

Theaters of War: Hollywood in bed with the Pentagon and the CIA

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22 December 2022

The 2022 documentary *Theaters of War: How the Pentagon and the CIA took Hollywood* is a chilling exposure of the deep-going collaboration between the American entertainment industry and the US state apparatus. It demonstrates how Hollywood and other segments of the industry glorify the multi-trillion dollar war machine, whitewash its bloody global interventions and attempt to condition the population to even greater crimes.

Released earlier this year and available on some streaming services, including Kanopy, the 87-minute film is directed, edited and narrated by Roger Stahl, a communication studies professor at the University of Georgia.

Stahl's film, which was recently screened at the Barcelona Human Rights Film Festival, however, has not received the publicity it deserves. This is no surprise but is in line with the efforts to minimise the significance of the Biden administration's gargantuan increases in the Pentagon budget as part of its military operations against Russia in Ukraine and the preparations for military conflict with China. Anything that accurately references or even raises concern about the real record and catastrophic consequences of US imperialist militarism is brushed aside and marginalised.

Stahl's documentary draws heavily from *National Security Cinema: The Shocking New Evidence of Government Control in Hollywood* written by Matthew Alford and Tom Secker and published in 2017 (see WSWs review) and recently obtained internal Pentagon documents and emails.

Alford, Secker and other academics, along with director Oliver Stone, two Iraq War veterans, and others are interviewed in the documentary.

US military intervention in Hollywood film production, of course, is not a new phenomenon. Washington established a so-called Committee of Public Information in 1917 to formulate media guidelines and promote domestic support for its entry into World War I.

The film industry responded by pledging to provide “slides, film leaders and trailers, posters... to spread that propaganda so necessary to the immediate mobilisation of the country's great resources.”

Wings (1927, directed by William Wellman), the first-ever Academy Award winner, was given crucial assistance by the

military, thus opening the way for a spectacular increase in this sort of partnership following America's entry into World War II in 1941.

While this is generally well known, few Americans today are aware of the massive expansion of this collaboration since WWII and the censorious control that the Pentagon and CIA have over the much of the mainstream entertainment industry. As Matthew Alford tells *Theaters of War*, “The Pentagon operates like a slickly oiled PR machine that's advertising the most violent and powerful organisation on the planet.”

Since the end of WWII US-based filmmakers and television producers wanting Department of Defense (DoD) or CIA assistance—i.e., cut price or free use of military equipment and facilities, technical advice, and military personnel as extras—have had to accede to the demands of these agencies.

Directors and producers must be prepared to have their scripts vetted, and then accept all changes demanded. “Production assistance agreements,” include direct control of subject matter, plot, and character development.

The DoD's Entertainment Media Office, in fact, has a long list of “showstopper” rules that automatically ban all military assistance to films depicting war crimes, torture, fragging, veteran suicides and sexual assaults and racism in the armed forces.

The Pentagon's interventions are no longer confined to the film industry but include, dramatic television series, cooking shows, endurance competitions and other “reality” programs, as well as video games and social media.

Prior to its production, Stahl's documentary team secured up to 30,000 pages of internal DoD documents, emails and other material, revealing that the Pentagon and CIA have exercised direct editorial control over more than 2,500 film and television productions, most of them since 2001. Most commentators previously thought these agencies had only been involved in a few hundred films.

Theaters of War opens with the Pentagon's involvement in *Top Gun: Maverick*, which made \$US1.48 billion this year, the highest grossing film for 2022 (see: *Top Gun: Maverick—War propaganda built to order for the United States military*).

Following on from the military assistance it provided to *Top Gun*, its 1986 predecessor, the studios allowed the Pentagon's

Entertainment Media Office to edit and modify the script to add key “talking points.” The “Office” was also given a special screening of the final result before its official release.

The documentary then traces out the evolution of Hollywood’s post-WWII relationship with the military-industrial complex and academic hacks, such as Lawrence H. Suid (*Guts & Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film* [2002]). It also reviews how the CIA went on to establish its own entertainment media office in the 1990s, which quickly developed into pitching, advising and even writing some movies for the studios.

Oliver Stone tells *Theaters of War* about his unsuccessful attempts to secure assistance for *Platoon*, based on his own experiences in the Vietnam War, and *Born on the Fourth of July*, about paralysed Vietnam veteran Ron Kovic. The military categorically rejected Stone’s anti-war scripts, cynically claiming they were inaccurate.

“The whole ethos of that [entertainment media] office at the Pentagon is that they’re supposed to provide accuracy to the filmmakers, but they do the opposite. They provide inaccuracy and lies,” Stone explains. “They only want movies that glorify the American soldier, glorify our patriotism, the homeland and nationalism, [and] this [sort of] nonsense. They fetishise the military.”

Although there are too many examples of the Hollywood/Pentagon-CIA productions to cite here, *Theaters of War* focuses on several high profile movies and producers. These include Jerry Bruckheimer (*Pearl Harbor*) and Michael Bay (*Armageddon*) and his *Transformers* franchise.

Theaters of War has a clip of Bay, sitting alongside Phil Strub, who headed the Entertainment Media Office for almost 30 years, boasting about how he has “a direct line to the Pentagon.”

The documentary also examines some multi-million dollar blockbusters, such as *Godzilla* and the Marvel Comic’s *Iron Man* franchise, which, following Pentagon interventions, flip the political intent of their original stories and glorify the military, presenting the use of nuclear weapons as a force for good.

As Ontario Tech University’s Tanner Mirlees tells the documentary, science fiction and fantasy provide “a fictional imaginary space for the various melodramas of the military to be scripted and played out, without ever having to address the real motives of foreign policy in the world today or the consequences for those who fight on its behalf and die in its wake.”

Theaters of War also pulls apart *The Long Road Home*, (2017), a television miniseries about the disastrous US army military intervention into Iraq’s Sadr City in which 60 US soldiers were wounded and eight killed in early April 2004.

The miniseries was made with the close collaboration of the Pentagon, which provided Fort Hood, the largest army base in America and its inner-urban warfare training ground, which

was remodelled to look like Sadr City and used to film the television production.

Two former US soldiers—Duncan Koebrich and Travis Walker—who were involved in the action explain how the show blatantly distorts what occurred, falsely presenting Lieutenant Colonel Gary Volesky as a frontline hero. They also denounce the program for denigrating Tomas Young, one of the many seriously wounded.

Young, who was permanently paralysed after being wounded, went on to become a determined Iraq veteran anti-war activist and peace activist (see: “Dying US army veteran denounces ‘illegal’ Iraq War”). Casey Sheehan, the 24-year-old son of anti-war campaigner Cindy Sheehan, was killed in the same incident.

Theaters of War notes that the US has spent an estimated \$8 trillion bombing 70 countries around the world since the end of WWII and references the staggering numbers of deaths and untold suffering. This includes, it states, over 200,000 dead in Afghanistan and over one million in Iraq alone, and about 59 million refugees globally.

Notwithstanding the powerful material assembled in *Theaters of War*, the documentary concludes with a call for legislation or court action to compel Hollywood to place text at the beginning of every film or television show telling the viewer that it was made in collaboration with the Pentagon and/or the CIA. Such an appeal is entirely futile.

While audiences should be told about who made what they’re watching, this seriously underestimates US imperialism and its military-industrial complex and the threat it constitutes to basic democratic rights and the existence of all of humanity. Despite this critical weakness, *Theaters of War* deserves to be made available to audiences everywhere. Its revelations are a devastating indictment of Hollywood and the entertainment industry chiefs who needed little persuasion that massive profits could be made by producing war propaganda for the US military.



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