

Matt Damon: A Cosmopolitan Hero for the Mainstream

In *Elysium* (2013), Matt Damon plays the role of Max Da Costa, a reformed ex-convict trying to make ends meet in the global ghetto that planet Earth has become in the year 2154. After an accident at his workplace exposes him to a lethal dose of radiation, Max decides to travel illegally to Elysium, the ring-shaped space station where the privileged citizens of this science-fiction world live in affluence and where every house comes equipped with a healing bay that can cure any disease in seconds. Even if his cross-border journey to Elysium does not go exactly as planned, Max manages to reboot the system and make the unbreachable border between Elysium and the Earth disappear. In his role as Max Da Costa, and shrouded in the conventions of the science-fiction action blockbuster, Damon enacts the century-long cosmopolitan ideal of “world citizenship,” granting all human beings in the film equal rights and civic status.

Max Da Costa’s cosmopolitan aspirations can be contextualized within the renewed interest in cosmopolitanism across the human and social sciences. The cosmopolitan tradition, which can be traced back to the Stoics and to Immanuel Kant’s 1784 essay “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose” (2010), gathered renewed momentum in the 1990s, a decade that witnessed certain epochal changes such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of apartheid, among others, as well as the widespread use of the internet and the emergence of the so-called network society. Although Kant never used the term globalization specifically, he believed that the world was becoming increasingly interconnected and that the forces of nature were organized in such a way that they would eventually produce a cosmopolitan condition and social order that would also be the guarantor of perpetual peace (p. 25). Kant’s ideals about a cosmopolitan world order, cosmopolitan law and cosmopolitan hospitality became the foundations on which moral cosmopolitanism, understood as a philosophical and political

project aimed at the creation of cosmopolitan political institutions and the development of a cosmopolitan civil society, started to be theorised (see, for instance, Nussbaum 1994, Appiah 2006).

Even if these cosmopolitan aspirations became questioned at the beginning of the 21st century (Calhoun 2002, p. 871), the academic interest in cosmopolitanism as a transformative perspective has not declined. In spite of the reemergence of anti-cosmopolitan forces such as renewed nationalist pulsions, religious fundamentalism, and anti-migratory policies and attitudes, the notion of cosmopolitan solidarity continues to be behind many of the social and political movements that make up the tapestry of contemporary society. In its many different versions, cosmopolitanism is increasingly regarded as a key analytical tool to study a variety of outlooks and ethico-political practices that need to go beyond the limitations of methodological nationalism by adopting more complex and global perspectives (Schiller and Irving, 2015).

Elysium is not the only film in which Matt Damon has played a role that can be analysed from a cosmopolitan perspective. Different aspects of cosmopolitanism appear in the roles he plays in most of his latest movies, from *Invictus* (2009), *Hereafter* (2010) and *Green Zone* (2010), through *Contagion* (2011) and *Promised Land* (2012) to *The Great Wall* (2016) and *Downsizing* (2017). This article will trace the development of a cosmopolitan dimension in Damon's stardom. Paul McDonald's (2013) theorization of the economic and symbolic aspects of stardom will be used to explore the creation and transformation of the Damon brand according to a pattern of continuity and change. As will be argued, the identity crises Damon's characters must face in his early films have been gradually replaced by a cosmopolitan concern with the world as a whole. At the same time, the core set of durable attributes of the Damon brand that persists from his early films defines the star's particular embodiment of cosmopolitanism in both his filmic

and non-filmic roles. Drawing on recent critical theories on the cosmopolitan (Appiah 1997, Delanty 2006, Beck 2009), the last part of this article explores the meanings and connotations of the different types of cosmopolitanism associated with Damon the Hollywood star in two specific texts—*Invictus* and *Promised Land*—and how they relate to contemporary definitions of 21st century cosmopolitanism.

The Damon Brand

Richard Dyer's theorization of the star persona as a textual construction, that is, as a "complex configuration of visual, verbal and aural signs" that manifests itself both in films and in other types of media texts (1998, p. 34) was (and still is) crucial to most scholarly work on stardom. Dyer sees stars as the representation of social types that reconcile apparently contradictory meanings both in their filmic roles and in their very status as stars: they manage, for instance, to be simultaneously extraordinary (because they are stars) and ordinary (because they are the representation of cultural and social types). Dyer's work provides a model for probing into the cultural significance of a star drawing on both textual and biographical analyses as well as questions of pleasure and identification. In line with the general move within film studies from the texts themselves to industrial considerations of production, Dyer's textual approach was soon found lacking in the area of the industrial and economic production of stardom. Barry King, for instance, criticizes Dyer's (and others') obsession "with matters of signification" and advocates an approach that takes into account the specificities of the relations of production in which stars' performances take place (1987, p. 145). Paul McDonald's approach to Hollywood stardom sets out to redress this imbalance. His view of the star as brand, that is, as "a symbolic vehicle used to create a set of impressions deployed in

selling a particular film experience” binds together signification and economic issues (2013, p. 6).

Matt Damon caught the eyes of critics and filmmakers in his role as a soldier in *Courage under Fire* (1996), a secondary part for which he lost forty pounds. In an interview in 1997 Damon described the heroin-addict soldier he played as “a business decision”: “I thought, [n]obody will take this role because it is too small. If I go out of my way to make something of this role...” (in Kamp 1997). However, the part that established the fundamentals of the Damon brand was his role in *Good Will Hunting* (1997), the film that earned him, and childhood friend Ben Affleck, an Oscar for best original screenplay. The idea behind the script came from an assignment for a playwriting class that Damon took at Harvard. Damon did not complete his degree but left college with the idea for the film that would define his future star persona, one that, in this particular case, had been literally written by the actor himself (Phillips 2015). When trying to sell the script, Damon and Affleck fought hard to keep the film’s leading roles for themselves: “all they heard was ‘Leo and Brad, Leo and Brad... This would be great for Leo and Brad.’ They stuck to their guns: the movie got made with them or it didn’t get made at all” (Shone 2011). After the success of *Good Will Hunting*, the young actor who was “sick of reading scripts that Chris O’Donnell has passed on” found himself in a position where he could turn down work (in Kamp 1997). Damon’s breakthrough in the movie business was, therefore, a combination of talent (for both writing and acting) and tenacity, two features that, as will be seen below, soon became defining attributes of his early star persona.

While in two of his previous film roles, *Mystic Pizza* (1988) and *School Ties* (1992), Damon had played characters from wealthy family backgrounds, from *Good Will Hunting* onwards he would specialize in portraying young men from problematic low

class environments. In *Good Will Hunting* he plays the Will Hunting of the title, a character of Irish background who lives in a rough neighbourhood in Boston. Will is an orphan, was sexually abused as a child, and works as a janitor at MIT. Behind his “boy next door” looks, he hides a penchant for violence, criminal offense and cruelty. In the scene that opens the film, dissolves, slow camera movements, a mesmerizing soundtrack and a yellowish palette work in combination to show Will’s fascination with and talent for maths. Onscreen, mathematical equations are interspersed with extreme close-ups of the main character’s childlike face perusing the books in utter concentration. As the camera pulls away from the character, the spell that this opening scene has cast on spectators fades out. Will is now seen in derelict surroundings: a bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling, a mattress on the wooden floor and books scattered everywhere. Torn between mathematical paradise and harsh reality, Will’s struggle in the film follows the parameters of an identity quest: he has to come to terms with what he is and decide what he wants to be in the future.

Damon’s roles in the late 1990s systematically elaborated on these aspects of his nascent star persona. The characters he plays in *The Rainmaker* (1997), *Rounders* (1998) and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999), among others, also come from problematic social and family backgrounds. While the actor’s boyish (and also very white) looks draw spectators (and other characters) towards him, this drive is always combined with morally dubious actions that problematize spectators’ allegiance to his characters. Edward Yardley, writing for *Sight and Sound*, describes Damon’s character in *Rounders*, where he plays a law student who also happens to be a gifted poker player, as “an honest guy cursed with a talent for something most people regard as sleazy” (1998, p. 60), a description that brings to the fore the three features of Damon’s early star persona: intelligence, likeability and ambiguous morality. His inscrutability, or, as some call it,

Damon's blank acting style (Peacock 2012, Eggert 2012) contributes to the consolidation of the mixture of likeability and dubious morality as a basic trait of his persona, which the films usually narrativize through some sort of identity quest. As Shone (2011) puts it, most of Damon's film characters from the late 1990s "grope through a similar existential fog." In a review of *The Bourne Ultimatum*, when Damon's stardom was already consolidated, James Christopher (2007) from *The Sunday Times* claims: "Damon is unique among Hollywood A-list stars for the quality and consistency of his lies. His greatest roles are treacherous façades. His outstanding performances in *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and Martin Scorsese's Oscar-winning *The Departed* are obsessed with identity". The same could be said of Damon's role in Steven Soderbergh's *The Informant!* (2009), a film in which he plays Mark Whitacre, the vice-president of an agricultural company turned informant for the FBI who is also revealed to have been embezzling company funds for himself. In *The Informant!* Whitacre's constant lying, both to other characters and to the spectators through his narrative voice-over, turns out to be one of the symptoms of the bipolar personality disorder he suffers. As the real-life Mark Whitacre (2008) put it when the film started shooting: "It's like I was two people. I assume that's why they chose Matt Damon for the role, because he plays those roles that have such psychological intensity. In the Bourne movies, he doesn't even know who he is."

A Star is Bourne

Matt Damon's most famous role to date, and the one that made him an A+-list star and fully established the Damon brand, is that of Jason Bourne, an amnesiac assassin on an identity quest. After his successful films of the late 1990s, several box-office flops followed—*All the Pretty Horses* (2000), *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000), *The Majestic* (2001) and *Gerry* (2002), among others—and Damon's career was not in good

shape when the first Bourne movie was released in 2002. Damon credits his character in Bourne with “saving his life.” As he explains: “Suddenly it put me on a short list of people who could get movies made and so directors called me and that’s the best part of it” (in Hiscock 2015). In 2007, by the time of the release of the third Bourne film, *Forbes* named Damon the most bankable actor in Hollywood—“for every dollar Damon got paid for his last three roles, his films returned \$29 of gross income” (Pomeranz 2007)—and *People* magazine chose him as the “sexiest man alive”: “You’ve given an aging suburban dad the ego-boost of a lifetime”, the star wrote in a letter to the magazine (in Thompson 2007).

This role extended the Damon brand into the role of action hero and, according to *The Guardian*’s Peter Bradshaw “turned this moon-faced boy into a man” (2007). Jesse Hassenger (2016) has argued that “[i]n his signature role, Damon essentially rebuilt his star persona from the ground up, growing from mysterious cipher to confident action hero.” Yet, as McDonald (2013, p. 48) claims, star brands work by “creating differentiating similarities” and, in the case of the Damon brand, the most characteristic features of his early star persona became a crucial element in the construction of the character of Bourne as a violent, ruthless and yet likeable and emotionally vulnerable assassin that spectators are asked to identify with. To the combination of intellectual sharpness, likeability, moral ambiguity and identity issues of his early roles, Jason Bourne adds a physical superiority that is the result of a behaviour modification programme. Damon is, once again, the best of his trade. He single-handedly outwits and outfights the several Treadstone agents that are sent to terminate him. His almost extra-sensory powers and his ability to process information also excel those of his opponents.

Yet, the most relevant addition of the *Bourne* films to the Damon brand is its cosmopolitan resonances (see Azcona 2016). From the moment his body is rescued from the sea in *The Bourne Identity* (2002), this “man with no name” starts an identity search

that takes him on a journey across several countries and continents. Both his mobility and his search for identity result in openness to difference and outward-looking orientation, which the films construct as the basis of his nascent cosmopolitanism. In fact, what made Bourne start “malfunctioning” (in CIA terms) was the “sudden infiltration of empathy” (Epstein and Steinberg 2011, p. 107) that he felt when he saw his target playing with one of his children. From that moment on, the ruthless killer becomes a man without an identity and, therefore, also a stateless person (one devoid of any particular national attachment) in the sense invoked by early cosmopolitan thinker Diogenes the Cynic when he claimed “I am a citizen of the world” (in Nussbaum 1994).

Accompanied only by cosmopolitan loneliness, Bourne struggles on to recover his old attributes: a national identity and a sense of self. Yet, the process appears irreversible, as his journey around the world makes his national identity gradually irrelevant and replaces it by the type of open and self-reflective learning process of cosmopolitan engagement with the world that Gerard Delanty (2016) sees as the basis of critical cosmopolitanism. The revelation scene in which Bourne confronts his creator in *The Bourne Ultimatum* introduces a view of patriotism that clashes with the protagonist’s frantic travel across countries and national borders. When his creator explains the goal of Bourne’s former self as “saving American lives” both the protagonist and the audience realize how distant from these concerns he is now. Bourne’s presumed sense of patriotism is also invoked in *Jason Bourne* (2016) to make him go back to the agency. Even if he seems to be asking for time to consider the CIA’s offer--“Let me think about it”--the agency’s ‘patriotic’ exhortation to national feelings clashes with the narrative development of the protagonist. Bourne becomes a true cosmopolitan not because of the borders he crosses but because in his cross-border journey he undergoes the process of redefinition of the self that comes from the engagement with the other. As Gerard Delanty

(p. 41) claims: “it is in the interplay of self, other and world that cosmopolitan processes come into play.”

Damon’s Celebrity Cosmopolitanism

The cosmopolitan outlook demanded of the Damon character by the *Bourne* saga became a crucial part of the Damon brand in the last decade. Films like *Invictus*, *Hereafter*, *Green Zone*, *Contagion*, *Promised Land*, *Elysium*, *The Great Wall* and *Downsizing* align themselves with the cosmopolitan premise that in our globalized world one must find solutions that take into account the perspectives of others beyond one’s own immediate context. Within their different generic configurations, the issues that the protagonists of these films have to deal with highlight the urgency of a cosmopolitan paradigm to tackle the problems of our contemporary world.

These cosmopolitan concerns have also become a staple of Damon’s non-filmic star persona. His involvement as both producer and narrator in *Running the Sahara* (2007), a documentary about an expedition of three men across the Sahara desert, led to the star founding the NGO H2O Africa, which was announced at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2006 and whose mission, according to the official press kit, was “to create widespread public awareness of the water crisis in Africa and gather support for integrated sustainable clean water programs in critical areas” (*Running the Sahara* 2006). In 2009, the organization merged with Water Partners International and became water.org, of which Damon is a co-founder. The day after the merger was announced, web traffic at water.org quintupled, which shows the impact that the name of an A-list star may have on a social cause (Dittrich 2009). With the motto, “Safe water and the dignity of a toilet for all,” the company aims to provide aid to regions of developing countries that lack access to safe drinking water and sanitation. Damon himself promotes

many of the company's initiatives. In 2013, for example, he used a fake conference on YouTube to raise money for water.org. Drawing on the comic side of his star persona that he started to build up in *Dogma* (1999) and *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back* (2001) and is a defining feature of his television appearances (his ongoing fake feud with the late-night television host Jimmy Kimmel dates back to 2006), he announced that he was going on a "toilet strike," and promised not to go to the bathroom again until everybody had access to clean water and sanitation (water.org 2013). In accordance with his commitment to the cause, Damon drenched himself in toilet water for the ALS ice bucket challenge in August 2014, claiming that "the water in our toilets in the West is actually cleaner than the water that most people in the developing world have access to" (water.org 2014).

Damon's use of "toilet humour" to raise awareness of the needs of the less privileged inhabitants of the world could be seen as one of the many different routes that, as Jo Littler claims (2008, p. 239), contemporary celebrities and stars can use to show "that they do, really, truly and intimately care about global social injustice", a practice that Skrbis and Woodward (2013, p. 82) refer to as "celebrity cosmopolitanism." The practice has become a trademark of any established star from the 1990s onwards (Street 2004, Littler 2008, Kapoor 2013), giving rise to the phenomenon Street has called *celebrity politicians*: popular figures, like film stars and other celebrities, who claim the right to represent some peoples and causes and engage in different types of humanitarian and charity work (Street 2004). As has often been argued, it is difficult to generalize about the reasons for celebrities' involvement with humanitarian causes. Be it a commercial extension of the star brand and, therefore, a way to raise the star's public profile or a genuine attempt on the part of stars to use their privileged position in the social and cultural imaginary to act as a bridge between the cause and the general public, one should not overlook the intrinsic contradiction inherent to celebrity humanitarian and charity

work, or, as Littler (2008, p. 248) claims, the way in which it acknowledges “the structural inequalities in global social systems whilst simultaneously denying the material implications of the wealth of the star and how they contribute to the spaces where suffering takes place.” Ilan Kapoor, for example, censures this type of “celebrity humanitarianism” because, far from being altruistic, it “is most often self-serving, helping to promote institutional aggrandizement and the celebrity “brand”; it advances consumerism and corporate capitalism, and rationalizes the very global inequality it seeks to redress” (2013, p. 1). As he puts it, celebrity charity work “not only masks the causes of inequality, but handsomely profits from this deception” (p. 33). Interestingly enough, this is a contradiction that the phenomenon of stardom is particularly adept at erasing, since it is founded, as Dyer (1998, p. 43) claims, on the apparently irreconcilable difference between the ordinary and extraordinary nature of stars.

Damon’s active involvement with humanitarian causes—at the time of writing and, according to the website looktothestars.org, he has supported 37 causes—is now a crucial aspect of his contemporary star persona that filters into his screen roles. He has also played his celebrity cosmopolitanism in a reflexive way in the sixth season of the HBO series *Entourage* (2004-2011). In the episode titled “Give a Little Bit” (2010), for example, he plays a fictionalized version of himself pushing the reluctant A-list actor Vincent Chase (Adrian Grenier) into donating some money to a One by One foundation that is raising money for children all over the world. Damon’s scenes in the episode are filled with references to his film career (“he Jason Bourned me,” “I can’t believe that I have a fucking Academy Award and I am calling you back”). His cameo role in *Entourage*, on the one hand, foregrounds the performance of stardom (this is Damon the star playing himself) and, on the other, it allows spectators a glimpse into the “real” Matt Damon (even if this is a real Matt Damon which is as constructed as his fictional roles in

other films). The fact that he has chosen his involvement with humanitarian causes, that is, his celebrity cosmopolitanism, to present his “real self” shows cosmopolitanism as a key feature of his star persona and the Damon brand.

An Ambivalent Cosmopolitan Hero

As McDonald (2013, p. 73) has argued, while film studios, journalists, spectators and many other contributors may play a part in the production of the star brand, “stars themselves are equally active agents in the making and managing of their symbolic and commercial identities.” Damon has repeatedly claimed that his choice of roles is exclusively based on who the director of the film is (in Goodykoontz 2015). Yet, the ideological consistency of some of his latest films seems to suggest that other criteria may be at work as well. The cosmopolitan aspirations of his recent films, in combination with the militant celebrity cosmopolitanism intrinsic to Damon’s non-filmic persona, can be read as the star’s self-conscious extension of his branded identity. At the same time, the meanings accrued by the Damon brand throughout the years influence the roles he takes on, adding levels of signification that would have never been conveyed had the characters been played by a different male star. In the Bourne saga, the combination of constant mobility, border-crossing and identity transformation resulted in a cosmopolitan disposition that was permeated by the star’s inbred moral ambiguity, intelligence and likeability. This Damonesque cosmopolitan disposition crystallizes in different versions of the cosmopolitan in *Invictus* and *Promised Land*.

In *Invictus* Damon plays real-life François Pienaar, the captain of the South African Springboks rugby team in 1994. The film starts on February, 11, 1990, the day Nelson Mandela (Morgan Freeman) was released from prison. It opens with a group of white teenagers playing rugby on a pristine grass pitch while, on the other side of the

road, a group of black teenagers are playing soccer on a hardscrabble brownish sandlot. As the motorcade that is taking Mandela home from prison drives along the road that separates the two pitches, the young black men run to the wire fence and start cheering in excitement. The white boys also stop playing and look at the car from behind their black iron fence. They say nothing and some of them shake their heads in a mixture of disbelief and disdain. In this sense, framing and mise-en-scene contribute to the film's portrayal of South Africa as a country torn by a border with racial, economic and political implications. If Jason Bourne's nascent cosmopolitanism in the *Bourne* movies can be related to his relentless crossing of borders, in *Invictus* Matt Damon's character will engage in a conscious process of border dissolution in order to unite a segregated South Africa.

The star's combination of brightness and moral ambiguity is key to the film's construction of Pienaar as South-Africa's national hero (almost on the same level as that of the other national hero in the film, Nelson Mandela). The first time we see Pienaar, he is at his parents' home. Mandela has just taken office and Pienaar's father is voicing white fears about the future of the country now that blacks are going to rule it. In line with the familiar inscrutability of some of Damon's characters, Pienaar only draws a blank stare while he listens to his father. Neither agreeing nor disagreeing with his father and his white fears, Pienaar is presented as an apolitical person. As we learn later on, he did not even vote in the 1994 election. Pienaar's position as the captain of the Springboks, together with his apolitical stance at the beginning of the film, fit Dominic Lennard's (2012, p. 12-13) claim that Damon's characters "are usually socially or physically powerful at the same time as they are emotionally precious, in need of some quasi-parental guidance." In the case of *Invictus*, this parental guidance will be provided by the

racial Other represented by Mandela, and it will play a crucial role in the character's cosmopolitan transformation.

Like Jason Bourne's, Pienaar's cosmopolitan transformation follows the lines of Delanty's critical cosmopolitanism (2006). When Pienaar is invited to have tea with Mandela they discuss their views on leadership. At the beginning of the conversation they are sitting at opposite ends of a coffee table and are framed in medium shots. Once Mandela realizes that they share similar views on how to use others' words as a source of inspiration, Mandela stands up and sits closer to Pienaar. At this point we get closer shots of both characters. Pienaar's reaction shots show the effect that Mandela's words are having on him. As in the previous scene with his father, we find Damon's character staring at Mandela with an impassive and pensive expression. However, this time his blank face (he is only moving his eyes) is more a sign of introspection than one of apolitical stance and scepticism, as was the case before. It signals the beginning of the hero's reflexive cosmopolitan transformation.

Little by little, Pienaar comes to a full understanding of the implications of Mandela's words. When some members of the team complain about the fact that they have to do clinics in black townships as part of the public relations build-up for the World Cup, Pienaar tells them that they are not a rugby team any more. Later on, he suggests that they should try to learn "Nkosi Sikelel' !Africa", a song associated with the black community and banned during the apartheid era. The last stage of Pienaar's transformation occurs during his visit to Robben Island, the prison where Mandela spent twenty-seven years. He enters Mandela's cell, locks himself in it and measures the dimensions of the place with his arms. In a montage sequence in which the poem "Invictus" can be heard in voice-over, he imagines Mandela sitting in that tiny cell and working outside with the rest of the prisoners. At a very specific moment, this imagined

Mandela looks back at him with wide-open eyes. It is in this final encounter with the Levinesian (1987) “face of the Other” that Pienaar becomes fully aware of Mandela’s suffering and, by extension, of the extent of his forgiveness. His cosmopolitan transformation is complete and he can now face the task he was entrusted with.

As is usually the case with Damon’s characters, Pienaar does not disappoint when it comes to getting the job done. Under his captainship the Springboks win the World Cup and manage to get the support of the black community who, until very recently, had seen the “green and gold” as a symbol of apartheid. In its use of rugby to unite a nation, the film is an example of Michael Billig’s “banal nationalism” (1995), which may be difficult to reconcile with a cosmopolitan reading of the film and of Damon’s role in it. The critical reaction to Martha Nussbaum’s famous article “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism”, written in 1994, and her own revision of her views on the issue are a good example of the uneasy relationship between cosmopolitanism and nationalism. In her earlier article Nussbaum aligned herself with the Stoic cosmopolitan tradition to argue that we should distrust conventional patriotism and national symbols as parochial and see ourselves first as citizens of the world. Fourteen years later, in 2008, Nussbaum revised these views to make room for what she calls “a purified patriotism”, one that promotes national feelings but does not think that members of a nation are superior to those of other nations. The need to reconcile cosmopolitanism and nationalism is also at the heart of Appiah’s “rooted cosmopolitanism,” a type of cosmopolitanism that celebrates both the variety of human cultures and the democratic values of the state within which one lives (1997). This provides the basis for a type of nationalism that, like Nussbaum’s, does not need to be at odds with cosmopolitanism. In the case of *Invictus*, the film envisions a national project (“One team, one country”) that is founded on the appreciation of one’s country not on the basis of a common national identity or culture but as the embodiment of certain

democratic principles, as a means to the attainment of moral ends based on the cosmopolitan principle of the equality of all human beings.

If *Invictus* is about the cosmopolitan moment understood as the reflexive transformation that comes from the encounter with the Other, *Promised Land* deals with a different type of cosmopolitan moment, in this case one related to Ulrich Beck's (2009) conceptualization of the "risk society", that is, a society haunted by different types of potential threats and dangers that transcend national borders and, as a result, demand a cross-border, cosmopolitan response. *Promised Land* was supposed to be Damon's first movie as a director but, due to a conflicting schedule, he asked his friend Gus Van Sant to direct it (Green 2012). The movie, made on an estimated budget of 15 million dollars, only grossed 8 million at the domestic box office. Criticism because of the participation of Image Nation Abu Dhabi was rampant and fracking lobby groups went after the film. Energy in Depth created the website RealPromisedLand.org, which showed "real stories" about people's positive experiences with fracking to counterattack the "fictional facts" shown in the film. The Marcellus Shale Coalition bought commercials to be aired before the screening of the film in Pennsylvania theaters.¹ These commercials invited viewers to visit an industry website, where natural gas drillers and their allies present their side of the story. Damon's involvement in the film was for some an indication that the star was prioritizing his political activism over his career as a film star and that he could be even thinking of extending his star brand into politics (Gittell 2012).

At the beginning of *Promised Land*, Steve Butler, Damon's character, is about to be promoted to an executive position at Global Crosspower Solutions, the nine-billion-dollar company he works for. As is usually the case with Damon's roles, he has been chosen for promotion because his performance at his job has excelled above that of those around him. Yet, in this case, being the best is equivocal not only because of what he does

(buying drilling rights for a controversial industrial practice like fracking) but also because of the way he does it. Even if the character is a true believer in the benefits the sale will bring to the farmers, he usually buys the rights below Global's price point, giving the owners less money than they could get. His banter with his partner Sue (Frances McDormand) about what they think is going to be an easy sale betrays their condescending attitude towards the farmers' predicament. In spite of these moral flaws, Damon's character is still spectators' main source of identification. Once again, the proverbial "boy-next-door" looks provide Butler with the appropriate degree of "ordinariness" and likeability that makes it easy for him to gain the confidence of the locals and close the deal. Writing for the *New Yorker*, Denby (2013) refers to the character of Steve as "one of Damon's best regular-guy performances." In fact, reviewers and film sites are starting to refer to Matt Damon as the new Tom Hanks, the star who, as McDonald (2013) argues, has been, up until now Hollywood's favourite representation of an ordinary man.² The comparison is an intriguing one, given the lack of ambiguity in Hanks' upright-citizen brand. The apparent integration of shaky moral fibre into the idea of ordinariness has far-reaching cultural dimensions that cannot be tackled here, yet it may be said that in Damon's star persona ordinariness is not what it used to be, having lost some of its traditional Hollywood uprightness.

With the exception of the opening scene, *Promised Land* is set in a rural area of Pennsylvania. Yet, the specificities of McKinley are the same as those of any other rural area in the U.S.A. When Steve is asked how he manages to buy the drilling rights so quickly his answer is the following: "I grew up in Eldridge, Iowa. [...] It might as well have been Rifle, Colorado; Dish, Texas or Lafayette, Louisiana." The lack of specificity of the location is also achieved by the formal techniques used to represent it. Aerial extreme long shots of the fields abound, which highlights the background over the

characters. Time-lapse photography is also used to portray the uneventfulness and the regular rhythm of rural life. This lack of specificity seems slightly at odds with the visual format chosen by Van Sant and Swedish cinematographer Linus Sandgren, who took their inspiration from large-format still photography to present the rural setting of the film with the richest detail possible (Heuring 2013). The combination brings about a certain degree of “everywhereness” but at the same time the film’s space is captured with vivid detail to lure the viewer into sympathy towards the preservation of the landscape and the environment that is part of the film’s agenda.

The “every town” where the action of *Promised Land* takes place is an impoverished town, one that has been decimated by globalization and industrial delocalization. Insignificant players in the game of globalization, its people now have to decide whether they should lease the land for the extraction of natural gas through fracking. As Beck (2009, p. 25) argues, what is specific about the risks generated by industrial and large-scale technologies is that they are the result of conscious decisions, “decisions which, first, are taken in the context of private and/or state organization for economic gain and to seize the corresponding opportunities and, second, are based on a calculation for which hazards represent the inevitable downside of progress.” For Beck (p. 25), modern risks are not the consequence of the failures of modernity but of its success: “They do not assail us like a fate; rather we create them ourselves, they are a product of human hands and minds, of the links between technical knowledge and economic utility calculus.” Since these manufactured risks are about “possible events that could but need not necessarily occur, they are marked by a high degree of unreality.” As a result, he claims, they can be “dramatized or minimized, transformed or simply denied according to the norms which decide what is known and what is not.” In this sense, Beck

(p. 30) considers that risks are socially constructed within a public discourse, which he refers to as “relations of definitions.”

The fact that a thorny issue such as fracking and the global risk society is articulated in the film through the star persona of Matt Damon is not without implications. In fact, the evolution of the character in the film becomes an embodiment of Beck’s concept of the “relations of definitions” of the risk society. His nonchalant attitude and denial of the uncertain consequences the practice may entail at the beginning give way to his awareness of the manufactured uncertainties of global risks and his individual and social responsibility in the issue. As he puts it in the second town hall meeting, “I don’t know what the answer is anymore [but] we are betting a lot more than we think. Everything we have [...] is on the table now. And it’s just not ours to lose.” Steve’s transformation is almost a literal rendition of what Beck refers to as the “cosmopolitan moment” of the risk society. Through an increased awareness of the dynamics of global risks, which as Beck consistently argued cannot be mastered by nations alone, we realize that we share the world with non-excludable others.

In the light of the cosmopolitan meanings that the Damon brand deploys both onscreen and offscreen, Steve’s transformation transcends the boundaries of the fictional town of McKinley and even rural America to extend these concerns to the world as a whole. The community to which Steve goes back at the end of the film is not the self-enclosed community of McKinley but that of the global risk society. By staying in McKinley, and leaving Global, Steve becomes, again like Diogenes the Cinic, a “citizen of the [global risk] world.” This duality of the local and the global in Steve/Damon’s development in the course of the film parallels the way in which the filmmakers combine the specificities of place and the representativeness of McKinley through visual

strategies, suggesting that the most productive way to promote a cosmopolitan attitude towards the threats of the global is by staying local, or by returning to one's roots.

Damon's role in *Elysium*, a film in which, as was mentioned above, he becomes the Kantian agent of a cosmopolitan civil society based on the construction of a social order based solely on the common humanity of all human beings, seems the logical development of the cosmopolitan disposition that started with his constant crossing of borders in the *Bourne* franchise, his openness to difference when encountering the racial Other in *Invictus* (a cosmopolitan transformation that is also at the center of two of the star's latest films, *The Great Wall* and *Downsizing*) and his cosmopolitan environmentalism in the global risk society of *Promised Land*. However, Damon's cinematic identification with this type of utopian cosmopolitan thinking is not without contradictions, existing, as it does, in conjunction with the star's deeply ingrained moral ambiguity. Jackie Stacey (2015) has argued that moral ambivalence is, in fact, a defining feature of cosmopolitanism, since cosmopolitan aspirations must always coexist with more ambivalent drives. As she puts it, cosmopolitanism is "necessarily something of an aspirational project, haunted by that which it seeks to overcome: prejudice, intolerance, aversion, hatred, antagonism and violence" (p. 163). In the case of Damon's films, the intrinsic ambivalence of cosmopolitanism is already part of the moral ambiguity of the cosmopolitan hero and, therefore, will play a crucial role in the process of identification between the star and spectators. This ambivalence extends to the star's non-filmic persona: his active embodiment of celebrity cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan solidarity and the doubts generated by stardom itself as a cultural and economic phenomenon founded on the structural inequalities of the global social system. When in Damon's hands, spectators can be sure that the cosmopolitan project will involve both moral challenges and risk-taking. And yet, the resourcefulness and intelligence of a hero that

never disappoints is proof that, regardless of the risks involved, cosmopolitanism is the way to go in order to face the challenges of our contemporary battered condition.

Conclusion

In the course of his career and in the process of consolidation of the Damon brand, the star appears to have shed the early versions of individual identity crisis in favour of more pressing and more global concerns. As a result, the Damon brand is now characterized by a combination of the intelligence, likeability and moral ambiguity of the actor's late-90s roles and the cosmopolitan aspirations that he acquired through his global mobility in the Bourne films. At the same time, in his portrayals of a cosmopolitan hero, he neatly embodies the essential ambivalence surrounding the theory and the grim realities of cosmopolitanism. Offscreen, Damon's militant self is inevitably linked to the ideological contradictions inherent in contemporary stars, whereas onscreen his recent heroes have highlighted his constitutive moral ambivalence as an essential feature of the cosmopolitan aspirations they have come to represent. If Jason Bourne represented the commercial consolidation of the Damon brand, this was also the first time in which his filmic and non-filmic embodiments could be read through a cosmopolitan lens and, as a corollary, also the first time in which the search for individual identity was found lacking in the context of globalized societies. Since then, cosmopolitan concerns have gradually taken over the star's branded identity, smoothly incorporating its previous incarnations. While still functioning as a conventional star brand, with its associated ingredients of strong individuality and market value, Damon may have become a cinematic exemplar of the global hero of the 21st century, a hero whose cosmopolitan aspirations and anxieties delineate a new form of subjectivity and of being in the world.

In the wake of the Harvey Weinstein scandal, it remains to be seen how the Damon brand is to be affected by his association with the producer of *Good Will Hunting*. Damon's name was almost immediately tainted by the scandal when, in October 2017, former *The New York Times* reporter Sharon Waxman mentioned him in an article in which she accused the newspaper of killing a piece that she was writing on sexual harassment allegations against Weinstein back in 2004 (Waxman 2017a). Headlines accusing Damon of knowing about Weinstein's misconduct and trying to stop the publication of the piece soon surfaced and both the star and the reporter herself publicly denied the accusations (Fleming 2017, Waxman 2017b). Two months later Damon's attempts to explain his views on sexual harassment in Hollywood and the #MeToo movement in a fifteen-minute-long interview on ABC News (Valiente and Williams 2017) sparked further controversy on the social media and even a petition was started on change.org to have the actor's cameo removed from the mostly female cast of Steven Soderbergh's *Ocean's 8*. In January 2018 the star apologized for his comments in the TV show *Today*. He said that he wished he "had listened a lot more before I weighed in on this" (in Hines 2018). Interestingly, the apology was carefully placed at the end of an interview in which the star and water.org co-founder Gary White promoted Stella Artois four-year-long partnership with the foundation and their new Super Bowl ad. After carefully highlighting that women are the main beneficiaries of their foundation since they are the ones who have to walk miles and scavenge for water for their families, *Today*'s host Kathie Lee Gifford asks Damon about his "being caught up in something that is very much in the vernacular conversation these days". At this moment, the star, who has often been accused of having too many opinions and not knowing how to keep his mouth shut, stages a "public demonstration of regret" (Cashmore 2014): "I should get in the back seat and close my mouth for a while." As with his cameo role in *Entourage*,

Damon the star has chosen his celebrity cosmopolitanism to offer a glimpse into his real self, with the hope that, at least in this case, his cosmopolitan deeds will speak louder than the mediatic turmoil that followed his words. And yet, at the same time, the catch phrase chosen for the Stella Artois campaign that Damon is promoting when trying to clean face against accusations of sexism, “Buy a Lady a Drink”, may not be completely free from the sexual discrimination that the #MeToo and the Time’s Up movements are trying to fight, thus bringing to the surface, once again, the myriad contradictions of the phenomenon of stardom itself and the moral ambivalence of (celebrity) cosmopolitanism.

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Notes

¹The Marcellus Shale Coalition is the drilling industry's top grade group in Pennsylvania. Its webpage (<http://marcelluscoalition.org/>) lists thirty-five energy companies as full members and more than one hundred as associate members.

²In a review of the film *We Bought a Zoo* (2011), released one year before *Promised Land*, David Denby (2012) argues: 'along with Tom Hanks, Damon is one of the most likeable actors in contemporary movies.' Three years later, in a review of *The Martian*, Jonathan Kim (2015) elaborates the comparison between the two male stars in further detail: 'Both actors can handle comedy and drama, have been in a nice mix of Oscar contenders and crowd pleasers, do funny stuff on late night shows, and both display an effortless, non-threatening, regular-guy appeal that makes them easy to relate to and root for.'