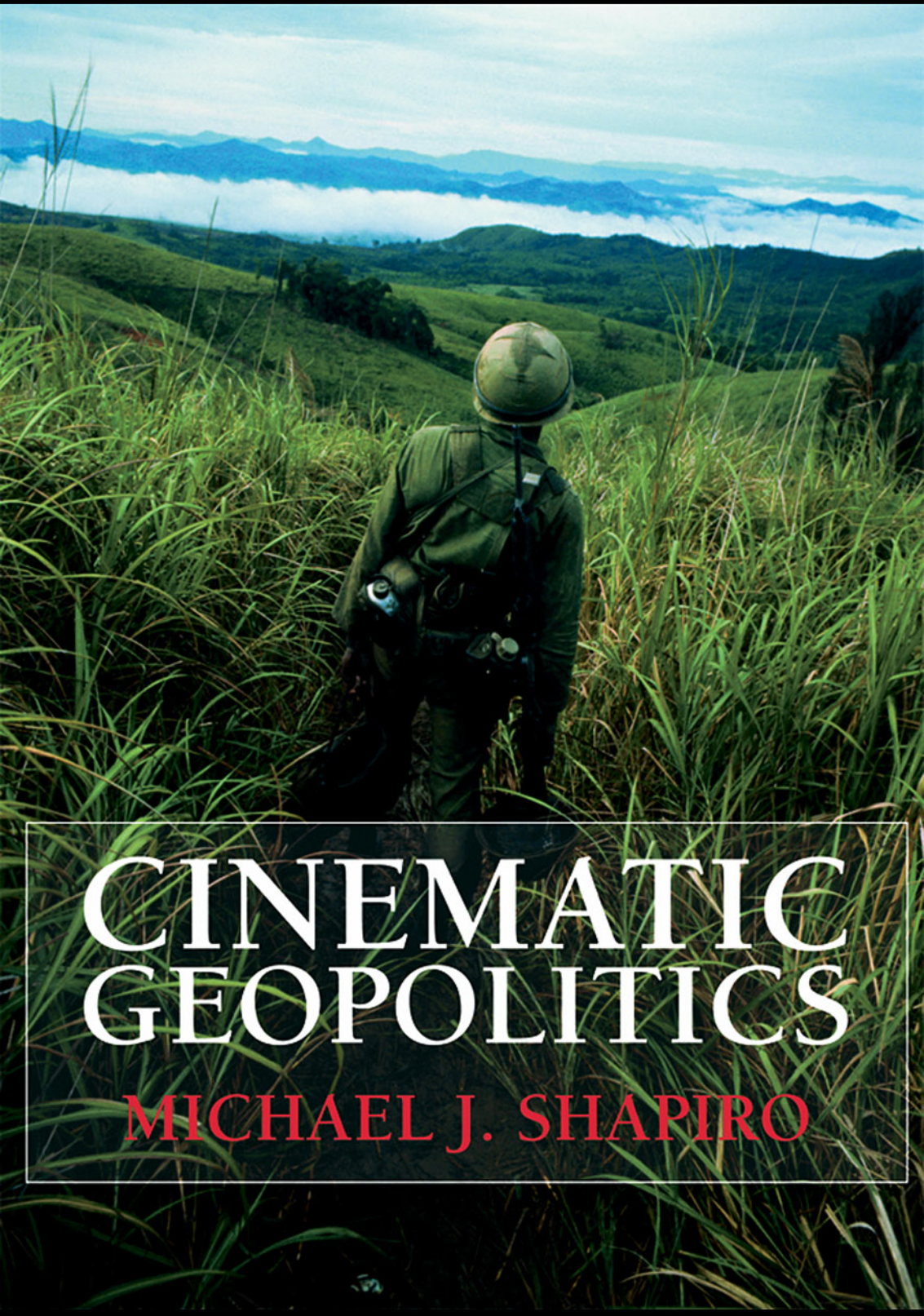

CINEMATIC GEOPOLITICS

MICHAEL J. SHAPIRO

Cinematic Geopolitics

In recent years, film has been one of the major genres within which the imaginaries involved in mapping the geopolitical world have been represented and reflected upon.

In this book, one of America's foremost theorists of culture and politics treats those aspects of the "geopolitical aesthetic" that must be addressed in light of both the post-Cold War and post-9/11 world and contemporary film theory and philosophy. Beginning with an account of his experience as a juror at film festivals, Michael J. Shapiro in *Cinematic Geopolitics* analyzes the ways in which film festival space and both feature and documentary films function as counter-spaces to the contemporary "violent cartography" occasioned by governmental policy, especially the current "war on terror."

Influenced by the cinema–philosophy relationship developed by Gilles Deleuze and the politics of aesthetics thinking of Jacques Rancière, the book's chapters examine a range of films from established classics like *The Deer Hunter* and *The Battle of Algiers* to contemporary films such as *Dirty Pretty Things* and *The Fog of War*. Shapiro's use of philosophical and theoretical works makes this cutting-edge examination of film and politics essential reading for all students and scholars with an interest in film and politics.

Michael J. Shapiro is a Professor in the Department of Political Science, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, USA. His research and teaching are in the areas of political theory, global politics, and cultural studies. Among his publications are: *Methods and Nations: Cultural Governance and the Indigenous Subject* (Routledge, 2004) and *Deforming American Political Thought: Ethnicity, Facticity and Genre* (University Press of Kentucky, 2006).

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To the memory of my cousin, Malcolm Greenberg,
1930–2004

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Introduction

Two historical events, one in which I participated and one that I merely witnessed, supplied the initiating impetus for this book. First, during the third week of January 2005, while President George W. Bush was using his second inaugural address to rally support for his "war on terror," deployed at home and abroad, I was with over five thousand people attending the Tromsø International Film Festival (the TIFF). Up in the Arctic Circle in Norway, in a nation that has often played a mediating role in a world of intra- and inter-state violence, I was performing as a necessarily judgmental viewer. I served on a five-person jury charged to select one among ten films for *Den Norske Fredsfilmprisen* (The Norwegian Peace Film Award). Along with four other jurors, I watched the films and engaged in deliberations about both their artistic merits and their relevance to the contested concept of a "peace film." In addition, I participated in a panel discussion on the concept of a "peace film" and interacted with our audience, containing both festival attendees and students from the University of Tromsø.

Thus situated in a "cinematic heterotopia," I began the reflections on the relationship of film to the geo- and bio-politics of war and peace and to other aspects of violence versus sympathy and interpersonal generosity that are the foci of investigations and analyses in this book.[1] Thanks to our jury coordinator, Jochen Peters, who administers the University of Tromsø's Center for Peace Studies, and the jurors with whom I served—Eva Gran, the director of the Tromsø branch of Norway's UN information agency, Margreth Olin, a Norwegian filmmaker and director, Ola Lund Renolen, the cultural director for the municipality of Trondheim, Norway, and Alberto Valiente Thoresen, a student in the Peace Studies program at the University of Tromsø—my views were contested, edified, and often changed. During the course of a week, I was led to confront the limits of my own film viewing in particular and to the ways in which critically oriented films can challenge the limits of perception in general.

The film we selected for the prize, the Iranian director Asghar Farhadi's *Beautiful City*, was timely as well as complex and thought-provoking. The film narrative begins with a revelation during a birthday celebration at a youth prison for Akbar, who has just turned 18 and can therefore be executed unless the plaintiff, the father of the girl he murdered when he was 16, forgives him. His sister and his friend Ala, a fellow inmate out on furlough, seek to convince the father, who seems

implacable in his desire for revenge, to forgive Akbar. As the plot unfolds, the viewer is treated to the complex cultural and economic patterns of an Iranian city, as well as to the array of personae who influence personal and cultural judgments. Much of the film's *mise en scène* is often more edifying than its dramatic plot. Indeed, apart from the plot as a whole, which never reaches a definitive resolution, one scene stood out for all of us jurors. After Ala and Akbar's sister bring their cause to the attention of the imam of the mosque where the victim's father attends, the imam engages the father in conversation about his refusal to forgive. The father asserts, "Doesn't the Koran mention my right to revenge?" The imam replies that indeed it does but then goes on to say that there are more places in the Koran that encourage forgiveness. Viewers are thus invited into a highly complex, text-based value negotiation at the center of an Islamic culture, at a time when many have regarded Islam's "faithful" as monomaniacally violent.

The experience at that festival and the historical moment within which it transpired encouraged me to think about how special film festival space is when a segment of it is given over to peace-oriented themes and to explore the cinema–violence and cinema–peace relationships deployed across the geopolitical world more extensively. After I learned that the first Norwegian Peace Film Award was given at the TIFF in 2004 to Michael Winterbottom's docudrama *In This Time*, I watched this film, which also won the top prize at the Berlin Film Festival in 2003. Using "real people" rather than actors, the film employed a road movie genre to follow two refugees, Jamal and his older cousin Enayat, headed to London to escape the hopeless lives they would otherwise lead in the Afghan refugee camps, which date back to the Russian invasion and have since been augmented after the disorder following the U.S. post-9/11 invasion. Like Winterbottom's more recent docudrama, co-directed with Mat Whitecross, *The Road to Guantanamo* (which I treat in chapter 1), *In This Time* gives the viewers an up-close experience of a smaller world of adversity within the larger, geopolitical world, where antagonisms lead to violent policies in places that most of the world grasps only with remote abstractions. Lodged between documentary and fictional genres, the film enjoyed a recognition at festivals that suggests that we might view film festivals as counter-spaces to the violent ones generated by inter- and intra-state antagonisms. Heeding the nature of that film and Winterbottom's *The Road to Guantanamo* (a prize winner at the 2006 Berlin Film Festival), while also reflecting on my 2005 experience at the TIFF, led me to sign on as a juror for the Peace Film Award at TIFF 2007, in order to explore more deeply the ways in which film festivals articulate a challenge to global violence in the post-9/11 world.

At TIFF 2007, where I served on a jury (again assisted by Jochen Peters), along with Rashid Masharawi, a Palestinian filmmaker from Gaza (living in Paris) and Silje Ryvold, a Norwegian graduate student in the University of Tromsø's Center for Peace Studies, we awarded the Peace Film Prize to Linda Hattendorf for her documentary *The Cats of Mirikitani*. It's a film that, among other things, articulates a historical case of both foreign civilian deaths and domestic oppression—the bombing of Hiroshima and the detention of America's Japanese Americans during World War II respectively—with the post-9/11 war on terror. I reserve my

discussion of that film for chapter 3, in which I treat another notable prize-winning documentary, Erroll Morris's *The Fog of War*.

The second provocation for my turn toward cinema is a perverse occasion of cinema viewing, the widely reported screening of Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (another film festival award winner—Grand Prize, Venice, 1966) for a group of officers and civilian "experts" employed by the Pentagon. In 2003 it was reported in the *New York Times* that the flier used to invite the viewers read, "How to win a battle against terrorism and the war of ideas."[2] Of special interest to those viewers was the effectiveness of the French "interrogation" techniques (the euphemism used by the commanding lieutenant colonel for torture). Pontecorvo's film is in an Italian neo-realist style. It uses non-actors in a vernacular setting and a Rossellini-inspired newsreel style—in black and white with documentary-type editing—to demonstrate, with close-up looks at Algerian insurgents (while in most scenes the French colonialists are shot from distances that render them as remote and unsympathetic), a people seeking to control their political destiny. As one writer notes, "Pontecorvo has penetrated our Western self-absorption and let in the harsh light of reality" and adds that "the true heirs of *Algiers* have been the numberless filmmakers from Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Cuba, Senegal, Mali, Tunisia, Morocco, Palestine and Algeria itself—inspired by Pontecorvo's supreme empathy to tell their own stories of nationalist striving."[3]

In contrast, the Pentagon's viewers were encouraged to watch the film to explore "the advantages and costs of resorting to torture and intimidation in seeking human intelligence about enemy plans."[4] What they were able to see, given their instructions, was tortures which include electric shock, near drowning, blowtorch burning, and upside-down hanging. Could this provide lessons for U.S. invaders of Iraq, involved in what they have called "Operation Iraqi Freedom"? What might they have seen were they able to place the scenes in the context of the anti-colonial struggle that the film's *mise en scène* foregrounds—a situation of curtailed freedom in which (in Jean-Paul Sartre's words during the actual rebellion) "the riches of the one are built on the poverty of the other"?[5]

On reading about the episode, I was reminded of an earlier attempt at perverse cinema appropriation, Hitler's propaganda minister Josef Goebbels's complimentary response in the German press to Sergei Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin*, and his suggestion that National Socialist films should seek to emulate Eisenstein's techniques. Eisenstein's reaction, in an open letter, is memorable. Reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's famous remark that fascism has no use for the arts employing mechanical reproduction is Eisenstein's remark that Goebbels's "suggestion that Fascism can give birth to a great German cinema is profoundly mistaken." After asserting that "National Socialism has not produced a single work of art that is in the least bit digestible,"[6] Eisenstein goes on to state that "*truth and National Socialism are incompatible*" (283), and ends with the following:

> *Get back to your drums, Herr drummer in chief!* Don't play the tune of National Socialist realism in cinema on your magic flute . . . . Stick to the instrument you're used to—the axe. Make the most of it. *Burn your books.*

> *Burn your Reichstags.* But don't imagine that a bureaucratic art fed on all this filth will be able to "set the hearts of men on fire with its voice" (284).

The Goebbels–Eisenstein exchange cannot be dismissed as a matter of the opposing ideologies of two propagandists. Although many have seen Eisenstein's films as propaganda in behalf of the (then) new Soviet experiment, Jacques Rancière makes a compelling contrary case. Eisenstein's films (for example *The General Line*), he suggests, are aesthetic, and thus political in a critical sense, rather than ideological, because they are "about what we see" and, most significantly:

> A propaganda film must give us a sense of certainty about what we see, it must choose between the documentary that presents what we see as a palpable reality or the fiction that forwards it as a desirable end, all the while keeping narration and symbolization in their respective places. Eisenstein systematically denies us this sense of certainty.[7]

Although it's tempting to respond to the Pentagon in the style with which Eisenstein engaged Goebbels, I am adopting a more theoretical stance in order to locate the perverse screening event in an aesthetic, rather than a polemical, context. Pontecorvo's characters, wrought from Algerian non-professionals, are aesthetic and thus highly political subjects. To follow their movements is less to interrogate their psychology than it is to watch "history-a-transpiring" (to enlist a Thomas Pynchon phrase).[8] Instead of merely condemning the Pentagon's film enthusiasts, I want to introduce an analytic (which I apply more extensively in chapter 5) to suggest that we can use the contrast between Pontecorvo's cinematic efforts and the Pentagon viewer's project to think about a politics that crosses geopolitical boundaries. In the canonical political theory literature, which foregrounds the social contract (John Locke's treatises are exemplars), the primary political problem is one of translating egotism into sociality. This leaves the outside of national societies in the cold, because, as many theorists of international relations insist, there is no global society and thus no international contract but rather a situation of normative anarchy (as some put it), or at least a normativity that is less than contractual (as others note). However, if we turn to David Hume instead of the various contract theorists, we are encouraged to consider the role of partialities rather than contracts, because for Hume passion precedes perception. Within the Humean frame, the political problem is one of how to stretch the passions into commitments that extend beyond them, how, as Gilles Deleuze puts it in his gloss on Hume, "to pass from a 'limited sympathy' to an 'extended generosity,'"[9] for, as Hume insists, "the qualities of the mind are *selfishness* and *limited generosity*."[10]

The two initiating experiences I have described have prompted me to investigate the ways in which cinema, when viewed critically in order to think rather than perversely to pursue a particular interest, can be used to extend generosity and thus to challenge the episodes of the violence deployed in official war policy and other modes of coercion and abjection. Accordingly the studies in this book are illustrations of cinema's contributions to sympathetic as well as critical political

thinking about the modern world. And crucially, contrary to the dominant presumption in the social sciences, *thinking* as I will be emphasizing it is not a matter of systematically achieving representations of experience by using reliable (that is, repeatable) techniques of observation. Rather, thinking involves resistance to the dominant modes of representing the world, whether those representational practices function as mere unreflective habit or as intentionally organized, systematic observation.

Cinema, as it has functioned in the hands of certain directors, is a vehicle for animating and encouraging such thinking. For Gilles Deleuze cinema is a technology that produces signs, which, in their encounter with the body, provide for a new "image of thought."[11] Yet many academics tend to dismiss the epistemic significance of cinema. More than one reviewer of essays I have written on film for social science journals have offered remarks to the effect that this or that essay is just about "movies" (enough said). And, when I have presented prototypes of the chapters in this book to university audiences, composed mostly of those who are more attuned to the reliability of representations than to the provocations of critical genres, some have reacted by wondering what one can derive from examining films, which they see as mediated, fictional renderings of human experience. For them, the mediating effects of measurement devices aimed at static data are less problematic with respect to access to "empirical reality" than are films, which restore the process through which such "empirical reality" emerges.

Against such a "trained incapacity" (thank you, Thorstein Veblen), a variety of philosophers and social theorists whose writings influence my analyses have argued that cinema provides superior access to empirical veracity than other forms of managed perception. Among these, Friedrich Kracauer tellingly subtitled his mid-twentieth-century film book *The Redemption of Physical Reality*. Cinema, according to Kracauer, allows us "the experience of things in their concreteness"; it restores what scientific abstractions remove. Science's "objects are stripped of the qualities which give them 'all their poignancy and preciousness.'"[12] Similarly Walter Benjamin saw film technology, still in its early realizations, as a mechanism that makes the real more apparent than mere vision, by among other things allowing "the audience to take the position of a critic" as it "takes the position of the camera." It is a perspectival position that "reactivates the objects produced" to comport with the viewer's contemporary situation rather than articulating "the traditional value of the cultural heritage." In addition the kind of vision offered by cinema contrasts with the perspectives of its actors because the way the camera presents the actor to the public is such that the viewer "need not respect the performance as a whole."[13]

More recently, in a gloss on the film-philosophy writings of Deleuze, Rancière has noted that cinema achieves what vision obscures by undoing the "ordinary work of the human brain." It "puts perception back in things because its operation is one of restitution" of the reality that the brain has "confiscated," in part because it disrupts the human tendency to place oneself at "the center of the universe of images."[14] Space and positionality are crucial aspects of Deleuze's contribution to the analysis of cinema's critical capacity because cinema deprivileges the

directionality of centered commanding perception; it allows the disorganized multiplicity that is the world to emerge. In his words, "Instead of going from the acentered state of things to centered perception, [we] could go back up towards the acentered state of things and get closer to it."[15]

To pursue the epistemic and political significance of recovering the "acentered state of things," I want to elaborate Deleuze's remark by turning to Thomas Mann, who provides a similar insight in his epic tetralogy *Joseph and His Brothers*. Not surprising, the style of this set of novels is strikingly cinematic; Mann explicitly formulated a principle of montage, which he applied in his writing.[16] The third book, *Joseph in Egypt*, begins with Joseph's remark "Where are you taking me?" to a group of nomadic Ma'onites who have pulled him from the pit where his brothers had left him to die. After deflecting this and subsequent queries with which Joseph expresses the presumption that the Ma'onites are part of *his* story, Kedema, whose father is the group's patriarch, says, "You have a way of putting yourself in the middle of things," and goes on to disabuse him of his privileged location: "Do you suppose . . .that we are journeying simply so that you may arrive somewhere your god wants you to be?"[17] Like Kedema, who contests Joseph's conceit that his spatio-temporal location commands all relevant perception, cinema effects a decentering mode of creation and reception.

Those who have recognized cinema's decentering effects are in debt to Henri Bergson's philosophy of embodiment. Bergson saw the body as a center of perception, but crucially the Bergsonian centered body is a center of indetermination in that its perceptions are always partial. To perceive is to subtract in order to come up with *a* sense of the world, selected from all possible senses. Inasmuch as each body, as a center of indetermination, selects an aggregate of images from the totality of the world's images, the question for Bergson becomes:

> How is it that the same images can belong at the same time to two different systems [for example Joseph's and Kedema's]: one in which each image varies for itself and in a well defined measure that it is patient of the real action of surrounding images; and another in which all images change for a single image [for Bergson each *body* is a single image] and in varying measure that they reflect the eventual action of this privileged image?[18]

As is well known Bergson's answer is that each single image or body subtracts in its own interest-based way, its way of isolating some aspects of the aggregate of images rather than others. Hence the Joseph–Kedema interchange is quintessentially Bergsonian.

For Bergson, the brain is a particularizing and evacuating mechanism. Edified by Bergson's insights on perception, Deleuze offers a *cinematic* body as a center of indetermination by noting how a film's cuts and juxtapositions generate perspectives that depart from the control exercised by individual embodiment. Subjective perception is not cinema's primary model for Deleuze, who insists that "cinema does *not* have natural subjective perception as its model . . . because the mobility of its centers and the variability of its framings always lead it to restore