

A Predicament

Imagine the following scenario: You have developed a great idea for a new service or product. The only problem is that you cannot finance your potential start-up. In order to get your project off the ground, you turn to crowdfunding.

You are then confronted with the following (moral?) dilemma: A major donor has appeared on the scene. But there's a hitch. He or she represents values that are completely opposite to your own.

Discussion

1. Do you still accept the (badly needed) money? Why or why not?
2. Make a list of people and/or organizations that you would NOT accept money from.
3. What if the donor demands that you make changes to your product or service? How far will you go to please the donor?

B Hollywood's devil in disguise

Movies have probably been made about every war that has ever been fought. World War II is a popular setting and the Vietnam War also gets a lot of coverage in the US. In recent years, the various wars in the Middle East have also been a favorite. Typically war movies show good and evil in black and white; that is, the viewers have no trouble discerning the good guys from the bad guys. Action-packed scenes and lots of heavy equipment are usually also a given.

1. **In class come up with a list of war movies. What features do they have in common? Are any of them remarkably different?**
2. **Discuss this quote from Steven Spielberg: "Every war movie, good or bad, is an antiwar movie."**

There are basically three different ways that a war movie can be made. First of all, a producer or director can rely on computer animation and special effects to simulate helicopters, tanks, friendly and unfriendly fire – and a multitude of other war machinery. Such was the case with the movie *Independence Day* (technically a science fiction action film but with plenty of fighting scenes) which was released in 1996 and directed by Roland Emmerich. More than 3,000 special effects and an unprecedented number of miniatures and models were used to make the film.

Secondly, the directors can avoid showing lots of equipment and instead concentrate on making the setting look and sound real. Filmmakers can go on location to a jungle in the Philippines to make the viewers think they're in Vietnam, and the beaches of Normandy in WWII have been re-created in Ireland. The sound of helicopters will make most people picture them in their mind.

But why go to all this trouble when – theoretically – anyone making a film could use military resources since – to play devil's advocate here – they are all financed with taxpayers' money? This brings us to the third possibility. Contact the Department of Defense's Special Assistant for Entertainment Media at the Pentagon in Washington, DC, or one of the armed forces' branch offices in Los Angeles. If there's no extra cost to the US government, filmmakers are also charged nothing.

That means if they need footage of standard flight operations, it's free. However, any special requests come with a price tag. That is, if the Pentagon has already approved your script and your characters. And if you agree to a military consultant being on set. And if the movie is screened one more time by the Pentagon before its final release. Then you can get whatever you want.

3. What kinds of things could the Pentagon disagree with in a war movie?

4. Why does the military offer these services to filmmakers?

Hollywood is stereotypically known as a place for “lily-livered (cowardly) liberals”. So how do you account for the apparent contradiction of them getting along so well with the military? Filmmakers take advantage of the Pentagon's offers because it saves them a lot of money. Why build a model of a tank if you can use a real one? The equipment's authenticity makes the movie more believable. There's a wide range of equipment to choose from, so they don't have to settle on second best. However, as mentioned above, the price tag attached is not only monetary. Filmmakers must be willing to make compromises and give up some of the control over their project. However, average taxpayers don't have a say in the matter at all. The Pentagon decides which films will be supported with taxpayers' dollars.

And the military? To put it in a nutshell, the military gets to show off its state-of-the-art equipment. It's like a showcase for the taxpayers. Roger Stahl, author of the book *Militainment, Inc.*, put it this way, “They're [the armed forces] looking to legitimate their operations.” And in a second nutshell, the Pentagon ensures that the women and men in the armed forces are portrayed in a positive light. Philip Strub, director of entertainment media at the US Department of Defense, said, “Our desire is that the military are portrayed as good people trying to do the right thing the right way.” All different kinds of entertainment – from movies to video games – play a big role in forming public opinion on what a soldier is.

Put these two nutshells together and some people say you've got propaganda and recruitment rolled into one. The 1986 movie *Top Gun*, starring Tom Cruise, is considered to be the “daddy” of the war movie genre. In fact, the Navy had recruiters stationed in the lobbies of movie theaters just waiting for the enthusiastic young moviegoers to exit. It is reported that immediately after the movie was released, there was a short-term 400% increase in enlistment.

Some movies are still made despite the Pentagon refusing their support. Independence Day was made without military assistance after they didn't approve of the main character dating a stripper. A Kevin Costner movie, *Thirteen Days*, about the Cuban missile crisis, received no support because the way in which generals were portrayed was deemed negative and inauthentic, and Costner refused to change the scenes in question. A negative depiction of military heroes is often used as a reason to refuse support of a movie. Moviegoers tend to gravitate toward the semi-defiant, self-assured military heroes while the top dogs in the Pentagon do not. Inauthentic, they say.

Hollywood Military

And yet the Pentagon is willing to offer assistance, a lot of assistance, for a movie starring toys. Is that authentic? The movie in question is *Transformers* from 2007. On the surface it looks like light entertainment for the younger crowd; however, it's hard to find a film with more military hardware. Add to that the real life military personnel taking over roles in the movie and the filming locations (US airbases and the Pentagon) and you've got... what?

Such movies used to be criticized as overblown advertisements for toys, but are they now ads for the military? The message that children may be receiving from such a movie is that the military, and also war, is an action-packed adventure full of immortal, impeccable heroes around every corner. And which little boy would not like to get his hands on all that technology? It has even been suggested that impressionable young children are being targeted with movies like *Transformers* because recruitment rates have fallen since 9/11.

5. What messages do war movies send?

6. Is entertainment apolitical? In other words, can I leave my politics at the cinema door?

7. Think back to the predicament presented in section A. Should filmmakers accept military money?

C What do you think?

Comment on one of these quotes:

Heba Amin, visual artist:

“You can't convince an entire country to go into an illegal war in the Middle East without having previously convinced them of a certain kind of image of a bad guy. And Hollywood plays a very big role in perpetuating that image.”

David Robb, author of Operation Hollywood:

“The military is part of the US government. In America we have the First Amendment, which prohibits government from favoring speech it likes and not favoring speech it doesn't like.”

Author Lawrence H. Suid:

“Hollywood feature films have served as the most significant medium to argue for the military.”

Author Lawrence H. Suid:


“Americans love violence, and war movies provide all that violence without danger.”

Calum Marsh, writer:


“Films like this contribute to subtle shifts in public perception, helping to legitimize feelings of xenophobia and American exceptionalism.”

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Further information on the topic:

- <https://www.army.mil/info/institution/publicAffairs/ocpa-west/faq.html> 
- What criteria are used to determine if my production will be approved?
The following criteria are used to judge the possibility of fully supporting entertainment industry requests.

The production must benefit the Department of Defense or otherwise be in the national interest based on the following factors:

- The production must help increase public understanding of the Armed Forces and the Department of Defense.
 - The production should help Armed Forces recruiting and retention programs.
 - The production must be authentic in its portrayal of persons, places, actual military operations or historical events. Fictional portrayals must depict a feasible interpretation of military life, operations and policies.
 - The production should not appear to condone or endorse activities by private citizens or organizations that are contrary to U.S. Government policy.
 - The producer must agree to sign and abide by the production agreement and DODI5410.16 (you will receive copies of both documents early in your coordination).
 - Military assets requested must be available when required.
- Strecker, Rainer: *Gebrauchsanweisung für Los Angeles*
 - Read an article from the *Atlantic* about war movies: <https://bit.ly/2FMOLpG> 

B Hollywood's devil in disguise

Although the seven questions posed in the text are basically opinion questions, we have provided some food for thought for you here.

1. In class come up with a list of war movies. What features do they have in common? Are any of them remarkably different?

Top Gun, Warrior, Transformers (based on toys), Battle: Los Angeles (battling aliens), Battleship, Act of Valor, The Deer Hunter, Platoon, Blackhawk Down, Independence Day, Saving Private Ryan, The Avengers, Wings, Midway, The Longest Day, The Great Escape, Pearl Harbor, Armageddon, Crimson Tide, Thirteen Days, The Hunt for Red October, Apocalypse Now, Catch-22, Full Metal Jacket, Dr. Strangelove, Three Kings, Lone Survivor, Avengers, Soldier Woman, They Shall Not Grow Old, Dunkirk, Midway

Two films made by Clint Eastwood in 2006 show the battle for Iwo Jima told from the opposing sides' perspectives. They are called *Letters from Iwo Jima* and *Flags of Our Fathers*.

2. Discuss this quote from Steven Spielberg: "Every war movie, good or bad, is an antiwar movie."

Perhaps what he means by "antiwar" is that such movies show that war isn't harmless, that people die and it's dangerous. However, I actually disagree with his statement. I think that war movies tend to glorify war and make people immune to it. There's always a hero and so the message is, "War makes heroes."

3. What kinds of things could the Pentagon disagree with in a war movie?

How the armed forces and the military personnel are portrayed (too negative), the brutal dialogs, inaccurate portrayal of military life, too much criticism of the military and war, unethical/immoral behavior by the characters.

4. Why does the military offer these services to filmmakers?

Because they want to show a positive picture of the military to audiences and gain support. Because they want to control how the military is presented. Because they want to earn extra money.

5. What messages do war movies send?

War makes heroes, war is dirty, war is hard, war makes a man (or adult) out of you, war is justified.

6. Is entertainment apolitical? In other words, can I leave my politics at the cinema door?

I think it's hard to go to a "pro-war" movie and still say that you're a pacifist, for example. You can say it's just for entertainment, but often actions speak louder than words.

7. Think back to the predicament presented in section A. Should filmmakers accept military money?

I think that the military has too much influence on a film when they supply equipment for it. Nowadays there are enough other possibilities to create war scenes using special effects and computer simulations so that I think filmmakers could do without the Pentagon.