subject of in-depth analysis in terms of an escapism-providing source will be the model of one of the most famous war films, *Rambo: First Blood* (1982) and a vivid post-9/11 example Act of Valor (2012).

   The third and last point attributing to the integrity of the research question would be the discussion of the mainstream yet ironically deep, superhero movie genre. Of this genre, the project will concentrate on *Superman (*1978*),* which had a colossal input in the development of the superhero movie genre. Another representative would be the *Iron Man* (2008) as one of the highest-grossing superhero franchises, which also had a revival effect on the genre. Regarding the analysis of the data, this section will wrap up findings of the preceding sections simultaneously applying descriptive analysis, and reaching to an inferential analysis by trying to establish the current form of escapismthat superhero films present.

 Lastly, I will administer perhaps the most laborious process, predictive analysis, that will be assisting my project in understanding what willescapismin the cinematography of near-future films look like.

**Research Analysis**

What is escapism? In his piece named *The Rationality of Escapism and Self-Deception* John L. Longeway, manages to clearly define escapism as an “attempt to avoid awareness of aversive beliefs,” arguing that its prime function is to cultivate effectiveness in unclear instances, acting as a rational barrier to fight self-mutilation and anguish. Longeway elaborates that escapism in the entertainment has a purpose to “to draw us away from our everyday troubles, and, sometimes, to help us to fantasize ourselves as better, more important, and better off than we realty are” (1990, p. 1-3). In fact, with the rise of technology that allows people always to remain operating, the stress, anxiety, and depression level rises[[1]](#footnote-1) (“When asked if they had had a major stressful event or experience in the past year, almost half of all respondents from the U.S., 49% reported that they had[[2]](#footnote-2)”). Subsequently, now, more than ever, people need to find ways to escape reality as frequently as they can for the sake of their own mental stability. Nevertheless, it would be a hasty assumption to think that only entertainment could serve as a breeding ground for escapism. Moreover, escapism could be observed almost in every action done by a human being[[3]](#footnote-3). Even though most people are “haunted” by escapism because of common reasons, for many of us, such a coping mechanism is a method to process traumatic events. But what if the same trauma could be shared across a large group of people, what if it could generate a specific form of escapism that is universally necessary for a big collective, such as an entire country? Contemporary American Trauma Narratives written by Alan Gibbs (2014) discusses post-traumatic stress disorder known as PTSD, embodied as a collective trauma that came into the U.S. public awareness in the late 20th century. Separate chapters of this book contain information about famous writers and the trauma-narratives that have been articulated in their work, having even more powerful effect on the formation of escapism derived from collective trauma (linkage of postmodernism to a marker of collective trauma, or rhetorical techniques implemented by propagandists in the literary genre to perpetuate convenient narratives regarding Gulf war and 9/11). Aftershocks of this collective trauma, as Gibbs hints, ought to “surely be appreciated as manifesting in different ways…” (pp. 40-41). One form of such manifestations is investigated during the examination of post-9/11 films in the frames of this project. Another book, Guy Westwell’s *Parallel Lines: Post-9/11 American Cinema* (2014), clarifies this point (the influential change in post-9/11 film narratives), stating that it had actually taken place. Westwell believes that the change that occurred to the U.S. film industry during the post-9/11 period started to illustrate the struggle between hegemony and counter-hegemony, ultimately serving as a “robust incarnations of a conservative and prevalent construction of US identity” (pp. 15-17). The further analysis of movies that had been released before and after events of 9/11 might help the project to trace whether such alteration had happened and if it did, in which way the American filmmakers had demonstrated it.

*Die Hard*

 The original *Die Hard* is an iconic film, one that still deserves an admiration. Released in 1988, the movie managed to set up a whole new franchise, transforming the idea of a hero through positioning the main character via entirely different wrapping. In fact, *Die Hard* is one of the few movies discussed in this project that could be considered successful in both of its intentions: it had been perceived warmly by most critics[[4]](#footnote-4) and had been high grossing[[5]](#footnote-5). Furthermore, precisely Die Hard had been the movie to have a significant impact on the advancement of director John McTiernan’s career, meanwhile serving a brilliant artist Bruce Willis (who had previously been known from the popular television series *Moonlighting)* as a bridgehead to make his grand leap forward. In a global sense, *Die Hard* appeared and remained as a trend-settler, and exactly the abrupt shift of the protagonist's image that had been differing from the past prototypes shrouds the film with a mist of escapism.

 The plot of *Die Hard* is very concise, but at the same time, it encompasses a formidable amount of curtsy that blends, сcomplementing brevity of the movie with pulsating visual leitmotifs. At the beginning of the story, the viewer is introduced to John McClane, a charismatic NYPD officer who, in the wake of Christmas Eve, arrives in Los Angeles to unite with his wife Holly (Bonnie Bedelia) and their children. McClane is invited to a party hosted by Holly’s employer, a giant company named Nakatomi Corporation. In the midst of the party, a group of ex-West German radicals led by an outrageous figure of Hans Gruber (Alan Rickman) disturbs the peaceful flow of events, seizing the building, paralyzing any possible means of communications, and most importantly taking the guests hostage. Needless to note that officer McClane turns out to be stealthy enough to dodge the terrorists, silently liquidating them in the isolated halls of a colossal tower during the most part of the rest of the film. Yet the driving force that pushes *Die Hard* into feeding escapism is not related to the mere protagonist; it also concerns the entourage surrounding him.

 According to film critic Almar Haflidason, *"*Die Hard is more layered than your average action movie[[6]](#footnote-6)” as it includes images and characters that pitch the movie more depth, making its setting more resonating, thus more likely to be vulnerable to obtaining escapist nature. A bright example is antagonist Gruber, even the awkward accent and the perfectly clean suit of whom could be linked with various conspiratorial theories contemplating not the pragmatic and mercantile (Gruber aims to steal 600$ million worth of obligations located in the building’s vault) but rather the psychological and ideological motives of German renegade. Throughout the movie, the viewer witnesses Gruber as an intelligent, extremely prepared, and coldhearted professional, whose virtuosity would soon be ruined by a lone cop wearing an undershirt. This vibrant contrast between the two of these characters is critical to the understanding of the film's portrayal of who actually holds power. As mentioned earlier, the striking dissimilarity of McClane compared with Gruber does not stop here, as the uniqueness of Willis’s character is there even if we juxtaposed McClane with the early eighties’ protagonists. Curiously enough, there is even a line from *Die Hard* that generally attributes to the articulated point. The first verbal confrontation of McClane and Gruber depicts the latter sarcastically asking a rhetorical question: “Who are you? Just another American who saw too many movies as a child? Another orphan of a bankrupt culture who thinks he's John Wayne? Rambo? Marshall Dillon?[[7]](#footnote-7)” Yet Gruber himself knows that this hero is nothing like them, either does the viewer. What is especially interesting about this line is its empirical connotation, which accentuates the change of status quo. Digging deeper, the viewer might encounter that, a "bankrupt culture" mentioned by Gruber, is not bankrupt at all, introducing McClane and the generation of charismatic heroes that filled Hollywood after him. In other words, the audience that had watched *Die Hard* back when it had just released had a chance to observe the emergence of a new archetype of an American hero. According to a film critic Anton Dolin, McClane “wasn’t the same standardized, almost stereotypical image of an eighties’ Hollywood protagonist.[[8]](#footnote-8)”The point is that the same masculine and overwhelmingly muscular type of character has not disappeared but instead has been supplemented with a more relevant one. McClane is still this bald, regular height police officer who lives regular life, makes regular jokes, and has regular family issues. Essential remark highlighting the authenticity of the protagonist's identity is McClane’s self-irony, which yet draws another sharp divergence between himself and representatives of the “preceding” generations in the guise of *Rambo: First Blood* (1982) or *Commando* (1985). The aspect of a cyclical change brought to an image of American protagonist largely prompted by *Die Hard* in its diversion from *Rambo* series (1982-1988) is addressed more specifically in the book *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in the Hollywood Cinema* in a grand section of which the authors imply that “What Hollywood culture is offering, in place of the bold spectacle of male muscularity and/as violence, is a self-effacing man, one who now, instead of learning to fight, learns to love” (Cohan & Rae Hark, 1993, p. 245). Although it might be unnoticeable for most of the audience, *Die Hard* plays on these strings too, the author Stephen Keane in his book *Disaster Movies: The Cinema of Catastrophe* (2006, pp. 50-52,*)* indicates that “gender and, again to a lesser extent, race also work in the content of Die Hard. Hence “McClane’s relationship with Holly placing the emphasis more on romance than comedy.”Indeed, McClane’s change of attitude to a sincere once the narrative touches upon his personal life becomes appreciable as soon as the viewer looks for it.

 Summarily, the film could be perceived in both of its patriotic contexts, depending on the audience's particular choice: here the film shows a cop who endangers his life to save strangers (possibly extolling the figure of a police officer as a guy who will always be there for the sake of citizens), on the other side *Die Hard* portrays distrust of the legal system embodied in an individuum who does everything necessary to save his/her family, and most importantly to preserve its spiritual value. Distrust of the justice system, in its turn, is cited in the film rather sporadically, without seeking to escalate a burst of collective resentment of the status quo, but rather breathing out a slight air of mockery towards incompetence and/or ignorance of the establishment. In some sense, *Die Hard* is deliberately flirting with this phenomenon. Several scenes such as the dialogue between an officer and the chief of local police (in which latter shows the lackadaisical attitude towards his subordinate) who, as soon as FBI arrives, is “not in charge anymore*”* do not contest the situation, but instead simply exhibit it, in this case underlining another, yet the obscure negative side of governmental hierarchy - its reciprocal and repetitive nature.

 The attempts of *Die Hard* unobtrusively reminding of its resonating tone do not end here, as despite already sympathized and real McClane, close to the middle of the film, the viewer gets acquainted with sergeant Al Powell, more fragile, and even more straightforward alteration of McClane. With the installation of this character lacking in every single characteristic that a normal hero would have, *Die Hard* becomes even purer in its revolutionary objective. As a result, the component of escapism present in the movie displays itself in a somewhat ambiguous inclination. In essence, the film achieves escapist form by distancing itself from a fantasy genre, one that is frequently associated with escapism (pioneered by Steven Spielberg and George Lucas). As the film continues depicting the audience the tired law system, it also hints at what important role a regular person stuck in between the battle of a good and evil could play. *Die Hard* emphasizes the superiority of individualism over collectivism: terrorists are united, but it is McClane who goes against the flow and divides them; the FBI and LAPD have vast resources; still, they are tricked easily when Powell is not. Similarly, law enforcement agencies as well equipped and prepared professionals would be the perfect match against analogous terrorists Still, it is the figure of McClane that emerges in the midst of this fiery confrontation, squashing the harmony of equality. While doing this, McClane, not the others, becomes a subject of involuntary idolatry in the eyes of the audience. The reason behind this is easy as pie: considering that affection with terrorists would be aberrant, the viewer imagining himself/herself as an FBI agent is, in comparison, idealistic. On the other hand, McClane, likewise his partner Powell, has significantly more resemblance to the general audience, not merely because of the focus on these characters but also because of their incessant mundaneness. This is mostly due to the fact that people tend to connect with fictional characters building on their encounters in real life. To put it in an academic way, as a post-doctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki, Howard Sklar argues, “We’d have no way of processing a character cognitively if we didn’t have experiences with people outside of the fictional world. The experiences with fictional characters resonate with us because of the fact that we’ve had deep experiences with people throughout our lives” (2009).The unconformity, unconventionality, and imperfection of characters facing a foreign-terrorist threat manifested through a critical situation is what makes *Die Hard* escapist.

 In the end, other than being granted as a classic of the world, *Die Hard* is a classic representative, a medium of a constantly shifting escapism in films. The detailed camera work that seeks to build a cramped atmosphere of a hero enclosed in an impressive-sized tower and consequent fight scenes at the top of it help *Die Hard* to play on the natural fears of a human being. Nevertheless, this feeling is thoroughly minimized with another, yet ambivalent “escapism agent,” a charismatic revolutionary protagonist who does not lose his confidence even in the very middle of a catastrophe. In *Die Hard,* "Focusing on a cop who is always in the wrong place at the wrong time, action is combined with disaster and terrorism met with escapism" *(*Keane, 2006, p. 48).

*Olympus Has Fallen*

 In a broad sense, attributing *Olympus Has Fallen* directed by Antoine Fuqua to another representative of the conventional genre of action/thriller would not be a mistake. Having said that, I am sure that the analysis of this film could be fruitful in the context of the project. Perhaps the most significant aspect that makes *Olympus Has Fallen* released in 2013 potentially intriguing in the eyes of its audience is its splendid cast: Gerard Butler (leading actor), Aaron Eckhart (the president of The United States), and Morgan Freeman who replaces Eckhart’s character during the film. Such a courageous bouquet of actors resembling two unique generations (even though Morgan Freeman, thanks to his regular appearances on screen is very well known by the modern audience) must have already had a high probability of generating interest within diverse layers of the audience. Yet that is precisely what had happened, as *Olympus Has Fallen* accomplished to gross $170.3 million worldwide[[9]](#footnote-9). Nevertheless, the assumption that the mere cast could have been sufficient to make the film profitable at the box office would be a hasty one. Other assorted factors that could invoke such a success, especially in the U.S. domestic market (generating $98.9 million), would be discussed in the continuity of the section. It is noteworthy that in the same year, another, yet very similar movie about “terrorism in the White House” had been released, getting slightly higher rankings by the critics. Nevertheless, the generosity of the critics that accentuated *White House Down’s* “playful innocence at its core[[10]](#footnote-10)” did not mirror in the box office[[11]](#footnote-11). Perhaps one inference that could be maid while judging *Olympus Has Fallen’s* ephemeral success and likewise questionable failure of *White House Down* is that people needed a similar narrative positioning itself as serious. But let us immediately move to the examination of the content.

 For an experienced viewer, the plot of *Olympus Has Fallen* might not seem idiosyncratic. The opening sequence is regular wintertime in the modern United States, the president of which, Benjamin Asher (Aaron Eckhart), loses his wife as a car in the service of First Family goes out of control on a slippery road. A Secret Service agent Mike Banning (Gerard Butler), who is also in close relationships with Asher, saves his son Connor (Finley Jacobsen) from the burning vehicle. However, supposedly being torn apart from the agony of losing a beloved one (or for the sake of erasing dubious memories), Asher’s and Banning’s paths diverge without a chance of being crossed until the zenith of the film. Starting from the next shot, more than a year had already passed, and the viewer witnesses the major plot twist of *Olympus Has Fallen* during which a North Korean terrorist group interrupts the meeting between the United States and South Korean highest officials at the White House. Aiming to access Cerberus code, which is known only to several top American officials (amongst which is Asher), the terrorists take them hostage. Activation of Cerberus would lead to the detonation of the entire nuclear arsenal of the United States, turning the country into ashes. As two government officials reveal their codes (a command given to them by the president), Asher is assured that he will remain silent, ready to commit a patriotic act. Suddenly, it turns out that Connor is also in the building, and as terrorists search for him to threaten the president, Banning, who had joined defenders from the initial onslaught, begins the procedure of rescuing the friend of his. *Olympus Has Fallen* does not get greedy in showing its audience many scenes in which the protagonist is smashing and crushing the terrorists, finally saving everyone who could have been saved.

 I had tried to interpret the plot in a somewhat meticulous way to demonstrate its striking correlation with the previously discussed *Die Hard*. Whereas the internet is imbued with peculiar comments of critics mostly sharing a mutual frustration by lack, or even absence of authenticity in *Olympus Has Fallen* (“just too much of a pale Die Hard ripoff,”[[12]](#footnote-12) “The movie is “Die Hard” in the White House, a combination of the violent and the cheesy…”[[13]](#footnote-13))I would like to pinpoint the critical discrepancies between these films that display metamorphosis of escapist narratives served by the American film industry.

 *Olympus Has Fallen* insists on the collective superiority of its characters, and that is why the movie is so different from *Die Hard.* In order to glorifyJohn McClain, his character is displayed as an amateur who, in spite of his unprofessionalness, handles his job far better than the incompetent agents of the government. Mike Banning, however, is precisely this government agent who is supreme in every aspect: he is smart, brave, competent, profoundly masculine, and good-hearted (what could we expect of a Secret Service agent?). This observance resonates with all of the good characters of *Olympus Has Fallen.* President Asher, though loses to Banning in charm, never loses his dignity and determinedness. Even minor characters, such as officials presented here, are not willing to provide their codes to terrorists, not until they receive a direct command from the president. The rest of the leaders of the United States, embodied by now acting president Allan Trumbull (Morgan Freeman) and his team are also persistent in their task to provide Banning with insight via earphone contact. All of these elements strive to persuade the viewer that not the separate characters, but the unity and the will of the United States might take down its enemies. That being said, from the aesthetical perspective, the film is comprised of classic accessories of eighties hero movies’ including the uber-competent protagonist. Still, at the same time, the film encompasses patriotic, even propagandistic through lines that slightly alter its tone from the most samples of the past. Therefore, while *Die Hard* mostly focuses the camera lens on the protagonist, allowing himself to be revealed by the audience, Fuqua’s creation, because of its eclectic nature, sacrifices the integrity of the characters in the name of spiritual. In order to compensate for rather colorless characters, *Olympus Has Fallen* seeks a new medium of communication, speaking to the viewer not through people on the screen, but through symbolism.

 As far as my analysis goes, this symbolism is a breeding ground for escapism. Once looked from such an epitomizing angle, the film itself swiftly transforms into a big metaphor, one that loudly screams about its essence. In this perspective, Banning is not a robust, brutal, and simultaneously dull character now, but instead, he is a metaphor for the United States. Benjamin Asher is not the president; he is the institutional value of the president, a divine power that is willing to give up everything to protect its citizens. Its citizens, consequently, are ready to do the same. The essence of reciprocity and a unified sense of self-sacrifice should appear beckoning to the viewer. The same diabolical North Korean terrorist group is yet another transcendental connotation, which according to columnist Noah Berlatsky, experiences deficiency in rationale. “The controlling paranoid fantasy here is, again, that North Korea is somehow our technological and military superior. In the real world, North Korea is nearly as incompetent as its leader is insane…[[14]](#footnote-14)”

 Apart from criticizing the film for its similarity to *Die Hard,* in their book *Alcohollywood - Our Year in Movies 2013,* the authors Jared Latore and Clint Worthington agree that the movie is abundantly filled with symbolism, especially a nationalistic one. “Take a drink every time the picture or bust of an American president is featured (especially when Butler uses the bust of Lincoln to dispense American justice)” (2013, pp. 85-86). The moment mentioned by Latore and Worthington is extremely interesting as it uses symbolism to its absolute extent. Oval Office, in which the fight takes place, is perhaps the biggest symbol of the United States’ source of power through which it is directly implemented. In this context it looks invigorating that the president himself, in the form of a statue, defends his office, the force of the United States. The last rampant hit with Lincoln’s bust that smashes the terrorist’s head open represents the invincibility of this cabinet. Although the scene looks rather uproarious, at its core, it embellishes the unapproachability and sublimity of a symbol that, if necessary, will defend itself.

 In *Olympus Has Fallen* the audience does not (and should not) associate themselves with distinct characters, but what film tries to convince them to do, is to imagine themselves as moving components of a giant mechanism, devout organs of a human body that are consolidated to face “political attacks that will inevitably remind of 9/11” (Latore & Worthington, p. 85). Despite installing this symbolism within characters (more subtextual trick) director Fuqua, also exhibits his motives through a more glaring prism (possibly to broadcast his idea to everyman), supplying the movie with plenty of visual examples. One of those examples is the destruction of the Washington Monument, site of which, as Berlatsky notes, “deliberately evokes the World Trade Center collapse.” Regarding the mentioned scene, the opinions might vary, though options suggested by *The Guardian’s* editor Paul Harris tend to be persuasive enough. Harris believes that the era of films to which *Olympus Has Fallen* belongs transmits a composure to the viewer through demolishing Washington buildings that carry symbolic values of pride, strength, and patriotism, meanwhile prudently implying that the pain from the notorious events of 9/11 is on its way to vanish. Another version brought up by Harris hints that the reason behind pounding buildings has a political context that articulates anti-governmental sentiments within the public. This hypothesis is based on a presumption that some Americans wish to observe “their symbols of government trashed so spectacularly.[[15]](#footnote-15)”

 *Olympus Has Fallen* isbelieved to be a superficial and monotonous, almost sordid adaptation of iconic films that target merely commercial benefitting, and the movies' scores in various platforms prove that.[[16]](#footnote-16) The other side of the coin is that, with all its flaws, the film remains controversial and flexible. With the attempts of reincarnating the model of *“*eighties’ protagonist*”* and inconsistent deviation from the past formulas, *Olympus Has Fallen* exacerbates its escapist feature, thus making it omnipresent. The absence of detailed characters does not deprive the movie of it, as it results in the audience scrupulously navigating itself to find another source of escapism clutching at anything it possibly could. The ultimate prehensile sight is then concentrated on the symbolism, the linchpin of the movie. Be it through metaphors concerning characters, or easily digestible visual elements such as a waving flag, provocative poster, the damaged White House or devastated Washington Monument, the film naively, almost in a puerile way, drags the viewer into the cobweb of escapism. In *Olympus Has Fallen,* Gerard Butler’s character is alone, but the audience knows that he is not.

*Rambo: First Blood Part II*

 Michael Allen, the author of the book *Contemporary U.S. Cinema,* notes that, to shift (or to complement) a rather experimental film such as Coppola’*s The Rain People* (1969) “By the mid-1980s, a more visceral, escapist tendency was beginning to become dominant” (2003/2014, pp. 96-97). Allen puts the *Rambo* franchise at the top of this revolutionary emergence. The success that had followed *Rambo: First Blood Part II* released back in 1985 might still seem unbelievable. Apparently enough, not every movie had managed to pay off more than ten times (with a budget of $25.5 million, the second *Rambo* movie grossed $300.4 million worldwide[[17]](#footnote-17)). However, from a broad perspective, the most important had been and still remains, the tremendous impact that the *Rambo* franchise had on the universal film industry. Moreover, the pages dedicated to this project would not be enough to assiduously depict every single sphere that had been influenced by this truly legendary series. A considerable role in building its alluring and outrageous image had been played precisely by *Rambo: First Blood Part II,* a tribute to bygone age directed by George P. Cosmatos. Although this film clearly speaks for itself as one in which the form prevails upon the content, it is still crucial to obtain some knowledge on what had been actually happening and why. I want to make a vital remark here: in order to reveal the pure and intense spectrum of the escapism pulsating in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* ona full-scale basis*,* it is mandatory to possess at least a superficial amount of insight on the prequel *First Blood* (1982). A variative, interchangeable, and at the same time, conflicting synergy establishing between these two films is what forces the escapist structure of the sequel to become evident.

 The opening sequence of *Rambo: First Blood Part II* begins from the place that prequel left off. A high military official Samuel Trautman (Richard Crenna)visits the prison Rambo (Sylvester Stallone) is placed in. As if annulling all the pain and suffering caused to the uber-masculine protagonist, colonel offers him a deal: Rambo would be freed, but he should return to Vietnam, the same place he had been held in, to make photographs reassuring the American public that there are no prisoners of war left there. The viewer might think that the mere proposal of such an offer might be illogical, considering everything that had happened between Trautman and Rambo in the past. Nevertheless, perhaps it would be appropriate to say that whatever happens in the prequel, stays in the prequel. Sooner, the main character (whose detest towards authorities turned to be as ephemeral as his regeneration abilities) returns to Vietnam, getting acquainted with Vietnamese insurgent-intel Co Bao (Julia Nickson) along the road. The plot develops as Rambo sees one of the prisoners, but also gets captured sooner. Later Co assists him to escape, but she gets killed. Tormented by anger and anguish, Rambo reveals the presence of Soviets in the jungle, transforms into one-man-army, and murders everyone who lays on his path. Even a bomb dropped by Soviet helicopter does not stop Rambo in his divine mission of rescuing POWs and returning to the base in which the audience sees sordid traitor Marshall Murdock (Charles Napier), whose life is to be spared by the lone hero.

 As it had been mentioned earlier, the escapism in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* mostly rests in its sharp contrast from the previous part. From examining the plot as well as how Rambo himself fits within the narrative, it comes crystal clear that the tone of *Rambo* had been purposefully shifted. Whereas a rather dramatic initial picture directed by Ted Kotcheff strikes mostly through its morality and sincerity, the sequel leaves no chance of uncovering emotion or exhibition of a mental weakness within at first sight the superb character of the protagonist. In his interview with *Digital Spy* magazine, as an ultimate response to massive speculations about trauma carried within John Rambo, the writer of original *First Blood* novel (1972) David Morrell told that, even though initially unplanned, Rambo is a “portrait of someone with PTSD[[18]](#footnote-18).”The point is that an aggravating culmination of this shade could be traced in *First Blood,* serving as a universal explanation of the film. In his article dedicated to the analysis of post-traumatic issues tormenting the protagonist in *First Blood,* among other examples, the author Scott Perez writes, *“*The war flashbacks that Rambo experiences are among the many symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), that Vietnam veterans commonly experienced and that often were dismissed or ignored.[[19]](#footnote-19)” Perez is also sure that the central subject of the very first *Rambo* is the severe emotional battle repeatedly occurring in American veterans after the Vietnam War, one of the most complicated post-war concerns which is oftentimes passed into oblivion.

 At this point, to avoid possible misunderstanding, it is noteworthy to remind that this section still stresses discussing *Rambo: First Blood Part II,* but not *First Blood.* Notwithstanding, the escapism present in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* manifests precisely through its deviation from the past prototype, and that is why it is necessary to comprehend the philosophical dichotomy between these two. The sequel of the original movie is constantly pressing its audience through building a marvelous entourage that emphasizes Rambo's invulnerability and decisiveness. In *Rambo: First Blood Part II,* the martyred veteran is replaced by a cyborg-like machine that takes out its enemies in a coldhearted manner as the poster of the film is. The final battle of the film in which Rambo uses a minigun to destroy his opponents attacking from different corners of the jungle stands as a manifestation of his relentlessness and preeminence. The emotionless look on Rambo’s face, his superlative reaction on the peaking enemies, and reoccurring tight shots of his body, as well as facial expression done from the low angle perspective, affirm the character’s tenaciousness and his big body. Even the positioning of the characters is crucial here, as while foes attack Rambo from the edges of the frame, he himself is consistently situated at the very center of the scene, once again underlining the idea of one hero against the rest. However, close to the end of the film, Rambo’s facial mimicry tends to “humanize” right at the moment when he unloads a whole magazine on the military electronics that belong to the army. Here the viewer could see the resentment on Rambo’s face that is materialized into bullets that damage the ones responsible for his suffering and for the injustice (apparently computers and gadgets stand as a metaphor for the real people behind). As soon as these shots are fired, Rambo is relieved, and he certainly knows that Murdock will not be hurt by him.

 John Rambo is a Raegan era figure whose appearance praises the masculinity of white American cisgender who is ready to confront his foes all alone. In such scenes, the escapism that is provided by this film is not solely based on the viewer imagining himself as Rambo, but instead feeling himself going against the system. Interestingly enough, even Rambo’s body in this film shows a total transformation of the character, who somehow got rid of heinous wounds and scars that explicitly covered his torso in *First Blood.* Consequently, the escapist quality of the movie is not nourished by plot twists or character development, but it is rather unceremoniously embedded in the mind of the viewer through the symbol of Rambo. In spite of its savage setting, in *Rambo: First Blood Part II,* the escapism expressed through symbolism is implemented delicately. In comparison with already discussed *Olympus Has Fallen*, which is filled by visual symbolism that reminds the viewer about collective feelings such as patriotism, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* places one character who corresponds to a solo symbol, and the rest is mostly guesswork required from the subjective audience. Opposed to the same *Olympus Has Fallen (*the nature of which mainly displays somewhat formal and conventional perceptions, praising national pride, heroism, and collectivism) in *Rambo* (1985), this symbol, in its turn, serves the purgative needs of the viewer via an illustration of instead intimate feelings. To elaborate, the character of Rambo shown here stands as a symbol of one's belief in himself. All of the scenes of actions in which the viewer sees Rambo strutting through armies of Vietnamese and Soviets, simultaneously being courageous enough to face against sinister and powerful people at his own homeland (Marshall Murdock, who had been positioned in the guise of shameful persona drowned in nasty political games), pretty much prove the point of exalting an image of individuum over mediocre and trivial society. If this assumption is not baseless, then I could even articulate my vision that the last stage of escapism in *Rambo: First Blood Part II* is the advancement of the sense of unconformity within the viewer.

 At the beginning of the film, Rambo ironically asks Trautman: “Sir, do we get to win this time?[[20]](#footnote-20)” As Jeffrey A. Brown notes in his *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television: Popular Genre and American Culture,* the rest of the film shows that *they* are not the ones who are going to win, but *he* is. “Rambo does get to win this time, despite being betrayed by corrupt and incompetent military commanders (like those, it is implied, who hindered American military men in the war)”(2017, p.70). Such bedeviling connotation against the U.S. military (not as a whole unit) is yet another argument restating a type of escapism addressed earlier.

 Still, at the end of *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, Stallone's character reminds the viewer that collectivism and unity, after all, is a necessary component for America's prosperity to be achieved. Speaking to Trautman, he says, “I want, what they want, and every other guy who came over here and spilled his guts and gave everything he had, wants! For our country to love us as much as we love it! That's what I want![[21]](#footnote-21)”I believe that this moment is to provide the viewer (who could have previously been overwhelmed by the countercultural aspect) with a relief of a mutual burden, one that should be equally split and laid the shoulders of the rest of the society too. Whether this brief sense of calming down works or not is debatable, as *Chicago Tribune* critic Gene Siskel notes, “Films such as ‘Rambo’ encourage violence more than peace, even though Rambo`s final speech properly talks of love for America and love for the soldiers who fought in her name.[[22]](#footnote-22)”

 All in all, *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, is a brilliant exemplar of how minor mistakes (primitivity of script, logical fallacies such as Rambo returning to Vietnam in 1985 to save his comrades ten years later after the end of the war) do not act as obstacles for a film to achieve an epochal status. Nevertheless, a prestige that the composition had earned does not undermine its escapist manifestations.

*Act of Valor*

 Released in 2012, *Act of Valor* is one of the scarce modern war films that tackle more than action sequences. The film directed by Mike McCoy and Scott Waugh could not brag about its high budget or world-renowned cast. In his article editor, Jordan Zakarian restated that *“Act of Valor* was born not in Hollywood, but in the Pentagon. It was commissioned by the Navy's Special Warfare Command, and its success will be measured not in box-office receipts, but in the number of new recruits it attracts to the Navy SEALs.[[23]](#footnote-23)” Still, with a budget of $12 million (which is apparently below an average action movie[[24]](#footnote-24)), *Act of Valor* grossed $81.3 million worldwide[[25]](#footnote-25), attracting mostly the citizens of the United States. Yet that is not strange, as in its essence, the film has been developed as cinematic propaganda of the U. S. military, which itself could potentially lead to the audience being less heterogeneous. But let us understand what the film is about and what exactly makes it escapist.

 *Act of Valor* has a defined task to portray the United States military as skilled, mighty, and undivided. Meanwhile, behind rather spiritual values, the film accentuates the advanced technologies that the warriors use, which include but are not limited to impressive weaponry, military drones, and night vision goggles. All of these elements together, praise the idea of the U. S. military to an absolute level. Moreover, with the brevity of the plot (which encompasses a classic action narrative: the military armed group rescue a hostage, then capture a drug dealer, and the culmination is their battle against terrorists) and the cast that primarily consists of stuntmen and people having military backgrounds, *Act of Valor* does not give its viewer a possibility to focus on anything else than the representation of powerfulness of the army. Nevertheless, some might even argue that with its inclination, the release of *Act of Valor* had been necessary to promote the image of the American military, as well as to bolster enthusiasm amongst the new generations who might want to join it. This view is supported by the claim that the film industry had been interpreting the U. S. military as ineffective and cruel for too long. According to an analytical paper written by Robin Andersen named *Act of Valor: Celebrating and Denying the Brutalities of an Endless and Global U.S. War “*Films such as Platoon (1986) Apocalypse Now (1979) Full Metal Jacket (1987) where harshly critical of the military, the justifications for war, the brutality experienced by civilians, and even the actions of U.S. soldiers.” *(*p. 23, 2014). In this context, the film might come as a breath of fresh air that is awkwardly straightforward in its intention.

 *Act of Valor* is escapist in both its contextual as well as visual manifestations. Being aware of the shaky position, the United States’ military is in the eyes of its citizens [[26]](#footnote-26)[[27]](#footnote-27), the film tries to change the status quo. Director of the film McCoy himself admits that saying, “It (Vietnam War) was a really bad time in American history, absolutely, but it’s time to sort of forget that and forget those sensibilities and don’t associate our troops and our men and women to that conflict anymore, and time to really open our eyes to say, ‘What’s going on in this world? What are our men and women in uniform really doing right now for us?’*” (*Zakarian*, Huffpost,* 2012).Precisely this is the contextual escapism within the Act of Valor. Roughly speaking, the film persuades its audience to forget that dark shades of its history and to take a look at the modern United States, one that allocates more than $930 billion to its military in a year[[28]](#footnote-28).

 Another significant aspect of *Act of Valor,* which despite revealing itself through visual transmits contextual escapism is its avoidance of tackling complexities of the war. Despite the authors of the film continuously speaking about the movie's similarity to the real battlefield, it occasionally displays itself more like the *Battlefield* video game series[[29]](#footnote-29). Ironically, one of the film's posters says, “this is no game.” In fact, the argument that speaks for the film persistently trying to resemble the reality is not baseless, because the filming had been done during Special Forces' exercising. Nevertheless, at some points in the film (for instance, when combatants try to rescue a fellow comrade), the action is apparently prolonged. In real life, as director Waugh himself mentioned, the entire procedure could take “like five seconds…[[30]](#footnote-30)”The resemblance of the film to a video game becomes even more striking as soon as the viewer witnesses first-person action scenes, in which he himself is placed in the middle of the conflict, holding a heavy weapon (truly does not feel so in the hands of the SEAL Team member) and spectating bombarding scenes. According to Andersen*, “*Under attack with no distance from the operation, viewers sense the thrills, danger and excitement of war as entertainment”(p.28, 2014). Several paragraphs later, the author indicates that producers intentionally divided the film into separate sequences of actions in which the SEAL Team is continuously involved in clashes against all sorts of enemies. Andersen believes that this should be emphasizing American soldiers who are under attack, whose mission of rescue is somewhat divine, and whose superiority in every aspect is justified by the foreign threat of terrorists who endanger the United States.

 Whereas *Olympus Has Fallen* advocated for patriotism in its global, national sense and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* dealt with strong but suffered individuum, *Act of Valor* stands as the median of these works, resonating with a relatively narrow group of people, contemplating the idea of unity in the frames of the military field. In his review, Roger Ebert noted that “we don't get to know the characters as individuals, they don't have personality traits, they have no back stories, they don't speak in colorful dialogue, and after the movie you'd find yourself describing events but not people.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Michael Phillips has a similar observation, “*Act of Valor,”* he writes that movie “has no time for that lack of teamwork. Its Navy Sea, Air and Land team warriors, better known as SEALs, collaborate without friction. They stick to the plan or adapt it when needed. Authority is not bucked.[[32]](#footnote-32)”

 As mentioned, although the main characters - members of Navy SEAL Team are rather bleak, the role that they play as a collective, one might even say as a brotherhood, is never undermined. That is another contrast with the previously discussed films, as *Act of Valor* represents not the opponents, but the U. S. forces as the most powerful. They always outnumber their enemies; their motives are noble; they are best-equipped. Through such lionizing, producers of the film shape the narrative into a way that suggests that the entire country watches their backs, simultaneously promising the viewer the same if he joins the team. In spite of the *Act of Valor’s* dissimilarity to already analyzed films, we still might observe a canonical shift of narratives that could be traced throughout this project. Elaborating, whereas action movies of the eighties’ (specifically *Die Hard*, and *Rambo: First Blood Part II)* unendingly remark on the systematic disobedience, and the “mythical loneliness” of the amateur character who stands as the embodiment of “One Man Army,” post 9/11 films in the guise of *Olympus Has Fallen* and *Act of Valor* emphasize proficiency of a united team (in the latter it is as straightforward as possible), who wholeheartedly compete against ant-American terrorism manifestations. Moreover, precisely because of the aforementioned attachment of the SEAL Team to the United States’ military (just like Mike Banning’s connection to both to the person as well as his symbol), American warriors are always justified. In some sense, they are the United States; thus they cannot make mistakes. Regarding this, Richard Corliss writes that “The SEALs, with their ethnically diverse membership and platitudes about the folks back home, are like the coolest commando hotshots from a World War II movie.[[33]](#footnote-33)” The next paragraph of Corliss’s work encompasses a scene that embarks on this point.

 The Seal Team does not lack in its dedication and motivation. In his *“I’d Rather Be in Afghanistan”: Antinomies of Battle: Los Angeles”* the author Gerry Canavan writes that “…, reflecting post-9/11 ideological commitments to the figure of the soldier-as superhero, our heroes’ total dedication to a massive war effort that had begun only a few hours before knows no possible rest” (p. 42, 2014). This sentence concurrently applicable to the *Act of Valor.* At the scene in which SEALs say goodbye to their families, the non-diegetic narrative voice that accompanies the film says, “there was a brotherhood between us, and we depended on each other more than a family,"then it says “an individual twig will break but a bundle is strong.”One absorbing speculation about this phrase is its fascinating alikeness to the original symbol of Fascism in Italy. Initially, the fasces “were a bundle of rods and a single axe which were carried as a symbol of magisterial and priestly authority in ancient Rome.[[34]](#footnote-34)” However, Benito Mussolini added an altering connotation to it, which suggested power of the collective (accumulated sticks that form a bundle), and, most importantly, presumed the weakness of an individual. This might be interpreted as another escapist hint prepared for a specific callously hardened viewer. Nevertheless, this moment also illustrates one of the ideas of the entire film: even though SEALs are caring and they love their families, the bonds that had been established within themselves are much more substantial. Therefore, the commitment and self-sacrifice to serve the nation, something that they collectively do on an everyday basis, is prevailing; it is above anything else. As the good characteristics had been embedded into the SEALs, close to the finale of the film, the viewer might even get a chance to observe the humanity of warriors. The scene in which heroes fight against terrorists the team spares every single woman (who is directly shown in the sights of the guns). Even a female who is holding a baby and screaming, thereby supposedly ruining the operation, is spared. Furthermore, the already mentioned phenomenon of self-sacrifice reaches its peak in one of the last scenes in which a terrorist throws a grenade at SEALs, and one of the agents jumps on the grenade, saving his crew. Now, it is important to note that by this action, the character does not merely save his friends, but what he does is that he gives a chance for his mates to complete the mission, thus bringing a victory to the United States. It turns out that the death of precisely this character, Rorke, is not a coincidence, and an attentive viewer could remember that he was the one who said "last" goodbye to his wife and gave a letter to his friend in case he does not return. Rorke had been prepared for this sacrifice. As the framing, effects, and the lighting provide the scene with a mesmerizing atmosphere, I also assume that the death of this character is essential to the movie, it is the pure representation of the act of valor. This is another contrast with *Rambo: First Blood Part II* that is displayed in the same context of the clashes occurring between differing ideologies of individualism against collectivism. Whereas the latter one proclaims about the triumph of an individuum, in the *Act of Valor,* this individuum believes in the preeminence of the group. Therefore he is ready to sacrifice himself for a greater good.

 In the eyes of an ordinary viewer, the film is applause to the U. S. military that will always protect its citizens against “the others.” For the audience that enjoys watching action movies, the *Act of Valor* is an opportunity to plunge into the essence of the war, feel like warriors. Veterans might think that the film demonstrates the revival of the U. S. military after its debatable adventures in the previous decades. For people who had considered joining an army, this film might be the necessary push. To humanists who blame the notion of war because of its diminishing aftermaths, the film shows how benevolent the U. S. soldiers are. On the whole, on the list of the films that had been analyzed so far *Act of Valor* presents the most adaptable escapist expressions.

*Superman*

 “It's not a bird. It's not a plane. The daring young man flying through the air with the greatest of ease could only be the caped marvel himself - Superman, the beloved hero of countless comic books and the star attraction of a truly super new movie.” This is the prelude to the *Superman* review written by Kathleen Carroll, published by the *Daily News* in 1978[[35]](#footnote-35), the year of the film’s release. Even a glimpse of identical reports from the 20th century discussing Richard Donner’s *Superman* is indicative of the extraordinary disenchantment of the American nation by both this character, as well as the aesthetics that surround him until today.

 From the very first quote of this section, it becomes apparent that particular movie which is discussed in this project, one starring Christopher Reeve as Clark Kent (Superman), did not introduce the figure of Superman to broad masses, instead, its destiny was to be a trampoline for a series that told a story about a man with superpowers. The rebirth of the franchise initiated by *Superman (1978)* was set to succeed two of the previous movie serials,[[36]](#footnote-36)[[37]](#footnote-37) as well as sterling *Superman and the Mole Men[[38]](#footnote-38),* all of which had been released in the period between 1948-1951. Although the visible affinity between *Superman* and its predecessors, the first and foremost factor that contributes to the distinction of the latter is the huge budget of it. The film had cost $55 million, grossing $300.5 million globally[[39]](#footnote-39) and making *Superman* one of the highest-grossing films of the 1970s worldwide[[40]](#footnote-40). The sum spent on the development of the film had also been astonishing for the time of its release, therefore bewitching the potential viewer even more. Now, let us dig into the film and understand what has driven James Berardinelli to label *Superman* as “the only motion picture based on a comic book to have a lush, epic feel[[41]](#footnote-41)” at the time being.

 The story behind *Superman,* at least if we look at it today, is minimalistic. According to Anton K. Kozlovic’s paper, *Superman as Christ-Figure: The American Pop Culture Movie Messiah* the original script was written by legendary novelist Mario Puzo and was based on a Greek tragedy (2016, pp. 1-2). The plot starts as the council of a planet Krypton disregards the warnings of renowned scientist Jor-El (Marlon Brando), who believes that the planet is endangered. His son Kal-El is saved as the caring father has sent him to Earth, where he is picked up and raised by a farmers' couple who give him a new name, Clark Kent. As time passes, Clark is visited by his birth father, who tells the eighteen years old protagonist about his divine powers and unique origins. The plot is later supplemented by romanticism embodied by Lois Lane (Margot Kidder), a target of Clark’s attraction, and a charismatic antagonist Lex Luthor (Gene Hackman), who plans to destroy the western part of the United States. Though the filming of the sequel started simultaneously with the initial film (Berardinelli, 2016) which again, reassures the status and the fame Superman’s character enjoyed even forty years ago, *Superman* does not end with a major cliffhanger: Clark outplays his foes, rewinds the time and saves his mistress.

 In the modern world, the audience is used to seeing how a concrete superhero is replaced by another almost on a yearly basis. In comparison with this cyclical shift and the colossal abundance of special effects that flood superhero films of nowadays, *Superman* might seem too naïve. Nevertheless, it is important to note that back in the 1980s, both morals, as well as perceptions had been different. Consequently, perhaps the biggest film about the most infamous character of the DC Universe was a reason for excitement not merely in the film's homeland, but in the entire world. The time span during which *Superman* had been released is one of the quintessential factors that contribute to its escapist nature. To be precise, my observances lead me to the conclusion that the film discussed in this section is a bright example of how a film could try bringing a positive change in the circumstance the United States had been in back in the late 20th century. The economy had been going through devastating aftereffects of the Cold War[[42]](#footnote-42), the unemployment level rose[[43]](#footnote-43). As one of the official responses, a prominent speech given by President Jimmy Carter[[44]](#footnote-44) labeled as *malaise* had been given. In the wake of such a *crisis of confidence,[[45]](#footnote-45)* the American nation sought for a method to fight the omnipresent anxiety. Nevertheless, Hollywood had not been ready to be the lifeline yet, as in the early and mid-70s industry had faced a dilemma. Peter Lev’s book named *American Films of the 70s: Conflicting Visions* is dedicated to the analysis of the issue - “should American society move towards openness, diversity and egalitarianism, welcoming such new developments as the counterculture and the anti-Vietnam War movement? Or should America change by refusing to change, by stressing paternalistic authority and traditional morality? (2000, preface). Exquisite manifestations of such volatility are movies like *The Exorcist* (1973), *Deliverance* (1972), *Jaws* (1975). The American dream had to be revived, and supposedly the first major film that brought back the aesthetics of optimism was the original *Star Wars* (1977). Meanwhile, the community needed a hero, someone who does not belong to any race, ethnicity, or nationality, someone who is a solution to the nation’s clash against boredom and injustice, someone divine, just like Superman! This point is also articulated by Brown, who believes that "during the Great Depression… Superman was imagined as a powerful savior of the downtrodden." Along with that, for the American nation distinctively, "Superman became synonymous with the American Dream, or, as his famous catch phrase has declared: ‘Truth, Justice, and the American Way” (2017, pp. 90-91). Furthermore, Brown also argues that Superman, essentially, is a nationalist superhero, and whereas all of the heroes fight for justice, equality, and morality Superman has to do more than that. This aspect is beforehand noted by Jason Dittmer, who, in his article dedicated to the analysis of nationalist superheroes, claims that "the nationalist superhero bears an additional burden that other superheroes do not – embodying the nation state" (2013, p. 8).

 Meanwhile, the character should also seem real so that the ties with the potential viewer could have been established easier. Pauline Kael mentions that producers of the film worked on this aspect by providing a “metaphor for the troubles and conflicts of boy dreamers: hidden inside the fumbling, fear-ridden adolescent (who) is the all-competent giant.[[46]](#footnote-46)" As a result, the audience witnesses the emergence of a rather tragicomic personality who encompasses a striking dichotomy of a crumpled up, sociophobe young reporter and an almighty "polite, patriotic and law-abiding,” as Judith Martin portrays, hero, who “doesn't destroy villains as they would like to destroy him; he turns them over to the police ‘so they can get a fair trial.’ And when he does this, he is careful to examine the police officer's nameplate to be able to address him properly.[[47]](#footnote-47)” Gary Arnold also agrees that precisely the ability to portray two "egos" in one body that is achieved by the efforts of Christopher Reeve transform Superman’s character into a balanced, thus, more relatable persona. “Clark is wittily differentiated from Superman. Reeve varies his appearance, voice and masquerade credible.” Arnold writes, “He has fun playing the roles straight, allowing the humor to emerge from the fundamental improbability of his character. His winning grin may establish a conspiratorial link with the audience, but it never violates the integrity of his character.[[48]](#footnote-48)” In addition to this, Reeve’s character is overwhelmingly muscular, and the disparity is even more clear if we compare Clark Kentto his early prototype played by George Reeves in *Adventures of Superman[[49]](#footnote-49)* (1951). Such a foundational transformation of Superman’s body is not merely done to provide him with a glossy look but is rather an effortless and calculated process the reverberation of which is one of the key principles of the escapism in this film. The scrupulous attitude of the film producers could be vividly traced in one of the interviews of Reeve’s interviews. A video in which Reeve and his personal trainer describe the whole process of the actor’s physical transformation contains real-life scenes of Reeve exercising[[50]](#footnote-50). Essentially, this material serves as yet another evidence of how predominant the necessity of portraying superheroes in the context of godlike imagery was.

 The aspect of Superman’s obedience brought up by Martin earlier is yet another important marker that emphasizes the down-to-earth nature of the invincible, godlike superhero, which displays respect towards law and order, underlyingly persuading the audience to behave likewise. In this context, I could not help myself but compare *Superman* with the latter released blockbusters that had been discussed so far. Whereas *Die Hard* efficiently incorporated exhibition of the rationally-based disobedience, (something that had been materialized as even more severe and concretized despise in *Rambo: First Blood Part II*) towards the system and its agents, Superman stands as a direct controversy to the similar narrative. Kent cooperates with the police, and he believes that the law enforcing body is the supreme echelon that will righteously decide the faith of criminals through the authority it possesses.

 Curiously enough, escapism branched even in the representation of the antagonist Lex Luthor, whose insidious plan might have looked like a textbook cliché today, seemed terrifying just decades ago. A crucial component that makes Luthor so different from the antagonists of modern sagas is that he is far from being a pretentious misanthropist whose character is laced with gravity. He is instead an ironic image of a criminal, whose occasional lines ("Some people can read War and Peace and come away thinking it's a simple adventure story. Others can read the ingredients on a chewing gum wrapper and unlock the secrets of the universe.[[51]](#footnote-51)”) seem to reinforce this pattern. Moreover, the idea of a spectacle in which a godlike being clashes against an ordinary person is always intriguing, but how could they possibly measure swords with each other? Here is when the installment of Lois Lane comes in handy to its fullest extent, as precisely her character (despite the mineral Kryptonite) is the weakness of Superman, his attachment to the profane. Nevertheless, the dispute between good and bad presented by *Superman* is divergent from similar narratives. In his *Somewhere in Time: Utopia and the Return of Superman,* Matt Yockey argues that “while he (Kent) too is marked by a traumatic past…, he cannot ritualistically redress this past by fighting criminals in hand-to-hand combat, as Batman and Spider-Man do.” Yockey continues, “…Superman's climactic task is to save millions, even billions, of lives by thwarting geological catastrophes created by Lex Luthor. So while Superman does fight an individual criminal, that battle is projected onto a larger scale than typically seen in Batman or Spider-Man narratives[[52]](#footnote-52)” (pp.26-27). In other words, Superman has not only lost his relatives or family members (which possibly attracts the viewer), his grief is disastrously more significant, as Krypton is already a quintessence of utopia, a world he could never return to anymore. This is the element that is supposed to show the viewer Superman's commitment, the responsibility of a supernatural creature never to let history repeat itself, in this case, menacing the planet earth.

 Apart from the factors mentioned above, the escapism carried within *Superman* is offered through the modernized representation of the fundamental story about Jesus Christ. In one of his interviews, Donner noted that he received life threats “because people accused me of approaching Brando as God and his son was Jesus.[[53]](#footnote-53)” Nevertheless, already mentioned Kozlovic’s piece sheds light on this part, bringing up another interview by the directorin which the latter admits his intentions, saying “It’s a motif I had done at the beginning when Brando sent Chris (Reeve) to earth and said ‘I send them my only son.” It was God sending Christ to Earth.” The references to Bible do not end here, and in his *The Gospel According to the World's Greatest Superhero* writer Stephen Skelton went to the very roots of *Superman’s* resonances with the Bible, concluding that even Martha Kent (Clark’s mother) is identical to the biblical Martha (2006, p. 55). One might even say that the film enchants the viewer with its dualistic phenomenon: the visual medium of the film keeps resonating with Greek mythology both through the protagonist’s athletic body-structure and his unwavering skill in action; at the same time subtext of it has a biblical shade. My assumption is that such a straightforward reverence for two bodies adds up to the flexibility of *Superman’s* escapism. Another noteworthy element attributing to the film’s appeal is the symbolism in Kent’s and Jor-El’s dialogue that directly opposes the prominent subject of Turgenev’s battle between sons and fathers (nihilists and liberals[[54]](#footnote-54)). In this case, Kent’s meeting with his real father is the exhibition of his psychological journey’s end. Simultaneously, this scene, yet another time, praises modesty of the hero and his respect towards the father figure, who, as Vincent Canby mentioned, has a striking resemblance to George Washington.[[55]](#footnote-55)In his interview with *The Post,* Reeve himself told that “this character Superman is a real part of our American myth…We take the audience to a place they’d like to escape to.[[56]](#footnote-56)” Through a similar synthesis of the spiritual (religious references) and heroism (“etymology” of the character), *Superman,* that according to Kristopher Spencer strives on “The soaring, patriotic theme (that) is the very embodiment of the film’s superhuman hero” (2008, pp. 199-200) mixes its eventual style becoming eclecticism, thus pitching the viewer two homogenous, but independent escapist narratives with differing messages conveyed.

 According to Ian Gordon’s book *Superman: The Persistence of an American Icon “*film offered a reassuring version of the superhero who, under the slogan ‘you’ll believe a man can fly,’ also offered renewed belief in the American way after the debacle of the Vietnam War and Watergate.” The cornerstone of Superman's everlasting popularity, Gordon thinks, “is that his audiences have engaged with the character” (2017, pp. 116-117). Elaborating, Superman is not merely a superhero; he is more than that. Although masses had known character for more than eighty years, Superman had always appeared at the right time. In addition to Superman's history and aesthetics, the constant relevance is achieved thanks to the excellent management of the character. Therefore, the escapism in *Superman (1978)* is not a prerogative of a distinct movie; instead, it is one of the culminating, brightest phases for its depiction. The authors of an article titled *The Myth of Superman* embrace this observation, saying that "Superman, then, must remain 'inconsumable' and at the same time be ‘consumed’ according to the ways of everyday life. He possesses the characteristics of timeless myth, but is accepted only because his activities take place in our human and everyday world of time.” (1972, Eco & Chilton, pp. 15-16).

 *Iron Man*

 “Starring the likes of Robert Downey Jr., Gwyneth Paltrow, Jeff Bridges and Terrence Howard, ‘Iron Man’ boasts the kind of rarified call sheet one would typically associate with an Oscar-customized ensemble drama, not a smash-mouth sci-fi blockbuster about a guy in flying robot suit.[[57]](#footnote-57)” Such admiration does not solely end with *Orange County Register,* the critics and the general public reached a fascinating consensus on Jon Favreau’s creature, being equally impressed. This point is correspondingly displayed by *Iron Man’s* high ratings[[58]](#footnote-58)[[59]](#footnote-59) and its success in the box office (with a budget of $140 million, the film grossed $585 million[[60]](#footnote-60)). We might also need to take into account that *Iron Man* is the initial film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe[[61]](#footnote-61) that, apart from preparing the ground for upcoming series[[62]](#footnote-62), served as the first installment of one of the most profitable franchises of all time[[63]](#footnote-63). In the year of its release, Mick LaSalle named the film as “…the best movie of its kind since the second "Spider-Man" movie four years ago.[[64]](#footnote-64)” But what makes the adaptation of Marvel Comics series such a triumphant discoverer of the genre? In his sarcastic prelude dedicated to *Iron Man’s* review, Paul Byrnes addresses the roots of the protagonist, tying his origination to Cold War ideology blending with the beginning of the Vietnam war. "He (Iron Man) hated commies, like all red-blooded Americans were supposed to. A few years later, when the war became unpopular, he became a bit of a peacenik - which was hard, given he was an arms manufacturer.[[65]](#footnote-65)” Nevertheless, *Iron Man* that came out in the post-9/11 era (2008), was here to reincarnate the franchise and serve its audiences' changing escapist needs.

 “*Iron Man* begins on dangerous ground: in the harsh terrain of Battleground Afghanistan. A convoy of Humvees (inadequately armored, no doubt) speeds through the desert carrying ultra-bazillionaire Death Merchant, and a notoriously dissolute playboy, Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.), scotch in hand, flirting with the female driver.[[66]](#footnote-66)” The opening sequence is then followed by Stark and his friend Colonel James Rhodes (Terrence Howard) attacked by a group of terrorists known as the Ten Rings. Ho Yinsen (Shaun Toub), another captive and a doctor, notices a wound in Stark's body, rapidly installing an electromagnet into the latter's chest to avoid a fatal outcome. Meanwhile, the terrorists offer Stark a deal that includes building a missile for Ten Rings in exchange for being freed. As none of the terrorists is a bachelor of engineering, Stark and Yinsen develop a powered suit that could help them to escape under the pretext of working on creating a missile. As a result, Yinsen sacrifices himself, but Stark manages to fight his way out of the mess, later proclaiming that his company Stark Industries ceases operations of manufacturing weapons. As his assistant Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow) deals with modernizing the suit, Stark is told that Ten Rings acquired a weapon produced by his company. Consequently, Stark flies back to Afghanistan, saves everybody, and returns home. Meanwhile, it turns out that Obadiah Stane (Jeff Bridges), the company’s manager, had been plotting against Stark and maintained worldwide criminal organizations with weaponry. The last scenes of the movie depict a fight between Stark and Stane wearing a heavy suit. This clash of robots ends with Stark's predictable victory and a press conference in which the charismatic billionaire admits being the new hero. The ultimate cliffhanger of intelligence agency director Nick Fury arriving at Stark's place with a curious proposal speaks for the confidence of Marvel Studios in the prosperity of their film.

 One of the most notable peculiarities of *Iron Man* is its star’s persona, Robert Downey Jr. who despite being spotted in a cycle of drug and alcohol abuse[[67]](#footnote-67) had been trusted to play a hero, a character who, J. R. Jones believes is “not just a crime fighter, he's a weapons system[[68]](#footnote-68)” The vast majority of the critics argue that Downey is a cornerstone of this project. A.O. Scott wrote that his “antic energy and emotional unpredictability bring out their agility and resourcefulness.[[69]](#footnote-69)” *Evening Standard,* in its turn, emphasized the movie’s distinction from the other franchises by the factor of Downey, claiming that he “steals the show in this latest cinematic plundering of the Marvel comics universe. He serves up swagger and swank and arch one-liners in place of the earnestness of Spider-Man, or DC’s dour Batman.”[[70]](#footnote-70) Bob Mondello, while adding to this, highlights the merit of the team by saying that “No one throws away a line with more style than Downey… and the dozen or so screenwriters it took to turn this comic book story into a storyline have given him plenty to throw away[[71]](#footnote-71).” Considering Stark’s frequent phrases such as “give me a scotch i'm starving,[[72]](#footnote-72)” or “Iron Man. That's kind of catchy. It's got a nice ring to it. I mean it's not technically accurate. The suit's a gold titanium alloy, but it's kind of provocative, the imagery anyway[[73]](#footnote-73)” Mondello’s comment is very suitable. In short, Downey's identity (at least one that is known to the viewer), being sarcastic, witty, cheerful, and earthly turned to be more than appealing to the audience. Consequently, the answer of how to make the audiences seem sympathetic towards a hero whose body is fully put in a metallic casket the producers’ answer is “to cast Robert Downey Jr. in the lead role and keep him out of the Iron Man suit for as long as possible[[74]](#footnote-74).”

 Besides Downey himself, a critical element to the *Iron Man’s* integrity is the character and his unique transformation that takes place in the evolving narrative of the film that frequently gives the viewer some political remarks. Tony Stark is not a hero with a personal tragedy, his planet was not destroyed like in *Superman,* nor he lost his family as Bruce Wayne did. He, for sure, had not been injured during gamma radiation and transformed into a mutant similar to Dr. Bruce Banner in *The Incredible Hulk.* Other than rare lines hinting at Stark’s loneliness (such as the scene in which he tells Yinsen that he has not gotten a family), the viewer does not witness exposed signs of trauma haunting the character from within. On the contrary, the film continually shows a billionaire surrounded by luxurious sports cars and beautiful women who seem like left fashion magazine covers to join the protagonist, simultaneously pinpointing the change happening within Stark. Suddenly, a person who did not care understands that his developments harm his country, injure himself. “Stark returns home in triumph but has an epiphany of conscience.[[75]](#footnote-75)” The character uncovers his humane side by purposefully ending the production of weapons (knowing that it might result in a shortage of income), but at the same time, he does not give up on his shiny life. One might say that *The Dark Knight* released in the same year does not portray Wayne as one who dismissed his status either, but whereas Nolan's film uses that status as a device for the development of the plot, *Iron Man* deliberately screams about its grotesque, an element that accompanies Stark throughout his entire journey in the Marvel’s cinematic universe. If that is the case, then we see a canonical change offered by *Iron Man,* something that has been mentioned by many professionals in the field.

 In his article, Tom Charity mentions that in the wake of rather severe and morbid remakes of already mentioned Hulk and Batman Iron Man is "riding to the rescue, a glass of Scotch in his hand and a sardonic smile on his lips.[[76]](#footnote-76)” In his book *Hollywood 9/11: Superheroes, Supervillains, and Super Disasters* the author Tom Pollard, alongside with touching upon the above mentioned aspects that make *Iron Man* unique, wrapped up his analysis by claiming that “*Iron Man* provides a perfect post-9/11 hero – a billionaire inventor with a conscience” (pp. 91-92). This thinking is further articulated by Peter Bradshaw, who had noticed almost a pattern like inclination present in fictional movies that appeared in the post-9/11 United States. Bradshaw argues that the first category of the two that emerged is "Anti-War… Another group can be called Fence-Sitter - Robert Redford's Lions for Lambs, Peter Berg's The Kingdom, Kimberly Peirce's Stop-Loss - a muddled, desperately liberal-patriot genre that yearns, in the manner of Gov Bill Clinton in the early 1990s, to support the troops rather than the war.” In this diversity, Bradshaw believes that Iron Man is “a refreshing change to all this…(which) for all its disposability, makes a cheerful and unpretentious change to the current crop of war movies.[[77]](#footnote-77)” But what essentially is this change all about?

 My observances lead me to speculate that *Iron Man* is one of the few representatives of the genre that seeks not to be associated with maximalism; it does not take sides. Nevertheless, such a film cannot remain wholeheartedly neutral, and the audience sees waving flags and carriers of democracy riding brutal tanks. The patriotic imagery and narratives are not deferred. Still, the viewer is also allowed to see the opposite side of the system, one in which a person plays his role, and he remains unreplaced as long as he holds on to his functions. Furthermore, the viewer sees how weak the government forces (in the guise of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents who fail to arrest Stane) are, thus reassuring the faith in superheroes. A criticism towards the military is also present in the movie, and the scene in which, according to J. R. Jones, Stark is “coming back to destroy his own stuff makes him the perfect metaphor for the U.S.” is an example of that. Another scene focusing on the same idea is the scene in which terrorists torture Stark by dunking his face in a barrel of water. This scene does not merely show Stark’s willpower, but it also, as Byrnes notes, "is a liberal Hollywood take on the superhero story. The water torture is meant as a subtle reminder of the torture that Washington finds acceptable, such as waterboarding.” Robert Hanks also accentuates this scene, dropping a rhetorical question, "isn't that the kind of thing it's OK for Americans to do to suspected terrorists?[[78]](#footnote-78)”

 Most of the modern superhero movies in which the variation between good and bad could be displayed merely by the costumes of heroes, such as *Superman,* possess a risk of generating disinterest in the protagonist. Although the figure of Iron Man does not incorporate philosophical nuances, it differs from the rest of the superheroes: there is no mystery related to identity of Tony Stark. In contrast to the previous film the escapism is manifested through familiarity, as Stark likes eating cheeseburgers, and still falls for all of the perverse attributes of luxurious life. This distinction is perhaps bigger and more important than a factual remark that “unlike Superman…this superhero (Iron Man) has no vulnerabilities or specialized skills.[[79]](#footnote-79)” Therefore the main difference between Iron Man and Superman is that Stark does not need to behave to a certain moral code, simply because he is not the character who should be perceived as a savior of the humanity(unlike Clark Kent), but rather is the one who might give a hand, someone who is not wholly flawless. Even Stark’s suit, which reminds of “RoboCop on human growth hormones[[80]](#footnote-80)” that has nothing to do with displaying his muscularity or emphasizing his nobility proves that.

 What is the inference? *Iron Man* does not try to be a burden on the shoulders of its audience. The film does not concentrate on the scrupulously self-reflexing protagonist, nor is the antagonist obsessed with enslaving the world. "Even though the movie makes an admirable bid for political topicality by retrofitting the struggles of its Marvel Comics hero for our (America’s) current wars[[81]](#footnote-81)” all of the characters stick to their local challenges. Meantime the film tries to minimize exaggeration and insists on being natural, thus naturally escapist.

**Conclusions**

 The inference of this project insists on considering cyclical escapist narratives present in the history of the American films as something apparent and relevant. Although my analysis could not cover all of the film genres with all of their pivotal representatives, I believe that if the research is carried on throughout a long-term perspective, more evocative patterns could be traced regarding the transformation of similar narratives. It would require a tremendous amount of research to possibly predict what mutually escapist narrative would be acquired by the film industry representatives in the course of the next decades, but my analysis leads me to suspect that this change will inevitably occur.

 As of now, my project illustrated what precise direction had been chosen by the leaders of the late 20th century film industry and how this direction had been adjusted in the early 21st century. One major pattern that could be identified in my project is that symbolism had been the most important tool in the modification of narratives in the films that had been released before and after 9/11. Summarily, the narrative of praising an individual (one that been common in the first cycle of discussed films) had been switched to portray the collective power of the nation. The analysis illustrated that films which portrayed denial of legal institutions and the confrontation of the irate protagonist against it such as *Rambo: First Blood Part II* and *Die Hard* started to retreat with the beginning of 2000s, being shifted by films that carry reverse ideology of advocating for collectivism (*Olympus Has Fallen, Act of Valor).* Although this aesthetical tendency had been variated, it is remarkable that the imperative leitmotif of the protagonist, mainly facing a foreign terrorist group as its prime enemy, had not been abandoned.

 A different situation had been recorded in the case of superhero films. Whereas throughout decades, the narrative of individualism, one that is rooted in the image of a superhero, had remained mostly untouched, post-9/11 superheroes started to obtain terrestrial shapes. Escapist narratives, in this context, brought divine superheroes (like Superman) on the ground, consequently making them more human-like, and more resonating. If we were to look closer, we might notice that even films that tell stories about supernatural heroes aim to make their characters more realistic. This is oftentimes done through implementing charisma, emotions, attractions, and weaknesses in the personality of protagonist, and as we could see most of these characteristics had been reconceptualized with the release of *Iron Man.*

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