

The Revolution Will Not be Cinematized

Written by Matthew Alford

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MATTHEW ALFORD, DEC 3 2013

'Hollywood in Revolt?' is the question posed by the latest issue of *Dissent*. Interesting but, as Kevin Bacon would say, it's a 'no-brainer'.

Of course Hollywood is not in revolt. Established commercial, corporate, and political pressures are as prominent as the sign hammered into its hills.

The American screen entertainment industry reflects Washington's consensus over US domestic and foreign policies, with occasional sweeping, xenophobic flourishes, as in the North Korean invasion of mainland America in the remake of *Red Dawn* and the US invasion of Pakistan in *GI Joe: Retaliation*.

One of the key political pressures is the Department of Defense, which has long altered screenplays in exchange for providing specialist military kit on-set. This relationship has continued with films like *Battle: Los Angeles*, *Battleship*, *Captain Phillips*, and *Zero Dark Thirty* and ratcheted up to include major franchises like *Man of Steel*, *Terminator*, *Transformers*, and *Iron Man*.

Spencer Ackerman, Defense Correspondent for *Wired*, points to 2012's *Act of Valor*, which starred real life Navy Seals, as being a 'striking example' of a phenomenon that is 'so deeply engrained in Hollywood that we barely even notice it exists'.

Not that the Pentagon's influence is necessary for a film to favour US 'national security', as I show in my book and as David Wong explains impeccably with regard to the 'ugly lessons' hiding in the superhero genre.

Hollywood, of course, has always been willing to compromise any narrative to anyone with political or commercial influence, including the Nazis throughout the 1930s, and indeed the Chinese government who complained about being depicted as the invaders in the aforementioned *Red Dawn* (North Korea does not have the clout to enforce a million dollar re-edit).

New evidence, trends, and discoveries support and surpass my thesis. I always contended that Steven Spielberg's *Munich* was far from being an 'even-handed cry for [Middle Eastern] peace', as claimed by many commentators, but that was before we knew its director donated \$1m to Israel during its 2006 war with Lebanon.

I always argued that *Charlie Wilson's War* was a patchwork of self-serving CIA falsehoods but it has since transpired that even the film's central dramatic twist – that Congressman Charlie Wilson (Tom Hanks) operated as a maverick in raising funds for the Afghan *Mujahideen* 'freedom fighters' – was also untrue. President Ronald Reagan secretly employed him for this task that resulted in the establishment of Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda network.

Hollywood in genuine revolt would repudiate such narratives and instead generate a significant body of films that actually challenge establishment perspectives. Such products do occasionally arise, somehow surviving in a hostile environment. When Hollywood gets it right, the results can be both popular and stunning: *Johnny got his Gun*; *Bulworth*; *V for Vendetta*.

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Russell Brand is a testament to the impotence of celebrity activism in the belly of the beast, as his apparent political convictions have so far led him no further than movies like *Arthur* and adverts for the HP Touchpad. Even a comedy film informed by Brand's well-articulated beliefs on the news-circuit is hard to imagine. If he commits more fully to the rare path trod by former Hollywood radicals like Charlie Chaplin, Jean Seberg and Jane Fonda he will be subject to government surveillance, smear campaigns and charges of treason.

In the final analysis, of course, no one seriously believes the proposition that Hollywood is in revolt. The *Dissent* article itself highlights 'the idealization of the executive' in films like *Lincoln*, *The Dictator*, and *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* and – arguing against its initial set-up – observes that although audiences 'are drawn to movies by the promise of the White House's destruction (*White House Down*; *Olympus Has Fallen*), they are also there to see it saved'. Indeed, through fear-mongering films like *World War Z*, it explains, Hollywood is taking on 'the social inevitability of riot and class violence' but that there is an 'almost total lack, even within apocalyptic narratives, of non-capitalist worlds that aren't fascist or a violent, atomized state of nature'.

What is true, and the reason why the Right gets so annoyed about Hollywood liberals, is that filmmakers are shy of undisguised conservatism and nationalism. So filmmakers love to advertise guns (product placement provides studios with easy money) but consider it progress to show women and minorities firing them. And they don't want to make G.I Joe an explicit tool of the US, so they are an American-led international force.

Hollywood has no obligation to make political films that suit me, or anybody else. It's surely imperative though that it **stop** sending messages that favour a repressive state and corporate apparatus – especially when they are dishonest or government-backed – just as it has long been obliged to **stop** sending explicitly racist or sexist messages (I know, I know – it still happens). It's the least we should expect... but it's nowhere near what we get.

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