The shifting cinematic portrayal of managers in the USA post-2008.

ABSTRACT

I examine cinematic depictions of American corporate managers since 2008, extending previous discussions. Experts agree that earlier filmic representations often showed managers as at best indifferent to subordinates, at worst cynical and/or exploitative of them. The standard archetype was seen by several commentators as that of the 'Macho Manager'. Drawing on analyses of selected films and auteurs' public statements, I argue that since the financial crisis managers have increasingly been portrayed as vulnerable individuals themselves subject to unemployment, with problems in common with other employees, sympathetic towards them and on occasion willing to mobilise them for collective ends. I conceptualise the new depiction in the idea of the Post-Company ManagerialHero. The shift has been a conscious one on the part of auteurs. Given the cultural importance of cinema as a popular medium, demonstrating that such a change has taken place in the cinematic depictions of managers may help us better understand popular perceptions of management more broadly in the period following the financial crisis.

KEYWORDS: American managers

cinematic depictions

financial crisis

workplace cooperation

cultural archetypes

 masculinity

INTRODUCTION

This article examines how cinematic depictions of corporate managers have developed in American films since 2008's financial crisis, contrasting these with earlier portrayals. Social relations in the workplace lend themselves to narrative representations (Mangham 1996). Just as management in workplaces and managerial practices change (Watson 1994), the workplace drama evolves to confront different managerial trends and attitudes (Bugos 1996). The financial crisis created a dramatic shock to this evolutionary process by creating dramatic changes in workplaces, corporate employment, society and the polity of many developed economies (Wade 2009). The subject is important because, as is widely recognised, these depictions are both impacted by and influence popular perceptions of managers and their relationships to employees (Rhodes and Westwood 2008, Boozer 2002). Given Hollywood's reach, they may therefore subtly impact public views of managers, employment relations and societal attitudes towards business more widely. The American 'Liberal Market Economy' is an influential model; developments within it have global resonance.

By 'manager' I mean all those exercising authority over labour within corporations who would normally describe themselves as such, since it is these, rather than those managing in small and medium sized enterprises, that are traditionally emblematic of capitalism in American cinema. I exclude 'Corporate Barons' (designated 'principals' in agency theory) who exercise ownership control; they are contrasted with managers in my discussion. I include top managerial 'agents', who have appropriated considerable power and corporate wealth in recent decades (Piketty 2013). The gap between them and the heterogeneous group of managers beneath their level, whom I also consider, is evident. The latter encompass those middle managers who have frequently been stripped out of corporations and foremen/women, in immediate and daily contact with the mass of employees, whose position is more akin to the managed. The latter have been referred to as occupying an 'intermediate' position between senior managers and workers but as having little in common with middle

managers and as identifying closely with workers (Cadet and Guitton 2013: 20). However, following cinematic depictions, I am more centrally concerned with the elite and middle managers than with foremen and women.

The article proceeds as follows. In the first section, earlier expert discussions about depictions of managers prior to 2008 are critically evaluated to constitute a base line for my analysis. Subsequently, I outline my method. In the article's core I analyse three post-2008 films before I discuss previous managerial archetypes and proposing that a new one is emerging. Finally, I summarise how depictions have changed, answering the central research question: *Has there been a shift in American cinema since 2008 towards more humanistic and sympathetic portrayals of managers?*

I argue that new depictions have emerged. All three films depict managers in a rather different light from their pre-2008 counterparts. One is a manager (Josh in *Tower Heist*) who also fills some of the roles of the traditional Organisational Hero. I dub him a Post-Company ManagerialHero, while pointing to features he shares with the other managers examined here and arguing that collectively they constitute a new and distinctive type of depiction of managers.

EXPERT ASSESSMENTS OF THE MANAGER-SUBORDINATE RELATIONSHIP AS DEPICTED IN PRE-2008 FILMS

I now examine the dominant filmic conceptualisations of manager-subordinate relations from the late 1980s onwards, as proposed by expert analysts. After the following introductory paragraph, my focus is on this period, since the films that I discuss relate more to conventions established in films of those decades than they do to earlier films.

Until the late 1980s, a strong tradition of labour-oriented film-making flourished in both Britain and the USA, predictably advancing critical views of managers (Stead 1989). The later decline of this strand threw more commercial depictions into sharp relief, but commentators from traditions less committed to the labour movement have also observed critical depictions of both companies and managers. Bell (2008: 65) comments that 'in many films, employees [were] shown to be constrained or crushed by organization through the existence of monotonous work routines, technologies, bureaucratic rules and overzealous management.' Narratives require an antagonist; since managers and their subordinates are structurally likely to experience some conflict, managers have often taken that role (see e.g. Bell 2008). Bell identifies different categories of cinematic organisation, including the 'mad organization' (76-78) and the 'psychopathic corporation' (78-80) which clearly supported aberrant management behaviours.

Managers operating outside corporate contexts were judged by non-labour movement experts to be depicted in negative ways. Before 2008, managers were shown as enjoying a separate, privileged position. Bell (2008: 66) argues that many representations of the manager-worker relationship were calculated to communicate 'a sub-ordinate, super-ordinate distinction…' Managers were depicted as insulated from their subordinates' problems, such as fear of redundancy (Rhodes and Westwood 2008: 55) and as having more control over their own lives (Zaniello 2003: 8). They were also shown controlling and intimidating subordinates with threats of punishment (Rhodes and Westwood 2008: 63).

The Macho Manager is identified by several analysts as central to many different films in subtly varying forms from 1945 onwards, becoming pervasive in the last quarter of the twentieth century. In the last two decades, this archetype, albeit with variations, became the central dominant cinematic incarnation of the manager. The Macho Manager is so described because of his attitude to women and his overt masculinity, manifesting itself in selfishness

and callousness. Gordon Gekko in Oliver Stone's well-known business movie *Wall Street* (1987), in many senses the archetypal Macho Manager, is described by experts as 'ruthless' (McDowell 1998: 171, Williamson 1991: 158) and representing 'the ruthless short-term organizational culture associated with the late 1980s' (Bell 2008: 66). The Macho Manager was dedicated to his work to the point of proudly lacking a home life (Panayiotou 2010: 668). The archetype is, Rhodes and Westwood (2008) suggest, integral to wider depictions of 'the ethos of contemporary capitalism' (2008: 53). According to these authors, 'vicious put-downs' to subordinates as well as self-aggrandisement (2008: 58) were the hallmarks of the manager Blake in *Glengarry Glen Ross* (Foley, 1992). They draw the point more widely: 'the capitalist ethos is infused with and underpinned by the discourses of patriarchal and masculine power and this extends into the more micro-domain of organizations' (Rhodes and Westwood 2008: 53).

Panayiotou (2010), examining films made between *Wall Street* (Stone, 1987) and its 2000 counterpart *Boiler Room* (Younger, 2000), identifies the Macho Manager as someone inclined to 'control, discipline and even abuse (women, subordinates, the law and themselves)' (675). He symbolised and indeed embraced the numerous threats represented by capitalism, encompassing 'corporate downsizing, redundancy and deskilling, particularly in relation to white-collar managerial and professional work' (Bell 2008: 161). The Macho Manager was then, ultimately, considered to constitute a metaphor for both sexism and capitalism itself (Panayiotou 2010). He could simultaneously be depicted as an 'organization man' (Whyte 1956) in that he in was not simply employed by but strongly identified with the company. His signifiers were prominent: he would often be in impressive physical condition, and carry the trappings of material wealth: flashy suits, jewellery and an expensive car. His language was frequently punctuated by profanity and misogyny, demonstrations of aggressive masculinity (Panayiotou 2010). As gender relations evolved,

authorities pointed out that aggressive managers were increasingly women (Sheppard 1989). These female characters often demonstrated some of the 'macho' manager's classic defining features: such women were vindictive, deceitful, 'ruthless careerists' (Bell 2008) and ultimately a dangerous presence for their workplace subordinates of both genders (Brewis 1988: 87). Katherine Parker, the financial executive in *Working Girl* (Nichols, 1988), exploits her female personal assistant, taking credit for her achievements. Johnson, the woman manager in *Disclosure* (Levinson, 1994), sexually harasses a male subordinate and then engages in complex chicanery to discredit his claim of harassment. Brewis (1998: 83-96) argues from a Foucauldian position that the latter representation constitutes and consolidates understandings of successful working women as threatening and unnatural.

Experts recognised that such managers had antagonists who threw them into relief. In William H. Whyte's seminal 'The Organisation Man' (1956), Whyte summarises most workplace drama as being rooted in 'the problem of the individual versus authority' (243). Some characters therefore are shown to oppose authority. The Organisational Hero (Panayiotou 2010) was not normally a manager and was counter posed to managers. S/he would rise to heroic status by reclaiming his/her humanity from the system. S/he often did this by standing up to the manager (or very occasionally other managers), or by resigning his or her job for more fulfilling employment. As Panayiotou ironically writes, the hero 'saves himself from the evil corporation and the greedy capitalist boss and….in the process may even save humanity' (2010: 671). Williamson (1991), discussing business films of the 1980s, talks of the convention of such heroes triumphing (often over a boss or manager) through natural business sense. Williamson contends that this convention ultimately illustrates 'the unfairness and dishonesty of capitalism' (115).

Experts recognise a few cases of managers being shown in ways less emblematic of ruthless capitalism. It nevertheless bears repetition that the weight of expert opinion has been that managers were more often depicted in negative ways. However, the financial crisis clearly had significant and widespread consequences for both managers and workers in the USA and beyond and appears likely to have changed cinematic depictions in order to reflect both reality and audiences' experience. My research question is therefore: *Has there been a shift in American cinema since 2008 towards more humanistic and sympathetic portrayals of managers?*

METHOD

Consistent with the conventions of film interpretation and analysis (Sobchack and Sobchack 1997), I ultimately chose three films to allow the in-depth analysis required to demonstrate depictions in sufficient detail. The films are John Wells's *The Company Men* (2010), Brett Ratner's *Tower Heist* (2011) and JC Chandor's *Margin Call* (2011). These films meet certain criteria. They are all theatrically- released feature films set in corporate industrial (conceived broadly) workplaces located in the USA after the onset of the financial crisis, which centrally depict both the crisis and managers interacting extensively with other employees.

I arrived at these films through the following process. As the first stage of selection I compiled a list of films using the keyword "Manager" on the Internet Movie Database (IMDB) search facility, refining the search to give only feature films released between 2008 and 2016. The result was a list of 76 films. Several different types of film were then eliminated. Films dealing with sports, music or show business were excluded on the basis of the short synopsis provided for each film on the IMDB; 34 were eliminated as they were not set in corporate contexts. Next, the details of the remaining films were consulted to discover

the country they were set in and 23 were eliminated as they were not set in the USA.   For the

remaining 19, plot descriptions were consulted and as a result a further 11 were eliminated.

These were other films set in non-corporate contexts such as police dramas, war films, and

films set in politics since, (as for sports and music films) the power dynamics in those

settings are very specific to their contexts. The 8 films remaining required finer judgements

to be made. They were all considered individually from plot summaries and watching them

where necessary. The five eliminated at this point included well-known films rejected

because corporate managers are not central or for other reasons. Thus, *The Wolf of Wall

Street* (Scorsese, 2013) was eliminated as it is set in an historic setting. *Up In the Air*

(Reitman, 2009), was excluded as the protagonist is an employee of an HR consultancy.

Arbitrage (Jarecki, 2012) was eliminated because the action was predominantly in a court

room. This left the three films examined in detail here.

   Although not a selection criterion, it was helpful that the films selected reflected an explicit

desire on the part of film-makers to tackle the real world issues created by the financial crisis

as demonstrated in publicly-available sources about their creation. I used several other

sources to throw light on the film-makers and their stated intentions: five online interviews

with the directors (Weintraub 2011, Tribute.CA 2011) one publicity press kit (the

compilations of character and plot summaries, and filmmaker interviews that studios issue to

critics) and a documentary made for the *Tower Heist* DVD. More than one source is used for

each movie. I checked the filmmakers' statements in interviews for internal consistency and

for compatibility with the films themselves. These sources ostensibly express the filmmaker's

own beliefs and ambitions for their works and were prepared for publicity purposes.

Nevertheless, they proved internally consistent and were compatible with the content and

overall commercial identity of the finished films. Thus, whether or not the artistic processes

they describe are accurate, the intentions they describe are accepted unless I had good reason

to question them. The extent to which filmmakers are free to address the complexities of these issues is much debated by Bell (2008) and Rhodes and Lilley (2012: 2). Nevertheless, the extent to which actual post-crisis events and their effects on managers and employees were researched appears at least potentially relevant to the degree to which the films might resonate with audiences. Such research is not always undertaken by film-makers, including those represented in my selection. The additional material was used as an adjunct to the analysis of the films, to demonstrate the claimed foundations of the films' themes in the directors' research among people who had suffered through the financial crisis. This aspect of the paper is reported on at the end of my analysis of each film as it constitutes an additional albeit necessarily tentative extension of the analysis of the films themselves.

I examine the films with particular reference to the hero's trajectory. The films are primarily analysed in terms of how the central manager depicted behaves in the power and authority relationships regarded as significant by organisational theorists (Whitley 2000). All three films have an extensive cast of characters, but my central concern is the depiction of the central managerial figure; how he interacts with his corporate environment and with other people. Joseph Campbell (1949), in his first and highly influential early model of the hero's journey identifies a critical stage (five) of twelve at which the hero crosses the threshold, at which he leaves a familiar world and enters a 'special' world in which enemies, allies and tests differ from those in the familiar world. Susan Mackey-Kallis (2001) builds on Campbell, and argues that the concept of the hero's journey is constantly evolving in American cinema. The hero undertakes a quest to find him/herself and his/her literal and figurative home in which s/he finds personal realisation. At one level, they are reaching an accommodation with the culture at large. Thus, in modern film, the hero's ultimate goal need not necessarily be a material object; it can be an emotional goal, and that goal shifts with the

cultural and social climate in which films are being created and consumed. These theoretical ideas inform and focus my central analysis.

   At another level, the films are also examined from a symbolic interactionist standpoint, identifying the ways in which they draw on familiar symbols and patterns of social interaction. This is a tradition initiated by Blumer (1933) in the seminal "Movies and Conduct," but for my purposes the most significant and useful guiding text is Bell's "Reading Management and Organization in Film" (2008). Bell points out (p31) that the cinematic manager is defined by a series of emblems indicating trappings of power and material success. These long-established visual signifiers are exploited and emphasised in all three of the films under consideration. The use of camera angles and *mis-en-scene* to communicate particular power relationships and emotional effects will also be central to my analysis, following Bell.

The films are examined in the chronological order in which they were released.

FILMIC ANALYSIS

Broad overview of the three films

In broad terms, all of the films show managers experiencing inhuman treatment as a consequence of the financial crisis, the consequences of this treatment both for themselves and others and the ways that the managers respond.   The central shift depicted in all three movies is from the central manager's conflict with another individual - usually their boss but always somebody richer and more powerful than them - to conflict with a corporation and its financiers. In all three of the films, although more senior managers and financiers are initially represented as antagonists—albeit to varying degrees--, the ultimate antagonist is revealed to be not these individuals but the corporations involved. The films all use a range of cinematic devices to achieve a sympathetic depiction of the central managers' position in relation to the corporation but also in relation to other employees.   I now turn to analysis of the first film.

The Company Men

Made in 2010, *The Company Men* was not the first Hollywood film to address the financial crisis' fallout, but challenged the workplace drama's traditional tropes by introducing the crisis' real-life consequences. Over the opening credits, we hear authentic footage from American news explaining the 2008 crash's trajectory. The news footage is followed by footage of the protagonists' luxury houses and vintage cars. Immediately, the symbols and emblems of the cinematic past, as identified by Bell (2008), are contrasted with contemporary events which will pose issues for the traditional manager. We see the three leads standing at their mirrors, putting on silk ties and gold cufflinks before going to the office; they are introduced to us via the emblems of material success familiar from the business movie (Bell 2008). When one character (Bobby) loses his car and the senior sales manager Phil Woodward is unable to pay his daughter's tuition, we realise that we are witnessing the onset of the financial crisis.

The film follows the fortunes of three white-collar employees of publicly-owned shipbuilders GTX after the hostile financial environment outlined in the opening credits results in the venerable company enduring round after round of downsizing. When young salesman Bobby Walker (Ben Affleck) loses his job in the first round, other employees fear for their own positions. Phil is among them. Phil is an isolated figure within the company, older than much of the staff, less educated and experienced than many of them. We never see him interact with his subordinates (in contrast to Bobby, who twice takes control of team meetings). Phil is often shown alone, as when he stands by the window watching his recently fired colleagues leave, or when he is one of the few downsized employees to be given his own office at the out-placement 'transition centre'. In the film's first half, this emphasises Phil's unusual position: he rose to management after having worked in the shipyards as a labourer, 'and not many people can say that anymore.' Phil is later fired; the visual motif of

his isolation continues, as when he sits alone in a bar getting drunk in the middle of the day. However, the motif now emphasises how little support he can expect since he is no longer protected by his managerial position. The three men at the movie's centre (Bobby, Phil, and the company's Executive Vice President, Eugene McLary) all have material possessions taken away from them and come to be viewed differently. Phil's relationship with his subordinates and the rest of his company changes beyond recognition, leading to his own destruction. His human capital largely derives from the company and the status and respect he had earned within GTX. The antagonist, it is now apparent, is not senior managers but the corporation and to some extent the structural forces around it, notably the financial system.

The retraction of organisational respect when he loses his job signposts the beginning of Phil's descent into despair and alcoholism. At the orientation interview he attends following his dismissal, he takes umbrage at the guidance counsellor's insistence on addressing him by his first name ('Do we know each other?'), the first of a series of encounters in which peers and acquaintances deny him the respect he has become accustomed to. Initially he attempts to maintain the image he imagines others have of him, continuing, at his wife's insistence, to leave the house in his suit and tie every morning. Eugene and Bobby both find a way to survive independent of GTX, but there is no future of any kind for Phil. 'My life ended,' he tells Eugene, 'and nobody noticed.' A man used to being perceived as powerful is hurt by the idea of having that perception compromised. 'I have to look successful,' Bobby says at one point when looking for a job, and that is even truer of his manager, Phil. He commits suicide. Not appearing successful destroys Phil.

In this film, everybody except the corporate baron Eugene is equally at the mercy of the corporation; the long-established manager Phil is as vulnerable to downsizing as the much

younger and more junior employee Bobby. As in Bell's model, the organisation is the true

villain and is gradually revealed as such as the film progresses. Ultimately, even Eugene's

old friend, company founder and president Jimmy Salinger (Craig T Nelson) loses his

position when the board accepts a bid from another company. Yet he is secure. 'How much

are your shares worth?' he asks Eugene. 'Twenty million? Thirty?' Eugene subsequently

uses these shares to start his own company. Salinger moves to go back to work, but before he

can, Eugene chastises him for letting their workers down. 'They deserved better,' he says.

Phil does not reverse his circumstances – unlike Eugene he does not have the resources to

start a new company– but instead allows his identity be taken away from him, destroying him.

The founder and head of GTX, Jimmy Sallinger, is depicted in the first half of the movie as

approving all three rounds of downsizing, but finally, he too loses his job; he doesn't have

any power over the corporation that he created.

   Like every other aspect of the film, the Phil, Bobby and Eugene characters were apparently

meticulously researched. John Wells originally wrote *The Company Men* in the early 00s,

inspired by the dot-com bust and its effect on middle-class professionals. Just under a decade

later, Wells revisited the script (Tribute.CA 2011). When the script was resurrected, Wells

conducted further research in order to make the script as relevant as possible to the

crisis. ;many of the justifications and rationalisations Salinger offers for the rounds of

downsizing are verbatim quotations from interviews Wells conducted with individuals in

Salinger's position (Tribute.CA 2011). While such a research process was key to both *The*

Company Men (Tribute.CA 2011) and *Margin Call* (Whitworth 2012), the more

conventionally Hollywood sensibilities of *Tower Heist* did not call for meticulous character

research, but nevertheless benefitted from a different type of inquiry (Universal Pictures

Home Entertainment 2012).

Tower Heist

Tower Heist is explicitly influenced by the financial crisis – like *The Company Men*, its story was substantially rethought to fit new economic circumstances post-2008 (Universal Pictures Home Entertainment 2012). It is also probably the most mainstream film I examine, as a star-led, large-budget entry in a then highly popular genre, the heist movie. Social ideas and relationships central to *The Company Men* are examined using a tone and perspective likely to appeal to a mass audience. The film's defining breaks with tradition were undertaken with mainstream success in mind.

The initial antagonist is Arthur Shaw (Alan Alda), a wealthy Wall Street businessman and favoured guest at New York's luxurious Tower apartment building. He is not the central characters' employer, but is revealed as a cunning and dangerous force through his regular chess games with one of the hotel's employees, building manager Josh Kovaks (Ben Stiller). Likewise, Josh, our protagonist, reveals himself to be a patient and skilled player, although that avails him little; Shaw invariably wins their games. In this film, our manager is increasingly defined by his *separation* from the trappings of material wealth: Josh is around the wealthy Tower residents all day, charged with maintaining their expensive cars and ensuring they order the correct wine for their parties, but then walks home to his modest flat on the same street as small-time criminal Strike (Eddie Murphy). Josh, then, is a different type of manager from that identified by Williamson (1991) in the archetypal business movie, although he seems at first to have some attributes in common with the Macho Manager. Josh spends his weekends working and has an unimpressive formal education (Panayiotou 2010: 668). Unlike the traditional Macho Manager, Josh is considerate and kind, allowing one employee to study for an upcoming exam in his office; his conduct throughout the movie underlines this kindness. When we first meet Josh, his professionalism and skill as a manger seems to be ensuring his future; Shaw is opening a building of his own and tries to hire Josh

away from the Tower to be his general manager. But throughout the film, Josh's professionalism and eagerness to get the job done – be it his job as building manager at the tower or the rather different managerial position he will subsequently create for himself – will be undermined by a failure to recognise the selfish motives of others (Strike later attempts to betray him). What makes him become the epitome of a Post-Company ManagerialHero (see below) is exposure to financial crime. He foolishly entrusts his pension and those of his staff to Shaw, only to see all of their money consumed in a Ponzi scheme. Josh was discharging his duties as a manager when he trusted Shaw with his staff's money, acting in what he judged to be their best interests, but he was misled by his blind trust in Shaw's social status and profession. Shaw is capricious and dictatorial. He has Josh sacked and humiliated and later threatens to do the same to somebody else who challenges him. This power is emphasised by the fact that – startlingly given his status – Shaw has a portrait of Chairman Mao in his apartment among his other emblems of wealth, evoking the highly questionable Chinese leader and his blatant abuses of power in relation to an entire nation. Yet he boss who sacks Josh makes it clear to him that he is doing so because he broke hotel rules by confronting Shaw in his bedroom. The Tower will not only decline to take legal action against Shaw on behalf of Josh and all the other employees cheated out of their money, it will not assist him in reclaiming that money. The Tower caters to the extremely rich and privileged, and it prizes those people over its own employees - even in an instance like this, where one of the guests has stolen millions of dollars. This is the point at which the corporation—rather than Shaw-- becomes the antagonist. When Josh gathers his subordinates in the lobby to tell them that their money has been stolen, a subordinate asks him, 'Did he get your money too?' Josh pauses before replying 'Yeah, he did,' reluctant to reveal the extent of his exposure. Josh's position as a manager and his naivety have combined to put his subordinates and himself in a difficult position. He has perpetrated the

financial cycle of misplaced trust and subsequent exploitation while becoming one of its

many victims. His friend, Lester, attempts to commit suicide. Josh's guilt at having lost his

subordinates' money and anger at having been taken advantage of fuel the transformation at

the film's heart. In a symbolically important act, he vandalises Shaw's antique car and loses

his job at the Tower as a result; two of his colleagues also lose their jobs for not restraining

him. Josh then discovers that not all of the money Shaw stolen has been recovered; deducing

that some of it must still be in his apartment building. He forms his one-time employees and

tenants into a team of vigilantes. As in *The Company Men*, the revocation of Josh's formal

position prompts an identity crisis; he can no longer define himself by his managerial status.

'I'm a thief,' professional criminal Slide (Eddie Murphy) tells Josh. 'I know exactly what I

am. You're the one that's confused.' Ultimately Josh triumphs by re-defining his managerial

responsibilities as to his subordinates . Josh's personal capital, his managerial skill and the

strength of the bonds he formed while an employee, enable him to unite the team, a very

disparate mixture of personalities and attitudes to employment. When Josh finds

incriminating evidence that could send Shaw to prison, he is offered a large amount of money

to relinquish it, but refuses. He continues to exhibit great management skill during the

execution of the heist; he helps his teammates reach their full potential (Matthew Modine's

Fitzhugh overcomes his fear of heights thanks to Josh's encouragement). Josh's skills, his

knowledge of the building, his ability to coordinate his employees and inspire confidence

remain useful to him and to others. He welds his subordinates together- members of racial

minorities or immigrants – to cooperate against Shaw We see this clearly in the last act of the

film: the Tower's black maid agrees to help the team in their robbery, and a former

subordinate of Josh's (an Eastern European desk clerk who was always secretly studying for

the bar at her desk) represents him in court. Josh finally accepts a prison sentence in

exchange for all the other members of his team being released. When both he and Shaw are

convicted and sent to separate prisons, Shaw looks intimidated, but the very last shot of the film is Josh smiling to himself as he enters prison, satisfied that he did the right thing. Ultimately, the former Tower employees are able to find some justice because they trusted in Josh's leadership. The manager has asserted his moral superiority over the Corporate Baron , an individual shown to embrace and advocate the system..

Tower Heist, in the version that it now exists (an almost unrecognisably different script for it was first circulated in 2005) (Universal Pictures Home Entertainment 2012), was apparently explicitly influenced by the inequalities and injustices witnessed after the financial crisis (Weintraub 2011). In the film's original concept, conceived in 2005, the antagonist was to be a Donald Trump-modelled billionaire and the protagonists professional criminals. When screenwriter Ted Griffin rewrote the script, he reconfigured the antagonist as a Bernie Madoff-style corrupt financier (Universal Pictures Home Entertainment 2012). '[At first] it was set at the Trump tower and it was robbing Trump's penthouse,' Griffin has said. 'It was just a bunch of guys stealing, there's nothing new about that, just guys stealing a lot of money. And then the economy tanked and Bernie Madoff ripped off millions and millions of dollars. [That's when I realised] that's how you do it, you put a Madoff-like character in the penthouse and it's economic justice, it's the little guy taking on the big guy who screwed over everybody.' Griffin also suggested that the film, initially conceived as having an all-black ensemble cast, shift its focus: 'This is a class film, this is about the upstairs versus the downstairs, not a film about race.'

The film's producer, Bryan Grazer, confirmed that global events conspired to make the film more topical than it might have been, and thus more appealing to a mass audience: 'Who would have known that, in this period of time, the global financial markets would teeter on the verge of collapse and the villain in our story would pale in comparison to some very real ones on Wall Street?' (Universal Pictures Home Entertainment 2012.) The explicit

acknowledgement of this influence by the filmmakers underscores the film's deviation from previous workplace archetypes. Their decision to make a sympathetic and courageous manager the hero is executed in the awareness that doing so breaks with cinematic tradition.

Margin Call

Margin Call (2011) takes place in the offices of an unnamed Wall Street investment bank in 2007. As Werner (2014) suggests, it operates in an environment rendered familiar from previous films about bankers and salesmen, which it references. We are quickly introduced to the bank's milieu, in many ways similar to the 'macho'-dominated environment of the 80s office drama, replete with many current manifestations of Bell's visual signifiers of management (2008) and the material emblems of success. Will Emerson tells his colleagues 'I spent 150 [thousand] on a car, about 75 on restaurants, probably 50 on clothes.' The fierce misogynistic profanity of the traditional Macho Manager also asserts itself when a furious manager (Dale) refers to a female colleague as 'that cunt'. The day starts with the unannounced dismissal ('termination') of several key employees, among them Head of Risk Management, Eric Dale (Stanley Tucci). As a parting gift, Dale gives young up-and-comer Peter Sullivan (Zachary Quinto) a memory stick containing a financial analysis project he has been working on. Peter examines the information and is horrified to realise that a loss greater than the bank's market capitalisation is held in stock positions. The film becomes a fascinating comment on the traditional hierarchy of the workplace genre as a number of different managerial figures, all variants of the Macho Manager archetype, are faced with this dramatic situation. As Peter and trading desk head Will Emerson (Paul Bettany) meet with increasingly more powerful company figures, gradually working their way up to CEO John Tuld (Jeremy Irons, playing a somewhat-more-sympathetic-than-traditional Corporate Baron), it becomes clear that no possible response will result in the firm maintaining its current position in the long-term. 'So what you're telling me,' Tuld says of the reports presented to

him by his various managers, 'is that the music is about to stop and we're going to be left holding the biggest bag of odorous excrement ever assembled in the history of capitalism.'

In *The Company Men*, employment was uncertain; *Margin Call* takes place inside employment, and the long-accepted hierarchy is thrown into chaotic uncertainty. As noted above, the film has several managerial figures at its centre, but most are passive or defeatist in the face of the crisis. Sam is the most active and therefore most prominent. We are not told for how long Sam has been floor head, but he has worked at the company for thirty years. He is a careful and pragmatic man, not as belligerent as the classic 80s manager. Revealingly, he spends much of the film concerned about his gravely sick dog, and complains about being called back into the office in the late evening. He is jaded and self-interested in a manner illustrative of the classic 'survivor syndrome' common to those employed in a profession subject to much risk (Bell 2008: 174.) He exits the room when two colleagues start arguing, saying, 'I don't want to hear this. That's how I've stayed around so long.' We know from his speech to the employees who remain in the office after the film's opening purge that he is a survivor who admires that trait in others – he tells them to give themselves a round of applause 'because you're still alive' - but the unprecedented situation jeopardises this attitude. 'You're selling something that you know has no value.' Sam tells his boss, John Tuld, 'We are selling to willing customers,' Tuld replies, 'at the current fair market price so that we may survive.' The implication is that Sam has finally discovered something more important than mere survival: responsibility. *Margin Call* is structured as a succession of interactions between managers and subordinates, but the managerial relationship which will ultimately dictate the story's outcome is that between Sam and Tuld.

When the extent of the coming crisis becomes clear, high-ranking officers of the bank recommend immediately selling all of their toxic stock. Tuld endorses this move, but Sam becomes the company's conscience. It is at this point that the bank itself, personified by its

most senior office-holders becomes the antagonist. Having long been the pragmatist and the survivor, Sam is now the slowest of all the characters to vocally support Tuld's decision. Tuld makes it clear to Sam that he needs his support, and stops just short of threatening Sam's job: 'This is it,' he angrily tells Sam, 'I'm telling you, this is it.' Rather than fall on his sword in the tradition of a certain subspecies of Organisational Hero (such as *The Apartment's* JJ Baxter (Wilder, 1960) or *Wall Street*'s Bud Fox (Stone 1987)), resigning from the firm and repudiating the banking world, Sam decides to stay with the company, taking Tuld's advice. 'You're the luckiest guy in the world, Sam,' Tuld tells him; 'You could have been digging ditches all these years.' – 'Yes,' says Sam, 'and if I did, at least I'd have a few holes in the ground to show for it.' We are witnessing the final antediluvian moments before the crisis, the effects of which will create the circumstances for *The Company Men* and *Tower Heist* – and we are also witnessing the death of a genre tradition. Our assumptions about the workplace genre are at risk, as are our assumptions about society. Sam agrees to go along with Tuld's decree: just as Will advises his colleagues to look the other way during a mass downsizing ('It's better to just get on with your work') and Eric accepts a large bonus to come back to the company that sacked him and help react to the crisis, Sam also compromises. He accepts the CEO's position. 'I'll do it,' Sam tells Tuld, 'because I need the money. As hard as it is to believe, after all these years, I need the money.' Finally, with disaster on the horizon, Sam goes to the house he once shared with his wife to bury their dead dog (a visual recollection of the 'holes in the ground' line from earlier). One of the cinematic manager's traditional traits is his reluctance to spend much time at home (Panayiotou 2010: 668). However, this movie ends in a domestic setting suffused with symbolic pathos; we finally see our manager at home and the result is to reveal how lost and vulnerable the manager is. Previously invisible to us, Sam's home life was already a casualty of his work; he is separated from his wife, who warns him with apparent seriousness not to

try breaking into the house. His home life is poignantly damaged and incomplete, and yet at the close of this traumatic and prescient day his impulse is to try and take respite in it. The camera pulls away as Sam continues to dig his dead dog a grave in the garden she spent so much time in. The film fades out over the sound of a hole being dug – a symbol of the final demise of his domestic life.

The glamour and decadence associated with the business films of the 80s (Williamson 1991) has been replaced with a greater sense of consequence and sadness. As Chandor, himself the son of an investment banker, said, 'The fact that *Margin Call* is not going to lead people to go rushing out to join this field à la *Wall Street?* That's not something I'm upset about' (Whitworth 2012). Sam is not depicted as a Macho Manager. Yet, unlike Josh , he is a compromiser depicted as resisting but as being forced to accept *force majeure*. Sam places his formal protests on record, and then oversees the unloading of the toxic stock. Sam remains floor head, loyal to his subordinates and to the bank, opting to protect them as best he can in the face of a moral dilemma. Importantly, he feels compelled to accept the offered CEO position through financial necessity rather than naked ambition or greed. Throughout the film, while aware that many of his subordinates will be sacked, he has been as supportive of them as possible. , The film is portraying something far from Macho Managerial behaviour.

Jeremy Irons plays Tuld as reasonable and realistic. 'It's just money,' he tells Sam. 'It's made up. Pieces of paper with pictures on it so we don't have to kill each other just to get something to eat. It's not wrong. And it's certainly no different today than it has ever been.' The true villain therefore is not the capitalist system, but rather economic activity *per se* in a monetised economy something which is much older than capitalism. Tuld, noting this long history, observes that it endlessly reproduces itself . 'It's all just the same thing over and over,

we can't help ourselves. And you and I can't control it, or stop it, or even slow it. Or even ever-so-slightly-alter it. We just react.'

DISCUSSION

The three films that we have examined were chosen partially because they all feature managers in a central narrative role. This allowed us to examine how the films modify the symbolism traditionally associated with managers in cinema. The three films do not entirely dispense with the archetype of the Macho Manager as established in previous decades. The material trappings that Bell (2008 p30) associates with the archetype – expensive watches and suits etc. – feature prominently, as do some of the behavioural trappings – arrogance, selfishness etc.- but these familiar hallmarks are sufficiently tempered by unfamiliar ones to make it clear that the protagonist in all three films does not quite fit the Macho Manager archetype. This is one of the reasons that lead me to suggest a new archetype, which I call the Post-Company ManagerialHero.

What marks this new archetype? Some qualities connect him to the Macho Manager, but these qualities – be they material or personality-based – are often stripped away early in the film. This occurs when Phil loses both his money and his confidence, when Josh is removed from his position or when Sam finds his managerial power superseded by the board's dictate. However, the protagonists pointedly lack the callousness and aloofness of a Gordon Gecko or a Katherine Parker. Even before the travails that the characters face in the latter stages of each movie, they are depicted executing their managerial duties with a certain compassion. Where the Macho Manager was isolated from his subordinates, the Post-Company Managerial Hero is shown to interact with them frequently. Phil reminisces with a colleague about their blue-collar days in the shipyard; Josh lets a woman desk clerk use his office to study for her exams; after a round of downsizing, Sam attempts to give the remaining staff a

comforting as well as inspiring speech. The Post-Company Managerial Hero obtained his position through honest hard work, in contrast to a figure such as Gordon Gecko, who bragged about the fact that he made his living from the creations of others. The Post-Company Managerial Hero is a person whose moral entitlement to the position of manager is made very clear. Thus, when the company the hero works for declares war on him – either by relieving him of his position or attempting to make him do something which is against his principles – the company is revealed as the antagonist, since the Hero has already won our sympathy.

In Susan Mackey-Kallis's (2001) terms, in previous decades, when America was enjoying high employment and relative financial stability, the hero of the workplace movie pursued his emotional goals within the organisation that employed him. This emotional goal usually entailed the hero – in those days, often an employee rather than a manager – retaining their dignity and self-worth within the corporate environment. Their ultimate success in doing so was often symbolised by their succeeding on a major project or winning a promotion. Such symbolic successes potentially ring hollow in a time of economic turmoil and unemployment. Thus, the emotional goal of the Post-Company Managerial Hero is different: the challenge he is confronted with is to define and maintain his personal worth *outside* of the company context. This dilemma might arise because the hero loses his job, or because he reaches a position where his own goals are no longer in sync with those of the company (Josh in *Tower Heist* is confronted with both of these problems simultaneously; he is the epitome of the Post-Company Managerial Hero). In any event, the hero reaches a crisis point in which his organisational status is challenged and he has to arrive at a new self-definition in order to continue functioning. He might fail, like Phil; he might succeed, like Josh; he might be obliged to arrive at an unpalatable compromise, like Sam. He is not a class warrior; sympathy with those he manages or even organising them as Josh does not bring him to embrace

explicit, wider political conflict with capitalism. But the Post-Company Managerial Hero is defined by this conflict, which is subtly different from those his predecessors faced; he must find his identity and his abilities independent of his managerial status or the company which grants it. This is his equivalent of Campbell (1949)'s 'crossing the threshold'. He is presented with the 'opportunity' for transformation in a new situation with different rules. What he does with that opportunity will determine his destiny.

This is the ultimate fate of the Macho Manager concept; having first been gifted by the auteurs with qualities of compassion and empathy which were earlier denied him, he is then subjected to travails which would have not gained our sympathy in his earlier form. (For example, the probable death of the Macho Manager at the end of 1980's *9 to 5* is played for broad comedy; rather than humanising him, his misfortune is depicted as merely what he deserves.) By the end of our films, he has largely disappeared, as has the Organisational Hero. Both of these archetypes have donated some qualities to the Post-Company Managerial Hero, who, at the end of the film, has reached the end of his search for self-worth. Whether they have been successful in their Hero's Journey or not, they all end the film in a setting removed from the corporate environment. Phil commits suicide in his car; Josh goes to prison; Sam buries his dog in his garden. Whereas the Macho Manager was rarely glimpsed outside of his office (Bell 2008), The Post-Company Managerial Hero eventually realises that whatever he needs to achieve cannot be fully accomplished in his company's space. He resists corporate logics even if he is sometimes forced to accept them. He ultimately transcends his connection to the corporate environment; whether his ending is happy or not, it transpires outside of his company. He has transcended his roots in previous archetypes and become the Post-Company Managerial Hero.

CONCLUSION

The depiction of the central managers in these three films indicates that the essential answer to our research question is that humanistic portrayals of managers are better developed post-financial crisis than before 2008.   Managers are no longer shown as having very distinct fates from other employees and their situation is depicted with greater sympathy.

From *The Apartment* (Wilder, 1960) onwards, managers had frequently represented the 'establishment', with employees representing 'everyman' or the underdog. Films positioned managers and the employment system as employees' antagonist (Bell 2008: 65). After the financial crisis the antagonists' identities shifted: they were now companies and Corporate Barons. In *Tower Heist* the heroic manager, subordinates, the self-interested and the public-spirited collaborated to counter the Corporate Baron. A traditionally antagonistic relationship between managers and managed has been at least supplemented and in one case (Josh) it has been displaced by a cooperative one.

I do not argue that the Macho Manager (Panayiotou 2010: 671), nor the aggressive and unsympathetic manager (Rhodes and Westwood 2008: 64), nor the manager who symbolises and embraces power and control over workers (Zaniello 2003: 8) has entirely disappeared. Rather, I suggest that a group of alternative depictions provides a well-articulated version of a different set of managerial types. The years following 2008 saw a shift towards more vulnerable and sympathetic cinematic managers and also created the Post-Company Managerial Hero who fulfilled some of the roles of the traditional Organisational Hero by resisting the corporation's inhumanities but went further as their personal destinies all transcend the corporation even if in one case the final result is the hero's death.

25

The movies all stop short of expressly indicting capitalism per se, as is to be expected from commercial art made in a capitalist context (Williamson 1991: 152). *Margin Call* comes closest of the three films to indicting finance capital, but also hints at a longer history of financial crises pre-dating capitalism. Overall, the specific American form of corporate capitalism is viewed critically, particularly for its effects on individuals, but some individuals are shown to resist. Those that do so are shown as being able on occasions to make a difference. The new cinematic manager is more compassionate, vulnerable and critical in relation to the corporation even if he has limited power over his company's actions. Further, the Post-Company Managerial Hero can also show a moral courage that his predecessors lacked, while finding his ultimate destination beyond the corporation.

REFERENCES

Bell, Emma (2008), *Reading Management and Organization in Film*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Blumer, Herbert (1933), *Movies and Conduct*, New York: Macmillan & Company.

Brewis, Joanna (1998), 'What is Wrong with This Picture? Sex and Gender Relations in Disclosure', in John Hassard and Ruth Holiday (eds), *Organization – Representation, Work and Organizations in Popular Culture*, London: Sage, pp.83-99.

Boozer, Jack (2002), *Career Movies and the Success Mystique*, Austin: University of Texas Press.

Bugos, Glenn (1996), 'Organizing stories of organizational life: Four films on American business', *Studies in Cultures, Organizations and Society,* 2:1, pp.111-128.

Cadet, Jean-Paul and Guitton, Christophe (2013), *Les Professions Intermédiares,* Paris: Armand Colin.

Campbell, Joseph (1949), *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, New York: Pantheon Books.

Chandor, JC (2011), *Margin Call*, USA: Lionsgate.

Foley, James (1992), *Glengarry, Glen Ross*, USA: New Line Cinema.

Levinson, Barry (1994), *Disclosure*, USA: Warner Bros Pictures.

Susan Mackey-Kallis (2001), *The Hero and the Perennial Journey Home in American Film,* Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Mangham, Iain (1996), 'All the world's a…', *Studies in Cultures, Organizations and Society,* 2:1, pp.9-13.

McDowell, Linda (1998), 'Fictional Money (or, Greed Isn't So Good in the 1990s)', in John Hassard and Ruth Holliday (eds), *Organization – Representation, Work and Organizations in Popular Culture*, London: Sage, pp.167-183.

Panayiotou, Alexia (2010), ''Macho' managers and organizational heroes: competing masculinities in popular films', *Organization,* 17:6, pp.659-683.

Piketty, Thomas (2013), *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Paris: Editions de Seuil.

Ratner, Brett (2011), *Tower Heist*, USA: Universal.

Rhodes, Carl and Westwood, Robert (2008), *Critical Representations of Work and Organization in Popular Culture*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Rhodes, Carl and Lilley, Simon (2012), 'Introduction', in Carl Rhodes and Simon Lilley (eds), *Organizations and Popular Culture*, New York: Routledge.

Scorsese, Martin (2013), *The Wolf of Wall Street*, USA: Universal.

Sheppard, Deborah (1989), 'Organizations, Power and Sexuality: The Image and Self-Image of Women Managers', in Jeff Hearn, Deborah Sheppard, Peta Tancred-Sherriff and Gibson Burrell (eds), *The Sexuality of Organization*, London: Sage, pp.139-157.

Sobchack, Thomas and Sobchack, Vivian (1997), *An Introduction to Film*, London: Longman.

Stead, Peter (1989), *Film and the working class*, Cornwall: Routledge.

Stone, Oliver (1987) *Wall Street*, USA: 20th Century Fox.

Tribute.CA (2011), 'John Wells (The Company Men) Interview', http://www.tribute.ca/interviews/john-wells-the-company-men/director/21540/ Accessed 20 October 2016.

Universal Pictures Home Entertainment (2012), 'Tower Heist – Developing the Script – Own It 2/21 On Blu-ray and DVD',. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HqzUMjhjbjc Accessed 20 October 2016.

Wade, Robert (2009), 'From global balances to global reorganisations', *Cambridge Journal of Economics,* 33:4, pp.539-562.

Watson, Tony (1994), 'Management 'flavours of the month': their role in managers lives', *The International Journal of Human Resource Management,* 5:4, pp.893-904.

Weintraub, Steve (2011), 'Brett Ratner talks Tower Heist, the Oscars, Beverly Hills Cop 4, Hong Kong Phooey, the Woody Allen documentary he's producing', *Collider*, published online, http://collider.com/brett-ratner-tower-heist-oscars-interview/ Accessed 20 October 2016.

Wells, John (2010), *The Company Men*, USA: The Weinstein Company.

Werner, Andrea (2014), ''Margin Call': Using Film to Explore Behavioural Aspects of the Financial Crisis', *Journal of Business Ethics,* 122:4, pp.643-654.

Whitley, Richard (2000), *Divergent Capitalisms*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Whitworth, Melissa (2012), 'Margin call is Wall Street for our times', *The Telegraph* website, 13th January 2012, 3.55pmGMT, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/filmmakersonfilm/8995018/Margin-Call-is-a-WallStreet-for-our-times.html Accessed 20 October 2016.

Whyte, William Hollingsworth (1956), *The Organization Man,* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Wilder, Billy (1960), *The Apartment*, USA: United Artists.

Williamson Judith (1991), ''Up where you belong': Hollywood images of big business in the 1980s', in John Corner and Sylvia Harvey (eds), *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture*, London: Routledge, pp.151-161.

Younger, Ben (2000), *Boiler Room*, United States: New Line Cinema.

Zaniello, Tom (2003), *Working Stiffs, Union Maids, Reds and Riffraff. An Expanded Guide to Films about Labour,* Ithaca: ILR Press.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Mark Houssart is Researcher at Middlesex University, London. He has published research on the Hong Kong film industry, representations of the Spanish Civil War and other cinematic topics. His interests are in film history, labour and politics. Contact details: Middlesex University, The Burroughs, London NW44BT. M.Houssart@mdx.ac.uk.