

Portraits of Mars

In Hollywood war movies of the 1940s, American soldiers fought for a sense of national purpose. In subsequent decades, they fought mainly for the sake of their buddies. Now, when the mayhem in war films is more realistic than ever, Hollywood seems unwilling to give the violence a larger context.

by Martha Bayles

Honor, fear, and interest. Of the three motives Thucydides gave for war, honor came first. That was because, as an officer, he understood that fear and interest do not rank high among the reasons men march into battle. What soldiers know, artists know too. For millennia, poets, sculptors, storytellers, and painters have depicted war as driven less by fear (“weapons of mass destruction”) or interest (“blood for oil”) than by motives such as those the historian Donald Kagan, writing in the journal *Commentary* (1997), included in a definition of honor: “the search for fame and glory; the desire to escape shame, disgrace, and embarrassment; the wish to avenge a wrong and thereby to restore one’s reputation; the determination to behave in accordance with certain moral ideals.” For almost a century now, the movies, too, have been portraying those same motives for war.

Only a fool or a totalitarian would draw a direct causal relationship between what people see on the screen and what they’re willing to fight for. Yet war films have always stood midway between art and propaganda. If the recent conflict in Iraq is a harbinger of things to come, and if political scientist Andrew Bacevich is right in suggesting that the war on terrorism is likely to be “an all but permanent and inescapable part of life in the 21st century,” then it’s worth pondering how war will be depicted in the world’s most popular art form.

The most constant but least honorable element in war is blood lust. The all-too-human propensity toward aggression is

found in what historian John Keegan calls “the endemic warfare of nonstate, even pre-state peoples,” as well as in the “habits of loot, pillage, rape, murder, kidnap, extortion, and systematic vandalism” that characterize “irregular” troops from Cossacks and Hussars to today’s genocidal paramilitaries. The ancient Greeks sought to ennoble blood lust by making war a contest between equals. In Homer, the wrathful Achilles is compared to a lion, but when his ferocity is finally unleashed, it’s directed solely at other champions. The classical ideal of honor, then, was prowess in battle, where every virtue is heated to a molten state and then forged into noble character.

The Enlightenment introduced a new version of honor, based on the idea of war as a rule-bound, principled undertaking. This ideal sought, through universal military service, to expand the personal glory of the warrior to the nation as a whole. The philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote, “War itself, provided it is conducted with order and a sacred respect for the rights of civilians, has something sublime about it, and gives nations that carry it on in such a manner a stamp of mind only the more sublime the more numerous the dangers to which they are exposed, and which they are able to meet with fortitude.”

This Enlightenment ideal took a beating in World War I. As millions were mowed down on the mechanized killing fields, poets such as Wilfred Owen portrayed national honor as a deceptive veneer over blood lust. Soon the infant art of film



Sergeant York (1941): a chestful of medals in the good fight for freedom and democracy.

picked up the theme. During the war, Hollywood produced a handful of belliscose films (among them, *Escaping the Hun* and *The Kaiser, the Beast of Berlin*). But the tone of movies changed in the 1920s, and by 1930, when Universal released its memorable adaptation of Erich Maria Remarque's novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the dominant tone of war movies was pacifist.

Then came the Good War. In July 1941, five months before Pearl Harbor, Warner Brothers released *Sergeant York*, a film biography of

the Tennessee rifleman who, by killing 23 Germans and capturing 132 in a single battle, became the most decorated American soldier in World War I. Film historian Thomas Doherty suggests that *Sergeant York*, starring Gary Cooper and directed by Howard Hawks, "recast the Great War as a reasonable national enterprise, not as the crazy slaughterhouse depicted in literature and film for the previous 20 years." In this light, *Sergeant York* can be viewed as the first movie to foster public support for America's entry into World War II by dramatizing a new, democratized ideal of

War Movies

honor—which, Kagan argues, emerged between the wars:

War itself, in this conception, was believed to be *morally* wrong, its causes connected with the aggressiveness natural to authoritarian and despotic regimes. Democracy, by contrast, was right and good in itself and also a force for peace. Over time, the idea took root that the only just war was a war in defense of democracy and self-determination.

Sergeant York exemplifies this new ideal by showing how the title character, a simple Tennessee farmer who at first refuses to fight because the Bible says “Thou shalt not kill,” is guided by a wise commanding officer to the realization that freedom cannot be taken for granted. Heeding the call, Sergeant York renders unto Caesar and is richly rewarded with a chestful of medals, a ticker-tape parade, and a coveted piece of farmland. (It helps that this hugely popular film depicted trench warfare not as mass slaughter but, in Doherty’s phrase, as “just another turkey shoot.”)

This became the preferred formula for almost all the war movies made between 1942 and 1945 under the auspices of the Office of War Information and other federal agencies: feature films, morale-building documentaries (such as Frank Capra’s “Why We Fight” series), and military instructional films. Most of the feature films played up the skill and heroism of the ordinary GI, and played down the carnage of battle. In retrospect, it’s easy to knock these movies for relying on what film critic Richard Schickel calls “some mystical connection between the dumb, dutiful decency of the average American and the great and necessary moral task [such Americans] accomplished.” But as Schickel himself adds, audiences were all too aware of the harsh reality, not only from the newsreels shown along with the films, but from the thousands of telegrams bringing grief to their doorsteps.

This early-1940s formula lasted into the postwar era because it was effective at promoting and perpetuating the

democratic ideal of honor. Like its predecessors, the democratic ideal posits a link between virtue and victory. On the level of fact, it’s well documented that Japanese, German, and Russian soldiers fought valiantly during World War II. But on the level of myth, it was important to show the sons of democracy fighting more valiantly than the sons of dictatorship. In 1949 Hollywood released eight films that did just that, including *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, starring John Wayne. It’s hard to argue with an icon, and like its famously photographed climax, the raising of the Stars and Stripes on Mount Suribachi, *The Sands of Iwo Jima* is an icon. But by the time the Korean War came along, the 1940s formula was starting to feel stale.

Among the crop of movies made about Korea, one of the few still worth watching is *Pork Chop Hill* (1959). Directed by Lewis Milestone (who 29 years earlier had directed *All Quiet on the Western Front*), the film is about an army platoon ordered to take a hill with no clear strategic importance. Casualties are heavy, and the commanding officer, Lieutenant Joe Clemons (Gregory Peck), has grave doubts. The film ends with a voice-over claiming that the platoon’s sacrifices helped others to breathe free, but the real message emerges when a fellow officer asks Clemons, “Is this hill worth it?” and Clemons replies, “Worth what? It’s not worth anything militarily. Americans wouldn’t give you a dollar for it. No Chinese would give you two bits. But values change. Sometime, somehow. Maybe when the first man died.”

In a subtle way, this speech undermines the 1940s formula. Like most war narratives, *Pork Chop Hill* focuses on the experiences of a single unit. This is really the best way to dramatize battle. But the formula requires that the unit serve as a microcosm of the larger society, and that the lowly grunt embody the strengths of democracy. Showing respect but not slavish obedience toward his officers, the grunt must be able, when circumstances require, to think for himself—to seize the initiative, improvise,

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Saving Private Ryan (1998): buddy helping buddy, in the midst of bloody battle.

and, when it comes to making “the ultimate sacrifice,” do so willingly, because he believes without being coerced that the cause for which he is dying is his own dignity and freedom.

Lieutenant Clemons’s speech does away with the idea of the unit-as-microcosm. Soldiers, Clemons says, die for their comrades. We accept this narrowing of the focus because we know that in the heat of combat soldiers do not think about abstract ideals, they think about their comrades. They act out of loyalty to them, out of fear of letting them down, and (at most) out of a desire to uphold the honor of the unit. Sociologists call this “unit cohesion,” and every war story must acknowledge it, just as it must acknowledge blood lust. The war films of the Vietnam era acknowledged both these things, with a vengeance.

It’s a cliché that young Americans went off to Vietnam with visions of John Wayne dancing in their heads. But it’s also true. After citing several sources on this point, the military historian Richard Holmes concludes that “middle-ranking infantry officers in Vietnam in the late 1960s would have been in their early teens when *The Sands of Iwo Jima* first appeared; it is, perhaps, not surprising that its impact was so tremen-

dous.” Holmes does not mention Wayne’s terminally klutzy Vietnam movie, *The Green Berets*. Made in the style of 1949, set in the confident days of 1963, and lobbed like a grenade into 1968, *The Green Berets* was ridiculed by soldiers in the field for such incongruities as having the Viet Cong attack in close formation and the sun set in the east.

More attuned to the times was Robert Altman’s *M*A*S*H* (1970), set in Korea but clearly a black comedy about Vietnam—and the first movie to portray the American soldier not as an exemplar of democracy but as an avatar of alienation. The character had already appeared in literature: In Joseph Heller’s best-selling novel *Catch-22* (1961), the protagonist Yossarian is an antihero, part opportunist and part rebel, who (like Hawkeye and Trapper John in *M*A*S*H*) thumbs his nose at the hypocrisy of the system and lives by his own unerring code. This lone wolf type is, of course, a staple of classic American genres such as the western and the detective story, but it was new to war movies. Given the importance of the unit in that genre, the lone wolf was not a natural fit. It’s worth noting that *M*A*S*H* is

War Movies

set not in combat but in a field hospital, and that *Catch-22* (adapted for the screen in 1970) is set at the end of World War II, when, as Yossarian explains, “the Germans will be beaten in a few months.” None of these antiheroes are shown fighting a real enemy.

The lone wolf persisted in the first two commercially successful Vietnam films, *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979). The former is a better film in many ways, not least because it does not insult the memory of those who fought. But its hero, Michael (Robert DeNiro), is too clever and resourceful by half. He goes to Nam with his two best buddies from a Penn-

sylvania steel town but never has to rely on anyone but himself. Even when the three are captured by sadistic Viet Cong and forced to play Russian roulette, Michael alone engineers the escape. Lone wolf heroics do not work well in combat, but that doesn't matter in *The Deer Hunter*, because there isn't any combat.

In this one respect, the extravagantly flawed *Apocalypse Now* is actually more probing. As Captain Willard (Martin Sheen) journeys up river in search of the mysterious Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando), the trope of the lone wolf warrior defying the half-baked orders of quisling superiors is slowly but surely turned on its head. As everyone knows, *Apocalypse Now* is based on Joseph



The Deer Hunter (1978): the epitome of the Lone Wolf.

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. But what exactly is the darkness evoked by this bizarre film? Surprisingly, it's anarchy. One of Willard's stops along the way is a free-fire zone where all the American officers are dead. Encountering one soldier, a severe-looking young black man who is obviously the most ruthless killer in the place, Willard asks, "Hey, soldier, do you know who's in command here?" The young man gives him an icy stare: "Yeah." Kurtz's realm is the same, only larger in scale. Unlike *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now* sends the lone wolf type into combat, and the result is a man such as Kurtz, who has made "horror" his "friend." In other words, the triumph of blood lust.

The 1960s and 1970s saw the elimination of virtually all film industry controls over violent content in the movies. Along with the demise of the Hays Office, this development made it possible to depict battle more graphically than ever before. The technical challenge of rendering combat—the ultimate action sequence—became an obsession, and war films could soon boast of a whole new level of simulated mayhem.

Yet the 1970s also saw a growing realization that Vietnam veterans were taking an unfair drubbing. In celebrated movies such as *Taxi Driver* (1976) and obscure ones such as *Rolling Thunder* (1977) and *The Ninth Configuration* (1979), vets were cast as emotional time bombs, just waiting to explode. One solution to this problem was the cartoonish figure of Rambo, Sylvester Stallone's Vietnam-vet-turned-super-patriotic-hero. The Rambo films were popular not just for their action but for their handling of a darker theme: veterans' resentment of a government that failed to wage the Vietnam war to the hilt. Rambo's most famous line, after all, is "Sir, do we get to win this time?"

So along with the challenge of making war look gorier came the challenge of making vets look nobler. The two goals were not easily reconciled, especially by filmmakers who had opposed the war in Vietnam. In the 1980s three films managed to accomplish this reconciliation, with compelling results, but they also relied on an expedi-

ent—combining state-of-the-art gore with an unprecedentedly tight focus on unit cohesion—that was ultimately evasive.

The most enduringly popular of these films is Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986), praised by vets for its intense evocation not only of combat but of the discomfort caused the troops by everything from monsoons to mosquitoes. Less well evoked, however, is the moral ambiguity of the war. The two sergeants assigned to the cherry lieutenant, Chris (Charlie Sheen), are stock figures, a villain and a hero. Wicked, scar-faced Barnes (Tom Berenger) gets all the nasty jobs, such as interrogating villagers, while kindly, graceful Elias (Willem Defoe) gets all the nice ones, such as tracking North Vietnamese regulars through the sun-dappled greenwood. And their followers divide along tidy countercultural lines, with the bigoted whites sharing Barnes's taste for booze and killing, and the soulful blacks smoking herb with Elias. *Platoon* is a gripping film, but it's also a melodrama.

More obvious are the manipulations in *Full Metal Jacket*, Stanley Kubrick's 1987 film based on *The Short-Timers*, a novel by war correspondent Gustav Hasford. After a vision of marine boot camp as pure sadism, the movie shifts to Hue, where Cowboy, the buddy of the protagonist, Joker, is killed by a sniper. The unit hunts down the sniper, who turns out to be a girl. Badly wounded, she begs Joker to kill her, which, after some hesitation, he does, thereby earning the label "hard core." Joker is something of a lone wolf, existentially hip to the war's meaninglessness. Yet rather than follow this logic to its conclusion, Kubrick makes Joker into a hero in the buddy-helping-buddy sense. When Cowboy is shot, Joker braves sniper fire to embrace him before he dies. This scene comports with marine tradition, but not with Hasford's novel. Kubrick actually softened the message of *The Short-Timers*. In the book, Joker does not risk his life to reach the wounded Cowboy. On the contrary, he saves himself by blowing out Cowboy's brains.

The best 1980s Vietnam War movie is John Irvin's *Hamburger Hill* (1987), which draws a complex portrait of soldiers alienated from the way the war is being fought but

War Movies

not necessarily from its purpose. Like *Pork Chop Hill*, *Hamburger Hill* focuses on a Pyrrhic victory, the all-too-temporary conquest of Hill 937 in May 1969. The final assault on Hill 937 is widely agreed to have been a tactical disaster, and the film makes clear that the grunts hate their orders even as they obey them. One of the most painful scenes in the movie depicts a soldier receiving a Dear John letter that calls him a war criminal. Unlike *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket*, *Hamburger Hill* does not try to make its characters appear antiwar. But it pays the price of not connecting their struggle to anything larger than the ethos of buddy helping buddy.

Ironically, this ethos now dominates almost all war movies, including those that self-consciously depart from the pattern laid down by antiwar directors such as Stone, Kubrick, and Irvin. In *We Were Soldiers* (2002), Mel Gibson's promilitary reconstruction of the 1965 battle of Ia Drang Valley in Vietnam, the first American casualty says, "I am glad to die for my country." But by the end of the film, a voice-over attributed to the hero, Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore, is intoning that the men of the Seventh Air Cavalry "went to war because their country asked them to, but in the end they fought not for their country or their flag. They fought for each other."

They fought for each other. Sometimes this new formula works, as in such highly regarded recent films as *Saving Private Ryan* and the HBO series *Band of Brothers*. It works because the cause, World War II, is already well understood. Indeed, when *Band of Brothers* includes an episode called "Why We Fight," in which Easy Company stumbles into a Nazi death camp, the effect is almost too didactic. The audience already knows why they fight.

The formula also works in two of the most riveting World War II films ever made: *When Trumpets Fade*, about the Hürtgen Forest battle in November 1944, and *The Thin Red Line*, about the campaign for Guadalcanal Island. Both were released in 1998 and overshadowed by *Private Ryan*—which is too bad, because they do something quite extraordinary: They evoke a dimension of war that previously belonged only to lit-

erature. I call it the *war sublime*, using *sublime* in the philosophical sense to mean an acute awareness of life, consciousness, and moral freedom inspired by proximity to death. For some, the experience is both aesthetic and spiritual. Novelist Tim O'Brien has written that while war is ugly and horrible, it also contains a "powerful, implacable beauty" that can provoke in the soldier "an intense, out-of-the-skin awareness of your living self—your truest self, the human being you want to be."

A vicarious version of the war sublime—a sudden rush of exaltation amid mayhem—is now clearly the goal of every production designer, cinematographer, music director, and special-effects wizard who works on a war film. Steven Spielberg achieved it in the astonishing first 20 minutes of *Private Ryan*, and many other battle scenes come close. Along with buddy helping buddy, the war sublime is now part of the accepted mode of depicting war in the movies.

The war sublime skirts a very tricky idea of honor, the ancient one that makes prowess in battle the whole point of war. Here the rush is not just aesthetic or emotional, but transcendent. In the war movies of the 1940s there was a surprising amount of religiosity, albeit in the form (quoting Schickel) of "pink clouds, heavenly choirs, busybody angels, and a God who appeared to be rather like my grandfather." That was not the war sublime; it was kitsch comfort for a stressed-out people. The war sublime is something else: a romantic inducement to battle as the greatest of all highs.

Along with a pacifist literature, World War I produced a literature of the war sublime. In several books written in the 1920s, the German veteran Ernst Jünger celebrated modern war as a "storm of steel" in which "the enthusiasm of manliness bursts beyond itself to such an extent that blood boils as it surges through the veins and glows as it foams through the heart. . . . It is an intoxication beyond all intoxication." The next step, for Jünger, was war for war's sake. In 1922 he wrote, "What is essential is not what we fight for but how we fight. The quality of fighting, the engagement of the person, even if it be for the most insignificant

idea, counts for more than brooding over good and evil.”

The danger of such sentiments is obvious: They lead to the kind of cult of aestheticized violence that lies at the heart of all fascist—and, I might add, terrorist—movements. Should this concern us? Of course. But we must also be careful not to condemn either the vividness of war films or the pleasure we take in watching them. In the words of Aristotle: “We enjoy contemplating the most precise images of things whose actual sight is painful to us, such as the forms of the vilest animals and of corpses. The explanation of this . . . is that understanding gives great pleasure.” The issue is one of *understanding* as well as spectacle, *honor* as well as flying body parts. Aristotle also argued that there is nothing wrong with “spectacle” (he was thinking of the stage effects of the Athenian theater) so long as it does not have priority over plot and character. He placed plot and character first because they are the seat of moral action, and without moral action spectacle is vulgar. One does not have to endorse all of Aristotle’s prescriptions to see his point illustrated daily in the nation’s multiplexes.

If American war films are wandering into dangerous territory, it’s not because they’re getting good at simulating the spectacle of combat. It’s because, in an effort to avoid political controversy, they offer underdeveloped plots and characters to serve an outdated and dysfunctional definition of honor. To separate comradeship from cause while the bullets are whizzing past may be dramatically necessary (and sociologically accurate), but that separation can be carried only so far. At some point the shooting stops, and soldiers ponder why they fight. If no adequate reason presents itself, then they grow less willing to walk back into hell. This is what happened in Vietnam (which is why films such as *The Green Berets* and *We Were Soldiers* focus on the early years), and this is what *could* happen in the war against terror. So it’s worth asking how well the post-Vietnam formula works in 21st-century films about 21st-century war.

There is one recent film that attempts to deal with the problem of dramatizing a contemporary conflict. *Three Kings* (1999),

David O. Russell’s flawed but fascinating movie about the 1991 Gulf War, begins with a scene of self-indulgent chaos not unlike the opening sequences in *Apocalypse Now*. Amid drunken celebrations of victory in Kuwait, a band of cynical American grunts decide to venture into Iraq to steal some gold. But unlike the Americans in *Apocalypse Now*, who descend into the heart of darkness, these adventurers encounter a group of desperate Iraqis involved in the thwarted uprising against Saddam Hussein. By helping them to escape, the Americans ascend to a state of surprisingly convincing moral clarity. The film is full of black humor and graphic violence, but at the end it achieves something like a modern vision of democratic honor.

Unfortunately, *Three Kings* does not seem to be the template. Much more popular and commercially successful has been *Black Hawk Down* (2002), an eye-popping extravaganza that shows a group of virtually interchangeable Delta Force and Ranger soldiers battling in the streets of Mogadishu to save a group of stranded comrades. The film brilliantly evokes the physical aspect of modern high-tech warfare, but unfortunately it also goes out of its way to avoid showing why these fresh-faced lads are fighting in Africa in the first place. And because this is not World War II, the audience cannot fill the vacuum with its own understanding.

The result? A movie that continues the drift away from meaning and toward violence for its own sake. *Black Hawk Down* leaves us shaken by its sheer assault on the senses, but because the thrill is vicarious, it makes war seem more exciting than horrible, closer to a video game than to a deadly serious undertaking. Richly produced, poorly scripted spectacles of this sort ignore the bitterest but most important lesson of defeat in war—namely, that the willingness of one soldier to sacrifice for another, however potent in the short run, depends in the long run on his knowing “Why We Fight.” When the cause is perceived as meaningless or unjust, unit cohesion dissolves and battle spirals into a dishonorable nightmare of every man for himself. Surely that’s not a movie any human being wishes to see. □