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Hollywood's Service to Empire

More Than Entertainment

by PAUL STREET

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The United States corporate media's function of transmitting ideology and propaganda in service to those atop the nation's reigning and interrelated structures of Empire and inequality is hardly limited to the news. Equally if not more significant for that task are "entertainment" media, including – of special interest on the eve of the 2015 Academy Awards – the US movie industry. Far from restricting their hearts-and minds-influencing powers to the (Aldous) "Huxlean" mass diversion, distraction, and infantilization, US movies (like US television sit-coms and dramas and video games) are loaded with richly "Orwellian" political and ideological content.

US citizens are being more than merely entertained when they sit before the nation's 40,000 commercial movie screens. They are also propagandized by a film industry whose owners and executives are deeply biased on behalf of the aforementioned hierarchies.

Many Americans would find it strange to think of their local Cineplex as propaganda sites. But more than six and a half decade ago, the notion of US movies as tools of propaganda was hardly debatable for right-wing McCarthyites determined to eliminate leftists from Hollywood. As US Court of Appeals Justice Bennett C. Clark explained in upholding the conviction of ten Hollywood screenwriters and directors who refused to "confess" current or past Communist Party membership in 1949, US motion pictures play "a critically important role" as "a potent

medium of propaganda dissemination” (quoted in Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* [Boston, 1998], 328).

***Zero Dark Thirty*: “Pure Storytelling”?**

Indeed they do. Look, for example, at *Zero Dark Thirty*, a 2012 “action thriller” and war film that dramatized the United States’ search for Osama bin-Laden after the September 11, 2001 jetliner attacks. Directed by the Academy Award-winning director Kathryn Bigelow, the movie received critical acclaim and was a box office-smash. It was also a masterpiece of pro-military, pro-CIA propaganda, skillfully portraying US torture practices “as,” in Glenn Greenwald’s words, “a dirty, ugly business that is necessary to protect America.” By “excising the moral debate that raged over the interrogation program during the Bush years,” *The New Yorker*’s Jane Mayer rightly noted, “the film ...accept[ed] almost without question that the CIA’s ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’ played a key role in enabling the agency to identify the courier who unwittingly led them to bin Laden.” Under the guise of a neutral, documentary-like examination, *Zero Dark Thirty* marked a distressing new frontier in US military-embedded filmmaking whereby the movie makers receive unprecedented technical and logistical support from the Pentagon in return for producing elaborate public relations on the military’s behalf.

The film’s defenders and Bigelow herself argued that the film was neither pro- nor anti-torture: “Pure storytelling,” film supporter Mark Bowden wrote, “is not always about making an argument, no matter how worthy. It can be simply about telling the truth.” In reality, however, *Zero Dark Thirty*’s outward impartiality over the sickeningly cruel and unusual punishments inflicted by CIA torturers amounted to a normalization and endorsement of torture that was all the more insidiously potent precisely because of its understated, detached, and “objective” veneer.

***American Sniper*: “Makes Me Wanna Go Shoot Some Fucking Arabs”**

The 2014-2015 blockbuster *American Sniper*, directed by the Republican Clint Eastwood, is another good example of Hollywood’s “critical role” as “a potent medium of [US imperial and military] propaganda dissemination.” The film’s audiences are supposed to marvel at the supposedly noble feats, sacrifice, and heroism of Chris Kyle, a rugged, militantly patriotic, and Christian-fundamentalist Navy SEALs sniper who participated in the US invasion of Iraq in order to fight “evil” and to avenge the al Qaeda jetliner attacks of September 11, 2001. Kyle killed 160 Iraqis over four tours of “duty” in “Operational Iraqi Freedom.” So what if the invasion was one of the most egregiously criminal, brazenly imperial and mass-murderous (evil anyone?) acts in the long and bloody history of Empire? And so what if Iraq had nothing to with 9/11 and al Qaeda?

Like *Zero Dark Thirty*’s apologists, *American Sniper*’s defenders claim that the film takes a neutral perspective of pure and true storytelling, neither for nor against the US occupation of Iraq. Eastwood has even claimed that the movie reflects his opposition to the war. In reality, however, the movie is so rife with reactionary, racist, and imperial distortions and deletions as to function for all intents and purposes as flat out war propaganda.

Despite its director's purported opposition to the war, *American Sniper* fails it to tell us why Kyle falsely believed that Iraq was connected to the 9/11 attacks. Doing so would mean confronting one of Washington's numerous deceptive pretexts for the criminal war.

American Sniper uncritically portrays Kyle referring to Iraqi occupation resisters as "savages," a racist term used by white US settlers to justify their genocidal destruction of the North American indigenous population during the 19th century.

It portrays Iraqis who resisted the monumentally criminal and imperial US invasion as fundamentally evil, consistent with Kyle's skewed Christian-fundamentalist perception of them before he was deployed.

The movie suggests that any and all Iraqis who took up arms against the American occupiers did so for no other reason than that they were bloodthirsty killers – as if the "insurgents" had no legitimate reasons to resist the imperial takeover of a once proud and independent nation and region by American invaders.

American Sniper portrays al Qaeda in Iraq with no reference to the fact that the terrorist organization followed the US into the country, lacking a presence in Mesopotamia until the devastating US assault occurred.

It portrays the Iraqi city of Fallujah (where Kyle was sent in 2004) as a mysteriously devastated community, with no reference to Fallujah's massive prior bombardment by the US.

It falsely suggests that US troops in Iraq would have been subject to arrest and incarceration as war criminals by the US military if they had mistakenly killed Iraqi civilians (nothing would be further from the truth).

It presents the main torturers and killers of Iraqi civilians as the "evil" occupation resisters – and Kyle and other US troops as those civilians' protectors. The opposite was much closer to the truth during a deadly US invasion that killed more than a million Iraqis.

American Sniper also portrays a US soldier as having becoming unforgivably weak and as therefore causing and deserving his own death because he came to question the invasion.

In the face of all this and more, Eastwood's claim to have made an antiwar movie is laughable. It's hard not to agree with Rania Khalek's judgment that "*American Sniper* is dangerous propaganda that sanitizes a mass killer & rewrites the Iraq War." Clint "Dirty Harry" Eastwood's latest film whitewashes the arch-criminal US occupation and lionizes a racist, Christian-fundamentalist mass murderer of unjustly invaded Muslims. It sends a very dark and ugly message.

After seeing *American Sniper*, I found it unsurprising to learn that a large number of Americans were influenced by the film to post comments like these on Twitter:

"Great fucking movie and now I really want to kill some fucking ragheads."

“American sniper makes me wanna go shoot some fuckin Arabs.”

“Just watched american sniper and I feel like killing every sand nigger on the fucking planet.”

“American sniper got me pumped up to kill sand people.”

“American Sniper was so good. Makes me wanna join the Seals and take some towelheads out.”

“Damn props for the director of American Sniper making me wanna snipe some towel heads/sand niggers.”

“American sniper made me appreciate soldiers 100x more and hate Muslims 1000000x more.”

“American Sniper best movie EVER hands down. Really captures just how insane Muslims in Iraq and Syria are.”

“Nice to see a movie where the Arabs are portrayed for who they really are – vermin scum intent on destroying us.”

“American Sniper the movie is about one of our HERO warriors but it also exposes the sick culture of Muslims and there way of living.”

Clint Eastwood might want to review these and numerous other similar Tweets and Facebook posts and Instagram messages before he makes his next “antiwar” movie.

It will not bode well for the Hollywood elite’s commitment to keeping such terrible, incipiently fascist sentiments at bay if *American Sniper* does well during this weekend’s Academy Awards, where the movie is nominated for “Best Film.”

Perfect Timing for Renewed War and Denial

The movie is perfectly timed for Hollywood darling Barack Obama’s recent request for the Congress to grant him essentially unlimited, blank-check power to use military force to wage an expanded US war against the Islamic State (ISIS or ISIL) and its “associated persons or forces” – all understood to be fundamentally “evil” and “beyond civilization” (like Eastwood’s Iraqi insurgents) in the eyes of the president and the US government.

American Sniper is also nicely situated in relation to Obama’s address to a recent Washington “Summit on Countering Violent Extremism.” In his vapid reflections on how and why millions of Muslim youth have been drawn to al Qaeda, ISIS and other fundamentalist organs of Islamist jihad, the president avoided what is by far and away the single leading recruitment factor: repeated devastating, mass-murderous and petro-imperial US incursions, interference, and invasions in the oil-rich Middle East, resulting in the death and displacement of millions of Arabs and Muslims. The deletion is hardly surprising given the fact that Obama “has launched 2,300 airstrikes in Iraq and Syria since August 8, 2014. In his six years as president,” Marjorie Cohn notes, “he has killed more people than died on 9/11 with drones and other forms of

targeted killing in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia – countries with which the United States is not at war.” Now the president is ramping up an expanded US war, certain to involve considerable ground forces, in the Middle East, seeking an open-ended Congressional Authorization for the Use of Military Force – certain to be granted with some small modifications – for re-escalation of the endless imperial wars that drive “violent extremism” in the Middle East in the first place.

From the perspective of the White House and others in the vast bipartisan Washington War Lobby, movies like *Zero Dark Thirty* and *American Sniper* provide richly welcome propagandistic cover. Here’s guessing that Obama and his aides will be rooting for Republican Clint Eastwood’s dangerous propaganda film to out-perform *Selma* – a liberal film on Martin Luther King Jr, and the Civil Rights Movement’s struggle to win voting rights for Blacks in the US South during the middle 1960s – at the Academy Awards. So what if Obama owes his political career to the heroic activism of King and other Civil Rights activists fifty years ago? The great Civil Rights leader (whose bust sits in shame behind the desk of the corporatist and militarist Obama in the Oval Office) became an open opponent of the US military Empire not long after his voting Rights victory in 1965, a legacy that the imperial Obama can no more embrace than he can acknowledge King’s democratic socialism. Were he alive today, he would surely not approve of Obama’s endless war on the Muslim world. For that and other reasons, the President is much closer in essence to the likes of Clint Eastwood and countless other predominantly white agents (witting and unwitting) of US military empire.