

THE SHIFT

THE REEL WORLD

Hollywood has long adapted magazine articles into films, but the most recent wave reflects moviegoers' changing tastes—and an unexpected upside for a risk-averse industry.

BY STINSON CARTER ILLUSTRATION BY BEN WISEMAN

IN THE CINEMATIC ERA of superheroes and sequels, sometimes it seems that all the smart content has migrated to television. But based-on-a-true-story movies with a journalistic pedigree—like *Argo* and *Spotlight*—are the thinking moviegoer's refuge at the multiplex. When it comes to making smart films that don't break the bank in present-day Hollywood, truth is the new fiction.

The practice of turning magazine stories into movies has a long history; *Dog Day Afternoon*, *Saturday Night Fever*, *Boogie Nights* and *Almost Famous* are all examples of films that were inspired by articles. Now Hollywood's rapidly changing business model is fueling a new wave. Thanks to high-tech, 4K home theaters and streaming services, the theatrical distribution of

movies is facing more challenges than ever. Studios increasingly want safe bets, which usually come dressed in colorful tights. Many producers who want to make sophisticated, grown-up movies are turning to long-form journalism for source material.

Director Todd Phillips's new film, *War Dogs* (out in August), is the latest example. Starring Jonah Hill and Miles Teller, the comic drama is based on "Arms and the Dudes," a March 2011 *Rolling Stone* article by Guy Lawson. It chronicles two opportunistic twentysomethings in Miami Beach who landed a nearly \$300 million defense contract during the Bush administration, exploiting a so-called small-business initiative that allowed pretty much anyone with an Internet connection to bid on U.S. military contracts.

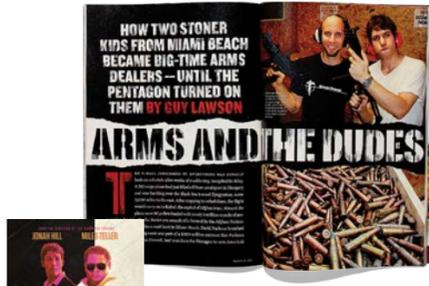
Needless to say, things did not go according to plan for the two young men.

Known for raucous comedies like *Old School* and *The Hangover*, Phillips, who co-wrote, directed and produced *War Dogs*, opted for a slightly more serious tone with his first film based on an article. "*Argo* did a lot of the heavy lifting for a movie like *War Dogs* because it's the same studio, and it was a huge success for them. They took an interesting article and made a phenomenal film that really resonated," he says.

Argo is the poster child of the magazine-to-movie model, with its three Academy Awards and over \$200 million in worldwide box office earnings. So it's no mystery why Warner Bros., the same studio behind *Argo*, has similar ambitions for *War Dogs*. >

PAGE TURNERS

Hollywood has relied on source material from stage plays and books for decades, but many magazine articles have also served as inspiration for movies from *Dog Day Afternoon* to *American Gangster* to *War Dogs*.



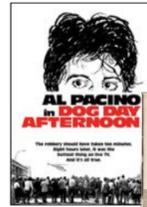
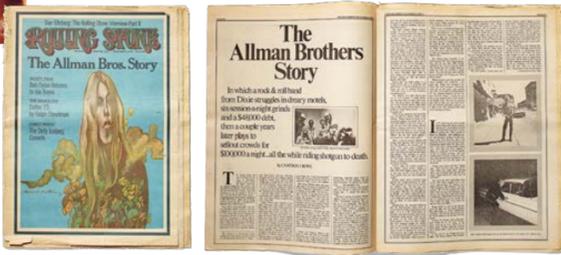
WAR DOGS
Out in August, the Todd Phillips-directed film stars Jonah Hill and Miles Teller and is based on Guy Lawson's 2011 *Rolling Stone* article.



ARGO
The 2012 Academy Award-winning film, directed by and starring Ben Affleck, was inspired by Joshua Bearman's 2007 *Wired* article.



ALMOST FAMOUS
The 2000 Academy Award-winning movie, written and directed by Cameron Crowe and starring Kate Hudson, took cues from Crowe's 1973 *Rolling Stone* article.



DOG DAY AFTERNOON
The 1975 Oscar-winning movie, starring Al Pacino, was based on P.F. Kluge and Thomas Moore's 1972 *Life* article.

Like *Argo*, the film is based on a magazine article that digs into a period of history we thought we knew, in order to tell a story that no one would believe if it weren't actually true. "Oftentimes truth is stranger than fiction," says Phillips. "Which is what you find with *Argo* and hopefully with *War Dogs*."

Argo's impact came as a surprise to journalist Joshua Bearman, who wrote the *Wired* article ("The Great Escape") on which the film is based. "*Argo* was my first article that was optioned, and it was only my second big magazine story," says Bearman, who was contributing to *LA Weekly* when he wrote the *Wired* article. "And then I sold my next 10 stories. All of them."

Bearman served as a consultant on *Argo* as well as a creative producer on other projects adapted from his articles, including an upcoming movie based on his two-part *Wired* article "The Rise and Fall of Silk Road," published last year. He believes that Hollywood's interest in nonfiction stories is directly tied to the age of superheroes and sequels—a period dominated by a film industry term known as pre-brand awareness (studio marketing department speak for playing to a built-in audience). "Pre-awareness is pushing the studios toward *Wolverine 7*," Bearman says. "But at the same time it's pushing them toward these true stories."

For a studio executive, it can be harder to make a \$20 million movie than a \$200 million one, and adapting nonfiction has gone from being a creative

choice to a financial necessity. "What we're seeing is a desire on behalf of financiers, particularly major studios, for proof of concept," says Mark Gordon, the veteran producer (*Saving Private Ryan*, *The Patriot*, *Steve Jobs*) who first brought the article that inspired *War Dogs* to Todd Phillips's attention. There's a practical reason for optioning an article rather than just appropriating the underlying idea: "If *War Dogs* wasn't a true story, I think an audience would have a hard time buying it," says Gordon. "Audiences are more attentive these days to things that are true—even if they're modified substantially."

How substantially these stories are modified varies from movie to movie. "In the case of *Argo*, the movie worked because of its authenticity," says Bearman, who provided the screenwriters with ample research. But in his experience, the process differs from genre to genre: For example, there is often more creative freedom with comedies. While *War Dogs* has a heavy dose of humor, Phillips tried to stay true to the tone of the original article. "You need to make sure everything falls in line either with what *did* happen or what *could* have happened," says Phillips.

"The article acts as a treatment," Phillips continues. "It's not necessarily valuable intellectual property in that millions of people have read it and are waiting for the movie, but it's valuable IP in that it sets the tone and acts as an outline for the studio to read and go, 'Yeah, I could see that.'"

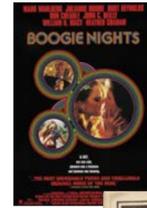
When Hollywood needs real stories, it's a lot easier

to turn to journalists who are out in the field finding them—rather than screenwriters who are by and large geographically tethered to Los Angeles.

"It's hard to find original ideas in Santa Monica, and journalists go out into the world and find them," says Lawson, who wrote not only *War Dogs*' underlying *Rolling Stone* article but also a 2015 book on the same subject—*Arms and the Dudes*.

"The magazine world is a bazaar of ideas for movies, where Hollywood can go shopping for new stories," Lawson says. Typical film options for articles can range from \$5,000 to \$75,000, while actually making a film like *Argo* costs tens of millions, so the ratio of what gets made versus what gets optioned remains low. For studios, these options are an inexpensive way to buy story legitimacy. "The business of Hollywood is becoming a little less entrepreneurial," he says. "And along with that has come the need for a stamp of approval from the *New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *GQ* or *Vanity Fair* that an executive can show to the studio."

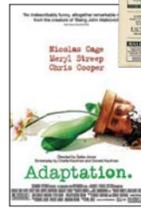
As articles have become more popular as film and television source material, magazine publishers have moved to capitalize on this trend as well. Major publishing companies (Random House, Macmillan, Condé Nast and American Media, Inc. among them) have created new film and television divisions or developed joint ventures. This move is similar to the way that Marvel Studios began capitalizing on its properties, beginning with *Iron Man* in 2008. One



BOOGIE NIGHTS
The 1997 film, directed by Paul Thomas Anderson and starring Mark Wahlberg and Julianne Moore, was inspired by Mike Sager's 1989 *Rolling Stone* article.



AMERICAN GANGSTER
The 2007 Ridley Scott-directed film, starring Denzel Washington and Russell Crowe, was based on Mark Jacobson's 2000 *New York* article.



ADAPTATION
The 2002 film, directed by Spike Jonze and starring Nicolas Cage, Meryl Streep and Chris Cooper, was based on Susan Orlean's 1995 *New Yorker* article.



THE BLING RING
The 2013 movie, directed by Sofia Coppola, turned to Nancy Jo Sales's 2010 *Vanity Fair* article.



SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER
The 1977 film, starring John Travolta, was inspired by Nik Cohn's 1976 *New York* article.

key difference is that in order to profit from film and television rights, the magazine publishers must possess those rights, which in the past were typically retained by the journalists themselves.

"What amazed me in a happy way when I started in the business is that I would retain the copyright ownership of my work," Lawson recalls. "It's like the one piece of dignity that you get, and now some media companies are taking that away. As someone who loves journalism, I feel like this next generation of journalists is getting ripped off."

Another element that may be bolstering these types of films is the recent change to the Academy Award nomination rules. "It wasn't too long ago that there were only five best picture nominees, and now there can be up to 10," says Josh Singer, who co-wrote the screenplay of last year's best picture winner, *Spotlight*. "What I think has been great about expansion is that a lot of people want a little statue. So you have hungry producers and they say, 'Hey, it's not just five. I can get in, I can get nominated.' Nonfiction movies tend to do well in this category, so that expansion makes it that much more lucrative to make these movies—it gives hope."

Journalist-turned-screenwriter Mark Boal (*The Hurt Locker*, *Zero Dark Thirty*) has made a particularly

successful transition from journalism to mass entertainment. And his new production company, Page 1, which he started in 2013, could be described as an embodiment of this trend of combining the two. The company is co-run by former magazine editor Hugo Lindgren and backed by producer Megan Ellison's company, Annapurna Pictures. Tossing out

"OFTENTIMES TRUTH IS STRANGER THAN FICTION."
—TODD PHILLIPS

the old dynamic of screenwriters spitballing ideas with development executives, Page 1 assigns journalists to report on broad themes, such as wealth inequality.

"Journalism is part of our development process," says Lindgren, who was the editor of the *New York Times Magazine*, then worked at the *Hollywood Reporter* and left publishing in 2014 to run Page 1 with Boal. "It's not like we just hand over the research to the screenwriter, and they're off and running. What it has involved is teaming reporters with our screenwriters and having them work together." Rather than being just another production company scouring magazines for articles to option, Page 1 has moved the newsroom into the production company.

Page 1 has not yet released its first film, but Lindgren says they have been working on a project about Bowe Bergdahl—the U.S. Army soldier who caused tremendous controversy in 2014, when he was accused of desertion after he was freed from

the Taliban in a prisoner exchange. "We were really attracted to that story, because you have this small story at the front of it—just one guy and what he did—and then you had this tremendous resonance and reverberation in the world," he says. After amassing hours of interviews with Bergdahl and becoming experts on his story, Page 1 found it had enough material on its hands to cross over from journalistic film research to journalism proper, with a collaboration on the newest season of the podcast *Serial*, which was based on Bergdahl. In developing an upcoming crime drama set during the 1967 Detroit riots and directed by Kathryn Bigelow, Boal led a team of five journalists on six months of interviews and research.

Investigative journalism is high risk for a production company, Lindgren says. His company has to go down the road a long way with a story before really knowing if it has that "resonance and reverberation" quality. "And that's where our backing from Annapurna is really valuable to us," he says. "We have a backer in Megan Ellison, who wants Mark to take big swings. One of Mark's classic responses when we're talking about stories is 'Ehh, that's a canoe. I want us to be building battleships.'"

A canoe would have floated in 1970s Hollywood, but this is the age of battleships. "Not many people can submit to the discipline required to find these stories," says Lawson. "Journalists are the ones who have to walk down the beach with their metal detectors, looking for the treasures." ●

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