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**Save the world with Ben and Matt: Ben Affleck, Matt Damon, and the importance of film texts to critical discussions of star campaigning**

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Save the world with Ben and Matt: Ben Affleck, Matt Damon, and the importance of film texts to critical discussions of star campaigning

By looking at films such as *Good Will Hunting* (1994) and *Argo* (2012), this paper provides close analysis of the on-screen roles of Ben Affleck and Matt Damon, alongside a discussion of their involvement in social and political causes. Existing scholarship about Hollywood campaigning tends to gloss over the importance of films, viewing on-screen roles as secondary to a star’s off-screen activities. Instead, I argue that on-screen roles are directly relevant to any understanding of activist endeavour. Building on ideological critiques of celebrity humanitarianism, the goal is to show how films are crucial in shaping not just the media and institutional traction of Hollywood star campaigners, but also the wider instrumentalities that their campaigning performs. The paper concludes that close analysis of the on-screen roles of individuals like Affleck and Damon can help to reveal just how embedded the phenomenon of star campaigning is within neoliberal capitalism, as well as dominant discourses of race and gender. It can also uncover slippages in this phenomenon, whereby stars are able to mobilise their on-screen image to amplify attacks against the same hegemonic forces.

Keywords: celebrity humanitarianism; Ben Affleck; Eastern Congo Initiative (ECI); Matt Damon; Harvey Weinstein

# Introduction

In February 2014, film stars Matt Damon and Ben Affleck appeared in a short video to promote their respective charities: Damon’s Water.org, an organisation that campaigns to increase access to clean water and sanitation in developing countries; and Affleck’s Eastern Congo Initiative (ECI), which helps to raise funds for community-building initiatives in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Shot in a sequence of short, staccato takes, the video mimics the style of a Hollywood blooper reel, showing the two stars fluffing their lines as they speak directly to camera. In one take, Affleck fails to recall the minimum donation, provoking an angry outburst from his fellow actor/fundraiser. The dialogue in this sequence appears spontaneous and natural, with the pair trading insults on a wide range of topics – from Affleck's box office flops and Damon's height, to which actor has the most ‘important’ cause. After two minutes, the video ends with a take in which Affleck and Damon bicker about who should receive top billing– should it be ‘Ben and Matt’, or ‘Matt and Ben’?[[1]](#endnote-1)

The 2014 video is significant from a number of perspectives, including the way in which it invokes a strong emphasis on homosocial bonding that has been pivotal to the on-screen images of both stars. Childhood friends Affleck and Damon rose to fame in the late 1990s, when they co-wrote and co-starred in the sleeper hit *Good Will Hunting* (1997) while they were still in their twenties. Directed by Gus van Sant, the film casts Affleck and Damon as working-class Bostonians Chuckie and Will, with a large part of the narrative focusing on the close relationship between the two young men. For example, early scenes show the pair getting into a series of scrapes around the South Boston neighbourhood in which they grew up, while later sequences make it clear that there is a deep affection beneath all of their horseplay and teasing. In the years since *Good Will Hunting*, Affleck and Damon have continued to be paired together, sending up aspects of their friendship in cult films *Dogma* (1999) and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* (2001), as well as modelling a similar sense of masculinist camaraderie in their separate on-screen roles: Damon’s appearances in the *Ocean’s* trilogy (2001, 2004, 2007), for instance, and Affleck’s supporting turn in the disaster movie *Armageddon* (1998).

The playful exchange in the 2014 video draws off this element of their on-screen portrayal, so that what is being marketed in the campaign – aside from the opportunity to ‘make a difference’ – is the chance to be a part of Hollywood’s longest-running ‘bromance’: to partake in the type of light-hearted banter that has featured so strongly in Affleck and Damon’s film careers. Indeed, donors were literally offered this chance when they were entered into a raffle to attend a ‘special’ event with the two stars. It is this blurring of the lines between on-screen roles and off-screen campaigning that the current paper seeks to address. Using Affleck and Damon as case studies, it considers the importance of stars’ films to the meanings that they communicate as activists, advocates and humanitarians.

This paper provides close analysis of the on-screen roles of Affleck and Damon, alongside a discussion of their involvement in social causes. In contrast to celebrity studies scholarship more generally, where text-centred approaches remain the norm (Turner 2010), the extant literature about Hollywood campaigning tends to gloss over the importance of films, viewing on-screen roles as secondary to a star’s off-screen activities (e.g., Repo and Yrjölä 2011, de Waal 2008). One consequence of this approach is that it ignores the specific circumstances of the campaigners involved: the fact that they are famous actors, who rose to prominence on the back of their performances in commercially and critically successful films. Instead, I argue that on-screen roles are directly relevant to any understanding of activist endeavour. If Affleck and Damon possess wide name recognition, of the type that makes them hot property in awareness-raising terms, they owe it largely to their appearances in blockbusters like *Armageddon* and *Ocean’s Eleven*. The following analysis aims to show how films are crucial in shaping not just the media and institutional traction of Hollywood star campaigners, but also the wider instrumentalities that their campaigning performs.

By emphasising the importance of on-screen roles, I also want to consider just what is distinctive about film stars who turn to charitable and political campaigning, as compared to celebrities originating from other fields. As we know from press stories about footballers building schools in Africa (e.g., Samuel Eto’o), and vloggers speaking on behalf of the United Nations (e.g., Lilly Singh), the phenomenon of celebrity campaigning extends far beyond the film industry, incorporating many different types of famous individual – everything from novelists, pop singers and TV presenters, to astronauts and CEOs. Within this crowded marketplace, the work of famous actors is distinctive because of the way it triggers a series of associations from their most iconic on-screen roles, something that I discuss below. Overall, then, this paper proposes that we analyse Affleck and Damon as precisely what they are, *film stars*; and, in doing so, explores the interplay between a star’s films and her/his off-screen campaigning.

The paper begins with the rationale for incorporating films within critical discussions of celebrity humanitarianism. Here, I consider how a detailed analysis of these texts helps to further ideological critiques, arguing that stars’ film roles intersect with their campaigning in ways that can reinforce and/or challenge existing power structures. The next two sections then proceed to examine Affleck and Damon, focusing on their interventions in the areas of international development and US education policy, respectively. Affleck and Damon represent useful case studies because they are among the most high-profile campaigners in contemporary Hollywood. Significant here is how both stars are able to utilize their on-screen images, drawing off the populist dimensions of films like *Good Will Hunting* to animate and amplify their off-screen activities. However, there are crucial differences in the types of causes they promote. While both stars pursue a transnational humanitarianism that is firmly located within neoliberal and colonial ideologies, Damon has at times combined this with a progressive critique of the increasing marketization of US politics. An analysis of the two stars therefore captures some of the complex ways in which film stardom and campaigning intersect. I conclude with a brief discussion of criticisms aimed at Affleck and Damon in the wake of the Harvey Weinstein scandal, linking these to the gender politics of their on-screen roles.

**The importance of films**

The film texts of Hollywood stars should not be ignored because they so often serve as the primary frame through which their humanitarianism is read. Jim Cullen (2012, p. 6) identifies film stars as a particular type of famous individual, whose meaning and significance is simultaneously bound up with both their actual personhood (the star her/himself), and the characters that they play on screen. Crucially, Cullen describes how film stars carry ‘traces’ of their past characters and performances with them into every new role. The same is also true when they participate in politics and charity: these activities are necessarily seen through the prism of the various meanings, images and narratives, which circulate in and around their cinematic work. The significance of this is that a film star’s on-screen roles directly influence how her/his off-screen campaigning is understood. When George Clooney hosted a Darfur fundraiser on the French Riviera, for example, journalists were quick to invoke his on-screen escapades as debonair conman Danny Ocean in the *Ocean’s* trilogy (Rush 2007). Likewise, Sharon Stone’s appearance at the 2013 World Summit of Nobel Peace Laureates, where she testified about her work with the American Foundation for AIDS Research, drew comparisons with her iconic role in the erotic thriller *Basic Instinct* (1992). In this instance, pundits were interested in the dress that she wore to the event and how it evoked the clothes worn by her character in the 1992 hit film (Anon 2013; see Gulam 2014a). By failing to closely analyse on-screen roles, scholars writing about celebrity humanitarianism have missed an important part of what makes individuals like Stone unique: the fact that they produce immensely popular cultural products – in this case, films – which tell stories about themselves and the wider world.

Richard Dyer’s (1998, pp. 60-63) work on stardom provides a useful framework for thinking about the importance of films. For Dyer, the star is a textual construct, an ‘image’ produced out of four primary types of media text: promotion; publicity; film roles; and criticism and commentary. However, central to his approach is the primacy of film texts. He writes: ‘It is after all *film* stars that we are considering – their celebrity is defined by the fact of their appearing in films’ (emphasis in original). Thus, Dyer concludes that while ‘the star phenomenon in cinema’ consists of ‘all kinds of media text’, a film star’s films are likely to have a ‘privileged place’ in her/his image.

In some ways, this argument about the centrality of films stands at odds with recent technological and cultural shifts, such as the digitization of cinema and the growth of social media over the last twenty-five years. As explored by the other papers in this issue, these shifts have impacted greatly on celebrity paradigms, with the images of today’s film stars circulated and consumed in ways that are markedly different to those of, say, the Hollywood studio era. In fact, given that the vast majority of movies are now shot and screened digitally, it is not unreasonable to question whether the term ‘film star’ is even relevant in the current age. Yet, the basic validity of Dyer’s approach still holds, with the on-screen roles of film stars remaining pivotal to their overall images. Indeed, regardless of how movies are distributed and shown (be it on celluloid film, or, as is increasingly common, via streaming platforms), a star’s appearances in these texts continue to function as the touchstone for discussion of much of what they say and do off screen, as illustrated by the case studies below.

Philip Drake and Michael Higgins (2006, p. 94) also highlight the significance of film texts in their overview of celebrity politics. They argue that a star’s political activities should be understood in terms of her/his ‘overall celebrity’, including the cultural texts s/he has previously produced. Looking at Arnold Schwarzenegger, Drake and Higgins observe how his successful run for California governor in 2003 drew heavily on his earlier action films. A. Freya Thimsen (2010, p. 48) makes a similar argument in her own analysis of Schwarzenegger. Specifically, she looks at how his tough on-screen persona – a product of films like *The Terminator* (1984)– fed into the populist rhetoric of his 2003 gubernatorial campaign, allowing Schwarzenegger to claim the status of plain-speaking political ‘outsider’. What is clear from these studies is that any consideration of Hollywood campaigning cannot be complete without also attending to on-screen roles, because these are a vital part of ‘the affective and connective power’ that film stars wield (Drake and Higgins 2006, p. 94).

At the centre of this analysis are broader debates about the kinds of values that star campaigning helps to promote. In the fields of politics and cultural studies, the ideology of celebrity humanitarianism has come under increased scrutiny. A growing number of studies look at representations of celebrity campaigners in the media, and to what extent these reproduce existing power structures (Kapoor 2012, Repo and Yrjölä 2011, Littler 2008). The value of this literature is that it highlights the wider instrumentalities of celebrity humanitarianism. Rather than concentrating solely on the policies that stars promote, these scholars interrogate what this phenomenon represents: they look at the meanings that celebrities disseminate through their high-profile involvement in politics and charity. The next two sections aim to contribute to these debates by examining the charitable and political engagements of Affleck and Damon. Like previous ideological critiques, I pay close attention to the images, ideas and practices that surround these A-list humanitarians; but do so in a way that emphasises the importance of their film texts. Taking my cue from the likes of Drake and Higgins, as well as the intertextual approach developed by Dyer, I show how Affleck and Damon’s on-screen roles are pivotal to their off-screen campaigning.

# Affleck’s cameo on Capitol Hill

On February 26, 2014, Ben Affleck testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee about his charitable activities in Eastern Congo. The star was one of several individuals called upon by the committee to discuss ongoing violence in the DRC. Affleck’s inclusion on a panel of experts was in part recognition for his many years of campaigning. Since 2007, he has made numerous visits to the DRC and surrounding areas; documented his experiences in various public appearances and interviews; and lobbied politicians around the globe. In his testimony, Affleck discussed the work of ECI, a non-profit organisation he co-founded in 2010 that seeks to support development in Eastern Congo through the provision of locally-targeted grants and training. Here, the star spoke about the success of the organisation’s recent efforts to promote commercial partnerships between Congolese cocoa farmers and the American chocolate industry. In particular, he pointed to the example of California-based manufacturer Theo Chocolate, which had recently launched a range of Fairtrade chocolate made from 100% Congolese cocoa, with a portion of the proceeds going to ECI (US SENATE 2014).

In his closing remarks to the committee, Affleck differentiated the work of ECI from traditional models of humanitarianism. Referring to the collaboration with Theo, he stated: ‘This is neither charity nor aid – *it’s good business* […] Just imagine what can be achieved for both the Congolese people and American businesses with increased […] stability’. Affleck has been a prominent advocate for the Democratic Party since he first rose to fame in the late 1990s. By framing the work of ECI in these terms, however, he was attempting to speak beyond the Democrats with whom his political views most closely aligned. Indeed, the actor spoke about the potential for this type of initiative to ‘enjoy bipartisan support’, citing Senator Lindsay Graham as one of several Republicans who endorsed further government spending in this area. What is notable about Affleck’s closing statements is the degree to which they frame his activities within a neoliberal discourse that extends market-based principles and techniques of evaluation into non-market domains. According to this framework, the value of supporting farmers in Eastern Congo derives not only from the positive contribution that it makes to the Congolese economy. Value also lies in the profit-making opportunities that this initiative realises at home, for ‘American businesses’. For example, Affleck was keen to stress the ‘extraordinary’ rewards to be obtained through US investment, noting how Theo had secured a lucrative and previously underused supply of cocoa as a result of its operations in the region. The image cultivated by Affleck here is that of a committed and shrewd operator: a pragmatist who, in his quest to realise the best results for the people of Eastern Congo, is able to bring together Democrats and Republicans; the state and the corporate sector; aid workers and entrepreneurs (US SENATE 2014).

This image of the star overlaps with aspects of his cinematic career; namely, his work on the Oscar-winning film of the same period *Argo* (2012). Directed by Affleck and based on true events, *Argo* details the efforts of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to extract six US State Department workers hiding in Tehran during the 1979-81 Iran hostage crisis. Early scenes depict the events of November 4, 1979, when Iranian demonstrators stormed the US embassy in Tehran. Amid the chaos, a small group of embassy employees manage to evade capture and take refuge in the nearby home of the Canadian ambassador to Iran. Affleck stars as real-life CIA agent Tony Mendez. Mendez, an ‘exfiltration’ expert, is recruited by the State Department when their attempts to devise a rescue mission fail to produce a realistic or safe option – the situation in Tehran is too volatile for any of the normal procedures to work. While watching television one evening, Mendez concocts an ingenious solution: he will pose as a Hollywood movie producer and travel to Iran to scout locations for a non-existent science fiction movie, entitled ‘Argo’. Enlisting the help of a pair of movie industry veterans, played by John Goodman and Alan Arkin, Affleck’s character sets up a bogus production company and stages a series of extravagant press events in order to substantiate his cover story. Once in Tehran, Mendez provides the six marooned workers with forged Canadian documents and successfully smuggles them out of the country as members of his ‘film crew’.

There are several points of comparison between Affleck’s work on *Argo* and his activities with ECI. Firstly, the heroics of Mendez are steeped in the same sense of patriotism that he sought to communicate in his Senate testimony. As scholar Patricia Daley (2013, p. 388) notes, one of the ideological functions of the globetrotting humanitarianism performed by Western celebrities is that it masks injustices within geopolitical relations. Commenting on Affleck specifically, she observes how his call for American investment in the DRC works to obscure a ‘long history of involvement’ on behalf of the US government, ‘especially its support for the kleptocratic regime of President Mobutu Sese Seko during the Cold War’. This limited account of US foreign policy is also found in *Argo*, which uncritically celebrates the CIA’s operations in Iran. The film glosses over CIA involvement in the 1953 coup that deposed then-Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh, as well as the US government’s subsequent support for Reza Shah Pahlavi. Although *Argo* does make reference to the 1953 coup, in a brief prologue that mixes storyboard art and archive footage, the remainder of the narrative concentrates on the resourcefulness of the CIA, as epitomised by Mendez’s daring plan. Film scholars Tony Shaw and Tricia Jenkins (2017, p. 108) explore this element of *Argo* as part of a broader investigation into cinematic depictions of the CIA. Likening it to other contemporary releases such as *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), they argue that Affleck’s film portrays the CIA in largely ‘altruistic’ terms, consequently performing a useful PR function for the US government. In elements of both his on-screen roles and his off-screen campaigning, therefore, Affleck can be said to uphold a sanitized view of US intervention overseas, where it is seen to solve, rather than perpetuate, violence and suffering in Africa and the Middle East.

Besides celebrating US courage and enterprise, *Argo* is also a narrative about the capacity of Hollywood to do ‘good’. In order to pull off his unlikely scheme, Mendez calls upon the film industry itself, in the form of Goodman and Arkin’s characters: Goodman plays the real-life make-up artist John Chambers, while Arkin’s Lester Siegel is a composite of several 1970s’ movie producers. Hollywood is shown to have played a crucial part in the rescue mission, with Chambers and Spiegel making a number of interventions to secure the safe return of the embassy employees. For example, the closing scenes depict a tense phone call between Chambers and an Iranian official, in which the former must vouch for Mendez’s bogus credentials. The actions of Chambers and Spiegel thus appear to speak reflexively to Affleck’s status as a filmmaker-turned-humanitarian; specifically, they mirror the way the actor has looked to use his industrial clout for more ‘serious’ pursuits since founding ECI.

*Argo* was a commercial and critical hit, earning $230 million at the international box office, as well as a Best Picture Oscar. The success of *Argo* at the 2013 Oscars ceremony cemented Affleck’s reputation for making complex, character-centred films. Since 2007, the star has combined acting with a career as a director, receiving plaudits for his ability to produce thought-provoking and timely narratives. A representative review of *Argo* in the *Washington Post* praised the star for making ‘the kind of […] classy good-story-well-told that Hollywood has otherwise bailed on in recent years’ (Hornaday 2012). This aspect of his film career has been pivotal to Affleck’s charitable and political activities, helping to establish him as a credible campaigner and to guard against accusations of ignorance – journalistic profiles of the actor-director regularly preface information about ECI with details of his award-winning stints behind and in front of the camera, for instance (e.g., Horn 2012).

Affleck’s 2014 Senate testimony did not just invoke his reputation for making socially relevant films. It also drew on the buzz around his upcoming role as Batman. On August 22, 2013, one year after the conclusion of the hugely successful *Dark Knight* trilogy (2005-12), Affleck was announced as the latest actor to play the ‘Caped Crusader’: he would star in a cinematic reboot of the character scheduled for 2016, *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice*. The decision to cast Affleck prompted debate, with scores of journalists and bloggers weighing in with their opinions about his suitability for the role (Abrams 2013). Fuelled by the enthusiasm of fan communities, these debates continued for months after the casting announcement, meaning it was inevitable that Affleck’s 2014 Senate appearance would be read in terms of the iconic superhero. For example, *PerezHilton.com* (2014) published footage of the testimony under the headline, ‘See Batman Try to Save Gotham, Err, The Congo’. *JustJared.com* (2014) approached the story from a similar angle, dubbing Affleck, ‘the Congo’s Real Life Batman’. Even the star himself got in on the act, joking that many of the politicians on Capitol Hill were surprised to see he had not worn his cape (Cassata 2014).

What is clear from these examples is how Affleck traded off the associations of the Batman character to present himself as a special type of Senate witness – someone who, like his vigilante alter ego, is capable of extraordinary acts of heroism, and embodies the ‘best’ of neoliberalism. Promotional materials for ECI emphasise its aim to ‘empower’ the people of Eastern Congo by ‘forging partnerships’ with local groups (see Budabin 2015). However, in the slippage between Affleck-as-campaigner and Affleck-as-superhero, the white Hollywood star emerges as the primary agent of change (‘the Congo’s Real Life Batman’). Various scholars have identified the white saviour narratives embedded within much celebrity humanitarianism (Kapoor 2012, Repo and Yrjölä 2011). For example, Lisa Ann Richey and Alexandra Cosima Budabin (2016, p. 39) argue that, despite its rhetoric of Congolese empowerment, Affleck’s campaigning reinforces stereotypes of Africa as ‘an emptied landscape where Americans can do good’. In light of these postcolonial critiques, it is interesting to consider how the on-screen images of stars feed into their humanitarian narratives. It seems significant that Affleck’s on-screen heroes travel back and forth across borders much in the same way that he does in his campaigning. From this perspective, the global dimensions of Batman – the battles he fights in distant corners of the galaxy – are part of the ‘affective and connective power’ of the star, buttressing his privileged (and problematic) status as a humanitarian who claims to ‘speak for’ communities around the world.

This type of press reception recalls P. David Marshall’s (1997, p. 246) observation that celebrity is built on a ‘triumphant individuality’. Echoing Marshall, ideological readings of celebrity humanitarianism situate it within the ‘hyperindividualised’ culture of neoliberalism that works to reframe ‘broader social problems’ as matters for the individual to solve (Littler 2008, p. 246). For example, Michael K. Goodman (2010, p. 109) notes how star campaigning ‘forcefully refract[s]’ complex issues ‘through the neoliberal lens of the heroic individual’, thereby hindering in-depth accounts of the structures that perpetuate global inequality. This was certainly true in the case of the 2014 testimony, where press stories of Affleck’s ‘heroic’ presence tended to displace any discussion of the political and social situation in the DRC. This focus on Affleck, at the expense of the wider issue, speaks to the way in which, as Dyer (1998, p. 78) states: ‘What the star does can *only* be posed in terms of *the star doing it*, the extraordinariness or difficulty of her/his doing it, rather than the ostensible political issues involved’ (emphasis in original).

Scholars like Goodman argue that celebrity humanitarianism is more than just a politics of distraction; it is also involved in propping up the worst injustices of neoliberal capitalism, because of stars’ existence as commodities (Kapoor 2012). Pointing to Affleck’s ECI work, Daley (2013, p. 376) frames this type of celebrity activism as part of ‘the increasing commodification of humanitarianism’ in Africa. She argues that the sale of Congolese chocolate bars by American businesses ultimately draws the country into a ‘dependent’ relationship with global capital. Richey and Budabin (2016, pp. 37-41) present a similar critique of these market-based solutions, observing how Affleck offers a ‘neoliberal narrative of development’ that posits foreign investment as the key to Congolese prosperity. Such narratives are ideologically significant because they obfuscate the damages wrought by neoliberal capitalism, as well as Western consumerist practices, on developing countries such as the DRC. Crucially, these damages are not only experienced on an economic and social level, in the outsourcing of low-paid and unsafe labour to the Global South; but also ecologically, through incidences of drought-induced famine and high levels of commercial pollution and waste.

When discussing the pro-business approach of Affleck/ECI, one aspect of the Batman character appears particularly salient – his alter ego as billionaire entrepreneur Bruce Wayne. Across the *Batman* series, Bruce’s wealth performs an instrumental role in the superhero narrative: he uses the profits from Wayne Enterprise, as well as the fortune he inherited from his murdered parents, to fund the high-tech gadgets that give him an edge over Gotham’s criminals (the ‘utility belt’, ‘Batmobile’, etc.). According to the world of *Batman*, therefore, big business is literally a force for good. Recent films in the series have consolidated this dimension of the Batman mythology, with scenes from both *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) and *Batman v. Superman* showing Bruce engaged in benevolent acts of philanthropy: he donates to an inner-city orphanage, for example, and offers to pay for the healthcare costs of his former employees. In this way, the Batman story works within the same neoliberal framework deployed by ECI, promoting the idea that the solutions to global inequality rest in the hands of US businesses, and the individuals who run (or endorse) them. Complicating this somewhat is the presence of evil businessmen like Lex Luthor (Jesse Eisenberg) in *Batman v. Superman*, who use their wealth to commit crimes and pervert the course of justice. However, the contrast between Lex and Bruce only serves to reinforce one of the central messages of both the film, and Affleck’s humanitarianism: that there is such a thing as ‘good’ capitalism, and thus no need for wholesale structural change.

The case of ECI, and how it invoked both *Argo* and *Batman v. Superman*, captures a tension between Affleck’s reputation as a ‘serious’ filmmaker-come-humanitarian, on the one hand, and his work in light-hearted genre movies, on the other. While this trait is not exclusive to Affleck – other contemporary stars like George Clooney and Angelina Jolie model similar tensions (see Gulam 2014b, 2016) – it does help to explain why he has been particularly successful at gaining traction within today’s crowded marketplace for celebrity campaigners. In the case of his February 2014 testimony, Affleck’s prestigious work on *Argo* established him as a credible campaigner, at the same time that he deployed his superhero alter ego for the purposes of engendering broad, cross-party support – with regards to this effort to speak across party lines, the tough-on-crime persona of Batman no doubt endeared him to the conservative Republicans in the audience.

In the next section, I want to explore the relationship between films and campaigning further by looking at the case of Matt Damon. In many respects, Damon’s off-screen activities have mirrored those of his friend: like Affleck, he has set up his own foundation, Water.org, which also concentrates on African development projects. However, unlike Affleck, Damon has paired these bipartisan humanitarian projects (often described as ‘apolitical’ or ‘safe’ causes) with advocacy work for smaller organisations on the progressive end of US politics, including promoting the Working Families Party.[[2]](#endnote-2) The following section looks at one such intervention: his involvement in the 2011 Save Our Schools campaign. Building on this analysis of Affleck, I examine the way that Damon’s action films have fed into his off-screen comments about US education policy.

# Damon as action star/activist

‘I don’t know where I would be today if my teachers’ job security was based on how I performed on some standardized test’. Matt Damon was speaking to the students, teachers and other education activists, at a July 2011 Save Our Schools rally in Washington, DC. Over 5,000 people, many of who had marched on the White House earlier that day, were gathered in National Mall Park, to protest against policies that evaluate teachers based on the standardized test scores of their students (Strauss 2011).

Damon was one of several high-profile speakers at the rally. From midday to mid-afternoon, a procession of prominent educators and activists took to the stage to voice their anger at years of failed education policy: from the high-stakes testing of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), to the current Race to the Top programme (2009) – initiated by then-President Barack Obama – and its agenda of privatization and corporate school reform. Prior to Damon’s speech, best-selling author Diane Ravitch called on policy makers to tackle the structural causes behind America’s educational shortfall, while comedian Jon Stewart offered his support in a pre-recorded video message. However, it was Damon who drew most applause from the crowd. Introduced by his mother, a professor of education at Lesley University, Damon praised the passion and commitment of the teachers who had taught him in the Cambridge public school system of the 1970s and 80s. He noted that these individuals had been ‘empowered to teach’, and criticized recent efforts to link public school funding to standardized test scores. After five minutes, the actor concluded with an impassioned call for educators to stand firm: ‘The next time you encounter some simple-minded, punitive policy devised by a corporate reformer who has never taught anything… please know that there are millions of us behind you’ (Strauss 2011).

Damon's appearance at the rally received widespread coverage in the press, with multiple national newspapers publishing his speech in full (e.g., Strauss 2011). Moreover, in an indication of the ability of celebrities to directly influence policy debates, *The Nation* reported that then-US Education Secretary Arne Duncan had asked to meet with Damon in the days prior to the rally: Duncan, it was argued, was hoping to mitigate Damon’s anticipated criticism of Race to the Top, as well as the Obama administration more generally (Goldstein 2011). Yet, it was the actor's interview with *Reason* magazine – a monthly libertarian magazine with a circulation of less than 90,000 – that attracted most attention to the Save Our Schools event.[[3]](#endnote-3) Following his speech, Damon answered questions from the media, including *Reason* reporter Michelle Fields. Fields asked the star to justify his defence of current working conditions in public schools, observing that the practice of awarding tenure to teachers, ‘actually dis-incentivizes hard work’. Damon replied:

You take this MBA-style thinking, right? It’s the problem with ed[ucation] policy right now – this intrinsically paternalistic view of problems that are much more complex.

It’s like saying a teacher is going to get lazy when they have tenure… *A teacher wants to teach*. Why else would you take a shitty salary and really long hours, unless you really love to do it?

Posted on *Reason.com*, the interview became a viral phenomenon. Within three days, Fields's video for the libertarian website had been viewed by over 80,000 people, while a shorter clip of the exchange received more than 800,000 hits on YouTube.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Aside from its circulation among activist networks, Damon’s *Reason* interview was picked up by a number of mainstream media outlets, including the *Hollywood Reporter* (Ford 2011) and *HuffPost* (2011). A recurring theme in this coverage was the way that the interview evoked aspects of the star’s film career. For example, *TMZ.com* (2011) noted how Damon’s astute comeback was reminiscent of the young genius he had played in *Good Will Hunting*. Other journalists were quick to highlight the comparison with his character in the *Bourne* action movies (2002, 2004, 2007). For instance, *CNN News* anchor Anderson Cooper compared the Save Our Schools footage to the spectacular action sequences in the franchise, observing: ‘It isn’t as explode-y […] but it’s still thrilling to watch’ (*Anderson Cooper 360°* 2011).

Of the on-screen roles cited in the press reception, the *Bourne* films are the most curious because they seem so far removed from debates about public schools. Grossing over $1.5 billion at the worldwide box office, the *Bourne* franchise stars Damon as the titular hero, Jason Bourne. Bourne is one of several super soldiers who were trained as part of the CIA’s top-secret ‘Treadstone Program’. In the first film of the series, *The Bourne Identity* (2002), Damon’s character wakes up from a coma with no memory of who he is, or how he got the two bullet wounds in his back (the only clue to his real identity is a piece of Treadstone technology implanted in his right hip). Over the course of the film, however, Bourne uncovers the truth about his involvement in Treadstone, and sets out to get revenge against the CIA officials who subjected him to a series of cruel and dehumanising experiments. In terms of Damon’s Save Our Schools appearance, and his charitable and political activities more generally, the significance the *Bourne* franchise lies in the way that it reproduces the anti-government and masculinist thrust of earlier action blockbusters such as *First Blood* (1982). Like the iconic muscular heroes of the 1980s, Bourne is a crusader against government tyranny, fighting to rid the world of unaccountable and deceitful public officials. In *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007), for example, the former spy is once again drawn into the clandestine operations of the CIA when he discovers further details of his manipulation at the hands of Treadstone’s bosses, as well as their plans for a new super soldier programme. As in the previous films, Damon’s character foils his immediate antagonists, but is unable to completely drain the swamp. In the world of the *Bourne* franchise, US government can never be trusted; it will always be rotten.

Given the contradictory nature of the *Bourne* films, which lend themselves equally to both liberal and conservative perspectives on US politics, it is significant that Damon’s portrayal of the amnesiac spy featured so prominently in the reception of his activism. As illustrated by the previous analysis of Affleck, film stars are able to use their appearances in blockbuster films as a platform for their off-screen campaigning. In the case of Damon and the Save Our Schools campaign, the populist dimensions of Jason Bourne contributed to the high levels of influence that he appeared to wield over education debates. In fact, the *Bourne* series’ overarching narrative of government tyranny fed directly into his statements about the ‘punitive’ education policies being imposed by the Obama administration. Therefore, rather than mobilising his action stardom to promote a neoliberal agenda – as in the case of Affleck/ECI – Damon did so in order to further a progressive critique of corporate school reform. Here, he was able to use the Bourne persona to animate arguments against the extension of market-based principles into the education sector, with his speech pointing powerfully to the negative effects of an increasingly target-driven culture on teachers’ mental and physical health.

In October 2011, the *Hollywood Reporter* conducted a poll of 1,000 of its readers, examining the impact of a person’s political views on the types of films that they choose to see at the cinema. Among the many questions included in the poll, which divided readers according to their party affiliation (Democrat or Republican), there was one relating to the *Bourne* franchise and its star. Significantly, the poll found that while 23% of Republican respondents claimed to avoid Damon’s films because of his ‘liberal’ politics, these same respondents also preferred the Jason Bourne character nearly twice as much as their Democrat counterparts (Bond 2011). This *Hollywood Reporter* poll raises a series of questions about Damon’s involvement in the Save Our Schools campaign, and the way in which it gestured to his on-screen roles. To what extent did a mobilisation of the Bourne persona enable the star to speak beyond a niche audience of education activists, to centrists and, most intriguingly, the Republican fans of his big-budget action films? Were Republicans and Democrats both more receptive to Damon’s politics because of the *Bourne* connection? Or, did their responses to his *Reason* interview simply mirror pre-existing views and predilections?

Irrespective of the answers to these questions, the Save Our Schools example provides further evidence of the value of paying close attention to the film texts of stars like Damon, and how these draw off and feed into the meanings generated by their off-screen humanitarianism. In order to fully understand the social and political significance of film star campaigning, it is necessary to consider not only what these individuals say and do off screen, but also how they communicate through their on-screen roles. Such an approach can reveal more clearly just how embedded this type of activism is within dominant neoliberal and colonial ideologies, as in the case of Affleck’s ECI work. It can also uncover slippages and gaps in this phenomenon, whereby stars like Damon are able to mobilise their on-screen image to amplify attacks against the same hegemonic forces.

# Postscript: Re-evaluating Affleck and Damon in the wake of the Weinstein scandal

In late 2017, a series of press articles were published that connected Affleck and Damon to the Harvey Weinstein scandal. Given Weinstein’s role in the success of *Good Will Hunting*, the film was distributed by his then-company Miramax, it is unsurprising that the two stars were drawn into debates surrounding allegations that the movie producer had sexually assaulted more than 50 women working in the film industry. These stories ranged from arguments about their complicity in a ‘culture of silence’ that enabled Weinstein to commit repeated assaults (Doyle 2017), to the widely reported accusation that in 2004 Damon helped to ‘kill’ a *New York Times* article about the movie producer’s misconduct (see Azcona-Montoliu 2018). The fallout from these stories have led some in the media to call for ‘re-examinations’ of Affleck and Damon’s careers (Zimmerman 2017). This is something that we can do by looking more closely at the gender politics of both their off-screen campaigning and their on-screen roles, because, as I have argued, these two elements of a star’s image are deeply intertwined.

This paper began by noting the importance of a particular type of machismo to the early on-screen images of the two stars, and the way in which it has fed into their charitable and political engagements, as per the 2014 Ben and Matt/Matt and Ben video. The same interplay of film roles and humanitarianism can also be seen in the Buy a Lady a Drink campaign, a joint collaboration between Stella Artois and Damon’s Water.org which raises funds for clean water projects through the sale of limited-edition beer glasses. Launched in January 2015, Buy a Lady a Drink is a particularly ill-conceived attempt to raise awareness of the large number of women who are affected by a lack of access to drinkable water in the developing world. Promotional videos cut from shots of the actor in Los Angeles, to footage of unnamed women in countries such as Bangladesh, Indonesia and India. These images are overlaid with voiceover from both the actor and the women, recounting the hardships of daily treks to collect clean water, while intertitles urge viewers to ‘Join the cause’ by purchasing a $13 ‘chalice’ (STELLA ARTOIS 2015). These videos veer towards the white saviour narratives that I have already identified in Affleck’s ECI work. However, where the campaign seems most problematic is in its explicitly macho rhetoric. The slogan ‘Buy a Lady a Drink’, suggestive of the clichéd barroom encounter, seeks to appeal to a male demographic by framing female beneficiaries as objects of sexual curiosity. Indeed, through its use of patronisingly chauvinistic language, the Damon-led campaign crystalizes the often regressive gender politics of celebrity humanitarianism, whereby women tend to be valued for their bodies (see Repo and Yrjölä 2011).

In a recent analysis of ‘the Damon brand’, Maria del Mar Azcona-Montoliu (2018, p. 13) links Buy a Lady a Drink to the actor’s alleged role in the Weinstein scandal, observing that the campaign ‘may not be completely free from the sexual discrimination that the #MeToo and Time’s Up movements are trying to fight’. The value of Azcona-Montoliu’s analysis is that it highlights the complex circuitry of stardom, the way in which a star’s various texts can bleed into one another. Here, we see how Damon’s charitable promotions intersect with not only stories about his professional and personal life (the off-screen relationship with Weinstein), but also – as I have shown – the macho politics of his on-screen persona. From this perspective, it seems especially significant that the emphasis on homosocial bonding in Damon’s (and Affleck’s) films often comes at the exclusion of women: both on screen, where women tend to play supporting characters; and off screen, in the patriarchal relations of production that restrict female involvement behind the camera (as directors, screenwriters, etc.). Damon and Affleck’s association with the Weinstein scandal points once again therefore to the need to closely analyse films, showing just how important these texts are to an understanding of the political and social justice dynamics of star campaigners.

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1. Entitled ‘Ben Affleck & Matt Damon Take Shots at Each Other’, this video is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojZmJPr4jHE> (OMAZE 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Obviously, designations such as ‘safe’ and ‘apolitical’ ignore the way in which this type of humanitarianism is deeply embedded within the wider power relations of global politics. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Reason* magazine is published by the Reason Foundation, a libertarian think-tank which claims to support ‘the values of individual freedom and choice, limited government, and market-friendly policies’ (<https://reason.org/>). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. A version of this video is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3WIv7Xk8BjA>. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)