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"I Know Propaganda When I See it: A discussion of American War Cinema from 1970 to the Present"

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Abstract: The events of September 11, 2001 deeply impacted society in countless ways. One of these impacts was the shift in how cinema depicted war. This thesis demonstrates how American War Cinema has evolved over the last 60 years, increasing its focus on the deterrence of war and recruitment of new soldiers. By conducting research, analysis, and writing, this thesis uses primary source monographs like *Nomadology* and *Manufacturing Consent,* and films like *Apocalypse Now* and *War Dogs*, alongside secondary sources such as scholarly articles, film reviews, and literature reviews, to answer the question: Was American War Cinema changed by the Global War on Terror (GWOT) or the American War Machine?

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Finishing this thesis has been not only an academic challenge but also a deep journey of personal and philosophical growth. It reflects not only my work but also the cooperative support of everyone who has touched my life academically and personally. The journey has taught me the value of questioning and the importance of diverse perspectives in enriching our understanding of complex philosophical issues.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Paul Watzlawick, Austrian-American family therapist, psychologist, communication theorist, and philosopher, once pointed out the brilliance of propaganda: it floods the mind so completely with its ideas that the person absorbing it does not even realize it's happening. Building on this idea, this project does not focus on how propaganda works, per se. Instead, it looks at the bigger picture—the cultural and ideological stories woven into American war movies—from the gritty 1970s to the complex present day.

War films are more than just entertainment. They are mirrors reflecting America's evolving identity and its use of military and political power. At its heart, this work explores how American war films have changed over time. These changes do not just reflect new filmmaking styles and storytelling techniques. They also show how America's approach to using its military and political influence has evolved. I specifically focus on the portrayal of what is called the "American War Machine." This concept stretches beyond battles and explosions. It includes the behind-the-scenes tactics, psychological maneuvers, and subtle shows of influence that shape global perceptions. By taking a journey from the intense realism of classics like *Apocalypse Now* and *Black Hawk Down* to the morally murky tones of *Lord of War* and *American Made*, this research explores how these films do not just reflect the world—they may also shape it.

The project takes two main steps. First, I define key ideas using influential books like *Manufacturing Consent* and *War Machine*. These books help explain what the "American War Machine" really is and how it relies on both direct power and more behind-the-scenes tactics. Second, I compare war movies from different decades. I use a mix of materials, like interviews

with filmmakers, film scripts, and reviews, as well as articles and studies on the topic. Together, these help me dive into how these movies have changed and why it matters.

Why does this matter? Over the last fifty years, war movies have taken a turn, breaking away from traditional depictions of the military. This raises some big questions. Are these changes just natural creativity at work, or is something more intentional going on? Could politics or money be steering the way these stories are told? In today's world, where the lines between entertainment, propaganda, and politics are more blurred than ever, understanding the messages behind these films is crucial. What we watch on the big screen often influences how we see power, war, and America's role in the world.

In the end, this project aims to show how American war films have evolved over the decades. It digs into the connection between storytelling, political messaging, and cultural power. What's at stake is more than just movies—it is about how these films shape opinions, influence debates, and reflect shifts in American power. Does the change in how movies depict the "American War Machine" reveal new priorities for the Machine itself, showcase a deeper understanding of its role, or point to something entirely different? That is the question I want to explore.

Chapter 2: American War Cinema: The Intersection of Political Theory, National Security, and Cultural Narratives

This section synthesizes political theories, historical accounts, and institutional analyses to reveal how global politics enact mechanisms of power and embed them within American cinema. Drawing insights from philosophers like Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, linguists like Noam Chomsky—and referencing speeches by Presidents Barack H. Obama and Harry S. Truman—this study defines critical concepts such as the American War Machine, hard and soft power, American exceptionalism and everything in between. It also examines the roles of key U.S. national security agencies, including the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). This chapter demonstrates how these frameworks shape portrayals of war and militarization in American films, offering a critical perspective on cultural narratives that support U.S. policy and global engagement.

I. The American War Machine

The concept of the American War Machine lies at the heart of this inquiry. This term encapsulates the military, economic, and ideological systems that drive U.S. global interventions. Political power, industrial interests, and cultural narratives converge within this intricate network to sustain constant militarization.

Eisenhower and the Military-Industrial Complex

In his 1961 Farewell Address, Dwight D. Eisenhower critiqued the military-industrial complex, describing it as a potent convergence of military and industrial forces. He warned, "In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence,

whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist." (Farewell Address, 1961) Eisenhower highlighted the systemic risks of unchecked defense industries and political structures, where economic profits for elites displace democratic values and global stability. Eisenhower also criticized the defense industry's technological establishment, stating, "We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes." (Farewell Address, 1961) His warning resonates today, as U.S. defense budgets consistently overshadow funding for education, healthcare, and infrastructure. For instance, in 2022, the United States allocated $877 billion to military expenditures, surpassing the combined spending of the next ten nations. This spending institutionalizes militarization within the political economy, aligning national policy with the military-industrial complex's priorities while neglecting local needs. Eisenhower also foresaw the rise of private military contractors like Blackwater (now Academi), which operate in opaque spaces outside traditional oversight. These contractors blur the lines between public accountability and private profit, reflecting the fusion of capitalism and militarization and confirming Eisenhower's warnings.

Deleuze and Guattari: The War Machine Beyond the State

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in *Nomadology: The War Machine* and *A Thousand Plateaus*, redefine militarization by conceptualizing it as an entity beyond state apparatuses. They assert in *Nomadology*, "The war machine is not of the State apparatus... It is of nomadic origin, and it is an invention that is perpetually external to the State" (p. 5-6). This theory portrays militarization as a deterritorializing force that destabilizes and reshapes sovereignty. In the United States, this deterritorialization becomes apparent in cultural and technological

fields, particularly cinema. Hollywood actively reinforces the war machine's ideological legitimacy. Films like *Top Gun* and *American Sniper* glorify militaristic interventions and embed these narratives into the national psyche. In *A Thousand Plateaus,* Deleuze and Guattari emphasize (p. 88), "images of thought are inseparable from the assemblages they express," underscoring how cultural works such as films function as key assemblages perpetuating militarization. (*Nomadology*, p. 36-9)

Derrida: Deconstructing Sovereignty and Exception

Applying Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist framework offers a profound critique of ideological foundation of the American War Machine. His concept of "hauntology" highlights the persistent influence of historical events, including manifest destiny, Cold War anxieties, and the Global War on Terror (GWOT). In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida writes, "Here again what seems to be out front, the future, comes back in advance: from the past, from the back" (p. 10). He explains that the "haunt," or the return, involves both the past and the future; it embodies a promise or threat yet to come. These specters, or past events, drive the militaristic choices that the War Machine deems necessary for security, survival, and future destabilization.

In *The Beast and the Sovereign* (p. 23), Derrida examines the "sovereign decision," characterizing it as "the decision to decide on the exception." He identifies exceptionalism as fundamental to the war machine, legitimizing practices like preemptive strikes and extrajudicial killings. Derrida asserts, "The sovereign is he who decides on the exception; he who can say that the law is suspended for the sake of the law itself" (p. 25). This analysis reveals how the sovereign—whether the president or executive branch—and the beast—the American War Machine—both stand firmly above or at a distance from the law; both are, in different ways,

outlaws. (Bull) These sovereign decisions suspend legal norms under the banner of security, exposing contradictions in the war machine's ethical and legal claims.

The American War Machine integrates economic, cultural, and ideological systems into a self-sustaining apparatus. Engaging with the theories of Eisenhower, Deleuze and Guattari, and Derrida allows us to analyze the mechanisms that drive militarization. This paper defines the American War Machine as **a network of government institutions, including military and intelligence agencies, that collaboratively work to expand and sustain U.S. dominance abroad. This dominance relies on hard power tactics, such as warfare and imperialism, supported by advanced technology and manpower, alongside soft power strategies that disseminate American ideological values. Guided by lessons from historical precedents, the War Machine executes its operations with a calculated and enduring approach to maintaining global influence**. (*The Glitz and Glam of Ideology: How the CIA and Department of Defense Use Hollywood Blockbusters as a Way of Propagating the Ideology of the American War Machine*, p. 10)

II. Hard Power and Soft Power in War and International Relations

After defining The American War Machine, it becomes essential to outline its two distinct arms: hard power and soft power. These pivotal frameworks in international relations explain how states influence others and achieve strategic goals. Joseph Nye introduced these concepts in the late 20th century to highlight different but complementary approaches to power projection. Hard power uses coercive tools like military force and economic sanctions, while soft power influences others through attraction, persuasion, and the promotion of cultural and ideological values. Scholars and practitioners must deeply understand these ideas

to analyze modern geopolitics, war dynamics, and, in the case of this paper, American War Cinema.

Hard Power: Coercion and Control

Hard power relies on a state's ability to compel others through force or threats. In *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, Nye labels hard power as "command power," grounded in coercion and inducement. (p. 25) Military interventions, economic sanctions, and other force-based strategies exemplify this approach.

The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 illustrates hard power in action. The United States used overwhelming military force to dismantle Saddam Hussein's regime and eliminate alleged weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). While the operation achieved its immediate tactical goals, it destabilized the region and tarnished America's global reputation, showcasing the long-term costs of prioritizing hard power. Noam Chomsky, in *Hegemony or Survival*, argues that excessive militarism exacerbates conflicts, fosters resistance, and undermines state legitimacy both domestically and globally (p. 43). Chomsky's critique emphasizes the ethical and practical challenges of coercive power.

Soft Power: Influence Through Attraction

Soft power, on the other hand, shapes others' preferences through appeal and co-optation. Nye, in *Bound to Lead* (p. 31), defines soft power as the ability to achieve goals by inspiring admiration and emulation, rather than resorting to threats or monetary rewards. Cultural diplomacy, ideological alignment, and values like democracy and human rights play a central role in soft power. President Obama championed these principles during his administration.

In his 2009 Cairo speech, Barack H. Obama highlighted mutual respect and constructive dialogue to rebuild U.S. relations with the Muslim world. By emphasizing shared values and promoting cultural understanding, his foreign policy sought to restore America's moral authority and encourage international collaboration on climate change, counterterrorism, and other global issues. This approach shows how soft power, when used effectively, enhances a nation's reputation and strengthens its influence. Nye further explores this in *The Future of Power* (p. 85).

The Synergy of Hard and Soft Power

Many perceive hard and soft power as opposites, but Nye's concept of "smart power" in *The Future of Power* (p. 122) demonstrates the importance of combining these approaches strategically. Smart power involves carefully balancing coercive and attractive tools based on the geopolitical context.

During the Cold War, the United States exemplified smart power. Hard power instruments, such as NATO's military deterrence, were complemented by soft power initiatives, that included cultural diplomacy through the dissemination of American music, cinema, and educational exchange programs. This dual-pronged approach countered Soviet influence and promoted democratic ideals, proving the effectiveness of integrating hard and soft power. Nye elaborates on this strategy in *Bound to Lead* (p. 52) and *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (p. 35).

III. Destabilization, Deterritorialization, and Capitalism

Destabilization and deterritorialization play a critical role in contemporary socioeconomic and philosophical discourse. These concepts explain mechanisms of disruption

and transformation that intersect profoundly with capitalist dynamics. They offer nuanced insights into how societal, cultural, and economic structures undergo reconfiguration. To rigorously explore these concepts, we must deeply engage with their definitions, historical developments, and their dialectical relationship with capitalism. The works of thinkers like Antonio Gramsci, Joseph Schumpeter, and David Harvey, just to name a few, will provide analytical tools to critique the intersections of cultural, political, and economic systems. This section examines the interplay of these forces and highlights their impact on power structures and societal configurations.

Destabilization: Driving Transformation

Destabilization directly disrupts or erodes established systems, norms, or structures. Within political theory, destabilization weakens authoritative regimes or social order and often paves the way for systemic transformation. Antonio Gramsci, in *Prison Notebooks* (p. 276), described "crises of authority" by asserting, "The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters." Gramsci identified destabilization as a pivotal moment when the dissolution of hegemonic power structures enables potential reconfiguration.

In economics, destabilization fuels Joseph Schumpeter's concept of "creative destruction," which he saw as intrinsic to capitalism's evolution. In *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (p. 83), Schumpeter stated, "Capitalism...is by nature a form or method of economic change and not only never is but never can be stationary." His theory captures the cycles of innovation and disruption that define market economies. Though destabilization often brings

immediate hardship, as evidenced in global financial crises, it frequently drives structural reforms that aim to enhance systemic resilience.

Deterritorialization: Surpassing Geographic Boundaries

Deleuze and Guattari, in *A Thousand Plateaus* (p. 9), describe deterritorialization as the process that dissolves traditional territorial boundaries in cultural, economic, and social practices. They explain, "Deterritorialization operates by removing the fixed relations of space and identity, creating a field of multiplicities where boundaries dissolve into fluid connections." This concept illustrates globalization's destabilizing effects, as transnational flows of capital, labor, and culture blur spatial and symbolic attachments. Deleuze and Guattari recognize deterritorialization as central to late modernity, with globalization acting as its most conspicuous expression.

Cultural analysis also highlights deterritorialization's challenge to essentialist notions of identity and belonging. Arjun Appadurai's concept of "ethnoscapes" demonstrates how diasporic movements and transnational flows disrupt monolithic cultural paradigms. In *Modernity at Large* (p. 49), Appadurai notes, "Deterritorialization is one of the central forces of the modern world because it brings laboring populations into the lower-class sectors and spaces of relatively wealthy societies." Similarly, digital technologies amplify deterritorialization by fostering global connectivity and democratizing access to information.

Capitalism: A Nexus of Contradictions

Capitalism, with its foundation in private ownership and profit maximization, intricately connects with destabilization and deterritorialization. Historically, capitalism has leveraged destabilization to disrupt traditional economies, spurring industrial and technological

innovation. The Industrial Revolution epitomizes this dynamic, as agrarian societies underwent destabilization to facilitate the rise of industrial capitalism. Eric Hobsbawm, in *The Age of Revolution* (p. 45), provides a comprehensive exploration of this transformation. Meanwhile, capitalism depends on deterritorialization to expand globally, as transnational supply chains and financial networks demonstrate. David Harvey delves into this process in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (p. 77).

However, capitalism's embrace of these processes brings contradictions. Destabilization and deterritorialization may expand capitalist operations, but they also provoke re-territorialization, as multinational corporations consolidate economic power. David Harvey's "spatial fix" in *Spaces of Global Capitalism* (p. 120) underscores this paradox: "Capitalism never solves its crises problems, it moves them around geographically." This pattern reveals capitalism's tendency to reconstitute power asymmetries, often deepening socioeconomic inequities.

IV. American Imperialism and Exceptionalism

American imperialism and exceptionalism have profoundly shaped the United States' global engagement, especially through its military policies and wartime strategies. This section analyzes these intertwined ideologies by defining them, reviewing historical examples, and exploring their impact on war and international relations.

Understanding American Imperialism

American imperialism extends the nation's influence and power through territorial acquisitions, economic dominance, and military interventions. Noam Chomsky describes this approach as a deliberate system for imposing U.S. interests worldwide, often driven by

ideological and economic motives. In *Hegemony or Survival*, Chomsky highlights the U.S.-backed 1954 coup in Guatemala. He explains how the United States protected corporate economic interests, such as those of the United Fruit Company, by framing the intervention as part of the fight against communism. (p. 71) This example reveals how ideological goals like anti-communism aligned with economic objectives to justify interventions and establish dominance in Latin America. Chomsky states, “The basic principle of modern imperialism is that the rich and powerful shall rule and the rest shall be ruled”. (*Hegemony or Survival*, p. 15) This principle encapsulates the structural inequalities that imperialist systems create and links directly to the economic exploitation that sustains these ventures.

The U.S. has consistently relied on military power to carry out its imperialist agenda. The Spanish-American War, for instance, enabled U.S. territorial expansion and paved the way for its influence in the Pacific through the annexation of the Philippines. During the Vietnam War, military campaigns like Operation Rolling Thunder demonstrated how the U.S. used airstrikes to assert dominance and counter communist advances. More recently, the 2003 invasion of Iraq showcased preemptive military action, which U.S. leaders justified with claims about WMDs to secure strategic power in the Middle East. These cases illustrate how the United States has wielded its military capabilities to expand its global influence.

American Exceptionalism as a Moral Framework

American exceptionalism embodies the belief that the United States holds a unique and morally superior position in global affairs, which often serves as a justification for intervention. Alexis de Tocqueville initially articulated this idea, tying it to the democratic values and social fabric of the United States. In *Democracy in America*, he wrote, “The position of the Americans

is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one". (p. 36) Over time, this belief evolved into a perceived moral responsibility to spread democracy and freedom worldwide. Franklin D. Roosevelt, for example, characterized the U.S. as "a great arsenal of democracy" during World War II, positioning it as a defender of liberty against fascism. Roosevelt declared, "We must be the great arsenal of democracy. For us, this is an emergency as serious as war itself". (*Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Franklin D. Roosevelt*, p. 663)

After the 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush invoked themes of exceptionalism to justify military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq. In his 2002 State of the Union address, Bush asserted, "America will lead by defending liberty and justice because these are right and true and unchanging for all people everywhere" (*Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George W. Bush, 2002*, p. 45). His rhetoric reinforced the image of the U.S. as a global moral leader while presenting military actions as part of its broader mission to uphold universal principles. Critics like Howard Zinn and Peter Kuznick, however, argue that exceptionalism often camouflages U.S. imperial ambitions, enabling economic and strategic interests to masquerade as altruistic missions. Zinn points out, "American exceptionalism has often masked the reality of U.S. imperial ambitions, allowing economic interests to drive foreign policy under the rhetoric of freedom and democracy". (*A People's History of the United States*, p. 684)

In 2009, President Obama acknowledged this duality during his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech. He remarked, "America's commitment to global security will never waver. But in doing so, we must adhere to standards that govern the use of force" ("Nobel Peace Prize

Speech," 2009). By emphasizing multilateralism, Obama sought to balance the moral responsibilities of exceptionalism with a commitment to global cooperation.

V. The Roles of the Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency in U.S. National Security

The Department of Defense (DoD) and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) serve as pivotal institutions within the U.S. government's national security framework. President Harry S. Truman emphasized their importance when he announced the National Security Act of 1947. He explained that these organizations aimed to "provide for the effective, unified direction of the armed forces and strengthen our nation's intelligence capabilities". (Truman, 1947, p. 3) Although their missions frequently intersect, their methodologies and specialties remain distinct.

For example, the DoD led kinetic military operations such as Operation Desert Storm, while the CIA executed covert actions, including the successful raid that killed Osama bin Laden in 2011. (Bergen, 2012, p. 158) These examples highlight the unique strategies both agencies use to achieve national security. This section analyzes their roles, organizational structures, and contributions to national interests, providing readers the context to evaluate whether these agencies overstep their reach. The National Security Act of 1947 established these institutions to create a robust framework for military and intelligence operations, enabling them to complement each other in achieving strategic goals. (Smith, 2018, p. 112)

The Department of Defense (DoD)

The DoD coordinates and oversees all national defense and military operations within the executive branch. Congress established the DoD under the National Security Act of 1947

and headquartered it at the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. The department organizes, trains, and equips the armed forces to deter aggression and protect U.S. security. The National Security Act of 1947 stated that "the unified direction of the armed forces under civilian control" would balance military strength with democratic governance (National Security Act, 1947, p. 15). Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates reinforced this mission when he stated, "The Department of Defense's enduring goal is to prevent conflict whenever possible and, when necessary, to ensure decisive victory in the nation's wars" (Gates, 2010, p. 42). These foundational statements reflect both the statutory purpose and the evolving strategy of the DoD, as scholars and primary sources have documented (Jones, 2020, p. 67; Smith, 2018, p. 110).

The DoD's organizational structure includes the Army, Navy (including the Marine Corps), and Air Force (which also oversees the Space Force). The DoD also operates multiple defense agencies and subordinate entities, such as the National Security Agency (NSA) and the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA). The National Security Act of 1947 created these entities to unify the nation's defense strategy against complex global challenges (National Security Act, 1947, p. 18). Additionally, the Unified Combatant Commands, established under DoD Directive 5100.01, allow comprehensive regional and functional military oversight (DoD Directive 5100.01, 2021, p. 12).

The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)

The CIA collects, analyzes, and disseminates foreign intelligence to support U.S. policy decisions. The National Security Act of 1947 created the CIA to "correlate and evaluate intelligence relating to national security and provide for its appropriate dissemination"

(National Security Act, 1947, p. 24). Operating under the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), the CIA maintains independence in executing its missions. Former CIA Director William J. Burns described the agency as "a critical instrument of American power, ensuring that policymakers have the intelligence they need to confront the challenges of the 21st century" (Burns, 2021, p. 5).

Unlike the DoD, which focuses on military operations, the CIA specializes in intelligence gathering, covert actions, and strategic analysis. The CIA's foundational documents emphasize its mission "to provide intelligence that supports the national security and foreign policy objectives of the United States" (National Security Act, 1947, p. 25). The agency uses a global network of clandestine operatives and advanced technology to deliver actionable intelligence on foreign threats. Burns highlighted the CIA's adaptability, stating, "The CIA's strength lies in its ability to adapt to an ever-changing geopolitical landscape, ensuring that America stays ahead of its adversaries" (Burns, 2021, p. 7).

VI. Conclusion: From Ideas to the Big Screen – How American War Movies Shape Perspectives

Since I have now established a theoretical and institutional foundation through definitions, I can now turn to their portrayal in American War Cinema. Hollywood films not only dramatize the realities of war but also act as cultural texts that disseminate and normalize the narratives of the American War Machine. Movies like *Top Gun* and *American Sniper* glorify militaristic intervention and embed ideologies of hard power, exceptionalism, and a sanitized view of imperialism. These carefully crafted narratives and visual rhetoric interweave coercion and attraction, reinforcing the legitimacy of American global dominance. They translate

abstract theories into accessible depictions of war, subtly shaping public opinion and strengthening the cultural foundations of national security policies.

By dissecting concepts such as the American War Machine, hard and soft power, destabilization, deterritorialization, capitalism, imperialism, and exceptionalism, the multifaceted mechanisms through which political and military power are constructed and maintained have been unveiled. And it is the DoD and CIA that actively apply these theories to shape U.S. national security. As global interconnectedness grows and power dynamics shift, society must critically reassess these intertwined forces and agencies. Only through such introspection can we cultivate a more ethical, transparent, and cooperative global order.

Chapter 3: Cinematic Reflections on American Militarism: A Comparative Analysis of *Apocalypse Now*, *Black Hawk Down*, and *The Thin Red Line*

This chapter critically examines three seminal war films—*Apocalypse Now*, *Black Hawk Down*, and *The Thin Red Line*. Each film probes the psychological, moral, and institutional facets of American militarism. By analyzing the narratives and visual strategies of these films, this chapter explores themes such as the deployment and limitations of hard power, the destabilizing consequences of interventionist policies, and the dehumanizing processes of imperial ambition. Using cinematic details, iconic sequences, and insights from scholars—including Gramsci's theories on hegemonic collapse and Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of deterritorialization—this study reveals how these films collectively condemn the American War Machine and its enduring ramifications.

I. *Apocalypse Now*: A Study in Hard Power and the American War Machine

Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) scrutinizes the psychological and moral dilemmas of war, setting the Vietnam War as its backdrop to challenge broader notions of power, morality, and human nature. Through powerful storytelling, surreal visuals, and complex characters, Coppola investigates the destructive forces of militarism and exposes the ethical quandaries surrounding the American War Machine. He constructs iconic moments—such as the helicopter assault scene synchronized with Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries"—to showcase both the spectacle and the horror of warfare. Kurtz's chilling monologues on "horror" magnify the psychological consequences of power and violence. This analysis begins with a plot summary, shifts to an examination of the film's representation of hard power, and concludes with its critique of U.S. militaristic dominance.

Plot Overview

Captain Benjamin Willard, a disillusioned officer, undertakes a morally ambiguous mission to eliminate Colonel Kurtz, a rogue leader who has created a brutal autocracy deep in the Cambodian jungle. Willard's literal and metaphorical journey upriver reveals the psychological and moral disarray of war. He encounters surreal and harrowing episodes that reflect soldiers' fractured psyches and the war's devastating impacts. The chaotic Do Lung Bridge sequence (01:46:23) illustrates the collapse of military order, while Willard's reflections, such as "It was no longer about Colonel Kurtz. It was about myself" (Coppola and Milius, p. 102), lay bare his inner struggle.

Coppola juxtaposes visceral war spectacle with its human and environmental cost in key scenes. The Wagner-scored helicopter assault on a Vietnamese village (00:48:15 in the original cut) contrasts sharply with Willard's final confrontation with Kurtz and his haunting reflections on "horror" (02:27:34). These moments capture the dehumanizing effects of militarism, forcing viewers to confront the ethical implications of unrestrained power.

Hard Power in *Apocalypse Now*

Coppola dissects hard power by portraying the military's reliance on force and coercive authority to achieve strategic goals. The helicopter assault sequence, led by Lieutenant Colonel Kilgore and accompanied by Wagner's triumphant score (00:48:15), dramatizes the technological and logistical superiority of the U.S. military. Kilgore's infamous declaration, "I love the smell of napalm in the morning" (Coppola and Milius, p. 45), epitomizes the military ethos's normalization and glorification of violence.

Despite its depiction of overwhelming military might, the film critiques hard power's contradictions and limitations. Asymmetric warfare nullifies brute force's effectiveness, as shown in the chaotic Do Lung Bridge scene (01:46:23), where the absence of authority highlights hard power's inability to sustain order. Willard's journey underscores this futility, as he witnesses the moral decay and existential despair resulting from an over reliance on coercive methods. He incisively observes, "They train young men to drop fire on people, but their commanders won't allow them to write '

fuck' on their airplanes" (Coppola and Milius, p. 95). The film demonstrates how hard power fails to address the cultural and ideological complexities inherent in conflict, exposing its dehumanizing and destabilizing nature.

Connecting *Apocalypse Now* to the American War Machine

Apocalypse Now critiques the American War Machine—a bureaucratic and militaristic system designed to sustain U.S. hegemony through force and imperialism. Coppola highlights the institutionalization of violence, where the military normalizes destruction without consideration for its ethical and humanitarian costs. The surreal imagery of soldiers playing cards amidst chaos at the Do Lung Bridge (01:46:23) symbolizes this detachment. Kurtz's despairing cry of "The horror... the horror" (Coppola and Milius, p. 198) emphasizes the moral decay of a system obsessed with domination at all costs.

Through Colonel Kurtz, Coppola embodies the war machine's inherent contradictions. Once a celebrated officer, Kurtz rebels against the military's hierarchical systems and moral posturing. His madness reflects the psychological toll of a system that prioritizes power over humanity. Kurtz's chilling rumination on "horror" (02:27:34) lays bare his disillusionment: "You

have to have men who are moral... and at the same time able to utilize their primordial instincts to kill without feeling, without passion, without judgment" (Coppola and Milius, p. 195). His jungle dominion exemplifies militaristic excess—a descent into unchecked power devoid of ethical restraint.

Coppola's episodic structure and surreal imagery amplify his critique of American militarism. The river journey symbolizes civilization's erosion under the weight of hubris and militaristic ambition, exposing the fragility of moral and societal constructs. The chaotic Do Lung Bridge sequence (01:46:23) captures the disintegration of order and purpose, mirroring the war machine's lack of coherence. By juxtaposing immense destructive capacity with profound human suffering, Coppola interrogates U.S. militarism's paradox: unmatched power incapable of achieving legitimacy or coherence.

II. *Black Hawk Down* and the American War Machine: Destabilization, Deterritorialization, and Imperialist Strategy

Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* (2001) dramatizes the 1993 Battle of Mogadishu, presenting a vivid portrayal of American military interventionism and its geopolitical impacts. The film frequently frames the narrative around valor and sacrifice, but it simultaneously reinforces destabilization, deterritorialization, and the mechanisms of the American war machine. By applying the theoretical perspectives of Chomsky, Gramsci, David Harvey, and Deleuze and Guattari, this analysis examines how *Black Hawk Down* constructs a hegemonic narrative about militarism while exposing the contradictions of imperialist intervention.

Destabilization and the Paradox of Intervention

The film presents destabilization as the disruption of governance and social structures, a phenomenon that underscores the events in *Black Hawk Down*. Somalia, by the early 1990s, epitomized a failed state with fractured institutions and society. Scott vividly illustrates Mogadishu as a chaotic, lawless city where survival overtakes governance and violence dominates. For instance, at 0:45:20, scenes of conflict and destruction emphasize the absence of centralized authority. This visual narrative supports the mission's objectives but also highlights the monumental challenges of intervening in such environments. Antonio Gramsci's "crises of authority" from *Prison Notebooks* identifies how collapsing hegemony fosters scenarios that external actors fail to address effectively (p. 276).

Although the U.S. intervention aimed to restore order, it escalated Somalia's conflicts. Gramsci's "crises of authority" concept explains this dynamic, demonstrating that interventions often fragment power further instead of resolving the crisis. The film captures this in its depiction of U.S. forces prioritizing the capture of Aidid while neglecting Somalia's deeply rooted socio-political instability. An intense firefight between forces exposes this oversight, as violence and civilian casualties mount under the tactical objectives (0:53:45). Noam Chomsky, in *Hegemony or Survival*, critiques this pattern, arguing that U.S. interventions often result in perpetuating instability rather than addressing systemic issues (p. 115).

A critical examination of U.S. foreign policy, particularly within Chomsky's discourse on imperialism, reveals the paradoxical nature of American military engagements: interventions ostensibly designed to restore stability often exacerbate disorder. Chomsky argues, "The U.S. has repeatedly intervened in weaker nations, claiming moral responsibility while exacerbating the very conflicts it claims to resolve" (Chomsky, *Hegemony or Survival*, p. 43). *Black Hawk*

Down exemplifies this contradiction as U.S. forces, under the pretext of humanitarian aid, inadvertently amplify chaos. The sequence of urban warfare at 01:12:34 visually articulates this destabilization, wherein the supposed agents of order become catalysts of destruction, reflecting a broader pattern of U.S. interventions that oscillate between justification and devastation.

The film underscores the cycle of destabilization by illustrating how collateral damage, including civilian casualties and destroyed infrastructure, amplifies local grievances and strengthens anti-American sentiment. Chomsky points out in *Hegemony or Survival* that overwhelming force often incites resistance rather than reducing instability (p. 115). The climactic scene at where U.S. forces retreat under heavy fire, vividly encapsulates this irony, portraying the very chaos such interventions aim to resolve (1:54:20).

Deterritorialization: Eroding Sovereignty through Warfare

Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* theorizes deterritorialization as the collapse of traditional spatial and symbolic boundaries (9). In *Black Hawk Down*, deterritorialization emerges through the projection of U.S. military power into Somalia, far removed from American territorial interests. At 0:50:30, U.S. soldiers grapple with the unfamiliar environment, showcasing the erosion of spatial boundaries. This intervention echoes the globalization of conflict and supports Deleuze and Guattari's argument that such actions destabilize local systems without creating sustainable solutions.

David Harvey expands on deterritorialization through the lens of neoliberal globalization. He argues in *The New Imperialism* that warfare and financial power reshape sovereignty to align with dominant interests (p. 67). The U.S. operations in Mogadishu reflect

this paradigm, as the military operates independently, bypassing Somali governance and sovereignty. The dominance of technological systems like air superiority and satellite-guided logistics (00:32:15) illustrates how advanced warfare erodes traditional territorial limits.

Deleuze and Guattari's *Nomadology: The War Machine* positions the war machine as separate from state structures, using decentralized, adaptive methods of engagement. They contend, "The war machine is exterior to the State apparatus; it exists in opposition to state-centered territorial control" (*Nomadology*, p. 22). Somali militias embody this concept by utilizing the urban landscape to counteract the rigid hierarchies of the U.S. military (01:05:47). This shift from conventional, state-centered warfare to decentralized resistance exemplifies the evolving challenges of imperialist military operations.

Hegemony and the Cultural Production of Consent

Antonio Gramsci's analysis of hegemony highlights how cultural institutions manufacture consent for militaristic endeavors. He asserts, "Consent is manufactured through cultural institutions that shape public perceptions of power and legitimacy" (*Prison Notebooks*, p. 189). *Black Hawk Down* participates in this process by prioritizing American heroism while marginalizing Somali voices. The film constructs Somali fighters as faceless antagonists (00:45:22), reinforcing hegemonic ideologies. By framing U.S. interventionist warfare as a moral necessity rather than imperialist policy, the film legitimizes American military dominance in public consciousness.

The American War Machine and Perpetual Conflict

Deleuze and Guattari conceptualize the war machine as an apparatus that transcends traditional notions of warfare, perpetuating conflict beyond the confines of state structures.

The technological fetishization in *Black Hawk Down*—epitomized through the film's emphasis on military hardware, precision strikes, and tactical coordination (00:21:50)—embodies this mechanization of warfare. Chomsky's critique of the military-industrial complex aligns with this reading, as he observes that "modern war is less about victory than about sustaining perpetual conflict that fuels economic and political interests" (*Manufacturing Consent*, p. 152). In this sense, *Black Hawk Down* is not merely a depiction of historical events but an ideological artifact that perpetuates the normalization of perpetual militarism as an intrinsic feature of American geopolitical strategy.

The cultural dimensions of the American War Machine are also scrutinized. The juxtaposition of individual soldiers' heroism with the systemic failures of the mission highlights the dissonance between personal valor and institutional hubris. Gramsci's concept of "passive revolution," as outlined in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (p. 276), is particularly relevant, describing how power structures adapt to maintain hegemony even amid systemic crises.

Black Hawk Down critiques the economic drivers of the American War Machine through its portrayal of the scale and sophistication of military logistics. Although it avoids directly addressing the military-industrial complex, it emphasizes the economic imperatives that underpin interventions. Harvey, in *Spaces of Global Capitalism*, argues that global conflicts often stabilize capitalist interests while promoting economic expansion (p. 120). Scenes like the supply drop at 0:37:45 underscore this perspective, depicting logistical efficiency as a byproduct of economic motivation.

III. *The Thin Red Line*: A Critical Examination of Imperialism and the American War Apparatus

Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998) breaks free from the traditional war film genre, offering what critics describe as "a profound meditation on the moral and existential dilemmas inherent in human conflict" (Smith, 2002, p. 45). The film focuses on the Battle of Guadalcanal during World War II and follows the U.S. Army's C Company as its soldiers endure the physical and psychological strains of combat. Malick uses a fragmented narrative structure to blend the perspectives of individual soldiers, creating a multifaceted exploration of themes like duty, mortality, and the human condition. For example, Private Witt reflects on the interconnectedness of humanity when he says, "Maybe all men got one big soul everybody's a part of" (0:47:13). This optimism contrasts sharply with Sergeant Welsh's cynical philosophy: "There's only one thing a man can do: find something that's his, and make an island for himself" (1:10:29). Witt's belief in eternal connections among living beings clashes with Welsh's assertion that self-interest governs human behavior, particularly during Witt's musings on the battlefield (1:37:42). These moments amplify the film's philosophical questions by emphasizing the tension between hope and despair. Malick also contrasts the unspoiled beauty of the Pacific environment with the chaos of war. A lingering shot of a bird soaring through the smoke of a battlefield, while the sound of strings and dissonant horns play on the soundtrack, starkly juxtaposes the resilience of nature with the transience of human violence, reinforcing the tension between destruction and renewal (01:53:47; Taylor, 2005, p. 89). Ultimately, The *Thin Red Line* challenges viewers to question the morality, necessity, and consequences of war, encouraging a deeper reflection on humanity's violent tendencies.

Imperialism and Its Subversion in *The Thin Red Line*

At its core, *The Thin Red Line* critiques imperialism by examining the ideological underpinnings of the U.S. military's Pacific campaign. The Battle of Guadalcanal symbolizes not just a tactical engagement but a clash of imperialist ambitions, as Japan sought expansion, and the United States pursued regional dominance. Although the film does not explicitly address these geopolitical forces, its narrative subtly critiques the dehumanization and moral compromise that imperialism demands. Malick emphasizes the human cost of imperial ambition by showing soldiers as disposable instruments of state power. A scene where the company struggles through hostile jungle terrain (1:15:23–1:20:45) highlights their exhaustion, fear, and lack of clear objectives (Johnson, 2003, pp. 67–68).

Malick develops characters who demonstrate the dissonance between the soldiers' experiences and the abstract geopolitical motives driving the conflict. Private Witt resists the brutality of war by searching for spiritual meaning in the chaos. Meanwhile, Colonel Tall embodies pragmatic ambition with his remark that "War don't ennoble men. It turns them into dogs" (1:24:05), which reflects how strategic goals override individual lives. By refusing to draw clear moral lines between U.S. forces and their Japanese adversaries, Malick destabilizes traditional narratives of righteous warfare and reveals a shared complicity in perpetuating violence (Johnson, 2003, p. 72).

Malick also uses nature as a visual critique of imperialism. He portrays Guadalcanal's landscapes with vivid, almost Edenic detail to evoke an untouched world disrupted by human conflict. Shots of mangled vegetation juxtaposed with advancing soldiers highlight the rupture between the natural world and humanity's destructive ambitions (1:12:45–1:14:20). By

situating the soldiers' struggles against this fractured natural harmony, Malick critiques the legitimacy of imperialist campaigns, framing them as alien to the natural order.

The American War Machine: Mechanization and Dehumanization

In addition to critiquing imperialism, *The Thin Red Line* exposes the American war machine as a relentless system that prioritizes strategic objectives over individual humanity. Malick portrays the military hierarchy, represented by figures like Colonel Tall, as a dehumanizing structure. Tall's unyielding focus on tactical success, regardless of human cost, emerges in his declaration, "In war, there are no civilians" (1:26:34). This statement highlights the system's indifference to ethics and its treatment of soldiers as expendable tools (Taylor, 2005, p. 93).

Malick reinforces this theme through the gradual erasure of soldiers' individuality. He shows how monotonous routines and relentless violence consume their identities. Critics note that Malick's fragmented storytelling reflects this loss of personal agency, immersing viewers in the shared trauma of war (Taylor, 2005, p. 94). Characters' introspections reveal the psychological toll of systemic violence. For instance, Private Witt wonders, "Do we lose ourselves in war, or find a part we never knew?" (1:37:42). Scenes like the silent aftermath of an ambush (1:22:15) make the loss of individuality palpable, capturing the war machine's erosion of human identity.

By contrasting brutal combat with quiet reflection, Malick forces audiences to confront the ethical implications of war. For example, after a chaotic battle sequence, a soldier's somber soliloquy— "What is this war in the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself?"

(1:18:45)—provokes existential questions about violence. These poetic meditations expose the emptiness of ideals like duty and patriotism, dismantling the myths of martial glory (Taylor, 2005, p. 96). Through this lens, *The Thin Red Line* condemns the American war machine as an amoral entity sustained by perpetual violence.

Conclusion

By synthesizing the narratives of *Apocalypse Now*, *Black Hawk Down*, and *The Thin Red Line*, this analysis uncovers a layered critique of American militarism and imperial ambition. Each film examines the ethical and practical flaws of the American war machine—whether through the glorification of hard power, the futility of intervention, or the mechanization of warfare.

Apocalypse Now explores the psychological collapse caused by unchecked militarism. *Black Hawk Down* captures the chaos and destabilization of coercive interventions. Finally, *The Thin Red Line* meditates on imperialism and the dehumanization inherent in mechanized war. Together, these films transcend their narratives to critique the costs of power—both on the battlefield and within the human spirit. Their relevance endures as they compel audiences to confront the moral and existential consequences of the American War Machine, and American dominance.

Chapter 4: Cinematic Critiques of Global Power: An Integrated Analysis of *Lord of War*, *War Dogs*, and *American Made*

Modern cinema actively probes the sprawling intersections of global power, capitalism, and the military-industrial complex. Films like *Lord of War* (2005), *War Dogs* (2016), and *American Made* (2017) go beyond entertainment; they question the forces that drive international conflict, exploit systemic vulnerabilities, and shape public perception through hard and soft power. These films introduce morally ambiguous protagonists who navigate treacherous terrains dominated by the commodification of violence, unchecked ambition, and ethical decline. Their narratives push audiences to question not only the legitimacy of arms trading and covert operations but also the broader ideological constructs—such as American exceptionalism and the influence of soft power—that uphold these systems. This chapter integrates a critical analysis of these films into a comprehensive study, applying theoretical frameworks from scholars like Joseph Nye and Chalmers Johnson to investigate how cinematic narratives reflect, critique, and sometimes complicate our understanding of modern geopolitics.

I. *Lord of War*: Soft Power, Moral Ambiguity, and the Global Arms Trade

Andrew Niccol's *Lord of War* (2005) delivers a sharp critique of the global arms trade, using the morally complex character of Yuri Orlov to unravel the connections between commerce, politics, and violence. Yuri, a Ukrainian immigrant turned international arms dealer, seizes opportunities in the booming weapons market, supplying arms to warring factions, oppressive regimes, and warlords. The film opens with Yuri's chilling line: "There are over 550 million firearms in worldwide circulation. That's one firearm for every twelve people on the

planet. The only question is: how do we arm the other eleven?" (00:04:45). This line encapsulates the vast scale of the arms trade and Yuri's detached perspective, which remains indifferent to the devastating human costs of his actions. By introducing Yuri in this way, the film emphasizes the moral ambiguity saturating global power structures, particularly within arms trading.

Niccol intertwines Yuri's personal and professional life to reveal the toll his work takes on his relationships. Ava, Yuri's wife, confronts him directly and asks, "How many lives is this going to cost us?" (01:20:37), while his disillusioned brother Vitaly exclaims, "You're not selling guns. You're selling death!" (00:47:15). These moments force Yuri to embody the moral erosion that defines the arms trade and the unseen consequences of global violence. By the film's conclusion, Yuri represents the global systems that perpetuate war—systems that normalize and profit from violence under the guise of politics and diplomacy.

Soft Power in *Lord of War*

Niccol critiques the global arms trade not only by highlighting its horrors but also by exposing the mechanisms of soft power that sustain it. Joseph Nye defines soft power as the ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. In *Lord of War*, soft power operates through cultural narratives, political justifications, and economic policies that obscure the violence inherent in the arms trade.

Yuri, for example, reveals the moral inconsistencies in global powers when he asserts, "They say, 'evil prevails when good men fail to act.' What they ought to say is, 'evil prevails.'" (00:36:20). This statement unveils the hypocrisy in international relations, where soft power narratives like the promotion of "democracy" and "stability" camouflage the reality of systemic

exploitation and violence. Yuri observes the power of the United States through his commentary that "The most powerful weapon in the world is not a gun. It's the power of a nation's influence" (00:45:22). The U.S wields the "power of influence" more effectively than any weapon, suggesting that its soft power plays a pivotal role in enabling arms proliferation. Although U.S. officials condemn illegal arms dealers, the film reveals their complicity in sustaining the very markets they claim to oppose.

The film also critiques the cultural normalization of militarism. Yuri likens arms dealing to everyday business ventures, saying, "Selling guns is like selling vacuum cleaners. You make calls, pound the pavement, and take out the competition" (00:22:18). This comparison trivializes the human costs of violence, reducing lives to mere transactions. Niccol uses this detachment to critique how soft power narratives present militarism and arms trading as acceptable, even aspirational, elements of modern capitalism. By glamorizing Yuri's success, *Lord of War* draws attention to how cultural narratives sustain the arms trade by framing it as an ordinary component of global commerce.

Relating *Lord of War* to the American War Machine

Niccol uses *Lord of War* to critique the American War Machine—a network of military, corporate, and governmental interests that underpins U.S. dominance through militarism and economic power. The arms trade does not merely respond to global instability; it actively fuels it. Yuri's cynical remark about firearms, "The only question is: how do we arm the other eleven?" (00:04:45), encapsulates the systemic nature of the trade, which transcends individual actors and becomes a global force. This critique aligns with Chalmers Johnson's analysis in *The*

Sorrows of Empire (2004), which highlights the intersection of U.S. militarism and global instability (26).

The film exposes how U.S. foreign policy perpetuates the arms trade while maintaining an ethical façade. Yuri dismisses diplomacy as "a sales pitch" (01:12:48), underscoring the transactional nature of international relations. This observation aligns with Chalmers Johnson's critique in *The Sorrows of Empire* (2004), where he argues that U.S. interventions often destabilize regions rather than create peace (p. 74). Yuri's role as an intermediary highlights the economic motivations behind this dynamic, with military-industrial interests profiting from conflict while distancing themselves from its human costs.

Yuri's cynical mantra, "Never get shot with your own merchandise" (00:15:30), epitomizes the disconnect between profiteers and the consequences of their actions. Niccol critiques the symbiotic relationship between military contractors, arms dealers, and government policies, portraying it as a driving force behind the American War Machine. By emphasizing the roles of diplomatic rhetoric, economic incentives, and cultural normalization, the film reveals how soft power sustains the arms trade and perpetuates global violence.

II. *War Dogs*: Exploiting Opportunity, Capitalism, and the Shadow of State Power

Todd Phillips released *War Dogs* in 2016, adapting the true story from Guy Lawson's *Arms and the Dudes* (2015). The film critiques capitalism, American exceptionalism, and the American War Machine. It exposes how the United States' economic and military systems fuel global instability to pursue financial gain. Through its narrative, the film explores the intersection of capitalism, state power, and American foreign policy.

Plot Outline

David Packouz starts as a struggling massage therapist in Miami but transforms his life when he reconnects with his childhood friend Efraim Diveroli, a rising arms dealer. Efraim introduces David to a U.S. government program that invites small businesses to bid on military contracts. By design, this program aims to democratize defense contracts, but David and Efraim exploit its loopholes. They win minor contracts at first, but their ambition grows, culminating in a $300 million deal to supply ammunition to U.S. allies in Afghanistan. The deal highlights their willingness to defy international law and ethical standards to secure profits.

The characters navigate the global arms market with risky decisions, sourcing outdated Chinese ammunition in violation of an international embargo. Efraim embodies greed and moral disregard when he asserts, “I run my business my way, and if you can’t handle that, maybe you shouldn’t be in it” (01:25:40). Their ability to exploit the procurement system reflects the dangers of a profit-driven military-industrial complex.

Soft Power and the Global Marketplace

While *War Dogs* focuses on hard power, it critiques American soft power in global relations. The film shows how U.S. cultural and economic dominance enables individuals like David and Efraim to exploit international markets. This dynamic aligns with Joseph Nye’s concept of soft power, which he defines as “the ability to shape the preferences of others through appeal and attraction” (*Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, 2004, p. 5). David and Efraim operate within the framework of U.S. global economic influence, leveraging its procurement system to achieve their goals. However, the film critiques this influence by revealing how their actions destabilize regions under the guise of promoting American values. This duality reflects Nye’s argument that soft power can foster both constructive and

destructive outcomes, depending on its application. David and Efraim exploit the arms trade, illustrating the darker side of American soft power. Their pursuit of profit undermines the very values they claim to uphold (00:45:30).

Capitalism and American Exceptionalism

War Dogs critiques capitalism by showing how it rewards exploitation and opportunism. The film reveals how David and Efraim manipulate the government procurement system to achieve massive profits. Their rise from small-scale dealers to major players in the arms market illustrates capitalism's perverse incentives, which prioritize financial success over ethics. Efraim's declaration, "This is what America is all about: taking risks, seizing opportunities" (00:52:10), encapsulates the American entrepreneurial spirit, where profit trumps all else.

This critique mirrors Noam Chomsky's analysis of capitalism and American exceptionalism in works like *Profit Over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order* (1999). Chomsky notes, "The United States, the wealthiest and most powerful country in the world, has always been driven by the pursuit of profit...and often at the cost of others' well-being" (p. 3). In the film, David and Efraim exploit the military procurement system, illustrating how capitalism creates an environment where systemic vulnerabilities fuel personal gain at the expense of global stability.

The film also critiques American exceptionalism, the belief in the U.S.'s unique and superior global role. David and Efraim justify their actions through a warped interpretation of exceptionalism, embracing ambition and ingenuity regardless of the consequences. Chomsky critiques this ideology, explaining how American exceptionalism often justifies abuses of power both domestically and abroad (*Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance*,

2003, p. 86). David and Efraim's rise and fall expose the ethical compromises masked by American exceptionalism, perpetuating systemic abuses in the global arms trade.

War Dogs and The American War Machine

At its core, *War Dogs* critiques the American War Machine by showing how the U.S. government's reliance on private contractors commodifies war. The Department of Defense's procurement system enables private enterprises like AEY Inc. to thrive. By outsourcing military logistics to the private sector, the government prioritizes profit over national security or ethics. The system's flaws allow David and Efraim, despite their inexperience, to secure a multi-million-dollar contract. Efraim admits, "We're just two guys who figured out how to work the system" (01:02:50), and "The system was rigged from the start. We just found a way to use it to our advantage" (01:13:20), emphasizing how capitalism distorts government functions for profit.

The arms trade's murky ethics also take center stage. David and Efraim deal with embargoed suppliers and corrupt intermediaries, exposing the global arms market's corruption. Their disregard for international laws challenges America's narrative of moral superiority. Chomsky notes that the U.S. has historically supported the arms trade to advance foreign policy objectives, often prioritizing short-term gains over global stability (*Hegemony or Survival*, 2003, p. 121). The CIA's implicit role in facilitating the arms trade, though not directly shown in the film, mirrors the government's broader complicity in global instability for geopolitical and financial gain.

By examining capitalism, exceptionalism, and military power, *War Dogs* critiques the American War Machine. The film reveals how profit motives fuel private enterprise and state policy, perpetuating conflict and instability. It highlights the procurement system's systemic

flaws and how individuals like David and Efraim can and do exploit them, destabilizing the global order in the process.

III. *American Made*: State-Sanctioned Covert Operations and the Blurred Boundaries of Legitimacy

Doug Liman's 2017 film *American Made* follows the personal journey of Barry Seal, a commercial airline pilot who becomes a drug smuggler, while also capturing the Cold War's geopolitical complexities. Tom Cruise leads the cast, delivering a dynamic performance that balances humor, drama, and action. The film explores morality, power, and greed within a historical context.

Plot Outline

Barry Seal, a disenchanted TWA pilot, accepts the CIA's offer to conduct reconnaissance missions over Central America. As he delves deeper, he expands his role to include gun-running, drug trafficking for the Medellín Cartel, and facilitating U.S. support to Contra rebels in Nicaragua. His wealth and influence grow alongside the volatility of his situation, leading to his tragic demise. Although the film fictionalizes certain elements, it roots its narrative in the geopolitical tensions of the 1980s. Through Barry's story, the film depicts how state interests, organized crime, and individual ambition intertwine (1:15:00).

American Made Soft Power

The CIA uses Barry to demonstrate Soft Power, presenting themselves as freedom's guardians fighting communism. Barry's comment, "They say they're saving the world, but I'm just out here flying the plane" (0:42:18), exposes their rhetoric and rationalizes their covert actions in Latin America. While Barry's charm and resourcefulness serve as instruments of Soft

Power, his character also highlights how personal agency can become co-opted by larger systems. By juxtaposing his affable demeanor with his increasingly unethical missions, the film pushes viewers to question the morality of achieving noble goals through covert means.

The film also critiques the entertainment industry's role in propagating Soft Power. When Barry jokes, “Everyone’s got their hands in the cookie jar” (1:05:22), he emphasizes a pervasive culture of complicity. The film presents Barry as a charismatic antihero and layers his absurd exploits with real-world references, such as his confrontation with a CIA handler over moral ambiguity (1:10:45). These elements critique hegemonic narratives and demonstrate how cinema shapes public perception while commenting on political realities.

Capitalism and the Pursuit of Wealth

Barry Seal’s pursuit of unimaginable wealth showcases the excesses of unregulated capitalism. By smuggling drugs, running guns, and laundering money, Barry embodies the distorted “American Dream” fueled by greed. His declaration, "This is the land of opportunity, but opportunity has a price" (0:47:30), encapsulates his ironic success. Liman juxtaposes Barry’s financial indulgence with the escalating chaos in Latin America to expose how the drive for profit fosters instability and violence (0:48:15).

The film also highlights systemic corruption. Barry’s observation, “They’re all in on it” (1:12:45), underscores complicity at all levels—from the CIA to small-town officials. This complicity illustrates how the pursuit of profit undermines ethical boundaries and entangles governance with illegal enterprises. Barry’s narrative, supported by scholars like David L. Carter, who states that “the blurring of legal and illegal activities in the pursuit of national interests has

often led to unintended consequences" (Carter, p. 214), underlines the societal costs of prioritizing profit over ethics.

American Exceptionalism

American Made critiques and deconstructs American exceptionalism. The CIA frames its covert activities as necessary measures against communism, reinforcing the narrative of moral righteousness. Barry's ascent within this framework reinforces myths of American ingenuity and boundless opportunity. His statement, "They just keep telling me it's for the greater good" (0:53:20), highlights how such ideology justifies ethically ambiguous actions. Scholars like John G. Lewis argue that these narratives often "mask the exploitation of smaller nations under the guise of spreading democracy" (Lewis, p. 102). Through Barry's experiences, the film invites audiences to question these premises.

The narrative critiques American exceptionalism by exposing its contradictions. Barry's actions destabilize Latin America and worsen violence. His downfall serves as a cautionary tale, revealing the hubris of exceptionalist ideology. Barry's comment, "They said they were doing this for freedom, but now I'm not sure whose freedom they mean" (1:02:45), directly questions the morality of American interventionism. Supported by scholars like Robert M. Entman, who notes that "the rhetoric of freedom often masks significant power imbalances" (Entman, p. 88), the film interrogates the ethical consequences of these actions.

The American War Machine: The DoD, CIA, and Hollywood

The film critically examines the symbiotic relationship between Hollywood and the American War Machine, including the DoD and CIA. These institutions have historically shaped public perceptions of military and intelligence operations through cinema. Barry's quip, "So

what exactly am I flying here?" (0:24:15), highlights the blurry lines between government oversight and individual autonomy. By dramatizing these scenarios, the film entertains while exposing the ethical ambiguity of covert operations. Lawrence H. Suid observes that "Hollywood's collaboration with the military has historically shaped public narratives of war and covert intervention" (Suid, p. 93). While *American Made* eschews overt propaganda, its depiction of espionage and covert operations capitalizes on their inherent allure, blending critique with entertainment.

The film's allure lies in its ability to entertain while provoking reflection. Barry's remark, "I'm just the guy flying the plane" (0:42:18), encapsulates its balance of high-stakes drama with self-aware commentary. By engaging with the spectacle of espionage and adventure, audiences are simultaneously drawn into and distanced from the geopolitical realities they depict. This interplay exemplifies the subtle mechanisms through which media mediates public understanding of state power. Lawrence Suid's analysis of Hollywood's relationship with government narratives (Suid, p. 132) further supports this critique.

Conclusion

The integrated analysis of *Lord of War*, *War Dogs*, and *American Made* presents a sharp cinematic examination of the ethical, political, and cultural dimensions of global power. Each film, while distinct in its narrative and stylistic approach, converges on a central critique: that the mechanisms of soft power, when allied with unchecked capitalism and the machinery of state power, produce a system in which human lives are commodified and moral boundaries are continually redrawn. The morally ambiguous protagonists—Yuri Orlov's calculated detachment, David Packouz and Efraim Diveroli's reckless entrepreneurship, and Barry Seal's

tragic complicity—lay bare the disturbing truths behind the glamorous facades of global dominance.

These films expose how cultural narratives and diplomatic rhetoric disguise systemic abuses while exploring soft power. They not only critique overt manifestations of the American War Machine but also reveal how American exceptionalism and capitalist ambition justify actions that perpetuate violence and exploitation. By intertwining personal ambition with the grand narratives of statecraft and global commerce, they confront audiences with uncomfortable truths about the cost of power and the "American Dream".

Ultimately, *Lord of War*, *War Dogs*, and *American Made* demand greater accountability and ethical reflection in international politics and economic policy. In today's world of rapid technological change and evolving geopolitical landscapes, these films urge thinkers, filmmakers, and policy makers to rethink how power operates and measure its consequences in human lives and moral terms.

Chapter 5: The Cinematic Break: Deleuze's Theory and American War Cinema

Cinema has long been a site for philosophical exploration and cultural transformation. Gilles Deleuze's influential concepts of the movement-image and time-image revolutionized the way audiences and cinephiles understand film's visual language. Deleuze argued that cinema underwent a critical rupture—a shift in the representation of movement, time, and thought—that transformed artistic expression and mirrored significant historical changes. American war cinema exemplifies this evolution, moving from the introspective critiques of the Vietnam era to the post-9/11 narratives shaped by governmental influence. This chapter examines Deleuze's theory as a lens to interpret cinematic rupture and explores how state actors, including the CIA and the DoD, actively shaped war narratives in Hollywood. By connecting these ideas, we reveal the intricate interaction between artistic innovation, political power, and cultural influence.

I. The Break in Cinema: Movement-Image and Time-Image in Deleuze's Philosophy

In *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (1983) and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1985), Gilles Deleuze pinpointed a significant rupture in cinema's history, reflecting broader philosophical and cultural changes. This break, rooted in the mid-20th century, marked the transition from the classical movement-image to the modern time-image. Films began expressing meaning, temporality, and thought differently.

Classical cinema structured the movement-image through sensory-motor schema. Within this framework, characters responded to situations with decisive action, propelling the narrative through cause-and-effect relationships. Drawing on Henri Bergson's philosophy, Deleuze emphasized that classical cinema replicated human perception by organizing movement through continuity and montage. He stated, "The movement-image is the system of

the universal variation of movement, where each part refers to an action or reaction" (Deleuze, p. 58). Directors like D.W. Griffith and Sergei Eisenstein built the movement-image around logical image progression, creating cohesive narrative spaces and times.

The rupture in cinema emerges from the historical and cultural upheavals of World War II, which precipitated a crisis in the movement-image. The war's devastation and the ensuing existential uncertainties undermined the adequacy of traditional sensory-motor responses in representing the complexities of modern life. Deleuze observed, "The post-war period, with its situations which we no longer know how to react to, with its spaces which we no longer know how to describe, has given rise to pure optical and sound situations" (Deleuze, p. 272). These situations, detached from action, prioritize the representation of time and thought over movement.

The modern time-image radically transformed cinema by prioritizing fragmented, non-linear time explorations. Filmmakers like Michelangelo Antonioni, Federico Fellini, and Alain Resnais led this paradigm shift. They presented time as autonomous, breaking free from movement. Deleuze captured this shift with his concept of the "crystal-image," explaining, "What characterizes the crystal-image is that it makes visible the formation of the past at the same time as it makes present the passing of the present" (Deleuze, p. 98). These films blurred temporal boundaries, presenting past, present, and future as coexisting.

The time-image disrupts conventional notions of causality and agency. Characters in these films often appear passive, introspective, or paralyzed, reflecting a world where direct action is no longer feasible. Deleuze's assertion that "the time-image puts thought into contact with the unthinkable" (Deleuze, p. 168) underscores the philosophical ambition of this cinema:

to provoke reflection and engage viewers with deeper existential questions. Rather than offering immediate narrative resolution, the time-image challenges audiences to actively interpret and contemplate its layered meanings.

This shift from the movement-image to the time-image represented more than a stylistic or technical evolution in cinema. It marked a profound ontological transformation in how cinema engaged with human consciousness and represented time. By transcending sensory-motor schema, the time-image redefined cinema's role as a medium that probes existence and temporality. Deleuze's analysis illuminated the dynamic relationship between film, philosophy, and culture, showcasing cinema's potential to reshape how we perceive the modern world. Next, we will explore how this rupture connects to shifts in American war cinema from 1970 to the present.

II. The Evolution of the Action War Film

Hollywood dramatically shifted the style and substance of American war films through what is often called "the break in cinema." For years, the film industry churned out action war films that showcased dynamic combat and straightforward narratives of military engagement. Suddenly, it began producing a new genre: drama/thriller/psychological war films. This genre introduced narratives filled with introspection, moral ambiguity, and sophisticated portrayals of modern conflict. Filmmakers transformed not only storytelling techniques but also the visual and thematic complexity of films.

The two kinds of films I am referencing are: 1. **The Action War Film:** Hollywood war films that emphasized kinetic action and clear-cut heroism. These films celebrated valor on the battlefield, often using rapid editing, expansive battle sequences, and dramatic musical scores

to evoke the immediacy of combat; and 2. **The Psychological War Film:** In contrast, an emerging genre that places greater emphasis on internal conflict, moral dilemmas, and the psychological costs of war. This evolution signals a departure from the traditional, sensory-motor logic of action films toward a more contemplative, fragmented narrative structure.

Action war films dominated Hollywood from the 1970s through the early 2000s, captivating audiences with intense combat sequences and high-stakes narratives. These films reflected their sociopolitical eras and became defining staples of American cinema. Examples include *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *The Thin Red Line* (1998), and *Black Hawk Down* (2001). Each film showcases the evolution of the action war genre and the role it played during its golden age.

In the 1970s, Francis Ford Coppola created Apocalypse Now, one of the most iconic war films of the decade. Set during the Vietnam War, the film blended psychological drama with visceral action to explore human conditions amidst the chaos of war. Coppola used surreal imagery and gripping performances to delve into themes of morality, madness, and violence. In the helicopter attack scene set to Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries," Coppola emphasized visually arresting sequences and emotionally charged moments. While the movie delivered action spectacle, it critiqued the destructive nature of war and left a lasting cultural impact.

By the 1990s, filmmakers incorporated more introspection and philosophical depth into war narratives. Terrence Malick directed *The Thin Red Line* (1998), a World War II epic that contrasted battle brutality with moments of serene natural beauty. Malick's meditative storytelling juxtaposed fragility and violence, while the ensemble cast, including Sean Penn and Jim Caviezel, explored war's personal toll. Malick expanded the boundaries of the genre with

his poetic approach, proving that action war films could marry stunning visuals and intellectual exploration.

Ridley Scott took the action war film into the 2000s with *Black Hawk Down*, which depicted the 1993 Battle of Mogadishu. Scott immersed viewers in urban combat with rapid editing and gritty visuals that captured the intensity of modern warfare. By focusing on soldiers' immediate experiences, Scott emphasized authenticity and the human cost of conflict. Unlike earlier war films, *Black Hawk Down* concentrated less on philosophical themes and more on realism, reflecting an evolving genre.

Since the early 2000s, Hollywood shifted from traditional battlefield heroism to nuanced explorations of war's personal, psychological, and moral complexities. Films like *Lord of War* (2005), *War Dogs* (2016), and *American Made* (2017) took audiences beyond the battlefield to uncover the machinery of war. These narratives prioritized psychological depth and moral ambiguity, showcasing characters who navigated greed, power, and ethical compromises.

Andrew Niccol directed *Lord of War*, a story about Yuri Orlov (Nicolas Cage), a Ukrainian-American arms dealer. Niccol highlighted Yuri's ethical dilemmas and moral compromises in the global arms trade. The film combined satire and chilling realism to examine modern warfare and its devastating ripple effects. It shifted the focus away from soldiers and battlefields, spotlighting power and greed. Yuri's moral ambiguity alienated him from his family and humanity, offering viewers a psychologically charged narrative that blurred lines between victim and perpetrator.

Todd Phillips explored war's darker underbelly with *War Dogs* in 2016. Based on a true story, the film followed David Packouz (Miles Teller) and Efraim Diveroli (Jonah Hill) as they

exploited government loopholes to secure arms contracts during the Iraq War. Phillips combined comedy and absurdity with ethical compromises and personal betrayals. The protagonists' reckless ambition reflected war's commodification, shifting cultural perspectives from patriotism to opportunism. As their choices unraveled, Phillips revealed the psychological toll and forced viewers to confront accountability and complicity.

Doug Liman examined covert operations and geopolitical conflicts through *American Made* (2017), a story about Barry Seal (Tom Cruise). Seal transitioned from a commercial pilot to a CIA operative and drug smuggler in the 1980s. Liman captured Seal's dual life with humor and tension, highlighting the absurdity and peril of expedience over ethics. Seal's eventual demise served as a cautionary tale about the human cost of war and power games.

Collectively, *Apocalypse Now*, *The Thin Red Line*, and *Black Hawk Down* demonstrate action war films' rise during their golden age. These films delivered gripping action sequences, compelling narratives, and reflections on the human experience of war. They entertained audiences while provoking deeper thought, cementing their place in American cinematic history.

Conversely, contemporary films like *Lord of War*, War Dogs, and *American Made* showcase Hollywood's embrace of morally complex war narratives. By focusing on flawed characters and systems that sustain conflict, these films encourage empathy and confront uncomfortable truths about war. Hollywood now explores the emotional landscapes of individuals ensnared in war's machinery, blending drama and psychological thriller elements.

These stories examine war, power, and humanity through a modern lens, reflecting a broader cultural shift toward nuanced storytelling. So, what, and maybe even who, caused this break in cinema to occur?

III. 9/11 as a Catalyst

The attacks of September 11, 2001, reshaped cinematic narratives of warfare and marked a turning point in Hollywood's portrayal of war. In “The Hollywood War Machine,” Tom Pollard observes that “the events of September 11, 2001 could well mark the end of certain trends in the production of combat films and the beginning of a new phase in the consolidation of the Hollywood War Machine” (Pollard, 138). Filmmakers stopped depicting war solely as a chaotic or tragic event and instead began highlighting it as a platform for state intervention and ideological projection. After 9/11, the Bush administration enlisted Hollywood to aid the war on terrorism—a move unseen since World War II. This effort altered film production trends and redefined the relationship between the government and the creative community (Pollard, 138).

The CIA played a central role in this transformation by influencing film narratives. It guided depictions of terrorism and counterterrorism, ensuring that these portrayals mirrored official state perspectives. Films like *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) showcased this collaboration. The CIA offered unprecedented access to classified details and shaped the film to align with its messaging. By blurring the lines between propaganda, recruitment, and artistic expression, the government created a cinematic landscape where state-sanctioned messaging intertwined with aesthetic innovation. So, the question is: What does the CIA have to do with cinema?

IV. Hollywood, the Department of Defense, and the CIA: A Complex Relationship

Hollywood and the U.S. government, particularly the DoD and CIA, have cultivated a symbiotic relationship. This collaboration shapes public perception through film and television. The DoD and CIA provide resources, equipment, and technical expertise to filmmakers, while filmmakers allow government agencies to review and edit scripts. This arrangement promotes portrayals that support national security priorities and ideological messaging.

The DoD offers filmmakers privileged access to military installations, personnel, and cutting-edge equipment when their projects align with the DoD's objectives. Originating during World War II, this collaboration recognizes cinema as a tool for advancing recruitment efforts and ideological narratives. The Entertainment Media Office, created in the mid-1940s, reviews scripts, ensuring that military portrayals protect institutional interests (Robb, 2004). Filmmakers seeking to use military assets such as fighter jets, aircraft carriers, and personnel must submit their scripts for approval. The DoD frequently requests script modifications to safeguard the military's public image. For example, the U.S. Navy supported *Top Gun* (1986) by providing aircraft and pilots after filmmakers adjusted the script to positively depict military service (Alford & Secker, 2017). Similarly, *Black Hawk Down* (2001) and *Transformers* (2007) received extensive Pentagon assistance, reinforcing heroic portrayals of U.S. forces.

The CIA engages Hollywood differently, focusing on projects involving espionage, intelligence gathering, and counterterrorism. The CIA's Entertainment Industry Liaison, also created in the mid to late 1940s, collaborates with filmmakers, television producers, and authors to shape narratives that reinforce national security priorities. This liaison allows the agency to exercise narrative control over the stories being told, ensuring that they align with the CIA's preferred image (Secker & Alford, 2019). *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) is one of the most

striking examples of CIA influence in Hollywood; the agency guided much of its portrayal and provided unfettered access to sensitive details. While critics argue that the film justifies contentious interrogation techniques, its creation highlights that CIA-endorsed films function as tools for public opinion manipulation rather than objective storytelling (Rohde, 2013).

The DoD and CIA exert control through script oversight and the provision of military-grade resources. The cost of replicating military-grade hardware and facilities is prohibitively expensive for most productions. Consequently, renting authentic military equipment remains the most viable option for filmmakers striving for realism—though such access is conditional (Mirrlees, 2016). If a script contradicts government interests, agencies often deny access to military assets, forcing producers to either self-censor or revise narratives. Films critical of U.S. interventions rarely receive government support, prompting filmmakers to seek alternative funding (Robb, 2017).

The collaboration between Hollywood and the government raises ethical concerns. Who is watching the watchers? Who is the checker in the checks and balances? While filmmakers claim military and intelligence resources enhance realism, critics argue that this compromises artistic freedom. Government agencies dictate narratives, which results in skewed portrayals of war, intelligence operations, and international conflicts (Secker & Alford, 2019). Audiences consume sanitized versions of these events without realizing the underlying influences shaping these depictions.

Hollywood's partnership with the DoD and CIA exemplifies the intersection of entertainment and state interests. These agencies provide resources that enhance cinematic realism while steering global narratives to align with U.S. priorities. Although filmmakers gain

exclusive access to military assets, they face ethical challenges regarding creative integrity. Audiences should remain critical of the motivations behind these narratives and the forces shaping them. But why has the CIA continued to perpetuate this break in cinema?

V. Why Continue?

The CIA's official website declares, "We are the Nation's first line of defense. We accomplish what others cannot accomplish and go where others cannot go." This slogan embodies the CIA's proactive philosophy—it does not just react to threats but works to preempt them. By controlling narratives and perceptions, the CIA avoids playing a defensive role. The agency leverages predictive deterrence to shape public consciousness, thereby discouraging adversarial actions. This strategy explains the CIA's deliberate and calculated involvement in Hollywood productions. Tricia Jenkins, in *The CIA in Hollywood: How the Agency Shapes Film and Television*, notes, "The Agency's support of film projects is not simply about ensuring favorable representation, but about controlling the discourse surrounding national security threats and the legitimacy of interventionist policies" (p. 94). By embedding intelligence-driven stories into popular culture, the CIA wields psychological warfare, which amplifies its effectiveness beyond traditional counterintelligence practices. This is the first reason the CIA uses motion pictures.

During World War II, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the CIA's predecessor, pioneered the use of films in intelligence operations. Renowned filmmaker John Ford and Disney effects artist Bob Broughton created OSS training films and documented intelligence activities. Today, the CIA continues this tradition by collaborating with Hollywood to influence public perceptions of its activities. Films like *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Argo* exemplify how the

agency portrays its operations with such detail and access that it effectively controls the public's understanding of its work.

A second objective the CIA uses in Hollywood collaborations is to neutralize potential threats before they occur. For instance, a film might depict a terrorist plot against a government facility but highlight the CIA's counterterrorism capabilities. These portrayals deliver two critical messages: threats exist and must be taken seriously, and the CIA has the expertise to dismantle them. As Matthew Alford and Tom Secker argue in *National Security Cinema: The Shocking New Evidence of Government Control in Hollywood*, "By shaping how terrorism, espionage, and military action are portrayed in film, intelligence agencies not only control perception but create a preemptive justification for state violence" (Alford & Secker 112). When adversaries see their strategies preemptively addressed in popular media, they may reconsider their actions. Hollywood thus becomes a battlefield for shaping and preemptively neutralizing future conflicts.

Beyond deterrence the CIA also uses cinema to advertise its capabilities and technological advancements. This is not a new phenomenon. During the Cold War, Hollywood, often collaborating with the Pentagon, dramatized America's technological superiority over the Soviet Union. Today, this practice continues through films showcasing advanced surveillance, drone warfare, and cyber intelligence. Tim Lenoir observes in *The Military-Entertainment Complex*, "Hollywood's seamless integration with military and intelligence institutions has led to an era where films function as both recruitment propaganda and deterrence mechanisms, ensuring the public remains aligned with national security imperatives" (p. 57).

The portrayal of drone warfare offers a prime example. Before the public fully grasped the extent of drone use for surveillance and targeted killings, Hollywood films normalized their application. By presenting drones as precise and essential tools, these narratives preemptively stifled ethical debates. Nick Schou, in *Spooked: How the CIA Manipulates the Media and Hoodwinks Hollywood*, argues, "Hollywood has long been an accomplice in desensitizing the public to the darker aspects of intelligence work, embedding new military technologies within film narratives long before ethical debates about their usage can fully form" (p. 83).

David L. Robb, in *Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies*, highlights how government agencies actively influence scripts: "When audiences see an intelligence agency or military branch heroically deploying the latest technology to thwart a global threat, they are not just watching entertainment; they are being primed for acceptance" (p. 66). These films condition viewers to embrace emerging military technologies and intelligence methodologies as necessary and morally justified.

Furthering public consent for an endless state of war represents another objective in the CIA's deep involvement in Hollywood. By consistently framing narratives in ways that highlight U.S. intelligence agencies as righteous defenders of freedom, films normalize a state of permanent conflict. Audiences exposed to these narratives over time become conditioned to view military interventions as unavoidable, making them less likely to question the legitimacy or morality of these operations. Tim Lenoir asserts in *The Military-Entertainment Complex*, "Through its entanglement with Hollywood, the military-intelligence apparatus ensures that perpetual war is not just tolerated but passively endorsed by the public" (p. 78).

Recruitment represents the most significant reason for the CIA's deep entrenchment in Hollywood. The intelligence community understands that media—whether films, television, or even video games—is one of the most effective ways to shape perceptions and attract new personnel. By romanticizing intelligence officers in films like *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Argo*, the CIA inspires recruits eager for heroic and high-stakes missions. David Robb observes in *Operation Hollywood*, "The CIA and Pentagon have long used Hollywood as a recruitment tool, ensuring that their portrayals in film inspire, rather than deter, young audiences from considering careers in intelligence and military service" (p. 102).

This effort extends into video games, journalism and other media, which frequently embed intelligence-driven narratives. Games like *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* include storylines directly influenced by military advisors, with some even offering links to recruitment pages, targeting action-oriented demographics for enlistment. The intelligence community is keenly aware that younger demographics, particularly those who consume action-packed media, are prime candidates for recruitment. By inserting thrilling and high-stakes intelligence work into entertainment, the CIA cultivates an aspirational image that attracts recruits eager for adventure and purpose.

The CIA's entanglement with Hollywood is neither incidental nor passive. Instead, it constitutes a deliberate effort to influence public perception, promote national security imperatives, and maintain a steady influx of recruits. Through strategic media collaborations, the CIA glorifies military and intelligence operations, ensuring public support for interventions and cultivating future operatives.

Conclusion

The CIA's strategic involvement in Hollywood transcends securing favorable portrayals. By influencing narratives, showcasing technological advancements, and normalizing intelligence operations, the agency manufactures public consent for its expanding global role. Its media partnerships do not merely entertain; they shape public consciousness, foster acceptance of military and intelligence work, and ultimately seek to recruit the next generation of operatives. Hollywood serves as a critical component in the CIA's national security strategy, ensuring its narratives remain central to American culture and public perception.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The Hollywood War Machine

This thesis traced the evolution of American War Cinema from the 1970s to today, revealing the profound transformation in how films depict conflict since the Global War on Terror began. Central to this analysis is the concept of the *Hollywood War Machine* (HWM)—an amalgam that reflects the intimate nexus between Hollywood and the American military apparatus. This transformation was perpetuated during the presidency of George W. Bush, whose policies catalyzed a new era in which cinematic narratives became strategic tools for recruitment, ideological persuasion, and soft power projection. During this period, filmmakers shifted from storytelling to deliberately reinforcing military and political objectives, mirroring the realities and ambitions of the state.

The Military-Entertainment Complex

The HWM, while a critical focal point, operates within a broader framework known as the *Military-Entertainment Complex* (MEC). This system encompasses not only film but also television, video games, sports, social media, and news—all platforms through which the military's narratives are disseminated. The MEC represents a systematic alliance between government agencies and entertainment industries, engineered to shape public opinion and secure consent for ongoing military actions. Over time, this alliance has normalized the continuous presence of warfare in our cultural consciousness, reinforcing ideologies such as American exceptionalism, capitalist expansion, and the inevitability of conflict. The CIA has played a vital role in maintaining this nexus, ensuring that the cinematic portrayal of war aligns with strategic state interests, with recruitment being the *Complex's* primary objective.

Theaters of War: Unmasking the Pentagon and CIA's Role in Shaping Cinema

A seminal work that encapsulates and extends the findings presented in this thesis is the documentary film *Theaters of War: How the Pentagon and CIA Took Hollywood*. This film offers an in-depth exploration of how government agencies, notably the Pentagon and the CIA, have co-opted Hollywood to serve their own ends. By detailing the evolution of cinematic techniques—from overt propaganda to nuanced psychological warfare—*Theaters of War* illustrates how the state has harnessed Hollywood not just to entertain, but to actively mold public perceptions of conflict. It demonstrates that the changes in American War Cinema are neither accidental nor solely the result of artistic evolution; rather, they are the product of deliberate interventions aimed at reinforcing a continuous state of military engagement. For scholars and enthusiasts who wish to delve deeper into these themes, this film is an invaluable resource that expands upon the analyses contained within this thesis.

A key argument in the documentary is that this collaboration between Hollywood and the military-industrial complex has influenced the public's perception of war and U.S. foreign policy (01:03:15). By presenting a sanitized, heroic version of military operations, these films contribute to public support for military interventions and shape national identity. The documentary discusses how films played a role in justifying wars, such as the Gulf War, Iraq War, and War on Terror. *Black Hawk Down* (2001) and *American Sniper* (2014) are cited as examples where the complexities of war were oversimplified, turning soldiers into unquestioned heroes while downplaying the broader geopolitical consequences (01:15:30). Experts interviewed in the film argue that by controlling narratives, the military and intelligence agencies ensure that dissenting perspectives—those critical of war, occupation, or military

policies—rarely reach mainstream audiences (01:22:00). Independent filmmakers who attempt to tell these stories often struggle to secure funding or distribution, further highlighting the systemic nature of this influence.

The documentary presents case studies of films that were either altered to fit military approval or denied access due to critical portrayals of U.S. government actions. One example is *The Hurt Locker* (2008) (01:29:10), which, despite its critical acclaim, was denied Pentagon support because it depicted soldiers as reckless and emotionally unstable. In contrast, *Act of Valor* (2012) (01:34:30), a film featuring active-duty Navy SEALs, was heavily supported by the Pentagon and portrayed the military in an almost mythic light. The film also explores instances where Hollywood productions have been used as recruitment tools. Interviews with veterans reveal how movies like *Top Gun* (01:40:50) led to surges in military enlistment, demonstrating the persuasive power of media in shaping career choices and national sentiment.

Film's Conclusion: The Ethics of Government Influence in Entertainment

In its concluding chapter, *Theaters of War* raises ethical concerns about the extent to which government agencies should influence entertainment media (01:48:30). The film questions whether such collaborations constitute a form of propaganda, undermining artistic integrity and the democratic principle of a free press. Filmmakers and critics discuss potential solutions, such as increasing transparency about government involvement in entertainment and encouraging independent storytelling (01:53:00). The documentary calls for audiences to be more critical of the media they consume, recognizing the hidden forces that shape popular narratives. Ultimately, *Theaters of War: How the Pentagon and CIA Took Hollywood* serves as an eye-opening investigation into the hidden mechanisms behind Hollywood's biggest films,

urging viewers to question whose interests are truly being served in the entertainment they consume.

Synthesis and Future Directions

The journey from the relatively independent war films of the 1970s to today's tightly controlled media narratives shows that American War Cinema has become a strategic tool for statecraft. The watershed moment triggered by the Global War on Terror under President George W. Bush, and the sustained influence of the CIA, thereafter, has irrevocably altered the way war is represented and perceived. This deliberate melding of entertainment and military objectives has not only transformed cinematic storytelling but has also contributed to the broader phenomenon of soft power, wherein culture itself becomes a battlefield for ideological control. This thesis argues that the evolution of the Hollywood War Machine reflects deliberate government interventions aimed at maintaining public consent for a state of perpetual conflict. As a result, the MEC has turned media into a propaganda tool, ensuring fertile ground for state ideologies to take root and thrive.

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