War or #Nothing
An Exploration of Militarization Depiction in Adolescent Media
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Abstract
Adolescent Media underscores the inevitable need for war to achieve social reconstruction or defend existing ideological structures; the themes of the former strive to create peace in an oppressive society whereas the latter aims to preserve existing peace in established governmental structures. It becomes incredibly apparent that many of these films, regardless of their pro- or anti-establishment stance, utilize specific and subtle references to militarization. More specifically, there is a reliance on visual cues such as memorabilia, rank, and transit vehicles rather than overt proclamations regarding themes, although ideology is also significant. This suggests that the media consumed by young people does promote a military-forward, pro-war sentiment. Whether pro- or anti-government, these films contain indicators and factors that push young people toward viewing war as a viable solution for societal issues.

Key Words
Propaganda, ideology, establishment, indoctrination, adolescent, government, entertainment, media

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Introduction

The past few years have witnessed a growing recognition of the significant influence media exerts on teenagers’ worldview. Growing up with animated series like Avatar: The Last Airbender and superhero franchises like The Avengers, it has become increasingly clear how media shapes perspectives. During my own formative years, The Avengers and the broader Marvel universe were undeniably some of the most prominent trends. I vividly recall a visit to a Navy ship, where the vessel bore a striking resemblance to those depicted in films like The Avengers or Captain America. My own path towards activism and the political issues I hold dear, such as colonialism and genocide, were introduced to me at a young age through media like Avatar: The Last Airbender and The Hunger Games, both of which explore well-defined social hierarchies and methods of oppression.

1. To understand how propaganda and media shape public ideologies from a young age. This includes examining the mechanisms behind how these messages establish specific beliefs (dogmas) in young audiences.
2. To analyze how contemporary media regarding anti-government and pro-war sentiments manifest in the cultural landscape

Anti-Government Propaganda

The project will specifically explore how media geared towards adolescents portrays liberation from oppressive governments. It will analyze how such media emphasizes war as the sole viable path to freedom. Examples of media under this category include: Avatar: The Last Airbender (television series by [creator’s name]), The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 2 (2015), and Twilight Breaking Dawn Part 2 (2012). All three examples share similar themes: social stratification, rebellion against traditional governmental structures, and the portrayal of war as a seemingly inevitable consequence for achieving freedom.

Contrasting Pro-War Propaganda

The project will then turn its focus to pro-war or pro-establishment propaganda. This type of media typically emphasizes the preservation of governmental institutions and portrays them as nearly perfect. Often sponsored by state entities, this propaganda discourages public debate by framing the government and its policies as unquestionably beneficial and worth protecting.
Outline

This project will begin by examining the history of propaganda targeting children, followed by a discussion of current military campaigns used to shape ideologies toward a pro-war agenda. Next, we will cover the methodology for collecting the data, followed by an analysis of the data and results for each film, and their implications in the wider context of shaping adolescent ideology. Finally, the paper will end with caveats of the project and suggestions for future research.

History of Propaganda for Children

Despite contemporary examples, the utilization of propaganda to shape the ideological perspectives of children has long been a cornerstone tactic employed by various state apparatuses. This extends beyond merely influencing familial values or subtly nudging them towards specific ideologies. A diverse array of content mediums, including print media, music, and film, have been strategically appropriated to deliberately mold and shape the opinions and identities of young people. This has resulted in the current landscape of adolescent media, where content is frequently designed to indoctrinate young audiences, fostering either anti-establishment or pro-establishment viewpoints. These perspectives can ultimately lead to youth activism or tangible forms of engagement with the world.

Early examples of deliberate propaganda targeting adolescence that lead to today’s landscape can be traced back to the early 20th century during World War II (Mohapatra, 1999). Examining both the Axis and Allied powers, it becomes evident that both state apparatuses purposefully crafted media environments specifically aimed at indoctrinating or recruiting young people. In the case of the Axis powers, deliberate attempts were made not only to co-opt the media landscape but also to extend its influence into tangible community spaces. Young boys weren't just conditioned through media content to join the Nazi cause; organizations like the Hitler Youth further mandated participation and active embodiment of these beliefs (Gottfried and Alcorn, 2001). In terms of the Allied powers, elaborate media print campaigns were employed into schools in an effort to game requirements for war (Miami, 2015). The Western Powers also employed media corporations, such as Walt Disney, to create anti-Nazi, pro war cartoons to first establish what we know today as the military entertainment complex (Adam 2000). At the time a specific office within the US government was dedicated to supplying information for propagandistic movies: the United States office of War information (Koppes and Black, 1987) This department was adamant about creating or shaping the ideologies of young people with the Director of the Department in the 1940’s saying “The easiest way to inject a propaganda idea into most people's minds is to let it go in through the medium of an entertainment picture when they do not realize that they are being propagandized” (Koppes and Black, 1987).


Current Military Campaigns

Current means of recruiting young people follow the same mechanisms used in the early 20th century where there is an emphasis on entering the community to build a sort of fantasy about the military but more specifically in the cases of this paper through the media. more specifically the American Military entertainment complex. This apparatus is a partnership between the American Department of Defense and various cinematic production companies in Hollywood- Including Paramount Pictures, Walt Disney Studios, and Universal Pictures (Stockwell, 2024; Underhill, 2013). Under this partnership, Hollywood production companies have access to military resources such as combat weapons, filming locations such as military bases, As well as technical expertise about the authenticity of scripts (Mirrlees, 2019). In exchange for access to these resources, these production companies have to submit scripts for approval to the Department of Defense which often means characterizing the military apparatus as a positive additive Force even in science fiction genre type movies ((Alford, 2016).

Implications

The introduction of children and adolescents to this type of media can be viewed as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can be a valuable tool for them to rediscover their world and gain a deeper understanding of the intricacies of the systems that govern it. Conversely, it can also possess a brainwashing quality, potentially leading children to mimic what they see on screen without fully grasping the real-world consequences.

This project seeks to explore the factors that contribute to the promotion of specific ideologies within media content. As media continues to evolve and permeate our lives to an ever-greater extent, it becomes crucial to understand its impact beyond mere entertainment. Media shapes our understanding of the world, influences our interactions with it, and guides the issues we choose to champion.

Much of the existing literature only focuses on one Paradigm either wholly anti-establishment contemporary propaganda or pro-establishment meta-analyzes that only focus on the Productions funded by the Department of Defense (DoD).

Why These Films?

Growing up, each of these films—Avatar: The Last Airbender (the TV show), *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay - Part 2 (2015), Twilight: Breaking Dawn - Part 2 (2012), Iron Man (2008), Transformers (2007), and Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015)—had incredibly salient and impactful cultural capital when I was in middle school and high school. Regardless of whether people are fans of these works, these movies unilaterally hold cultural relevance with each film grossing at least. One accurate measure of this would be the box office grossing. And it seems as though the discrepancy in box office grossing between the Anti-establishment and
Pro-establishment would be from the difference in production and distribution resources rather than simply connection to the DoD.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Avatar the Last Airbender (TV Show)</th>
<th>N/A(^1)</th>
<th>Nickelodeon (Paramount)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iron Man (2008)</td>
<td>$585.8 million</td>
<td>Paramount Studios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transformers (2007)</td>
<td>$5.286 billion</td>
<td>Paramount Studios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015)</td>
<td>$1.403 billion</td>
<td>Paramount Studios</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\)Avatar: The Last Airbender* is an outlier since it is the only piece that is not a typical cinematic production. However, I would argue that *Avatar: The Last Airbender* has as much cultural weight as the other franchises due to the fact that it has been adapted into a movie (which was neither critically acclaimed nor culturally respected as an adaptation), expanded into a series and now an entire universe, and has recently obtained deals for further development.
Methods

When watching each film, a blank chart was used to tally each instance of a military reference. Ideally, these counts would be documented with detailed notes, including timestamps. However, you can achieve the same effect by taking good notes and recording them in accordance with the movie's timestamps.
In cases where multiple occurrences happened within a single scene or instance, it was counted as no more than five. For ideological references, they were counted based on monologues. For instance,

Character A: War is inevitable
Character B: Why?
Character A: Because it's our duty

This interaction would count as one ideological reference to war.

In terms of groups, each unifying identity was counted. So, if Military A was fighting Military B, it would count as two groups.

To begin with, we looked at six different movies produced between 2005 and 2015 to examine their impact on Gen Z. Each film was watched once and analyzed for specific categories present in the content:

**Weaponry**
Large non-personal weapons such as bazookas or stationary tanks.

**Surveillance**
Technology such as computers, phones, and devices meant to track establishment intel or anti-establishment groups.

**Personal Defense**
Weapons for combat such as guns, arrows, and in this case, mystical powers. Some instances of personal defense weapons were not counted because they were not pictured in a combative way (e.g., the bow and arrow used by Katniss was counted as a competitive weapon when President Coin was killed; however, it was not counted as a combative weapon when she was hunting).

**Transit Vehicles**
Vehicles specifically geared for militaristic unit transportation or weapon transportation, such as planes, tanks, cargo vehicles, and ships.

**Strategy**
This refers to any demonstrated plan such as maps or any dialogue concerning how an invasion or combative effort will take place.

**Memorabilia**
This refers to tire flags or symbols that reference an establishment or anti-establishment group. In this case, this would include uniforms of officers or other noted symbols that represent the greater institutions.

**Rank**
This is either a verbal or action-based reference towards leaders, princes, cronies, or soldiers that denotes hierarchy within the greater apparatus or establishment.

**Groups**
These include people meeting for a specific purpose. On the anti-establishment side, this would include mobs, riots, or armies. On the pro-establishment side, it represents political meetings, cabinet meetings, or strategy discussions.

**Ideology**
This is specifically characterized by dialogue that forwards a specific dogma either geared toward or against the establishment or the implications of actions in the war. This also includes past references that have culminated in the plot of the film.

**Strongholds**
These are defined as meeting places for strategies or physical embodiments of establishments.

**Propaganda**
This is defined as news circulated within the universe that is either for or against the establishment. This differs from memorabilia or symbols in that it is a circulation of information regarding the ideologies and not simply a symbolic representation of it.

**Violence**
This is defined as demonstrated general combat or group combat that is either supposed to represent a show of strength or power of the establishment or the rebellion group. This is a physical manifestation of the conflict within the films.
It's important to note that Avatar: The Last Airbender is a television series, not a film. While the entire series is lengthy, for the purposes of this project, we will analyze a representative sample. This sample will consist of a number of randomly selected episodes (e.g., using a random number generator from 1 to 61, the total number of episodes). Although a series, Avatar: The Last Airbender will be treated similarly to the other film examples within the project's scope, considering its total running time of approximately 140 minutes. Episodes viewed:
Data and Results

By analyzing these films, we see how propaganda in teen media often relies on visual and thematic elements to subtly influence young viewers. This influence extends to shaping perceptions of the military, reinforcing societal norms, and even impacting political views. The ethical implications of this are profound, raising questions about the responsibility of media creators and the importance of media literacy in helping teens navigate these complex messages.

$H_0 = \text{Transformers (2007)}$ will focus on ideology, framing the weaponry and war as a necessity, and highlighting the importance of the United States as a positive force or apparatus even in the context of an alien invasion.

$H_1 = \text{Iron Man (2008)}$ will include many visuals concerning military transit, as well as explicit ideological claims and enforcements representing either the rebellion or the establishment side.

$H_2 = \text{Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015)}$ will include explicit mentions of ideology, uses of weaponry, and enforcement groups.

$H_3 = \text{Twilight Breaking Dawn Part 2 (2012)}$ will include heavy implications regarding Volturi or vampire council, where there would be a lot of emblems and shows of force.

$H_4 = \text{Hunger Games Mockingjay Part 2 (2015)}$ will include high levels of references to propaganda, Transit Vehicles, strongholds, and strategy.

$H_5 = \text{Avatar the Last Airbender}$ will include explicit ideological claims, lots of imagery regarding transit vehicles, and memorabilia.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Pro - Establishment</th>
<th>Anti - Establishment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>IM</td>
<td>AAOU</td>
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<td>Weaponry</td>
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<tr>
<td>Surveillance</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Personal Defense</td>
<td>11</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transit Vehicles</td>
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<td>20</td>
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<td>Strategy</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>Enforcement</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stronghold</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Propaganda</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Aggregate Military References

- **ATLA**: Green
- **Hunger Games**: Blue
- **Twilight**: Red
- **Transformers**: Yellow
- **Age of Ultron**: Orange
- **Iron Man**: Black

Legend:

- ATLA
- Hunger Games
- Twilight
- Transformers
- Age of Ultron
- Iron Man
Pro-Establishment Films

Pro-Establishment Counts
**Transformers (TF)**

My initial hypothesis was that the film would focus on ideology, framing the weaponry and war as a necessity, and highlighting the importance of the United States as a positive force or apparatus even in the context of an alien invasion.

Some of the biggest categories present in the film included memorabilia, transit vehicles, personal defense weapons, and surveillance. Transformers depicted the United States as an auxiliary force supporting the Autobots.

My initial hypothesis, which anticipated a focus on ideology or explicit proclamations of beliefs, though relevant did not hold true.

Even so, the idea of transit vehicles was significant. The film showed that many of these vehicles were meant to transport weapons and military units. Another salient aspect of the movie is its depiction of the American military against Iraq, with numerous references to Arab countries and depictions of Arab cultures. Additionally, the depiction of memorabilia was intense, illustrating rank and status in the military through uniforms, emblems, and symbols. In this case, Transformers (2007) revealed how much of the pro-establishment propaganda is visual rather than an overt mechanism to convince young people to be pro-establishment. This becomes even more pervasive and insidious when considering the film's context, which includes a mix of comedy, action, and the sexualization of some protagonists, like Megan Fox. Featuring notable comedic actors such as Bernie Mac or Anthony Anderson adds to this effect. The visual and underlying themes impact adolescent viewers because a young person who still believes in mythical things like aliens might think, "I haven't met an Autobot, but a way I can support the
Autobots is by joining these military apparatuses that aim to defend and support their mission." This highlights the military as a necessary additive force that can promote positive ways of living.

**Iron Man (IM)**

My initial hypothesis for Iron Man was that the film would include many visuals concerning military transit, as well as explicit ideological claims and enforcements representing either the rebellion or the establishment side. In accordance with my initial hypothesis, there were several instances with the highest categories being weaponry and themes, followed by memorabilia, groups, and transit vehicles. Iron Man heavily relied on the weaponry made available by the U.S. Department of Defense and intertwined this with explicit ideological claims throughout the movie.

The themes of rank and enforcement were very subliminal and natural to the overall plot. For instance, Rhody, one of Iron Man's best friends, was in the military, giving him access to provide Tony Stark with more information about surveillance technology and other resources. Similarly, the enforcement aspect depicted the Arab "extremist" group with a unifying cause of buying weapons in line with American views regarding Afghanistan at the time.

What was especially surprising about Iron Man was that one of the main villains, Obadiah Stane, was in cahoots with the enemy group. Although the film initially suggested that the government could be an additive force supporting superheroes like Iron Man in defeating or managing insurgent groups or violence in other countries, it equally positioned greedy capitalists like Stane as counteractive to the overall positive force represented by Iron Man and, through Iron Man, the United States military.

**Avengers: Age of Ultron (AAOU)**

My initial hypothesis for Avengers: Age of Ultron assumed there would be a lot of explicit mentions of ideology, uses of weaponry, and enforcement groups. Contrary to my expectations, many of the themes prevalent in Age of Ultron were not as powerful as in other Marvel movies such as Iron Man. The highest categories were transit vehicles, memorabilia, themes, and surveillance, with relatively lower instances of explicit themes or strategy compared to other pro-establishment films.

This film, in particular, didn't feel as robust in terms of integrating the United States military into the plot. However, it did have many salient features toward establishing support from other countries, such as the fictional Eastern European country Sokovia, which was able to support the Avengers' efforts through its police force. Additionally, the idea that S.H.I.E.L.D. (Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division) was able to add forces to evacuate people using transit vehicles reminiscent of actual U.S. transport vehicles added to the sentiment that the United States military is an additive force to the superhero complex.
This represents how the Marvel Cinematic Universe, in general, uses films like Iron Man and the first Avengers movies to set up the foundation of the United States being an auxiliary force to superheroes. Age of Ultron and subsequent films build upon that foundation, making it more digestible and less overt that the United States has had a role in funding these sorts of movies. Age of Ultron was primarily a film for entertainment, with the underlying foundation of being funded by the United States and military. The work of presenting that visually in an overt way, as seen in Iron Man, was already established in previous films.

**Anti-Establishment Films**

**Anti-Establishment Military Count**

- **Twilight**
- **Hunger Games**
- **ATLA**
Next, let's discuss Twilight. My initial hypothesis was that there were going to be very heavy implications regarding Volturi or vampire council, where there would be a lot of emblems and shows of force. However, the major theme in Twilight was the declaration within the dialogue that either prioritized conflict or reconciled with the meaning of war and its implications. Twilight was more realistic in the sense that it showed community gathering or collective passion as something organic, relying on existing ties and friends to rally against an establishment. This organic means of rallying also applied to establishing strongholds, such as the Cullen house, which became the stronghold or meeting place for the rebellion group. Strategy came through conversation rather than cut-and-dry maps present in other contexts. The implication of violence was also interesting, serving as a physical manifestation of conflict and a means of establishing power and intimidation. The Volturi would use their cronies to torture people into giving information, establishing fear within others, and demonstrating their power.

In "The Hunger Games: Mockingjay Part 2," My initial hypothesis predicted that there would be high levels of references to propaganda, Transit Vehicles, strongholds, and strategy. Generally in accordance with my hypothesis, the highest categories included transit vehicles, strategy, and propaganda; with self-defense weapons and explicit ideologies. Transit vehicles not only transported military units and weapons but also served as symbols for the government. For
instance, the bombing of children in front of the Capitol building was executed by an aircraft bearing the Capitol's emblem, which was a ploy by District 13 to depict the Capitol as violent and uncaring.

Hunger Games incorporated more subliminal messaging, contrasting the militaristic barricade of District 13 with the opulence of the Capitol. It had enough direct dialogue to establish ideology and the cause of war. Both sides of the establishment used news and famous individuals to forward their ideologies. Hunger Games uniquely showed how establishment structures are cyclical, with both District 13 and the Capitol being repressive. The idea of rank was significant, with both governmental and rebellion establishments having presidents, auxiliaries, and strategists, showing the parallels between the two sides.

The use of strategy to promote violence and combat. Personal defense weapons symbolized how individuals must decide about joining collective action movements. Surveillance technology was used by both the rebellion and the establishment to weaken each other, demonstrating the pervasive nature of control and observation.

**Avatar the Last Airbender (ATLA)**

For Avatar: The Last Airbender, my initial predictions included explicit ideological claims, lots of imagery regarding transit vehicles, and memorabilia. In accordance with my hypothesis, there were high levels of each category; however, the highest overall was the reference to rank and strategy, followed by themes and memorabilia.

One characteristic of portraying or building the world of the establishment was the use of rank. Many of the main protagonists were referenced using characteristics like Western military titles, such as General Zhao, or fictional titles that conveyed power or leadership, such as the Fire Lord. The idea of strategy was incredibly pertinent, especially in the rebellion's plotting on how to take down the establishment and what that would entail.

Despite instances of comedy, romance, and themes of family, the themes of war were pervasive. However, it didn't feel as life-threatening or grave as in other films where explicit
violence and tragedy were central. As a children's show, the violence was implied or depicted in a powerful but inconsequential manner. For instance, rather than saying “kill,” characters would say “put an end to his reign—permanently.”

In interviewing one of the lead writers on the show, Stanford GSB Alumni Aaron Ehasz, Ehasz said that the goal was not to make these themes overly overt. While the themes are present, they are not central to the entire show. For Ehasz and the other writers, the idea was to ensure that the themes, though grave and serious, were depicted with a lightheartedness, honesty, and innocence that could be understood by young people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it becomes incredibly apparent that many of these films, regardless of their pro- or anti-establishment stance, utilize specific and subtle references to militarization. More specifically, there is a reliance on visual cues such as memorabilia, rank, and transit vehicles rather than overt proclamations regarding themes, although ideology is also significant. This suggests that the media consumed by young people does promote a military-forward, pro-war sentiment. Whether pro- or anti-government, these films contain indicators and factors that push young people toward viewing war as a viable solution for societal issues. From this data, it is evident that militaristic war themes are significantly present in adolescent media. We must question the extent of this presence in the wider scope of adolescent media. This study looks at a small sample of media that was prominent in my own life, so a broader study of more adolescent media, specifically the most popular films and television shows for teens within the time range, would provide a more robust understanding of how militaristic themes have infiltrated the media landscape for Gen Z.

Throughout the study, there could have been improvements in the data-gathering process. For instance, having multiple people documenting each subject or category observed within the films would have been beneficial. My viewing, although adhering to specific guidelines and structures, may have been tainted or convoluted (e.g., mixing up propaganda symbols with memorabilia like flags).

Given that I had already watched these films multiple times as a young person and as an adult, my hypotheses or expectations regarding the films could have been biased. It would be beneficial to conduct this research with someone who has not seen any of the films to obtain results that are less predictive and more ambivalent.

For future research, it would be interesting to interview a robust sample of Gen Z individuals who have seen these movies. From anecdotal experience, I assume many people my age have seen them. The goal would be to determine if their opinions regarding the military apparatus within the U.S. or their perspectives on war, liberation, freedom, and service to their country or communities align with the themes presented in these films. This research could explore whether Gen Z has an inclination toward war as a solution and whether those who have not seen these films have the same predisposition.
Works Cited


sistance from the Pentagon Freedom of Information Act Request February 4 2013.
Accessed 6 June 2024.

Generative AI was used only for editing content; all data collection, writing, and synthesizing of research was done with human labor!