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3. Film critic Andrew Sarris observed in Politics and Cinema, "Most Hollywood movies have been castigated by the left for crimes of omission." And yet recent fiction films that overtly tackle the key political question of the day—the U.S. response to the September 11 tragedy, specifically, the conflict in Iraq—have been box-office poison (e.g., Lions for Lambs, Redacted, Stop-Loss). Are these simply bad films, or is something different about the current climate?

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Miller: I don't draw any conclusions about the failure of a few films to be profitable in cinemas in the United States. The Hollywood system is predicated on the commercial failure of most texts in their lives as objects of hard-top exhibition, so the fact that a tiny sub-genre has not made money signifies nothing more than one more moment in the system. I don't regard Andrew Sarris as a guide to film studies, film theory, or the left, in any event. He is an historically important national movie critic from the 1960s and '70s bourgeois media.

Nichols: This is a time of political amnesia. A small town mayor and small state governor can become one step from President, not in a Frank Capra movie, but on the Republican ticket. A Republican Senator who backs Bush almost entirely can run as the candidate of change, and get widespread support for it. War without words or images is like a tree that falls with no one to hear it. It doesn't exist. The Iraq war can devastate the budget and ruin the economy but it is treated as a non-factor, as if huge deficits were a result of too many highways and too much socialism. Even veterans get little care. The spirit of collectivism, of a commonwealth and a common good, has eroded massively after several decades of dribbles and trickles. Pump the money to the rich so they dribble some more and stop worrying; nothing else matters. No more taxes. That's all it takes. Change will and must come before the system implodes but it is not clear if the semi-opposition party can provide it.

Tryon: I think it would be a mistake to attribute the box office failure of these films to any single factor. At the same time, we should caution against placing so much emphasis on the movie theater as a primary site for politically engaged entertainment, especially given that audiences are now more likely to consume films on DVD or online. Similarly, there have been a number of well-received TV shows, including HBO's Generation Kill and In Treatment that examine the effects of the war either directly or indirectly. In fact, the "failure" of many of these films may be blamed in part on a changing marketplace for independent and Indiewood films, illustrated in part by the closure of a number of high-profile independent studios. Further, because of the increasing competition over a limited number of screens, theater owners can no longer afford to allow movies to build an audience gradually, playing movies to small audiences for several weeks with the hope that enthusiasm for a film will eventually build.

Further, a number of these films may not have been "bad" films as much as they were victims of bad marketing

campaigns that were unsure of how to promote movies with volatile political content. Because audiences usually pay for movies before they see them, they are more than likely “buying” (into) the advertising for the film, not the film itself. In this context, I would argue that we need to attend to the role of extratextual materials not only in shaping whether a film is a box office success but also how those materials—advertisements, trailers, reviews—position the political content of movies in a wider popular and political culture. For example, while Brian de Palma’s Redacted offered a complex meditation on representations of the Iraq War, the film was virtually buried by its distributor, Magnolia Pictures, due to a conflict between Mark Cuban and Brian de Palma over a montage of documentary photographs of dead Iraqis. Although Redacted would have been a difficult sell under most circumstances, the controversy overshadowed any attempt to build critical buzz for the film, making it difficult to reach any specific conclusions about its theatrical performance.

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