



Body of Lies

THE MANICHEAN STRUGGLE between light and dark, between good and evil, goes on without end. In the movies, at any rate, there is no prospect of an end because although Hollywood returns *again and again* to the apocalypse, the incurable virus is invariably cured, the Aliens always lose (or lose heart), the implosion fails, and the final inferno is indefinitely postponed. Therefore I am afraid that there is no end in sight to the moral ambiguities, the dilemmas, the heart-rending body-strewn contradictions, and the bloody predicaments that face our taut, stubbly-faced heroes.

Whether it's Jason Bourne, Billy Costigan Jr, Danny Archer, or Roger Ferris, *the insider, become outsider*, will inevitably be deserted by those on the *Inside*. Their journey to the outside will be marked every step (and car chase) of the way by the fraud, the torture, and the lies that are the stock-in trade of power. While our hero knows that these things go on, he may even have participated in them – he's not a naïve virgin after all – he finds them repugnant; when they threaten to despoil the very things he cherishes he calls it a day, the relationship with his ruthlessly cynical bosses is terminated, turning him instantly from the hunter into the hunted.

These events are framed by byzantine twists and turns in which conspiracy is piled upon conspiracy so that only the most alert viewer has the slightest idea about what is going on. The hero's *stop-at-nothing*

boss is a model of amoral determination sparing no outrage however vile or corrupt in order to get the job done. The boss and the organization for which he works whether government agency or mercenary outfit is, despite being on the *right side* blatantly immoral and spiritually equivalent to the guys on the *bad side*. This balance in which the good is sustained by evil means gives our hero the precise circumstances in which to express both his battered idealism and his rejection of the depredations of power.

The advantage of this narrative strategy is that the hero, along with being startlingly good-looking, streetwise, tactically astute, athletic and technically adept, is also a robust individualist. He is not a team player; fundamentally he is his own man, insubordinate, iconoclastic, and fully aware of just how rough it can get. He is ready-made for the modern *Boy's Own* story in which the lad does his best against the odds and tries never to forget that honesty and loyalty are the keystones to any life worth living. There are girls of course, usually one girl in particular, who simply *by being herself*. brave, resourceful, but vulnerable, reminds him in the nick of time, of these timeless verities.

It is always, just in the nick of time, because the hero is always in danger of being sucked into the cynical morass by those for whom he works which despite being on the right side are capable of the full range of wickedness that characterise the enemy. "They", some secret agency of the United States, or some out-sourced outfit, represent merely the "formal" assertion of moral authority against the terrorists despite the fact that they are plainly just as bad as each other.

Only the hero makes the difference between good and evil. He does not represent democratic society or democratic values, he is an individual bound by his own sense of honour to loyalty and truth. The hero is beyond the dirty business of politics. Taking sides in a political struggle is not for him. Right and virtue does

not reside in the defence of particular political arrangements. On the contrary, right and virtue are only present in the defence of loyalty and truth by the heroic individual.

This bizarre personality, excellently played among others by Leonardo DiCaprio and Matt Damon, brilliantly reveals the necessity, felt by the popular cinema, to empty political movies of their political content. Fearful of their audiences' scepticism about freedom and democracy the writers and filmmakers need to defend open societies *without expressing any general political commitment to democratic governments or free institutions*. Fear of the prevailing scepticism is then compounded by the desire of directors and scriptwriters to satisfy popular fascination with the *inside story on conspiracy*; they set about feeding the widespread belief that society is run by conspiratorial elites with stories and characters, which dramatically confirm these beliefs.

This is why we have movies in which the cops are as bad as the robbers, the spies are as bad as the enemy upon whom they spy, and the Swat Teams and crack troops are as bad as the terrorists. Abu Ghraib Prison, Guantánamo Bay Detention Centre and the brutal killing of Jean Charles de Menezes, to name a few outrages among thousands, support this story; the government is almost as bad as the enemy – for hundreds of thousands the government *is* the enemy.

In the past, in the 1940s for example, filmmakers could boldly distinguish between good and evil in films about crime and war. The white hats and black hats of earlier days could be maintained because the vile brutality of democratic states was, by and large, concealed from the public. The detention of hundreds of thousands of enemy combatants beyond the protection of *Geneva*, the widespread practice of torture, slavery, and ethnic cleansing were not allowed to sully the narrative of the *Good War*. The hero was the guy who fought for freedom and democracy against the foul fascists. Of course, he could be

insubordinate and a bit of a handful, but he was a team player, not an angst-ridden loner.

Such clarity is not possible today: the media has become ubiquitous, telecommunications have become much more powerful, open societies have become more democratic; it has become much more difficult to conceal the barbarism of warfare and the bloody doings of the police and other state agencies. Paradoxically, as society has become more open and more democratic, it has become much more difficult to dispel scepticism and cynicism about our army and our police. Newspaper revelations, public inquiries and investigations, juries, veterans' organizations, civil rights activists and campaigners of all sorts make concealment and cover-ups vulnerable to exposure at every turn.

This is why we need better movies and better heroes. Movies and heroes who leave the angst-ridden loner behind and give us characters and stories who openly fight for democracy against Islamism and tyranny by explicitly opposing torture and kidnapping. We need more heroes like Douglas Freeman, played by Jake Gyllenhaal in the movie *Rendition*. Freeman observes the futility of torture by quoting *The Merchant of Venice*:

I fear you speak upon the rack
Where men enforced do speak anything

Here is a hero who is repelled by the CIA's actions, and his own complicity with them, a hero who takes an explicit stand against the agency and their torturers. Freeman's primary aim is not the defence or expression of his own integrity, but the integrity and effectiveness of the democratic state.