

# Filming War

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*Abstract: In the century since the outbreak of war in 1914, film directors have alternated between two approaches to filming war: the spectacular approach, aiming at a kind of realism, and indirection, drawing away from realism. The balance between these choices varies over three periods. The first is the era of silent films from 1914 to roughly 1930, including the overflow of silence into the first talkies. Silent films used indirection out of necessity, though the search for the spectacular was evident as well. The second is the era of World War II and after, extending roughly to 1970, when spectacular techniques brought a kind of realism to the cinematic representation of the “good war.” The third is the era of asymmetrical wars, since 1970, when many films used indirection at times more than spectacle to capture the moral ambiguity of warfare, and when the Holocaust entered the cinematic narrative of World War II.*

The portrayal of military conflict in film is a mainstay of the industry. Box office considerations are never absent in the framing and gestation of commercial film, and the perennial popularity of films about combat – terrestrial or extraterrestrial – requires us to take measure of their power to represent war and men at war.

The film industry came of age as a centerpiece of mass entertainment at precisely the moment industrialized war arrived in 1914. That first world war helped globalize American film, which saw exponential growth at the same time the U.S. position in the war remained neutral.<sup>1</sup> Many national industries flourished in the interwar years and after. It is impossible, however, to treat film in strictly national terms because the upheavals of the 1930s produced a massive hemorrhage of talent from continental Europe to London and Hollywood, among other destinations. European filmmakers such as Fritz Lang, Ernst Lubitsch, and Billy Wilder brought their art with them, and braided it together with American approaches to the medium. In this essay, I examine representations of war from a transnational perspective, but all the while recognizing the significance of nation-

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al institutions and codes, many of which are explicitly political in character.

In this effort, I identify roughly three periods in the cinematic history of war. The first is the silent epoch, from about 1900 to 1930. I extend this first period beyond 1926, when sound was initially introduced, because many directors schooled in silent film imported silence into the talkies. They framed sound by its absence, and did so in dramatically important ways. Consider the famous scene in Fritz Lang's classic film *M* (1931), in which a child murderer, played by Peter Lorre, faces a kangaroo court made up of hundreds of Berlin criminals. The faces of those criminals are scanned in a forty-five-second tracking shot that seems to last for hours. Silence did not disappear with the talkies; it entered into and inflected the medium in a host of ways, even years after the introduction of sound.

We frequently lose sight of the advantages to be had from silence. Suggestion is more hypnotic than instruction. When the great radio personality Alistair Cooke was asked, after forty years of presenting *Letter from America* on BBC radio every Sunday morning, why he did not work in television, his answer was revealing. Radio, he said, had better pictures. And silent film, I believe, delivered better sound, by drawing on viewers' pulse and heartbeat and internal voices. It is best to treat silent film not as a simple precursor of the talkies, but as a powerful art form in its own right, one that launched the cinematic history of war.<sup>2</sup>

The second phase takes place in the lead-up to World War II and its aftermath, from 1933 to 1970. I include pre-1939 films because the fear of the return of total war is evident in 1930s cinema. War was both unthinkable and just around the corner. Images of war in the 1930s were seen by audiences that included millions of veterans, many of whom

would take up arms again: first in Manchuria, then in Ethiopia, next in Spain, and finally throughout Europe. European filmmakers who later fled the Continent, such as Jean Renoir, did some of their greatest work in the later 1930s. This period also saw the production of some of the few pacifist classics in the history of the medium.

I have somewhat arbitrarily chosen 1970 as the end of this second phase of the cinematic history of war, but I base my decision on two interlaced developments. First, the Holocaust assumed a central place in the history of World War II and, increasingly, became a subject of powerful cinematic treatment in and of itself. Second, the Vietnam moment arrived, both repeating many of the heroic stereotypes of the World War II era, and to a degree, subverting them. Films of Vietnam drew on World War II tropes but went beyond them, too. Defeat mattered, yet so did dissent and disaffection, muting the unflinchingly patriotic posture of early Vietnam films, such as *The Green Berets* (1968), and producing in the next, third period of war films much darker and more ambiguous treatments of the conflict: for example, *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). For these reasons, it makes sense to separate war films made between 1933 and 1970 from silent films before and from the films of asymmetrical war that came after.

The third phase of representations of war in film covers the period from the 1970s to our own times, when changes in the face of war itself inflect the face of war in film. Historian Charles Maier has described the end of the age of territoriality,<sup>3</sup> which forces us to see war not in national terms alone, but in subnational and transnational terms as well. War is no longer primarily a classic military encounter between nation-states and

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armies, but rather a messy and chaotic array of violent clashes between national troops, say, American forces in Somalia, Iraq, or Afghanistan, and a wide variety of insurrectionary groups – not nations. Since the 1970s, war has often meant “dirty wars” waged by military elites against their own people, including in Central America, South America, Africa, and the Middle East. Not surprisingly, film has followed the tides of war into these destinations, too.

Asymmetrical war also means civilian casualties on a scale, and as a proportion of all losses, greater than ever before. This distinction matters in the history of film because the shadow of the Holocaust is also cast on the victims of wars remote from those of Nazi-occupied Europe. War as horror is not new, but the horror is no longer limited to the battlefields: it is present in cities, in the countryside, indeed, everywhere. One reason the Holocaust has become metonymical, standing for victims of war and violence elsewhere, is that no one of Jewish origin was safe anywhere within the Nazis’ reach. Wars of extermination are wars without limits; for that reason, among others, the war against the Jews was a transformational event.

In each of these three phases of war-film history, filmmakers have operated in one of two registers: *spectacle* or *indirection*. Film has always flourished in the atmosphere of the spectacular drama of war.<sup>4</sup> But the power to convey the spectacle was limited in the first phase by the absence of sound, and in the third phase by the absence of moral transparency between “good” and “evil.” World War II was the cinematic “good war” par excellence in that its power to simplify and dramatize latched on to a cause that was clearly intelligible in precisely those terms: the war of good against evil. In the evolution of that moral calculus, the Ho-

locaust became more and more important as time went on. Here, the cinematic tools of indirection were necessary because the problem of representing the Holocaust defies direct solutions.

The third, post-1970 generation of war films did not leave World War II behind, but instead oscillated between morally simplifying war and recognizing its horrors and moral predicaments. These films are one important source of the moral ambiguity with which the public has come to view war in the last few decades. As war has changed, it has been increasingly difficult to construct moral certainties about its meaning. Yet films that show the ugliness of war in recent years stop short of pacifism. They suggest not that war is always immoral, but rather that it is out of control and leaves men broken in its wake, whatever the outcome. If these films have anything positive to say, it is to visualize the camaraderie, courage, and sacrifice of war, affirming its power to bring out both the best and the worst in ordinary people. Over the course of a century, war films have developed from studies of conflict to studies of combatants, their loves, their hatreds, their inner lives.

Within this chronological framework, I note what may be termed a pendulum theory in the choices directors of war films make. Early filmmakers’ first forays were not realistic; they were indirect, allusive, suggestive, performative. They had to be so, because the roar of war – the sound of battle and of artillery and of airpower – was not reproducible. The films’ technological weakness was their strength. They gestured toward images of battles rather than pretending to show war “as it really was.” No one could, and no one can, do that.

In the second generation of war films, the quest for “realism” dominated. Over and over, audiences saw combat, sacri-

fice, and killing and were led by filmmakers to believe they “were there,” on Guadalcanal, in Iwo Jima, on Bataan. Technical effects and massive injections of cash produced this mighty canvas of war, but however hard they tried, filmmakers could as little show the face of war realistically as they could show the dark side of the moon. In the World War II period, the pendulum swung too far toward what was taken to be verisimilitude.

That urge to show the “real face of war” is still apparent, but it exists alongside another powerful impulse, one that moves away from realism and toward suggestions of the unrepresentability of war. In part, the emergence of this new element reflects the literariness of cinematic culture. War literature, from Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*, to e. e. cummings’s *The Enormous Room*, to Joseph Heller’s *Catch 22*, has made the madness of war part of our cultural landscape. The literary witnessing of the victims of the Holocaust, from Anne Frank, to Primo Levi, to Elie Wiesel, has brought that madness into an even more haunting register that is increasingly at the heart of World War II narratives. But the change in representations of war is also a consequence of the change in war itself: its civilianization, its transformation into the asymmetrical struggle between men in uniform and ordinary people, brutalized, mutilated, killed by the millions since the 1970s. In this period of new forms of warfare, war films introduce us to different kinds of landscapes of violence, doing so in new, and indirect, ways. There is very little in the pre-1970 period to match the hallucinatory effects of the Israeli film *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), a cartoon exploration of shell shock. Innovative approaches have the power to move beyond realism to explore the face of war – at a tangent, at an angle, indirectly, and with great power. And that face is of a soldier, not of war.

War stories were at the core of D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), which wandered through the Civil War and Reconstruction with a romantic brush, memorably presenting heroism in battle, the assassination of President Lincoln, and the “chivalry” of the Ku Klux Klan. From that time on, silent filmmakers turned to the 1914 to 1918 conflict, which formed the perfect setting for adventure stories, melodramas, love stories, and the like. Whenever a director needed a handy separation or tearful reunion, the war could provide it; if the virtues of heroism or loyalty were to be the vehicle for the celluloid star of the moment, why not use the war? But aside from good box office entertainment, cinema contributed to popular narratives of the war by locating it within identifiable and mundane themes, thereby humanizing it. By suggesting the monumental scale of the conflict, in a way prose rarely could do, cinema mythologized the war as a vast earthquake against the backdrop of which the petty conflicts and hopes of ordinary mortals were played out. John Dos Passos’s novel *1919* (1932) used collage and indirect narration to paint his vast canvas; film could do the same, and in an instant. And while Dos Passos’s novels reached a literary public, film reached a much larger audience.

If, as historian Paul Fussell famously showed, war novels stood on the knife-edge between realistic and ironic modes of narrative, war films oscillated between the realistic and the epic, or what I call the *cinema of indirection* and the *cinema of spectacle*.<sup>5</sup> Yet the realistic genre was per force indirect because sound was absent, and silence was either preserved or replaced by impromptu or arranged piano or organ music. Audiences brought their own sound effects with them, and thereby were drawn into the story in even more compelling ways. Consider the contrast

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after 1926, when the score, inscribed on a sound track, told us (and still tells us) how to react to what we see. With sound came emotional *dirigisme*, a kind of authorial instruction that we should feel suspense later, relief later still, and resolution at last.

In 1916, the British government produced a film entitled *The Battle of the Somme*, which was distributed and shown while soldiers were still engaged in this staggering six-month operation. Perhaps two million people saw it in six weeks, the equivalent of fifteen to twenty million Americans today going to the same film at roughly the same time. At the center of the film was an entirely false reconstruction of what it meant to “go over the top.” A line of soldiers in a trench crawl up to its lip, then stand and proceed through smoke and fire to engage the enemy. One man is “hit” and slides down the trench. Entirely silent, without any musical accompaniment, the scene had a staggering effect on the audience, many of whom had relatives serving in the war at that very moment. Women fainted; others cried out and had to be escorted from the cinema. Silence provided the visceral punch.<sup>6</sup>

Sound films framed audience reactions in ways that tended to reduce their own affective choices to the ones the cineaste or his composer provided. Silent films were more open-ended emotionally, and hence potentially more powerful. Yet whatever the sound or silence accompanying the scene, those screen images carried a kind of authenticity, a surface realism, with them. They appeared to be about real people: a real man hit on the lip of a trench, who could have been the husband, brother, or son of someone in the audience. The power of film to lie about war was revealed at its inception, though the power of sound expanded this field of invention in significant ways.

Indeed, the introduction of sound effects enabled viewers to believe that they could actually imagine war. What is thinkable is what is doable, and one ramification of the introduction of the talkies was that war films helped domesticate a set of violent events that, at their core, resist accurate representation. To be sure, all films misrepresent war; but talkies do so with gusto and with even more powerful effect.

Part of the reason for the unrepresentability of war in all film is its chaotic character. Battle has no vanishing point, no center of gravity, and the rubble of destruction accompanying industrialized warfare in 2011 – just as in 1916 – makes it difficult to see what is happening and why. Films have a proscenium arch, just like the theaters and music halls out of which they were born; they frame action and draw our eyes to some central point of action. Yet the oddness of war, the weird, uncanny sights it presents to soldiers, is frequently beyond even today’s special effects.

If the physical landscape of battle is almost always trivialized or reduced to mundane proportions, the emotional landscape of battle also eludes cinematic portrayal. We cannot capture the smell of cordite or decaying bodies, or the stench of the detritus war brings in its wake. Fear can be suggested but never tasted in film, and without that dimension, cinematic representations of war always remain stylized or worse. Thus, both the material and this affective framing of war in film tend to reduce it to formulae or clichés.

Silence had another major advantage in the early interwar years. Silent film, which can be defined as a set of cinematic nonspeech acts,<sup>7</sup> framed the mourning process in ways rarely, if ever, matched by talkies. Music and banal dialogue frequently turn filmic treatments of this theme into kitsch and worse. By saying

less, and leaving viewers to create the words and voices in their own minds, silent film had the power to portray the predicament of men and women alive in the aftermath of wars that took life, and not by the scores but by the millions.

Spiritualism had wide appeal in America both before and after World War I, and it gave a mournful character to many war films. When viewers reached the end of Lewis Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), they encountered the faces of the dead looking back at them before they marched off to eternity. This was, in a sense, a very American film, spoken with American accents and without inflection. Five years earlier, King Vidor's *The Big Parade* had also offered a downbeat version of war, including the hero's loss of a leg in combat and his rejection by his prewar sweetheart. His French *petite amie* managed to come to the rescue afterward. *The Big Parade* was the biggest box office hit of the silent era.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1930s, a number of talking films presented the dread of war to a public more and more concerned with the menace of a new war. Frank Borzage's 1932 film *A Farewell to Arms* was downbeat, as was Sidney Franklin's *The Dark Angel* (1935). More elegiac, but marked by a sense of the futility of war was Jean Renoir's masterpiece *La Grande Illusion* (1937). Sympathetic to German soldiers, filled with the fierce and defiant patriotism of French prisoners of war, Renoir's film humanized not war but the men trapped in it. I am not alone in considering it in a class of its own as a war film. It said so much about war without showing a single battle scene. That is indirection as cinematic genius.

It is indeed arbitrary to choose to bracket films about World War II in the period from 1940 to 1970, and to claim that most of them adopted a realist's pose in pre-

senting war to cinematic audiences. World War II films were certainly produced long after 1970,<sup>9</sup> and I return to this matter below. In addition, there were nonrealistic, indirect, and unusual war films in this era. One such film, René Clément's *Jeux interdits* (*Forbidden Games*) from 1952, directs our attention away from the battlefield of 1940 and to the ways two children, aged four and seven, deal with war and death in the French countryside. Another is the Japanese masterpiece *Biruma no tategoto* (*The Burmese Harp*), first released in 1956 in black and white and re-released in color in 1985. Kon Ichikawa's tale concerns a Japanese soldier who, at the end of the war, is sent by his Allied captors to persuade his comrades not to fight on after the Armistice. He fails in his mission and is nearly killed. In his effort to rejoin his comrades, he traverses old sites of combat and is horrified by the hundreds of unburied Japanese corpses he sees. He decides to put on the robes of a Buddhist monk and stays to tend the graves of his fellow soldiers. His lonely vigil transforms the landscape of war into an eternal landscape of mourning.

Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (1957) is a devastating portrait of evil or incompetent commanders saving their careers by executing soldiers for cowardice in World War I. Charged with failing to succeed in a senseless and impossible operation, the three men shot are chosen at random; none was a coward. What constitutes courage or cowardice had already made American cinematic history in Borzage's *A Farewell to Arms*, starring Helen Hayes and Gary Cooper. Cooper, who plays an American volunteer ambulance driver in Italy in 1917, deserts from the chaos of the Italian defeat at Caporetto to find his lover, a British nurse. They are reunited, but Hayes's character dies in childbirth. Indirection, indeed, plays

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War out in the story of loss of life in wartime. The film was remade in 1957 by Charles Vidor.

While death is ever-present in most films set in World War II, it is not the central element in this body of work. As historian John Bodnar has recently shown, the movie industry presented many different facets of World War II, but the primary focus was internal, in the sense that what mattered was what Americans had done in the war “and what type of people they were.” This guiding theme left room for both national celebration and meditation on the rocky road many veterans faced in returning to civilian life.<sup>10</sup> Here, we see an important transition in film from a focus on war to a focus on men at war. Once again, this is a matter of emphasis, not precision, but it may be useful to bear in mind nonetheless.

However nuanced their positive view of World War II as “a good war,” most filmmakers aimed at a kind of verisimilitude that made audiences believe they could actually know “what it had really been like.” The most spectacular instance of this approach is *The Longest Day* (1962), directed by Ken Annakin and Andrew Martin. Filming in black and white to highlight the film’s “authenticity,” producer Darryl Zanuck managed to acquire substantial support and military hardware from Britain and France as well as from American authorities. Cameo performances by an array of stars helped make this film the biggest box office success before Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993), a classic of the third generation of war films (which I discuss below). Similarly admiring of the swagger of military masculinity and the American way of waging war was George C. Scott’s portrayal of Patton in Franklin Schaffner’s eponymous film of 1970. Bringing viewers onto the battlefield meant bringing them into the minds of the men who im-

posed their will on it and on the enemy; no one did that with more panache than Patton.<sup>11</sup>

The presentation of the home front was another matter entirely, and in William Wyler’s *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946), the troubled return of veterans emerges without much sugar-coating. Most of the women awaiting these soldiers’ return in the film were loyal to them, whatever their disability, but the challenge of demobilization was not brushed aside even at this intimate level. The film generated twice the box office earnings of *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), demonstrating that filmmakers were prepared to deal with the difficult aftermath of military service, though within certain conventional limits.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the theme of return and recovery unites films spanning from the silent era – *The Big Parade*, for instance – to later cinematic work such as Hal Ashby’s 1978 film *Coming Home*. Ashby’s film develops the theme, even going so far as to explore recovery in the sexual life of a Vietnam vet amputee. The film presented an issue that was treated earlier, but did so in a new and more daring manner. (Below, I return to Clint Eastwood’s sensitive handling of psychologically disabled veterans.)

What I term the *direct* or *realistic* approach to presenting war in film had plenty of room for nuance and contradiction. By no means were all World War II films formulaic presentations of sadistic Japanese or snarling Nazis, subdued in turn by simple, small-town, honest GIs. Most audiences would probably not have paid to see such junk. Instead, many powerful films brought the war home, largely forgetting the rest of the world and the price other nations paid for victory in 1945.

This insularity in filmic representations mirrored a narrow construction of World War II in two respects. The first was to limit the years depicted to 1941 to

1945, ignoring the devastating early phase of combat, from the invasion of Poland, to the Blitz, to the invasion of the Soviet Union. But starting at Pearl Harbor was only part of the problem. There was also the tendency to reduce the victory to the result of American intervention alone, thereby playing down the staggering human cost the Soviet Union paid. Unsurprisingly, the Russians are absent from virtually the entire corpus of “realistic” American films about the conflict; “our war,” presented as spectacle and a test of national character, stood out alone.

Realism in war cinema was not exclusively the domain of American films. It marked British approaches to the ambiguities of war, too. In *Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) and *In Which We Serve* (1942), both directed by David Lean, we find counterparts to the American filmic presentation of “realistic” war scenes and “realistic” approaches to the home front. In one controversial film, which Winston Churchill tried to scrap, a vision of British decency as an obstacle to victory was presented in terms of getting rid of the old guard who were too old school and not nasty enough to win the war. Churchill took the message personally, but Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’s *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943) survived anyway. Like many films of the realistic generation, it does not avoid the ugliness of war but still focuses on the men of character who see the fight through to victory.<sup>13</sup>

Other pre-1970s European film presentations of the war are similarly heroic and realistic in their account of combat. Jean-Pierre Melville’s 1969 film *L’armée des ombres* (*Army of Shadows*) in effect summarized a gritty, harsh, unvarnished presentation of the awful choices Resistance fighters had to face. Their war was indeed a dark one, and honoring it was the least the film industry could do while nations

like France were recovering from defeat, humiliation, and collaboration.<sup>14</sup> American films returned time and again to the Resistance, though with less realism and more romance. From *Casablanca* (1942), to *13 Rue Madeleine* (1947), which was based very loosely on “Wild Bill” Donovan and the U.S. Office of Strategic Services, to *Betrayed* (1954), Hollywood repeatedly took up the subject of the Resistance, thereby internationalizing the war Americans saw on the screen.

After 1968, filmic representations of World War II changed in important ways. The lid came off the story of collaboration and the Holocaust, both on-screen and in wider discussions of the war. The effect of Marcel Ophüls’s 1969 film *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (*The Sorrow and the Pity*) was palpable. The narrative of collaboration and resistance turned from one of black and white to many shades of gray.<sup>15</sup>

The rewriting of the World War II narrative to include the Holocaust in a central role coincided with American defeat in Vietnam. The combination opened up a new phase in the history of war films. The focus shifted from the war the soldiers waged to the victims of violence in the midst of a new kind of asymmetric warfare. This new form of war ushered in a renewed and deepened concentration on the psychological and moral effects of war on combatants themselves.

In this way, the meaning of asymmetric war was inflected by its growing linkage to the Holocaust, the only war the Nazis won, namely, by exterminating the large centers of Jewish life in Poland, the Baltic states, and the USSR. Asymmetric wars of a different kind emerged after the end of the Vietnam conflict, pitting Western forces, mostly American, against insurgents in many parts of the world.<sup>16</sup>

Film followed the flag, first into Vietnam and then into these transnational

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or subnational conflicts. I have already noted the transition from *The Green Berets* to the much more complex landscape of *The Deer Hunter*. At the end of the latter film, the group of young, working-class men and women at the heart of the story wind up singing “God Bless America.” One is paraplegic, another is scarred mentally, and one of their circle, who lost his mind in Vietnam, has just been brought home and buried. The tone of the anthem is muted: are they still patriotic? Probably, but the message can be read another way. In a world of ugly choices, God had better bless America, for Americans cannot find answers in the old patriotic tags. War as madness takes over in *Apocalypse Now* and in *Full Metal Jacket*, both tales of disillusionment and savagery.

Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* (1986) added a different dimension to the cinema’s representation of the Vietnam War. Stone drew on his own service in Vietnam. His ambivalence about the war emerged in his treatment of two sergeants: one humane, the other a brute who commits war crimes with impunity. Open the Pandora’s box of war, Stone says, and who knows how any of us will be transformed by it? Atrocities are built into war, he shows; no one is unscarred by it. Here, Stone echoes many literary accounts of the passage in wartime from innocence to experience; the film both recalls World War I poetry and anticipates Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, published four years later in 1990.

The link with the Holocaust is especially evident in the work of Steven Spielberg. His masterpiece *Schindler’s List* was followed five years later by *Saving Private Ryan*. The films both show the essential elements of the new cinema of war. The first is a powerful and realistic account of the morally ambiguous figure of Oskar Schindler, who lived on the tightrope of the Nazi bureaucracy surrounding the

Holocaust and managed to save hundreds of Jews thereby. World War II is only the backdrop of the story, but there are few portrayals more powerful of precisely what Hitler’s war against the Jews meant than the *Aktion* (or murderous round-up) in Krakow. The horror is palpable, and so is the miracle of the survival of “Schindler’s Jews.” In *Saving Private Ryan*, war is the central subject. Spielberg starts with blood and guts, in a boldly realistic manner, leaving little to the imagination in his portrayal of the Normandy landings, and then segues to a more conventional account of the rescue of a surviving soldier whose three brothers had died in combat. The film ends with the survivor asking his wife, in the cemetery where one of the men who rescued him is buried, if he is a good man – if the loss of life in his rescue had produced something good to ennoble it.

This sentimental ending shows that nostalgia for the “greatest generation” pervaded the third generation of war films, though it was diluted by greater attention to war’s physical brutality. This combination brought American war films closer to European ones, which had never had any difficulty focusing on destruction and senseless killing as central to the story of World War II.

Once the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan began, moral ambiguity became dislocated from nostalgia, and films increasingly portrayed war as cruelty, bloodshed, and (at times) butchery without redemption. In Sam Mendes’s *Jarhead* (2005), set in the first Gulf War, the brutality of Marine Corps training echoes Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*; but this time, the men itching to get into the action “only” manage to mutilate corpses and do not even shoot at the enemy. The Air Force gets in first, and the frustrated Marines fire off a fusillade only at the end of the film. Impotent killers indeed.

The lies about weapons of mass destruction are the subject of Paul Greengrass's *Green Zone* (2010), which features Matt Damon as a decent GI betrayed by those in the CIA and higher up who invented the story. Ultimately, all the killing and suffering are for nothing. *Rendition* (2007) tells the story of the Bush administration's complicity in torture by allies through the fictionalized tale of one man mistaken for a militant who disappeared into the Bush administration's twilight zone. In a much more poignant, though downbeat, account of the costs of the Iraq War, *The Messenger* (2009), directed by Oren Moverman, focused on the work of the U.S. Army's Casualty Notification Service – the men who brought home the news of a soldier's death on active duty. This wrenching task is portrayed sensitively, but it is hard to answer the question in the faces of the bereaved: for what purpose did their loved ones die?

The theme of decent soldiers locked in an indecent war recurs in Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008). The film features a bomb disposal unit composed of men whose primary aim is to get home alive. Their sergeant, William James, played by Jeremy Renner, is a more puzzling man, someone who seizes danger by the throat. He appears to enjoy the Russian roulette of disarming booby-trapped bombs, and even when he makes it back home, he cannot reembrace civilian life. At the end of the film, we see him returning for another tour of service in Iraq. Whether or not he was suicidal before the war, he certainly was during and after it. War as a home for suicidal men is hardly an advertisement for the military, and yet *The Hurt Locker* won the Oscar for both best director and best picture of the year.

The unending character of the “war on terror” was also the subject of Steven

Spielberg's 2005 film *Munich*. Spielberg tells the story of the assassination squad that liquidated the men who masterminded the Munich massacre at the Olympics of 1972. After the killings have been avenged, the Israeli agent who is the central figure in the story tells his boss that he is through with assassination because it changes nothing of importance. He walks away from his mission against the backdrop of the World Trade Center. The script says nothing about the juxtaposition of words and scene; it doesn't have to. Silence does it better. The spiral of killings in the “war on terror” leads nowhere, Spielberg suggests, except to more terror.

In this all too brief survey of film and war, many facets of the cinematic history of military conflict have been omitted. Andrzej Wajda's account of the murder of his father and thousands of other Polish officers in *Katyn* (2010) is a realistic war film of dignity and power. So is Andrei Tarkovsky's *Ivan's Childhood* (1962). I could not write of war film without paying tribute to the genius of Akira Kurosawa's *Dreams* (1990), one part of which follows a failed officer, pursued forever by the men he commanded and who lost their lives because of his incompetence. Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) was blatantly a World War II film *avant la lettre*.

I have omitted, too, the vexed question of filmmakers as ideologues, as representatives of certain powerful interests that want to “sell” war to the public. Consider as one example Gary Cooper's pacifist-turned-sniper in Howard Hawks's 1941 film *Sergeant York*. A World War I film placed in a World War II setting, it was good propaganda material in the effort to bring America into the war against Hitler. It is not central to my argument because my purpose is to leave aside film

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as propaganda, which is a subject deserving separate and lengthy treatment.

My aim is more modest. It is to point to certain trends in the way filmmakers in America and elsewhere have tried to portray war. I have emphasized the choices filmmakers make, which are embedded in the medium itself. Their business has been to choose the cast, to find ways to interchange silence and dialogue, to select a particular musical setting, to try to “re-create” a battlefield or base camp, to turn a rough cut into a final product. Some do better than others. But all, in my view, fall short of faithfully representing war.

Samuel Fuller, the director of *The Big Red One* (1980), was once asked what constituted a good war film. His answer was “one which cultivates dignity and does not pursue voyeurism.” He saw service in Africa, Sicily, Normandy, Belgium, and Czechoslovakia, and was present at the liberation of the Falkenau concentration camp. He was one of the few directors with extensive combat experience.<sup>17</sup> Dignity without voyeurism is indeed a good measure of the balance war films aim to achieve. And yet few succeed. The reason is that showing war without terror is a recipe for voyeurism, and cinema rarely makes terror come alive. Here is the central point about silence: it carries terror within it much more readily than the scariest movie score does. Stop the sound and terror is one of the elements of the story that rushes to the surface. This truth has endured since the beginning of film, and it persisted once those men who trained in silent filmmaking went on to make talkies.

The subject of terror is present in all war narratives, but it is differently configured in the age of asymmetrical wars. The terror of children, women, and the aged is etched into the history of the Holocaust, and into the story of brutality from Biafra in 1968 to the Sudan, Somalia, or Afghanistan today. Post-national warfare is there-

fore less about soldiers and more about victims. Terry George’s *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) is a film about genocide, and the hotelier, Paul Rusesabagina, who saves hundreds of lives, is a Schindler without the moral shadows. The friendship between two men is at the heart of the 1984 film *The Killing Fields*, and despite the monstrous evil he faces, Dith Pran’s survival is what leaves us with hope, even now.

Surveying such films, we can see the force of Fuller’s plea for dignity. Films can portray men and women at war, whose dignity, integrity, and existence are threatened, but who, if they are lucky, emerge from war as recognizable human beings nonetheless. We are left, therefore, with a modest conclusion: war defies simple representation, but men at war can be presented, with clichés or human qualities attached, depending on the actor, the director, and the audience the producers want to reach.

In a vast array of nondocumentary films, American soldiers have been represented as frail, complex men as well as cartoon-strip figures. What differs is the framing of the wars in which these soldiers fight. Here, we can take note of an evolution. Film in the silent age stood back from realism: it could hint, suggest, gesture, but without sound, it could not portray war. In the World War II generation, realism took over, with mixed effects. Phony wars were presented as real wars, and given the moral clarity of the 1939 to 1945 conflict, in most cases that was enough. But from the 1970s on, soldiering was framed differently. It was darker, more tragic, more morally ambiguous, more focused on victims than on heroes. Heroic images of war were still on offer, but the colors of war grew somber, muted. Thus, the portrait of the soldier, and particularly the American soldier, came to be more important than the war in which he served.

In a country with a volunteer army, that was not a negative outcome; masculine virtues still matter. One television ad for enlistment offers not to make men strong, but to make them “Army strong.” Yet once the broader public began to see war as morally precarious, as it did beginning in

the 1970s, public support for the men who wage war became uncertain, too. Supporting the men but not the war is a hard act to pull off. It usually winds up in disillusionment and disengagement. Here is a legacy of one hundred years of war films, which we ignore at our peril.

Jay M.  
Winter

#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Jay M. Winter, *The Experience of World War I* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 238.
- <sup>2</sup> Kevin Brownlow, *The War, the West, and the Wilderness* (New York: Knopf, 1979).
- <sup>3</sup> Charles Maier, “Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era,” *Forum Essay, American Historical Review* 105 (3) (June 2000): 807–831.
- <sup>4</sup> James Chapman, *War and Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008).
- <sup>5</sup> Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 211.
- <sup>6</sup> Roger Smither, “‘A Wonderful Idea of the Fighting’: The Question of Fakes in *The Battle of the Somme*,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 13 (2) (1993): 149–168.
- <sup>7</sup> Jay M. Winter, “Thinking about Silence,” in *Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Efrat Ben-Ze’ev, Ruth Ginio, and Jay M. Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1–30.
- <sup>8</sup> Michael T. Isenberg, *War on Film: The American Cinema and World War I, 1914–1941* (London: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1981), 118–122.
- <sup>9</sup> Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard, *The Hollywood War Machine: U.S. Militarism and Popular Culture* (London: Paradigm, 2007).
- <sup>10</sup> John Bodnar, *The “Good War” in American Memory* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 165.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 144–145.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.
- <sup>13</sup> Robert Murphy, *British Cinema and the Second World War* (London: Continuum, 2000).
- <sup>14</sup> Sylvie Lindeperg, *Les écrans de l’ombre: La Seconde Guerre mondiale dans le cinéma français (1944–1969)* (Paris: CNRS, 1997).
- <sup>15</sup> Henry Rousso, *Le syndrome de Vichy: 1944–198--* (Paris: Seuil, 1987).
- <sup>16</sup> Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999).
- <sup>17</sup> Norbert Multau, “Quand la guerre est un spectacle,” in *Le Cinéma et la guerre*, ed. Philippe d’Hugues and Hervé Coutau-Bégarie (Paris: Economica, 2006), 148.