HOLLYWOOD AND THE PENTAGON: U.S. MILITARY FUNDING

OF POPULAR CINEMA IN THE POST-9/11 ERA

by

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The United States Department of Defense has had a significant hand in the production of some of the most popular films of the 21st century. Hence, the images of war that we see on the silver screen are often filtered through the military itself. This thesis explores how these films convince audiences to support the actions of the U.S. military. In order to address this issue, I employ a tripartite strategy: first, I explore the history of the Pentagon's involvement in the production of film, from its initial implementation in World War II, to the aftermath of 9/11. I engage with several theoretical approaches from the discipline of media and cultural studies about propaganda and the relationship between cinema and war. Finally, I analyze two recent Pentagon-funded films using these theories: *Captain Marvel* (2019) and *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022). Ultimately, I argue that both films utilize the strategy of emphasizing spectacle over narrativization, and hegemonic constructions of gender, to convince audiences of their laudatory depictions of the military. I conclude by examining possible paths to dismantling these funding structures.

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Introduction

When examining a list of the top ten highest grossing films of the 21st century, one may be surprised to find that most of the titles are produced in some capacity in collaboration with the United States military.[1] [2] In order for these films to access Department of Defense funding and utilize military facilities, their scripts are first be approved by the Pentagon itself. If the script is not found to portray the military in a complimentary light, it is either denied funding, or rewritten to better suit the needs of the military. The effect of this is a media landscape deeply entrenched in pro-military messaging, with little capability for filmmakers to access appropriate resources to convey dissent. What is especially insidious about this model is that it often results in military propaganda being inserted into both related and unrelated properties, so that productions of several different varieties—war films or otherwise-- have more pecuniary resources to draw from. Audience approval of military action is being cultivated in several different facets of the box office, from the overt messaging in films about war, to lighthearted superhero ventures. Filmgoing audiences everywhere are being subjected to what amounts to little more than theatrical recruitment advertisements.

This relationship between Hollywood and the Pentagon has existed for decades, although not always in the same arrangement as it now stands. The passage of time has brought on different iterations of the American military, different causes, different approaches to war, as well as ever-changing cinematic technologies and trends. Hence, the state-sponsored war film has taken on different forms, each uniquely suited and inextricably bound to its individual time and place. The War on Terror is no exception, and although we stand two decades out from the

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[1] "Top Lifetime Grosses." *Box Office Mojo*, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/chart/ww_top_lifetime_gross/.
[2] Secker, Tom. "Updated 'Complete' List of DoD Films," n.d. https://www.spyculture.com/updated-complete-list-of-dod-films/.

initial 9/11 terrorist attacks, this era has had immense influence on the films sponsored by the Pentagon.

In this thesis, I conduct two case studies on recent films produced in collaboration with the Department of Defense: *Captain Marvel* (2019) and *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022). I argue that these films exemplify a type of military film that has become increasingly ubiquitous in the 21st century: the pro-war blockbuster. I chose these films both for their recency, as well as their box-office success. These are huge films. Despite the tenuous position of the movie theater in contemporary society, these are the films that people are willing to make the journey to the cineplex to see. Their mass appeal and ability to generate billions of dollars of profit is what makes them worth analyzing as cultural objects. Because these films are so widely seen, the messages that they are sending to the general public are particularly important. Sometimes, these messages are textual, but sometimes, they are codified within the cinematic techniques themselves. I posit that in line with the trends of the post-9/11 film and news landscape, *Captain Marvel* and *Top Gun: Maverick* embrace a turn to the spectacular that encourages total acquiescence to their endorsement of their respective military institutions. Additionally, I argue that each film represents a different approach to gender politics with regards to the military, but ultimately, both approaches are invoked with the intention of convincing the largest group of people of the integrity of the project of the American military. These films are exemplary of the pro-war blockbuster for their massive scale and mainstream appeal, and their endorsement of a jingoistic attitude that aims to generate public support for military violence. I believe that this specific type of film, produced in partnership with the military, is what constitutes one of their most effective and therefore most insidious strategies to garner public support.

In order to address this issue in the depth that it deserves, I employ a tripartite strategy of history, theory, and end with these case studies. I look back at the origins of the military-sponsored film in the 1940s and what this can tell us about Hollywood and the Pentagon's enduring legacy, before exploring the media landscape in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, and the implications that those films have for the military-sponsored films of the 2020s. For the theoretical basis of the thesis, I bring several media and cultural studies perspectives to bear on the military-sponsored film. My analysis of the case studies is based primarily in the concept of the Ideological State Apparatus, designed to impart the ideology of the ruling class to be internalized by the audiences who consume it. I also draw from Gramsci's definition of hegemony to parse these films' approach to gender. Additionally, I incorporate more contemporary theory about the specific relationship between war and cinema from thinkers Paul Virilio, Robin Andersen, and Roger Stahl, to examine the ideological and technological implications of the military having disproportionate control over its own onscreen images. Finally, I conduct a close analysis on the aforementioned films using these theoretical approaches, by examining both the messaging presented through their respective plots, as well as the specific cinematic techniques used to convey spectacle and identification.

I am concerned with the wide reach of these films, as well as a general lack of criticism amongst the American public. Some of the biggest, most widely seen films in recent years are produced with the explicit intention of increasing military enlistment and support, which deserves to be acknowledged. I hope that by analyzing these films as legitimate cultural objects, rather than dismissing them as shallow pop culture produced solely for entertainment, I can encourage a more critical approach to media consumption—particularly of media produced in collaboration with the Department of Defense. Roger Stahl posits that "Understanding the

citizen's relationship to war is crucial to understanding how power functions to manufacture war itself."[3] This project will explore that relationship through the pro-war blockbuster. Ultimately, I argue that regardless of how powerful a tool the pro-war blockbuster truly is, its impacts are dependent on audiences, who can choose to view the films however they want. Hence, despite the staggering scale of this issue, the DoD can never enforce total acquiescence. The public can read these films counter to their intended messaging—the true power lies in their habits of consumption and critical engagement.

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[3] Stahl, Roger. *Militainment, Inc: War, Media, and Popular Culture*. Routledge, 2010.:4

Part 1: Historiographies, from 1941 to 9/11

In November 2001, Senior Advisor to the Bush administration Karl Rove, held a meeting with some of the most prominent and recognizable names in the media industries.[4] In attendance were executives of major television and film conglomerates, in addition to countless members of directors, writers, and actors guilds.[5] The subject of the meeting, which took place only a few months after the terrorist attacks of September 11, was to establish how these influential entertainment giants could be utilized to encourage patriotism and support for the war effort within the general populace.[6]

The intimate relationship between Hollywood and the Pentagon is by no means recent. Since its inception, cinema has been recognized as a powerful tool of coercion. During the second World War, this principle was extended to Hollywood, which had by 1941 already generated a significant amount of global capital. At the time, both enlistment and public morale appeared to be relatively low, despite the growing threat of the Axis powers. Given such dire circumstances, it became clear that the power the movies possessed over the civilian populace should be redirected to the support of American intervention. Hence, Roosevelt identified the cinema as "a necessary and beneficial part of the war effort".[7] Roosevelt created several different agencies with the intention of producing propaganda, but there was an overall apprehension to the presence of propaganda films until Pearl Harbor, after which the true gravity of the situation became more clear to the American public.[8] In 1942, the previous iterations of Roosevelt's

4 Calvo, Dana. "Hollywood Signs On to Assist War Effort." Los Angeles Times, November 12, 2001. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2001-nov-12-mn-3236-story.html.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
7 Doherty, Thomas Patrick. *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1999.
8 Koppes, Clayton R., and Gregory D. Black. Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies. New York : London: Free Press ; Collier Macmillan, 1987.

propaganda offices were combined to create the Office of War Information (OWI), whose purported goal was simply to "inform" the civilian populace.[9]

Initially, the government's approach to encouraging Hollywood involvement in the war effort was relatively hands-off—the strategy for producing propaganda was simply presented as "telling the truth".[10] However, the lack of direction provided by the Office of War Information resulted in several misfires. Between racially insensitive portrayals of the Japanese and a general oversimplification of the issue at hand, it became clear to the OWI that more involvement was needed if these pictures were to contribute to an American victory. In their book *Hollywood Goes to War*, Clayton Koppes and Gregory Black state that "OWI could be the most helpful in…incorporating government messages in feature films…if it got to review scripts before production began".[11] A particularly influential approach was rather than exclusively making propaganda films about the war itself, support of American interventionism should be incorporated into casual dialogue in films with more broad genre appeal. This would in turn represent a notion of national unity by painting the picture of a cohesive American attitude regarding the war. The OWI also laid out a set of seven questions for filmmakers to keep in mind during the production of their pictures, beginning with perhaps the most memorable: "Will this picture help us win the war?"[12] At its inception, the OWI only encouraged scripts to be submitted for approval, rather than requiring it. But the time, effort, and resources invested into the program demonstrated a faith in the power of the movies as a tool of propaganda.

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9 Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*: 63.
10 Ibid, 59.
11 Ibid, 63.
12 Ibid, 66.

The start of the war was marked by several failures, and there was a general atmosphere of uncertainty regarding the inevitability of American victory. Although the goal of the OWI was never rooted in censorship, there was a question of whether some films being exported, war-related or otherwise, were sending positive messages about Americans to other parts of the world. Films like *The Palm Beach Story*, a screwball comedy from acclaimed writer/director Preston Sturges, came under fire for depicting immorality performed by Americans onscreen.[13] Eventually, the OWI decided to withhold certain films from worldwide distribution if they painted the citizens of the U.S. in an unfavorable light.[14] Their requirements for script submission also tightened—they wanted to see each script, or at the very least, each treatment or concept, before it went into production, in order to assure it was either contributing to the interventionist effort, or at minimum, depicting American ideals in a positive light. There was widespread uproar in the industry at the time, but ultimately, all but one major studio acquiesced, and the OWI gained more footing over the film industry than it had initially promised.[15]

Figure 1: Claudette Colbert and Joel McCrea in *The Palm Beach Story* (1942).

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[13] Ibid, 91.
[14] Ibid, 94.
[15] Ibid, 106.

Whether any of those war pictures helped win the war is unclear. What is important about this point in time is that it set a precedent for the future relationship between cinema and the war effort. Not only were films viewed as a necessary tool for an American victory, but the amount of control that the OWI exercised over production would become representative of future collaborations between Hollywood and the state.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the U.S. government found it once again necessary to make a more pointed turn to the entertainment industry, with all its financial and social power, to unite the nation in the interest of patriotism. Rove's November meeting was only one part of a more sophisticated and expansive PR strategy that incorporated news media, film, and television. In *Terrorism TV: Popular Entertainment in Post-9/11 America*, Stacy Takacs posits that during the initial period following the 9/11 attacks, the twenty-four-hour news cycle "translate[d] war into entertainment"[16] by depoliticizing and dramatizing the events— ultimately making the idea of war more palatable to viewers.[17] This news coverage also made it clear to American audiences that the impending war was to be consumed as entertainment, a sentiment that would ultimately impact the landscape of popular culture as a whole. Any dissent was being explicitly crushed within the news media, as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice asked stations not to show any potentially "inflammatory" messages on the airwaves—which they unanimously agreed to do.[18]

The goals set during the November 2001 meeting parallel the initial intentions established by the OWI: that the government would remain relatively uninvolved with production. Rove and his collaborators, media executives from different facets of the film industry, made it clear that the intention was not to decide what content media executives were to make. The *Los Angeles*

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16 Takacs, Stacy. *Terrorism TV: Popular Entertainment in Post-9/11 America*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012.:6
17 Ibid, 6.
18 Ibid, 6.

Times article about the meeting reported: "Rove and industry representatives, perhaps mindful of concerns in some quarters of Hollywood that the White House is seeking a war propaganda arm, repeatedly said afterward that there was no overt attempt to dictate the content of movies or television".[19] But whether the Bush administration wanted to directly control the subject matter of film and TV is largely irrelevant in the face of the environment that the administration fostered through the relentless PR cycle. Media executives were voluntarily prepared to use their available resources to encourage support for the war effort. The president of the Television Academy of Arts and Sciences, Bryce Zabel, argued that the only reason that content had not been outwardly discussed was that there was no clear path for how to approach it: "Everyone was bending over backwards to make sure that content was off the table. That was because everyone is very interested in protecting the First Amendment and free speech. But that strikes me as wrong. Content is always on the table. It's what the entertainment industry is about. The issue is, how can we properly discuss it?"[20] Ultimately, it appears that no films were funded in direct collaboration with the government as a result of this meeting, but it established an atmosphere of urgency that would characterize the state of the industry in the immediate aftermath of the attacks.

Takacs cites several film and television ventures produced closely after 9/11 that aim to foster patriotism and support for the war effort, such as a 2003 "Showtime docudrama"[21] titled *DC 9/11: Time of Crisis* following Bush's actions in the initial days after the attacks. The film works to lionize the president, "presenting all major policy developments, as well as all public

19 Calvo, "Hollywood Signs On to Assist War Effort."
20 Pease, Donald E. *The New American Exceptionalism*. Critical American Studies Series. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.
21 Takacs, *Terrorism TV*, 11.

relations talking points, as originating from Bush himself".[22] The film also intercuts footage from the attacks themselves, as well as reaction shots of "weeping Americans".[23] Because of this, the lines between reality and fiction are intentionally blurred in the film. This serves to further position the 9/11 attacks as an object of cultural consumption, while also playing on the audience's emotional state by invoking the (imagined) consequences of inaction to encourage acquiescence to the declaration of war.

Figure 2: Timothy Bottoms as President George W. Bush in the Showtime docudrama *DC 9/11: Time of Crisis*.

However, not all media following the terrorist attacks was so overt. The post-9/11 period also saw several major releases of films about war, even if not explicitly linked to the terrorist attacks. Takacs notes that these films, from *Black Hawk Down* (2002) to *The Great Raid* (2005) focus on divorcing combat from any political context, instead choosing to focus on the details of violence. While these sometimes brutal depictions of battle may be perceived as removing the idealized Hollywood sheen from the imagery of war, Takacs argues that the goal is to demonstrate the necessity of military action, as well as the upstanding moral character of the

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22 Takacs, *Terrorism TV*, 11.
23 Ibid, 12

troops, who will go to great lengths to protect their fellow man.[24] The effect of these films is to convince audiences that war is necessary, while also showing the deep humanity of those who participate in war. A film demonstrating the horrors of war is not necessarily "anti-war" on the merit of such a depiction. Rather, it ensures that the public remains supportive of the war effort.

The impact of the terrorist attacks on popular culture in the early 2000s goes beyond the docudrama and the war film. Conversations about 9/11 seeped into the edges of many other pop culture entities. In 2001, The Disney Channel ran a series of promotional clips featuring talking heads of popular child stars discussing the ways 9/11 had alerted them to the necessity of patriotism and "expressing yourself":

> Frankie Munoz: Being patriotic means to come together as a country, and, uh, you know, help others, and be free. You know, we're very lucky to live in a country where we can actually can be free.
>
> Beverly Mitchell: It shows us how great our country truly is, because everybody stepped up to the plate. Kids are emptying out their piggy banks trying to give money to the families…
>
> Paula Jai Parker: Patriotism, to me, goes beyond that I'm from America. It's about love of mankind.
>
> Narrator: Now, more than ever, it's important for people like you to express themselves every day. [25]

The Disney Channel could not produce something akin to *DC 9/11* or a violent war film due to its established branding as a family-friendly entity. Yet, the ubiquity of the issue drove them to respond anyway, evoking similar sentiments as those more adult media properties. The idea behind them remains the same, particularly in the veneration of America's supposedly unique capacity for democracy and freedom. And the open discussion of what a contemporary article

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[24] Ibid, 13.
[25] Zoog Disney - "Express Yourself: Patriotism," 2001. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uv7iCbsZM1E.

about the promos describes as "jingoism-lite"[26] from a company geared toward children harkens back to one of the essential propaganda strategies of the OWI days: to integrate support for the war into quotidian environments, in order to convey national unity—to imply that all Americans were concerned with the issue and felt the same way about the necessity of intervention.

Much like the uproar surrounding *The Palm Beach Story* in 1942, 2001 audiences also scrutinized films that would have fared well under more precedented conditions. University of Minnesota professor Scott Laderman details the story of the 2001 film *Buffalo Soldiers*, a war drama that ultimately held up a critical lens, if only mildly so, to the U.S. Army.[27] The film was such a success after its premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival that several distribution companies vied to control its release.[28] In the end, independent distributor Miramax acquired the rights on September 10, aiming to have the film in theaters within a year—a goal that Miramax was forced to push back five times. When *Buffalo Soldiers* did eventually see the light of day at a test screening, it was met with tepid reactions. An audience member at the screening responded to the film by stating, "I think this is a time when we need to be patriotic and I don't think people should see it".[29] Laderman's reaction to the film's post-9/11 reception is one of incredulity, given the film's even-handed commentary on the American empire: this is what passed for controversy in the wake of 9/11?[30]

Although the Rove meeting established that the government would not intervene with the content of any media, there was one suggestion made: to avoid Islamophobia and make it clear

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26 Jezebel. "How Disney Channel Sold Patriotism To Kids After 9/11," September 10, 2021. https://jezebel.com/how-disney-channel-sold-patriotism-to-kids-after-9-11-1847593222.

27 Laderman, Scott. "Camouflaging Empire: Imperial Benevolence in American Popular Culture." *In Imperial Benevolence: U.S. Foreign Policy and American Popular Culture Since 9/11*. California: University of California Press, 2018.: 1
28 Ibid, 1.
29 Ibid, 3.
30 Ibid, 3.

that the issue was with the terrorists, not with the religion they belonged to. Despite the media industry's eagerness to abide by the other wishes of the DoD, this suggestion was one they failed to follow. Much like the propaganda films of the OWI days, criticized for their racist depictions of Japanese characters, negative portrayals of Muslims, particularly in the news media, became increasingly common following 2001.[31] The media's failure to heed Rove's request makes clear which aspects of the meeting were taken to heart: the patriotism and support for war were embraced, the avoidance of racism rejected.

As time distances us from the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the fervent patriotism that plagued these initial post-9/11 films is perhaps not quite as urgent yet remains intense. As Tim Gruenewald posits in "Superhero Films After 9/11: Mitigating 'Collateral Damage' in the Marvel Cinematic Universe", the portrayal of the American empire in post-9/11 popular entertainment is, at the very least, one of "benevolence".[32] While something like *Buffalo Soldiers* might garner a more successful reaction in 2023, many mainstream films, whether directly about the war or otherwise, do not adopt a critical stance on American military action. They seek to silence dissent and placate audiences, to drum up continued support for the actions of the U.S. military.

In part, this stems from the mutual partnership between Hollywood and the Department of Defense. As previously explored, the Rove meeting was clear that the government would mostly refrain from dictating specific parameters for content, and seemingly, this promise was kept—at least in terms of the meeting itself. However, the DoD has had a hand in the scripts of

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[31] Lajevardi, Nazita. "The Media Matters: Muslim American Portrayals and the Effects on Mass Attitudes." *Journal of Politics*, vol. 83, no. 3, July 2021, pp. 1060–79. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi.org/10.1086/711300.
32 Gruenewald, Tim. "Superhero Films after 9/11: Mitigating 'Collateral Damage' in the Marvel Cinematic Universe." In *Imperial Benevolence: U.S. Foreign Policy and American Popular Culture Since 9/11.* University of California Press, 2018.

thousands of films produced since the inception of the OWI during World War II, and sponsored several post-9/11 entertainment ventures, including the previously mentioned *Black Hawk Down* (2001). In order for a film to obtain access to military funding, and use of other resources like facilities and equipment, its script must first be approved by the Pentagon. The script must be sufficiently laudatory of the military—otherwise, it is either denied funding or rewritten until it meets the DoD's requirements. Unlike the required OWI script review in the 1940s, this process is strictly voluntary. But, to make a war film without the budget or resources that the DoD provides is far more difficult, if not impossible.

In 2014, British journalist Tom Secker, writer and producer of the website *Spy Culture*, filed a Freedom of Information Act request to determine the number of films produced in collaboration with the U.S. military. This initial request returned around 300 film titles, while a later FOIA, filed two years later, returned around 400.[33] The DoD hadn't coproduced 100 films between 2014 and 2016—the difference can only be explained by assuming that the information was being partially withheld. Secker also acknowledges that neither list contained the 2015 film *Aloha*, although it was mentioned in an entertainment liaison report for the Air Force, meaning that the most recent request is still incomplete.[34] Secker writes,

> The upshot of this is that we don't know how many films the DOD has worked on, except that it's well over 400. The absolute total (I have not comprehensively combined the two lists yet, and even that would not be the full and true answer) could be over 500. Given that most of the existing literature only recognizes around 200, this constitutes proof of a much larger Hollywood propaganda operation than anyone previously realized.[35]

33 Secker, Tom. "Updated 'Complete' List of DoD Films," n.d. https://www.spyculture.com/updated-complete-list-of-dod-films/.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.

One of the most interesting (and troubling) aspects of Secker's list is the number of DoD-sponsored films centered around topics that on a surface level, have nothing to do with war or the military. This is reminiscent of the insertion of 9/11 discussion into unrelated entertainment properties in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, such as in the Disney Channel promos. It also harkens back to the OWI philosophy that propaganda is more effective when it does not announce itself as such. There are scores of war-related films on the list, but there are also many that frame themselves as focusing on something else entirely. For example, *Transformers* (2007), a science-fiction film about robots based on a popular toy line was produced in collaboration with the DoD.

It is also worth acknowledging that most of the titles on the FOIA list are not fringe independent films—they are some of the highest-grossing American movies of all time. The influence of, for example, the Marvel franchise (which encompasses *Iron Man* and the case study film *Captain Marvel*) transcends the U.S., geographically and culturally. As Roosevelt and Rove understood, the cinema can serve as a tool of coercion, both overtly, and in more subtle ways. Whether the American people agree with it or not, the contemporary landscape of popular culture has been irrevocably shaped by the Department of Defense and, in a looser sense, by the OWI.

Part 2: Theoretical Perspectives

From its extensive history to its complex particulars, the relationship between Hollywood and the Pentagon can be difficult to parse. What does it mean when the military itself has almost complete control over its own onscreen images? In order to provide a more informed understanding of the issue, it is necessary to turn to critical theory, a form of social philosophy that engages with cultural and social formations to critique hierarchies of power under capitalism.

French philosopher Louis Althusser, in his text *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, introduces the idea of the Ideological State Apparatus, a central concept for making sense of the impact of films produced in collaboration with the Department of Defense. The State itself is a more nebulous term within Marxism, but defined here, it is representative of the ruling class— the government, the bourgeoisie, and the symbiotic relationship between the two. Althusser posits that the State is able to reinforce its subjugation of the lower classes via a dual structure. The Repressive State Apparatus, or RSA, is the public wing of the State, which controls the masses through physical violence, at least ultimately. "The Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc."[36] compose this method of oppression. These bodies all use punishment as a means of control.

In contrast, the Ideological State Apparatuses, or ISAs, are a system of private institutions that function primarily on the basis of ideology as opposed to punishment. Some examples of these institutions include the religious ISA (i.e., the Church), the educational ISA, and most relevant to this discussion, the cultural and communications ISAs, which encompass things like

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36 "*Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses by Louis Althusser 1969-70*."Accessed May 1, 2023. https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm.: 15

art, literature, radio, and news. Althusser clarifies that each apparatus contains the capacity for

the primary tendency of the other within it:

> The Ideological State Apparatus functions massively and predominantly by
> ideology, but they also function secondarily by repression…this is very attenuated
> and concealed, even symbolic. There is no such thing as a purely ideological
> apparatus…schools and churches use suitable methods of punishment, expulsion,
> selection, etc., to discipline.[37]

He also posits that the aspect of punishment also extends to the cultural apparatus, through

censorship. There are many disparate and even contradictory institutions that fall under the

category of the ISA, but Althusser argues they are ultimately united by their perpetuation of the

same ruling class ideology.

The effect of the dominance of ISAs is internalization. Rather than having certain rules,

beliefs, and laws imposed on us by means of force, we willingly integrate them into our own

system of thought. Antonio Gramsci, another Marxist thinker, specifically articulates the idea

that the mass media as a tool of the elite class to "perpetuate their power, wealth, and status [by

popularizing] their own philosophy, culture and morality".[38] Because the mass media, along with

other ISAs like the educational and family apparatuses are so ingrained within the routines of our

daily lives, the rhetoric espoused by these institutions becomes integrated into our own

understanding of the world. The ruling class is responsible for the production and distribution of

mass media, and their material interests do not align with the people that consume it. Yet, its

pervasiveness makes it almost impossible to notice, and thus, criticize or even acknowledge,

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[37] Ibid. 16

[38] Lull, James. "Hegemony" In *Media, Communication, Culture: A Global Approach*, 2nd ed., [Fully rev. and Updated]. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.: 6

making the acquiescence of the masses to these ideals more effortless.[39] This phenomenon, of the willing acceptance of ruling class domination, is referred to by Gramsci as "hegemony".

The theories of ISAs and hegemony provide insight into the military-sponsored blockbuster film as a cultural object. As a film, it is a part of the cultural apparatus, imparting the ideology of the dominant class on audiences through its images, sound, and story. But its connections with the military, an RSA that enforces control through punishment and violence, allow it to straddle both methods of subjugation. The ubiquity of films with military ties, such as the billion-dollar global force of Marvel, allows the systems of beliefs that these films represent to become integrated into the larger cultural sphere and hence, into the minds of its audiences. These films present American military intervention as a positive force, even if such actions do not align with the class interests of the average citizen. Therefore, whether these pictures actually do anything to "help win the war", as the OWI encouraged filmmakers to consider in the 40s, matters little—the sheer existence of such films helps to control American attitudes towards the apparatus of the military.

In addition to more general concepts from critical theory, there are philosophical works on the specific connection between war and film that are also worth acknowledging, in order to form a more complete conception of the topic. Paul Virilio, in *War and Cinema: the Logistics of Perception*, argues that war and the film camera are inextricably linked forces: war is entirely dependent on its being perceived by the masses. He states, "There is no war without perception, no sophisticated weaponry without psychological mystification."[40] To illustrate this argument, he traces the development of several technological innovations now used for film, that have origins

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[39] Ibid, 40.
[40] Virilio, Paul. *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*. London; New York: Verso, 1989: 6

in military and intelligence. Most significantly, however, is his argument that the perception of war eclipses actual outcome—representative of this is the fact that the first chapter of the book is titled "Military Force is Based on Deception." In it, Virilio writes that "war consists not so much in scouring territorial, economic, or other material victories as in appropriating the 'immateriality' of perceptual fields." [41] What actually happens on the battlefield, what is materially won or lost, is nothing compared to what is seen onscreen, and thus understood, by civilians, particularly when they are geographically distanced from the war itself. Virilio additionally argues that the role of movies within the context of war enabled them to take on an almost religious quality, which ultimately allowed audiences to come to terms with the grief and destruction of battle: "Cinemas…were training camps which bonded people together in the face of death agony, teaching them to master the fear of what they did not know…the audience learnt to control its nervous reactions and began to find death amusing."[42] He notes the particular significance of film as a visual medium, and as a generally communal experience (although we might consider this aspect differently in the explosion of home distribution in the years since *War and Cinema*'s initial publication). These two aspects privilege its impacts on audiences over other forms of entertainment, making the military connection with the medium of film inextricable—as he ultimately posits, "War *is* cinema."[43]

In light of Virilio's arguments—i.e., if we are chiefly, or even only, able to understand war through its cinematic representations, what does that mean for the post-9/11 era, wherein the military itself has a significant hand in almost all war films and many top-grossing blockbusters? One way to understand the issue is to consider whose stories are being told, and how. The

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41 Ibid, 7.
42 Ibid, 40.
43 Ibid.

Department of Defense cultivates a specific image of the War on Terror through its filmic endeavors, one that focuses almost exclusively on American soldiers. These individuals may not always be successful in whatever mission they are carrying out; they may even die or become seriously injured. The audience is meant to identify with these individuals and, according to Virilio's argument, any harm that comes their way over the course of a film ultimately serves to acclimate viewers on the home front to the mortality of war, to the extent that it no longer incites fearful reactions, but placated acceptance. There is rarely, if ever, an exploration of the impacts of the War on Terror on the people native to Afghanistan and Iraq in films co-produced with the DoD. Of course, this is an extremely pressing issue, and one of the most horrific consequences of the fight. But the military itself has such an intense grip on the production of films, which are our primary method of comprehending war, according to Virilio. Hence, the understanding of the American public is heavily distorted by what the military wants them to understand. And because we are relatively isolated from the geographical locations of the War on Terror itself, it is difficult to break free of the ideological impositions delivered through these cinematic representations.

Expanding on and responding to the ideas in *War and Cinema*, Glen Jeansome and David Luhrssen's text *War on the Silver Screen: Shaping America's Perception of History* focuses more on the affective qualities of the medium, and how this has bolstered its role in the American understanding of military history. They argue that unlike reading a book, a solitary action that revolves around our intellectual ability to parse its contents, movies "operate at the visceral, emotional level, which is locked into our electrical, chemical, and cellular memories."[44] The emotional response that cinema can evoke in audiences is what allows it to possess a strong

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[44] Jeansonne, Glen, and David Luhrssen. *War on the Silver Screen: Shaping America's Perception of History*, xi. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2014.

grip over our perception, and, as Jeansome and Luhrssen argue, our understanding of history, particularly in the circumstance of the war film.[45]

The issue of the historical implications of the war film is particularly pressing as the prominence of 9/11 begins to fade from popular memory. In spite of the myriad newscasts, articles, and books on the subject that the population consumed following the attacks, the historical perception of the event and its impacts will be shaped primarily by its onscreen depictions. The concepts argued in *War on the Silver Screen* follow Virilio's assertion that war is cinema, but this particular theoretical perspective draws more attention to the emotional power of cinema. The authors posit that it is because film has such an immediate impact on our emotional state that makes it a uniquely effective tool of psychological manipulation, particularly in the context of war.[46] Hence, as time places distance between American citizens and the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks, it is our experience with the films on the topic, above all else, that shape our perception, and in turn, the historical recollection of the events.

War on the Silver Screen was published in 2014, in contrast to Virilio's text from 1989. The recency of the book allows the authors to explore more prescient issues of the progression of our experiences with film viewing in the wake of recent technological developments, something Virilio's work could not address. Although they do not provide any definitive answers, Jeansonne and Luhrssen grapple with the question of the "diminishing power" of the silver screen in the era of smart devices, which make the experience of watching a film far more personal and isolated, so the communal aspect is largely lost.[47] The size of the screen itself also may have an impact on the affective quality of the medium. Before the proliferation of watching

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[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid, xi.
[47] Ibid, 164.

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content on phones, laptops, and televisions, the only mode in which audiences could experience a film was by going to the theater. The film in the theater demands much more of its audience's attention—in a darkened room, with a screen that takes up their entire line of vision, there is less opportunity for distraction, and audiences can more easily immerse themselves in the product in front of them. On a phone or laptop, though, there is nothing binding the viewer's attention. They may leave films on in the background while completing other tasks, for example—hence, a war film may have no effect on their emotional state and have no impact on their perception of the military. Ultimately, Jeansonne and Luhrssen argue that because filmmakers are continuing to produce war films still today, they still possess a cultural meaning that warrants analysis.[48]

To expand further on the affective quality of the cinematic medium and its ties to the military, Robin Andersen and Robert Stahl construct an image of the American media landscape that ultimately transformed the relationship between the soldier and the citizen, and the goal of film in general. Their ideas follow from the exploration of the news in the aftermath of 9/11, specifically, that one of its major impacts was the transformation of war into a consumable media object. Stahl first argues that the events of the Gulf War established a close collaboration between the news media and the military.[49] This relationship carried over to the War on Terror and is still a dominant factor in our understanding of military action. In the 1990s, the press would receive all information about the Gulf War from the military itself.[50] This collaboration between the press and the Pentagon boosted news media profits, which, until that point, had been deteriorating. But this financial success was not without its consequences—as Stahl writes, "The sacrificial lamb in this new military-media arrangement, was, of course, the American public.

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[48] Ibid, 164.
[49] Stahl, Roger. *Militainment, Inc: War, Media, and Popular Culture*, 21. New York: Routledge, 2010.
[50] Ibid, 22.

Along with the diversity of perspectives, so disappeared the very oxygen of democracy."[51] Since all arms of the press were essentially presenting the same story about the war to audiences, the differentiation of news media product came in the form of dramatization and spectacle. Stahl argues that the impact of this phenomenon of spectacle lies in its in contrast to previous forms of propaganda: instead of making a judgment about what is being shown on screen, "the consumer war only asked that one assume the position of audience member and enjoy the show. The creation of this new subject required presenting a war that implied disengaged spectatorship as a natural response."[52] The civilian-subject of the 21st century is thus an inherently passive one, for whom participation in the war consists of simply watching it unfold in an increasingly commercialized setting.

Robin Andersen argues that the affective quality of military coverage of the Gulf War spread to cinematic depictions of the war, too, in what might be termed a "spectacularization" of the medium. Andersen writes that "Techniques that convey immediacy, excitement, and highly charged emotional experiences are now acceptable as 'serious' news. They are also evident in contemporary filmmaking practices…Films position the viewer in an intense experiential relationship with the hero and, by doing so, extend an 'open invitation to become him at that moment—to ape that sneer of hate, to feel the way it feels to stand there tensed up with an Uzi (Miller 1990, 210)."[53] As an extension of techniques being employed within the news media, the cinematic medium has turned toward not only an emphasis on generating emotional responses from the viewer through spectacle, but also an encouragement of total identification with the

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[51] Ibid, 24.
[52] Ibid, 25.
[53] Andersen, Robin. *Consumer Culture and TV Programming*. Critical Studies in Communication and in the Cultural Industries. Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1995.

onscreen hero, such that the lines between the two are blurred. The narrative qualities of a given film are thus deemphasized in favor of spectacle and viewer-identification with the cinematic hero. The impact of these techniques, both in the news and in film, is to more effectively manufacture consent amongst audience members for the actions of the American military.

To better understand these theoretical contributions, it is necessary to place them within the context of the films they describe. Hence, I turn to two Pentagon-sponsored blockbusters in order to generate a more thorough picture of the issue: *Captain Marvel* (2019) and *Top Gun: Maverick* (2022). While all of the theoretical approaches explored in this chapter are relevant frameworks for analyzing these films, in particular, I focus on hegemony and its different iterations to parse how these films use gender in different ways to increase audience support for the military. I also investigate how our understanding of war is impacted through its cinematic depictions. Additionally, I examine the films' use of the spectacle and identification, rather than narrative storytelling, to encourage audience acquiescence to their messaging.

Part 3: Case Studies

Captain Marvel (2019)

In 2008, Marvel Studios and Paramount Pictures released *Iron Man*, a film about the origins of the titular superhero and his mechanized suit of armor. Even though the film performed well at the box office, audiences of 2008 still probably could not have predicted that *Iron Man* would ultimately spawn a franchise of over 20 films and dozens of live-action and animated television shows as of 2023, with several more "phases" already planned for staggered releases across the next decade.

It is difficult to overstate the impact of the Marvel Cinematic Universe-- not only within the U.S. but worldwide. Four of the top ten highest-grossing films of all time are Marvel films, each earning over $1 billion.[54] These films are not underseen or obscure. Jeansonne and Luhrssen are right to wonder about the continuation of the movie theater as a meaningful cultural establishment in the wake of recent on-demand streaming technology[55], but these are the films that mainstream audiences are still making the effort to see in the theater. This is particularly extraordinary considering the pure saturation of Marvel releases over the past two decades— sometimes there are multiple releases within a single year—yet legions of fans still flock en masse to catch them on opening night. These films are some of the defining blockbusters of the past two decades.

Starting with *Iron Man*, the U.S. military has been inextricably linked within the Marvel franchise, both thematically as well as within a production capacity. Iron Man is a weapons manufacturer; thus, the film had to be approved for $1 billion by the Pentagon for the use of

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54 Box Office Mojo. "Top Lifetime Grosses." Accessed March 12, 2023.
https://www.boxofficemojo.com/chart/top_lifetime_gross/?area=XWW.
55 Jeansonne, *War on the Silver Screen*, 163.

military resources.[56] These are expensive films to make, which center primarily around large-scale action set pieces, so having open access to military weaponry and facilities is something of a necessity. Pro-military sentiment is therefore entrenched in the very ethos of these films, and there are countless other entries in the franchise that could be selected as shining examples of the state-sponsored military propaganda blockbuster. *Captain Marvel*, however, stands as a unique entry as the first female-led film in the franchise, a fact that will be problematized and explored further in my analysis. Additionally, this film was marketed alongside an Air Force recruitment advertisement campaign drawing on its imagery and messaging, which further implicates it as a tool of propaganda. This ad campaign only makes the intentions of the film more explicit. This is a pro-war blockbuster: a massively successful piece of cinema with widespread appeal which seeks to uplift the project of the American military.

Captain Marvel depicts the story of Carol Danvers (Brie Larson), the titular captain, who we are introduced to as Vers. The film opens with violent conflict between two alien races: the Kree and the Skrulls. Vers has extraordinary powers but suffers from memory loss and cannot recall details of her previous life. Nonetheless, she participates in the war on the side of the Kree, at the behest of her commander, Yon-Rogg (Jude Law). Yon-Rogg chastises her for expressing emotions and encourages her to keep them under control in order to perform more efficiently in battle. After she is captured by the enemy, the Skrull scan Vers' memories and trace them to Earth, where the Skrull and Vers both travel.

Through her time on Earth, she is able to recover her memories by meeting Maria Rambeau (Lashana Lynch), a close friend from her previous life. Vers discovers that she is

56 Saveliev, David. "New Marvel Film Puts Spotlight on Hollywood's Military Ties." *Responsible Statecraft*, November 5, 2021. https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2021/11/05/new-marvel-film-puts-spotlight-on-hollywoods-military-ties/.

actually human Air Force pilot Carol Danvers. Throughout her childhood and during her training for the Air Force, Carol was subjected to constant sexist remarks, from men who, like Yon-Rogg, would criticize her for showing emotion. Danvers was injured (and presumed dead) after a plane crash piloted by Dr. Wendy Lawson (Annette Bening), an engineer who was developing a light-speed engine. It is ultimately revealed that Lawson herself was a Kree soldier who had defected to help the efforts of the Skrulls. Yon-Rogg attempted to steal the engine from Lawson, so she tried to destroy it before he could get to it. However, Yon-Rogg killed Lawson before she could finish the job. Carol recalls that it was she who ultimately destroyed the engine, which allowed her to absorb its powers.

These revelations force Carol to reconcile with the fact that she has been fighting on the wrong side of the war; the Skrulls are an innocent group of people who have been displaced by the conflict and are only seeking a place to live. She decides to join the Skrulls, taking full control over her powers and casting off the Kree technology that inhibited her power.Ultimately, the Kree are defeated without Carol having to compromise her emotionality.

The picture that *Captain Marvel* paints of the American military is complex. On the one hand, the Air Force is depicted as an unambiguously positive entity. Carol is empowered (literally and figuratively) by her time spent in the Air Force, and it is shown to be a lifelong aspiration of hers. Her entire life is dedicated to her performance as a pilot, demonstrating that joining the service is an inherently noble pursuit. Wendy Lawson represents a force of absolute good, despite being caught on the wrong side of the war. She uses the resources that the U.S. military provides to create a powerful tool for change, something that will "end wars, not just fight them". The conflict between the Kree and the Skrulls is where the film muddies the waters. At first, it appears to be a loose allegory for the War on Terror—the term "terrorist" is even used

to refer to the Skrull enemy. It is worth that the film is set prior to the events of 9/11, taking place in 1996, but the use of the term "terrorist" in this context invites the audience to make the connection to more recent conflicts. This framework of understanding the fictional conflict, however, is ultimately incoherent, as Carol realizes that she has been fighting for a morally bankrupt force. The Skrulls are not terrorists, they are just trying to live in peace and have unfortunately been swept up into violent conflict. One of the primary themes of the film, therefore, appears to be the necessity of questioning authority, particularly in the context of the military, when the lives of other people are at stake. Yet, this message is never applied or even considered in the context of the Air Force itself, which is consistently lauded without criticism. The theme of being on the wrong side of a conflict is incongruous with the film's wholehearted endorsement of the Air Force, ultimately leaving the audience with an entirely contradictory understanding of American military action.

The juxtaposition of the real-life institution of the Air Force with the fictionalized alien conflict between the Kree and Skrulls is also significant. It feeds back into the conception of war as an object of entertainment, established through the media coverage of the Gulf War and War on Terror. It trivializes the real-life violence and destruction perpetuated by the Air Force. Violence in the film is cartoonish, justified by the non-human status of the two groups in conflict. Fight sequences are composed almost entirely with CGI, meaning that even apart from the alien technologies the Kree and Skrulls use, there is a lack of realism in the depiction of violence. Guns shoot lasers, not bullets. The Kree bleed blue, not red. Explosions and gunshots are also animated—there is no real weight to the conflict. This mirrors Virilio's argument that the military film ultimately serves to acclimate its audiences to the death and suffering that occur

during war.[57] When the audience has no knowledge of the realities of war, they are likely to fit the comic-book violence of *Captain Marvel* into their mental representations of real conflict. This leads to a skewed, sanitized understanding of American interventionism.

Figure 3: Lawson bleeds blue after suffering injuries in a plane crash.

As previously stated, the film is noteworthy for being the first film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe to feature a lead female superhero. The film consequently incorporates a message of feminism into its plot: Carol experiences sexist mocking from the men in the Air Force, who argue that her female status makes her too susceptible to her emotions, which will ultimately prevent her from becoming a pilot. In a flashback sequence, one male colleague tells her "They call it a 'cockpit' for a reason." In another, Carol fails to perform a rope-climbing test and is belittled for her feminine physicality. Creating a place for herself in the historically male-dominated Air Force is thus portrayed as overcoming these misogynistic social forces and breaking the glass ceiling. Carol finds community with her fellow female pilots, Maria and Wendy. The military institution empowers them to overcome the stereotype that women are inherently suited for "softer" jobs.

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[57] Virilio, *War and Cinema,* 42

This theme of the film is reinforced and expanded upon within the marketing campaign produced in collaboration with the Air Force. The tie-in recruitment advertisements are primarily geared toward young women, using footage of real-life female pilots. The slogan "What will your origin story be?" plays on the superheroic qualities of *Captain Marvel*, implying that joining the Air Force empowers women as much as having actual powers. The ad also intercuts footage of actual Air Force flights that parallel the notable action sequences of the film, again blurring the distinction between the realities of war and the fictional, comic-book representation of it. The film's release campaign also integrated other recruitment strategies, such as inviting Air Force pilots to its red carpet premiere and interviewing them about their time in the service. The message this campaign and the film itself are aiming at is that joining the Air Force is an inherently feminist act. This positioning was ultimately hugely successful: after the release of the film and campaign, the Air Force received more female applicants than it had in five years.[58]
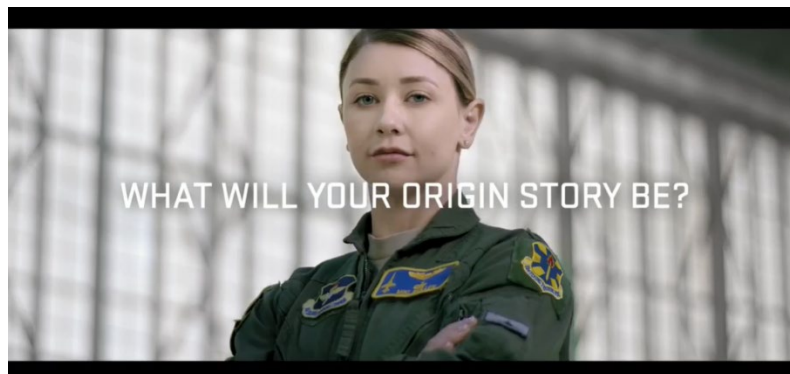

Figure 4: "U.S. Air Force: Origin Story" recruitment advertising tie-in with *Captain Marvel*

Is it feminist for a woman to perpetuate violence in the name of an imperialist institution? Gramsci posits that hegemonic structures convince subjugated groups that it is beneficial to act

58 Pawlyk, Oriana. "'Captain Marvel' Effect? Air Force Academy Sees Most Female Applicants in 5 Years." Military.com, January 5, 2020. https://www.military.com/daily-news/2020/01/05/captain-marvel-effect-air-force-academy-sees-most-female-applicants-5-years.html.

in the interest of the state, even if it contradicts with their own interests.[59] A woman entering a traditionally male-dominated career could be considered a challenge to patriarchal authority. Women who wish to change the societal conditions of gender-based oppression may therefore believe that to break the military glass ceiling is to act in their own interest (and the interest of women in general), rather than the interest of the state. However, the ruling class is not ultimately concerned with bridging gender disparities. Rather, the expansion of women's roles from the domestic sphere to the military sector has provided the ruling class with another resource to further their own interests. Carol's role in the Air Force is not a triumph for women, but a reification of the same oppressive system embodied by both patriarchy and imperialism. Therefore, the feminism of the film seeks to cast a wider net of hegemonic domination, which includes groups who have been historically oppressed by the state. It encourages them to support the very system which prevents them from truly achieving equity.

The superficial approach to women's rights on display is reminiscent of the ideology of postfeminism, which emerged as a kind of "girl power" approach to female empowerment in the 1990s—the era in which this film is set. In postfeminism, female empowerment is closely linked to capitalist consumption and individualism, more concerned with the aesthetics of liberation than material social improvement.[60] This film supports the presence of women in military institutions which seek to fulfill the desires of the ruling class, which mirrors the idea of empowerment only reaching so far as appearances. The feminist messaging of the film is also grounded in individualism—Carol succeeds, but her role as a pilot does not empower women as a social class. Postfeminism is also marked by a lack of intersectionality,[61] which is also on

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59 Lull, "Hegemony": 40
[60] Bae, Michelle S. "Interrogating Girl Power: Girlhood, Popular Media, and Postfeminism." *Visual Arts Research* 37, no. 2 (December 1, 2011): 28–40. https://doi.org/10.5406/visuartsrese.37.2.0028.:31
[61] Ibid, 32

display in this film through the character of Maria, a Black woman who is Carol's best friend in

the Air Force. The oppression that she would have uniquely faced as a woman of color in a

predominately white and male institution is largely unacknowledged, taking a backseat to

Carol's hardships. Hence, despite its status as the first Marvel film with a female lead, the

feminist messaging in the film is surface level. Female empowerment is strictly employed as a

recruitment strategy to encourage more women to apply to the Air Force. It is not intersectional,

nor is it concerned with empowering women as a social class.

Like most Marvel films, *Captain Marvel* conforms to the post-Gulf War trend that

emphasizes visual and affective spectacle over narrative cohesion. The spectacular elements of

the film are present primarily in its use of military technology. There are several sequences of

Carol piloting Air Force planes that serve to evoke feelings of awe, excitement, and tension in

audience members. One chase scene, which occurs at 1:06, utilizes particularly fast-paced

editing, which cuts rapidly between interior shots of Carol flying the plane, wide shots which

establish the proximity of Carol's aircraft to the one pursuing it, and POV shots of Carol's

control panel. The effect of this is to build adrenaline and excitement in viewers through the

quick cuts between the different views. It is not unlike the initial coverage of the Gulf War that

Andersen and Stahl describe, which aimed to cultivate specific reactions from audience members

in relation to the war. It is also worth noting the presence of multiple perspectives: the camera

takes on both the view of an outside observer with the exterior shots of the two planes and the

subjective point of view of Carol herself. This leads to both an identification with Carol while

also placing distance between the audience member and the action. Viewers assume the position

both of participant and observer. The scene, therefore, provides the opportunity for audience

members "to ape that sneer of hate"[62] by experiencing total identification with the hero, while also remaining comfortably detached. The employment of the spectacular therefore makes audiences more susceptible to the film's pro-military messaging.

Figures 5: Carol's POV, piloting the plane

Figure 6: Wide shot of Carol's plane

It is also worth considering identification in terms of the film's feminist themes. Having a female lead already allows for female audiences to feel a stronger sense of identification with Carol, but the film also depicts her struggles with experiencing misogyny, particularly in the context of her career. This is a relatable experience for many women, which evokes a greater sense of empathy from the audience, and thus, encourages closer identification with the character. In turn, this makes the pro-military messaging of the film more palatable to an

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62 Andersen, *Consumer Culture and TV Programming.*:216

audience who may not otherwise identify with the masculinist archetype of the soldier present in many other military films.

A climactic sequence of the film at 1:32 plays on both the social identity and affective aspects of the film that make it an effective piece of propaganda. Following her capture, Carol takes complete control of her powers by removing the implant placed on her by the Kree. No longer inhibited, she easily overpowers the alien race which had previously held her back. The sequence is visually arresting, making heavy use of CGI special effects to convey the true extent of Carol's powers. It is also the culmination of Carol's struggle against the sexist institutions that threatened to prevent her from joining the Air Force during her time on earth, and the oppressive forces of Yon-Rogg that kept her from her potential. The sequence is set to No Doubt's "Just a Girl", thereby not only furthering the message of female empowerment via the song's lyrics, but also providing a sense of nostalgia for the 1990s and the kind of "girl power" postfeminism that No Doubt is evocative of. The spectacle of the visuals coupled with the moment of triumph over sexism, set to a memorable rock song, is a pitch-perfect example both of spectacularization and identification. This moment allows the audience to feel powerful alongside Carol, to essentially feel as she feels. Although the spectacle itself is unrelated to the U.S. military, this scene makes the audience more susceptible to identification with Carol in future sequences that explicitly associate the character with her role in the Air Force. Therefore, it serves to encourage audience support of the military as an institution, despite the fact that the scene itself has nothing to do with the military.

Figure 7: The spectacle of Carol's powers as she fights unencumbered by Kree limitations

Captain Marvel is not an especially unique entry into the ubiquitous canon of Marvel superhero ventures. It draws from an established MCU tradition of integrating pro-war messaging into exciting, hyper-palatable comic-book films. However, its contradictory fictionalized war, surface-level feminist messaging, and CGI spectacle make it a particularly strong example of the tools that a state-sponsored film has at its disposal to convince audiences that the U.S. military is worthy of their support. Its mass appeal and explicit endorsement of the Air Force make it a recent example of a pro-war blockbuster, characterized by its hegemonic constructions of gender and its combination of spectacle and audience identification.

Top Gun: Maverick (2022)

There is an unattributed statistic which states that the original *Top Gun* film, released in 1986, drove up U.S. Navy recruitment by 500 percent.[63] According to a recent fact check, the

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[63] Novelly, Thomas. "'Top Gun' Boosted Recruiting and Brought the Tailhook Scandal. So What Happens After the Blockbuster Sequel?" Military.com, August 11, 2022. https://www.military.com/daily-news/2022/08/11/top-gun-boosted-recruiting-and-brought-tailhook-scandal-so-what-happens-after-blockbuster-sequel.html.

real number falls around 8 percent[64], but the impact of the film went beyond just enlistment numbers: it made the American public care about the Navy.[65]

Tom Cruise plays the rebellious but goodhearted naval lieutenant Pete "Maverick" Mitchell who is recruited, with his Radio Intercept Officer Nick "Goose" Bradshaw (Anthony Edwards), for the prestigious Top Gun program, a naval weapons school for only the best and most capable pilots. The pair are sent in the place of wingman Cougar, who resigned from the service after a nerve-wracking encounter with two MiG-28 fighter aircrafts. Maverick is unconventional in his methods, and often takes wild, dangerous risks when flying, much to the chagrin of his superiors. But his rebellion is always in the service of the greater good (i.e., the mission of the American military). In the Top Gun program, he faces off against rival pilot Lieutenant Tom "Iceman" Kazansky (Val Kilmer), who is much more by the book. Maverick's risk-taking results in Goose's death after an ejection during a training exercise, leaving Maverick shaken. He considers quitting the service but chooses to graduate the program and is deployed alongside Iceman in a crisis situation. Mentally affected by the death of his RIO, he struggles against enemy MiGs, but Maverick and Iceman eventually claim victory, with Maverick's confidence in his abilities restored.

While the film deals with the death of a friend and colleague, the overall view of the Navy presented is considerably romantic. This was not by accident: in accordance with access to facilities and equipment, the Navy had to first approve the film's script. Several changes were made, mostly softening the more abrasive moments to paint the program in the most positive light. Goose's death was changed from a collision to an ejection after officers complained that

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[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.

"too many pilots were crashing."[66] If the recruitment numbers were not actually up by 500

percent, filmgoers still had reason to believe that being in the Navy allowed you to make lifetime

friends and perform impressive plane stunts, an idealistic view that undeniably bolstered the

enlistment effort. Captain Brian Post, a 28-year veteran, joined the Navy because of this film: "I

saw the movie, thought it looked like the most exciting job in the world. And it is."[67]

But the 1986 film's portrayal of male camaraderie in the Navy has also been subject to

criticism. There is one prominent female character in the film, herself not a naval officer but an

instructor in the Top Gun program: Charlie (Kelly McGillis), whose Ph.D. is shown to be useless

in the face of Maverick's superior experiential knowledge of the MiG-28. He embarrasses her in

front of the Top Gun class on the first day of training. Her only purpose in the film, following

this scene, is to serve as a romantic and sexual conquest for Maverick—women are therefore

portrayed as inferior to the pilots, only worthy of being objects of male attention. The film

therefore emphasizes a masculine superiority when it comes to the world of the Navy.

In 1991, a scandal shook the military world, and *Top Gun* was implicated. The Navy and

Marine Corps came under fire for allegations of sexual assault against 83 women and seven men

at the Tailhook Symposium in Las Vegas, a prominent professional gathering for Naval aviators.

The conference's unofficial afterparty devolved into drunken revelry and sexual misconduct, a

fact that was blamed on a "Top Gun mentality"[68] of raucous partying and the devaluation of

women. The horrors of Tailhook are indicative of a deeply flawed military culture, to the extent

that it is perhaps unfair to blame these events so singularly on the film. But the chauvinistic

environment on display in the 1986 *Top Gun* film probably did not help.

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[66] Zenou, Theo. "'Top Gun,' Brought to You by the U.S. Military." *Washington Post*, May 27, 2022.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2022/05/27/top-gun-maverick-us-military/.
[67] Novelly, "Top Gun".
[68] Ibid.

Figure 8: An unnamed naval officer wearing a "women are property" t-shirt at the 1991 Tailhook Symposium

Top Gun grossed $360 million in its box office run, making it the highest-grossing film of 1986. Considering that sequels and reboots dominate the current box office, it was perhaps inevitable that such a successful film would spawn an eventual second installment. But in light of the Tailhook Scandal, making a legacy sequel was not so straightforward. *Maverick* had to prove that it was no longer emblematic of the "Top Gun mentality", while still presenting a similarly idealized view of the institution to once again increase recruitment numbers and public awareness.

Maverick takes place nearly 30 years after the conclusion of the original film. Maverick is a test pilot, held back from further advancement in the field due to his rebellious nature. He is called by Iceman, now the commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, to serve as an instructor for a new generation of Top Gun recruits. He is tasked with training them for a seemingly impossible mission: destroying a uranium enrichment plant, in violation of an international treaty, at the bottom of a canyon defended by a host of planes, missiles, and GPS jammers. Among the pilots assigned to this mission is Bradley "Rooster" Bradshaw (Miles Teller), son of Maverick's former RIO and friend Goose who died tragically in the first film. Maverick secretly withdrew Rooster's

application to the Naval Academy at the behest of Rooster's dying mother, who did not want her son to become a pilot. This serves as a source of tension between Maverick and Rooster, who also blames Maverick for the death of his father. When Iceman dies of throat cancer, Maverick is removed from his instructor position for a training incident wherein a fighter jet was lost but is reinstated upon successfully running through the training course to prove that the mission can be achieved. Working together with the Top Gun recruits, Maverick sets out to complete the mission. They successfully destroy the uranium plant, but Maverick sacrifices his plane to protect Rooster. He survives the crash, but Rooster follows his plane against orders to save him. The two steal an aircraft from the abandoned base where they crashed and pilot it back to safety.

Like its predecessor, *Maverick* was an astounding success, both critically and commercially. With a worldwide box office gross of $1.5 billion and five Academy Award nominations,[69] its impact is substantial, particularly in the context of the pandemic, which left the film industry floundering. It was lauded as the film that "saved theaters" after health and safety concerns forced out moviegoing audiences for two years.[70] What the film tells audiences about the Navy, then, is crucial, given both its broad reach and its controversial legacy.

The rehabilitation of the image of the Navy, considering the Tailhook Scandal, is a particularly interesting component to consider regarding *Maverick*. Notably, the film introduces a singular female pilot who serves as a member of the Top Gun mission: Lieutenant Natasha "Phoenix" Trace (Monica Barbaro). While this could be a step towards challenging the male-

[69] Jr, Mike Fleming. "'Top Gun: Maverick' Lands Best Picture Nom & Five Others". *Deadline* (blog), January 24, 2023. https://deadline.com/2023/01/2023-oscars-top-gun-maverick-nominations-best-picture-six-nominations-tom-cruise-1235238544/.

[70] Mendelson, Scott. "'Top Gun: Maverick' Box Office: Tom Cruise Really Did Save Movie Theaters." *Forbes*. Accessed May 1, 2023. https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2022/08/16/top-gun-maverick-box-office-tom-cruise-really-did-save-movie-theaters/.

dominated military culture that led to the horrific crimes at Tailhook, it is a marginal one.

Phoenix's role in the film itself is relatively unimportant. Her character could be cut without

disrupting the plot. The only other female character, Penny Benjamin (Jennifer Connelley) is

Maverick's love interest and the tender of a Navy bar—her role is essentially reducible to

providing a service for the (almost exclusively male) Top Gun recruits. Hence, the film's focus is

still chiefly on male relationships; namely, the tenuous friendship between Maverick and

Rooster. *Maverick* refuses to probe the chauvinism of the first film in a meaningful way. It

appeals to audience nostalgia, both for the original *Top Gun*, and for a military era in which

women were excluded and uses this nostalgia to present joining the Navy as an especially

appealing pursuit. Therefore, in having such an inconsequential female role, the film possesses

the appearance of progressiveness while still reifying misogyny and explicitly linking it to the

institution of the military. *Maverick* thus serves as an example of how hegemonic structures are

disseminated through popular culture. The ideology of the ruling class, namely, the domination

of historically marginalized groups such as women, is presented as natural through the

underrepresentation and sidelining of such groups. The military is depicted as inherently moral

and worthy, and this is connected to its demographic skew toward men. It therefore subtly

endorses sexism, failing to eliminate the "Top Gun mentality" from its ethos.

On the question of the representation of the Navy, it is also worth examining how the

institution is presented beyond gender. Following Virilio, if war is cinema[71], the mission at the

crux of the film is of particular significance to public understanding of the U.S. military. The

country storing the nuclear facility in the film is never identified; the enemy remains entirely

nameless and faceless throughout the runtime. The potential impacts of the successful

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[71] Virilio, *War and Cinema*.

completion of the mission are never considered. What if conflict escalated? What if destroying the uranium plant resulted in serious retaliation—a full-on war? If done right, the destruction of the plant is clean. Maverick and the Top Gun squad aren't setting out to kill anyone. They aren't ending lives—in fact, by attempting such an impossible task, the lives most in danger are their own. The mission, therefore, provides a perfect vehicle for conveying the nobility and moral righteousness of the Navy, as well as giving the pilots the opportunity to showcase their abilities in a particularly blatant demonstration of spectacle. The American public is taught that the military's enemies are irrelevant, so much so that they are never given a name. The potential aftershocks of such a mission are equally irrelevant, regardless of how potentially destructive they may be. Choosing to center the film solely around the Americans marginalizes the overseas civilians who would be affected by this mission—not only are they not given a voice, but they don't even receive the dignity of a name.

The film's presentation of the mission is already problematic, but becomes more insidious when considering that the uranium plant in question is a thinly veiled reference to the real-life JCPOA deal between the U.S. and Iran.[72] In 2015, the two nations struck a treaty to put a cap on Iran's rapid production of weapons-grade uranium, in exchange for relief from U.S. sanctions.[73] However, it was the U.S., not Iran, as the film would lead us to believe, that initially violated the agreement when Donald Trump reinstated sanctions in 2018.[74] *Maverick* twists the already misunderstood story in favor of the United States, further emphasizing its nationalistic messaging. The film skews this story in the Navy's favor, even if that necessitates the blatant

[72] Khan, Sahar. "What Top Gun Says about the Iran Nuclear Deal." Inkstick, June 22, 2022. https://inkstickmedia.com/what-top-gun-says-about-the-iran-nuclear-deal/.
[73] Davenport, Casey. "By Violating Iran Deal, Trump Jeopardizes National Security." Time, May 9, 2018. https://time.com/5271040/trump-reckless-violation-iran-deal-national-security/.
[74] Ibid.

misrepresentation of a real-life situation. Audiences, therefore, receive an overwhelmingly positive view of the institution. Considering what Jeansonne and Luhrssen posit about the historical understanding of war being distorted through the lens of cinema, this is concerning: public understanding of the JCPOA deal may forever be altered by this film's choice to frame America as blameless.

As previously mentioned, the film relies heavily on spectacle. To be more explicit, the film itself *is* a spectacle. According to Stahl and Andersson, this is in line with the turn away from narrativization following news coverage of the Gulf War. Excitement and awe will always sell better than factual accounts of military proceedings, and this film takes full advantage of the trend toward action over thought. The first two-thirds of the film, with their interpersonal drama and nostalgic callbacks to the 1986 film, are merely setting up the extended forty-minute action setpiece that closes out the film and the franchise. Every tension-building element in a director's arsenal comes into play during this sequence. The Top Gun crew has two minutes to complete the mission; there is a literal ticking clock shown onscreen to remind audiences just how little time there is to accomplish this task. The sound design immerses viewers completely in the world of the film, we hear each labored breath of the pilots as they fight against the altitude, the whizzing missiles narrowly avoiding their aircrafts. We hear explosions, beeps, helicopter blades whirring, the frantic muffled dialogue over headsets. Beneath it all is the score, equal parts epic and moving depending on what is happening on screen. As the pilots initially take off, it underscores their flight with a loud, booming, heartbeat motif. When Maverick crashes, it fades to a tense string section, only to return to the heartbeat sounds as he and Rooster make their escape. Naturally, the spectacle is solidified and intensified through the visuals. While we do see wide shots of the planes—for example, as they weave through the mountain landscape leading

up to the uranium plant, the camera never strays long from claustrophobic, intimate close-ups of the pilots. This serves to increase the audience's adrenaline—we never forget how tense the Top Gun crew feels in these moments. The film also makes heavy use of POV shots, further forcing viewers into the perspective of the pilots as they complete the mission.

The filmmaking in this sequence is particularly adept. Even those who have qualms about the film's connection to Tailhook, or its conspicuously propagandistic messaging, may be won over by the spectacle of it all. The film takes advantage of the base human desire to experience a rush of adrenaline and excitement. As Jeansonne and Luhrssen argue, it is cinema's ability to evoke specific emotions in its audience that makes it such a powerful tool of propaganda[75], and *Maverick* knows exactly how to make its audience tense. It is the combination of audio and visual techniques unique to the medium of film that creates this reaction.

Figure 9: A claustrophobic close-up of Maverick piloting the plane.

The tension built in audience members through spectacle also results in identification with the film's protagonist. Maverick experiences all-encompassing fear as his plane spins out, thus, so does the audience. The techniques deployed to evoke feelings of stress and anxiety during the mission place the viewers within Maverick's headspace. For the last forty minutes of

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[75] Jeansonne and Luhrssen, *War on the Silver Screen* ix.

Maverick, audiences effectively traverse the impossible mission themselves. In seeing themselves in this Navy aviator, audiences, therefore, feel more strongly attached to the U.S. Navy's cause—both while viewing the film itself and long after they've left the theater.

Unlike *Captain Marvel*, the film's approach to these spectacular sequences lies less in creating a cartoonish, fantastical image of the military, but instead in making the spectacle feel both real and nearly unbelievable at the same time. Tom Cruise was lauded for his insistence on participating in his own stunts and demanded that other cast members fly their own planes, too.[76] CGI was used only for the most dangerous stunts.[77] Because it feels so realistic, the audience is further immersed in the spectacle. They feel as if they really get to live through the mission. But obviously, this is a Hollywood film. Even realism is manufactured. The principal characters are never in any danger of serious injury or death. They expertly dodge each missile, and effortlessly steal an enemy aircraft in a time of need. By convincing audiences that what they are seeing is real, while still presenting an ultimately sanitized image of battle, the film further complicates our understanding of what war looks like.

Maverick stands apart as a particularly intriguing—and insidious—pro-war blockbuster. The film was wildly popular upon its release, both among critics and general audiences, which makes its perpetuation of pro-war sentiment especially harmful. It fails to amend the issues surrounding the first film, still pushing women to the sidelines and perpetuating a military culture that thrives on chauvinism. It refuses to give a name or a face to the country that it is potentially starting a war with. It rewrites the history of the real-life JCPOA deal to encourage patriotism and xenophobia, and it wins audiences over by employing the spectacular. In many

[76] Ivan-Zadeh, Larushka. "Tom Cruise Reveals How the Amazing Flight Stunts in Top Gun: Maverick Were Shot." *Metro*, 25 May 2022, https://metro.co.uk/2022/05/25/tom-cruise-reveals-how-flight-stunts-in-top-gun-maverick-were-shot-16699788/.
[77] Ibid.

ways, it differs from *Captain Marvel*: its action sequences are nowhere near as comic-book-like, and its approach to female empowerment is even more lackluster. But ultimately, both films share the same intention: to convince American audiences to consider enlistment—or at the very least, exit the theater with an overwhelmingly positive view of the Navy. The fact that each film takes such a different approach ensures that they collectively convince as many people as possible to internalize their stance that war is necessary, and that the U.S. military is a positive force.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of the state-sponsored war film is nothing new. In the 1940s, the government considered the proliferation and popularity of these films a vital component of an American victory. In 2001, the state once again turned to the cinematic medium as a tool of psychological persuasion to convince the public that it was necessary to go to war. However, considering the social, political, and technological developments that occurred during the time between World War II and the War on Terror, the post-9/11 military film inhabits a space entirely of its own. In the wake of commercialized news coverage of the Gulf War, the depiction of war onscreen in this era has been permanently altered to favor spectacle over narrativization, harkening back to the earliest uses of the medium. Storytelling is sacrificed for the uniquely affective audiovisual capacity of the moving picture. In *Maverick* and *Marvel* alike, the pretense of narrative is eventually dropped in favor of extensive, sprawling action sequences designed to keep audiences on the edges of their seats. They intentionally evoke fear, tension, excitement, and eventually relief when the battle is won, which leaves filmgoers more susceptible to their pro-war messaging.

There is always some degree of hegemonic messaging implicit to war films—after all, their purpose is to convince audiences to acquiesce to the ultimate power and authority of the state. But as social norms have shifted, so, too, has the way that hegemony is imparted on the general public. The position of women, for example, has changed considerably since the 40s. Women are no longer solely relegated to the domestic sphere, instead making up vast swaths of the professional sector. But the post-9/11 war film uses this to its advantage, incorporating the tenets of feminism into its jingoistic messaging. Progressive ideals are subsumed into the hierarchical structure that positions the state above its people. A female moviegoer may be

pleased that *Captain Marvel* depicts the difficulties of breaking the glass ceiling. They might

walk away with a more favorable view of the U.S. Air Force, even though such a state power is

cut from the same oppressive cloth as the film's misogynistic villains. *Maverick*, on the other

hand, plays at the other side by forcing its women characters into minor supporting roles. For as

many pro-feminists there may be in America, there is also a significant portion of the population

who will not agree with the pseudo-progressive messaging of *Marvel*. The military, therefore,

appeals to as much of the population as possible. Pro-feminists and anti-feminists alike are

encouraged to support the ventures of the Pentagon. Both are incorporated into the same

hegemonic structure that values the interests of the ruling class above all else.

Despite being two decades out from the initial 9/11 terrorist attacks, the DoD's approach

to media propaganda has changed very little. The U.S. military no longer needs total public

consent for their actions. The War on Terror has waged on for the millennium thus far. Yet, these

case study films demonstrate how desperately these filmmaking techniques are still being used to

stamp out dissent and placate audience members. The reverberations of those initial films

produced in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 are still being felt. The convergence of

technology—particularly, advances in computer generated imagery that allow filmmakers to

create any images they want out of thin air-- and sociopolitical events has resulted in a military

film culture that values the acquiescence of the American public above all else.

Determining how to address this issue poses a challenge because of the sheer financial

and authoritative power of the Department of Defense. Demanding that the film industry end

their partnership with the military is a worthwhile endeavor. But, considering how intertwined

the structures of the Pentagon and Hollywood are, the timeline for this goal might stretch on

indefinitely. Additional transparency surrounding a film's military funding sources could be

helpful to the public—one of the major components of the issue is that most audiences have no idea which films are made in collaboration with the Pentagon, and therefore do not understand the pro-military biases present in these films. A graphic could be shown at the beginning of all DoD-funded films disclosing military involvement, for example. But given the magnitude of the issue, I fear that this still wouldn't be enough.

In lieu of a major institutional change, the solution is to start with audiences. For whatever tricks the military might throw at the public in their films-- the explosive audiovisual spectacle, for example-- audiences can say no. They can ignore these films when they hit theaters. If they do choose to view these films, they can do so with a critical eye, noting the discrepancies between the real horrors of war and the rosy images we see in, for example, *Captain Marvel*, of female empowerment and cartoon violence. For as powerful the tool of cinema is, it is art, and is therefore subject to interpretation and critique. The military wants us to watch *Maverick* and join the Navy, or at least think very positively of it. But we will always have the ability to exercise intellectual autonomy and refuse this interpretation.

Filmmakers not affiliated with the DoD can also choose to take up the affective qualities of the medium to counter the biases of military-sponsored cinema. It is true, given the current structures of funding in place, that making a war film which contradicts the messaging of the U.S. military is difficult. These films may be comparatively low budget. They may lack access to the equipment and facilities that their pro-war counterparts possess. However, this may prove to be an advantage, for where the popular blockbusters turn to the spectacle, the small anti-war film can remain grounded in narrative, character, and storytelling. Unlike the unnamed enemy in *Maverick*, these films can give voices to the civilians whose lives have been upended by military invasion. They can focus on the trauma that soldiers experience on the battlefield. The affective

qualities of these films come from an appeal to the audience's humanity, rather than the creation of tension through empty spectacle. Where the blockbuster utilizes computer-generated action sequences, these smaller films can depict the reality of the War on Terror, rather than a glamorized, idealized version of it.

The pro-war blockbuster, as embodied through *Maverick* and *Marvel*, is dangerous because it prevents audiences from understanding the true harm of war. Through its spectacle and laudatory depiction of military action, public understanding of war is distorted and sanitized. The heroes of these films are good people who perform amazing stunts—the audience looks up to them or wants to be like them. The films are entertaining, enthralling, and engaging. They get people into theaters even when the film industry is in a state of crisis. They are beloved by many and seen by even more. Yet, we can always exercise our power as citizens and consumers to interpret these films counter-hegemonically. We can label them for what they really are: military propaganda. And we can refuse to accept the messaging that they present to us.

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