



How to Read *Iron Man*

## The Economics, Geopolitics and Ideology of an Imperial Film Commodity

BY TANNER MIRRLEES

*Iron Man* (2008) is a Hollywood film produced by Marvel Studios and distributed by Viacom-owned Paramount Pictures. Based on the Cold War-era Marvel comic by the same name, the film is about Tony Stark (Robert Downey, Jr.), a multi-millionaire engineer whose Stark Industries (inherited from his father) researches, develops and sells weapons technologies to the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD). In the opening scene, Stark is escorted to U.S.-occupied Afghanistan by a friendly DOD liaison, Lieutenant Colonel James Rhodes (Terrence Howard). There, Stark demonstrates the killing power of a new commercialized weapon system (the “Jericho Missile”) but is soon after ambushed and taken captive in a cave by a jihadist group called The Ten Rings. Stark is almost killed by IED shrapnel, which is lodged close to his heart. But Yinsen, Stark’s fellow captive, saves him by grafting an electromagnet into Stark’s chest to keep the shrapnel from reaching his heart. The terrorist leader Raza then forces Stark and Yinsen to make weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) for them from the cave. But instead of doing so, they engineer an electric generator (the arc reactor) and a weaponized armoured battle-suit, which Stark uses to escape. Yinsen is killed, but Stark fights his way to freedom and is then rescued by the DOD, which takes him back to the U.S. There,

Stark announces that he will no longer sell WMDs, but Obadiah Stane, the manager of Stark Industries, advises him against this decision. To his dismay, Stark learns that the weapons Stark Industries sells are being used by the Ten Rings to kill peasant Afghans and also, that Stane wants to cut him out of Stark Industries. Stark engineers a new weaponized armour suit, flies back to Afghanistan, kills the terrorists and saves the Afghani villagers. Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow), Stark’s assistant, discovers that Stane supplied the Ten Rings with WMDs and also, hired the terrorist group to kill Stark. At the film’s climax, Stark battles Stane (who dons his own battle-suit) atop his Stark Industries and defeats him with a massive energy blast. The film ends with Stark revealing his super-hero identity to the press.

*Iron Man* was made in a world system in which the U.S. is the dominant imperial power. Since at least WWII, the U.S. state and U.S. corporations have struggled to rule markets across territories by building, promoting and policing a world system of states that share the U.S.’s core features: the capitalist mode of production, the liberal democratic state form, and the consumerist “way of life.” The U.S. fights for “hegemony” in the world system through the incorporation of others, using strategies of coercion and ideological persuasion, brute force and consent building. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the U.S. continues to be a dominant imperial power, economically, militarily and media-culturally. The U.S.

economy is three times the size of the world’s next largest, Japan. With only 4.6% of the world population, the U.S. accounts for about 27.5% of the world’s total Gross Domestic Product (GDP). *Iron Man* exists in a world in which U.S.-based corporations are backed by the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD)—the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard—which controls more than half a million troops, is equipped with nearly half of the world’s total weapons and has more than eight hundred and sixty five military bases in more than forty foreign countries. *Iron Man* is also part of globalizing Hollywood, major film companies that are located in Los Angeles, California, but have business operations that encircle the planet. Hollywood studios, distribution networks and exhibition platforms are largely controlled by six U.S.-based transnational media conglomerates (TNMCs): the Walt Disney Company, Comcast-NBC-Universal, News Corporation, Viacom, Time-Warner and Sony Entertainment of America. TNMC-controlled Hollywood exerts asymmetrical influence over the internal structure, ownership patterns, distribution and exhibition process and standards of film of other national film industries without proportionate reciprocation of influence by them. Hollywood’s worldwide box office revenues climbed in 2011 to \$32.6 billion and in 2012, rose even higher to \$34.7 billion.<sup>1</sup> Hollywood adds nearly \$180 billion to the U.S. economy each year and sustains a near one-way flow of film commodities between the U.S. and other countries. Hollywood TNMCs control the property rights to the top 30 all-time worldwide highest grossing films and in 2012, Hollywood made all of the top ten highest grossing films: *The Avengers*, *Skyfall*, *The Dark Knight Rises*, *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*, *Ice Age: Continental Drift*, *The Twilight Saga*, *The Amazing Spider-Man*, *Madagascar 3*, and *The Hunger Games*. In terms of its economic size, military preponderance and cultural power, the U.S. is an Empire.

In this article, I argue that *Iron Man* is one small but important part of the U.S. Empire. While much has been made of *Iron Man*’s spectacle as Hollywood entertainment media, this article examines how *Iron Man* is shaped by and supportive of the economic, military and ideological power of the U.S. Empire. I argue that *Iron Man* supports U.S. economic power (as a Hollywood blockbuster and synergistic franchise), U.S. military power (as DOD-Hollywood co-produced militainment) and cultural power (as a national and global relay for U.S. imperial ideologies). The nexus of the actual world of U.S. Empire and the reel world of Hollywood film expressed by *Iron Man* highlights how popular film is not “just entertainment” that circulates in apolitical theatre markets, but is linked to and supportive of the geopolitical-economy and ideology of the U.S. Empire. Combining the political-economy of communications and critical cultural studies methods, I explore the nexus of the U.S. security state, Hollywood and film so as to

critically interpret *Iron Man* with respect to the broad economic, geopolitical and ideological forces and relations that shape it.

### The Economic Power of *Iron Man*: A Synergistic Blockbuster for the Walt Disney Company

*Iron man* is a blockbuster film and synergistic franchise that supports the U.S. Empire’s economic power by extending Hollywood’s global market dominance, adding to the Walt Disney Company’s profits and perpetuating the class power of Robert I. Ager, Disney’s CEO, Chairman and major shareholder.

Like all blockbuster films, *Iron Man* was made with a big budget (\$140,000,000) with the goal of making Hollywood as much money as possible. To cultivate consumer demand for this film and attract viewers to theatres, Marvel Studios and Paramount Pictures mass marketed *Iron Man* using in-cinema previews, TV ad spots (one during halftime of Super Bowl XLII), ads in newspapers and on billboards, buses, benches and websites, soft news interviews with actors, tie-ins at thousands of 7-Eleven stores and Burger King chains and via social media platforms like Facebook. After creating global hype, buzz and intrigue, Paramount Pictures mass-released *Iron Man* to theatres worldwide. Between April 14, 2008 and May 14, 2008, the *Iron Man* commodity flowed across and was consumed in eighty countries including Argentina, Brazil, China, Germany, Estonia, Iceland, India, Israel Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Pakistan, Russia, South Africa, Ukraine, the United Arab Emirates and Vietnam. As *Iron Man* crossed the borders of these and other countries, the title was translated or dubbed into local languages. In Argentina, *Iron Man* became *El Hombre de hierro*; in Brazil, *Homem de Ferro*; in Estonia, *Raudmees*; in Greece, *O atsalenios anthropos*; in Japan, *Aian Man*; in Russia, *Железный человек*, in Vietnam, *Nguoi Sat*. *Iron Man*’s box office returns quadrupled the amount the film cost to make. Overall, *Iron Man* took a total of \$585.2 million: \$318.4 at the “North American” box office (54.5% of the total) and \$266.8 million at the worldwide box office (45.6% of the total).<sup>2</sup> *Iron Man*’s production budget was approximately \$140 million, meaning the film generated a little more than \$445 million at the box office. This box office return made *Iron Man* the 89<sup>th</sup> highest grossing worldwide film of all time and set in motion Marvel Studios’ production of *Iron Man 2* (2010) (the 74<sup>th</sup> highest grossing worldwide film of all time) and *Iron Man 3* (2013), the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest grossing film of all time. Clearly, *Iron Man* contributed to Hollywood’s global market dominance.

In addition to being a global blockbuster, *Iron Man* is a synergistic entertainment franchise, designed to generate as much revenue for its owners as possible, not only through the accumulation of box office receipts, but also, through the sale of ancillary commodities. At the core

of the *Iron Man* franchise is the comic book (stories and characters), which prior to the film, already had a big fan base and whose “high concept” was widely recognized by people. Spreading from the core of the *Iron Man* concept are brand extensions that expand a consumable *Iron Man* experience through commodities, screens, platforms and stores. Accompanying the “pre-sold” release of the *Iron Man* film to the world was a CD soundtrack (composed by Ramin Djawadi, an *Iron Man* fan) and an *Iron Man* Video game (published by Sega and released on Playstation 3, Xbox 360, Playstation 2, Playstation Portable, Nintendo DS, Wii, and PCs). In the lead up to and following this multi-platform release, *Iron Man* merchandise (action figures, coffee mugs, T-shirts, candy, trading cards) was sold by retailers at shopping malls around the world. Four months following its theatrical release, *Iron Man* DVDs and Blue-ray discs started filling the shelves of more retailers and rental stores and soon after, the film was licensed to broadcast and cable TV networks and pay-per-view providers in the U.S. and elsewhere, generating even more revenue for *Iron Man*’s owners. To generate long-term engagement with the *Iron Man* brand, Marvel Studios built an *Iron Man* Web site that invites users to interactively “learn more” about the film, read character profiles, view stills, watch preview trailers, sign up to receive emails, deals and “insider info” and download desktop *Iron Man* themed wallpaper, screensavers and skins. The website uses its users to extend the *Iron Man* brand through their own lives, bodies and screens and also, uses its users’ creativity and love of the story and characters to generate *Iron Man* fan art, which it co-opts and showcases to add further value to the overall franchise. *Iron Man* is not just a blockbuster, but a synergistic entertainment property designed to move consumers from medium to medium, commodity to commodity, transaction to transaction. With each user gaze, click, move, download and turn, additional revenue is generated for *Iron Man*’s owners.

While spinning out branded commodities based upon itself, the *Iron Man* also cross-promotes brands for other products. Hollywood has been fused with branding and the result is “branded entertainment”: films that try to cultivate goodwill for brands by associating them with the positive attributes of scripted protagonists. *Iron Man* is an example of branded entertainment. For example, after battling his way out of an Afghan cave and crash landing in an Afghan desert, Stark talks about longing for “a real American cheeseburger”. In the next scene, Stark has been rescued from Afghanistan, returned to the U.S. and has had his appetite sated by Burger King, whose Whopper wrapper he dangles in the face of journalists at a press conference. *Iron Man* celebrates the liberation of Stark from Afghan terrorists, but places its own viewers in a cage of corporate brand culture: Pepper Potts drives an Audi; Stark uses a Mac computer and reads Vanity Fair, Rolling Stone and Wired magazines; other

characters fashion Bulgari watches, LG phones and Dell computers.

Though *Iron Man* made money for Marvel Studios and Paramount Pictures in 2008, since 2009, the film has been exploited as a revenue source by the Walt Disney Company, which acquired *Iron Man* from Marvel Studios in 2009 by merging this studio into its ownership portfolio. Since mid-1990s, Marvel Studios had operated as a semi-independent production company that made and licensed content for the majors. Marvel Studios generated revenue by making TV shows and films based on the content of its comic book collection and then selling distribution rights to these media commodities to bigger conglomerates. It also licensed the film production rights to comics like *The Avengers*, *Daredevil*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Iron Man*, *The Fantastic Four*, *Spider-Man*, *X-Men* to bigger studios, which developed them into films and then sold the distribution rights to other companies, which rented them to theatre chains and other exhibitors. Noticing the popular appeal and box of returns accruing to Marvel comic book films like *X-Men*, *The Incredible Hulk* and *Iron Man*, the Walt Disney Company launched a takeover of the company. On August 31, 2009, the Walt Disney Company bought Marvel Studios and with it, an archive of at least 5,000 comic book characters, each a potential source of a new synergistic franchise to be spread, cross-promoted and sold across films, TV series, video games, toys, rides and more. The Walt Disney Company’s CEO, Robert A. Iger, said that by buying Marvel, he gained control of a “treasure trove” of intellectual property and that this

comic world offered “so many opportunities to mine [for value] both characters that are known and characters that are not widely known”.<sup>3</sup> Stan Lee, Marvel’s founder, enthused that the Walt Disney and Marvel convergence would “be extremely beneficial to both companies” and be a “perfect synergy”.<sup>4</sup> This synergy has served the Walt Disney Company well, as it has made Marvel characters into two of the world’s top five highest grossing films of all time: *The Avengers* (#3) and *Iron Man 3* (#5). The Walt Disney Company’s Marvel feature films, including *Iron Man*, contribute to its annual revenue. In 2012, the Walt Disney Company generated \$42.3 billion in revenue, a sum greater than the combined 2012 GDP of the world’s six poorest countries: the Democratic Republic of the Congo (17.87 billion), Liberia (1.767 billion), Zimbabwe (\$10.81 billion), Burundi (2.472 billion), Eritrea (3.092 billion) and the Central African Republic (2.139 billion). Moreover, the Walt Disney Company’s control of *Iron Man* supports the class power of Robert A. Iger, Disney’s Chairman, Chief Executive Office (CEO) and holder of 1,159,675 Disney shares. In 2007, Fortune magazine ranked Iger as one of the “25 Most Powerful People in Business” and he is one of the top ten highest paid people in the U.S. In 2011, Iger took home \$28 million.

In sum, *Iron Man* supports the economic power of the U.S. Empire by sustaining the global market dominance of Hollywood and its cross-border trade in blockbuster films, synergistically cross-promoting itself and other U.S. commodities through itself and other derivative goods, and generating revenue for the Walt Disney Company and its U.S. ruler and owner, Iger.

### The Military Power of Iron Man: The DOD-Hollywood Complex and Militainment

In addition to supporting U.S. economic power, *Iron Man* supports the U.S. Empire’s military power as a form of DOD-Hollywood complex “militainment” that serves DOD public relations goals (PR).

The DOD-Hollywood complex refers to the symbiotic (mutually beneficial) relationships between the DOD and Hollywood studios which encourage the production of films which glorify militarism as a way of life. For the past hundred years, the DOD has supported the business of Hollywood and many Hollywood war films have aligned with the DOD’s use of PR to engineer public support for militarism and state violence. DOD-Hollywood complex militainment is designed to make the DOD look good and to make Hollywood money. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the DOD controls a centralized Hollywood liaison office that links every branch of the DOD. Headed by Phil Strub and located in the Pentagon, Washington, D.C., the Department of Defense Special Assistant for Entertainment Media (DODSAEM) is the “go to” place for Hollywood studios that wish to produce war films with the DOD. The Army’s Hollywood liaison is called the Office of Army Chief of Public Affairs; the Navy’s is called the Navy Office of Information West; the Air Force’s is the Office of Public Affairs-Entertainment Liaison Office; the Marine Corps’ is the Public Affairs Motion Picture and Television Liaison; the Coast Guard’s is called the Motion Picture and TV Office.

The DODSAEM, a DOD-film policy agency, grants war filmmakers access to military locations (bases, barracks, battlefields), personnel (U.S. officers and soldiers), software (knowledge about military protocol, chain of command, systems operation, troop lingo, drill routines), and most importantly, hardware (actual battle-ships, jet fighters, tanks, helicopters and guns), so long as their war scripts meet DOD content requirements. Hollywood war scripts that promote the DOD’s image to the public, cast the DOD in a positive light, align with DOD policy objectives and link with the DOD’s ongoing recruitment efforts tend to get DOD support while those that fail to meet these content stipulations, do not. Since 9/11, the DOD has helped Hollywood studios make a number of blockbuster war films such as *Pearl Harbor* (2001), *Enemy At the Gates* (2001), *Black Hawk Down* (2001), *Bad Company* (2002), *Behind Enemy Lines* (2002), and *Windtalkers* (2002), *Transformers* (2007), *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009). *Iron Man* is thus one among many examples of DOD-Hollywood complex militainment. The DODSAEM supported *Iron Man*’s production by linking Marvel Studios to the U.S. Air Force, which turned its Edwards Air Force Base into a Hollywood set piece for three days of shooting. The Air Force allowed Marvel Studios to cast over one hundred Airmen as extras in the film, flew its F-22 Raptor aircraft for the camera to help Marvel create high altitude action



combat sequences, provisioned helicopters, Humvees and jumbo jets, and even let its service-people act in the film. Technical Sergeant Thoshiya Jones played a pilot; Second Lieutenant Carsten Stahr played an Army special operations soldier; and Staff Sergeant Joe Gambles of the 31<sup>st</sup> Test and Evaluation Squadron acted as Air force pilot in a scene with Rhodie. “No other Air Force base has this opportunity”, enthused Gambles. “We’re near Hollywood and we work with Hollywood all the time”.<sup>5</sup> The Air Force also supported *Iron Man*’s production by giving acting lessons to Terrence Howard by embedding him on its base and letting him observe, train with and learn about the way the Air Force operates and communicates.

By working with the Air Force, Marvel Studios saved on production costs (associated with acquiring and flying an F-22 Raptor, paying extras to play as soldiers, renting locations to shoot and more). For director Jon Favreau, his DOD-Hollywood synergy also enhanced the “realism” of *Iron Man*: “This is the best back lot you could ever have. Every angle you shoot is authentic: desert, dry lake beds, hangars”. The Air Force is full of “tremendous professionals”, he said. “Every background performer is a bit of technical advisor. So there’s a plethora of information available to you.” The Air Force was happy to help Favreau make *Iron Man* seem “realistic”, so long as its comic book fantasy helped promote a positive image of itself to the public and to the world. Master Sergeant Larry Belen described *Iron Man*’s contribution to Air Force PR: “I want people to walk away from this movie with a really good impression of the Air Force, like they got about the Navy seeing *Top Gun*.” Air Force Captain Christian Hodge, *Iron Man*’s DOD Project Officer, said the film was also “good for [troop] morale” as it made its airmen look “like rock stars”. Furthermore, the Air Force chose to help Marvel Studios make *Iron Man* because it believed the character Rhodie conveyed its key values. According to Lt. Colonel Stephen Clutter, the Air Force Entertainment Liaison Office director, “The character of Rhodes reflects our warrior ethos and the professionalism that is so important to our Air Force culture”.<sup>6</sup> Clutter continued: “Mr. Howard worked very hard to ensure Airmen would be proud of his character. [...] We’re also proud of the fact that the airman battle uniform made its Hollywood debut in the film”.

In addition to serving Air Force PR goals, *Iron Man* promotionally interfaces with the DOD’s attempt to make a cyborg-soldier suit capable of enhancing the strength, speed, security and intellect of U.S. war-fighters. Since the 1990s, DOD proponents of a revolution in military affairs (RMA) have argued that information and communication technologies (ICTs) are transforming war and that the DOD must prepare itself to fight 21<sup>st</sup> century Network Centric Warfare (NCW) by integrating ICTs into every facet of what it does and networking its soldiers with weapon systems and the hardware

and software of the information age: computers, mobile devices, the World Wide Web.<sup>7</sup> The DOD also strives to enhance the physical, cognitive and sensorial powers of its soldiers by equipping them with combinations of ICTs, artificial intelligence (AI) supports, augmented reality interfaces (ARIs) and wearable exoskeletons. To generate buzz about these “cyborg-soldier” R&D projects, the DOD is linking them to the *Iron Man* film. Since *Iron Man*’s debut, DOD-sponsored university researchers and defense companies have been “working to turn *Iron Man* fiction into real technology”.<sup>8</sup> As the military analyst Max Boot says, the DOD is designing suits that aim to “give ordinary mortals many of the attributes of comic book superheroes”<sup>9</sup> At the University of Utah and the University Berkeley, for example, DARPA-funded researchers say they aim to create an “Iron Man” suit that would “protect soldiers in combat by giving them increased strength and endurance”.<sup>10</sup> At MIT, the Army-supported Future Force Warrior project intends to make *Iron Man* into a new innovation. U.S. journalists have echoed this excitement, simultaneously promoting the *Iron Man* film and the DOD’s cyborg-soldier R&D. The Popular Science magazine story “Building the Real *Iron Man*”, forwards the headline: “While audiences flood theaters this month to see the comic-book-inspired *Iron Man*, a real-life mad genius toils in a secret mountain lab to make the mechanical superhuman more than just fantasy.”<sup>11</sup> A September 10, 2012 CNNMoney news segment avers: “*Iron Man* is a prized military asset in the movie, the ultimate soldier. Hollywood styles it as futuristic fantasy, but decades of research, development and considerable investment have made bionic technology a reality”.<sup>12</sup> A Slate video declares “Yes, the U.S. Military is Building real *Iron Man* suits”<sup>13</sup> while a YouTube video says “US Army test real life *Iron Man* exoskeleton”.<sup>14</sup>

These stories and videos promote the idea that the suit worn by Stark in *Iron Man* has become or one day will become a reality, and this is what the DOD hopes will one day happen. *Iron Man* offers the DOD’s researchers a way to promote their cyborg-soldier R&D to the public and also, a fictional model to inspire their present-day prototypes. The *Iron Man* suit and MIT’s Future Force Warrior prototype, for example, have much in common. In addition to being battery powered, they are equipped with flexible armor that protects the wearer’s body from bullet fire, Heads Up Display Units (HUDs) that extend the wearer’s vision across many screens and tactical imaging systems, ear-pieces that extend the wearer’s hearing through global telecommunication systems, physiological monitoring devices that record and track wearer’s heart rate, temperature and hydration, and a variety of personalized impact-heavy but physically light weapons systems the wearer can kill with. Like Stark’s Iron Man suit, the actual suits being designed by the DOD are designed to augment or enhance the wearer’s experience of reality so they may more effectively and



efficiently defend America and attack its enemies. The *Iron Man* film sequences which show off the military capabilities of Stark’s suit not only prefigure the DOD’s cyborg-soldier, but also, encourage viewers to expect a future of cyborgian soldier warfare ruled by the U.S. By doing this, *Iron Man* normalizes a future that is yet to be while cultivating public compliance with present-day DOD expenditure on R&D that aims to make *Iron Man*’s cyborgian weapons system real.

In sum, *Iron Man* serves the U.S. DOD as a form of DOD-Hollywood militainment that glorifies the Air Force and promotes the military-industrial-academic-complex’s R&D on cyborg-soldier weapons technology.

### The Cultural Power of *Iron Man*: The Imperial Ideology of the *Iron Man* Text

*Iron Man* gives cultural and ideological support to the U.S. Empire by affirming post-9/11 U.S. foreign policy in Afghanistan, U.S. exceptionalism, and a distinctly U.S. military-industrial-complex (MIC).

Following 9/11, the U.S. launched an invasion and prolonged occupation of Afghanistan, a country from which Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda allegedly planned and orchestrated the 9/11 attacks. *Iron Man* supports the U.S. state’s post-9/11 foreign policy in Afghanistan by depicting it as a space of threat to America, a space that

must be contained and controlled with military might. In the film’s opening scene, Stark is being toured around Afghanistan by the DOD and is then ambushed by the Ten Rings jihadist terrorist group, which kills U.S. soldiers and nearly kills Stark. By representing Afghanistan as a place full of fanatical terrorists that wish to kill Americans and conquer the region, the film affirms the U.S.’s post-9/11 occupation of this country. Moreover, *Iron Man*, like the Bush Administration, contends that proper response to the terrorist threat is violence, not diplomacy. In an early scene, Stark demonstrates the destructive power of his Jericho missile to the DOD: “They say the best weapon is one you never have to fire. I respectfully disagree. I prefer the weapon you only have to fire once. That’s how dad did it, that’s how America does it, and it’s worked out pretty well so far” says Stark. “Find an excuse to let one of these off the chain and I personally guarantee you the bad guys won’t want to come out of their caves.” Stark then launches the Jericho at an Afghan mountain. Stark and the DOD are delighted and viewers are invited to enjoy the spectacle of Afghan caves and terrorists being obliterated by U.S. WMDs. In another scene, Stark escapes the Afghan cave-prison and uses his new suit to pummel terrorists and smash them into cave walls while incinerating them with a flamethrower. In these and other scenes, *Iron Man* gives popular support to the post-9/11 U.S. state’s violence in Afghanistan.

In addition to glorifying violence as the proper U.S. state response to terrorism, *Iron Man* intersects with and perpetuates post-9/11 nation-making processes that construct a positive American self by distinguishing it from a negative Arab-Muslim Other. For over one-hundred years, Hollywood has made Orientalist films that define America by othering Arabs and Muslims as “heartless, brutal, uncivilized, religious fanatics”.<sup>15</sup> *Iron Man* participates in this process. In *Iron Man* by casting the majority of Arabs and Muslims as villainous terrorists set against the heroic American Stark. The terrorists are dumb while Stark is a genius (Stark is able to make the first *Iron Man* suit while under the surveillance of the terrorists, who don’t understand what he’s doing). The terrorists are emotional and lack the scientific knowledge required to engineer weapons while Stark is rational, possesses scientific knowledge and can innovate weapons in a short

attacks an Afghan village, killing men and taking women and children hostage. Stark is made aware of this by the news, which says “no political or international pressure means no hope for [Afghan] refugees and villagers—who will help them?” Stark decides that he is the only one that can help, so dawns his new suit for the first time, flies to Afghanistan and destroys the Ten Rings, saving the poor and helpless good Afghans from the bad terrorist ones. *Iron Man* thereby gives popular credence to the post-9/11 liberal imperialist idea that the U.S. has a responsibility, obligation or mission to use its military power liberate or save other peoples living in other countries that are suffering from some kind of oppression. As an allegorical figure of the U.S. state, *Iron Man*’s protagonist Stark personifies the U.S.’s exceptionalist state and the post-9/11 state of exception. To secure America, Stark must play by his own rules and pursue goals he deems just, free of external constraints on his power.

*Iron Man* also promotes the existence of a distinctly U.S. military-industrial-complex in the guise of a critique of it. Hollywood studios often take account of the problems of the time and incorporate some of the potentially explosive and resonant political issues of the day when scripting films, opening some space in film texts for liberal, sometimes even radical, criticism of the world. While *Iron Man* addresses some of the anxieties viewers may have about the U.S. MIC, it efficiently defuses them. In an early scene, a female journalist accuses Stark of being a “war profiteer” but Stark deflects this label by saying that “peace means having a bigger stick than the bad guys” and that Stark Industries and the DOD’s expenditure on weapons R&D “helped defeat the Nazis”. Here, the MIC is represented as an “arsenal of democ-

period of time with limited resources. The terrorists are passive consumers of U.S. weapons technology; Stark Industries is the seller. While *Iron Man* perpetuates the post-9/11 stereotype of Arabs and Muslims as bad and inferior Others to define a good and superior American self, the film does depict some Arab-Muslim characters as good and intelligent, but not quite as good or intelligent as Stark. Yinsen, Stark’s friend, designs the technology that keeps Stark alive. But Stark improves upon this technology upon his return to the U.S. Yinsen even sacrifices himself to save Stark’s life, perhaps perceiving Stark to be more integral to scientific progress than he is. Other “good” Muslim characters appear in the film, but they are cast in passive, weak and dependent roles, in need of U.S. military help. In one scene, the Ten Rings

“trash”, something that serves world peace. Stark further deracinates the journalist’s questions by seducing her, having sexual intercourse with her and then allowing his servant Pepper Potts, who proudly claims to do “anything and everything for Mr. Stark”, to call the journalist “trash” as she takes her out of Stark’s mansion the morning after. *Iron Man* addresses and then silences criticisms of the MIC by allowing its super-hero to outwit, penetrate and then humiliate a caricature of a liberal-minded female journalist. *Iron Man* also addresses post-9/11 fears that U.S. weapons corporations are selling weapons to terrorist groups that use these weapons to kill non-U.S. civilians and U.S. soldiers. A terrorist calls Stark “the most famous mass murderer in the history of America”, noting how Stark Industry sells weapons that fuel violent

conflicts between peoples in his “part of the world.” Stark is shocked to discover that there is some truth in this claim, as Stark Industries manufactured the Ten Rings’ entire weapons supply, including the shrapnel bomb that nearly killed him. At a press conference in the U.S., Stark says that while in Afghanistan, he “saw Americans killed by the very weapons I created to protect them. And I saw that I had become part of a system that had become comfortable with zero accountability”. In response to this discovery, Stark attempts to close down the weapons manufacturing division of Stark Industries, but this leads to a conflict with Obadiah Stane, whose main goal is to please the firm’s shareholders and Wall Street. When Stark fails to step back or step down from Stark Industries, Stane goes into a rage, dawns the behemoth Iron Monger suit and tries to kill Stark, but is defeated.

*Iron Man* addresses worries that the U.S. MIC is controlled by greedy CEOs, who, motivated by profit, make and sell weapons to whoever will buy them (including the U.S.’s terrorist enemies). The potential of this framing of the U.S. MIC to become a structural critique of militarized capitalism, however, is not realized. *Iron Man* individualizes the MIC in Stark and Stane. Stark is a well-intentioned but naïve war profiteer who is oblivious to the harm his company causes until feeling and seeing this harm up close. Stane is a callous and realist minded war profiteer who is aware that the weapons he makes and sells kill people, but he only cares about the bottom line. *Iron Man*’s division of the MIC into individuals—a good war profiteer (Stark) and a bad one (Stane)—obscures how the system of capitalist-imperialism relies on near permanent war and the MIC. The film implies there are a few bad apples that need to be removed from the MIC, but the system which needs it is fine. Furthermore, *Iron Man* tries to placate concerns about the MIC with a plea for state regulation and by pushing the idea that the DOD should be the exclusive consumer of its weapons. Having realized that a global free-market in weapons and the free use of any weapons by anyone threaten the U.S. and its allies, Stark, by the end of the narrative, concedes to work with the U.S. state, thereby legitimizing its claim to the monopoly of physical violence. *Iron Man*’s potential for critique of the MIC slides into an argument for a distinctly U.S. MIC and affirms the need for a firm structural alliance between the DOD, U.S. weapons companies and military-minded engineers. *Iron Man* does not call for the abolishment of corporate weapons manufacture, but for regulations that make sure the U.S.’s war profiteers only sell their commodities to the U.S. state. *Iron Man* is not opposed to corporations prospering by selling weapons to the DOD or the DOD using such weapons to kill non-Americans; it is against profiteering by selling weapons to non-U.S. state and non-state actors that might use these commodities to kill Americans. Overall, it is a popular affirmation of the U.S. Empire’s military-industrial-complex.

## Conclusion

This article’s analysis of the geopolitical-economic conditions and text of *Iron Man* show how the capitalist accumulation logics of global Hollywood intersect with the strategic, promotional and ideological imperatives of the U.S. state, the DOD in particular. Although Hollywood and the DOD are not “fused” and Hollywood studios and the DOD are different kinds of organizations, this difference does not mean there is never any symbiotic interaction between the two. Though Hollywood and the DOD are motivated by different priorities, *Iron Man*—a new imperial film commodity—illustrates how economic and geopolitical interests interact and intertwine in support of the U.S. Empire and the broader culture of U.S. imperialism. *Iron Man* is part and product of the global market dominance of Hollywood, the DOD’s promotional and R&D goals and imperial ideology. As the Walt Disney Company’s *Iron Man* franchise flies across borders through various commodity platforms and brand extensions, it may, in addition to helping global Hollywood profit-maximize, elicit trans-national identification with an imagined U.S. community and shore up popular support for an expanding but always contested U.S. Empire.

## Notes

- 1 J. Kay, “Global box office hit \$34.7 billion in 2012”, [www.screendaily.com](http://www.screendaily.com) (March 22, 2013)
- 2 Box Office Mojo (October 20, 2013)
- 3 A. Clark, “Disney Buys Marvel Entertainment”, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com) (August 31, 2009)
- 4 The Economist, “Of Mouse and X-men”, [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com) (September 3, 2009)
- 5 D. Miles, “Movie Makers Team with Military to create Realism”, U.S. Airforce [www.af.mil](http://www.af.mil) (June 21, 2007)
- 6 I. Spencer, “*Iron Man*’s Wingman, Terrence Howard Talks” U.S. Air Force, [www.af.mil](http://www.af.mil) (June 4, 2008)
- 7 P. W. Singer, “How To Be All That You Can Be: A Look At The Pentagon’s Five Step Plan for Making *Iron Man* Real” [www.brookings.edu](http://www.brookings.edu) (May 2, 2008)
- 8 I. Pederson and L. Simcoe, “The *Iron Man* Phenomenon, participatory Culture, & Future Augmented Reality Technologies”, CHI’12: 5-10. (2012)
- 9 M. Boot, *War Made New: Technology, Warfare and the Course of History, 1500 to Today*. New York: Gotham Books. 449. (2006)
- 10 J. Winston, “U Researchers Develop *Iron Man* Suit”, [DailyUtahChronicle.com](http://DailyUtahChronicle.com) (October 25, 2008)
- 11 G. Mone, “Building the Real Iron Man”, [www.popsci.com](http://www.popsci.com) (September 4, 2008)
- 12 Video, “Building a real life Iron Man” [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)
- 13 Video, “Yes, the U.S. Military Is Building Real Iron Man Suits” [www.slate.com](http://www.slate.com)
- 14 Video, “US army test real life ‘Iron Man’ exoskeleton” [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)
- 15 J. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, *Annals*, 171-197. (2003)