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**Promoting peace and coffee pods: George Clooney, Nespresso activist**

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Since his rise to prominence in the late 1990s, George Clooney has been one of the most consistently sought-after Hollywood actors for product endorsements, working with major brands including Fiat, Omega, Martini, and Belstaff. The most lucrative of these endorsement deals has been his partnership with Nespresso. An operating unit of the Nestlé Group, Nespresso sells single-serve coffee machines and the gourmet coffee capsules (‘pods’) that are used in these machines. Nespresso announced Clooney as its ‘Global Ambassador’ in 2006, with the actor agreeing to appear in a series of television and print media advertisements produced exclusively for European markets.[[1]](#endnote-1) Estimates suggest that the actor earned over $40 million for his work to promote the company in the years from 2006 to 2013 (Said 2013). Significantly, Clooney’s ambassadorship coincided with a marked increase in the commercial fortunes of the brand in this period. Although Nespresso products have been on sale since 1989, it was only after his recruitment that the company emerged as a major player in the coffee industry: Nespresso recorded an annual turnover of $4 billion in 2014 (Reuters 2014), as compared to $810 million in 2006, with its sales accounting for approximately 4 percent of Nestlé’s total revenue (Gretler 2015).

In the years since he became a Nespresso ambassador, Clooney has also established himself as one of Hollywood’s most socially conscious stars (Horn 2011; Harris 2012), advocating for causes including Save Darfur and Cinema for Peace, as well as directing and starring in a series of films that address social issues, such as *Syriana* (2005) and *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005). These activities have earned the actor high praise from aid workers and journalists, in addition to various accolades. For example, the United Nations named Clooney as a Messenger of Peace in January 2008, a role he occupied until April 2014; and *LooktotheStars.org* – a website that chronicles the philanthropic activities of stars – lists him among ‘the most charitable hearts’ in the entertainment industry (Look to the Stars n.d.).

Clooney’s reputation as a celebrated filmmaker-come-humanitarian appears to be at odds with the crudely commercial nature of his Nespresso work. Yet the actor has often sought to link his product endorsements to his charitable and political campaigning. In interviews with the media, Clooney regularly explains how he channels a proportion of his Nespresso salary into his activist endeavours, using this money to support a number of charitable foundations (e.g., Siegle 2013; Woodruff 2012). At the same time, the actor has been cited as a key figure in Nespresso’s recent pledges to invest in sustainable farming methods. Clooney currently sits on the Nespresso Sustainability Advisory Board (NSAB), a board of ‘experts’ that helps to oversee The Positive Cup strategy. Announced in August 2014, The Positive Cup commits Nespresso to sourcing 100 percent of its Grand Cru coffee range sustainably by 2020 (Nestlé-Nespresso 2017).

This chapter asks what is at stake in the pairing of Nespresso with a celebrity activist like Clooney. Through close analysis of Clooney’s Nespresso promotions, in addition to a range of film and publicity texts, it considers the complex exchange of meanings between the multibillion-dollar coffee brand and the Hollywood actor. In what ways do Clooney’s Nespresso advertisements complicate and/or consolidate the meanings associated with his humanitarian image? And how has the star’s involvement helped to legitimise the practices of Nespresso and its parent company? Overall, then, this chapter contributes to a growing body of scholarship that examines the political economic tensions of celebrity activism (Collins 2007; Kapoor 2013; Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012; Brockington 2014). Specifically, it explores the tensions that exist between the celebrity as branded commodity, on the one hand, and their charitable and political activities, on the other. At each stage of the analysis, the chapter is concerned with how such tensions are resolved, and to what extent this works to reproduce hegemonic capitalist inequality.

The chapter begins by examining what the involvement of Clooney communicates about the Nespresso brand. This section looks in detail at Nespresso’s branding as an ‘ethical’ company and the role that Clooney plays in furthering these promotional claims. A second section explores the complex ways in which Clooney’s Nespresso ambassadorship intersects with his appearances in a series of anti-corporate films, including *Up in the Air* (2009) and *Michael Clayton* (2007). Here, I consider how the star has sought to frame his endorsements in ways that are consistent with both his on-screen roles and his off-screen campaigning.

**Making Nespresso compassionate**

From a marketing perspective, the value of celebrities extends beyond the public and media attention that they can bring to a product or brand. Celebrities are also valuable because of what they represent. As various scholars have observed, celebrities communicate certain meanings about the products they endorse (McCracken 1989; McDonald 2013). Grant McCracken (1989) labels this process ‘meaning transfer’. According to McCracken, particular meanings and values ‘reside in the celebrity’. When a celebrity endorses a product, these meanings and values are transferred from the celebrity to the product and from the product to the consumer. These meanings and values can relate to a general image of stardom – some broader sense of the glamour and romance of the acting profession, for instance – or to a specific set of associations that are ‘unique’ to the celebrity (McCracken 1989, 310–313).

Paul McDonald (2013) has applied this meaning transfer model to Clooney’s endorsement of Nespresso. In his book *Hollywood Stardom*, McDonald explains how partnering with Clooney helps to position Nespresso as a quality brand ‑ a large part of Nespresso’s marketing strategy is that its machines allow customers to brew ‘barista-quality’ coffee in their own homes (Nestle-Nespresso 2017). Central to McDonald’s analysis is the sense of style and sophistication that the actor has cultivated through his appearances in the *Ocean’s* trilogy: *Ocean’s Eleven* (2001), *Ocean’s Twelve* (2004), and *Ocean’s Thirteen* (2007). Grossing over $1.1 billion at the box office (Box Office Mojo n.d.), these three films cast Clooney in the role of Daniel Ocean, the debonair and handsome leader of an elite group of con artists.[[2]](#endnote-2) For McDonald, Clooney’s Nespresso advertisements operate by establishing a correlation between his *Ocean’s* persona and the coffee brand. He notes how the suave associations of this character work to frame Nespresso in ways that distinguish it from Nestlé’s cheaper products, such as the Nescafé range of instant coffees (McDonald 2013, 60–64).

McDonald’s analysis makes an important contribution to our understanding of not just the Clooney-Nespresso partnership, but how celebrity endorsements operate more generally: the way in which these endorsements draw on a broad range of meanings associated with the star, including those surrounding their on-screen roles. McDonald fails to mention Clooney’s reputation for charitable and political campaigning, however. By doing so, he neglects a vital part of the meanings that the actor communicates about the Nespresso brand. In addition to a sense of sexiness and sophistication, Clooney bestows upon Nespresso some of ‘integrity’ and ‘compassion’ that he has cultivated through his activism.

For over a decade, Clooney has combined his film career with high-profile work on behalf of various causes and charities. Clooney’s charitable and political commitments date back to September 21, 2001, when he was one of the organizers of the *America: A Tribute to Heroes* telecast (2001) that raised over $120 million for the victims of the 9/11 terror attacks (Huliaras and Tzifakis 2012). In the intervening years, he has campaigned for organisations as diverse as the UN, Hope for Haiti, and the American Foundation for AIDS Research, receiving both the Nobel Summit Peace Award (2007) and the Bob Hope Humanitarian Award (2010) in the process. Yet the actor is best known for his efforts to raise awareness of the Darfur conflict, which began in 2003. Since 2005, when a series of newspaper articles alerted him to the scale of the violence in the region (Woodruff 2012), Clooney has made a number of visits to Darfur and surrounding areas; documented his experiences in various public appearances and interviews; co-founded a not-for-profit organization that aims to prevent mass atrocities around the globe, Not On Our Watch (NOOW); and lobbied politicians, including US President Barack Obama. Clooney met with then-President Obama in February 2009, for example, to discuss the possibility of the United States appointing a full-time envoy to Darfur (see Gulam 2014a).[[3]](#endnote-3)

On April 30, 2009, *TIME* magazine included Clooney on its annual list of ‘the 100 most influential people’, as recognition for his campaigning in Darfur. In his profile of the actor for the ‘TIME 100’ issue, U2 singer Bono suggested that it was Clooney’s ‘commitment’ and ‘nuance’ that set him apart from other Hollywood ‘do-gooder[s]’ (Bono 2009). This assessment is representative of the high regard in which Clooney’s charitable and political activities are held, with many commentators citing the actor as an example of what star power can achieve when it is put to good use (Harris 2012; Look to the Stars n.d.). Writing in 2011, for example, *The Los Angeles Times*’s John Horn observed, ‘For better and often for worse, actors have dabbled in politics and causes, but few have shown the kind of sustained and informed [. . .] commitment that Clooney has’ (Horn 2011).

Clooney’s compassionate and thoughtful image stands in stark contrast to that of Nespresso’s parent company. In July 1977, the Nestlé Group became the target of a large-scale consumer boycott over its aggressive marketing of infant formula in the Third World. Proponents of the boycott criticised Nestlé for misleading customers about the benefits of its powdered milk formula. They argued that by persuading mothers to switch to formula instead of breastfeeding, the company had contributed to health problems and deaths among infants in developing countries (Smith 2012; Boyd 2012; Muller 2013). Although this boycott officially ended in 1984, when Nestlé agreed to follow a code of conduct developed by the World Health Organisation, large numbers of consumers continue to boycott the company because of its involvement in the infant formula scandal, as well as a number of other controversies (Muller 2013; Siegle 2013). Nestlé once again became the focus of widespread disapproval in late 2002, for instance, when it emerged that the company was seeking a $6 million payment from the Ethiopian government as compensation for a factory that was nationalised in 1975 (Denny 2002). More recently, the food and beverage multinational has been accused of conspiring to fix the price of chocolate in Canada (BBC 2013), while it was also forced to admit to incidences of forced labour in its supply chain, when allegations of child slavery were brought before the US Supreme Court (Worley 2016).

Since emerging as a major force in the global coffee market, Nespresso has sought to distance itself from Nestlé’s tarnished reputation. Alongside a focus on producing barista-quality coffee, therefore, promotional materials for the company emphasise its commitment to sustainability and improving the lives of farmers around the globe. Clooney has played a prominent role in articulating this sense of commitment. In 2013, the actor appeared in a series of videos intended to raise awareness of the AAA Sustainable QualityTM Program. A joint venture between Nespresso and the conservation group the Rainforest Alliance, AAA was launched in 2003 with the aim of managing the ecological and social impacts of the coffee manufacturer’s operations – a ten-year goal of the programme was to reduce the carbon footprint required to make a Nespresso coffee by 20 percent (Nestlé-Nespresso n.d.). In one of the videos, gentle guitar music overlays footage of Clooney speaking to Costa Rican farmers employed by the AAA programme. This footage is intercut with a sequence of title cards detailing Nespresso’s core values of ‘fairness’, ‘partnership’, and ‘expertise’ (Ecomtrading 2013).[[4]](#endnote-4) Overall, this promotional campaign champions the positive impact AAA has had on local farming communities, documenting the extra training and financial support that the company gives to its employees in the developing world – Nespresso contends that the AAA programme has helped to enhance the lives of more than 70,000 'famer partners' since its formation (Nestlé-Nespresso 2017). Part of the way in which the campaign does this is by creating a slippage between the ethical practices of Nespresso and those of Clooney himself, as per McCracken’s account of meaning transfer (McCracken 1989).

The Nespresso videos featuring Clooney draw heavily on his long track record of humanitarianism. At the simplest level, footage of the actor trekking across Costa Rican coffee fields recalls his on-the-ground campaigning in Darfur and other exotic locations. For example, Clooney dons the same cargo vest jacket in the videos that he has worn on many of his field trips for the UN. What is being invoked here is not just the extent of Clooney’s humanitarianism. On a more complex level, this promotional campaign also invokes the high regard in which his charitable and political activities are held. ‘Fairness’ and ‘expertise’ are both qualities that have been attributed to Clooney, while press reports about the actor regularly praise his ability to forge ‘partnerships’ across ideological divides: Clooney is said to be one of the few ‘liberals’ in contemporary Hollywood whose politics reach beyond Democrats, for example (Lowe 2005; Mottram 2007).[[5]](#endnote-5) Despite his long-standing involvement with the coffee company, several of the Nespresso videos also list Clooney as an ‘Independent Witness’ (Ecomtrading 2013). This designation provides a further reminder of the actor’s humanitarian credentials, summoning up the authority that he wields as an ambassador for a variety of NGOs. Each of these associations is invoked for the purpose of legitimising the promotional campaign, so that the effect of Clooney’s presence is to lend weight to the ethical credentials of Nespresso itself – the inference being that the *Ocean’s* star would only endorse an organisation that shares his own sense of integrity and compassion.

Clooney’s appearances in these Nespresso videos are indicative of the way in which celebrity activism and forms of ‘ethical consumption’ currently intersect (Goodman 2010). Indeed, Clooney is one of a number of contemporary stars who combine their campaigning with the endorsement of ‘ethical’ products: Hollywood actor and humanitarian Ben Affleck has partnered with the ‘ethical’ shoe company TOMS, for example; and Bono is the co-founder of Product (RED), an initiative that raises funds to help eliminate HIV/AIDS in Africa via the sale of popular consumer products (e.g., RED iPhone cases and RED iPods).[[6]](#endnote-6) Scholar Patricia Daley (2013) argues that rather than helping to promote social justice, this type of campaigning actually reproduces the worst inequalities of neoliberal capitalism. Pointing to Product (RED) and other examples, she notes how the linking of celebrity activists with ethical consumption has opened up new business opportunities for commercial superpowers like Apple, while also representing the practices of these companies as ‘socially responsible’ (Daley 2013, 380). For Daley, then, the caring and thoughtful personas of stars such as Bono and Clooney function at the level of ideology: they work to distract from the structural violence that exists within neoliberal capitalism (cf. Kapoor 2013; Littler 2008).

Daley’s ideological critique provides a valuable framework for examining the Clooney-Nespresso partnership. Specifically, it offers a useful starting point for discussions about how Clooney’s ambassadorship helps to mask a series of ecological issues relating to the Nespresso brand. In contrast to conventional coffee machines, Nespresso machines brew coffee using individually portioned aluminium pods. Promotional materials for Nespresso claim that these pods are ’100 percent recyclable’. For example, customers in the UK can return their used pods directly to Nespresso boutiques, dispose of them at a number of ‘dedicated collection points’, or arrange a collection via the company’s website (Nestlé-Nespresso n.d.). Although these options mark a significant improvement on the early years of the brand (originally Nespresso provided no options for recycling pods outside of Switzerland), a comprehensive rollout of effective sustainability measures has been slow to materialize, with access to recycling facilities remaining limited in many countries. As of May 2018, the option to dispose of pods in household recycling bins is only available in six countries, while free home collection is restricted to fifteen of the seventy-six markets in which the company operates (Nestlé-Nespresso 2018; BBC 2016).[[7]](#endnote-7)

At the same time, concerns arise from the 1.15 grams of aluminium that is used to produce each Nespresso pod. Aluminium packaging is a key feature of Nespresso’s brand identity, allowing the company to differentiate its capsules from cheaper, plastic alternatives. The company website trumpets aluminium as the best way to ‘preserve aroma’ and ‘freshness’, for example (Nestlé-Nespresso n.d.). Yet these manufacturing choices have significant ecological costs. The extraction and refining of aluminium is an energy-intensive process, which results in high levels of carbon emissions and hazardous waste. Moreover, critics of Nespresso point to the basic problem of getting small quantities of aluminium waste to recycling facilities, as these types of miniature packaging are generally thrown in the bin by consumers – in the UK alone, it is estimated that more than 340 million coffee capsules/pods end up in landfill sites each year (Hamann et al. 2014; Ellson 2016).

All of these ecological issues are compounded by a lack of transparency. At present, Nespresso focuses on ‘recycling capacity’ as a measure of its sustainability efforts. In 2017, Nespresso reported that its ‘global collection capacity’ had exceeded 86 percent, while The Perfect Cup initiative commits the company to achieving 100 percent capacity by 2020 (Nestlé-Nespresso 2017). Although these figures seem impressive and contribute to Nespresso’s overall branding as ‘The Sustainable Quality Coffee Company’, they fail to give a clear indication of the levels of waste generated by its single-serve aluminium pods. Recycling capacity refers to the percentage of Nespresso pods sold to ‘consumers who have accessible collection options’ as opposed to actual recycling rates, which - at just 24.6 percent - are substantially lower than the company's green branding might suggest (Nestlé-Nespresso 2018). Lisa Hamann et al., in their analysis of sustainability in the coffee industry, argue that these records of recycling capacity are ‘not really meaningful’, and show how they effectively obscure the ecological impacts of the Nespresso brand (Hamann et al. 2014, 34; cf. Gunther 2015). The involvement of a lauded activist like Clooney can be read in similar terms. His recruitment lends Nespresso a degree of moral authority, which helps to distract attention from both the wastefulness of aluminium pods and the misleading data about its sustainability programmes.

Any analysis of Clooney’s activism must also take into account his roles in films ranging from the *Ocean’s* trilogy to lower-budget productions like *Michael Clayton*. As I have explored elsewhere (Gulam 2014a, [2014b](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5CJessica%5CDropbox%5C15037-3009-FullBook.docx#Ref_297_FILE150373009006), 2016), films are central to the meanings that Hollywood stars communicate as activists, advocates, and humanitarians: these texts help to shape not just the media and institutional traction of star campaigners, but also the wider instrumentalities that their campaigning performs. Indeed, in the same way that Clooney’s Nespresso work draws upon the moral authority that he has accrued through his campaigning, it also invokes the decency and heroism of his on-screen characters. Since winning admirers for his performance of Dr. Doug Ross, a troubled but committed paediatrician on the hit television series *ER* (1994–2009), Clooney has been consistently cast as the hero or saviour. Each of his characters in *Batman and Robin* (1997), *Gravity* (2013), and *The Monuments Men* (2014) risk their lives to save others, for example, while the conman that he plays in *Out of Sight* (1998) sacrifices his share of the loot in order to prevent a violent assault. These cinematic narratives circulate in and around his Nespresso ambassadorship, contributing to the sense of integrity and compassion that he transfers onto the brand. The next section looks in close detail at the complex relationship between Clooney’s activism, his on-screen career, and his product endorsements.

**From anti-corporate crusader to corporate ambassador**

In the same period that he developed a reputation for his off-screen campaigning, Clooney also appeared in a series of films that addressed social and political issues: the geopolitical thriller *Syriana* (2005); *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005), a War on Terror allegory that he co-wrote and directed; the corporate corruption film *Michael Clayton* (2007); and *Up in the Air* (2009), a picture that touches on issues of consumerism and unemployment. Although these films failed to match the commercial success of the *Ocean’s* franchise, they each received widespread critical acclaim, with reviewers praising the filmmakers for producing the kind of ‘thought-provoking’ stories that Hollywood typically avoids (Lowe 2005; Levy 2008; Ansen 2009). Clooney’s work on these issues pictures exists in a feedback loop with his activism, whereby the two aspects of his star image draw off and feed into one another. Footage of his on-the-ground campaigning animates the portrayal of real-world political issues in films like *Syriana*, for example, while the apparent heft of these movies lends credence to the idea that Clooney is one of Hollywood’s most accomplished campaigners (Gulam 2014a). In terms of his Nespresso endorsement, however, what is most significant about this body of films is how they each contain a critique of big businesses and corporate capitalism.

This anti-corporate strain is most evident in *Michael Clayton* and *Up in the Air*. Written and directed by Tony Gilroy and co-produced by Clooney’s Section Eight Productions, *Michael Clayton* is a tense legal thriller, portraying the greed and corruption that exists within the corporate sector.[[8]](#endnote-8) Clooney plays the role of Michael Clayton, an attorney for a prestigious corporate law firm based in New York, Kenner, Bach and Ledeen (KBL). Clayton acts as the firm’s self-declared ‘fixer’, the person KBL calls upon to deal with incidents that require discretion and expediency. A series of early scenes show Clayton doing the dirty work that keeps the rotten corporate system intact, leveraging his contacts in federal government and the local authorities to achieve the best results for KBL and its shareholders.

The central storyline in *Michael Clayton* focuses on a $3 billion class-action suit involving one of KBL’s biggest clients, U/North, a multinational agrochemical company that manufactures pesticides. U/North is being sued over the harmful effects of one of its products, which is accused of poisoning farmland and water supplies, as well as causing the premature deaths of thousands of people. Clayton becomes involved in the case when the litigator representing U/North, Arthur Edens (Tom Wilkinson), dies from an apparent overdose. In his investigation into Edens’s death, Clayton uncovers a confidential U/North memo confirming that the company knew about the deadly properties of its pesticide. He also discovers the true details of Edens’s 'overdose', when it emerges that a senior U/North executive hired assassins to drug and murder the litigator as a way to cover the company's tracks. Grief-stricken by the death of his colleague and fearing for his own safety, Clayton delivers the memo to the police. In doing so, he not only helps to bring U/North to justice, but also turns his back on the corporate world. A climactic scene sees Clayton claim the symbolic role of corporate avenger when he tells two soon-to-be arrested U/North executives, ‘I am Shiva, the god of death’.

Directed by Jason Reitman and starring Clooney, *Up in the Air* also explores the injustices of corporate America, but does so through the genre of the romantic comedy-drama. Clooney plays Ryan Bingham, a professional corporate downsizer employed by companies to implement large-scale layoffs. Bingham is one of the leading consultants at the Career Transitions Corporation (CTC). Specialists in ‘outplacement counselling’, CTC claim to help former employees begin the ‘next chapter’ of their working lives. In reality, the company acts as little more than hired hatchet men: the full extent of CTC’s counselling is a generic pep talk and a thin envelope of materials, which former employees are invited to peruse at their own leisure. Like Clooney’s character in *Michael Clayton*, then, Bingham harbours no illusions about the ruthless nature of his work, recognising that his job is to get workers out the door as quickly and quietly as possible. An early montage shows Bingham dismissing workers with disconcerting ease. In one scene, Clooney’s character reassures a recently fired worker that he will be ‘in touch’, but his voiceover narration confirms that they will never speak again.

Despite these extended montages showing the plight of ordinary workers, *Up in the Air* is principally concerned with the toll that a dehumanising corporate culture has taken on its central character. Large sections of the film are dedicated to showing the aimlessness and vacuity of Bingham’s personal life. Travelling back and forth across America to wield the proverbial axe, Clooney’s protagonist possesses no meaningful or long-lasting relationships. The person he spends most of his time with is his new colleague, Natalie Keener (Anna Kendrick), while he is also estranged from his two sisters. Echoing the cut-throat philosophy of the companies for whom he works, the only things that appear to motivate Bingham are the desire for efficiency and personal gain. For example, a recurring motif in *Up in the Air* is his quest to reach 10 million frequent flyer miles, a goal that will earn Bingham access to a club that contains just six other members. Clooney’s downsizer eventually reaches his goal on a flight back from Chicago and is personally congratulated by the chief pilot (Sam Elliott). When the pilot asks where he is from, Bingham responds, ‘Here’. The sense of deflation in his response contributes to the film’s central message about the moral bankruptcy of corporate America and the human costs of the drive for ever-expanding profit.

Even more than his charitable and political activities, therefore, Clooney’s on-screen roles appear to be at odds with his Nespresso endorsement. Indeed, in a press event to promote *Michael Clayton* at the [2007](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5CJessica%5CDropbox%5C15037-3009-FullBook.docx#Ref_311_FILE150373009006) Venice Film Festival, the actor was asked how he could reconcile the film’s critique of corporate capitalism with his endorsement of a multinational like Nestlé. In his response, Clooney rejected the idea that any conflict existed between these two aspects of his career. Seeking to shift the focus back onto his cinematic endeavours, the actor ultimately refused to apologise for ‘trying to make a living every once in a while’ (Mottram 2007).

The Venice incident was noteworthy not only for how it crystallised a tension between Clooney’s roles as a corporate ambassador and activist, but also for the way in which the star attempted to resolve this tension. Like a number of contemporary film stars who pursue careers behind the camera, Clooney has fostered a reputation as an astute filmmaker – someone working within the commercial structures of Hollywood to make films that are both more ‘complex’ than the conventional blockbuster and deeply ‘personal’ (Hornaday 2007; Levy 2008). Journalistic profiles of the actor-director report that he operates according to a one-for-one process, for instance, whereby each commercial hit he delivers for the studios gives him the freedom to make a ‘serious’ picture like *Michael Clayton* (Levy 2008). By refusing to apologise for ‘trying to make a living every once in a while’, Clooney sought to rationalise his Nespresso ambassadorship in terms of the same give-and-take that is said to characterise his relationship with commercial Hollywood.

A similar logic was articulated by the star in a July 2013 interview with *The Guardian*. Commenting on his work for the coffee manufacturer, Clooney detailed the way in which he uses a large percentage of his Nespresso salary to fund the Satellite Sentinel Project (Siegle 2013). Co-founded by Clooney in 2010, the Satellite Sentinel Project (SSP) is an organisation that employs satellite imagery to monitor for signs of human rights abuses in several countries, including Sudan, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.[[9]](#endnote-9) In these instances, Clooney seeks to distance himself from accusations of corporate acquiescence and/or ‘selling out’. Instead, he claims the identity of the shrewd operator: an individual who sees all the angles, and knows how best to use his stardom for the good of the African citizens he claims to help.

This image of the star overlaps with elements of his representation in the *Ocean’s* franchise. Daniel Ocean is the consummate hustler. Although the central focus of the trilogy is the camaraderie that exists among the group of conmen, it is Clooney’s character who ultimately assumes the role of ‘top dog’, marshalling all of the resources at his disposal to pull off a string of elaborate heists (Gulam 2014a). Significantly, there is also an anti-corporate dimension to this character. In each of the films in the trilogy, Clooney’s protagonist is pitted against an unscrupulous businessman. Willy Bank (Al Pacino), the ‘mark’ in *Ocean’s Thirteen*, is a predatory casino magnate, and Ocean targets Bank when he cheats one of his crew out of their share of a lucrative hotel-casino. In the David vs. Goliath narratives of the *Ocean’s* franchise, therefore, Clooney’s character is not just a conman seeking great riches and personal glory. He is also a populist hero, striking a blow against elite interests.

Several of Clooney’s films seek to problematize the corporate world, therefore, by depicting the venality of those individuals at the top of the corporate pyramid. At the same time, these films also document the progressive potential that exists within such structures. Clooney’s protagonist in *Michael Clayton* outwits U/North using the craftiness that he learned as a corporate fixer, for example, while *Up in the Air* shows how the worst cruelties of corporate capitalism can be ameliorated by small acts of human kindness. By the same token, *Ocean’s Thirteen* contains a subplot in which one of Ocean’s crew – Casey Affleck’s Virgil Malloy – poses as a low-paid worker in a Mexican dice-making factory. Although Malloy is operating under self-interested motives – he is there to tamper with the dice that will eventually end up in Bank’s casino – he becomes involved in a protest against poor working conditions, helping to stage a strike with the other employees. This strike is only resolved once Clooney’s conman intervenes. Recognising the threat that the strike poses to his intricately planned heist, Ocean agrees to fund a wage increase for the factory employees out of his share of the loot, thereby allowing them to return to work.

Each of these cinematic narratives speaks to important aspects of Clooney’s humanitarian image and the broader ideological function that his Nespresso ambassadorship performs. Like the characters in his films, Clooney is represented as a force for ‘good’, someone who has been able to realise positive results by working within the structures of neoliberal capitalism. The press stories about how he redirects his endorsement money back into ‘progressive’ projects evoke the shrewdness and moral decency of Daniel Ocean, for instance (Gulam 2014a). Moving beyond a narrow focus on individual agents such as Nestlé, one of the ideological effects of the Clooney-Nespresso partnership is to promote the idea that the answers to global inequality lie within the very structures that produce it. Recalling the star’s relationship with commercial Hollywood, media coverage of his Nespresso activism serves to validate a form of give-and-take resistance in which benevolent corporate hustlers like Clooney work to tackle the worst symptoms of global inequality, while the system of neoliberal capitalism that drives this inequality is left unopposed.

In his influential work on stardom, Richard Dyer (2004) suggests that part of the appeal of stars is in the way their images can resolve ideological contradictions for the audience. Central to his analysis is how disparate notions of human identity are brought together in a star’s image. For example, he notes how Marilyn Monroe’s combination of sexiness and innocence helped to resolve certain contradictory notions of femininity circulating in 1950s America. For Dyer, this process is ideologically significant because of the way in which it obfuscates wider social structures: as these meanings are attached to the figure of the star, what is social appears as if it were ‘natural’ (Dyer 2004, 17–36). Clooney’s star image functions according to the same ideological process described by Dyer, combining his corporate ambassadorship with the populist heroics of his on-screen characters. The combination of these disparate elements naturalises the concept that the worst injustices of neoliberal capitalism can be overcome by individuals working within this system.

**Conclusion**

In November 2013, Nespresso launched a new series of advertisements featuring Clooney. Building on previous campaigns, these advertisements sought to use Clooney to promote Nespresso’s core values of sophistication, rich flavours, and responsible corporate practice. In the first of three interconnected vignettes, Clooney is shown in a Nespresso boutique, sitting beside an attractive woman. When Clooney goes to fetch a drink for the woman, she announces his presence to the other customers, causing a group of fans to swarm the actor. Alone at last, the woman sits back and enjoys Clooney’s own cup of Nespresso. The second advertisement sees a bedraggled Clooney in the same boutique, joined by Hollywood actor Matt Damon. When Damon tells his *Ocean’s* co-star that he is there to recycle, revealing a bag of empty Nespresso pods, this prompts Clooney to respond, ‘Me too’. A final advertisement completes the narrative as Clooney exits the boutique, having pulled the same trick on Damon that he was subjected to in the opening vignette (Gianatasio 2013).[[10]](#endnote-10)

Jointly entitled ‘In the Name of Pleasure’, Nespresso circulated these three advertisements via its YouTube channel, with staggered release dates for different markets. At the same time, the company linked the advertisements to a series of more in-depth videos about its sustainability efforts. These videos ranged from short trailers featuring Clooney in his role as an NASB member to round-table discussions about the AAA programme. Within six months of premiering the first advertisement, the campaign had received over 50 million views, including 10 million views for the linked content (Google 2014).

The ‘In the Name of Pleasure’ saga captures the complex interplay between on- and off-screen images of Clooney that has been a key feature of his partnership with Nespresso. In the three advertisements, Clooney does not simply play a version of himself – the glamorous and socially responsible film star-turned-humanitarian. He also plays a version of his *Ocean’s* character (McDonald 2013, 63–64). For example, the arrival of Damon in the second advertisement substantiates the connections between the coffee company and the populist heroics of Daniel Ocean, with Clooney’s endorsement of Nespresso constructed as just another good-natured escapade.

This chapter has examined the triangulation of Clooney’s roles as a film star, activist, and Nespresso ambassador, outlining how the sense of compassion that he has accrued in his on- and off-screen campaigning is transferred onto the coffee brand. Overall, the chapter has argued that the partnership between Clooney and Nespresso is significant not only in terms of the commercial opportunities that it realises for the two parties. It is also significant from an ideological perspective. I have shown how the pairing of a multibillion-dollar multinational with a lauded celebrity activist works to legitimise the concept of a benevolent capitalism – one in which the solutions to social problems rest in the hands of ‘ethical’ multinationals like Nespresso and the Hollywood stars who endorse them.

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1. The initial contract between Clooney and Nespresso prohibited the use of his image in the United States. Since 2015, however, Clooney’s Nespresso advertisements have aired in both European and US markets (Gretler 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Significantly this is a role originally played by Frank Sinatra in the 1960s Rat Pack film upon which Ocean’s Eleven is based, Ocean’s 11 (1960). For further discussion of the Ocean’s films and how they impact on the meanings associated with Clooney’s activism, see Gulam (2014a). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Clooney has also participated in the production of two documentary feature movies about the conflict: *Sand and Sorrow* (2007) and *Darfur Now* (2007).The 2007 Nobel Summit Peace Award was awarded jointly to Clooney and fellow Hollywood actor Don Cheadle. Clooney and Cheadle co-founded NOOW, together with their Ocean’s co-stars Brad Pitt and Matt Damon. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Entitled ‘George Clooney & Nespresso in Costa Rica’, this video is available online at www.youtube.com/watch?v=bHNSg9LxjpY (Ecomtrading 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For detailed discussion of Clooney’s particular brand of Hollywood liberalism, see Gulam (2014a). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. In his role as chairman of the Eastern Congo Initiative (ECI), a non-profit organisation that he co-founded in 2010, Affleck collaborated with TOMS to produce a line of limited-edition trainers using ‘Congolese-inspired textiles’. TOMS operates according to a ‘one-for-one’ business model, meaning that for each pair of shoes sold, it donates a similar pair to someone in the developing world. In the case of the TOMS-ECI partnership, shoes were donated to Congolese schoolchildren, while $5 from each sale was directed back into ECI’s ‘youth and families’ projects (Cappadona 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. In May 2017, Nespresso sought to offset longstanding criticisms of its environmental record by launching a six-month pilot project in the London borough of Kensington and Chelsea, which allowed Nespresso Club members to recycle their used pods through their council household recycling service (Smithers 2017). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Clooney and the Ocean’s director Steven Soderbergh co-founded Section Eight in 2000, with the company operating from 2000–2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. In collaboration with The Enough Project and DigitalGlobe, SSP claims to offer access to ‘near-real time’ information about events in conflict zones, making this information available via regular reports on its website. In May 2011, for instance, SSP visually confirmed the looting of a World Food Programme facility in the disputed Abyei region of Sudan (Raymond et al. 2013, 189–190). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Damon reportedly received $3 million for his appearance in this advertisement (Gianatasio 2013). The three advertisements are available online at www.adweek.com/adfreak/matt-damon-joins-george-clooney-nespresso-campaign-its-no-oscar-winner-153810 (Gianatasio 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)