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International Film Study: **PATRIOT GAMES**

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INTERNATIONAL FILM STUDY:

PATRIOT GAMES

Patriot Games, a 1992 film directed by Philip Noyce, is a film designed to interact with today's society: reinforcing sound values, developing new attitudes and influencing society's understanding of itself and the modern world. A story of Irish terrorism and patriotic loyalty, family love and cold-blooded killing, *Patriot Games* promotes a range of attitudes and values surrounding these themes. To do this, the director and producers have relied on a number of structural elements and film techniques essential to the effectiveness of film as a communication device.

Terrorism is portrayed daily in the mass media as being a sustained, clandestine use of violence that not only attacks a government but often harms innocent people. *Patriot Games* brings some of this reality of terrorism to the wide screen, confronting us with black-hearted IRA splinter terrorists who will stop at nothing for their cause. Dressed in stereotyped dark clothing with ski masks covering their faces, symbolically sitting in a black-coloured car, Sean Miller (Patrick Bergin) and his younger brother Patrick, plot the assassination of Lord Holmes, a member of the British royal family, in the film's exposition. As Holmes' car pulls out of Buckingham Palace, the terrorists swiftly swing into action, blowing up cars and shooting British guards with a "just war" attitude towards violence and murder. Noyce, using rapid and frantic camera action, presents terrorism as not only a savage, callous style of warfare but as a form of organised crime as well. The suspenseful music and hazy atmosphere add to the confusion of the scene, while the extraordinary use of close-ups on Miller's unshaven face immediately followed by Jack Ryan's (Harrison Ford) emotional reactions clearly exhibit the attitude that terrorism is about cold-blooded and ruthless killing, rather than loyalty to one's country or political persuasion.

Paddy O'Neil, Sinn Fein's political ambassador in the United States, is the Irish definition of loyal. An ever-present narrator, seen symbolically on the TV news

throughout the film, O'Neil presents the value that loyalty to one's friend or countryman is more important than life itself. This can be seen in the scene where Ryan confronts O'Neil in an Irish hotel. Even with Ryan's threats of crippling the IRA financially, O'Neil declares that "the day I sell out one of my own countrymen is the day I put a bullet in my own head". Such passionate dialogue allows us to fully appreciate Noyce's values towards patriotic loyalty.

However, such homage is questioned in *Patriot Games* as well. The Secretary to Lord Holmes is identified as an informant midway through the film and the mysterious "red-haired" femme fatale is recognised to be a traitor to Britain also. Together, these characters present the attitude that the British are corruptible when it comes to loyalty to one's country.

The family unit is presented as the most important element in life in the course of the film. Ryan, in a show of his role as protector of his family, dramatically throws himself over his wife and daughter in order to shield them from the explosion that occurs in the film's exposition. Similarly, Ryan is later seen to have tears in his eyes when he sees his daughter in hospital after Miller's attempt at murdering her. In powerful close-ups, Ryan's distress and "rage" can be determined from his expressions, clearly establishing Ryan's love for his family as a main value portrayed in the film. His family control his emotions and actions; his family is his motivation to catch and beat Miller in a traditional good vs. evil fight to the finish. Likewise, Ryan's wife, Cathy, reacts in a similar fashion, promoting the attitude that you can stand back from becoming involved in violence until one of your own is threatened. Her emotion-filled dialogue changes from "I can't go back to that life" to "do whatever it takes" when her daughter is almost killed in the classic cat and mouse chase along the freeway. In addition, melancholy music and heart-wrenching dialogue and expressions add to the effective communication of these family values throughout the film and while we may empathise with Miller over his brother's death, we are led to feel that his attempt at breaking down Ryan's family and his resort to vengeful killing is morally wrong and unjust.

Today's society generally views the killing of another person with malice as unacceptable, sometimes even disjointed. Sean Miller, sparked by revenge, hatred and an abnormal obsession, thoroughly portrays Noyce's values towards murder and killing. Time and time again, Miller is seen to kill people who stand in his way in fits of cold-blooded murder, with a kill or be killed attitude. No-one is above the cause, including Denis Cooley, the timid Irish terrorist who is shot dead by Miller at point-blank range when he no longer serves a purpose in their terrorist kidnapping. At the same time, Miller also seeks revenge for his brother's death and hunts out his prey - Ryan and his family. Noyce skilfully presents the value that the killing of innocent people is morally wrong following the traditional car chase scene along a busy American freeway. Captured in gripping slow motion, the Ryan family Porsche is shown slamming into a concrete traffic island - Cathy Ryan's terrified face caught in a chilling zooming close-up; her daughter framed in shattering glass pieces. The film's climax reiterates this attitude towards callous violence and killing when Miller shoots dead his comrades when they do not share his quest for revenge with Ryan. Using the traditionally evil thunder-and-lightning background, Miller kills the two other Irish terrorists right between the eyes, with no compunction or any sign of remorse.

Yet surprisingly, *Patriot Games* manages to maintain the American attitude that the killing of "bad guys" is somehow justified. The CIA, in their high-tech use of infra-red satellites and remote sensing, infiltrate a suspected Palestinian camp almost akin to playing a computer game. Whilst dressed in lounge suits and sipping coffee, cries of "that's a kill" echo throughout the room, without any sense of guilt or anguish present. Similarly, Ryan is expected to defeat Miller in the action-packed climax to the film and does so without misery and without remorse, providing the audience with the typical "happy ending" we count on in the classic narrative structure.

Through the development of several popular themes and by the use of a number of traditional structural elements and exceptional film techniques, Philip Noyce has directed a film that effectively presents and promotes a range of socially acceptable values and attitudes. Good triumphs over evil, and *Patriot Games* successfully achieves its aim in influencing society's understanding of itself and the modern world.