

Janna HalfDesiQueen

Dr. XXX

PLSC Class

19 November 2012

Avengers Assemble: How the American Film Industry Internationally Propagates a Realist Idea
of United States Military Superiority Through the Guise of Entertainment

Abstract: The war film has always been a staple of the American film industry, given that it can appeal to at least two, and sometimes three, of the major demographics: younger men, older men, and occasionally young women, depending on the subgenre of the film. American films are exported more widely than those of any other country, and are seen by citizens of first-world countries worldwide. Over the last thirty years, under the direction of the US Department of Defense, American war films have evolved from overtly selling the technological superiority of the military to a combination of that superiority and the moral preeminence of those who fight for America. The United States Department of Defense uses Hollywood as its personal international propaganda machine in exchange for advising and access to military equipment for filming, thus propagating the idea of American military superiority all over the world.

The American film industry is the largest of its kind in the world, and as such has always enjoyed a massive international export market. And while, unlike other countries, the government need not expressly authorize what films are and are not made, some genres, specifically those of the legal drama and the war film, still do enjoy a close advisory relationship with various branches of the US government. The government gladly utilizes this relationship, ensuring that those films that do deal with the American government – specifically the military – portray that military in the best and most powerful light, which impresses upon foreign film

audiences the exact (or exaggerated) power and scope of American military strength. This extensive use of propaganda is in line with the realist theory of international politics – that is, that states as primary actors seek power for security as well as the opportunity to build a hegemony for the sake of self-help and “peace through strength.” Hollywood oftentimes serves as a conduit for American military exceptionalism, and the broadcast of this view abroad aids the United States government in that the citizens of both our allies and our enemies remain acutely aware of our military power. The close relationship between the film industry and the military has tainted the US’s standing with the rest of the world, because it is now assumed by some that everything that Hollywood does is approved by the government, which led to international crisis with the circumstances surrounding the attack on the US consulate in Benghazi, Libya, on September 11th 2012 (Borger 2012).

The relationship between Hollywood and the United States military is a multifaceted and complex one. There are of course some secrets that the military doesn’t want made public, but if that secrecy can be maintained while still flexing the military’s muscles on the world stage, that opportunity must be exploited. Ever since 1948, the US Department of Defense has had a paid civilian position entitled “Hollywood Liaison,” a position currently held by Phillip Strub (Miller 2012). Strub’s tasks include but are not limited to pre-reading scripts that deal with the military, allowing for the loan of both active and retired equipment as props, and advising on the eventual worldwide marketing. The fact that Strub himself as well as his entire staff are employed by the executive branch of the United States government and paid with tax dollars speaks to the importance that the government places in the international community’s perception of the military (“Hollywood” 2012). Given that one of the major tenets of theoretical realism in international relations is the building of power (or at least the perception thereof) as a means of

detering any threats (Mearsheimer 2001), it is to the advantage of the United States for the rest of the world's citizens to believe sometimes fantastical tales of American military might. In fact, this goes a step further when one considers that first-world countries – with more developed militaries (Healy 2012) – are far more likely to have access to American films and thus feel the effects of the propaganda (Ursprung 1994).

There is of course a difference between propaganda and telling a good story. What makes the actions of Hollywood the former instead of the latter is the active exploitation of the film industry instead of passive allowance. The Pentagon (the Department of Defense headquarters in Arlington, Virginia) encourages Hollywood to write heroic and mythical stories about the military in exchange for billions of dollars' worth of funding, equipment, and advice ("Hollywood" 2012). It is a difference between benefiting and enabling, and here the Pentagon is enabling.

The film industry has a history of acting as a promoter of military propaganda, although the recent era did not begin with a pro-military bent. At the beginning of the Vietnam War, the Department of Defense commissioned a film entitled *Why Viet-nam*, which included many idyllic scenes of rice farming and family time among the people of South Vietnam, disrupted by the brutal attacks of the Viet Cong (Sklar 2002). But the attempt to persuade both Americans and allies abroad failed because of the overtness of the message – a very clear effort was made to tie the Viet Cong to Hitler, a totalitarian enemy that had already been defeated. However, an important difference between World War II and Vietnam lay in the size of the American military, which had in the twenty years between World War II and Vietnam ballooned in size and spending. It was hard to see the US as the defenders of the free people of Vietnam when their entry into the conflict was uninvited and out of proportion, and especially when they began

dropping Agent Orange on that same idyllic countryside. In fact, countryside shots very similar to the ones used in *Why Viet-nam* quickly appeared in (domestically distributed) American propaganda films criticizing our involvement in Vietnam.

To the credit of the Pentagon, they quickly realized what went wrong, and gave support and equipment to the first major war film produced after the US withdrawal from Vietnam, Francis Ford Coppola's masterpiece *Apocalypse Now*. Based on a novella by Joseph Conrad, *Apocalypse Now* explores the horrors of warfare, both on the group and the individual. Despite the fact that the military is not portrayed in the best of lights (commanding officers give Captain Willard an order to execute one of their most valuable and decorated colonels because they are no longer able to control him), the Pentagon still saw and seized an opportunity to show the scope and strength of the military – one of the first shots of the film is a jungle being completely destroyed by napalm (Coppola 1979). Because filming took place in the Philippines, President Francisco Marcos had agreed to lend Coppola some helicopters and other instruments of war for filming, but he wound up needing those instruments to suppress a rebellion, and the Pentagon was only too willing to step in. Even though the materials that the Department of Defense lent the production was left over from the Philippine War (Coppola 1979), it was still more sophisticated than most anything the rest of the world had seen, and the United States certainly would welcome the international reminder that our military is, despite the fiasco that Vietnam wound up being, the greatest in the world.

The next ten years saw two more films that were extremely glorifying to the US military: Tony Scott's *Top Gun* in 1986 and Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* in 1988. It is well-known that the Navy had recruiting tables set up outside theaters showing *Top Gun* ("Top Gun" 1990), which meant that the film not only broadcast the idea of US military might the world

over, but it also helped grow the size of the Navy. The Pentagon lent director Tony Scott aircraft from F-14 fighter squadron VF-51 Screaming Eagles; shots of the USS *Enterprise* were filmed on location; and the production was allowed to request that the pilots perform flybys for filming; all with the understanding that the Department of Defense would have the final say on the script (“Top Gun” 1990). The enemy team in the climactic dogfight scene is faceless and unnamed and its members seem to not be communicating with each other, but it is handily dealt with by cooperating, young, strong American men (Scott 1986). This presented a step forward in the idea that the military sought to convey through Hollywood: not only is our technology vastly superior to the rest of the world, but the actual members of our military – the men who do the fighting – are deeply committed to each other as well as to their country. And as any coach or commander can tell you, a unified team is a more formidable opponent than a well-equipped one.

This theme was expanded upon in *Saving Private Ryan*. Harve Presnell’s General George Marshall personally sees to it that the youngest of four sons from the same family serving in the United States Army is returned home after his three older brothers are killed in the line of duty, and sends a team of eight to go find him three days after the storming of the beach at Normandy (Spielberg 1988). Of course, the reminder of Normandy is a nice touch, in case the rest of the world forgot that the United States sees itself as the savior of World War II, and much is made of the various bits of military technology. But what is most relevant to *Saving Private Ryan* is the restoration of a young soldier to his family and his desire to be worthy of the sacrifice of the men who got him home. *Saving Private Ryan* hammers home the idea that American soldiers care about each other, and that is why the American military is exceptional.

After the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001, our enemies were not as clearly defined and could not be packaged into a stereotypical large power

such as the faceless one in *Top Gun*, and so the nature of war movies as such changed. The generic premise for the palatable (and PG-13) blockbuster war film that could be easily exported to the international market had to shift from earthly enemies to more powerful foes, simply because of the nature of the new United States military. Ever since the entry into Iraq, US military spending has bloated, and we now spend more on our military annually than most other first-world countries combined (Matthews 2012). Given such a size and scope combined with the fact that our current enemies are not a state but rather a coalition of terrorists, it is perhaps not surprising that Hollywood chooses to make film-America's chief military concerns not of this planet. In 2007, Michael Bay's action film *Transformers* was released, towards the beginning of the PG-13 military-versus-aliens genre. While Bay's best-known directorial trademark may simply be blowing things up, the fact remains that he got millions of dollars in government funding, support, and equipment because he managed to make a movie that showed off exactly how technologically superior the United States military was to that of the rest of the world, but he did it without offending any of the delicate international relations balances that exist here in the real world. *Transformers* made huge amounts of money, both at home and overseas, and the rest of the world was reminded of the power of the American military. Everyone was happy. *Battleship* followed a nearly identical pattern five years later (Berg 2012).

The trend continued through Paramount's efforts to make films of all the major characters' stories in Marvel Comics' *The Avengers* universe. The two of these that dealt most heavily with the military (or at least the military-industrial complex) were *Captain America: The First Avenger* and *Iron Man*. Robert Downey Jr.'s Tony Stark, in *Iron Man*, is a businessman and arms manufacturer who supplies to the US military and eventually uses his technology to build himself an indestructible superhero's suit (Favreau 2008). The indication here, then, is that

those who supply the military with their weapons have the capabilities to turn themselves into something more than human. In fact, serious consideration is given to providing such a suit to every soldier in the US Armed Forces, and while the idea is tabled because of cost, it is obviously not abandoned. Three years later, *Captain America* revisits World War II and suggests that Nazi Germany had a secret arsenal of nuclear-grade weapons made from a mysterious power source called the Tesseract (Johnston 2011), a very neat means of avoiding a debate about nuclear weaponry in the eventual *Avengers* film. But *Captain America* serves to remind the world at large that the United States was on the right side of World War II, and that there may have been even greater threats than Adolf Hitler that the world did not know about it because America neutralized it. Through the above list of movies, the Pentagon got to remind the citizens of the rest of the world – and through them, their governments – that the United States military is bigger and more powerful than any of them, and could easily take any and all attackers.

However, this bent towards propaganda works both ways – the Pentagon is unwilling and unlikely to provide support to a film that undermines the realist view of the US military. Phillip Strub, and through him the Department of Defense, pulled funding and support from the recent Marvel/Disney megablockbuster (Paramount sold Marvel to Disney for over four billion dollars in 2011), *The Avengers*. The grounds were not that the military was depicted negatively – no American soldiers commit war crimes, there is no deficiency in military power, and no member of the military “goes rogue” and defies command. The funding was pulled, instead, based on the implication that the military takes orders from an international authority, instead of the US government. The coalition of superheroes known as the Avengers are pulled together by Samuel L. Jackson’s Nick Fury, director of a shadowy governmental organization known as S.H.I.E.L.D (Strategic Hazard Intervention Espionage Logistics Directorate) (Whedon 2012). While the

organization of S.H.I.E.L.D is presented as almost identical to that of the CIA and nearly all its members appear to be Caucasian Americans who speak English with an American accent, it still made Strub uncomfortable because it was unclear to whom S.H.I.E.L.D answered. According to Strub, “We couldn’t reconcile the unreality of this international organization and our place in it. To whom did S.H.I.E.L.D. answer? Did we work for S.H.I.E.L.D.? We hit that road block and decided that we couldn’t do anything” (Miller 2012). Jackson’s Director Fury is seen three times conversing via video chat with an anonymous council, the members of which sit wreathed in shadow as they give Fury cautious directives that he disdains (Whedon 2012), and it is these directives that are the problem. The Pentagon here proved that they are unwilling to support the idea that someone else gives orders to any facet of the United States military. Furthermore, the military would find it doubly disturbing that this mysterious council has access to nuclear weaponry, such as the weapon that they deploy on New York City during the film’s climactic battle (Whedon 2012). The philosophy of the United States military is not overly inclined to approve of non-American powers having nuclear capabilities, if the current hostilities with Iran are any indication. And since we do not know if the council is a facet of the US government, the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or some other group entirely, we therefore do not know if Robert Downey, Jr.’s Iron Man is expressly defying orders that would further national security or if he is saving a civilian population from a hostile nuclear attack when he diverts the bomb. These concerns, however, were not enough to make the Pentagon pass up an opportunity for free propaganda, and authorized the use of digital images of an aircraft carrier (that transforms into a hovercraft that can turn invisible) as well as those of several small fighter jets and firearms (Miller 2012).

Not only does the United States government need the military to appear to the American people as the world's saviors, but they need the rest of the world to feel this way as well, so that the rest of the world will continue tolerating our military presence everywhere. The pervasiveness of American military exceptionalism in film may have gone too far, especially when one considers that many other governments – nearly all of the governments in the Middle East – have to expressly authorize what films do and do not get made. While the United States does not, the close relationship between Hollywood and the Pentagon might indicate differently for those who do not understand that it is possible to have an artistic culture without government approval. Syria, for instance, still insists that the US government had to approve *Innocence of Muslims*, the film that surfaced on YouTube and sparked the attacks on the US consulate in Benghazi that resulted in the deaths of four Americans, including ambassador to Libya Chris Stevens (Borger 2012). We have blurred the lines so much that we no longer can tell the difference between fiction, propaganda, and fact, and if we as US citizens don't know that about ourselves, how can we expect the rest of the world to think the best of us? The military has injected so much of itself into Hollywood that, not only is it sometimes difficult to tell where one ends and the other begins but the rest of the world may soon become afraid to do any kind of business with us, because we might pull out our aircraft carrier-turned-hovercraft and have our iron-encased supersoldiers invade their countries. We have crossed the line from realist self-interest and self-protection to terrorizing the rest of the world with our propaganda machine – and what is worse is that we did it on purpose.

Through the Pentagon's close relationship with Hollywood, the military has handed over control of the perceptions of the rest of the world's population to the entertainment industry. It is up to the film industry how much of the world sees the US military, and this degree of influence

over worldwide public opinion renders the military far too powerful and will overstretch the reasonable degree of perceived power that is warranted in the realist school of thought. Yes, the film industry helps the military seem powerful, which is desirable in the realist school, but the idea is that the perceived strength of the state is a deterrent to any and all attackers. The fantastical images of military power portrayed in such films as *The Avengers* and the relationships that the Pentagon keeps with Hollywood have the potential to blur the line between fact and fiction, casting doubt on those images of which the government does not approve. The situation surrounding *Innocence of Muslims* proves this: in most if not all Middle Eastern countries, the government has to specifically approve of any and all films being made, and the United States' claims that this is not the case in this country are cast into doubt by the aid they give to war productions. When the government claims to give some support to some films but not all support to all films, that does not make much sense in any country in which the primary experience is absolute governmental control over the entertainment industry. If the material about the military is perceived as directly threatening by the US's potential enemies, they will be prompted to attack, an idea in conflict with the realist theory but observable in situations such as Benghazi (granted, the attack on the Benghazi consulate was a planned act of terror, but used the film as a trigger to sway public approval) (CNN Wire Staff 2012). From this we can deduce that the realist desire to inspire fear in the rest of the world through the fantastical use of propaganda will ultimately be to our detriment, if it has not been already, in that the type of fearmongering in which we engage encourages our attackers.

Works Cited

- Bay, Michael, dir. 2007. *Transformers*. Prod. Ian Bryce, Tom DeSanto, Lorenzo di Bonaventura, and Don Murphy. DreamWorks. DVD-ROM.
- Berg, Peter, dir. 2012. *Battleship*. Prod. Peter Berg, Brian Goldner, Duncan Henderson, Bennet Schneir, and Scott Stuber. Universal Pictures. DVD.
- Borger, Julian. 2012. "How anti-Islamic movie sparked lethal assault on US consulate in Libya." *The Guardian*. September.
- CNN Wire Staff. 2012. "Ex-CIA Chief Petraeus testifies Benghazi attack was al Qaeda-linked terrorism." *CNNPolitics*. November.
- Coppola, Francis Ford, prod. 1979. *Apocalypse Now*. Writ. John Milius and Francis Ford Coppola. United Artists. Disc 2 bonus features. DVD-ROM
- Favreau, John, dir. 2008. *Iron Man*. Prod. Avi Arad and Kevin Feige. Paramount Pictures. DVD-ROM.
- Healy, Jon. 2012. "The U.S. defense budget: It's even bigger than Obama suggested." *The Los Angeles Times*. October.
- "Hollywood and the war machine ." 2012. *Al Jazeera*. August.
- Johnston, Joe, dir. 2011. *Captain America: The First Avenger*. Prod. Kevin Feige. Paramount Pictures. DVD-ROM
- Matthews, Dylan. 2012 "Defense spending in the U.S., in four charts ." *The Washington Post*. August.
- Mearsheimer, John J. 2001. "The Tragedy of Great Power Politics." In *Readings on How the World Works*, ed. Russel Bova. New York: Longman.

Miller, Julie. 2012. "Why the Pentagon Stopped Cooperating with The Avengers." *Vanity Fair*.
May.

Scott, Tony, dir. 1986. *Top Gun*. Prod. Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer. Paramount
Pictures. DVD-ROM.

Sklar, Robert. 2002. *Film: An International History of the Medium*. New York: Prentice-Hall,
Inc.

Spielberg, Steven, dir. 1998. *Saving Private Ryan*. Prod. Ian Bryce, Mark Gordon, Gary
Levinsohn, and Steven Spielberg. Writ. Robert Rodat. DreamWorks. DVD-ROM.

"Top Gun." *The International Movie Database*. Ed. Col Needham. Amazon.com, 1990. Web. 11
Nov. 2012.

Ursprung, Tobias. 1994. "The Use and Effect of Political Propaganda in Democracies." *Public
Choice* 78 ;259-82.

Whedon, Joss, dir. 2012. *The Avengers*. Writ. Joss Whedon. Prod. Kevin Feige. Walt Disney
Pictures. DVD-ROM.