Revisiting Adventure: Special Issue Introduction

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THIS SPECIAL ISSUE IS THE FIRST SUSTAINED ACADEMIC EXPLORATION of the contemporary adventure narrative across a wide range of media. While many other types of texts that emerged during the late-eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including gothic horror, romance, travel narrative, and melodrama, have received considerable attention, the contemporary adventure narrative has been left out of or taken for granted by recent popular culture studies. The absence of adventure in recent scholarship may, paradoxically, have to do with the ubiquitous presence of the form. Like many other genres, adventure has invaded and merged with a host of other modes and genres, from television reality game shows, such as *Survivor*, to gritty war films, such as *Black Hawk Down*. Indeed, as several of the contributions to this issue demonstrate, the contemporary adventure form often appears in trans-genre texts where the adventure component is perceived as secondary.

While contemporary adventure is severely under-researched, the nineteenth- to early-twentieth-century British and US variant has been closely scrutinized. This scholarship has primarily explored two different concerns: one related to supposedly universal mythical narratives and the other closely tied to the long history of European colonialism. Regarding the former concern, Joseph Campbell's not only influential but also much criticized work in the middle of the twentieth century maps a wide range of global mythologies. Campbell worked, like C. G. Jung or James Frazer, from a disciplinary framework that was partly psychological and partly anthropological, and he

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sought to show how a number of cultures and religions across the globe—from Christianity to Buddhism—employed the same archetypal structure to tell stories about themselves and their origins. This structure takes the form of a multistage core narrative trajectory that he termed the "hero's journey," and it provides the same type of structure as that which informs most adventure narratives. Campbell's work has had an important influence on how adventure is understood but perhaps even more on how it has been produced. Based on Campbell's research, Hollywood producer Christopher Vogler created the memo "A Practical Guide to The Hero with a Thousand Faces" that was later developed in 1990 into *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters* (a book that has been revised several times and which is now titled *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*). This memo and subsequent book have provided narrative structure to countless Hollywood films.

The other beginning is strongly connected to the development of European modernity and colonialism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the simultaneous emergence of mass literacy, mass market printing, and, consequently, of print-oriented popular culture. In *Dreams of Adventure, Deeds of Empire* (1979), Martin Green argues that the

> adventure tales that formed the light reading of Englishmen for two hundred years and more after *Robinson Crusoe* were, in fact, the energizing myth of English imperialism. They were, collectively, the story England told itself as it went to sleep at night; and, in the form of its dreams, they charged England's will with the energy to go out into the world and explore, conquer and rule. (3)

Green illustrates this thesis through a study that ranges from Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) to Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901), a tradition of writing that indeed clearly invests in empire by casting it as a violent coming-of-age project for white men in colonial or to-be colonial spaces. A number of other literary critics and historians have proposed similar understandings of this type of culture. In particular, John Cawelti, Edward Said, John MacKenzie, Elaine Showalter, and Amy Kaplan have studied the way that British and American adventure writing of the late-nineteenth and

early-twentieth centuries revolves around a performative white masculinity in the service of the British or US colonial projects. In British fiction, writers, such as Sir Walter Scott, Captain Marryat, R. M. Ballantyne, Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson, H. Rider Haggard, John Buchan, and Joseph Conrad, produced adventure tales in both literary and juvenile forms. In the United States, adventure fiction begins with Charles Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntley* (1799), and develops in both popular and literary strains produced by writers, such as James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, and Jack London, although many of these authors also included elements of ironic critique of adventure conventions in their work.

The contributions to this special issue consider both of these dominant critical engagements but look beyond the pre-World War I era. Keenly aware of the ways in which previous scholarship has discussed adventure, this issue traces the evolution of the form into the present moment to conduct the first sustained academic exploration of how contemporary popular culture makes use of adventure. This issue considers the nature of adventure as a form and a mode, as well as the genre's new modalities. In connection with this, the articles in this issue show how contemporary adventure narratives remain strongly connected to both the general development of the genre during the late-nineteenth century and to specific texts from that era. Additionally, this issue considers the ideological work adventure still performs, the many institutions involved in the production of these narratives, and the wide range of modalities that are available to its various producers.

Genre, Mode, and Form

Readers of *The Journal of Popular Culture* need not be reminded of the twists and turns of genre theory in recent decades, especially not of the performative turn which has allowed scholars to worry less about the precise perimeters of narrative genres and look more critically and productively at what they *do* (Tompkins; Williams; Altman). In other words, genre scholarship has largely turned its back on the fussy debates about classification that once preoccupied critics working with genre to explore the cultural and ideological work performed by

specific forms. The term "genre" itself is often replaced or supplemented with the words "mode" and "narrative form," and all three are often used interchangeably. While the actual difference between these concepts can be elusive, some distinctions can still be made. In general, one could define a "genre" as belonging to a specific historical and cultural moment and agree that a "mode" or "form" can refer to a larger pattern that operates across a wider historical and cultural field. Melodrama, for example, may have originated as a genre of eighteenth-century French theater, but it became, as Peter Brooks and Linda Williams have both argued, a *mode* that spanned across European and Anglo-American literature, art, and popular culture throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. The editors of this volume and many of the contributors use the word "mode" to designate adventure and to account for the way it has entered into twenty-first-century world culture.

Caroline Levine's recent intervention into the debate about form and neoformalism makes a similar distinction between genre and form, the latter of which she defines as "configurations and arrangements [which] organize materials in distinct and iterable ways no matter what their context of audience" (*Forms* 13). Thus, forms are distinct from genres in that they "afford repetition and portability across materials and contexts," while genres are more "historically recognizable groupings of artistic objects, bringing together forms with themes, styles, and situations of reception" (14). Levine intriguingly argues that the term "form" can help us analyze the workings of power and social arrangements because it straddles the world of art and aesthetics and that of political formations. The forms that she is interested in are actually quite "formal": whole, rhythm, hierarchy, and network.

Many of Levine's insights are intriguing and fresh, but the focus of her work is on entirely ahistorical forms (like "whole" and "rhythm"), whereas a pattern like the adventure form is *transhistorical* but far from ahistorical. Like melodrama, it migrates across media and contexts but it carries its roots—both ancient and modern—with it, activating meanings and affects that have both widely archetypal/mythical and specific historical/ideological underpinnings. A term that Levine proposes that does potentially offer purchase in discussions of modes like melodrama or adventure is "affordance," which refers to the "potential uses or actions latent in materials or designs" (6). Applied to genre, forms, or modes, affordance can help us

describe what a particular form is capable of doing, what aesthetic ideological or cultural work it can or cannot perform, and how it carries that potential from one medium or context to another.

Adventure and Empire in the Present Moment

While Green and other scholars of adventure primarily study adventure texts produced before World War I, Green importantly argues that adventure has *remained* a myth that energizes empire and that "Empire is to be found everywhere in the modern world, disguised as development or improvement" (xi). A central concern of this special issue is to investigate whether adventure still energizes an empire a century after the heyday of the genre and four decades after Green claims it is still active. The first step in such an investigation is to consider the notion that "Empire is to be found everywhere in the modern world."

In the 1970s, following the dismantling of most European empires, few historians or sociologists proposed that (Anglo) empire was still a global force. However, Green's claim does receive corroboration from a few notable scholars, most importantly Edward Said who devotes a significant portion of his seminal *Orientalism* (1978) to discussing how the US picked up the "white man's burden" shed by Britain in the post-war period. Similarly, in an article titled "Popular Imperialism and the Image of the Army in Juvenile Literature," Jeffrey Richards describes how the adventure form in Britain was strongly supportive of empire well into the late-twentieth century. However, it was not until the turn of the millennium that wide historical and sociological scholarship again considered empire as a current geopolitical force. In 2000, Chalmers Johnson's *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* forcefully argued that the United States had grown into a dominant military empire and was now reaping the detrimental blowback of this position. Neo-Marxists Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt approached the matter somewhat differently in their influential *Empire* (2000), where they propose that imperialism is no longer simply an economic and military project conducted by individual nation states but a ubiquitous, decentralized, networked, transnational, and capitalist enterprise.

Empire provocatively and usefully explained how imperialism survived decolonization and how it continues to operate across a globalized planet. However, in the wake of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, their contention that the era of old-style military invasion and occupation of land is over seemed misguided. In the years that followed, a series of texts began describing the United Sttaes as an old-style, colonial empire. Many of the scholarly voices were, like Noam Chomsky's, deeply critical. Others, including Michael Ignatieff and Andrew J. Bacevitch, recognized the long imperial history of the United States with fatalism. In the words of Bacevich, "like it or not, America today is Rome, committed irreversibly to the maintenance and, where feasible, expansion of an empire that differs from every other empire in history" (244). Yet another group lent US empire its support, most notably the Harvard-based British historian Niall Ferguson and US military historian and political advisor Max Boot, the latter claiming in 2001 that US imperialism has been "the greatest force for good in the world during the past century" (Boot 2003).

With this historical and political landscape in mind, it seems feasible to assume that there is still an empire that adventure is capable of energizing. Whether this empire is understood as a globalized, heterogeneous entity of the type that Hardt and Negri have proposed, or still a nationalist enterprise akin to the post-9/11 US described by historians and sociologists, may not be the important thing. Adventure is capable of energizing either or, indeed, both of these entities, and this issue returns frequently to this possibility.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that popular culture is highly complex and adaptable. It does not automatically energize any dominant movement of power. Authors and audiences have always been able to critically investigate dominant discourses and power structures, even if this potential has not always been used. The historical adventure novels for boys written by the prolific G. A. Henty may seem to programmatically further the causes of empire, but other popular writers, such as H. G. Wells or Joseph Conrad, make use of adventure to problematize colonialism. In the wake of two world wars, often dramatic decolonization of most of the territory once controlled by Western powers in Asia, Africa, and South America, and the advent of postcolonial, decolonial, and subaltern studies, and of new feminist and queer perspectives, the potential to powerfully complicate the tendencies of genres and modes

undoubtedly exists. In view of this, this issue investigates the ways in which adventure still energizes empire as a globalized force or as neo-nationalist project, but it also asks to what extent the producers of the popular adventure narrative sabotage the form's seemingly programmatic embrace of white masculinity and empire.

Modes of Production

When comparing present-day adventure with the late-nineteenth-century variant, one crucial development occurs in the ways in which adventure narratives are produced. Even before World War I, various government agencies were keenly aware of the potential of adventure to stimulate empire. As I. F. Clarke describes in *Voices Prophesying War, 1763–1984* (1966), the pre-World War I invasion narrative, often relying on adventure as its narrative framework, was used by different figures tied to various branches of the armed forces to encourage the public to increase military spending. Thus, "admirals, generals, and politicians turned naturally to telling the tale of the war-to-come, since it so conveniently allowed them to draw attention to whatever they thought was wrong with the armed forces" (47). Thus, adventure was produced in multiple ways by a vast collection of actors even during the late-nineteenth century.

This development has greatly accelerated in the present. Certainly, the contemporary adventure text is sometimes the effort of a single author, but even in these cases it enters a complex industry that turns the text into one or several commodities: a novel becomes a film, a television series on Netflix, a computer game, and an app on the iPhone. Moreover, it is not unusual for adventure narratives to also have been made-to-order, with the intention of accomplishing certain ideological and material goals.

The understanding of popular culture, or of any type of cultural practice, as not simply entertainment but as a potentially hegemonic (or counter-hegemonic) ideological practice capable of organizing society in various ways has long influenced academia. Indeed, popular culture plays a key role in the Gramscian battle for hearts and minds that institutions in society, from Coca Cola to the American Department of Defence, engage in. To those interested in mapping the way that, especially, US corporations and institutions attempt to reshape

the world into an entity willing, even happy, to accommodate US hegemony in its various forms, the most apt description of this process is "cultural imperialism." According to this model, American popular culture in the form of advertisements, Hollywood films, television shows, and comics are produced at the core and travel into the global periphery where they perform crucial ideological work that makes conventional military-assisted colonialism mostly unnecessary.

While this model is useful for understanding how the so-called "American way of life" was disseminated, adapted, and resisted across the globe, it does not directly address either the way popular culture has been used to manufacture consent within American borders or the development of networked, circular economies that feed its parts. Such an economy is what James Der Derian has termed the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network (MIME-NET) in *Virtuous War* (2001), and McKenzie Wark calls The Military Entertainment Complex in *Gamer Theory* (2007). Key players in this complex are Hollywood and the US Department of Defence (DoD), which have had a long relationship. This complex has developed over time, beginning with the establishment of the Bureau of Motion Pictures (BMP) during World War II. This bureau made recommendations to Hollywood on the content of specific films and would limit the circulation of those that could complicate the war effort in general and the recruitment of soldiers to the armed forces in particular (Worland). The next stage occurred during the Vietnam War when John Wayne received substantial funding from the Department of Defence to produce *Green Berets* (1968), a deeply promilitary film that recast the invasion action into Vietnam as altruistic adventure. The real watershed moment, however, was Jerry Bruckheimer's *Top Gun* (1986), which, in the mid-1980s, received considerable funding in the form of Naval Airforce hardware and personnel. As David L. Robb reports in *Operation Hollywood*, this film, which very closely follows the narrative trajectory of adventure, not only did very good business in the global box office but it also boosted recruitment of young men who wanted to join the Airforce by five hundred percent (182). This encouraged increased cooperation between the Department of Defence and Hollywood. From the perspective of Hollywood producers, generous funding from the DoD created tremendous production values. From the perspective of the DoD, who retained the right to edit the scripts they agreed to fund, Hollywood was capable of both

increasing recruitment and reshaping the way that US voters and an international community understood past and future war efforts.

Adventure is the central mode of these and similarly produced texts. From *Top Gun* to the recent *Godzilla* (2014) and *Lone Survivor* (2013), these films move across a reasonably wide spectrum, from gothic to fantasy and science fiction to war proper, but all contain a strong military element and a narrative that depends on adventure for its structure. In other words, these movies adhere to the monomyth, and, like the late-nineteenth-century adventure stories, their key figures are typically young, white males who have an unusual talent for killing, who are reluctant to engage this in the service of their nation and community, but who eventually put this reluctance aside for the greater good. Additionally, the relationship between entertainment providers, the DoD, and the industry that manufactures the tools of war have become increasingly complex. The product placement of military hardware and the inherently war- and soldier-friendly scripts make these adventure stories capable of stimulating what Eisenhower termed the military-industrial complex. They produce narratives that both encourage young men to join the armed forces and help build support for future war efforts. In this way, as several of the articles in this issue illustrate, contemporary adventure energizes empire in new and complex ways.

Overview of the Issue

The early adventure story was, for obvious reasons, not only disseminated mainly in the form of novels and short stories but it also appeared in early visual culture and music. Painting, music, theater, and itinerant exhibitions, such as Buffalo Bill's Wild West show made use of the adventure mode and relied on the same confrontation between the imagined savage and white masculinity as the adventure novel. Since then, the kind of media which disseminates adventure narratives has expanded further. This issue is thus structured according to the type of media that accommodates adventure. The first two articles of the issue examine two distinct, text-based forms: the novel and the graphic novel. In "New Adventures in Old Texts: Gender Roles and Cultural Canons in Twenty-First-Century Mash-ups," Miriam Borham Puyal explores how adventure informs genre-bending

mash-up texts, where canonical novels collide with popular pulp genres that focus on martial arts, zombie horror, or sea monsters. Borham Puyal shows how adventure still matters in twenty-first-century hybrid genres but can be rewritten and reconfigured to accommodate more contemporary gender norms and female adventurers. Along with the wild west gunslinger, the hit man, and the soldier the mercenary is one of the most central characters of present day adventure. Eric Covey's contribution "Mercenary Memoirs and Strategic Action-Adventure Storytelling," explores how this particular terrain is described in the graphic novel. The graphic novel is a more recent medium, and it furnishes new possibilities and perhaps also new audiences for the mode.

The issue then addresses the arguably most ubiquitous and widely disseminated media form at the present moment: the moving image. Since the interwar period, movies have been the most popular form with which to tell stories of adventure, and it is also through this medium that adventure most clearly begins to enter other genres. It is thus through film and television that adventure effectively merges with the wild west narrative, with science fiction, the fantastic, and, perhaps most often, the war film. The first three contributions in this section examine these connections. In "'They Said It'd Be an Adventure': Rethinking Masculinity, Nation and Empire in Centennial Australian World War I Film and Television," Glen Donnar discusses how Australian cinema and television use adventure in their depiction of the Australian contribution to World War I, especially the terrible slaughter at Gallipoli, which has been refashioned into a foundational myth for Australian nationalism. War is also the topic of Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet's "American War Adventure and the Generic Pleasures of Moral Violence: Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper.*" As Soltysik Monnet argues, war has become one of the most common locations for adventure, and it is especially ubiquitous in Hollywood war cinema. Taking *American Sniper* (2014) as a representative case, Soltysik Monnet shows how even films that purport to be critical and realistic often structure their narratives according to the tropes and affordances of the adventure mode. A similar project is conducted by Steffen Hantke, who investigates, in "Armchair Adventurers: Technology on the Global Battlefield in Films about Drone Warfare," how the drone has transformed the cinematic depiction of combat and war adventure, and, in particular, how the war film deals with

the issues of violent action and heroism when the warrior is sitting in a chair in front of a screen.

The two final articles that discuss film move away from the war themes to discuss recent depictions of the Anthropocene and of the wild west story. In "The Apocalyptic Sublime: Anthropocene Representation and Agency in Hollywood Action-Adventure Cli-Fi Films," Niklas Salmose investigates how adventure informs recent cinematic depictions of catastrophic climate and geological change. Finally, Cecile Heim describes, in "The New Imperialism of a Failed Pastiche: Symbolic, Subjective, and Systemic Violence in *The Lone Ranger* (2013)," how the inherent affordances and cultural baggage of adventure interferes with the attempt to reinvent the Lone Ranger for a new generation.

The final two contributions to the issue focus on electronic games, a medium that enables highly participatory and performative engagements with adventure. In "The Call of Adventure in *Call of Duty: WWII*," Johan Höglund looks at how a recent World War II first-person shooter game makes use of adventure to celebrate both the World War II GI and the US bid for global power through the game's representation of the invasion of Normandy and the liberation of the concentration camps. In the final articles of the issue, "BioWare's Imperialist Adventures: Performing Aggressive Colonization in Thedas and the Milky Way," Michael Fuchs, Vanessa Erat, and Stefan Rabitsch discuss how game developer BioWare struggles to problematize the anthropocentric and imperialist perspectives inherent in the genre.

The articles that comprise this special issue show that adventure still exists as a genre, and that it informs a host of other genres and forms across media. These articles furthermore illustrate that adventure remains capable of energizing empire, even if empire today is disseminated from different metropoles than the British. It is the hope of the editors of this special issue that these articles will encourage further exploration of this sorely neglected mode. To study and attempt to comprehend the continued prevalence of adventure in popular culture encourages the use of important contrastive temporal and spatial perspectives, it enables new engagements with matters such as gender, race, and class, and it is capable of revealing how a story-telling mode can be both a tool for power, and an opportunity to dismantle dominant local and geopolitical structures.

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