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Lights! Camera! Kill! Hollywood, the Pentagon and Imperial Ambitions.



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

There's a sickness that comes with the certainty of those who view the world in so black and white, so good and bad, so us versus them terms, that killing is often a morally defensible act. More so, such killing often goes beyond just simple self defense, to a level of retributive necessity, a preventive act that makes the act of killing practically an act of altruism. "If I hadn't killed the bad guy, the bad guy would have killed other people" so

the reasoning goes. The myth of redemptive violence, is clearly espoused and expressed in our explanations of American history: we had to kill the British to be free; in America's majority Christian religion: Jesus had to die in the most painful way possible, on the cross, for mankind to be saved; and in the United State's greatest popular culture: Luke had to destroy the Death Star to save the galaxy...

Such redemptive violence fails to exist in the real world, and in the individual life experiences of those involved, on both sides of the killing. Even now readers will say "what about Hitler?" It seems silly to have to remind Americans that Hitler did not spring from a historical vacuum, that history and Adolf Hitler did not start in 1933, but that rather Hitler, the Nazis and the Second World War, were a consequence and continuation of the violence and the killing of the First World War and that is the lesson of both wars.* However, Hitler and the Second World War, in the years and decades after its end, and the deaths of over 50 million people, became the casus belli for massive armaments, tens of thousands of world-ending nuclear weapons, proxy wars, and bombings, invasions and occupations that killed, wounded, poisoned, psychologically scarred, and left homeless tens and tens of millions of people world-wide. With each successive threat, perceived or real, the United States government imagined, concocted, and faced, the imagery of Hitler, Nazis and a morally simplistic, but well accepted description of an enemy that personified Evil, and allowed Americans to be defined as Good, was presented to the American public as a justification for war, neo-colonialism, obscene weapons budgets, economic inequality, and the many other trappings of Empire.

This straight forward, binary explanation for why the United States funds and wages war at levels beyond all others on the planet appeals to our basest tribal instincts and satisfies our emotional need to have a resident purpose: someone of whom to be afraid, someone to protect against, and someone whom to seek out and carry our revenge. Not only does this forced mass understanding of the world as Us vs the Other work well for the Pentagon's funding, recruiting and its wars, but it is a mainstay of Hollywood and the US entertainment industry. This cheap and easy story telling, which of course can be found in tales going back to cave paintings of primitive man vs beast, allows the audience to identify with the violent, yet well-intentioned, protagonist and lets them see the hero in themselves as the actors vanquish evil, restore order and justice, and make the future safe. As the audience leaves the theater they know that is how they would act if faced with the same existential and moral threat as the characters in the movie.

Such Pentagon and Hollywood storytelling, again focusing on the myth of redemptive violence, begins as soon as children watch cartoons, which often use excessive violence to achieve order and justice, or are taken to their first military air show or 4th of July parade. This exploitation by the Pentagon and Hollywood of children, teenagers and the adult public leads us to a militarized society where we spend over a trillion dollars a year on war, while we currently kill people in more than a dozen separate countries. To the individual American though, particularly for many that enlist, this is often a simple exercise of right versus wrong, worldly responsibility versus neglectful appeasement, and Good versus Evil, ie. the underpinnings of American Exceptionalism.

If such morally superior beliefs by the average hyper-militarized American were grounded in factual or historical experience, were exposed to critical thought, logic or examination, or were tested by actual exposure or contact with people of other cultures and lands, such due diligence would cause the foundations of US Manichean existence to rot, crumple and collapse. This moral dissonance may certainly be the root cause of why 20 veterans a day are killing themselves and why America's youngest male veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan are killing themselves at a rate 6 times higher than other young men their age.

Guilt, produced by the actions or inactions of the soldier in combat, may be worsened by the heightened sense of moral action and position so many Americans take into combat with them. When the reality of the wars, particularly the lies of the wars, the perfidiousness of their leaders, and the moral ambiguity of their own individual purpose and actions become a part of their conscious self, such guilt can cause a collapse of the self many veterans cannot survive. The importance of guilt, exacerbated by the destruction of a previously held moral self-believe system, as the primary driver in combat veteran suicides has been well known now for decades, with the VA reporting in 1990 the best predictor of veteran suicide was combat related guilt and, more recently, the National Center for Veterans Studies at the University of Utah in 2015 assessing that 22 of 23 studies that examined the relationship between guilt, combat, suicide and the act of killing found a solid and undeniable relationship.

But, even as this moral certainty in war devastates the individual when it comes undone, it dovetails nicely in two of the United States greatest industries and exports: war and Hollywood.

Right away, at the movie industry's founding, the US military was heavily involved in the business of Hollywood and in ensuring Americans had an understanding of American history and society, and the world, as befitted the American military and government. Most notably, in those early days, soldiers from West Point were involved with the production of D.W. Griffith's infamous 1915 racist glorification of the rise of the Ku Klux Klan after the Civil War, The Birth of a Nation; a film whose historical re-telling of the moral clash of good and bad, in literal black and white terms, still reverberates today. Hollywood soon got to prove its loyalty and utility to contemporary war making. During the First World War, a youthful, but earnest Hollywood pledged its support to the propaganda and recruiting efforts of the war as the Motion Picture News announced: "[E]very individual at work in this industry" has promised to provide "slides, film leaders and trailers, posters...to spread that propaganda so necessary to the immediate mobilization [sic] of the country's great resources."

After the war, cooperation between Hollywood and the military deepened, culminating in 1927 in a soon to become standard Pentagon and Hollywood transactional relationship. Hundreds of US military pilots, planes, and over 3,000 infantry men were provided to make the World War I film, Wings. Wings was a massive success and became the first recipient of the Best Picture Award at the inaugural Academy Awards in 1927. Cooperation between Hollywood and the US government continued into World War II, with President Franklin Roosevelt calling the movie industry a "necessary and beneficial part of the war effort." Some of this cooperation between Hollywood and the US government in "the good war" is just now being understood, as Greg Mitchell explained to Amy Goodman on Democracy Now on the recent 75th Anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing.

More than 90 years later, and as documented by Matthew Alford and Thomas Secker in their book, National Security Cinema, the Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency have actively taken an editorial, production and creative role in thousands of movies and TV shows; Alford and Secker list the Pentagon alone having played a role in 813 movies and 1,133 TV shows (as of 2016). Many times the role played by the military went well beyond simply providing the tanks or helicopters needed to add to the realism of the film, as the Pentagon and the CIA have, through established contracts with the movie studios, final say over the script, including rewriting lines of dialogue, deleting scenes not in line with the military or CIA's narrative or adding in

scenes helpful to the image, politics and recruitment drives of the United States generals and spies.

This relationship, one of “mutual exploitation” as the Department of Defense’s chief liaison with Hollywood, Phil Strub, describes it, allows unelected American military and intelligence leaders to not just censor current films, but future films, causing studios, financiers, producers, directors and writers, i.e. a large percentage of Hollywood, to endeavor to keep the military and CIA happy in order to make sure the studios get the support they need from Uncle Sam when it is time to film the next block-buster, super-hero, action-adventure or war movie. Not only does the Pentagon provide the equipment, but also by using real-life soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines in the movie or TV show, Hollywood saves millions of dollars on unionized labor. These savings are enormous, and are not to be dismissed, especially when the high cost of computer generated images (CGI) are understood. Take, for example, the 2013 Tom Hanks drama Captain Phillips: by utilizing all the Pentagon had to offer in terms of ships, aircraft and sailors, in lieu of CGI and union labor, the producers of Captain Phillips may have saved as much as \$50 million by using US military support. There is also no dismissing either the importance to the studio of using actual military equipment when it comes to the authenticity and realism of the movie scenes and action – audiences can tell the difference.

The results of such a morally-redacted transactional relationship between Hollywood and the military allow for the Pentagon to profit just as much as the studios’ bank accounts. The need to control the narrative over not just war making, but over American society and military culture, is all important to the generals and admirals. So, in exchange for the equipment and service members it provides to Hollywood, the Pentagon doesn’t just influence movie and TV storylines, it controls them. References to issues such as military suicide and rape are kept out of the movies, even though they are epidemic and endemic within the Armed Services. Movies based on classic, important and prescient novels like 1984 or The Quiet American have their endings, in their film adaptations, luridly changed in order to meet US government thematic and propaganda efforts. These propaganda efforts are directed towards the American public more than anyone else, and, along with government run media are now legal: Thanks Obama!

If studios want to make a film or TV show critical of the US military or CIA, and the Pentagon and Langley are the ones that determine if a film or show is critical, than the studios must remember that access for future films, typically their biggest box office hits,

to the US government's largesse may be jeopardized. David Sirota clearly demonstrated this in 2011 when he repeated these two quotes in a Washington Post op-ed:

"Strub described the approval process to Variety in 1994: "The main criteria we use is. . .how could the proposed production benefit the military. . .could it help in recruiting [and] is it in sync with present policy?" Robert Anderson, the Navy's Hollywood point person, put it even more clearly to PBS in 2006: "If you want full cooperation from the Navy, we have a considerable amount of power, because it's our ships, it's our cooperation, and until the script is in a form that we can approve, then the production doesn't go forward."

It's worth noting that not only do Hollywood producers get access to the equipment and the money saving personnel, but they also may receive access to those at the top of the military and CIA with the secrets and the behind the scenes tales that lead to the blockbuster tales of patriotic and morally-simple heroism that audiences love.

It thus makes sense then that an award winning producer like Kathryn Bigelow would make the following, absurdly obsequious, statement prior to producing Zero Dark Thirty, her film on the killing of Osama bin Laden:

"Our upcoming film project...integrates the collective efforts of three administrations, including those of Presidents Clinton, Bush and Obama, as well as the cooperative strategies and implementation by the Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency. Indeed, the dangerous work of finding the world's most wanted man was carried out by individuals in the military and intelligence communities who put their lives at risk for the greater good without regard for political affiliation. This was an American triumph, both heroic and nonpartisan, and there is no basis to suggest that our film will represent this enormous victory otherwise."

It doesn't take too much to understand then how Bigelow, and her production partner Mark Boal, received top secret classified briefings from the CIA and how Zero Dark Thirty then went on to parrot, quite falsely, the use of torture as a tool that successfully led to locating bin Laden after a decade of failure. Such a false narrative on torture, albeit one cloaked under the near-holy robe of moral necessity in the never ending Manichean Global War on Terror, is a necessary and just lie for the leaders of the CIA as they seek not only to excuse past crimes, but exonerate current ones. Seemingly a plurality, if not a majority, of Americans understand their history and the context of world events via entertainment media, helped along now by social media. This is a public relations success

most governments, religions and institutions could never imagine, let alone realize. Surely other nations and entities have utilized theater for propaganda purposes, take for example the spectacle of the Roman Triumph. However, I am hard pressed to identify any other media industries and nations that have so equally benefitted one another while so wounding the values and knowledge of their respective populations.

The films those who are selling war as a product gladly and willingly sponsor, like the The Transformers, Avengers, and X-Men franchises, are comic book tales of good versus evil, movies that explain the urgent necessity in utilizing brutal violence against “the enemy”. The reality of violence, the consequences of never-ending revenge cycles, or the psychological and psychiatric of impact of killing are rarely shown or discussed, because that would be counter to the purpose. As Sirota noted in 2011, and a statistic the Pentagon was probably well aware of before then, young men who were shown recruiting ads for the army in connection with super-hero films were 25% more likely to enlist. It is well understood as well how the Pentagon is using video games to recruit; cheers to Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and others who recently tried to provide some oversight to the military’s use of advertising in video games. Like a special feature produced by the Army that tied into the 2016 film Independence Day, the Pentagon’s use of advertising in interactive video games allows military recruiters to capture the details and information of children as young as 12 years old.

It is easy to note that the films the military doesn’t like and won’t cooperate with are those that, to combat veterans like myself and others, seem to tell the truths of war. Movies like Catch-22, M.A.S.H., Platoon, Apocalypse Now, The Thin Red Line, Three Kings and The Deer Hunter are some of the films that were denied support from the Pentagon because they don’t positively exhibit “the military ethos”. However, these films are perhaps the best war films Hollywood has produced. What they do, and this is anathema to Mr. Strub and the generals at the Pentagon, is to exhibit the horror, the absurdity and the moral indifference of war and killing, and, at times, aghast, they even show the humanity of the enemy.

These are the things so many combat veterans know very well in their lives post-war and post-killing. The Deer Hunter’s wedding scene, where a youthful Robert DeNiro, Christopher Walken and John Savage attempt to celebrate a Green Beret who is silently and agonizingly drinking away the Vietnam War by himself, is, to me, perhaps the best film summarization of war. Persistently asked by the gung-ho young men who can’t wait to go to war and kill for themselves what the war is like, the Green Beret will only reply

with the words “Fuck it”. As the young men’s dismay, incomprehension and anger grow to this blasphemy against the goodness and purpose of American war, the Green Beret medicates, numbs, and punishes himself with alcohol. Such a scene is not the kind of scene that provides the moral assuredness and certainty of US war and killing our generals want the American people to buy and consume, but it is the sentiment and action that combat veterans will tell you is truthful.

Moral certainty is not connected to truth however, perhaps they are antagonistic to one another. Moral certainty is connected though to the waging of war and killing, and the waging of war and killing is connected to media and entertainment profits. Hollywood and the Pentagon are not only symbiotic, they are the composite products of a US Empire that survives through the continual application of warfare, both against foreign populations and its own people (the utility of police and crime movies/TV shows is integral to promoting and sustaining the American public’s support for a massive, pervasive and ultra-violent police, surveillance and incarceration state).

Without Hollywood to inform and educate young people and their families to the dangers and horrors of the world, the military would be hard pressed to fill its ranks, meanwhile without the support of a military larger than the rest of the world’s militaries combined, Hollywood would not just find it difficult to produce its films and shows profitably, it may even struggle to sell tickets, streaming subscriptions and commercials. The two Leviathans don’t only support one another, they reinforce the existence of one another, as the power, justice and necessity of redemptive violence underlies the basic narratives of the US military’s purpose and Hollywood’s story-telling. That this comes at a profane and bloody price totaling in countless millions of souls is of no consequence to the men and women for whom the war-making narratives support, sustain and nurture an Empire and an industry that total in the trillions of dollars annually. Killing is not just good business, it is good theater.

The Pentagon and CIA, by subsidizing those in Hollywood that go along with it and punishing those that don’t, create and sustain the reality of a dangerous and hostile world, one in which violence is necessary to be a force for good, to protect and uphold the civilized world. Hollywood, eager for the hundreds of millions of dollars, if not billion of dollars, in subsidies annually, material and labor support from the US government, and keen to keep alive good versus evil storytelling, is a happy partner to the Pentagon, the CIA and the US government.

Not even a pandemic that has killed more Americans than every war in the last 75 years combined begets the moral authority possessed by American Empire and its myth of redemptive violence. There is incredible argumentation and divisiveness, even some apathy, in Congress about how to protect the American people from a real threat such as coronavirus, and almost no support for any real measures to protect Americans from the very real existential threats of climate change or nuclear warfare, let alone the continuing consequences of economic inequality. However, there is mass consensus in Congress, including a majority of Democrats, who annually, with certainty, vote for increased US war spending and the continuation of the US' unending wars against black and brown people in the Muslim world.

No dictator or monarch, regime or republic has ever had the means to condition, if not brainwash, its public into complicity and to ensure the compliance of its political system in support of its naked imperial ambitions, against imagined enemies, in the manner in which the US Empire benefits from Hollywood. Of course, this is only just one element within a capitalist and imperialist structure in which various near-monopolies cooperate to benefit one another at the expense of people and planet, but this is the relationship that reaches into our homes, teaches our children, and ministers, so very effectively, the belief and cause of American Exceptionalism in its many bloody forms.

*For reasons of space I will just mention WWI, although the origins of and reasons for both world wars far predate the 20th century.

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