



# MONASH University

*“Sir, do we get to win this time?”*

*Representation and Context in Hollywood War Cinema: from Vietnam  
to 9/11*

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## **Abstract**

This thesis considers the role that Hollywood war movies have played in the representation of war and the contradictory manner in which they can both affirm and contest the legitimacy of US military campaigns. The research project identifies a correlation between film texts and the social, historical and political context in which their production is situated. This is developed through a collective methodological approach that draws on the strengths of film studies, film history, textual, and contextual analysis.

The project investigates the patterns and relationships between film institutions, governments and audiences and how these relationships shift in emphasis over time through the representation of thematic content in exemplary texts – in particular the treatment of war, verisimilitude, heroism, PTSD, the enemy, the ‘other’, and the relationship between soldiers and civilians. The project aims, through a concentrated investigation of the most popular war film texts from Vietnam to the present, post-9/11 period, to examine the relationship between text, context, industry and audience.

## Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signature:  .....

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Date: 18 May 2017

## **Acknowledgements**

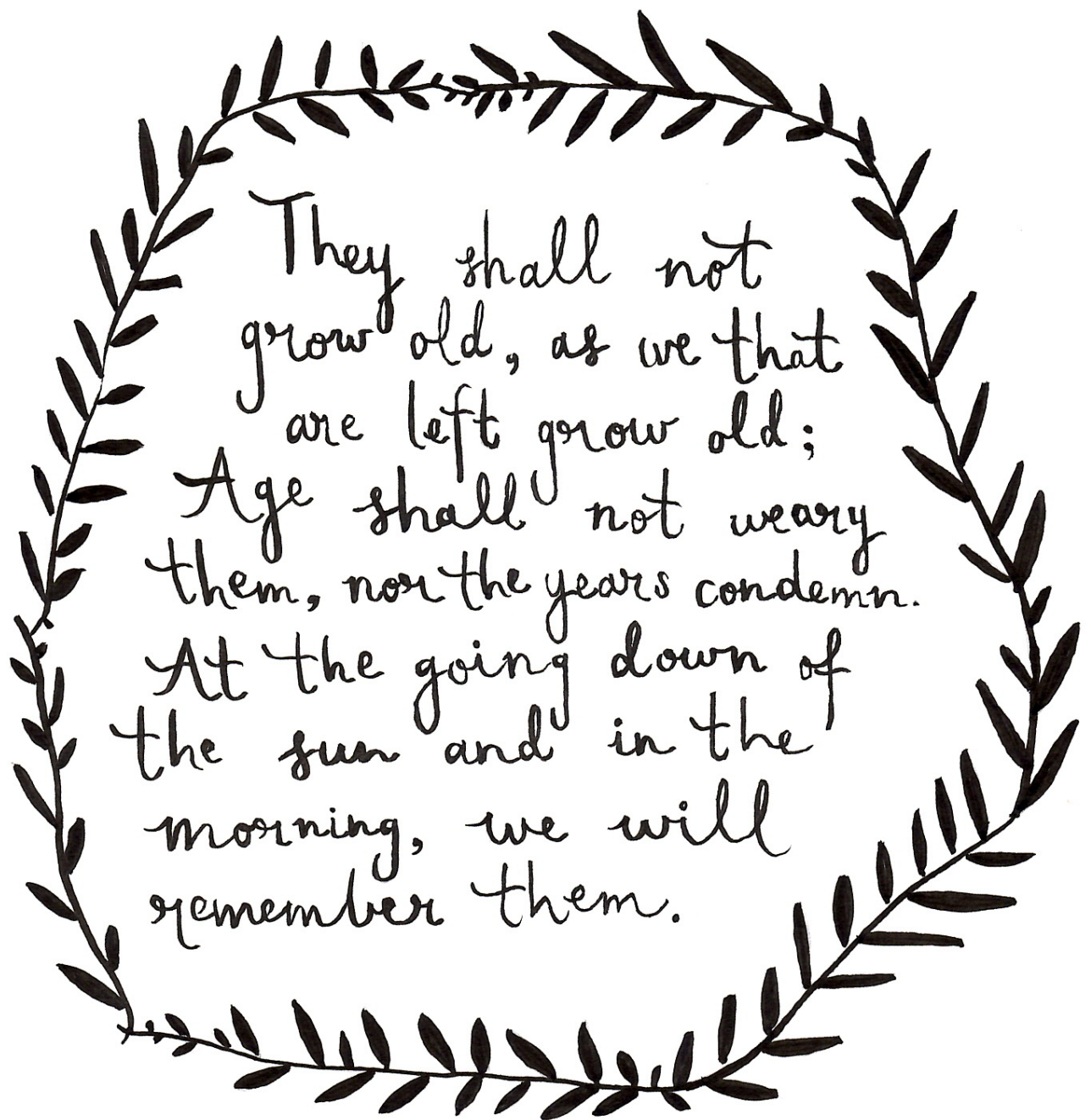
There were (many) moments when it felt like this project may never come to fruition. Yet, somehow, I find myself here. I am indebted to many of my family, friends and colleagues who have helped see this project to the end.

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Lastly, to the many soldiers and civilians who have died and fought restlessly for their country in the name of war. May your race, gender and nationality never hinder us in commemorating your sacrifices and the brutality of war.



They shall not  
grow old, as we that  
are left grow old;

Age shall not weary  
them, nor the years condemn.

At the going down of  
the sun and in the  
morning, we will  
remember them.

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# **War, Hollywood Cinema, Representation & Context**

## **An Introduction**

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This thesis considers the role Hollywood war movies have played in the representation of war and the contradictory manner in which they can both affirm and contest the legitimacy of US military campaigns. The research project identifies a correlation between film texts and the social, historical and political context in which their production is situated. In addition, it explores the patterns and relationships between film institutions, governments and audiences and how these relationships shift in emphasis over time through the representation of thematic content in exemplary texts – in particular the treatment of war, heroism, violence, the enemy, the other, and the relationship between soldiers and civilians.

The research presented here analyses Hollywood war film from 1978 that primarily engages with the Vietnam War and the war on terror. The thesis examines dominant shifts in war film cycles during this period and draws on exemplary texts. This analysis is focused on the social, political and historical contexts of production and reception. Rather than attempting to provide an exhaustive account of every area within film, history and representation which would be impossible given its length, the thesis focuses on the representation of the subject (the ‘hero’, the ‘other’), the complex relationship between Hollywood, US government and military, and the ways in which film and narrative conventions function to re-construct the war narrative in film.

The project employs a collective methodological approach that draws on the strengths of film studies, film history, textual, and contextual analysis. To achieve this, this thesis follows a straightforward structure in regards to film analysis: the film is placed in context, with respect to both the film industry, and the political and social situation from which it emerged; the project analyses the structure and meaning of the film as conveyed by script, visuals, acting, direction, and music; the discussion examines the representation of the subject in the film (both the ‘hero’ and the ‘other’); and other elements such as PTSD and verisimilitude are discussed in relation to how these

evolve throughout the period of analysis and how they contribute to the representation and revision of war narratives.

Throughout the last century, film has served a vital role as a source of information about society and human behaviour, as well as a site for the negotiation of cultural and political meanings, for large groups of people. Consequently, film remains a key medium through which members of the public engage with contemporary and historical events and anxieties. We must recognise that cinema – the dominant medium of our modern age – has a profound affect on the way we engage with both historical and contemporary issues, anxieties, attitudes and values. The task at hand is to unpack how, and to what extent this occurs. The challenge is to train the eye and mind to translate these entertaining representations into data for comparative and critical analysis.

In this research project, I acknowledge and draw upon the significant contribution produced in other texts on war film, popular culture, and film history including: *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (Jeanine Basinger, 2003), *From 9/11 to Terror War: The Dangers of the Bush Legacy* (Douglas Kellner, 2003), *A Hollywood War of Wills: Cinematic Representation of Vietnamese Super-Soldiers and America's Defeat in the War* (Brian Woodman, 2003), *Film and Television after 9/11* (ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon, 2004), *Imagining America at War* (Cynthia Weber, 2006), *War Cinema: Hollywood on the Frontline* (Guy Westwell, 2006), *War and Film* (James Chapman, 2008), *Cinema Wars* (Douglas Kellner, 2010), *Toxic Genre: The Iraq War Film* (Martin Barker, 2011), *Pop Culture Goes to War: Enlisting and Resisting Militarism in the War on Terror* (Geoff Martin & Erin Steuter, 2010), *Parallel Lines: Post 9/11 American Cinema* (Guy Westwell, 2014).

My thesis acknowledges and builds upon the research of these works, however, it differentiates itself in a significant manner, and also makes an original contribution to scholarly knowledge in this area by employing firstly a multi-disciplinarian approach that incorporates elements such as industry, textual analysis, contextual analysis to provide a more complex investigation into representation and context. Secondly, and most significantly, this project examines very recent material that has had little scholarly analysis. The later chapters in particular engage with how the war on terror

and its reverberations are an on-going phenomenon (and probably will be for a long time to come). Understanding how America sees (and mythologises) its role in this conflict is crucial in this contemporary historical-political climate where the shifting of power will no doubt generate new international frictions and conflicts in the near future. In addition, the present research attempts to make sense of the war film genre more broadly by examining it from the Vietnam War to the present. Lastly, the project offers comparisons between Vietnam and the war on terror and provides discussion on this.

### **The Foundation of Contemporary Film Studies**

As a field of academic enquiry, film studies emerged in its contemporary form in the 1960s. Like many theoretical movements, the emergence of film theory in the academy can be traced to a set of historically contingent causes (Rushton & Bettinson, 2010, p.2; Chopra-Gant, 2003, p.12; Chapman, Glancy & Harper, 2007, p.4). This development of film theory and film studies coincides with a number of key social movements that were occurring in the US and Europe in particular. Assisted by the success of the *Nouvelle Vague* in France and abroad, debates in prominent film magazines *Cahier du Cinema* and *Positif*, and the affluence of a new generation of moviegoers (the heirs to the post-war ‘baby boom’), the 1960s saw the peak of the cinephilia movement (Rushton & Bettinson, 2010, p.3; de Valck & Hagener, 2005, p.11). This movement resulted in both a flourishing art cinema tradition in Europe, and the rediscovery of the rich legacy of Hollywood film in the US. Stimulated by this widespread interest in film within the American culture, young professors and students endeavoured to achieve a formal academicisation of film studies within educational institutions (Rushton & Bettinson, 2010, p.3). However, the attempt to formally acknowledge film studies as a legitimate intellectual field of study was not without difficulty. Film academia was initially treated with condescension from factions of more conservative elements within the academy - believing that it would never amount to a credible enterprise (Rushton & Bettinson, 2010, p.3). Indeed, film was not perceived as a medium that possessed the same worth or status as the more traditional art forms. By the late 1960s, film scholars were incorporating paradigms from traditional humanistic programmes such as English literature, linguistics, and cultural theory in a bid to justify film studies as an academic discipline (Rushton &

Bettinson, 2010, pp.2-4; Chapman, Glancy & Harper, 2007, p.4). Consequently, film studies in the late 1960s was often taught out of English departments and its agenda was dominated by similar issues of authorship, genre, narrative and employed linguistic analytical methods of auteur theory, semiotics and structuralism (Chapman, Glancy & Harper, 2007, p.4).

The wider social and historical context for this first wave of academic interest is particularly significant for the way that film was conceived by founding film scholars. The late 1960s was a time of heightened political anxiety due to the ongoing international conflict of the Cold War. Within that context, there was an intensification of political engagement with a string of social movements that motivated a political awakening in Europe and the US in particular. US liberals marched against militarism and discrimination, and demonstrations broke out against the war in South Vietnam. Parisian society was likewise affected by political unrest – the worker and student protests of 1968 spread anti-capitalist attitudes and inspired a revolutionary radicalism (Chopra-Gant, 2003, p.12; Rushton & Bettinson, 2010, pp.6, 7). These political upheavals in Europe and America cued a major transition in the way films would be theorised and provided a particular orientation to the work of film scholars. Out of this historical context came receptiveness to cultural critique. Academics sought out symbolic spaces within culture to negotiate and contest dominant ideology. Thus, the cinematic apparatus became a space that not only kindled theoretical debate within film studies, but it also related the medium to contemporary trends of thought regarding culture and ideology (Chopra-Gant, 2003, p.12; Rushton & Bettinson, 2010, p.4). Not only is this significant for the development of film studies as a legitimate academic discipline on its own right, but the way in which these changes are situated in the broader historical and political context of the late 1960s is significant for the commencement of an investigation into the representation of the Vietnam War in Hollywood cinema.

By the early 1970s, film studies continued to bear traces of an ongoing effort to legitimatise the academic study of film. Film departments had sprung up across North American universities but they were still faced with resistance from conservative factions within those academic institutions. Nevertheless, the 1970s witnessed a fresh boom in film scholarship and an intellectual division emerged within the discipline.

Simply, this division has been categorised as the difference between ‘film studies’ and ‘film history’ (Chapman, Glancy & Harper, 2007, p.4). While the two disciplines shared common ground in their subject matter, they had very different intellectual and methodological assumptions. Where film studies grew principally out of English literature departments, film history emerged out of the disciplines of social and political history. Thus, methodologically, film history was traditionally concerned with assessing both the accuracy and errors of historical films, and contextual analysis – exploring the conditions under which films were made. This differs, of course, from early theories of film studies in the sense that the discipline was oriented towards literary methodological frameworks and focused on more interpretive forms of textual analysis.

The theorising of key elements such as theme, style and genre in the production and subsequent interpretation of films provided an important basis for the discipline that continues to form the grounding of the modern discipline (and the present research). Of particular stylistic significance is Classical Hollywood Cinema. Bordwell (1985) argues that between 1917 and 1960 this distinct and homogenous style dominated American filmmaking (whose principals remain universal in the current historical context) (p.2). The style was constructed out of a system of formal principles that were developed by filmmakers. Despite the implication of the name, the formal and narrative basis of the Classical style remains the basis for film production in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Bordwell (1985) argues that the Classical style is a set of norms that can be analysed at three levels: devices, systems, and relations to systems. Devices are understood as isolated technical elements that are used to situate the audience within the narrative (such as three-point lighting, continuity editing, musical scores, framing, dissolves). Systems are comprised of the function that individual devices perform (and their relations amongst each other). As Bordwell clarifies, “a style consists not only of recurrent elements but of a set of functions and relations defined for them. These functions and relations are established by a system” (1985, p.6). Hollywood films can generally be considered to have three basic systems: narrative logic (causality), cinematic time, and cinematic space (and a given device may work within any or all of these systems). Relations of systems refers to the relationships between narrative

logic, cinematic time, and cinematic space. In this style, spatial and temporal systems remain subordinate to the narrative logic (Bordwell, 1985, pp. 6-7).

When analysing Hollywood film, according to Bordwell's classical model, a number of key ideas can be observed: the centrality of the protagonist to the development of narrative action, narrative causality, the resolution of the film's central enigma through the climax, the sense of closure that the resolution provides. This thesis indicates where these classical conventions are notably (and deliberately) challenged within the primary texts of analysis.

Notable theoretical developments include the emergence of Structuralism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Structuralism is an analytical approach that sees society as containing underlying structures: language systems organise how meaning is produced and determine how it can be communicated (Etherington-Wright & Doughty, 2011, p.63). For Structuralists, language carries (usually dominant) ideology and meaning is shaped by the structures within which communication takes place. A primary concern of the approach is with the framework of meaning: how an audience reads and understands signs within a text.

One of the most successful ways of breaking down this framework of meaning is through binary oppositions, a concept important within Structuralism and its methodology (but which was subsequently critiqued by post-structuralists such as Derrida). Claude Levi-Strauss developed the concept of myth and meaning making which garnered widespread application in both narrative and film studies in the 1970s. For Levi-Strauss, myths have no intrinsic meaning in themselves, but need to be understood in relation to the structuring of social organisation (Rushton & Bettinson, 2010, p.14). His proposition was that myths – and by extension narratives – are structured around binary oppositions (such as light/dark, sun/moon, etc.) which are significant for a particular society or culture (Abrams, Bell & Udris, 2010, p.277). Indeed, the concept of binary oppositions is of particular interest to the present research and will be explored in the following chapter in relation to understanding and conceptualising the 'other' in Hollywood war cinema specifically.

The positing of binary oppositions is often used to identify the working of ideology and indeed film theory has been influenced by the work of theorists from Gramsci to Althusser and beyond. With each new iteration of the theory of ideology there is an attempt to grasp the complexity of the text in relation to social forces and institutions and a further movement away from the idea that the text has a single meaning – which can be then be identified as ideology.

This thesis allows for a complex understanding of ideology that looks at the role of institutions and social forces, allows for a degree of audience autonomy, and the possibility of multiple interpretations. Nevertheless, this does not mean that texts can be said to have any meaning at all – rather that through a combination of texts, contexts, debates within the public sphere and audience reaction it is possible to determine the accepted (or generally understood) meanings of the films discussed and from this explore their ideological role.

This thesis understands ideology as the framework for the shared sense of beliefs, perceptions and conduct of a body of individuals as shown by their attitudes, habits, feelings and assumptions. This definition can be further clarified as a common ‘world view’ that individuals possess and through which they negotiate their understanding of the demands of society at large, specific institutional meanings and cultural values (Eagleton, 1991, pp.1-2; 43). Ideology has to do with a form of legitimating the power of a dominant entity, dominant institution or social perspective. In this regard it primarily performs a hegemonic<sup>1</sup>, and even normative, function – however, this does not preclude the possibility of contestation and subsequent negotiation of meaning, as this thesis will demonstrate.

Conceptualised in this way, the framework offered by the war movie provides the viewer with a particular way of thinking and feeling about war and its moral and political significance. Whilst the ideologies provided through dominant institutions can actively shape the wants and desires of those subjected to them, in order for the

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<sup>1</sup> Hegemony is a term originally coined by Lenin but developed by political theorist Antonio Gramsci. Hegemony incorporates processes of ideological domination and contestation. According to this definition, ideology can be understood as the struggle and complex interaction between individuals, social groups, institutions, and power structures (Eagleton, 1991, p.45; Westwell, 2006, p.7; Clayton, 2006, p.112).

process to be successful, those ideas must also engage significantly with the wants and desires that people already possess (Eagleton, 1991, p. 15). Genuine hopes and needs are reflected back to their subjects in a manner that renders these ideologies plausible and attractive. It is in this way that ideological representation can both engage with and address the trauma and anxiety that the war generates.

## **Film and Context**

Whilst the development of the film studies discipline in the 1970s saw primary theoretical engagement with structuralism, psychoanalysis and ideology, within film history there was a focus on developing a methodological approach to understand the relationship between film and society. As with traditional cultural and film studies, the field of film history was dominated by theories that assumed a singular and simplistic understanding of meaning making. Prior to the late 1970s, the film history discipline adopted the ‘reflectionist’ model as the orthodox approach to understanding the relationship between film and society. Simply put, this approach explored the relationship between films and the societies in which they are produced and consumed (Chapman, 2013, p.90). Sometimes referred to as social film history, it involves relating the social structure of a given time and place to the representation of that structure in a film (Allen & Gomery, 1985, p.158). This paradigm is premised on the idea of film as a reflection or mirror of society, and owes much to the work of German sociologist Siegfried Kracauer. In his book *From Caligari to Hitler* (1947), Kracauer suggested that cinema of Weimer Germany provided a unique insight into the collective mindset of the German nation after World War I. He argued that films reflect society more accurately than other cultural artefacts because they were produced collectively rather than individually and were made to satisfy the desires of a mass audience (Kracauer, 1947, p.9). At the outset of *From Caligari to Hitler*, Kracauer states that:

“What films reflect are not so much explicit credos as psychological dispositions – those deep layers of collective mentality which extend more or less below the dimension of consciousness. Of course popular magazines and broadcasts, bestsellers, ads, fashions in language and other sedimentary products of a people’s cultural life also yield



valuable information about prominent attitudes, widespread tendencies. But the medium of the screen exceeds these sources in inclusiveness” (Kracauer, 1947, p.9).

According to Chapman (2013), Kracauer averred that the way in which films reflect the mental climate more than any other art form is for two reasons: firstly, films are collectively produced rather than the work of a single individual which means that individual impulses are incorporated within the dynamics of the group. Secondly, films are produced for the mass audience and can therefore be understood as responding to mass desires: the commercial responsibility of filmmakers to attract the largest possible audience ensures that films reflect the values and attitudes of audiences (p.17).

*From Caligari to Hitler* came to be regarded as the seminal historical account of the relationship between film and society (Allen & Gomery, 1985, p.159). The reflectionist model that stemmed from his work was enormously influential for the development of the discipline and was exemplified by important texts of the 1970s such as Raymond Durnat’s *A Mirror for England* (1970), Jeffrey Richards’s *Visions of Yesterday* (1973) and Robert Sklar’s *Movie-Made America* (1975). Whilst covering different subjects (Durnat investigated how British films of the 1950s reflect the transition in British society from austerity to affluence, Richards examined how British and American films about the British Empire were seen as evidence for British imperialism, and Sklar covered American Cinema from its origins until the 1960s), Durnat, Richards and Sklar all understood film (especially popular film) as ‘sources’ that shed light on wider social attitudes and provided insights into the values of the societies in which it was produced and consumed (Chapman, 2013, p.91).

However, this reflectionist methodology provided too simplistic an understanding of the relationship between film and society and has since been widely criticised. If films are theorised as a mirror of social reality, it does not take into account the complex ways that texts express meaning through their own formal properties and representational conventions (Chapman, 2013, p.92). Graeme Turner asserts that contrary to Kracauer’s theorem, film does not reflect or even record reality – like any other medium of representation it constructs and *re-presents* its image of reality

through codes, conventions, myths and ideologies of its culture (Turner, 1988, p.129). In this view, film is not a reflection of society but a representation of it – it does not act as a mirror of the world, but rather creates its own image. The more common metaphor in contemporary studies is mediation, rather than reflection. Film historians and film theory scholars alike recognise that the relationship between film and society is complex and that films are not straightforward mirrors of social reality. They do, nevertheless, reveal something about the cultural conditions that produced them and attracted audiences to them. More often than not, they reflect back what audiences want to see, rather than what is really there (Belton, 1994, p. xxi; Chapman, Glancy & Harper, 2007, p.4).

Since the late 1970s, there has been an increasing awareness and understanding that film is no longer a ‘reflection’ or ‘mirror’ of its historical context à la Kracauer, nor is it seen in the abstract terms of semiotic codes and signifying practices as professed through traditional film studies methodology. Rather, film is understood as a complex cultural artefact whose form and content are the result of a number of processes and factors – ideological, industrial, economic, technological and social (Chapman, Glancy & Harper, 2007, p.6). This framework allows for a more dynamic relationship between films and the social processes that produce them: it accepts that films do not necessarily speak for the whole of society, especially regarding marginalised groups (Chapman, 2013, p.94). By the late 1970s and early 1980s, then, there was a formal move from the reflectionist model of film and society, to a model of contextual film history. This new approach to understanding film not only took into account the criticism of the reflectionist model, but also highlighted the social processes involved in making film texts (Chapman, 2013, p.94). In a sense, this approach is a modified version of the reflectionist model inasmuch that the primary focus remained the relationship between films and their historical contexts. How it differs, however, is that the contextual model has an emphasis on identifying external contextual factors that shaped the context of the films (Chapman, 2013, pp. 94-95).

As with the reflectionist model of film and society, there were a number of texts that contributed to the establishment of contextual film history – John O’Connor and Martin Jackson’s *American History/American Film* (1979), K.R. M. Short’s *Feature Films as History* (1981) and Peter Rollins’s *Hollywood as Historian* (1983) – and two

books co-authored by British historians Jeffrey Richards and Anthony Algate, *Best of British* (1983) and *Britain Can Take It* (1986), as well as by articles in journals such as the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* (Chapman, 2013, p.95). In *Best of British: Cinema and Society 1930-1960* (1983) Jeffrey Richards and Anthony Algate outline the approach as threefold:

“First is the need to analyse what the film is saying, and that involves looking at the structure and meaning of the film, as conveyed by script, visuals, acting, direction, photography and music. Second, we attempt to put it in context with respect to both the film industry itself and the political and social situation, which produced it. Third, we try to find out how the films were received and what audience reaction to them was” (Richards & Algate, 1983, p.8).

The strengths of this approach are that it recognises the criticism made of the reflectionist model in regards to the insufficient attention it paid to formal properties of film (particularly mise-en-scene) in accounting for how films create meaning, and, how, in moving beyond reflectionism, it focuses attention on how the film industry responds to what audiences want, and how at times, it has consciously set out to influence public opinion (Chapman, 2013, p.95). There is a greater attention to the cultural dynamics of film production and an awareness of the extent to which the style and content of films are determined by the context of production. An important way of defining contextual film history in relation to the reflectionist model is in terms of representation: what films show is not a ‘real’ historical depiction of a narrative (per reflectionist theory), but a constructed version that accords with the ideological values of its makers and the cultural tastes of the audience (Chapman, Glancy & Harper, 2007, p.7).

Simultaneously within the film studies discipline, since the 1980s there has been evidence of a ‘historical turn’ with the recognition that textual analysis alone is insufficient to understand films as complex cultural artefacts, and that all film texts (mainstream, commercial entertainment cinema and alternative practices such as art cinema, documentary, and experimental and avant-garde film-making) exist within their various ideological, political, social, cultural, economic and institutional contexts

(Chapman, 2013, p.3) Thus, the two disciplines once again established similarities in the development of their core theoretical frameworks.

For much of the history of film as an academic subject, the argument within each school of thought seems to have been oriented towards whether to privilege text *or* context. At one end of that spectrum, text-based film theories such as semiotics and auteur studies have the tendency to detach films entirely from the material conditions in which they are produced and consumed, and place them in a sort of cultural vacuum. Therefore, it is only through a combination of both textual and contextual analysis, elements from both film history and film studies disciplines, that we are able to not only understand films as films, but also in relation to their institutional, social, political, economic and cultural contexts.

### **The Hollywood War Film: Analytical Framework**

The relationship between war and cinema is deeply entrenched in the formation of the medium. With the invention of cinema coinciding with imperialist military conflicts (the 1898 Spanish-American War, the 1899-1902 Boer War, the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War), war has long since been a favoured topic of cinematic representation (Bottomore 2002, p. 239; Langford, 2005, p.105). Indeed, all of these conflicts (and more, of course) have been reinterpreted and reproduced for the cinema – from the imperial battles of ancient Rome and Greece, to the dusty streets of the contemporary Middle East.

Providing a clear, collated definition of the war film genre has proven to be highly contentious, with many scholars in disagreement about the complexity of categorising the generic conventions of the combat film (James 1976; Basinger 1986; Kagan 1974; Kane 1976, 1988). This thesis acknowledges the complexity of the genre, yet understands that at its core, the war/combat film usually focuses on the direct experience of battle of the small infantry unit with clearly defined membership and boundaries (pragmatically the infantry platoon, gunship or bomber crew). War film is about the waging of war, in which combat scenes play a central role in the film. As Neale observes, the genre can be understood as a collection of films that focus on combat in the twentieth century, and therefore includes “films set in the First World War, the

Second World War, Korea and Vietnam. And it excludes home front dramas and comedies and other films lacking scenes of military combat” (1999, p.117). However, it is important to note that different conflicts and different national experiences of conflict and of victory or defeat do tend to ensure a remarkable dissimilarity in the generic conventions by which wars are represented (i.e. World War I and Vietnam War combat films tend to emphasise the futility, brutality and suffering of war, whereas World War II films are more likely to emphasise positive values of valor, patriotism, and sacrifice) (Langford, 2005, pp.107-108). More broadly, war films tend to employ three basic tenets – the actualities of events pertaining to an ongoing war, re-enactments, and the narrative. The latter is what constitutes the largest portion of the war film genre. These films can include documentary material, some element of re-enactment and present combat in a narrative format (Eberwein, 2010, p.9).

The major narrative framework that informs the war film genre is melodrama. Like any important framework, there is some discrepancy in how it is defined. I acknowledge that melodrama is a complex narrative framework and do not attempt to simplify it in any discussion, but rather highlight the relevant facets for this thesis. After reading some of the most pertinent literature written on melodrama, it is apparent that there are three recurring characteristics that are particularly significant for any discussion of the Hollywood war film genre: a focus on the victim-hero and their suffering, melodrama as a fundamental mechanism in which American culture and Hollywood address social issues, and the exploration of the clash between good and evil (Manichaeism). Underling all of these dominant characteristics of the melodramatic mode is pathos. Narratives ultimately work within the melodramatic mode to appeal to the emotions of the audience, through each of these key components of the style.

Throughout the thesis, representations of both the ‘hero’ and ‘other’ will be explored as a binary opposition, focusing on the victim-hero and the ‘other’ within the confines of Hollywood war film. In the instance of Hollywood war film, the victim-hero is almost always exclusively the American soldier, and the ‘other’ takes form as the subject who is treated as differentiated, socially excluded, visually or narratively absent, or notably marginalised (see Chapter 1). Melodrama, then, becomes an important framework for this analysis. Thomas Elsaesser, a significant contributor to

dialogue of the melodramatic mode, argues that a key characteristic of melodrama is the concentration on the point of view of the victim(-hero) (Elsaesser, 1972, p.64). Likewise, Williams argues that melodrama can be understood as an emotional narrative form (that appears across many forms of media/film genres) that explores the notion of the virtuous victim and the moral legibility of that victimhood and subsequent suffering (Williams, 2001, p.29). Further, in the context of the Hollywood war film, Monnet contends that one of the most important functions of the melodramatic mode is the rehabilitation of a socially marginalised subject/virtuous victim:

“Since the Vietnam War, Hollywood melodrama has been working intensely to rehabilitate and redeem the American soldier. It is the servicemen who is consistently portrayed as the virtuous victim, who arrives in Vietnam innocent, is made to suffer in a crucible of grief and disillusionment, but is finally presented as redeemed and better for his trial” (2014, p.364)

This narrative trope is seen throughout the Hollywood War film genre (which will be developed throughout the chapters to follow in a number of different war contexts). Kappelhoff argues that since the formation of the genre in the 1940s, this formula of victim-heroism has defined the formation of the war film (2016, p.99). To establish pathos (a key component to the melodramatic mode) and to emphasise the virtuous victim, the war film must feature combat death. The melodramatic narrative is based around the suffering and death of a virtuous victim (which does not have to be the protagonist). In this way, death lends meaning and agency to an otherwise toxic or demystifying event (Monnet, 2014, p.367). We see this narrative function repeatedly throughout the genre and in many (if not all) of the case studies discussed throughout this thesis.

Williams, Gledhill (and Mayer in his summary of the concept in *Encyclopedia of American Film Serials*, 2017) assert that melodrama seizes upon the social problems of reality (such as illegitimacy, slavery, racism, labour struggles, class division, disease, nuclear annihilation, genocide) and dramatizes them in melodramatic form. In this way, melodrama functions as a key mode by which American culture (and

subsequently Hollywood film) addresses social issues (Williams, pp.18-19; Gledhill, 1987, p.38; Mayer 2017, p.9). Allison argues that within the melodramatic form, characters can be seen as personifications of larger forces and social issues. She argues that through this practice, the Hollywood war film helps to reconcile deep rooted issues of guilt, loss and shame by:

“condensing all of the American military and the experience of war into a handful of characters [that] metamorphose abstract entities associated with guilt and suspicion into virtuous innocents, victim-heroes worthy of our empathy and respect” (Allison, 2017, p.59)

Likewise, Williams argues that melodrama can be understood as an attempt to “reconcile the irreconcilable, resolving primary contradictions that underlie the fabric of society” (2001, p.37). This was most significantly seen with the revision of the war narrative in Hollywood Vietnam War films (see Chapter 1), and also through the return to the WWII narrative in the aftermath of Vietnam (see Chapter 2).

In his book *The Melodramatic Imagination and the Mode of Excess*, Peter Brooks argues that melodrama emphasises the fundamental clash between good and evil (Manichaeism) (1976, p.36). This third key characteristic of the melodramatic mode takes form through the simplistic moral stereotyping of characters. Melodrama organises the presentation of characters through the framework of Manichean conflicts between good and evil (Williams 1998, p.77). Brooks argues that “the world according to melodrama is built on an irreducible Manichaeism, the conflict of good and evil as opposites” (1976, p.36). In this way, the melodramatic narrative is not open to compromise – there is a polarisation that is both horizontal and vertical. Characters, then, represent extremes. This narrative framework marries well with the notion of a binary oppositional reading of the subject within the war film genre (the victim-hero and the ‘other’; the former almost always is characterised by Brooks’ “good” in the Manichean divide, and the latter, the ‘other’, the “bad”). The good vs bad dichotomy is of course not restricted to the war film genre, but Melodrama becomes a useful framework for narrative analysis in this context.

Mayer (2017) argues that this Manichean dichotomy eliminates ambiguity of the “good” and “bad” and therefore functions as a natural dramatic mode for propaganda (p.9). Particularly in their early days, war films served a vital role as a type of ‘visual newspaper’, developing out of a desire to provide more information about conflict abroad and within the borders of domestic territory. This resulted in the medium serving another function – helping to curate a specific sense of national identity and thence disperse political propaganda to a wide audience. As we will see, this led to the development of an intricate relationship between film, military and government – particularly in the American context of Hollywood (the focus of this thesis). In addition, the war film also exercised (and exercises) its own powerful capacity to structure memory and revise history – something we see develop with more complexity over time.

### **The Hollywood War Film: Development of a Genre**

The evolution of the war film is influenced more than any other genre, by developments in the real world. The shift from the likes of *Birth of a Nation* (1915) to *Platoon* (1986), and then to *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *The Hurt Locker* (2008) cannot be explained in terms of simple generic evolution. Rather, Langford argues, the shifts in iconography, generic conventions and verisimilitude of war films can be attributed to the changing perception of particular wars (and war itself) caused by accumulative shared cultural experience of different conflicts and their politics (2005, p.107). It is this relationship between text and context (and politics) that this thesis strives to highlight from a discussion of Hollywood war cinema – from the dominant period of Vietnam War film (1978-1989), to the contemporary setting (that engages with the War on Terror). However, the films that shape this time period do not exist in isolation, but rather build upon and reference those that have come before – particularly in this context of analysis, the major twentieth century conflicts World War I and World War II.

The First World War affected global cinema almost as significantly as it did global politics and economies. The European nations were most affected, with the Russian domestic film industry effectively collapsing until the mid-1920s. America, due to their late entry into the conflict, fared remarkably well – emerging as the dominant



industry in the aftermath of the war (Langford, 2005, p.108). During the conflict, there were a number of distinct cycles of Hollywood war cinema – reflecting the shifting perception of the war and America’s role within it.

Early Hollywood war film (1914-1916) emphasised America’s attempted neutrality with a cycle of pacifist and isolationist texts. War films reflected contemporary US president Woodrow Wilson’s appeal to his fellow countrymen to “be impartial in thought as well as in action...” (Wilson in Unger, 1992, p.678). Subsequently, films in this period were often contradictory, with Hollywood releasing films advocating intervention (*The Battle Cry of Peace*, 1915), another promoting isolationism (*On the Belgian Battlefield*, 1914), and others still condoning war and violence (such as the pacifist epics *In the Name of the Prince of Peace* 1915, and *Civilisation* 1916). However, once the US eventually entered the war in April 1917, Hollywood was steadfast in its support for the war effort.

The relationship between cinema and politics shifted indelibly with America’s entrance. Under President Wilson’s advisement, the Committee on Public Information (the “Creel Committee”) was created within the month that the US declared its allegiance with their European Allies. It was the role of this committee to coordinate the presentation of information to the public and to shape opinion (Slocum, 2006, p.4). The Creel Committee became the American government’s key propaganda mechanism – collaborating with government, military and the Hollywood film industry through delegation and provision of resources (military advisers, film extras, equipment, filming locations)<sup>2</sup>. During this time, the movie theatre was a crucial space to reinforce the national agenda, with citizens auspiced under the Committee making speeches at the movie theatre before screenings. These speakers used material generated in Washington to inform and persuade audiences on a variety of World War One topics (such as how to maintain morale at home, why Americans were fighting the war, Liberty Loan, food conservation) (DeBauche, 2006, p.113).

The Committee ensured that Hollywood cinema shifted to reflect the growing distaste for the allied enemies. Therefore, from 1917-1918 we see a shift from the first cycle

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<sup>2</sup> A notion we see developed throughout future conflicts – the OWI in WWII, embedded journalism in Vietnam, the 9/11 Group in the War on Terror.

of war film that attested neutrality, to an increasing canon of Hollywood war films that focused their energies on anti-German propaganda. Films such as *Daughter of France* (1918), *The Kaiser*, *The Beast of Berlin* (1918) and *Hearts of the World* (1918) provided germanophobic representations of the European conflict, depicting political greed of Germany and fanciful predictions of the wars end.

As Neale notes, due to filming and production schedules, over fifty war-related features were released in 1919, after the war had already concluded (1999, p.120). There was a brief cycle of films at this time that featured revenge narratives<sup>3</sup> (such as *Why Germany Must Pay*, 1918, *The Heart of Humanity*, 1919) before attitudes towards the war changed again in the 1920s and 1930s with a cycle of revisionist war films. As DeBauche asserts, war films in this cycle “displayed striking innovations. They were told from the soldier’s point of view and foregrounded over any other wartime experience” (1997, p.171). These films, including *The Big Parade* (1925), *What Price Glory?* (1926) and *Wings* (1927), differed significantly from those films in 1917 and 1918 and focused extensively on the experience of the ordinary soldier and their experiences in the trenches (or the sky in the air combat features that dominated the last years of the decade). It is this last distinct cycle of World War I films that continued to dominate cinematic representations of war in the following two decades until the Second World War.

With struggling European economies and the US coming out of the Great Depression, Hollywood cinema initially struggled to find its place in the broken global market at the break out of World War II. However, with a steady British market, Hollywood soon found a flourishing domestic and international audience. Under President Roosevelt’s leadership, a massive defense boom in 1941 put a definitive end to the Great Depression and marked the first stage of an extended war boom for the US economy (Schatz, 2006, p.148). The Hollywood film industry was among the main beneficiaries of this shifting economic condition. By the late 1940s, Hollywood features, documentaries and newsreels were again dominated by war-related subjects.

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<sup>3</sup> In a way not dissimilar to that which we see with post-Vietnam War revenge narratives in the 1980s with the Rambo and Missing in Action trilogies.

Unlike WWI (or the wars that led before that), the generic paradigm of World War II film was established *during* the war. It is this generic model that also becomes the principle frame of reference for almost all later combat films (Langford, 2005, p.111)<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, Hollywood often returns to the tenets of Second World War combat film in the depiction of war in a number of post-WWII contexts (as we will see in particular in Chapter Two with the “Greatest Generation” film cycle in the late 1990s). Prior to the events of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Hollywood reflected America’s political stance towards the Second World War – an outspoken denial of any active promotion of US involvement (ever the isolationist). However, after the attack (and American’s subsequent entry into the war), Hollywood (like the political institution that drives it), begins to assert an aggressive on-screen support of the war effort (Schatz, 2006, p.149). The on-screen response is, of course, delayed due to the nature of production schedules (9-12 months for an ‘A-class’ film release). Most of these films, then, were initiated in the immediate aftermath of Pearl Harbor and the US entry into the war, but were not seen in movie theatres until 1942.

During the years 1942-1944, Shain identifies that one-fourth of all films released dealt with the war in one form or another (which equates to 312 of 1,286 releases). For the entire four war years the US was involved, 340 war related features were released, or roughly 20 per cent of the industry total (1976, p.31)<sup>5</sup>. Hollywood tended to focus on the war in the Pacific during the war years and produced narratives that engaged with battles being waged in the air (*Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo*, 1944), at sea (*Destination Tokyo*, 1943, *They Were Expendable*, 1945), and more extensively, on land in the

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<sup>4</sup> In light of the future divisive American-led conflicts that follow (namely Vietnam and the War on Terror) it is unsurprising that the industry (government/military) has clung to the tenets of WWII and the “good war” ideology.

<sup>5</sup> However, it is important to highlight that there are discrepancies between scholars in relation to this figure. The way an author chooses to define the notion of war or combat affects the statistics provided about films released in this period. For example, Basinger (1986) (of whom provides the most comprehensive inquiry into the films in this period (and beyond), (1940s-1970s), defines the combat film as one containing “a hero, a group of mix types, and a military objective of some sort”; taking “place in the actual combat zones of World War II, against the established enemies, on the ground, the sea, or in the air”; and containing “many repeated events, such as mail call, all presented visually with appropriate uniforms, equipment, and iconography of battle” (p.23). In this case, she argues that only two “pure combat” films were released prior to 1945 – *Air Force* (1943) and *Bataan* (1943) (p.24).

form of conventional GI combat features (*Wake Island*, 1942, *Bataan*, 1943, *Guadalcanal Diary*, 1943, *Cry Havoc*, 1943, *Objective, Burma!*, 1945).

With the conclusion of the war in 1945, there is a hiatus on the production of war related films of all kinds (Neale, 1999, p.122; Langford, 2005, p.117). The production of war film resumes in 1948 with *Fighter Squadron*, closely followed by *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, *Command Decision*, *Battleground*, *Twelve O'clock High Noon*, and others in 1949. This signals a third cycle of WWII films, which, as Neale argues, is marked by “the purity of its conventions and by various forms of generic awareness” (1999, p.122). This decade of war cinema is further complicated by the Korean War and the Cold War of the 1950s<sup>6</sup>.

With the Cold War and engagement in the domestic affairs in Vietnam, we start to see the emergence of films dealing with some aspects of the Vietnam War early as 1948 (*Rogues' Retirement*, *Saigon*<sup>7</sup>). A number of other titles follow, including well known feature *China Gate*<sup>8</sup> (1957), with the first film to engage with images of the American war in Vietnam released in 1958 (*The Quiet American*). From 1960 to 1975 Hollywood WWII film shifts again, with a variety of films (often contrasting) like epics *The Longest Day* (1962), *The Battle of the Bulge* (1965), the absurdity of war in *None But the Brave* (1965), and the cynical feature *What Did You Do in the War, Daddy?* (1966). In 1968, Hollywood releases its most reviled war feature *The Green Berets* before revisiting (and revising) the Vietnam War after the withdrawal of troops in 1975 with the 1978 features *The Boys in Company C*, *The Deer Hunter*, and *Apocalypse Now* (see Chapter One: The Dominant Period of Vietnam War Film: 1978-1989).

As with World War I, the government worked closely with Hollywood to curate a specific portrayal of political (and patriotic) messages through film. President Roosevelt created the Office of War Information (OWI) in June 1942 (which operated until the war's end in September 1945). As the head of the OWI, Elmer Davis, so

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<sup>6</sup> The Korean War only fostered a sporadic interest in Hollywood, with 20 out of 91 Korean War related features produced during the war, with the rest seen in the remaining years of the decade (Blair, 1987; Lentz, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> These films contain images of the French war in Vietnam, not the American war.

<sup>8</sup> *China Gate* contains images of the French war in Vietnam, not the American war.

aptly stated after the events of Pearl Harbor – the “easiest way to inject propaganda ideas into most people’s minds, is to let it go in through the medium of an entertainment picture when they do not realise they are being propagandised” (Davis quoted in Koppes & Black, 1990, p.64). The role of this organisation was much like its predecessor in WWI (the Creel Committee), in so much as its primary objective was to liaise and coordinate with the government to produce war-related films. However, the OWI worked to ensure that WWII needed to be portrayed differently from WWI: where the battle against the Kaiser generated “an Americanism rooted in Anglo-Saxon superiority, WWII needed to be understood as battle waged to defeat the brutality, cruelty, treachery, and cynicism of the enemy” (May, 2006, p.184).

The OWI worked on both a domestic and international front. The former produced films that were released for nontheatrical distribution (community organisations, libraries, and educational institutions), the latter produced content designed for counter propaganda in enemy countries and was produced cooperatively by five major American newsreel firms – Paramount, Pathé, Fox Movietone, Universal, and News of the Day (Barsam, 1992, p.219). Funding restrictions in the Domestic Branch meant that by 1944, the OWI operated mostly abroad where it helped maintain Allied confidence and to undermine enemy morale. Films made under the guise of the OWI included *Hymn of the Nations* (1944), *The Town* (1944), and *The Cummington Story* (1945). These films were ambitious and earnest in their advocacy of American preparedness and warnings against Fascist evil (Barsam, 1992, p.220). The OWI tended to present oversimplified and patriotic scenes of America that helped to solidify the values and reasons for which Americans were fighting.

### **The Relationship Between Hollywood, Military & Government**

As early as WWI, The Hollywood film industry and the US military have shared in a mutually beneficial relationship: for military and government bodies, they have relied upon positive portrayals that promote recruitment, benefit from Congressional funding, and support military interests abroad; for Hollywood, many films have relied upon military cooperation in the making of its movies (Barker, 2011, p.11). This cooperation can range from having access to film archives, to the use of equipment and military warships and vehicles. Indeed, access to military equipment can heavily

reduce production costs and it generates a level of authenticity in the production of the film. David Robb, in his book “Operation Hollywood” (2004) argues that this ongoing cooperation and relationship between Hollywood, government and military forms the most sophisticated and successful propaganda system in the world – particularly through the romantic way in which historical facts are strategically resisted in the representation of war within Hollywood cinema (p.14).

Military documents released in 2001 exposed the recent extent of influence the Pentagon exerts over Hollywood. In order for a film producer to get assistance from the Pentagon (and thus, access to military goods) they are required to submit five copies of a script for approval from a Pentagon liaison office, make whatever changes are required, film the script exactly the way the script states, and pre-screen the completed film to Pentagon officials before it is shown to the public (Robb, 2004, p.25). Scriptwriters and directors are rewarded when they yield to military demands on the content of scripts. Alternatively, when they choose not to, they are penalised in the form of denied access (for example, *Dr. Strangelove*, *Catch-22*, *Die Hard 2*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Mars Attacks!* were all rejected by the Pentagon and denied military access on the grounds that they were critical of the military). As producers have found, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to secure access to military equipment if authorities disapprove of the intended script. Consequently, those films that *do* secure the support of the US military tend to be politically conservative, state-centric and portray the military in a positive, more heroic light (Dodds, 2008, p.228; Lacy, 2003, pp. 613-614). For example, *Air Force One*, *Armageddon*, *Pearl Harbour*, *Top Gun*, *The Hunt for Red October*, *Behind Enemy Lines*, and *Golden Eye* were all films that were made with the cooperation of the military (Lacy, 2003, p. 213).

Filmmaker Oliver Stone was refused military assistance for his Vietnam War-era films *Platoon* (1986) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989). Stone attests that:

“[The Pentagon] makes prostitutes of us all because they want us to sell out to their point of view... They want a certain kind of movie made. They don’t want to deal with the downside of war. They assist movies that don’t tell the truth about combat and they don’t assist

those that seek to tell the truth. Most films about the military are recruiting posters” (Stone in Robb, 2004, p.26).<sup>9</sup>

After September 11, 2001, the relationship between the Hollywood film industry, US government and the military became furthermore intertwined. The Bush administration responded to the terrorist attacks with a comprehensive strategy to protect the American people. Bush led the most dramatic reorganisation of the federal government since the beginning of the Cold War, reforming the intelligence community and establishing new institutions like the Department of Homeland Security. As a part of this strategic plan and structural reorganisation, Bush also wanted to remove violent regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, which he believed, threatened the liberty of America by promoting terrorism. A decision to go to war was always destined to create an insurgence of controversy both on a local and global scale. So, as part of the strategic plan to unite the American people in entering war, Bush deliberately sought to utilise the resources available through Hollywood cinema.

The Bush administration considered Hollywood an important industry for gaining potential leverage in the construction of a new way of thinking about war that would support and sustain a more aggressive foreign policy stance (Westwell, 2006, p.2). In the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, White House political advisor Karl Rove and Bush media advisor Mark McKinnon met with the heads of Viacom, Disney, MGM, Fox, Warner Bros., Paramount and representatives from the Television and Film Actors, Directors and Writers Guilds to discuss how the entertainment industry could cooperate in the war on terrorism (Kellner, 2010, p.1; Lewis et. al., 2002, p. 126; Lyman, 2001; Young, 2006, p.318). Rove made a number of suggestions to those in attendance, requesting that Hollywood provides clarification on certain issues: “that the war is against terrorism, not Islam... that this is a global conflict requiring a global response, and that it is a fight against evil rather than a disagreement between nations” (Rove in Young, 2006, p.318). In addition,

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<sup>9</sup> Whilst Stone will no doubt claim this gives credence to the fact that he wasn’t making a pro-war film with *Platoon*, I would argue that films such as *Platoon* contain certain elements that could be described as advocating particular policies. It is important to highlight that films are complex documents and go beyond a simple pro-war or anti-war dichotomy: they can contain elements of both. Meaning within film can certainly also go beyond the intentions of the filmmaker, which further emphasises the importance of incorporating a component of audience analysis in more extensive research practices.

Rove asked that future movies could join in issuing a “call to service” to all Americans and aid the process of reassuring children and families in “these uncertain times” (Rove in Young, 2006, p.318).

In Bush’s eyes, establishing a partnership with popular film and television became an important political tool to encourage national unification (Lacy, 2003, p. 614; Westwell, 2006, p. 1). In the shadow of the haunting past of the Vietnam War, it became imperative to make some significant changes in the way the conflict was represented to the American public and the global audience. Importantly, the American government needed to ensure that the limited restrictions that were enforced for media personnel during Vietnam was revised. Part of that initiative was to mediate the train of communications through a strengthened relationship between Hollywood, US Government and US military. As a result of discussions between Bush, Rove and McKinnon, the Pentagon formed the 9/11 Group. This Group was composed of Hollywood filmmakers and directors that operated to brainstorm about future terrorist scenarios to better aid the Pentagon in securing the US homeland, and to help consolidate post-September 11 bellicosity through cinematic representations (Weber, 2006, p.3). Hollywood film began to function as a metanarrative for experiencing September 11, as postmodern theorists such as Slavoj Žižek argued that the events of 9/11 confirmed the postmodern collapsing of the real and the hyperreal, of reality and film (Weber, 2006, p.3). What this accentuated was a further strengthening of the bond that exists between Hollywood, the military, government and culture. Post-9/11 Hollywood cinema marks a site where official US foreign policy converged with popular symbolic and narrative resources to address the United States with questions about its individual, national, and international subjectivities, especially in relation to the war on terror (Weber, 2006, p.4).

Notably, because of the growing significance of this entwined relationship, the 9/11 Group, in cooperation with US government officials, became much more selective about the type of films that were released, and at what time. Films whose themes proved too close for comfort, like *Collateral Damage* (2002) (a film about a terrorist attack) were delayed, whilst Hollywood films about ‘old wars’ with clear patriotic and pro-military tendencies, like *Black Hawk Down* (2001), a film based around the conflict in Somalia, and *We Were Soldiers* (2002), a Vietnam War film, were



advanced (Young, 2006, p.319). The chair of Paramount pictures explained why *Black Hawk Dawn* (2001) would appear on local screens sooner than expected: “It’s about the sacrifices that soldiers make so the rest of us can be safe” (Young, 2006, p.319). Thus, the decision to move the release dates was driven by the desire to take advantage of the post-9/11 climate and work, ideologically, to unify the American people on the brink of a new intervention in the Middle East.

The Pentagon is open about the motives behind providing assistance to Hollywood cinema. According to the Army’s own handbook, *A Producer’s Guide to US Army Cooperation with the Entertainment Industry*, this collaboration between Hollywood and military must “aid in the recruiting and retention of personnel” (Robb, 2004, p.26). Over the last fifty years or so, hundreds of films have gone through this rigorous process in order to obtain military approval. Countless films have been altered, demonstrating the considerable power the military and government has in shaping scripts and controlling the representation of military, government and war within Hollywood cinema. Perhaps the most significant recent release is the *Transformers* franchise (2007-), which, interestingly, was not required to submit drafts of the screenplay/s. The *Transformers* producers secured more military assistance than any other franchise in movie history (including twelve types of Air Force aircraft, troops from four different bases, vehicles, locations, and military extras – an estimated value of a billion dollars for a cost of \$600,000) (Alford & Secker, 2017, p.8).

Recent research (2017) undertaken by Matthew Alford and Tom Secker identifies that the relationship between the US government and Hollywood is perhaps even more involved than previously understood. Files obtained through the Freedom of Information Act by Alford and Secker for their book “National Security Cinema” indicates that between 1911 and 2017, 814 films received support from the Department of Defense (DOD) (p.6)<sup>10</sup>. Of the biggest surprise, is the extent of

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<sup>10</sup> They argue that this figure is more likely to exceed 2,000 titles when taking into consideration their own analysis of TV titles, individual episodes, music videos, and films they suggest were not included in the “official” tally provided in those FOIA files. Part of the issue, they argue, is the lack of transparency in record keeping. As it currently stands, one historian, Lawrence Suid, is the recipient of annotated scripts and DOD-Hollywood correspondence from 1976 to 2005 (and possibly beyond, Alford and Secker suggest). Suid

Pentagon involvement in unsuspecting network television shows such as *American Idol*, *The X-Factor*, numerous *Oprah Winfrey* episodes, *Ice Road Truckers*, *Battlefield Priests*, *America's Got Talent*, *Hawaii Five-O*, *War Dogs*. In total, they assert, the Pentagon has worked on 1133 TV titles, 977 of them between 2004 and 2016.

However, we should resist drawing a sharp distinction between Hollywood pre and post 9/11. Much has been made about the attempts of the Bush administration to encourage the entertainment industry to support the war on terror, but it is important to remember that it is certainly not the first time that such overt measures have been taken. As we can see through the development of the war film genre, other US administrations have frequently turned to the movie and television industries during war and crisis to enlist their support. During the Second World War, filmmaker Frank Capra produced the influential *Why We Fight* (1942-1945) series in order to educate viewers about the threats facing the country (Dodds, 2008, p. 228). During the Cold War, intelligence agencies such as the CIA linked up with film producers to ensure that movies such as *Animal Farm* (1954) were released to audiences so that they could comprehend better the threat posed by the Soviet Union (Dodds, 2008, p. 228). The relationship between Hollywood cinema, US military and government has often been close and beneficial. Bearing this in mind, it becomes imperative to understand that Hollywood cinema is a place where common sense ideas about politics and history are reproduced, and where behaviour is naturalised and legitimated.

### **The Vietnam War and The War on Terror**

The Vietnam War presents a crucial event in American contemporary history that resulted in a distinctive shift in Hollywood combat cinema. Even after the withdrawal of US troops out of Vietnam in 1975, the conflict continued to be an on-going part of the political, social, and cultural life of America and the globe. During the dominant period of Vietnam War film (1978-1989), cinematic representations of war were significant in social culture and the public sphere. These representations functioned as both ideological proponents of war, and as points of contestation. Similarly, film, and popular culture more generally, has been closely associated with the terrorist attacks

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continues to have autonomy over who has access to that material (and to what (minimal) extent that may be) (2017, p.7).

of September 11 2001 and the ensuing war on terror from the very beginning. This relationship was strengthened when senior presidential advisor Karl Rove recruited a group from the entertainment industry in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 to help the government ‘think outside the box’ in relation to handling terrorist threats (Hammond, 2011, p.7). Although there are differences, the two conflicts share a number of points of comparison that prove vital for the purpose of this research project.

The Vietnam War and the war on terror take place in vastly different terrains but at the heart of it, from the US perspective, both conflicts have essentially strived to eradicate the spread of an ideology that has been a significant cause of fear and confusion (Kellner, 2003, pp.60-61).<sup>11</sup> The roots of America’s entanglement in Vietnam reside in the aftermath of the Second World War and the Korean War, and its anxiety concerning the increasing influence of communism. This anxiety led to the ‘domino theory’ of the 1950s, which speculated that if one state in a region came under the influence of communism, then the surrounding countries would follow in a ‘falling domino’-like effect. Promoted by successive United States administrations during the Cold War, the domino theory served as supposed justification for American intervention around the world. As a result, the US centralised their resources to intervene in South East Asia, against what they believed was the subversion of an American ally in Vietnam. The US began exercising an active involvement within Vietnam in the 1950s, subsequently culminating in the Vietnam War by the early 1960s (Tucker, 2008, p. 2232). In the case of the war on terror, the events of 9/11 were significant in the immediate foreign policy decisions being made by the Bush administration. The terrorist attacks were seen to justify the opening of a war not just against the United States, but against Western civilisation: a war waged by Islamic fundamentalists on a jihad to destroy freedom and democracy as part of a world-wide objective to impose their ideology over significant regions of the world.

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<sup>11</sup> This is exemplified in the speech delivered by President Bush to the Congress on September 20, 2001 declaring the war against terrorism. Bush described the war as a conflict between “those governed by fear [who] want to destroy our wealth and freedoms”. Bush continued to insist that “you’re either with us, or you’re with the terrorists” (Kellner, 2003, pp.60-61)

During the preliminary phases of the Vietnam War, it was claimed that the Communists had made the first move and attacked American ships in the Gulf of Tonkin. These claims were later found to be false but were used at the time as a justification for escalating America's troop commitments (Wiest, 2009, p. 25). Similarly in the Iraq conflict, US neo-conservatives claimed that Saddam Hussein had a large storehouse of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) that he was harbouring in preparation to use against the West. Hussein was also said to have connections to the 9/11 attacks and al-Qaeda more generally (Kellner, 2003, pp.65-66). Again, whilst these assertions were proved false, they played a seminal role in the decisions made in late 2001 to engage in an intervention in the Middle East. Both of these conflicts have, and continue to, cause extreme division amongst the American people and the global public sphere.

Whilst a number of valid and significant similarities can be made between the two conflicts, it is imperative to also highlight how the conflicts have differed in order to conceptualise how a dominant shift in cinematic focus has occurred in the Hollywood combat genre. The very nature of insurgent warfare within Vietnam and the Middle East is notably different: in Vietnam, the Communists waged a classic, peasant-based, centrally directed insurgency that eventually culminated in a conventional military victory. The Communists had a clear – and well-publicised – political, economic and social agenda. Alternatively, in the war on terror, small, scattered and disparate groups wage a smaller-scale war of ambushes, assassinations, car bombings and general sabotage against the US and coalition forces. The freedoms and aims of US military action were also much more limited in Vietnam than they are in the current conflict. Unlike within the Middle East where the US seeks revolutionary regime change, the US sought only to defend South Vietnam, not overthrow North Vietnam.

The war on terror is a very different war to that which was waged in Vietnam – the very essence of what war is has changed in the contemporary conflict, particularly in the Western world. The present conflict has created a distinctive blurring between civilian and military operations whilst simultaneously collapsing the boundaries of the physical parameters of the intervention: the war is no longer waged only in the frontlines. Consequently, the war on terror has less emphasis on numbers of military personnel, and more of a focus upon waging a more sophisticated high-tech oriented

intervention. In addition, the use of enhanced interrogation techniques employed by US selected government institutions within the conflict has become much more explicit and publicised through the media and popular culture (most notably in Hollywood cinema), particularly after the events of the Abu Ghraib scandal.

Whilst it is clear there are some irrefutable differences between these two conflicts, what unites them in relation to the broader aims of this research project is the explicit link that exists within both conflicts between Hollywood, government and military. In addition, the war on terror is often ‘framed’ or even ‘haunted’ by the legacy of the Vietnam War within popular discourse. The two conflicts are continually compared in the public sphere through statements such as “...we cannot have another Vietnam” (Fisher, 2009). Thus, what is occurring in contemporary cinema is in part a development of the tropes of the Vietnam War film, and a response to contemporary conflict, attitudes and anxieties. As a result, it is the aim of this research project to explore how the Vietnam War and its tropes infuse the representation of the war on terror. Whilst this new wave of post-9/11 war films are responding to a present conflict, they are simultaneously dealing with the narrative and ideological legacy of the Vietnam War film.

## **Chapter Outline**

This thesis begins with an analysis into the dominant period of Vietnam War films from 1978 to 1989 and explores the relationship between text and context during a time of heightened social and political anxiety. Films such as *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), and *Hamburger Hill* (1987) played an important role in the negotiation and revision of the traumatic experience of the Vietnam War. As such, this chapter discusses how the stylistic and thematic conventions of these texts can be better understood within the evolving historical-political phases of the period.

Extending the discussion in the previous chapter, chapter two describes the next cycle of films from the late 1990s to the early 2000s that follow the Vietnam War cycle. This period is commonly referred to as ‘the greatest generation’ cycle. The term, more commonly used to describe Americans who fought in WWII, is understood in film

studies as a historical cycle of war film that featured a ‘greatest generation’ interpretation of WWII in which the war is seen through a nostalgic lens and explores the experience of dignified and honourable men. Significant texts in this period are *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *Pearl Harbour* (2001) (both based upon events of WWII), *Black Hawk Down* (2002) (a film about the Battle of Mogadishu) and Vietnam War based film *We Were Soldiers* (2002). These films represent a clear shift from the thinking of the Reagan era discussed in the previous chapter, and attempt to foster a sense of World War II as a ‘good war’.

Chapter three marks the transition to contemporary discussion on the events of 9/11 and how the war on terror transformed the Hollywood war film genre. The focus of this chapter is the first decade after the attacks (2001-2010). In this context, chapter four explores the relationship between film and politics as Hollywood attempts to respond to the social and political climate. In this period, the war film genre suffered extensive failures at the box office. This chapter works to make sense of those failures and simultaneously examine those texts that experienced unexpected commercial success during this time of social crisis. Films of primary analysis include *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *Green Zone* (2010).

The final chapter examines Hollywood war film in the second decade after the events of 9/11. This chapter reflects the shifting nature in warfare by examining both conventional and unconventional war film texts. In this era, the traditional battlefield gives way to an ambiguous enemy and frontline – war takes place on rooftops surrounded by civilians and unmarked soldiers rather than in trenches. Exemplary texts in this period include *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) and *American Sniper* (2014). These texts signal a new phase of war and representation and encapsulate many of the central themes that have emerged in this period of modern warfare and cinematic representation.

The structure of each of these chapters is similar. Each begins by placing the chapter’s respective era in its historical context. This includes a brief introduction that describes what was happening in domestic American politics, and the greater world stage at the time of the films’ production and release. A more detailed film analysis follows. The films, wherever possible, are presented chronologically which best allows for an

insightful integration of the real (and reel) worlds in a combined textual and contextual analysis. Within this analysis, it is clear that Hollywood cinema plays a seminal role in the representation and construction (and re-construction) of war and identity. These representations have a strong correlation to the way in which the films are socially, politically and historically situated in their relative context.

## Chapter One

### The Dominant Period of Vietnam War Film: 1978 – 1989

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The Vietnam War marked a significant moment in American and international foreign policy.. Even after the conclusion of the physical conflict, Vietnam continued to be an ongoing part of the social, cultural and political life of the United States. Popular culture played an important role in the way that the American public negotiated issues of loss and the questionable motivation for the initial intervention, as well as the devastating long-term effects of the war (Klein, 1990, p.19). Moreover, popular media provided a unique insight into social attitudes and anxieties relating to the post-war climate. Initially Hollywood cinema turned away from representing the war in Vietnam, for a multiplicity of reasons (some of which will be explored presently). The 1960s saw only a handful of texts directly referring to the war (*China Gate* (1957), *The Quiet American* (1958), *A Yank in Viet-Nam* (1964), *To The Shores of Hell* (1966), *The Green Berets* (1968)). But, after the withdrawal of US troops in 1975, the major film studios began to produce a stream of Vietnam War based films. By 1978, there were a number of Hollywood productions that finally engaged with the complexity of residual Vietnam animosity. These films continued to be produced and distributed for a decade, with only a handful of texts made after this time (some of which will be examined in the following chapter in light of their historical, political context).

The focus of discussion in this chapter is this dominant period of Hollywood Vietnam War film (1978-1989). Through a combined methodological approach that examines text and context, this chapter investigates how Hollywood war film responds to the contemporary social and political context under the Carter and Reagan administrations. Drawing on exemplary texts *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), and *Hamburger Hill* (1987), this chapter examines shifts in Hollywood cinema and how they reflect the politics of the Carter and Reagan administrations. The first two texts, products of the Carter era, exemplify how Hollywood displaced questions of intervention in Vietnam by focusing on the veteran's experience serving in the conflict (and consequently removing the experience of the Vietnamese 'other'). The latter two, released during Reagan's term,



illustrate revisionism in the Vietnam War narrative through representations of masculinity and a move towards (highly mediated) verisimilitude as both a narrative and filmic technique.

The analysis in this chapter does not seek to re-write the critical literature covered by those in the field; it highlights many of the key areas of analysis on the Vietnam War film in this period. The broader thesis attempts to make sense of the war film genre through an analysis of Vietnam to the present post-9/11 period (from 1978-present) – from the contextual perspective of the second decade of the twenty-first century. At the time that much of the critical literature was published (that this chapter engages with), the war on terror was either not conceptualised, or it was a relatively recent conflict. Hindsight, then, becomes a valuable asset to this analysis (and thus, the way in which the thesis in its entirety is argued and presented). This chapter is significant for the objective of the broader thesis as it establishes methodological approach, provides analysis on ‘otherness’ (which is a significant part of the theses), demonstrates how politics plays a fundamental role in film production, and provides a framework for reading (and understanding) the war on terror in Hollywood war cinema in later chapters (a war which is often referred to in terms of the mistakes of the Vietnam War).

### **The Vietnam War**

The Vietnam War era was a time of crisis for Americans, generating pain and suffering at home and abroad. The war cost the United States an estimated \$165 billion and could only be described as a total military and diplomatic failure as communist regimes took over – the North conquered the South and united Vietnam under the rule of Ho Chi Minh, the Khmer Rouge controlled Cambodia, and Pathet Lao governed Laos (Friedman, 2007, p.9). The number of American dead exceeded 58,000, with another 300,000 wounded. A considerable number of veterans returned home either physically disabled or mentally impaired. Often neglected in the human tragedy are the casualties suffered by the Vietnamese people: over one million South Vietnamese troops, North Vietnamese Army regulars, and Vietcong (VC) guerrillas were killed, together with an additional one million civilian casualties. The bombing, and the use of napalm and defoliants, destroyed more than 5.2 million acres of

Vietnamese land. There have been over 1,500 casualties in Vietnam in the last 10 years alone due to the landmines that were laid during the Vietnam War. In just one district of Vietnam, landmines have killed 300 people, 42 have lost one or more limbs, and 16 have been blinded (Giglio, 2005). These are tremendous losses for what has been considered ‘a small war’.

The roots of America’s entanglement in Vietnam reside in the aftermath of the Second World War and the Korean War, and its anxiety concerning the increasing influence of communism. This anxiety led to the ‘domino theory’ of the 1950s that speculated that if one state in a region came under the influence of communism, then the surrounding countries would follow in a ‘falling domino’-like effect. Promoted by successive United States administrations during the Cold War, the domino theory served as supposed justification for American intervention around the world. As a result, the US centralised their resources to intervene in South East Asia, against what they believed was the subversion of an American ally in Vietnam. The US began exercising an active involvement within Vietnam in the 1950s, subsequently culminating in the Vietnam War by the early 1960s.

In contrast to the two World Wars and the Korean War that had preceded it, Vietnam was extensively documented on film and tape and broadcast through media institutions to both the American public and the globe, making the conflict the best-covered war at the time in American history. The relationship between the media and the government during the war was undeniably one of conflict and marked a significant event in US history<sup>12</sup>. Part of the struggle between government and media stemmed from the extraordinary freedom journalists had in reporting the war. Because the US was in Vietnam as a “guest” of the South Vietnamese government, media censorship was an impracticality – making Vietnam essentially the first “uncensored” war. This resulted in often unfavourable reporting of US involvement in the domestic political affairs of Vietnam (particularly after the Tet Offensive in 1968 and the shift in American foreign policy to a stance of de-escalation) (Hallin, 1986,

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<sup>12</sup> However, it is important to note that the issue of US reportage on Vietnam goes beyond Vietnam itself. The war coincided with a number of other significant historical events in the evolution of the media (the civil rights movement, the Democratic Convention in Chicago, Watergate) (Hallin, 1986, p.4).

p.9). The media wielded so much power during this time that it can be credited for the massive public disenchantment with the war (which eventually led to the withdrawal of American involvement in Vietnam in 1975). The mass opposition to the war contributed to President Lyndon Johnson's decision not to seek a second term in office, and generated a number of massive anti-war protests across the country (the anti-war movement witnessed the most dramatic acts of war protest in American history and reached its peak between 1965 and 1973. Notably during this period were the student shootings at Kent State University and Jackson State University in 1970, and the May Day Protests in 1971 (Danver, 2011, p.932)). No other foreign military action has ever divided the United States as dramatically as the Vietnam War (though, as will be argued in chapters three and four, the "War on Terror" did foster strong division).

By 1975, American troops had withdrawn from Vietnam after facing defeat with failed efforts at intervention within the war-torn state. However, the Vietnam War was not forgotten, rather, it continued to be an on-going part of the political, social, and cultural life of America. Indeed, the impact of the war was felt extensively in America's popular culture, with Herring (2016) arguing that Vietnam was fought with music, poetry, art, and film, as well as with weapons (p.xiii).

### **Vietnam in Popular Culture**

In the midst of the post-Vietnam era, the music industry, comic books, television, and Hollywood cinema all attempted to negotiate the complexities of the Vietnam loss. The quantity of texts premised upon themes of the Vietnam War that were subsequently produced is vast, but it is worth noting a select number of key texts that mark and exemplify significant shifts in the way that the war was understood and remembered. These cultural forms can be regarded as sites of material and ideological contestation and negotiation that contributed to the ongoing dialogue prevalent in American – and global – society concerning the war.

Within the music industry, artists such as Jimi Hendrix, The Rolling Stones and Bruce Springsteen all released songs that directly and indirectly expressed anxieties relating to the controversial nature of the war (Vietnam War Music, 2011). Similarly, the

comic book industry functioned as a less confrontational method to address some of the underlying tensions of the conflict.. During the Vietnam War, Marvel Comics produced the war comic book series *The 'Nam* that detailed the US war in Vietnam from the perspective of active-duty soldiers involved in the conflict. Don Lomax, an independent artist and Vietnam vet, produced a long-running comic *Vietnam Journal* which centered around military experience and provided a gritty representation of the reality of war (Handman, 1996).

Whilst there was explicit engagement with the themes of the Vietnam War in many cultural forms *during the fact*, predominately, popular culture – particularly television and film – avoided direct engagement with the politics of war until the withdrawal of American troops. Hollywood cinema erred on the side of caution when it came to presenting any form of critique of the war whilst the intervention was occurring, but US television executives were bolder in their endeavours to add their voice to the contentious discussion surrounding the war. Indeed, television served as an important medium to express the various viewpoints and concerns present in society and culture. Most notably, one of television's longest running and most popular situation comedies, *M\*A\*S\*H* (1972-1983) provided innovative form and content on the Vietnam War – through the framework of the Korean War. The program was unique in the way that it actively reflected societal change at a vital time in American society and politics – the end of the Vietnam War and Carter's reign in the oval office, and the beginning of Reagan's revisionist eighties (Wittebols, 1998, p.ix).

Whilst *M\*A\*S\*H* was undeniably revolutionary for its time, this inexplicit commentary on America's most controversial war was seen earlier, during the heart of the Vietnam conflict across other genres of US television. Safe in the confines of science fiction, *Star Trek: The Original Series* (1966-1969) used allegory to address contemporary social and political issues surrounding the US involvement in Vietnam. Presenting a liberal humanistic perspective, *Star Trek* implicitly addressed race, racism, foreign interventions and the Cold War in narratives featuring alien races (Kwan, 2007, p.59).

## **Vietnam in Hollywood Film**

Popular war film is a culturally shared site where matters of national identity, morality and historical representation are negotiated. The vividness of film and the graphic depiction of combat in post-Vietnam popular film have enabled the image produced through Hollywood cinema to become a source of meaning, understanding and commitment. Cinematic soldiers and veterans represented through conventions of post-Vietnam film express profound anxieties about war and American identity in ways that may have been too challenging for official formal discourses to address (Owen, 2002, p. 273). Thus, film plays a unique and important role in enabling the American and global audience to examine the Vietnam conflict at a distance, through the safe and less confrontational medium of Hollywood cinema. Unlike a society with a strong oral tradition, America remembers its history through visual imagery, film, print and electronic media (Lembcke, 1998, p. 188). Construction of subjectivity and perceptions of the world can then be understood as being heavily mediated by the institutions of popular culture and mass communication. In particular, during the years after the American withdrawal from Vietnam, popular television and film became prominent public sites where the traumatic memory of the war was constructed and negotiated. The myriad of expressions of anxiety that the US presence in Vietnam generated took a variety of ideological agendas, formulas and forms of representation within film and television (Owen, 2002, p.254). This rhetorical association between film and television and public memory has long helped cinematic audiences come to terms with significant social transformations, including the tragedy of war (Jordan, 2008, p. 199).

Due to the somewhat controversial nature of America's role in the war in Vietnam, the Hollywood film industry initially largely avoided direct representations of the conflict. The primary cause for this aversion can be linked to strong ideas of national identity and pride. The reunification of Vietnam under communist rule in 1975 signalled America's most significant defeat in a foreign conflict. It was this actuality that made it difficult to represent the war through any available Hollywood narrative forms. These narrative structures, specifically in relation to the war genre, are premised upon victory and therefore were unable to sustain or contain the fact of defeat (Kerr, 1980, p. 68). However, there were a number of films that were released

during the Vietnam War<sup>13</sup>. These films cautiously explored America's ambivalence towards the ongoing conflict. Of particular significance to the development of the Vietnam War film genre are *China Gate* (1957), *The Quiet American* (1958), *A Yank in Vietnam* (1964), *To The Shores of Hell* (1966), and most notably *The Green Berets* (1968).

*China Gate* (1957) is set at the end of the French phase of the Vietnam War and reflects a number of social and political norms of the time. The film focuses on a group of Korean War veterans now serving as part of the French Foreign Legion in Vietnam. The protagonist, Brock, is an American racist who abandoned his Euroasian wife and child when he was born with Asian features. His wife, "Lucky Legs" is recruited by the French high command to work alongside the mercenaries to travel through enemy territory to blow up an arms depot on the Chinese border. Lucky agrees to manipulate the affections of guerrilla leader Major Cham to help the men, with the promise of a better life for her son in America. Based in Saigon in 1952, *The Quiet American* (1958) explores Cold War animosity through two characters – a young American economist (played by Audie Murphy), and an English newspaperman (Michael Redgrave). The film highlights tensions between the Communists and the colonialists through a quest to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people (exemplified through competition to win over a beautiful young Vietnamese woman (Giorgia Moll)). *A Yank in Vietnam* (1964) starred and was directed by Marshall Thompson (who later went on to star in *The Shores of Hell* in 1966). Thompson plays the protagonist, Major Benson, who is shot down in a helicopter whilst stationed in Vietnam. Benson is subsequently captured by the Vietcong. Nearby, a South Vietnamese hospital is attacked by the Vietcong and the head doctor is likewise captured. The doctor's daughter and a small group of guerrilla fighters attempt a rescue mission and along the way, free Benson. Joining them on the raid, the doctor is freed and Benson falls in love with his Vietnamese daughter. In a similar plot, *To The Shores of Hell* (1966) again stars Marshall Thompson as a US Marine. In this film, his quest is to infiltrate a Vietcong encampment to rescue his brother (a doctor). The mission is a success, with the two brothers escaping by

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<sup>13</sup> For a comprehensive filmography of Vietnam War films, see Dittmar & Michuad (1990) *From Hollywood to Hanoi: The Vietnam War in American Film*, pp.350-362.

helicopter<sup>14</sup>. The Vietnamese characterisation in the film continues to enforce the narrative of a malicious enemy who kidnap innocents, coerce peasants, and rape nurses.

In 1968 possibly the most reviled war film in history is released: *The Green Berets*. The film is about a group of Special Forces troops (“Green Berets”) under the command of Col. Mike Kirby (John Wayne). War correspondent (and Vietnam War cynic) George Beckworth accompanies Kirby on his mission to defend a firebase. Beckworth openly objects to the war and the means in which it is being executed (of which many explanations for the whys and wherefores of the conflict are provided by Kirby). US Special Forces fight bravely, and Kirby is ordered on a special mission to capture General Pha Son Ti – an important North Vietnamese commander. *The Green Berets* was the first “A” grade Hollywood production that featured a direct-combat portrayal of Vietnam (during the war itself). The film is overtly pro-war and was made in support of the US policy of sending military advisors to defend South Vietnam against the Viet Cong and communism. The script was deeply influenced by government agenda and the Pentagon had a significant share in the development and production of the film (Eberwein, 2010, p.31; Devine, 1995, pp.41-43).

In 1978, after the withdrawal of US engagement in Vietnam, the first significant wave of films focused on the Vietnam War began appearing in Hollywood. Many critics argue this first wave was brought about by Francis Ford Coppola’s announcement to start shooting a project called *Apocalypse Now* in the jungles of the Philippines in 1976. Friedman (2007) argues that the publicity surrounding Coppola’s film helped convince producers to back other Vietnam projects (at least five of which made it to theatres the year before *Apocalypse Now*) (p.208). The eleven years from 1978 to 1989 witnessed a remarkable explosion of Vietnam War films that included titles such as *The Boys in Company C* (1978), *Go Tell The Spartans* (1978), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *Good*

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<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, in *Vietnam at 24 Frames a Second: A Critical Thematic Analysis of Over 400 Films about the Vietnam War*, Jeremy Devine identifies the significance of using helicopters in rescue operations (and attacks). He argues that helicopters, along with jets, were a source of continued US superiority in the sky. Indeed, the helicopter becomes a symbol for the conflict itself (think about the iconic helicopter scene from *Apocalypse Now* accompanied by Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries”) 1995, p.21.

*Morning Vietnam* (1987), *Hamburger Hill* (1987), *Casualties of War* (1989), *The Hanoi Hilton* (1987), and the *Rambo* (1982-1988) and *Missing in Action* (1984-1988) trilogies. Many of these films, particularly those in the first few years, were often critical of the war and deeply impacted by their contemporary social and political context at the time of production. These films examined the Vietnam War and its impact from all angles – ideological, political, and cultural, and they covered a remarkably diverse range of issues. The films depicted the (American) soldier before, during, and after time spent serving abroad in the jungles of South-East Asia, the best of which attempted to deconstruct the ideological and moral implications of the US intervention (Hart, 2016, pp.143-144).

The Vietnam War is one of the most discussed, debated and analysed conflicts in film studies, with literature dedicated to the war spanning over four decades. The framework of many of these analyses is to examine Vietnam War film as a series of cycles across this dominant period. These cycles are exemplified by changes in narrative patterns and how they reflect the effect of the Vietnam War on the American public. Discussed interchangeably as “waves”, “cycles” or “phases”, these appear in several stages. The first cycle of films, produced in 1978-1979, were marked by moral confusion and the experience of the returning Vietnam veteran. Films such as *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Go Tell The Spartans* (1978), *Coming Home* (1978), *The Boys in Company C* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) focused upon the suffering of the Vietnam veteran as a victim of the war, subsequently diverting the focus away from other key themes such as the motivations behind the war and the experience of the Vietnamese. The second cycle occurred in 1980-1985 and was dominated by revenge fantasy films, which included the *Rambo* and *Missing in Action* trilogies. Lastly, in 1986-1989, films such as *Platoon* (1986), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *Hamburger Hill* (1987) and *Casualties of War* (1989) premised their narrative representations upon presenting ‘authentic’ and ‘realist’ depictions of the war – often in bloody and violent spectacles. This cycle represents something of a counter-narrative to its predecessors. These films actively resisted the superhero aesthetic that the *Missing in Action* and *Rambo* films displayed, and instead offered a representation of a powerful ‘realist’ experience where the Vietnam veteran is used as a focal point for negotiating the experience and memory of the war (Westwell, 2006, p.77; Woodman, 2005, p.90). These films provided careful, meticulous attention to detail and a commitment to



constructing a believable Vietnam by making a forceful claim to authentic experience, verisimilitude and historical accuracy.

This thesis acknowledges the significant work that has gone before in identifying and examining these phases. This project utilises the research of significant scholars in the field and uses it to clearly explain the role of text and context in the production of select films in the dominant period of Vietnam War films (and thus, help to identify key developments of the war film genre from Vietnam to the present, post-9/11 period). Subsequently, this chapter will select two films from each half of the dominant period of Vietnam War film under the political administrations of Presidents' Jimmy Carter (1977-1981) and Ronald Reagan (1981-1989). These films exemplify specific components of their historical context of production, and each film is regarded as exemplary in the Hollywood Vietnam War film canon. In respect to Jimmy Carter, this chapter will examine *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979); with regards to Ronald Reagan, we will examine *Platoon* (1986) and *Hamburger Hill* (1987). Matters of social, political and ideological significance as well as an exploration of the construction of the subject will be examined within the realm of these film analyses. As well as understanding the role of the American soldier subject during this period, of notable significance during this dominant period of Vietnam War film is the construction of the enemy figure, or the 'other', and how this is developed across this eleven-year period.

## **Otherness**

American films about the Vietnam conflict have been duly criticised for their often blatant and stereotypical or derogatory treatment of the Vietnamese – in the rare instances where these films do actually feature Vietnamese characters at all (Westrup, 2006, p. 45). The Vietnamese become a cinematic 'other' that is exemplified by the dominant preoccupation with the representation of the combat experience of the American GI. For the purpose of this discussion, this 'other' will be defined as a subject who is treated, through the process of ideological film and narrative techniques, as differentiated, socially excluded, visually or narratively absent, inaccessible, or notably marginalised. Within existing research encompassing the Vietnam War film genre, a number of subjects have been identified as 'others',

including women, the Vietnamese and African-Americans. However, due to the parameters of this thesis, analysis of the 'other' will be restricted to the representation of the Vietnamese, both as an isolated group, and in contrast to the depiction of the American GI (i.e., ground-infantry). The notion of the Vietnamese 'other' can be further understood as a negative subject in two ways: firstly, they are negative in the sense that they are a *threat* to the American GIs in combat, secondly, they can be understood as the negative, *subtracted* space within representation. Thus, the Vietnamese are defined by their absence, not their presence and it is through the dominance of GI representation within Hollywood combat cinema that the absence of the Vietnamese can truly be conceptualised.

What is apparent in virtually all of these films about the Vietnam War is that the enemy – the Vietnamese – scarcely exist; they are absent or effaced as people, only ever seen as somewhere enigmatically *out there* in the jungle. For example, when we look at two key film texts from the late 1980s, *Platoon* (1986) and *Hamburger Hill* (1987), we can see that the enemy, or 'other' is literally seen as a target, via a few shots taken from the enemy's point of view, but without any real subjectivity (*Platoon*), or narratively marginalised where they are acknowledged as fierce fighters but never personalised (*Hamburger Hill*) (Anderegg, 1991, p.86). This ideological representation of the 'other' raises interesting questions about America's willingness to address the war and all its complexities by virtually disregarding the human aspect of the conflict. The unwillingness to acknowledge the Vietnamese as a subject of one of the most unequal and violent conflicts the United States has been a part of, indicates a failure to both confront the Vietnam War and a continuous failure to come to terms with it (Anderegg, 1991, p.88).

As discussed in the previous chapter, this notion of otherness can be understood in terms of the melodramatic imagination – the manichaeistic clash of good and evil. Developed further still, otherness can be broken down using the framework of deconstruction - in particular, the process of breaking down binary oppositions. When applied to Hollywood Vietnam War cinema, the process of deconstructing binary oppositions allows us to examine how realism and representation function within a text to generate particular ideologies relating to the perception of the Vietnamese and the American GIs. Developed by Jacques Derrida, deconstruction reveals how

meanings are not intrinsic to a text, but that they are constructed through interpretive dichotomies or binary oppositions that are constantly shifting (Derrida, 2016, p.49). Derrida shows that textual meaning is only stable because it privileges, or makes present, one term or the other in this binary opposition. These oppositions are deeply inscribed in language and therefore in thought itself. Meaning, then, is based on a complex system of presence and absence, inclusion and exclusion, and the legitimate and illegitimate. The aim of deconstruction is to identify which idea is marginalised or disempowered and which term is dominant and naturalised as being superior or more authentic, desirable or normal (Derrida, 2005, p. ix).

The overall project of deconstruction, however, is not to reverse binary oppositions but to problematise the very idea of opposition and the notion of identity upon which it depends (Derrida, 2005, p. ix). The purpose of applying an analysis of binary oppositions within the Vietnam War film genre is to identify how language and thought is structured to privilege one idea over another. When looking closely at the large quantity of popular film and television texts depicting the Vietnam War produced by the US, it becomes clear that the privileged, dominant term that exists within the framework of language and thought is the American GI, which means the Vietnamese, as the 'other' within these texts, is the absent, marginalised opposition.

Deconstruction is useful for analysing representation and ideology in Vietnam War film in three ways. First, the process of deconstruction reveals the political nature of realism and representation; second, deconstruction challenges dichotomous thinking which exposes the practices and structures that establish, legislate, and maintain oppressive systems of hierarchy, and lastly, deconstruction dismantles binary thought, destabilises traditional meaning structures and allows typically conceived questions of power and identity to be rethought (Mumby, 1992, p. 268). One way to begin this deconstructive project is to reconsider important organisational constructs, in this case, the way representation is used to establish dichotomous and oppositional thinking about the Vietnamese and the American GIs.

This practice of dichotomous representation is linked to the practice that is often used by dominant powers in order to justify the conquest of a group of people. As Gayatri Spivak argues, dominant powers achieve the othering of another group, whom she

refers to as ‘the colonised’, by describing them as treacherous, brutal and depraved (1985, p. 134). However, what becomes apparent in many of the films in this war film genre is that there is minimal screen time devoted to establishing a form of Vietnamese characterisation. What we can come to understand, is that the West seems to define itself in *opposition* to the East (Woodman, 2003, p. 45). The subsequent dichotomy that exists between the West and East that these films then generate, play an important part in a larger, essentially American discourse that attempts to rationalise the US defeat of Vietnam. Marianna Torgovnik explains that this discursive terminology sets up an opposition between the civilised and the savage, in which the West is treated as the norm and the East – the other – as deviant (1990, p. 21). The way this opposition is achieved within Hollywood films about the US war in Vietnam more specifically is through representation and the practice of stereotyping, or the production and repetition of fixed characterisations of a group of people in a way that suggest that these characterisations are normative (Woodman, 2003, p. 45). There are two dominant stereotypes of the Vietnamese that occur consistently throughout the collection of Vietnam War films: the ‘yellow peril’ and the ‘Asian super-soldier’. Gina Marchetti explains the yellow peril stereotype as combining:

“...Racist terror of alien cultures, sexual anxieties, and the belief that the West will be overpowered and enveloped by the irresistible, dark, occult forces of the East...the yellow peril has contributed to the notion that all non-white people are by nature physically and intellectually inferior, morally suspect, heathen, licentious, disease-ridden, feral, violent, uncivilised, infantile, and in the need of the guidance of white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants” (Marchetti, 1993, pp. 2-3).

This stereotype was most popular in World War II cinema where the marginalised opposition was seen as the Japanese. However, with the end of the Second World War and the introduction of the Truman Doctrine, the focus of US foreign policy shifted from eradicating fascism to preventing the domination of communism in the post-war world (Baritz, 1985, p. 65). With the rise of the Cold War, representations of the Asian enemy stereotype in combat films began to shift. Rather than the enemy being represented as the Japanese race, the enemy became specifically communist. It was now the communist Asian who was depicted as barbaric and savage, not just Asians

in general (Woodman, 2003, p.45; Adair, 1981, p. 25). This yellow peril stereotype dominated early Vietnam combat films including *The Green Berets* (1968). In such films, the Vietcong are depicted as committing dastardly acts and as often using primitive weapons such as knives and swords, as if to accentuate their barbaric nature (Woodman, 2003, p. 45). This image continued to appear in films released after the end of the war. For example in *The Deer Hunter* (1978) the savage Vietnamese enemy is seen tossing grenades at innocent villagers and shooting mothers and their babies, and in *Rambo: First Blood* (1985) the Vietnamese enemy, lead by Russians, torture and murder American Prisoners of War (Woodman, 2003, p. 45). In these Vietnam War films, this yellow peril stereotype of the Vietnamese functions as a means of exploring the horrors of Vietnam for American GIs and simultaneously, as ideologically reconstructing how the notion of the 'other' is understood by US audiences in order to help the public to face the realities of losing the war.

Whilst most scholarship on the representation of the Vietnamese enemy in Hollywood Vietnam War films has emphasised the depiction of America's foe as primitive and bloodthirsty in line with the yellow peril idea, it does not adequately characterise all cinematic representations of the Vietnamese enemy (Woodman, 2003, p. 44). The enemy is also represented within some films as exhibiting extraordinary endurance and power. This is where the second most common stereotype of the Vietnamese comes into play, the Asian super-soldier. This Asian superman stereotype was part of a long Western tradition of stereotypical images of the Asian 'other' (Dower, 1986, p. 116). These men have superhuman skills of perseverance and endurance in the absolute worst of circumstances. According to Dower, Americans attributed these amazing abilities to the Vietnamese in order to explain why this 'little man' had to be treated as tough, disciplined, and a dangerous 'Goliath' (1986, p. 113). Therefore, Dower demonstrates how this stereotype helped to justify support of the war effort against the Vietnamese. This representation of the 'other' broadly supports Edward Said's notion that Western culture and its belief system are largely defined and sustained through the contrasting representations of the East, thus further emphasising the need for deconstruction and analysing binary oppositions (Woodman, 2003, p. 44).

As demonstrated by the representations of the Vietnamese in *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and *Hamburger Hill* (1987), the super-soldier or the yellow peril stereotypes of earlier Vietnam War films are not solely adhered to. Whilst remnants of the latter stereotype do still exist, these films also portray an enemy more like the super-soldier, an enemy who is dedicated and worthy of respect with impressive fighting skills and will power (Woodman, 2003, pp. 44, 55). In each of these films, the Asian super-soldier is an enemy to be feared, but also one who demands respect. Examining the Asian stereotype provides a way to inspect the meaning of the futility of the war and the way America justified its loss (Woodman, 2003, p. 44). Whilst the super-soldier and the yellow peril Asian stereotypes constitute representations of the 'other' in many Vietnam war films, they are not the only types of representations that have been adopted by Hollywood Vietnam War films. Other films have deviated sometimes from both these stereotypes, for example, *The Boys in Company C* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) all have in common an almost total absence of the Vietnamese enemy. The enemy is always invisible in the shadows, a hidden danger (Woodman, 2003, p. 55). What becomes crucial in these instances is analysing the representation of the 'other' in relation to the concept of deconstruction and examining the role of binary oppositions. Whilst the enemy may appear to be an absent minority, we can come to understand them in light of the representation of the American GI, the privileged element in the equation. The Vietnamese are marginalised *because* the Americans are naturalised as being more superior, more authentic.

### **Representing Vietnam: 1978-1981**

With his election in November 1977, US president Jimmy Carter aspired to make Government competent, compassionate and responsive to the American people and their expectations. He claimed to be the candidate who would restore idealism to American foreign policy after the tragedy of Vietnam and bring human rights back to the forefront of international relations (Tucker, 2008, p. 376). His first major act as president in January 1977 was to extend a pardon to draft evaders, military deserters, and others who had violated the Selective Service Act from 1964 to 1973 during America's participation in the Vietnam War – a decision that generated public controversy. The psychological and political wounds from Vietnam had yet to heal,

and the nation still remained deeply divided over its involvement in the war and suspicious of the government following Watergate. In response to public disillusionment with the Vietnam War, Carter attempted to assert the United States' international predominance by emphasising moral rather than military superiority by focusing on human rights and related humanitarian concerns (Tucker, 2008, p. 376). However ambitious his ideals were, once reaching office his term was plagued with issues beyond his ability to contain. Economically, the country was in dire straits with high inflation rates and weak economic growth, which fuelled unemployment rates and declines in production (Friedman, 2007, p.10). Two years into his term, President Carter delivered a speech, which has infamously been termed his “malaise” speech, addressing what he called the “crisis of confidence” in the US:

“It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will. We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation” (Carter, 1979).

The United States was in a state of crisis and disunity following the debacle of Vietnam, and not even the promise of new leadership in Carter could transform the public morale. This domestic conflict was rife within Hollywood and its relationship with the military, an institution that was increasingly perceived in negative terms because of the war. Indeed, because of the war's unpopularity, US (and many international) audiences were more open to movies that presented a different side of the conflict, such as *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) (two films famously produced without US Defense Department support). Beginning in 1978, these films and the others that followed were characterised by a complex mix of sadness and confronting representations of the horrors of war. *Go Tell The Spartans* (1978) focuses on the futility of war through a helpless battle between an eclectic group of US servicemen lead by Major Asa Barker (Burt Lancaster) and Viet Cong in rural South Vietnam. The film draws parallels between the contemporary Vietnam conflict and French soldiers during the First Indochina War a decade prior – a similarly catastrophic engagement. Sidney Furie's *The Boys in Company C* (1978) follows five young Marines from training to their tour in Vietnam in 1968. The men are disheartened by the seemingly ineffectual combat and seek to find a way out of

the war. The film highlights the absurdity of the war by depicting the military officers as incompetent. The 1978 film *Coming Home* is a powerful anti-war film that engages with the difficult issues of those left behind in the homefront, and the returning vet. Questions of love, loss, injury and morality are explored through Captain Bob Hyde (a Captain in the US Marine Corps), his wife Sally, and a blossoming relationship between the latter and a paralysed Vietnam Vet at the local veteran's hospital where Sally volunteers. While these films engaged with facets of contemporary anxieties and frustrations, the most highly acclaimed films of this period are uncontestedly Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and Frances Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979).

### **'The Deer Hunter' (1978)**

Michael Cimino's 1978 film *The Deer Hunter* was perhaps most well known for its use of extreme violence, particularly the lethal game of Russian roulette that American POWs are forced to play by their Vietcong captors in the South Vietnamese jungle. The timing of the film's release was strategic – a slow December 1978 release enabled the film to capitalise on holiday ticket sales to maximise profit margins, and made it eligible for consideration for the 51<sup>st</sup> Academy Awards in February 1979. Indeed, the film fared remarkably well at both the box office and the Oscars, raking in \$27 million in the domestic market, and taking home five Oscars, including the coveted Best Picture and Best Director awards. The film really was the first of its kind to explore Vietnam in its form and content. It combined a number of sub-genres to engage with the different facets of combat – in-country, the effects of the war on those left behind, and those returning home.

Through the story of three young soldiers, *The Deer Hunter* engages with the physical and emotional reintegration and rehabilitation of returning home. The film follows Michael (Robert De Niro), Nick (Christopher Walken), and Steven (John Savage), three friends from the fictional steel mill town of Clairton, Pennsylvania. The film is set in three main segments covering all aspects of their Vietnam experience. Beginning the last day before entering the military, we share in Steven's wedding to Angela in a Russian Orthodox ceremony. This first segment develops the rituals of life and friendship in their community as the men prepare to go to war. The second



segment focuses on the Vietnam experience in-country. Michael, Nick, and Steven are captured by the Viet Cong and trapped in animal cages in a river, with water up to their necks. The details of their capture are not shown as it becomes more about the experience under those hostile conditions, rather than how they got there. In captivity, the brutality of their enemy is revealed when the men are forced to play Russian roulette whilst their captors bet over the outcome. The men manage to escape after Michael convinces the VC to increase the number of bullets in the gun, and miraculously manages to abruptly turn the gun from his own temple to the enemy leader, killing him instantly. After their escape, Michael and Steven are separated from Nick. Steven breaks both his legs as the men try to flee across a river torrent and ends up in a veteran hospital with both legs amputated. We later see Nick, traumatised, at a Vietnamese hospital, and then on the streets of Saigon – heavily affected by PTSD and drug addicted. Michael finds his way back to America, but deeply troubled by his Vietnam experience and the fate of his friends.

The last part of the film focuses on Michael, his return to Clairton, and his attempt to recover from the trauma of Vietnam. Michael, while emotionally affected by his time overseas, is in the best physical health out of the three and takes it upon himself to try and reconcile Steven and Nick with their past lives. Michael is eventually able to coax Steven, now an amputee, back home to Angela and their young child. Eventually he learns through cryptic clues that Nick is still alive in Saigon. On the eve of the fall of the city, Michael makes his way back to Saigon to try and locate Nick and bring him home. It is here that we see the Russian roulette metaphor further developed. Michael finds Nick after being led to a gambling den by a Frenchman. Nick, it seems, has become proficient at playing (and winning) Russian roulette and fails to recognise Michael because of his drug addled mental state. In a bid to connect with Nick, Michael looks him in the eye and asks if he remembers the water and mountains of his home – attempting to engage him in memories of their times together deer hunting. Nick smiles, at last remembering, then shoots himself in the head. His luck, it seems, had run out. Nick dies instantly. The film then cuts back to Clairton and Nick's funeral. After a graveside service, Nick's closest friends return to Welch's Bar. The film comes full circle with this filmic choice. It was here, in the first segment of the film, where the group had celebrated Steven's wedding and their last day before joining the US military. At the bar, the mood is sombre and awkward. John, the

barman breaks the moment by humming a chorus of “God Bless America”, and soon, the whole group break out in song. Michael toasts, “To Nick”, and the camera freezes them all toasting to Nick’s memory. The film ends.

Like much of the film, the ending was controversial and ambiguous. Some critics argued that the film concluded with a final act of patriotism (see Hatch, 1979), while others believed that it was a comforting reaffirmation that despite all, life will go on (Grenier, 1979; McFarland, 1995, p.168). With all that the characters had endured (and America’s ignominious defeat in the real world), it seems difficult to reconcile the song as a patriotic sentiment. Alternatively, was “God Bless America” being sung as a call for a legitimate blessing from an omniscient power? The ambiguity of the film’s ending challenges the classical Hollywood film style in which films conclude with a resolution that takes care of any loose ends that the narrative may have left open, providing a strong sense of closure. Bordwell argues that these traditional Hollywood endings function to “reaffirm the stability of the state arrived at through the previous causal chain” (Bordwell, 1985, p.202). Likewise, Maltby claims that the Hollywood ‘happy ending’ re-establishes order and “renders the viewer’s experimentation with expressive behaviour a matter of no consequence, contained within the safe, unexplored, unconsidered and trivialised space of entertainment” (2003, p.6). However, the war at the centre of the narrative did not resolve in the classical Hollywood “happy ending”. In this way, it is not unsurprising that the film (one of the first to really engage with the complexities of the war retrospectively) challenges these Hollywood norms. One possible reading of the film’s ending, then, can be seen as exemplifying the denouement that the war failed to achieve.

The film also generated a considerable amount of general critical commentary. Some of the significant issues of contestation included the depiction of race – the political Left tended to criticise the film for its racist portrayal of the Vietnamese and its unwillingness to critique the reasons for the US involvement in the war (Krantz, 1980; Emerson, 1979; Kinder, 1979; Hatch, 1979); whereas some scholars (see Hellman, 1982, p.421) argued that such accusations are incorrect and the film actually shows how the Vietnamese, like the Americans, are victims of war (particularly as the Vietnamese are shown among the victims of the Viet Cong in the infamous Russian Roulette scene). Some critics (see Maland, 2013; Kroll, 1978) argued that the film

did not provide political commentary on America's engagement in the Vietnam War – with Cimino himself stating that *The Deer Hunter* is more about the impact of war on Americans more generally and how the traumatic events of war threaten the sense of (small town) community, rather than being a film that is centered on the Vietnam War itself (Cimino in Carducci, 1978).

As a whole, the film echoes the confusion and ambiguity with the mix of realism and metaphor – at times Cimino utilises verisimilitude to depict the war-as-hell trope, where in other instances, he adopts a surrealistic approach (which is, perhaps, the cause for much of the general upset for the film regarding the highly fictionalised inclusion of the Russian roulette sequence). As with the Vietnam War, the film asked questions of the characters and narrative, and failed to answer many (symbolised in one instance with Nick's suicide). The disparate critical response exemplifies the controversy and pain that the war generated in the public sphere. Contributing to the debate, director Michael Cimino stated that his focus for *The Deer Hunter* wasn't on war policy, but on the effects of the war on American soldiers: "During the years of controversy over the war, the people who fought the war... were disparaged and isolated by the press. But they were common people who had an uncommon amount of courage". According to Cimino, his characters weren't trying to endorse anything other than common humanity and everyday heroism (Cimino, quoted in Kent, 1978). Taking Cimino's stance, Quart (1990) argues that, like most films, *The Deer Hunter* personalises history and constructs a Vietnam that is primarily concerned with the universal struggle between the good guys, who are merely trying to survive, and the bad guys – rather than an exploration of a specific war determined by ideology, Cold War politics, and nationalism (p.166). The narrative, then, is framed within the simplistic conventions of melodrama – ensuring the avoidance of direct discussion on the politics of the war.

By choosing to focus on a generic "war experience", what Cimino achieves is a reduction of the Vietnam experience into a game of self-destructive chance – premised upon the symbolism of a game of Russian roulette. In this narrative, the Vietnam War becomes an abstract moral struggle without substantial grounding in political or ideological actuality. Like many of the war films gone before (and the many more to come), one of the key strategies *The Deer Hunter* employs to de-

politicise the conflict in this way, is through the construction of subjectivity – both in terms of the US soldier subject, and the construction of the Vietnamese ‘other’. Our primary example of the US subject comes through the representation of Michael. This character is a natural leader in his group of fellow Clairton soldiers. When on screen, heroism, purity, loyalty and morality dominate his characterisation which works two-fold – the audience is drawn to form a sympathetic understanding of the American soldier (which Michael symbolises), and simultaneously the audience is denied a critical take on the Vietnam War through this strategic establishment of point of view. From early on in the film, we see that Michael is the leader, the responsible moral compass of the group. During the “deer hunter” scene in which the film is titled, Michael takes the lead over the hunt, dismissing the immature conduct of his friends who refuse to take the task at hand as seriously as he does. When at last Michael meets his desired prey, he is seen to cleanly (and honourably) shoot the deer with one shot – not lingering to cause any further suffering or undue harm. The camera uses an extreme close up at this stage, capturing the moment the animal is killed, but showcasing it in a way that honours the way in which Michael achieved the kill. In this way, American masculinity is constructed through heroic and sympathetic signifiers.

This scene transitions to the first Vietnam based sequence, which in this juxtaposition emphasises the differences between depiction of country and subjectivity. In this portion of the film we see a stark contrast in the treatment of man and prey, reaffirming the favourability of Michael and his fellow American servicemen over the brutality of the Asian enemy. The most graphic example of otherness with the enemy is uncontestably during the infamous Russian roulette scene. It is here we see the Vietnamese depicted as a demonic variant of the “yellow peril” stereotype discussed earlier. The VC are seen to viciously coerce Michael, Nick, and Steven to participate in the sadistic game for no other apparent reason than to appease their pleasure. Otherness is reinforced by close-ups of the enemy in this sequence, grinning and egging the men on. In the interim, we see the men in captivity like caged animals, stuck under water and surrounded by rats. In addition, it is this scene, the controversial “Russian roulette” sequence, that the audience assumes is the cause of Nick’s eventual mental unravelling. This manifests in his maddened state, traumatised and assumedly suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder that characterises him at

a later point in the film. This says a few things – notably, that the barbarity of the other goes beyond explicit acts of violence, and permeates into significant mental suffering (which ultimately leads to Nick’s act of suicide), it also contributes to the overarching representation of the American as victim – made to suffer at the hands of a relentless enemy.

Later, when Nick is seen in Saigon in his PTSD state, the city itself is depicted as ominous and reminiscent of film-noir style darkness and despair. Like many war films, any sympathetic reference to the enemy figure is captured at a distance, using a long shot with no residual lingering or emphasis on the humanity of these people. We see this at play on the streets of Saigon with refugees fleeing the city in a dazed chaos, possessions in tow. What becomes the dominant representation of these people, then, are the savage, murderous men we see forcing the innocent American party to gamble with their lives at the forced hand of Russian roulette. Indeed, what followed with the public reception of the film was a whirlwind of controversy and accusations of racist portrayals of the enemy ‘other’ (McFarland, 1995, p.170).

### **‘Apocalypse Now’ (1979)**

One of the strengths of both Michael Cimino and *The Deer Hunter*, and Francis Ford Coppola with *Apocalypse Now*, is the way that both of these films utilised imagery, camera work, and characterisation to illuminate the extreme manner in which the war affected the lives and psyches of American GIs. Vietnam was increasingly constructed through the experience of the “ordinary” US combat soldier during the 1970s and attempted to make sense of the horrors of war from a perspective audiences could engage with. The 1979 film *Apocalypse Now* focused on the experience of the Vietnam veteran as a victim of the war, one who fought for his country and was then rejected by it. We learn early on in the film that the protagonist, Benjamin L. Willard (Martin Sheen), a Special Forces Colonel, had returned to America, but became alienated from his wife and society. As a result, he decided to return to Vietnam in search of closure. Given a mission to assassinate Col. Kurtz (Marlon Brando), a Special Forces Commander who is now deemed to be out of control, Willard begins his journey. Consequently, *Apocalypse Now* becomes less of an account about the fighting or of the immediate experience of war, than of the violent obsession with

Vietnam itself. In this instance, the Vietnam veteran displaces the broader underlying questions of US intervention in Vietnam.

After a series of well publicised production setbacks, including a typhoon that destroyed the set and Martin Sheen suffering a heart attack, *Apocalypse Now* was finally released in 1979. The film offered something different to those that had gone before in this new Vietnam War genre – rather than focusing on the Vietnam-soldier-turned-Vietnam-veteran narrative (as the likes of *Coming Home* and *The Deer Hunter*), *Apocalypse Now* was set in the midst of the war, depicting it as madness through a number of surreal sequences. Based on the novel *Heart of Darkness* written by Joseph Conrad – a story of colonialism in Africa in the late nineteenth century – *Apocalypse Now* becomes a metaphor for the journey of war embodied in Willard's literal river journey from civilisation to primitivism in the name of Kurtz. Indeed, in a press conference following the film's release, Coppola echoes the sentiment by claiming that the very creation of his film was a metaphor, it "is not a movie about Vietnam, it is Vietnam. It is what it was really like. It was crazy. And the way we made it was very much like the Americans were in Vietnam. We were in the jungle, there were too many of us. We had access to too much money and too much equipment and little by little, we went insane" (Coppola at the Cannes Film Festival, 1979). And so, the metaphor ensued.

The film opens with footage of a helicopter flying across the screen, and Vietnamese bush in flames. "The End" plays over the footage as it cross-fades into an image of Willard's face, lying down, and a hotel ceiling fan. This cross-fading occurs a number of times, with the sound of the helicopter eventually blending into the sound of the ceiling fan. This sequence establishes the framework for understanding Willard's troubled, war-affected mental state. Indeed, it becomes apparent from the commencement of the film, and Willard's acceptance of the quest to find Kurtz, that he is affected from trauma, assumedly from his previous war experiences.

As Willard is escorted up the Nung River to carry out his mission, a series of disjointed scenes are presented, with the cumulative visual effect quite unlike any of the traditional war films (both that had been, and those that were still to come). These scenes can be read as a series of metaphors about the American experience in

Vietnam, one of the most famous being the helicopter attack at Charlie's Point to the sound of Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" (Lev, 2007, p.241). Adding to the oddity of this sequence is the choice made by the attack leader, Colonel Kilgore (Robert Duvall) to encourage his men to surf the waves on the coast in the midst of the violence. Lev (2007) argues that this evokes cultural difference and Americanisation of the war: the GIs brought their culture with them and could not engage the people of Vietnam (pp. 242-243). Reinforced, of course, by Kilgore's famous line, "I love the smell of napalm in the morning".

Later, we see Willard and his crew approach the last Army base before they reach Colonel Kurtz's suspected location. In this surreal sequence we see the camera shift to a behind-the-shoulder shot of Willard where, after evacuating a destroyed boat, a dozen US soldiers are seen in the river thrashing their arms and screaming as they attempt to swim to shore. In combination with low-key lighting and a sinister circus-like musical motif, these screams from the GIs evoke a strong connection between this situation and the religious notion of Hell. Diegetic sound in this scene is constituted by gunshots, moaning and screams from soldiers scattered across the camp. The combination of sound, lighting, editing and camerawork implies that the men stationed at this Army base have lost their minds due to the horrors of the war they are engaged in – whether willingly or not. The camera follows Willard as he approaches two African-American soldiers who are avidly shooting firearms with little direction. Willard asks the soldier firing what he is shooting at and he responds, "What the fuck do you think I'm shooting at? I mean, sorry Sir, there are Gooks out there by the water but I think I killed them all". What is apparent is that there are no Vietnamese soldiers by the water and the men are in fact firing at other American GIs. The exchange between the two soldiers now continues, "You haven't shot shit man, listen" (other GIs can be heard yelling out in the background, the soldier firing then proceeds to shoot at a flare). This scene attempts to represent the degree that the war has manifested upon the rational psychological state of the American soldiers, which disavows a sense of responsibility for both the soldiers and the nation more generally. In addition, it contributes to the cinematic representations of PTSD – providing another example of the consequence of war trauma to that which was seen in Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* a year earlier.

As the film enters its third and final hour, Willard finally reaches his destination – a bizarre kingdom adorned by dead bodies and severed heads. Willard is unceremoniously greeted by Kurtz and his loyal followers. He is invited in to the inner sanctum where Kurtz asks the purpose for his visitor's presence. "Are you an assassin?" he asks Willard. He replies, "I am a soldier". Then Kurtz says disdainfully, "You're neither. You're an errand boy sent by grocery clerks". In the final sequence of the film, and another iconic moment, we see Willard hauntingly stalk his prey, rising up covered in mud from the depths of the water to stealthily kill Kurtz. The editing pace quickens and crosscutting accentuates the moment Willard, wielding a knife, stabs Kurtz to death. His final words – the infamous "the horror, the horror". Willard escapes and returns to his boat. The end credits roll as an air strike begins – bombs and napalm destroy the ruins and presumably all those who remain.

*Apocalypse Now's* choice to focus on the veteran's experience this way represents a crucial move in recovering American credibility within the context of the Vietnam conflict. It allows the narrative to describe the veteran's quest to find psychological order, or a tangible goal, that is represented by the quest that Willard undertakes in order to find and assassinate Colonel Kurtz. This process allows a partial resolution while also avoiding the historical experience of the war and the American military loss (Westwell, 2006, p.64). *Apocalypse Now* functions to redirect the focus away from the human consequence of defeat – a strategy that neglects to place any focus upon the 'other' that existed within this conflict – the Vietnamese. The presence of the Vietnamese in this war and the severe casualties they suffered has become inconsequential through the decision to focus almost exclusively on the psychological experience of the American troops.

The films of this period, primarily viewed through *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, interact with the contemporary context in a number of ways. The films are unquestionably "Vietnam War" films, but rather than explicitly engaging with the conflict in a conventional war film narrative, they displace the trauma and experience of war through the experience of the *individual* (American). Both Cimino and Coppola employ surrealist techniques (the latter more so) in an attempt to reconcile the events of Vietnam and the residual animosity America found itself working through. Surrealist depictions of war are blended with moments of verisimilitude that



enhance the war-as-hell trope. Contributing to the cinematic representation of the horror of war is the inclusion of the physical and emotional manifestation of trauma exemplified through PTSD. In *The Deer Hunter* this is most pronounced in the development of Nick's character. He is clearly affected by his experience under Viet Cong captivity and the way in which his captors tortured him through Russian roulette. His trauma eventually costs him his life with his suicide at the hands of his willing (and troubling) participation in Russian roulette in Saigon. In *Apocalypse Now*, the whole film functions as a metaphor for the war – emphasising the madness of war and the psychological ramifications of that traumatic experience. This is personified through a number of characters throughout, notably Willard (who appears to be empowered from his troubled mental state), Kilgore (and the bizarre sequence of events at Charlie's Point), the disoriented and maddened US GI's at the last US Army base, and of course, Kurtz himself. All these characters exhibit different manifestations of war trauma, but all contribute significantly to Coppola's overarching madness of war narrative. In this way, both films represent how trauma and the horrors of war manifest within the individual, which personifies the larger social issues of the war (the deep rooted "why" questions) – thus attempting to reconcile the irreconcilable.

### **Representing Vietnam: 1981-1989**

The 1980s saw American politics come into a state of revision as the nation attempted to reorient itself in the international sphere. With the election of Ronald Reagan in 1981, the country appeared to orient towards the right. Reagan offered familiarity in the shadow of a difficult political climate under Carter. Reagan's rhetoric of traditional values and patriotism provided a type of right-wing reassurance and unflinching faith in America that people longed for. Reagan's electoral victory instituted a new phase, a period of national pride reflected in the many attempts to recover traditional grandeur. Unlike Carter's isolationist rhetoric towards foreign affairs, Reagan called for a renewal of American power and increased military spending substantially – enabling his firm opposition to communism through interventionism (Williams, 2003, p.49). Consequently, he oversaw the bombing of Beirut, and interventions in Lebanon, Grenada, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Libya. More so than any other US president, Reagan viewed the world through a movie lens,

making frequent references to film in his politics<sup>15</sup>. Indeed, Reagan capitalised on the considerable ideological work already conducted in Hollywood cinema in the 1960s and 1970s in order to rehabilitate the conception of the American hero.

The distinct stylistic shift in Hollywood Vietnam War cinema in this decade reflected a shift in contemporary attitudes regarding the conflict in Vietnam. By the mid-1980's, Hollywood was promoting Reagan's reinterpretation of the Vietnam War through the revenge fantasy film, which saw the likes of the *Missing in Action* and *Rambo* trilogies presenting the American GI not only as a victim, but one who had his revenge<sup>16</sup>. Through displays of hypermasculine violence and wish fulfilment, the revenge heroes Rambo (*Rambo*) and Braddock (*Missing in Action*) reclaimed damaged American masculinity and functioned to retrieve some form of (fictional) victory for the United States.

The *Rambo* movies are high velocity action films in which Rambo (Sylvester Stallone), equipped with only a survival knife, a quiver of exploding arrows and exaggerated masculine physique, returns to Southeast Asia on a mission to rescue captive American prisoners of war. Spanning across the 1980s, the three *Rambo* films (*First Blood*, 1982, *Rambo First Blood: Part II*, 1985, and *Rambo III*, 1988) captured the changing moods of the American audience. The first film, directed by Ted Kotcheff and based on David Morrell's 1972 novel of the same title, introduced the character of John Rambo. The film depicts Rambo's violent retaliation after being mistreated by the police. In the second, and most popular instalment, Rambo is released from prison (where he was sent because of his actions in the previous film), and sent to Vietnam to photograph POW in a North Vietnamese camp. In an ironic twist, the government that sent him did not believe there were any prisoners – setting the mission up as a ruse. However, Rambo *does* find POW and rescues them, only to be abandoned by those who sent him in the first place. It is in this film that the famous question, “Do we get to win this time?” surfaces – a tagline for both films, and fulfilment of the deeper ideological wish to rewrite the American War in

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<sup>15</sup> Reagan even referred to the Soviet Union in Star Wars rhetoric as the “evil empire” (Haas, Christensen & Haas, 2015, p.194)

<sup>16</sup> A similar response was seen in Hollywood following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in films such as *Flying Tigers* (1942), *The Navy Comes Through* (1942), *Somewhere I'll Find You* (1942), *A Yank On the Burma Road* (1942).

Vietnam. In the third film, Rambo returns to the silver screen, this time to fight the Cold War in Afghanistan in a bid to help Christianity thrive in Burma.

Gina Marchetti (2014) argues that these three films embody the contradictions of the times – moving from stories involving rebellious questioning of the US government, to rewriting America's actions in Vietnam and the Cold War. This embodiment captures the ideological shift in Reagan's right-wing agenda in which Christian family values intersected with a complex (and devastating) domestic agenda (p.221). Indeed, the films essentially stage a cinematic wish-fulfilment fantasy where America gets to go back and finish the war that "the bleeding hearts and bureaucrats wouldn't let us win the first time round". In its socio-historic context, *Rambo* functioned to both restore the perception of national identity which was displaced onto the notion of masculinity, and represent an alternate wish-fulfilment resolution of the Vietnam War through the narrative structure that constituted the film (Schechter, 1991, p. 17).

In a similar vein, Chuck Norris reinforced this hypermasculinity and revisionist interpretation of America's tainted Vietnamese past as Colonel James Braddock in the three *Missing in Action* instalments (*Missing in Action*, 1984, *Missing in Action II: The Beginning*, 1985, and *Braddock: Missing in Action III*, 1988). Braddock, an ex-POW who escaped from an internment camp during the Vietnam War, remains haunted by his ordeal and is plagued by violent flashbacks to his days in captivity. Each of the films, according to McFarland (1995), were remarkably unoriginal and each featured a mistrust of authority, the betrayal of the fighting soldiers, and an obsession with peace talks as a symbol of compromise (p.120). Though hardly regarded by critics as award winning material, the 1984 film *Missing in Action* generated positive reviews and was undoubtedly the most popular of the three films. The film costarred M. Emmet Walsh and James Hong as a North Vietnamese official. Israeli entrepreneurs Menahem Golan and Yoram Globus produced the film, which was directed by Joseph Zito. In the film, Chuck Norris plays a Vietnam veteran who returns to Cambodia to rescue POWs still held by the North Vietnamese (even though they deny having them). The film's popularity can be linked to the social context of the time of release. 1984 was an election year, which saw Ronald Reagan's popularity soar because of his "feel good" reinterpretation of the Vietnam

War as a “noble crusade”. It was also the height of the MIA issue. Norris’ direct engagement with the issue in Hollywood worked two-fold – he championed the cause and provided a fictional resolve through Braddock, and Reagan benefited from his charismatic and non-antihero image (Williams, 1990, p.132; Arnold, 2006, p.18).

In contrast to its predecessor, *Missing in Action 2: The Beginning* did not fare as well with critics and audiences. One critic claimed “the film looked so cheaply made that if the only people to pay admission to see the movie are the actors’ families, it should still turn a profit” (Hiltbrand, 1985, p.109). However, Arnold argues that by this stage Norris and the defining action of *Missing in Action* had garnered a strong following and even helped prepare the same audience demographic for the second *Rambo* film that was released the same year (2006, p.93). This second *Missing in Action* edition is a prequel to the first. Set in the 1970s during the war, the film shows Colonel Braddock’s capture during the Vietnam War and his time in captivity with other American POWs in a brutal prison camp. The film was followed up three years later (interestingly the same time lapses between each of the original *Rambo* trilogy films), with the third and final *Missing in Action* film, *Braddock: Missing in Action III*. Once thought dead, Braddock learns of his wife and son’s survival twelve years after the war (and his extradition from the war-torn nation) from a Vietnamese Reverend who was visiting the United States. Braddock mounts a one-man assault to free his Vietnamese wife and son who are being held in a Vietnamese prison. The film joins together villains and thematic threads from the previous two films in a display of violence and characteristic Norris-esque masculinity. What both the *Missing in Action* and *Rambo* films show, is that the communists could ultimately be beaten, and that long valued American patriotism could be restored. The revenge that both Norris and Stallone undertake in their respective fictional roles helped to redirect some of the Vietnam animosity that was pointed at the US government and policy makers around the poor handling of the Vietnam situation.

Conversely, the Vietnam War films of the second half of the decade such as *Platoon* (1986), *Hamburger Hill* (1987), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), and *Casualties of War* (1989) offered a representation of the subjective experiences of the ‘grunt’ in combat and an image of war-as-hell rather than “the playground for cartoon-like superheroes” (Gates, 2005, p. 297). In *Full Metal*

*Jacket*<sup>17</sup>, we see the Vietnam experience represented in two parts – Marine Corps basic training, and then later, in the frontline of the Vietnam War in the midst of the Tet Offensive. The film follows protagonist J.T ‘Joker’ Davis along with a number of new recruits and explores the hellish conditions in which they underwent basic training and assignment at one of the most contentious times of the Vietnam War. Oliver Stone’s *Born on the Fourth of July* provides disillusionment with the war through the story of Marine Sergeant Ron Kovic (Tom Cruise). The film, like others in the genre, tells Kovic’s story from before recruitment, deployment, and recovery back in the US after severe war induced injuries. Stone criticises conditions in Vietnam for veterans in hospital and engages with the complex politics surrounding the US intervention on home soil by engaging with famous events and institutions of the 1970s including the Kent State shootings, Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), and the 1972 Republican National Convention in Miami. In another tack, *Casualties of War* offers a harrowing insight into travesties committed by US servicemen in Vietnam. In the flashback format of the film, we see the events of the film from the point of view of Max Eriksson (Michael J. Fox) as he sits on a train in 1974. The film deals explicitly with the kidnap, rape and murder of a young female Vietnamese civilian and Eriksson’s quest to set her free and ultimately see justice enforced against the men in his platoon who committed the crimes. *Casualties of War* engages with complex relations between military hierarchies, the response to crimes committed overseas, and, ultimately, guilt and responsibility of the US on the darkness of Vietnam War crimes.

### **Memorialising Vietnam in 1980s Hollywood Cinema**

As the nation struggled to come to terms with the consequences of an American presence in Vietnam, Hollywood cinema, too, engaged in a battle to reclaim the memory of Vietnam through cinematic representation. This process entailed a struggle against very powerful institutional forces that toyed with public imaginings of the war for reasons of monetary, political or professional gain (Lembcke, 1998, p. 188). Hollywood cinema of the mid-1980s – more specifically the films *Platoon* and

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<sup>17</sup> The screenplay for *Full Metal Jacket* is based upon the novel “*The Short-Timers*” (1979) by Gustav Hasford, himself a Vietnam veteran (and also one of the screenplay writers for *Full Metal Jacket*).

*Hamburger Hill* – began to reflect this tension in the way they attempted to de-emphasise the overtly ‘Hollywood’ elements of the text and amplify elements that connected back to ‘real life’. These films played an important role in establishing a sub-genre within Hollywood combat cinema that functioned to memorialise the war and subsequently attempted to provide a form of closure for American audiences in particular (Anderegg, 1991, p.159). One of the ways that *Platoon* exemplifies this is by having Chrysler Chairman Lee Iacocca open the beginning of the videocassette version of the film with a 45-second “tribute” to Vietnam veterans:

“This film *Platoon* is a memorial... not to war but to all the men and women who fought in a time and in a place nobody really understood. Who knew only one thing. They were called and they went. It was the same from the first musket fired at Concord to the rice paddies of the Mekong Delta. They were called and they went. That in the truest sense is the spirit of America. The more we understand it, the more we honour those who kept it alive”

Iacocca’s sentiment (and no doubt commercialism – he delivers his words from the side of a Chrysler Jeep) indicates the ongoing cultural project to erase dissenting political questions about the defeat in Vietnam (Anderegg, 1991, p. 154). For America, the function of these films in memorialising the war is to reconstruct their history and to reconstitute those that were lost in a new, less confrontational manner. The American resistance to admitting culpability for Vietnam revolves around a cultural drama of memory and forgetting (Studlar, 1988, p. 11). Memory becomes a prominent subject of post-Vietnam war cinema, both for the soldier and his nation. For the cinematic combat veteran, memory itself is often impossible and always painful (Owen, 2002, p. 251). In essence, *Hamburger Hill*, *Platoon* and many of the Vietnam films of the 1980s, use the appeal to victimisation as a powerful rhetorical tool that attempts to eradicate the problem of guilt: “to be a victim means never having to say that you are sorry” (Studlar, 1988, p. 11). Further, the films present a sympathetic American GI and pay tribute to the act of remembering the war as a private hell (Studlar, 1988, p. 11). Films of this period need to be cautiously analysed in light of this and understood as generative and strategic, rather than as reflective and definitive of a conceptualisation of a ‘reality’. These films not only strive to represent

an historical event, but also ‘instruct’ their visitors about what is to be valued in the future, as well as in the past (Jordan, 2008, p. 199).

### **‘Platoon’, ‘Hamburger Hill’ and the Realist Film Tradition**

In 1986 with the release of Oliver Stone’s film *Platoon*, critics (Floyd, 1997, p.121; Hoberman, 1986, p.79) proclaimed that at last, the first ‘true’ Vietnam film had been made (Woodman, 2005, p.103). It was this film that really began to signal the shift in the type of films being produced in the 1980s. Set near the Cambodian border in 1967, *Platoon* describes the experiences of college dropout and new recruit to the Army, Private Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen). The film traces the moral and spiritual journey of this young recruit who is a member of a platoon engaged in ‘search and destroy’ missions. Seen from the new recruit’s point of view, the action of the film becomes intensely personalised. The men move through the jungles of Vietnam, often lost and disorientated and occasionally come into contact with the enemy. In between the combat sequences, the film focuses on the tensions that exist within the platoon – an apparent split of the men between two conflicting factions. On one side are the supporters and followers of Sergeant Barnes (Tom Berenger), a tough soldier who is known to drink heavily and complain about the restrictive rules of engagement that American politicians have imposed on him. On the other side are those who follow Sergeant Elias (William Defoe). This division institutes an argument about morality that displaces the larger political questions about the war.

As we move into a more focused discussion of *Platoon* and *Hamburger Hill*, the claim of ‘realist’ and ‘authentic’ representations of the grunts perspective plays an increasingly significant role in unpacking the underlying ideological motivations behind cinematic portrayals. These ‘realistic’ combat representations, which characterised mid-late 1980s Hollywood Vietnam War films, did not necessarily offer a more accurate portrayal of war. Rather, they often merely masked increasingly idealistic moral and political assertions (Gates, 2005, p. 298). With this in mind, it becomes important to examine what exactly constitutes this notion of an ‘authentic’ and ‘realistic’ depiction of war, therefore identifying how the concepts of realism and representation can best be understood as both political and ideological tools within cinematic representation. This forms a crucial framework for unpacking the

ideological work that occurs within Vietnam War films and *Platoon* and *Hamburger Hill* in particular.

Realism is a highly contentious term, particularly within Film Studies. Traditionally, it is associated with literary history and the effort of the novel in the nineteenth century to establish itself as a major literary genre that functioned to imitate perceptual reality. In general use within film studies, realism implicitly compares a filmic representation of something with an external reality: a film is realistic because it accurately reproduces the part of the ‘real’ world to which it refers (Blandford, 2001, p. 195). All theories of realism, however, rest on the assumption that a text (whether novel, television or film) imitates reality, and that reality is more or less stable and commonly accessible (Childs, 2000, p. 199). What becomes problematic with the praise of ‘realistic’ representation of combat sequences of the Vietnam War in Hollywood cinema is that there is no single, accurate representation of the ‘real’ world that these texts can simply reflect. ‘Reality’ is not universal and therefore commonly accessible due to the nature of meaning as changing and dependent upon reception and cultural literacy. What the notion of ‘realism’ in cinema does achieve, however, is constructing, or producing, merely one aspect of *a truth* or *a reality* (McKee, 2002, p. 63). Furthermore, the practice of mediation challenges realism: Hollywood is a world that is “framed, lit and dressed in ways that impose creative choices on an audience’s impression of external reality” (Blandford, 2001, p. 195). Moreover, any act of pointing a camera involves choice and selection, a version of the world, not the world itself (Blandford, 2001, p. 195).

In a similar vein, the term verisimilitude is often used within textual analysis. As with realism, it denotes the appearance of something being true, or real, and is more closely associated with conventions of classical Hollywood cinema. Within this framework, verisimilitude can be understood as a cinematic convention designed to create naturalism, and as such, is a form of realism. This is achieved through the careful use of classical Hollywood conventions (devices – lighting, continuity editing, music; systems – causality, cinematic time, cinematic space) (Hayward, 2001, p.242). Verisimilitude is fluid and when utilised, it ensures that a film adheres to genre conventions (which doesn’t always mean a representation of the external reality we understand as our everyday world view). Where realism aims to imitate reality,



verisimilitude functions to depict an image of reality “that is congruent with the audience’s expectations about what the world is like” (Kuhn & Westwell, 2012, p.444). As Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell (2012) illustrate, this can be best understood through the musical: within the conventions of that particular genre, “it is quite plausible that groups of people can suddenly launch into choreographed dance routines” (p.444). This is not realistic in the sense of realism defined above, but does adhere to the truths and expectations of that particular generic context.

Despite the fact that realism is another trope it still has a powerful effect, even as a point of difference from earlier ‘mythological’ and revenge-fantasy texts. Within *Platoon*, cinematic techniques operate to suggest an overarching representation of realism and the authentic experience of the grunt. As Auster and Quart suggest, *Platoon*’s greatest strength lies in the feeling of verisimilitude it evokes through the depiction of discomfort, ants, heat, mud, the fatigue of patrols, the boredom and sense of release of base camp, the terror of ambushes and the chaos of night fire-fights (1988, p.132). Due to the way *Platoon* is filmed in tight close-up and medium shots, it is able to suggest a powerful, murderous immediacy for the world in which the GIs are situated.

Moreover, *Platoon* combines cinéma vérité techniques with classical Hollywood conventions to create an effect of verisimilitude. This is most pronounced within the combat sequences. These scenes are characterised by shaky, hand-held camerawork which functions in two ways in particular: firstly, it provides audiences with a sense of immediacy and claustrophobia, secondly, and perhaps most importantly, it provides a subjective perspective – namely, the point of view of the protagonist, Taylor. In combination with the style of camerawork, the viewer is drawn to Taylor’s perspective through the recurrent voice-over readings of letters he continuously writes to his grandmother, but more powerfully, this association with Taylor is achieved through the repeated close-ups of his eyes in one of the earliest scenes during a night ambush. This practice encourages the audience to accept the film’s overall point of view, firstly through fearing that fatal disaster will come upon the protagonist, and secondly through the process of a shared emotional response to the action (Kinney, 1991, p.161).

Through these particular cinematic choices, *Platoon* avoids any conceptualisation of the underlying politics of the war. By focusing upon the journey of Chris Taylor as the American soldier and the harsh ‘realities’ of serving in the Vietnam conflict, *Platoon* indirectly argues that regardless of whether the conflict itself is right or wrong, the men fighting it are doing so for the right reasons. The conflict represented through *Platoon* is understood not as a political battle being waged, but rather, a *moral* one where the hero who fights it is the idealistic youth (Gates, 2005, p. 300). Further, it is clear that *Platoon* adopts a perspective that treats the experiences of the American soldiers as if they occurred in a political-cultural vacuum. As Anderegg (1991, p.9) attests, this cinematic perspective has promoted one of the primary myths of the conflict in Vietnam – the soldier in the battlefield had no concept or understanding of politics or contemporary American foreign policy, no sense of why the war was being fought and no awareness of the complexities the war represented.

Much of *Platoon*’s claim to authenticity and justification for the lack of political acknowledgement comes from the fact that it was written and directed by Oliver Stone, himself a Vietnam veteran. Stone, in an essay about the making of *Platoon*, states, “I wrote it as straight as I could remember it” (Woodman, 2005, p.104). This staging of Stone’s Vietnam memories on film includes battles and incidents that he had been involved in, as well as a recreation of the strife that existed within his original platoon. In addition, the movie’s intense ‘realism’ is a reflection not only of Stone’s own military experiences, but also of the movie’s technical advisor, a former Marine drill instructor who subjected the actors to a few torturous weeks of survival training in the Philippine jungles before filming began (Schechter, 1991, p. 18). Whilst the film reflects Stone’s personal memories of the war, it does not make *Platoon* an authentic representation of the way Vietnam really was for other GIs. What it does provide, however, are very real insights into his individual experiences in Vietnam while at the same time centralizing subjective experience as the key means of understanding the war (Woodman, 2005, p. 104).

Stone’s *Platoon* and Irvin’s *Hamburger Hill* possess similar characteristics that attempt to shift the focus of 1960s and 1970s representations of the Vietnam conflict within Hollywood cinema. As with *Platoon*, one of the key selling points of *Hamburger Hill* was the promotion of realism. The representations that both these

texts produced were justified through the same means – both films had significant crewmembers that had spent time serving the United States in Vietnam. John Irvin, British filmmaker and director of *Hamburger Hill* had spent a period in Vietnam in 1969 making a documentary about combat photographers. During his time in the war zone, he saw firsthand the difficulties faced by American GIs (Woodman, 2003, p. 53). Similarly, Jim Carabatos who wrote the film's screenplay, served in Vietnam as part of the First Air Cavalry Division. The film's military advisor was Command Sergeant Major Albert Neal who served at the actual battle for *Hamburger Hill* upon which the film is based. The film's technical advisor, Colonel Joseph B. Convey Jr. was the brigade commander at the battle, and the film, which was made in cooperation with the US Department of Defence, also used the skills of actual soldiers (Devine, 1995, pp. 266-267). Regardless of possessing such prominent military credentials, the text needs to be understood not as authentically validated by the participation of crewmembers that experienced the battle themselves, but rather understood in light of an ideological framework. *Hamburger Hill*, just as with *Platoon*, needs to be understood as a reflection of a combination of perspectives possessed by production members and not as a reflection of a one 'true' reality that exists.

*Hamburger Hill* is a fictionalised depiction of the historical ten-day battle waged on Hill 937 on Dong Ap Bia in the Ashau Valley in May 1969. The film was one of the first to show that the self-doubts and general bewilderment of combat troops was a response not only to the battlefield experience they endured, but also the expression of weakness triggered by the activities of American non-combatants and political commentators (Szamuely, 1988, p. 51). In addition to what was happening in Vietnam, the soldiers were affected by the antiwar statements made by prominent public officials back home, peace demonstrations and the loss of girlfriends and partners to antiwar civilians – all of which made them feel as if they were erroneously fighting for Vietnam (Szamuely, 1988, p. 51). *Hamburger Hill* thus represents combat as an unknowable natural force against which men can do nothing and in which they can find no meaning. The treatment of war is not seen as a political fact, or an endeavour organised by men, accountable to men's control if they possessed the desire or will to alter its course. Although the film comments on the overall ineffectuality of the battle of Hill 937, it focuses upon the grunts, the American foot

soldiers, which were often draftees at the bottom of the chain of military command. They were the soldiers who, whether they agreed with the war or not, were forced to do the 'dirty-work' on the front lines of combat (Woodman, 2003, p. 52).

The way in which *Hamburger Hill* attempts to represent authentic experience signals a movement within the Vietnam War genre. As well as professing elements of realism and authenticity, this change in cinematic approach views the Vietnam veteran sympathetically by attempting to explain their problems realistically (Katzman, 1993, p. 7). Consequently, the films' criticisms of the war in Vietnam predominately focus on individual experience and within the narrative of the text, individual cases of corruption and blundering. By choosing to approach the conflict in this way through cinematic representation, the film merely has to provide a perspective that condemns individual cases of excess and malfeasance in order to re-establish the broader illusion of a democratic national identity, one which fights for the underdog, saves women and children, and respects cultural and racial difference (Selig, 1993, p. 5). This is a strategy that is not unique to *Hamburger Hill* and has been adopted by numerous Hollywood texts in the combat film genre, notably *Platoon* and *Casualties of War* as other Vietnam oriented movies. These texts, like *Hamburger Hill*, use the narrative structure that suggests injustices are always brought to light and the underdog protagonist always emerges as a hero.

This protagonist-as-hero trope is further reinforced by the process of 'othering' the enemy. *Hamburger Hill* depicts the enemy both as a yellow peril and as a super-soldier. The film, however, does not primarily use these portrayals to justify the loss of the Vietnam War, but rather, uses them in combination with ideas of realism, cinematic conventions and the nature of the film as a memorial. The first portrayal of the Asian super-soldier stereotype occurs at the beginning of the film where Frantz (Dylan McDermott) trains his new recruits on the American base in Vietnam. Shots of Frantz and the new soldiers are intercut with shots of a North Vietnamese soldier. This soldier demonstrates his skills by penetrating American base defences for the American GIs while Frantz speaks:

"This is Han. Those of you who are foolish will think of him as gook, slope, slide, or dink. He is your enemy...and he will be

hunting your young asses in the Ashau Valley. Forget about this Vietcong shit. What you'll encounter out there is hardcore NVA – North Vietnamese – motivated, highly trained, and well equipped. If you meet Han or his cousins you will give him respect and refer to those little bastards as Nathaniel Victor. People, I am tired of filling body bags with your dumb fucking mistakes.”

As Frantz finishes his speech, Han is framed in close-up, holding a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) that is pointed at the audience. This scene is significant in that it establishes that the Vietnamese enemy is extremely skilled and dangerous, and therefore a formidable threat, one worthy of respect. This example functions to indirectly assert that because the Vietnamese are a highly accomplished opponent, they need to be treated harshly.

The Asian super-soldier stereotype is also present in the battle for Hill 937 where time after time, US troops call in bombing missions to dispose of the many North Vietnamese Army (NVA) soldiers planted above them on the hill – yet they never seem to be successful in dislodging or repelling them. Rather, the Vietcong soldiers seem to simply run around underground and wait out the bombing in hills and crevices and then return to their positions. What is evoked then is a sense that all the American technology that is available is useless against the well prepared, patient and committed Asian enemy. In the end, the final *mis-en-scène* of the battle on the Hill yields to a worn, dusted, wasteland of a hill. This Asian super-soldier stereotype functions alongside the bittersweet taking of the Hill to underscore the senselessness of the battle, and therefore of the war itself. In accordance with the characteristics of a memorial film, although the American GIs eventually come to win their brutal battle on Hill 937, they come to realise that they have fought for an ultimately worthless goal.

During battle, the enemy is often represented as nothing more than a target for American guns. Director John Irvin chose to capture the North Vietnamese soldiers using long shots with their faces hidden by their helmets or concealed behind billowing battlefield smoke. Occasionally, a medium shot captures the enemy as they fire their weapons at trapped American troops attempting to climb Hill 937.

Woodman (2003) believes that this choice of film technique is part of the 'grunts eye view' of combat, as many American soldiers in Vietnam rarely saw their enemy clearly (pp. 53-54). However, this choice of camera angle is occasionally violated in a way that suggests elements of the yellow peril stereotype. Close ups are occasionally given to the Vietnamese soldiers, but only at the moment when they are about to be brutally killed in combat. For example, during the battle on the Hill, after one NVA soldier emerges from a crevice in the hill to attack a passing GI with a knife, he is seen in a close-up as his head is grotesquely blown up by another American with a machine gun. Soon after this death, another NVA is killed in close-up when a bullet penetrates the back of his head. However, what is interesting to note is that whilst the film captures the rather graphic demise of Vietnamese soldiers, in both cases the camera shot only lingers long enough to show the impact of the bullet – a choice which attempts to merely represent a tragedy of war through the 'grunts eye view', rather than celebrating death or dehumanising the Vietnamese enemy.

Although *Hamburger Hill* grants the enemy at least a grudging respect, in its own way, the film uses the stereotypes of the super-soldier and the yellow-peril to examine what the Vietnam War meant for the United States, whether to explain why America was doomed to lose the war in Vietnam, or to comment on the senselessness of the war itself. The film can be read as not simply focusing upon who won the war in Vietnam and why, instead, the stereotypical representations of the enemy are used to honour American soldiers for the horrors and hardships they faced in an unspeakably violent, meaningless war. Thus what makes the memorial sub-genre of Vietnam War films so important for recovery and closure for the American people is that rather than focusing upon the big moral questions that underpin US involvement in Vietnam, the practice of stereotypical representations allow audiences to experience a reconstruction of the conflict and thus honour those who fought and lost for a cause that they never truly understood.

Like the historical period that came before, the films of the 1980s (characterised by *Platoon* and *Hamburger Hill*) navigated the political and social climate by concentrating on depicting the experience of the individual GI. However, where the earlier films cautiously engaged with the politics of war with a surrealist approach to the war-as-hell trope, these films employed realism and versimilitude to depict the

hellish experience of war. Also differentiating these films from the first cycle of Vietnam War films is the treatment and depiction of trauma. In *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, the trauma of war is negotiated through the manifestation of PTSD (albeit expressed differently in both films). These films take place over a number of different contexts (either implied or portrayed) that reference both the home and war experience – in *The Deer Hunter* we see the main characters both in America, and Vietnam, in *Apocalypse Now* we learn that Willard has been to Vietnam and is being asked to return again to fulfil the mission to find Kurtz. In these films, there is either overt or implied trauma that has resulted in some manifestation of PTSD. However, in *Platoon* and *Hamburger Hill*, films primarily set within the war zone (and not back “home” after the fact), there is no space in the narrative for the exploration of a post-traumatic experience. There are, however, ample experiences depicted in both films that no doubt would lead to ongoing psychological trauma after the fact. PTSD and the personalised US experience of war is a contributing factor to the de-politicising the war in the earlier cycle of war films. Whilst PTSD is not explored in the later films, the traumatic experience of the individual US soldier still functions to achieve this. In addition, films in this late 1980s cycle engaged with contemporary revisionist strategies of memorialisation to re-remember the war. In this way, the enemy is present, but contained within very specific stereotypical characterisation. As with the earlier period, melodrama attempts to reconcile the complex consequences of war by reducing it to a singular experience situated within a political (and contextual) vacuum.

This chapter has examined the political context of the late 1970s during the Carter administration and how it correlates to the process of representation within Hollywood Vietnam War films. As shown through readings of *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, Hollywood’s approach displaced questions of the intervention in Vietnam by focusing upon the veteran’s experience serving in the conflict. It became clear in the 1980s, with a change in presidential leadership and the end of the Cold War, that there had been a distinctive shift in the American cultural, social and political climate. Films in this period such as *Platoon* and *Hamburger Hill* were premised upon ideas of ‘realism’ and ‘authenticity’ and claimed to represent realistic portrayals of the grunts’ experience in Vietnam. The Vietnam War has left deep scars on the American psyche and it continues to haunt contemporary conflict. By

examining the relationship between text and context, we are able to understand how America attempted to deal with the biggest military loss it suffered in recent history.



## Chapter Two

### The Greatest Generation Cycle

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Chapter one examined the dominant period of Vietnam War films from 1978 to 1989 and explored the relationship between text and context during a time of heightened social and political anxiety. Exemplary texts *The Deer Hunter* (1978) *Apocalypse Now* (1978), *Platoon* (1986), and *Hamburger Hill* (1987) played an important role in the cultural revision of the traumatic experience of the Vietnam War. Extending that discussion, this chapter describes the next cycle of films from the 1990s to the early 2000s that follow the dominant period of Vietnam War film. Significant in this period are the revisionist texts *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *Pearl Harbor* (2001), *Black Hawk Down* (2002) and *We Were Soldiers* (2002). These films, made during a time of political consolidation, exemplify the characteristics of this period and represent a clear shift from the thinking of the Reagan era, to a return to the ‘greatest generation’ WWII film trope in the aftermath of the divisive Vietnam intervention..

### A New World Order

Until now, the world we've known has been a world divided – a world of barbed wire and concrete block, conflict and Cold War. Now, we can see a new world coming into view. A world in which there is the very real prospect of a new world order. In the words of Winston Churchill, a world order in which "the principles of justice and fair play protect the weak against the strong..." A world where the United Nations, freed from Cold War stalemate, is poised to fulfil the historic vision of its founders. A world in which freedom and respect for human rights find a home among all the nations.

- George H. W. Bush to Congress, March 6, 1991

In 1989, with the collapse of the East European communist parties' grip on power, the Cold War system began its rapid demise. By the end of 1991, the Soviet Union itself had collapsed while Germany, one of the key sources of the East-West tensions in

Europe, was reunified with the fall of the Berlin Wall (Best et al, 2008, p.481). Whilst many countries of the West enjoyed the unprecedented peace and prosperity, genocide and terrorism were also prominent in the aftermath of the Cold War. In the US, Republican George H. W. Bush succeeded Ronald Reagan as president and brought with him a new administration and political agenda. Faced with the altered political landscape, President Bush called for a 'New World Order' in which America would play an explicit and determinant role through the use of US military power (Joseph, 2006, p.82; Dumbrell, 2008, p.36). Bush believed the contemporary post-Cold War international climate provided a "rare opportunity to move toward an historic period of cooperation, one that was freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the quest for peace" (Engel, 2014, p.119).

The 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War was the first US military action after the Cold War (and the first major event for Bush to exercise this "New World Order"). The cause of the Gulf War was Iraq's conquest of Kuwait on August 2, 1990. The invasion of Kuwait promised a cure to both the economic and military legacy of the Iran-Iraq War – Kuwait's oil wealth would enable the Iraqi regime to reconstruct the state and to pay its non-Arab creditors, ensuring the army was kept busy and away from the capital (Best et al, 2008, p.490). Led by Saddam Hussein, the conflict was premised on two underlying beliefs: that Kuwait had provoked the attack through its unreasonable behaviour and failure to submit to Iraq's request for territorial concessions as a result of fighting the war against Iran on behalf of the Arab world, and, secondly, that both Arab and Western states would not intervene.

The occupation meant that Iraq was positioned to expand into the oil-rich Saudi provinces adjoining Kuwait and Iraq – an outcome the international community wanted to avoid at all costs. The allied nations, led by the now *sole* superpower the US, formed a coalition and worked on a number of strategies to put a halt to the Hussein-led occupation within the region. Prior to the "New World Order", Iraq had been a client state of the Soviet Union – which meant that if Hussein's occupation had occurred in the years prior, the Soviets almost certainly would have defended their ally against the US driven retaliation (Schwartz, 1998, p.4). The extent of Iraq's

miscalculation and misreading of the positions held by both former allies and the US and Britain became clear on the 16<sup>th</sup> of January 1991.

After months of UN Security Council resolutions, diplomatic moves, the freezing of Iraq's and Kuwait's assets and the imposition of sanctions aimed at compelling Iraq to withdraw voluntarily, an American-led multinational coalition launched Operation Desert Storm in January 1991 (Best et al, 2008, p.490). Between January 17 and February 27 the coalition waged an air offensive<sup>18</sup> that attempted to destroy the Iraqi Air Force and air defences in order to gain vital ground on Hussein's campaign. On February 24, a two-pronged ground attack commenced – an assault by US Marines and pan-Arab forces against the Iraqi fortifications in Kuwait, and the main coalition attack led by US and British armoured divisions of the elite Republican Guard in the west of Iraq (Schwartz, 1998, pp.6-7). President Bush ordered the cessation of the Gulf War at midnight on February 27. By this time, all of the coalitions outlined objectives had been achieved<sup>19</sup>. The success of the war enforced American power and cemented the death of the Cold War paradigm and the rise of Bush's "New World Order" – in which Washington would impose its values, for good or for ill, on the rest of the world.

President Bush's "New World Order", Engels (2014) argues, was not so much "new" as a reinvention of "the founding vision of the modern world developed at the end of World War II" (p.120). We see this particularly through Bush's rhetoric of the Gulf War. Often invoking images and arguments from World War II, Bush was recorded referring to Gulf troops as GIs (a WWII reminiscent term). Perhaps most notably, this rhetoric can be seen in his comparison of Saddam Hussein to Adolf Hitler. As Harlow (2006) elaborates, this was significant for two reasons:

"First, demonising the dictator made it much easier for Bush to persuade Americans that fighting him was justified and necessary, and that applying sanctions would forestall another Munich disaster.

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<sup>18</sup> An estimated 120,000 sorties had been flown by coalition air forces and 84,000 tons of ordnance had been dropped (including 7,400 tons of 'smart' bombs) (Best et al, 2008, p.491).

<sup>19</sup> However, there was some controversy over this decision as the Republican Guard had not been completely destroyed (Schwartz, 1998, p.7).

Second, fixing a comparison in the public mind between the Gulf War and World War II would distract the public from strongly negative associations of agents and agencies in Vietnam” (p.66).

This was reinforced further still by specific references to Vietnam throughout the Gulf War campaign. The last (and the most referenced), was given in a news conference following Resolution 678 in November 1990:

“In our country, I know that there are fears about another Vietnam. Let me assure you, should military action be required, this will not be another Vietnam. This will not be a protracted, drawn-out war. The forces arrayed are different. The opposition is different. The resupply of Saddam’s military would be very different. The countries united against him in the United Nations are different. The topography of Kuwait is different. And the motivation of our all-volunteer force is superb.

I want peace. I want peace, not war. But if there must be war, we will not permit our troops to have their hands tied behind their backs. And I pledge to you: there will not be any murky ending. If one American soldier has to go into battle, that soldier will have enough force behind him to win and then to get out as soon as possible, as soon as the UN objectives have been achieved. I will never – ever – agree to a halfway effort”<sup>20</sup>

These subtle references to WWII indicate a nostalgia and national pride associated with America’s efforts in that intervention. As much as Bush may have hoped that the Vietnam syndrome had been overcome, the continued comparisons of the Gulf to the “good war” and assurances that this war will not be a repeat of Vietnam failure proves otherwise. The debacle of Vietnam was still a very real phenomenon even in the post-Cold War climate and provided an unavoidable framework for public conception of the Gulf War.

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<sup>20</sup> President Bush, November 30, 1990

By the 1992 presidential election, in which President Bill Clinton was narrowly elected, focus had moved away from residual post-Cold War animosity and towards trade and budget deficits. Whilst Clinton's presidential appointment was initially hailed as a moment of liberal resurgence, Clinton was a very different kind of Democrat: cautious, fiscally prudent, and always keen to blur the ideological boundaries between himself and his opponents (Sandbrook, 2008, 27). Clinton followed the route of 'selective engagement' – prioritising international issues that had either a significant domestic surplus, or which had direct relevance to core US economic or security interests (Dumbrell, 2008, p.36). His focus on domestic affairs came to define his presidency, and, according to Melanson (2005), his time in office can be divided into several distinct periods: (1) "the shakedown cruise of 1993-1994" (where the White House moved from crisis to crisis and saw the failure of Clinton's ambitious health care initiative), (2) "raw partisan confrontation over the budget" (exemplified by the Government shut down in November 1995), (3) Clinton's political recovery in 1996-1997, (4) the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal in 1998 (that essentially paralysed the administration), and (4) the post-impeachment period (p.233).

A number of international humanitarian crises unfolded during Clinton's two terms in office, challenging his politics and abilities as a statesman. In his second inaugural address, Clinton used a phrase that came to signify his administration's commitment to international leadership: "America stands alone as the world's indispensable nation" (Clinton, 1997). By the time Clinton made this inaugural address, the US debate over post-Cold War global leadership had shifted significantly. After the failures in Somalia, Rwanda and Haiti, Clinton created a new approach to international affairs – a policy his advisors called the "doctrine of enlargement". This doctrine, based on the idea of enlargement as the expansion of market democracies, was for Clinton, a replacement for Cold War security doctrines. It reflected the new Clinton era where US leadership attempted to move towards an identity as a 'family of nations' where market democracies embrace free trade and acknowledge the indispensability of American leadership (Dumbrell, 2008, p.37). Amongst other objectives, the doctrine promoted the use of multinational forces to intervene in key international situations – often for humanitarian purposes (Wirls, 2010, p.113).

The reconceptualization of Bush's 'New World Order' into Clinton's activist America fostered a renewed confidence in the late 1990s and contributed to a new willingness to conceive international leadership in unilateralist (military) terms. We see Hollywood war cinema attempt to negotiate this diverse political climate of the 1990s through the re-visiting (and revising) of WWII (*Saving Private Ryan*, 1998, *Pearl Harbor*, 2001) and Vietnam (*We Were Soldiers*, 2002).

### **Nostalgia and Remembering 'The Good War' on Film: 1990-2001**

There were two wars fought – there was our war, and there was  
Hollywood's war.

– Steven Spielberg on *Saving Private Ryan*, 1998

Following the dominant period of Vietnam War film, the flow of war films coming out of Hollywood thinned dramatically<sup>21</sup>. The altered political and economic landscape in the post-Cold War era meant that the parameters of war were more ambiguous – and the Hollywood war film genre reflected the fact. Paired with the continued divisiveness of the Vietnam War (particularly as it was kept alive in President Bush's Gulf War rhetoric), Hollywood generally avoided the depiction of contemporary conflicts; choosing instead to concentrate on the re-presentation of significant twentieth century events with clear-cut binaries and real-life melodramatic principles – most extensively the revision of the WWII narrative.

The renewed interest in WWII for the cinema was, to some extent, stimulated by the many anniversaries celebrated between 1980 and 2005. Perhaps most significant of these commemorations was in 1994 – the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the allied invasion of Normandy. This was a key event of the liberation of Europe (an occasion made especially poignant because it was the last official parade of the surviving members of the Normandy Veterans Association) (Paris, 2007, p.1). During the anniversary commemorations, US President Bill Clinton walked the Normandy beaches in contemplation – which no doubt helped to fuel the emergence of a general cultural fascination with World War II (Westwell, 2006, p.90). In the political rhetoric of

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<sup>21</sup> With Basinger going as far as to claim that no film that could be designated 'combat' appeared in 1990, 1993, 1994, 1996, or 1997 (2003, p. xi).

presidential speeches, the endlessly looped television documentaries, and the non-fiction books dominating the bestseller lists, World War II has been constructed as Auster and Quart term, a 'mythic endemic moment where the entire nation bent itself to victory over evil barbarism' (Auster, 2002, p. 104). This commemorative movement not only revived old memories for veterans and those that had lived through the war, but also functioned to evoke the war story for those born after the conflict had ended.

In this decade between the dominant period of Vietnam War film and the events of 9/11, WWII, the 'good war' replaced the Vietnam War as the narrative in which war in general was understood. WWII provided an ideal framework for the next dominant cycle of Hollywood war film – taking the transgressions of the past and representing them through what Brokaw (2002) labels, "a nostalgic lens". This 'lens' functioned to both simplify the complexities of WWII politics, and to obscure the controversial and multifaceted Vietnam War cinema of the late 1970s and early 1980s (Westwell, 2006, p. 100). Crucial to the conceptualisation of war and militarism since Pearl Harbor, has been the creation of the 'good war' paradigm. This paradigm is often referred to in film criticism and purveys the narrative of WWII as the good war – a war fought by good, civilised (American) people for a noble cause against a despicable and barbaric enemy. War in this paradigm is the result of a simple melodramatic principle – a battle between good and evil. There is little moral and ethical ambiguity and war is the rational consequence of the actions of an evil enemy. The good war exemplifies patriotism and celebrates American victory. Director Jonathan Mostrow articulates this perfectly in the context of *U-571* (2000): "If it's possible to call a war a 'good war' that label would have to apply to WWII. Never before in our history was there such a clear-cut case of good versus evil. There was no ambiguity about our involvement in that war, and we rose up as a nation to defeat Hitler" (Mostrow in Suid, 2002, p.640).

WWII was once again brought to the front of public memory – for both the veterans of war, and those born after 1945. Seen through the lens of commemorative recollection, the re-remembering of WWII became a complex negotiation of the horrors of war and nostalgia for a time in the past. This was heightened by many Hollywood war films produced in this contemporary context. These films in many

ways were merely modern revisions of the WWII films of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s.

In order to understand how the war films of the 1990s and early 2000s revisited (and revised) these war film tropes of WWII cinema, it is important to identify and highlight the dominant characteristics of this significant genre of Hollywood film. As discussed in the introduction, there were a number of waves of WWII films across the dominant period of their production. Whilst the very nature of film cycles means that there were different points of narrative emphasis, there are a number of tropes that emerged from that particular sub-genre of Hollywood war film (that we can see at play in this contemporary context).

Within this WWII Hollywood paradigm, we see the principles of Classical Hollywood Cinema (CHC) and Melodrama come together with the distinctive creation of dominant tropes of the WWII film. Whilst there is some discussion on what *exactly* constitutes a WWII war film framework, a basic structure contains: a vital strategic goal (essentially a CHC basic narrative principle), superhuman efforts of a small combat group up against impossible odds (CHC/Melodramatic principle), male bonding, solidarity won in the midst of unbearable psychological pressure (CHC/Melodrama), a struggle to vanquish a cruel enemy (CHC/Melodrama).

More extensively, Boggs and Pollard (2016, p.49) provide a useful and concise summary of a number of distinctive characteristics that can be seen as reoccurring tropes in the dominant cannon of WWII Hollywood war films (and henceforth the conventional combat genre more broadly<sup>22</sup>). The Hollywood WWII film contains the following six indispensable motifs: (1) the horrors of war are pronounced, but the engagement in war is framed as noble and morally imperative, (2) war is represented in simple, clear-cut (melodramatic) Manichaeism terms – as a battle between good and evil. The allies (Americans) are civilised, and the enemy (Axis powers) are a

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<sup>22</sup> In chapters three and four we start to see how the events of 9/11 begin to reshape how combat is depicted in Hollywood cinema. In this contemporary context, there is a shift away from these “conventional” combat film tropes as Hollywood war film moves towards a more ambiguous and blurred exploration of these tenets of the combat film (i.e the Manichaeistic good/evil dichotomy) and the actual act of contemporary warfare in the age of modern technology.



barbaric other, capable of unspeakably demonic acts, (3) the narrative focuses on a typical (white) male heroism. Whilst females do often appear in these films, they are subordinate – depicted as either lovers, girlfriends, wives (a CHC convention), (4) military units are comprised of social, ethnic and religious diversity – emphasising a composition of American diversity (however, often offensive stereotyping thus ensues), (5) the (white/male) hero demonstrates pronounced soldierly professionalism in the face of terrible life-threatening conditions, and (6), outsiders entering the tightknit, established military unit are met with hostility and suspicion before being accepted by the group after narrative progression requires them to prove their integrity and military ethos.

For Browne (1998), the WWII Hollywood combat film formula is best characterised in two exemplary texts – *Air Force* (1943) and *Bataan* (1943). These films exemplify the two dominant variations of the genre: the narrative that focuses on the warship, and the other on the infantry unit. The first, as seen in *Air Force*, focuses on the group dynamic in the tumultuous war context and celebrates the superiority of American technology. This broad narrative framework is seen in all manner of “warships” – submarines, ships, tanks, and aircraft (p.114). The second, as exemplified in *Bataan*, focuses primarily on the horrors of combat and the psychological ramifications of soldiering in the increasingly grim conditions of war.

In its most basic form, these conceptualisations of the WWII formula have become the dominant framework for the *conventional* Hollywood combat film. It continues to be modified in shifting social and political contexts to retain contemporary appeal to changing audience taste and styles, but the fundamental structure remains the same. These characteristics formed the basis for the reconfiguration of WWII in Hollywood cinema in the post-Cold War era. This is exemplified in the largely popular films *Schindler's List* (1993), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *Pearl Harbor* (2001), *U-571* (2001), *Black Hawk Down* (2001), *We Were Soldiers* (2002); in the television spectacles like *Band of Brothers*; and computer games such as *Medal of Honour*, *Combat Elite*, *Battleground Europe* and *Call of Duty*.

It is the objective of this chapter to highlight how contemporary Hollywood war films engage with these traditional WWII tropes in the midst of the reconceptualization of

American power and politics in the post-Cold War (post-Vietnam) era. Subsequently, this chapter will analyse four films that best exemplify this. The first two, *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *Pearl Harbor* (2001) extend the traditional WWII combat film, in the contemporary context. The latter two, *Black Hawk Down* (2001) and *We Were Soldiers* (2002) are not WWII narratives, but provide revisionist accounts of significant twentieth century interventions that engage with the WWII tropes discussed above. *Black Hawk Down* depicts an American-centric revision of the 1993 Somali conflict, and *We Were Soldiers* presents the Vietnam War within a distinctive ‘good war’ paradigm not seen in any previous Vietnam War film. An essential component to the social and political context of this chapter is how the events of 9/11 impacted the development of the Hollywood war film genre. Because of this, the chapter is divided into two significant contexts/sections – pre-9/11 (*Saving Private Ryan* and *Pearl Harbor*) and post-9/11 (*Black Hawk Down* and *We Were Soldiers*). Within the film analyses of these exemplary texts is a discussion of verisimilitude, heroism, and otherness.

### **‘Saving Private Ryan’ (1998)**

Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) put the issues, iconography, attitudes and generic formula of the Second World War back in the forefront of Hollywood cinema and, consequently, public discourse surrounding war and representation. *Saving Private Ryan* immediately won over critics, veterans, scholars, historians, and the general-movie going public. The film succeeded beyond anticipation at the box office, earning a worldwide box-office gross of \$480 million<sup>23</sup>, making it the highest grossing war movie of all time (until *American Sniper* in 2015). Subsequently, the film received an impressive line-up of international honours and awards including Spielberg’s second presentation of an Academy Award. Janet Maslin of the *New York Times* was speaking for many of her fellow critics when she acclaimed *Saving Private Ryan* as “the finest war movie of our time” (1998, n.p). Likewise, veterans were highly receptive to the film – one of Spielberg’s prime intentions. The filmmaker admitted that he had wanted to make a film that veterans could recognise and be moved by. In

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<sup>23</sup> With \$216.119,491 earned at the US box office until from its release until May 23 1999 and \$224,700,000 at the non-US box office from its release until December 20, 1998 ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com))

conversations with veterans before the release of his film, he was struck by the fact that they had all dismissed the cinematic recreation of war, with the common response being: 'There were two wars fought, there was our war, and there was Hollywood's war' (Spielberg, 1998). It was therefore his intention to create a film that would encourage more respect for the men who fought in Normandy, and to portray the horrors of war to an expansive audience (Reed, 1998, p.14).

The movie opens in a graveyard where an elderly gentleman, James Ryan (Matt Damon) and his family appear to be searching for a particular grave site – walking through row upon row of white gravestones. As Ryan draws towards a particular grave, he breaks down, and as his family rush to offer support he asks, 'Have I been good?' As Ryan searches for an answer, the sound of battle fades out the present day and we are immediately transported back in time to the events that took place in the early morning hours of D-Day, June 6, 1944. Past and present overlap here, with, what Westwell argues, 'history figured as a dynamic force which shapes the present, and to which we are beholden (2006, p.91).

The following twenty-five minutes of *Saving Private Ryan* focuses on the horror and randomness of violence. As the doors of the landing craft open, two-thirds of the men on board are killed by machine-gun fire. Viewers are invited to stand alongside terrified soldiers who face a 'tempest of machine gun fire' that consumes the leading group of men (Shepard, 1998, p.23). What follows is graphic depictions of death and injury, a sense of randomness of fatalities, and the breakdown of command. The audience is visually assaulted with blood, vomit, dismembered arms and legs, wounds spurting blood; men drown, are wounded, and shot and killed in chaos, fear and bewilderment. One dazed soldier, having lost his arm bends down to pick it up. All of this results in a terrible, incomprehensible, and all encompassing sense of battle – it is a nightmare. From the fade-in of waves breaking against anti-tank obstacles, to the closing overhead shot of the beach strewn with bodies of dead soldiers, the impact of this opening sequence is so vivid and intense that it remains most viewers' abiding memory of the film (Chapman, 2008, p.19). After the dead exceed somewhere around 80 percent of those on the beach landing, the surviving men slowly make their way up the slopes of the beach. At this point, the camera turns back towards the beach and one name is highlighted on the back of a dead soldier's pack – 'Ryan, S'.

Once off the beach, much of the action in the film is premised on a search for Ryan, a soldier whose three brothers have been killed during the D-Day landings. Lead by Captain Miller (Tom Hanks), the members of the patrol – all brave and competent soldiers (a clear reiteration of traditional 1940s WWII cinema tropes) – are sent on the controversial mission behind enemy lines to retrieve the paratrooper with the American 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division. The mission came from an emotional General George C. Marshall (Harve Presnell) who decided that Mrs Ryan must be spared the loss of her last son. When one of the other members of his staff questions the relative importance of this single life, Marshall responds by reading the contents of the famous Bixby letter, a short note purportedly written by Abraham Lincoln that was sent to another grieving mother during the Civil War<sup>24</sup>. The letter is of clear importance to the General as he quotes some of the last sentences from memory. The search for the son thus becomes a moral imperative (Hasian 2001, p. 344). Whilst many of the characters in *Saving Private Ryan* are fictional, some of the events that are portrayed in the film are based on real life families: the Sullivan brothers, all five of whom were killed when the USS Juneau sank in the Pacific on November 13 1942, and the Niland brothers who, like the fictional Ryan family, all but one died in combat<sup>25</sup>.

The scene shifts back to the shores of Normandy where Captain Miller and seven other Rangers learn that they are the ones who have been selected to find Ryan.. Early on in

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<sup>24</sup> The Bixby letter read: “Dear Madam, I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any word of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom. Yours, very sincerely and respectfully, A. Lincoln (Washington, Nov. 21, 1864)” (quoted in Burlingame, 1999, pp.64-65).

<sup>25</sup> During the summer of 1944, two of the Niland sons were killed on D-Day while another was believed to have been killed in Southeast Asia. The last brother, Fritz, was a member of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division in Normandy. This last son was saved by Father Francis Sampson who allegedly found the paratrooper and got him home to safety (Spiller, 1999). Spielberg has admitted that the Niland family story was the “kernel of truth about which this morality play has been fictionalized” (Spielberg quoted in Caldwell, 1998, p.49). The second family that form the inspiration for Spielberg’s plot, The Sullivan’s, were five brothers who served in the US Navy and were all on the warship ‘USS Juneau’ when it sank in 1942. In *Saving Private Ryan*, one of the member’s of General George C. Marshall’s team explains that most brothers were split up after the Sullivan affair to prevent this kind of suffering (Hasian 2001, p. 354).

the journey, Miller remarks that ‘Ryan better be worth it’ (echoing the sentiment asked by an elderly Ryan at the start of the movie in the present day), but by the end of the film, few have any doubts about the importance of the mission. The narrative that ensues follows Miller and his team as they deal with hidden snipers, homeless French families, and German prisoners. When the platoon finally find Ryan and inform him of the deaths of his brothers, Ryan explains that he cannot leave as he is part of his own mission – holding a key bridge at Ramelle. Exasperated, Miller decides that his group will join Ryan and his group to secure the bridge. In the evening battle that follows, most of Miller’s platoon dies, and he becomes fatally wounded. As Miller is about to die, he whispers to the surviving Ryan to ‘earn it’ and make sure that he lives his life in a way that counts.

Ending where it began, we are transported to the present, and it now becomes clear that the elderly gentleman is Private Francis Ryan. Ryan turns to his wife and asks, ‘Tell me I’m a good man. Tell me I’ve led a good life’. The question is unanswered, but Ryan’s extended family surround him and reassure him with physical signs of affection of his worthiness for this life that merited the sacrifice his comrades made for him, one that consisted of devotion to family and country. ‘Every day’, he says to the grave of Miller, ‘I think of what you said to me that day on the bridge... I hope I’ve earned what all of you have done for me’. It is this statement that both frames the narrative, and challenges the audience to consider a collective response – ‘Have *we* led a good life?’

There are two factors that mark *Saving Private Ryan* as a text of significance in the combat film genre canon: the extent of its international success, and the realistic depiction of its combat scenes (particularly the opening sequence). A number of key factors are important in generating this immersive sense of war and verisimilitude. Firstly, in order to recreate the battle of Normandy, Spielberg exploited a number of filmmaking techniques. Spielberg and cinematographer Janusz Kaminski acknowledged the influence of Robert Capra’s famous photographs<sup>26</sup> of D-Day in

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<sup>26</sup> Capra’s eleven surviving photographs of the Omaha beach landings earned the nickname the ‘Magnificent Eleven’ but he had in fact taken 196 photographs while wading through the water towards the beach. The images were sent to Life magazine in Britain. In the magazine’s haste to develop the images, worker Dennis Banks shut the doors on a wooden locker where

recreating the look and feel of their depiction of the Normandy landing in *Saving Private Ryan*. Whilst Capra's original images were black and white, Spielberg and Kaminski chose to shoot this sequence with the grainy definition of 1940s 16mm film, but in colour – choosing to use desaturated colours (faded green earth tones) to evoke a nostalgic reference to a time in the past and thus attempting to create a powerful sense of 'authenticity' of the landings at Omaha beach. In addition, Spielberg opted to remove the protective coatings from the camera lens and abandoned the usual Steadicam in favour of an image shaker that caused the camera to vibrate when explosions went off (Chapman, 2008, p.24). At times mud, blood and gore fall on to the lens, obscuring the viewer's vision and drawing attention to the camera (a cardinal sin in traditional Hollywood cinema). This particular technique is more aligned with documentary conventions, which again, encourages the audience to identify with this particular perspective and a reading of this film as an authentic representation of the real-life events on June 6, 1944.

Secondly, in addition to this visual manipulation of film techniques, sound plays a particularly important role in the film and a great degree of effort was made to ensure diegetic sound accurately accompanied the Normandy landing sequence. For example, sound engineers did more than just use the correct ammunition and weapons when recording the gun fire, in order to stimulate the aural effect of bullets rippling into bodies the sound editor recorded the noise of rounds being fired into a dead cow in a military uniform – using the same calibre of ammunition as in 1944 (Haggith, 2007, p.179; Chapman, 2008, p.24). It is this unusual attention to both visual *and* aural techniques that helps to differentiate *Saving Private Ryan* from other combat films within the genre.

Strategies to evoke verisimilitude in *Saving Private Ryan* were not restricted to what was directly seen in front of the lens. In order to recreate the fighting at Normandy, Spielberg closely consulted with a team of military advisors – Stephen E. Ambrose,

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the film was drying and 95 of the images melted as the negatives were destroyed. The remaining eleven that were salvageable were blurred and presented to newspaper readers as indexical signs of the fear and chaos felt by those involved in the assault on the beach (Nolan, 2013).

author of *Citizen Soldiers*, and Dale Dye, a retired Marine Corps captain<sup>27</sup> (Basinger, 2003, p. 254; Haggith, 2007, p.179; Chapman, 2008, p.23). Before filming commenced, the principle actors spent ten days in boot camp undergoing basic military training to help them ‘get into role’. Most of the extras that were employed were comprised of present and former soldiers who were not only familiar with weapons and combat exercises, but could help to choreograph the beach assault and subsequent action sequences (Haggith, 2007, p.179; Chapman, 2008, pp.23-24). With a rather macabre adherence to authenticity, Spielberg also insisted in using extras that were real life amputees to act as the men who lost limbs in the battle on Omaha beach (Chapman, 2008, p.24; Haggith, 2007, p.179). This commitment to support authenticity in the film’s production was emphasised prior to and during the rigorous marketing campaign – serving both an ideological and commercial function.

Whilst Spielberg’s use of visual and audio techniques, as well as military advisors and movie extras work together to evoke a convincing (and highly acclaimed) verisimilitude, we see this achieved in a similar vein in the later Vietnam War films of the 1980s such as *Platoon* and *Hamburger Hill*. Indeed, these earlier texts were likewise noted for their impressive depiction of the “true” Vietnam experience (see chapter one). Much of the critical acclaim of verisimilitude in all of these features is beholden to the marketing campaigns of the film. For *Platoon*, Oliver Stone’s identity as a Vietnam veteran was paraded as evidence of the films realism – marking it distinct from its predecessors. For Spielberg, this is even more pronounced in light of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemorations where the wider public seeks to understand the veteran experience. Additionally, the ‘good war’ paradigm is a narrative that tends to be better received by audiences in principle – a war we can remember and grieve with pride. This stands in opposition to Vietnam – a war that retains residual animosity even in these early post-Cold War years.

*Saving Private Ryan* combines a number of traditional WWII narrative conventions to create a nostalgic image of war. Within this idealisation, *Saving Private Ryan* demonstrates some evolution in the narrow conceptualisation of the war as seen in earlier Second World War-time texts (whilst simultaneously redirecting the complex

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<sup>27</sup> In *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* Jeanine Basinger argues that having military advisors was a typical generic convention of the original combat film (p.254).

reconciliation of the trauma of the Vietnam era). There is little question that our mass mediated age has witnessed a revival of interest in understanding the affinities that exist between the problems of the present and the traditions of our past. The evocative power of *Saving Private Ryan* in particular has helped to create a complex tapestry of negotiated texts: an example of what Nora (1989) has termed ‘lieux de memoire’, or ‘sites of memory’. This special type of collective cultural memory and nostalgic thinking has been part of Western discourse since the late seventeenth century when the term “nostalgia” was used to describe an alleged medical ailment of Swiss missionaries who worked in distant lands<sup>28</sup> (Hasian 2001, p. 341). One argument was that the malady was partially cured when people came up with ways of returning to an idealised past – a spatial and temporal space different from a threatening present (Steinwand, 1997, p.9). In more contemporary times, it has been the commercialisation of nostalgia that has allowed millions of voyeurs to recreate the cultural memory of the past (Graham, 1984, p.348).

*Saving Private Ryan* is the kind of complex artefact that both reinforces the need to forget, and the desire to confront what has happened in our past (LaCapra, 1998, pp. 10-46; Bodnar, 2001, p.811). Spielberg achieves this through the careful execution of nostalgia. Spielberg’s cinema contains a deep nostalgia tied mostly to the 1940s – the war, the battle against fascism, and the formation of this “greatest generation”. This conceptualisation is framed by his self-confessed love of the period, admitting that:

“My father filled my head with war stories – he was a radioman on a B-25 fighting the Japanese in Burma. I have identified with that period of innocence and tremendous jeopardy all my life. It was the end of an era, the end of innocence, and I have been clinging to it for most of my adult life” (Spielberg quoted in Sanello, 2002, p.180)

Spielberg’s story was influenced by not only his personal experience, but the work of earlier auteurs that created work in the midst of the war (and post-war) climate such as Hitchcock, Ford, Capra, and Einstein. In particular, the battlefield chaos, the drama of combat and the carnage of war featured in the WWII documentaries of Frank Capra

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<sup>28</sup> The etymological roots of “nostalgia” come from the combination of the Greek words “nostos” (to return home), and “algia” (a painful condition) (Rosaldo, 1989, p.108)



and John Ford can be seen in the first twenty-five minutes of Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*. Other influences for the film can be seen texts such as *The Sullivans* (1944), *Story of G.I Joe* (1945), *A Walk in the Sun* (1945), *Battleground* (1949). Indeed, Spielberg's homage to the era of filmmaking before, and his fascination with nostalgia can be multiplied several times over (see Boggs & Pollard, 2016, pp.108-109).

More explicitly, the narrative of *Saving Private Ryan* is built upon the six core tenets of the traditional WWII combat film cited earlier: the horrors of war are pronounced (courtesy of the twenty-five minute graphic depiction of death and suffering) and the whole narrative is premised upon a noble and morally imperative mission to rescue Ryan; the war is essentially a simple battle between the allies and the Axis powers (the good/evil Manichaeistic divide) exempt from outside political complications; there are no significant females in the narrative; Captain Miller's unit is indeed socially, ethnically and religiously diverse; Captain Miller demonstrates pronounced moral character and professionalism throughout the quest to find Ryan – rallying his troops who doubt the merit in the mission at all; Ryan, an outsider promised to be part of their tightknit group from the onset of the film, is met with hostility, and eventually accepted by the group when they fight alongside one another at the battle of the bridge at Ramelle.

Whilst *Saving Private Ryan* no doubt engages with tropes from the traditional WWII film to create a distinct nostalgic depiction of the war and that “period of innocence”, it does differ from the traditional WWII film in a number of ways. Most significantly, the dominant political and moral values of the 1940s advocated collective goals over individual ones. In this historical context, the attainment of democracy was reliant on reciprocity between individuals and the institutions that governed their lives: people served the nation because they believed that the nation would serve their democratic interests in return (Bodnar, 2001, p.807). Thus, the 1940s call to patriotic service was contingent on assurances of a more democratic society and world. Government leaders such as Franklin D. Roosevelt went to great lengths to make democratic promises in pronouncements like The Four Freedoms. In addition, the Office of War Information (OWI) told Hollywood filmmakers to produce films that not only helped with the conflict, but reminded audiences that it was ‘a people’s war’ which would result in

more social justice and individual freedom (Alpers, 1998). In *Saving Private Ryan* we see a focus on the moral *individual* hero at the expense of the moral or democratic *community*. Spielberg's memory narrative of moral men in *Saving Private Ryan* represents very much the contemporary concern with the individual of the past, present, and future. We see this depicted through subtle nuances throughout the film. After learning the object of their mission, to find and relieve Ryan from his duties, Captain Miller's unit protest at the incongruous nature of their mission, which is resolved only by Miller who reminds them that they are fighting to get home to their families. Miller's response highlights this distinct lack of patriotic "for country" service seen in the traditional features. Indeed, in the three hours of *Saving Private Ryan*, aside from General Marshall's reference to the Bixby letter, there is not a single mention about a Love of Country as a valid cause for the mission. The only justification continues to be this idea that the men do it to go home – to their lives, to their wives, to their families. Captain Miller is eager to obey if it means that he gets his ticket home to see his wife. This is an interesting distinction from traditional WWII films as rather than fighting for the allies, the men in *Saving Private Ryan* appear to fight simply to get home; they fight for the individual, rather than the collective community.

Furthermore, whilst the film is set in the midst of WWII, the focus is not directly on combat between the allies and the Axis powers – but on the mission to save Ryan. As stated by Miller's men, the mission doesn't make sense – from all we know about war, soldiers understand the principle to sacrifice one for many, not the reverse. The immorality of the quest to find Ryan continues to be examined throughout the film, with not a single character stating that the mission is heroic. In a scene set in an abandoned church, Miller defends the loss of 94 men under his command to his surviving unit. Miller justifies his actions by insisting that the sacrifice of those men enabled the lives of 10 or 20 times more to be saved. One of his men identifies that this time the mission *is* the man which leaves Miller's sentiment unresolved. In the traditional WWII narrative, the heroic mission is much more explicit – clear-cut and celebrated. In this context, it becomes more ambiguous and we see the individual challenge the service of the nation and the Love of Country.

The film, produced in a very different historical context to the original cycles of WWII films, also carries with it the burden, lessons, and trauma of Vietnam. Again, in subtle applications, we can see how the events of Vietnam come to provide a further distinction between this contemporary revision of WWII on film, and the original films of the 1940s. In the Vietnam War cycles that preceded this 'good war' war film cycle, trauma is understood as a logical consequence of a difficult, bloody war. In this way we see the maddening effects of the war through the PTSD developed by characters in *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*. In *Saving Private Ryan* the manifestation of trauma is more subtle in light of the good war paradigm. Captain Miller has spent a significant amount of time on duty, away from his home and family. This certainly begins to take its toll and we see subtle exhibitions of this psychological toll through his abruptness with his platoon when discussions turn to service and home, as well as physical hand shaking at subtle times throughout the film. Moreover, whilst the film does present the war as ultimately a manichaeistic conflict, there are some explorations of moral and ethical ambiguity more suited to a Vietnam War feature than a traditional WWII film. This is exemplified in the treatment of both the hero and 'other' subjects.

Ultimately, Spielberg presents the war as savage, but the average American GI who fought in it as not. At its core, the film's argument would have seemed very familiar to audiences in the 1940s: the American soldier was fundamentally a good man who loved his country and his family – and he went to war out of a sense of duty to both (Bodnar, 2001, p.805). The hero figure in *Saving Private Ryan* takes form in Captain Miller, the brave, capable leader. Whilst his characterisation encapsulates many of the traditional WWII tropes, he also functions as the mechanism to challenge the "for country" and community mentality seen in many of the earlier World War II films (a fascinating contradiction). The 'other' takes form in Germans and the other Axis powers – seen first from the brutal onset of the Omaha beach landing. In much of this sequence the focus is not so much on the personification of the enemy, but rather the relentless, merciless killing of the allies upon their arrival to the beach. In this way, the enemy does not tend to be shown in close up, but rather as the culprit behind the never-ending rain of bullets and explosions. In two particular instances within the film, we see the allies confronted with ethical dilemmas around German soldiers. In the opening sequence, we see a number of allied troops mercilessly kill a number of

surrendering German soldiers in an act of vendetta (exemplified by showing Private Adrian Caparzo passing on a Hitler Youth knife to his friend, Private Stanley Mellish (a Jew)). Later in the film, Miller's unit capture a German soldier. One of Miller's men – who earlier argued to spare him – coldly butchers the hostage in an act eerily reminiscent of Vietnam War film brutality.

The film also attempts to address the broader burden of Vietnam through the elderly Ryan. Early in the narrative, Miller states, "Ryan better be worth it". During the final scene of the film an elderly Ryan seeks reassurance that he has led a good life, a life worthy of enormous sacrifice - he asks his wife, "Tell me I'm a good man. Tell me I've led a good life". Whilst the question is not verbally answered, it is clear that Ryan's family believe he has. What this ultimately suggests, then, is that Ryan, and thus America collectively, has successfully carried this burden, lifting some of the weight off the continued guilt of Vietnam. It also functions as a response (and reassurance) to the limited success in the humanitarian engagements of the 1990s in Somalia, Bosnia and Kosovo (Westwell, 2006, p.98).

Whilst we can see how *Saving Private Ryan* engages with the wider politics of the contemporary climate, Spielberg avoided participating in explicit ideological debates surrounding meaning, intent and motivation in regards to the representation of the war. This act (or lack thereof) was to encourage viewers and critics to fill these absences in ways that support polysemic ideological readings of the text. As Hasian (2001) articulates:

"Leftists can congratulate the creators of the film for the graphic depiction of the carnage of the war, and the unanswered questions that haunt the grave scenes. Moderates can identify with Miller's humanism, his willingness to acknowledge the need for occasional reforms in wartime bureaucracies, and his candid belief that this "PR" mission is temporarily keeping him from coming home. For conservatives, the movie shows that the bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood that developed during World War II have not been forgotten and that Americans have worked through their "Vietnam Syndrome". The nation may now be ready to once again recognise

the eternal importance of character, virtue, honour, and sacrifice”  
(Hasian 2001, pp. 351-352).

For Spielberg, earlier WWII centered combat films focused too much on asserting a transparent ideological agenda. For example, during the war, combat films were motivated by a need to encourage enlistment, or to sell war bonds. In the relative immediate aftermath of the war, the focus was on romanticising the conflict – soldiers would die with lovely last words that sounded like they were written by poets. Consequently, Spielberg claims, the representation of the war was not raw enough, not honest enough and shrouded by ulterior ideological motives (which of course, is a claim complex in its own accord) (Spielberg in Hertzberg, 1998, p.32).

### **‘Pearl Harbor’ (2001)**

Michael Bay’s 2001 military-romantic Hollywood blockbuster *Pearl Harbour* built upon the success of Spielberg’s WWII war film revival. The film similarly presents a nostalgic interpretation of an epic event in the WWII narrative and capitalises on a defining moment in American (and global) history. *Pearl Harbor*, whilst falling short of Spielberg’s record breaking box office success, fared remarkably well despite negative critical reception. The film earned \$75 million USD in its opening weekend and went on to gross \$449.2 million USD (IMDB). Likewise, the film received a coveted Oscar and a host of international award nominations. The main criticism for the film stemmed from the romance heavy storyline – a stark distinction from Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*. One particularly vocal critic for the film, Rand Richards Cooper, averred in his review in the *Commonweal* that the film is a startling marriage of a ‘nineteenth century romantic vision assembled so faithfully in a twenty-first century movie’ (Cooper, 2001). Throughout, *Pearl Harbor* conforms to a nostalgic vision of 1940s America, which, as with *Saving Private Ryan*, indicates a loss and longing for an earlier, simpler time in which Americans rallied together for a single cause.

The film’s release coincided with a loss of political direction as demonstrated in the 2000 US presidential elections, which resulted in a hung decision between Republican candidate George W. Bush Jr. and Democrat Al Gore (ultimately a senate decision

would award the election to Bush) (Sunstein & Epstein, 2001, p.1). The timing of the film's release is significant for two major reasons: firstly, the theatrical release was scheduled to coincide with the 60<sup>th</sup> commemorations of the attack on Pearl Harbor and was accompanied by two documentaries made in conjunction with the History Channel and National Geographic that demonstrated the resurrection of the traditional mode of narrating American history (Landy, 2004, p.87; Westwell, 2006, p.100). Secondly, with a release date of June 2001, just three months before the terrorists attacks of 9/11, the film set the stage for a retrospective and regressive view of US history and politics.

*Pearl Harbor* is a romantic drama that employs a "Hollywood" version of history as an emotional backdrop to the romantic narrative that runs throughout. This is demonstrated clearly in the film's opening sequence: rather than introduce us to the history of the events surrounding the Japanese attack, the film presents us with the history of the relationship of the two male protagonists, Rafe (Ben Affleck) and Danny (Josh Hartnett). The storyline is centred upon the friendship of the childhood friends, their journey to become combat pilots, and their competition for the love of the same woman, Evelyn (Kate Beckinsale). The plot unravels across three historical terrains: Rafe and Danny's pilot training (that consequently leads to Rafe's involvement in the Battle of Britain), the term Rafe, Danny and Evelyn spend serving at the Pearl Harbor base prior to and during the Japanese attack, and lastly, the post-Pearl Harbor US bombing mission over Japan, known as the Doolittle Raid (in which Rafe and Danny both participate).

While in pilot training, Rafe meets, and promptly falls in love, with Air Force nurse Evelyn. However, during bombing raids for the Battle of Britain, Rafe's plane is shot down and Danny and Evelyn (now stationed at Pearl Harbor) receive word of Rafe's death. The pair, devastated by the loss, take comfort in one another and become lovers. Just as Evelyn realises that she is pregnant with Danny's child, Rafe returns to Pearl Harbor. We learn that he was stuck in war-torn France and was unable to get word of his survival to Evelyn and Danny. Evelyn decides to stay with Danny because of her pregnancy. The boys predictably fall out, but in a true expression of patriotism, fail to let it get in the way of banding together to fight against the Japanese during the attack on Pearl Harbor and later, as volunteers on the Doolittle Raid.

As with *Saving Private Ryan*, *Pearl Harbor* extends the original canon of Second World War films and employs a number of traditional conventions to evoke a sense of nostalgia and emphasise tenets of the time gone past. Michael Bay's military-romantic interpretation of Pearl Harbor was the latest, most technically sophisticated Hollywood version of the Japanese attack of December 7, 1941. The attack made a considerable impact on international politics and, later, the cinema with a string of films based upon the events of 1941 such as *Air Force* (1943), *December 7th* (1943), *So Proudly We Hail* (1943), *From Here To Eternity* (1953), *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970), and *Midway* (1976). These films represent a broad range of genres including documentary (*December 7<sup>th</sup>*), romantic drama (*From Here to Eternity*, *So Proudly We Hail*) and historical drama (*Air Force*, *Tora! Tora! Tora!*).

*Pearl Harbor* adopts (and at times, extends) the traditional WWII film tropes of these earlier films in its reconceptualization of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Firstly, it is clear that the film attempts to depict the horrors of war (exemplified most explicitly in the reconstruction of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor – a sequence often compared to Spielberg's Omaha Beach scene in the way that it also presents a significant historical event in an extended scene that depicts mass pandemonium, chaos, destruction and death). There is a significant emphasis in *Pearl Harbor* on exploring war in terms of moral order (and thus framing the war as noble and morally imperative). Most explicitly, we see this in the way that the attack on Pearl Harbor is distinctively shown as a sneak attack on a serene tropical island (occupied by heroic, patriotic, innocent Americans), by a (mostly absent) malicious and cunning enemy. Through the trauma of the surprise bombing on the US, the film reinforces the themes of blamelessness, unprotected innocence, and the 'coming of age' of the nation. More implicitly, this trope is developed in one of the film's sub-plots – the exploration of moral order personified by the three lead characters. Weber (2006) identifies that Rafe symbolises a consistent moral clarity, Danny represents lapses in moral judgement, and Evelyn marks the location in which struggles to reconcile questions of morality take place (p.15). In this analysis, Rafe's moral code can be read as an allegory for the US emerging from a state of isolationism – Rafe is the film's 'Captain America' who is always eager to seek opportunities to protect US actions and values into the global context. This is exemplified in a few instances throughout the film, notably, as Rafe

tells his commanding officer when he volunteers for the Battle of Britain, he is not eager to die, 'just eager to matter'. Whilst Rafe maintains moral clarity, Danny tends to find himself morally compromised. For example, unlike Rafe who refused to consummate his relationship with Evelyn before marriage, Danny does the "wrong" thing by allowing comfort between two grieving friends to lead to sex, which led to Evelyn's pregnancy. Unlike the two boys, Evelyn's character's morality is not explored at length. Rather, her function is a space in which the masculine moral struggles of Rafe and Danny are staged. As Weber argues, Evelyn is the location from which the story rights the moral missteps of its lead male characters (2006, p.17). He surmises:

"The moral ruptures and closure experienced by all three lead characters is mirrored in America's historical relationship with Pearl Harbor – Pearl Harbor is both what made America feel vulnerable and what enabled America to take up its proper place in the international moral economics in and after the Second World War" (Weber, 2006, p.18).

Secondly, war is, of course, depicted in melodramatic terms as a battle between good and evil; thirdly, the narrative focuses on the typical white male heroism as exemplified predominately in the two male protagonists, Rafe and Danny. In this instance, a female, Evelyn, does play a significant role in the narrative – but primarily as the highly desirable girlfriend/soon-to-be-Mother; Fourthly, and notably – the military unit is not depicted in the same way as it is in *Saving Private Ryan*, but important to the overall narrative is the inclusion of racial diversity – particularly through the sub-plot centered on the story of Doris "Dory" Miller (Cuba Gooding Jr.), an African-American sailor and chef who shot down Japanese planes during the Pearl Harbor attack, and who was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross for his heroism. Whilst Miller's story fails to make a significant impact on the film's overall narrative because his character exists outside of the love triangle between Rafe, Danny and Evelyn, ideologically, Miller's presence makes a strong statement. Westwell (2006) argues that Miller's racial inclusion reinforces the 'greatest generation' ideal. In his view, the depiction of African-American patriotism, altruism, the ability to distinguish between good and evil, and the fact that despite their marginal position in American



society, they are still willing to defend their limited freedom to the death – making them the paradigm of the specific identity constructed by the ‘greatest generation’ view of the war (2006, p.102); fifthly, the heroes demonstrate pronounced soldierly professionalism in the face of combat and national attack – even despite their complex relationship over their shared love for Evelyn; the last element is not really relevant for this romance centered military narrative – but we can see how elements of this ring true around the Evelyn/Pearl Harbor bombing sub-plots. Collectively, what we see with the narrative of *Pearl Harbor* is a film that transforms an American defeat, into a distinct “good war” narrative – making it a WWII film that is more closely associated with an OWI propagandist piece (replete with themes of national heroism, individual courage, and military triumph), than a twenty-first century critical interpretation of a historically significant event (Boggs & Pollard 2016, p.117).

One of the key criticisms of the film is the claims of authenticity and historical engagement with the events surrounding Pearl Harbor. Much of this issue can be attributed to Bay and writer Randall Wallace’s (whom notably also wrote *We Were Soldiers*) endeavour to revisit Pearl Harbor with a sense of ‘utmost realism”, within the framework of a romantic melodrama (and concentrating so extensively on the love triangle between Rafe, Danny and Evelyn). This contradiction between realist text and romantic drama not only fails to engage with the events of Pearl Harbor realistically, but transforms an American defeat into an improbable victory. This highlights a significant misconception that realism is synonymous with verisimilitude. Like Spielberg before, Bay and his production team interviewed dozens of survivors, researched the historical events up to and around the attack. Yet, the final product, as Boggs and Pollard (2016) highlight, was “riddled with distortions and inaccuracies, lacked historical accuracy, mapping, dwelt on peripheral stories and events at the expense of the main narrative” (p.121). The film *did* strive to present the highly romanticised military event with some degree of verisimilitude. Most significantly in the reconstruction of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. These sequences function in a similar way to the opening sequence of *Saving Private Ryan* – intense and wholly committed to generating an immersive experience of war (however, with significantly more CGI than Spielberg’s extended scene). The use of a strategic point-of-view shot places the viewer in the bomb’s sights just moments before detonation. As with *Saving*

*Private Ryan* the effect of this film technique is to enhance a feeling of helplessness and place the viewer in the perspective of those caught up in the violence of war.

The recycling of WWII themes exemplified in *Saving Private Ryan* and *Pearl Harbor* signals both an emergence of US supremacy in the aftermath of the Cold War, and validates the American idea that it is a nation called to bring enlightenment and technological and military superiority to the rest of the world. Thus *Saving Private Ryan* and *Pearl Harbor* need to be understood as salient films are more than just artefacts that have been produced for commercial purposes. The representations in both these films (and film in general) taps into individual and collective psyches and tells us as much about our present needs and desires as they do about the events that are being depicted. Weisberg (1999) poses some insightful questions in regards to the return of WWII on cinema in the midst of contemporary war:

“The depiction of the Second World War...is subtly influencing the way I and most other Americans think about the crisis in the Balkans. Do these representations of the war in the 40s make us more reluctant? They do sober us to the physical reality of war, but they are nonetheless deeply nostalgic. They recall combat in Europe and the Pacific as the proving ground of manhood, an ultimate test of character, our last national bonding experience” (p.17).

What is happening here is the blurring between fact and fiction. Consequently, the very representation of the ‘Good War’ becomes a catalytic fragment in a much larger tapestry of meaning (Hasian 2001, p. 353).). What Spielberg and Bay achieved with the reinvention of war on cinema with *Saving Private Ryan* and *Pearl Harbor* was the modernisation of the combat genre. They reconfigured old filmic conventions together for a new purpose and challenged audiences by linking gratuitous violence to honest (American) historical events in the Normandy landing and Pearl Harbor bombing.

## **War and Cinema Post-9/11: 2001-2002**

George W. Bush, whilst controversially elected president in January 2001, built upon the established ideas of his predecessors and instilled his own unique take on how America should exercise foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. Upon entering office, Bush had outlined an ambitious domestic agenda that would overhaul Medicare, Social Security and public education; would reinvigorate the military, restore civility to the political system, and help the poor with tax credits for health insurance (Milbank, 2004). However, his priorities were significantly altered following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington on September 11, 2001. It was, of course, the most significant event of President Bush's tenure, and America's recent history: 2,931 confirmed deaths, 47 persons reported dead, 25 missing – for a total of 3,003 victims of the worst terrorist attack on US soil, dwarfing even the attack on Pearl Harbor (Dixon, 2004, p.3). Unlike the Vietnam War, which was hotly contested throughout the United States, the attacks on 9/11 galvanised the American public into a collective call for action – although the enemy being fought was both illusory and highly mobile, spreading through the world in numerous surreptitious cells (Dixon, 2004, p.1).

President Bush responded to the attacks with a comprehensive strategy to protect the American people. As part of this strategic plan and structural reorganisation, Bush also wanted to remove violent regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq that he believed threatened the liberty of America by promoting terrorism. A decision to go to war was always destined to create an insurgence of controversy both on a local and global scale. President Bush's pre-emptive strike against Iraq raised serious questions concerning the theory of 'just war', which permits intervention but on a limited, justifiable basis. Under 'just war theory', intervention is justifiable on three grounds: self-defence, to prevent genocide or flagrant human rights violations, and for humanitarian reasons. A pre-emptive strike to ward off a potential attack does not fit this rationale. Since September 11, 2001, the Bush administration sought to link this terrorist attack to an organised, if not always identifiable, enemy – Al Qaeda, supported by allies in Afghanistan and Iraq (Giglio, 2005, p.218). Hollywood cinema needed to respond to this with an approach that would help to generate support and legitimacy for the war on terror.

The Bush administration considered Hollywood an important industry for gaining potential leverage in the construction of a way of thinking about war that would support and sustain a more aggressive foreign policy stance (Westwell, 2006, p.2). Thus, through the direction of his senior advisor Karl Rove, they established an official partnership with the Hollywood film industry through the creation of the 9/11 Group. The attacks disrupted every form of American cultural production and forced Hollywood studios to not only make changes to existing material in production, but also reshuffle release schedules of films that dealt with particularly sensitive thematic content. *Collateral Damage* (2002) and *Big Trouble* (2002) were moved to later dates out of fear that terrorism (which featured heavily in both films) might have temporarily lost its entertainment value. In addition, because of the growing significance of the intertwined relationship between the 9/11 Group and the US government, the release dates of *Behind Enemy Lines* (2001), *Black Hawk Down* (2001), and *We Were Soldiers* (2002) were moved forward – reflecting the strategic need for Hollywood films representing clear patriotic and pro-military tendencies in a time of political unrest. The revised timeline for cinematic release coincided with a timely declaration of war in the Middle East.

*Black Hawk Down* and *We Were Soldiers* in particular played an important role in reconceptualising the way veterans should be viewed, the credibility of American military strategy, and the notion of military brotherhood. These films extended upon the reconceptualization of realist war narratives established earlier by *Saving Private Ryan* and *Pearl Harbor* and present a narrative that creates an immersive sense of war and verisimilitude throughout. Like the earlier films, the focus is primarily on the individual experience and the violence and trauma of war – without ever asking questions about *why* that violence was occurring at the hands of the US in the first place.

### **‘Black Hawk Down’ (2001)**

*Black Hawk Down* (2001), made by Revolution Studios, directed by Ridley Scott and based on a book of the same title by journalist Mark Bowden, addressed the 1993 US intervention in Somalia. The October 1993 raid left eighteen Americans and more than

a thousand Somalis dead (Orwell, 2001). Due to the extensive number of casualties, any attempt to re-define the collective memory of the raid through Hollywood would have to somehow establish that the US had the best of intentions (Markovitz, 2004, p.212). *Black Hawk Down*, produced and released in the midst of the return to the 'greatest generation' paradigm in 1990s Hollywood war film, endeavours to achieve this by reframing this tragedy as a success, and an example of US valour and heroism.

The film's opening credits establish that the US-led intervention in Somalia is fuelled by a humanitarian cause – to bring an end to a decade long famine. The film is centred on an Army Special Rangers mission to arrest key rebel leaders in Somalia. However, when the mission goes wrong, the Rangers become stranded in hostile parts of Mogadishu. As a rescue mission commences, two Black Hawk helicopters are shot down and another two convoys meander, lost, and under attack. Mogadishu is depicted as chaotic and threatening. Not dissimilar from what is seen in *Saving Private Ryan* and *Pearl Harbor*, the film represents unrelenting, extended combat.

As could be expected with the recent formation of the 9/11 Group (and the legacy of government and military engagement in the midst of international conflict), the US military was extensively involved in the production of *Black Hawk Down*. The Pentagon saw the film as tactical and an important opportunity to help depict both the distinctive valour of US soldiers during the 1993 Somalia operation, as well as the challenges of conducting operations in ambiguous situations that forces may encounter in the contemporary post-9/11 climate (Suid, 2002, p.670). Like many Hollywood war films that had gone before, the Department of Defense, led at the time by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, invited the actors in the film to participate in training at assorted military bases. In addition, they provided Scott with two soldiers who had participated in the actual raid depicted in the film to serve as military advisors – again, a fairly common practice in Hollywood war film. What was distinct about this particular film, however, was that it was the first time that US troops were sent to a foreign country to aid the production of a movie (Markovitz, 2004, p.211). The team that was sent over to Morocco where filming took place consisted of eight helicopters, more than one hundred US Rangers, and an extensive team of military personnel to serve as backup for the Rangers. The officer in charge of the Rangers averred that 'what's unique about the military supporting this film...is that you actually had the

units which participated in the military operation eight years ago, here doing it again. In fact, we have three or four of the actual veterans of that operation flying the helicopters while we film it' (Columbia, 29). Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz added to the dialogue about the film by stating that *Black Hawk Down* was 'a powerful film' and added, 'I think it's good for this time. It reminds people what it's all about' (Roberts, 2002). Interestingly, most critics viewed the extensive military involvement and government support for the film as evidence of the film's realism, rather than its value as propaganda.

The political value of the film to the Bush administration is all too evident. Originally scheduled to be screened in US theatres in March 2002, the film was rushed forward for a December 2001 release. At the time, there was widespread speculation around where the war on terror would lead after the initial bombing campaign in Afghanistan. Somalia was seen as a likely refuge for Taliban leaders and al Qaeda operatives fleeing Afghanistan so it was thought to be a likely target. Before embarking on any new military actions in Somalia, the Bush administration sought to work through 'the ghosts of earlier excursions into the country' (Markovitz, 2004, p.212). Indeed, the "Black Hawk" team attempted to do this by repositioning the raid in Somalia not as a disaster, but rather as a heroic tale of American soldiers looking out for each other in dire circumstances (Orwell, 2001). When questioned about whether the film's intent was to provide a revision of a rather grim historical event, Mr Roth, the chief of Revolution Studios, stated "to the press, Somalia means disaster. Our job is to see past that and shift the focus to tales of individual heroism". Further, he asserted that his team would work to assure audiences that the events on October 1993 were "not America's darkest hour, but America's brightest hour". In a controversial attempt to justify the raid in the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy, he went as far to argue that the soldiers in Somalia were not unlike the "fire fighters and police in the World Trade Centre, who were in the wrong place at the wrong time" (Orwell, 2001).

In the opening moments of the film, alongside images of emaciated Somali corpses and grieving family members we see text that informs us:

'Years of warfare among rival clans causes famine on a biblical scale. Three hundred thousand civilians die of starvation.

Mohamed Farrah Aidid, the most powerful of the warlords, rules the capital, Mogadishu. He seizes international food shipments at the ports. Hunger is his weapon. The world responds. Behind a force of twenty thousand US Marines, food is delivered and order is restored. April 1993. Aidid waits until the marines withdraw and then declares war on the remaining UN peacekeepers. In June, Aidid's militia ambush and slaughter twenty-four Pakistani soldiers, and begin targeting American personnel. In late August, America's elite soldiers, Delta Force, Army Rangers, and the 160<sup>th</sup> SOAR are sent to Mogadishu to remove Aidid and restore order. The mission was to take three weeks, but six weeks later Washington was growing impatient.'

This narrative suggests that the US intervention in Somalia was selfless and ultimately focused on alleviating the 'biblical scale' famine ravaging the nation. Further, this text implies that US actions were defensive in that US personnel were targeted: clearly this was a necessary mission. Situating the film in the context of the real-life events in this way is certainly necessary, however, the problem resides in the fact that this is the only real context that is provided for the events of October 1993. The film fails to show the indiscriminate killing of Somali civilians and presents a misleading representation of the number of casualties taken at the hands of the US military. Significantly, missing is any discussion on the role played by both the United States and the international community in the cultivation of the crisis, and, significantly, the film ignores the fact that before leaving the United Nations to move into Somalia, the US had backed Aidid and Ali Mahdi in a conflict with another clan chief: *Black Hawk Down* erases any sense of specificity and culpability of the conflict (Markovitz, 2004, pp.216-217; Westwell, 2006, p.106).

Whilst the film fails to depict much historical accuracy, the failure to ask why the Somalis were so angry at the United States in the first place is key to the film's process of dehumanising the 'other'. Markovitz argues that if US motivations and policies were as pure as we've been lead to believe, then the only logical reaction on the part of the Somalis would have been to display gratitude. Any hostility, much less expression of rage, therefore seems completely irrational (2004, p.216). As is, the lack

of context enables the narrative to seamlessly depict the Somali ‘other’ as a brutal threat. After capturing two of Aidid’s top officers who had been spotted in downtown Mogadishu, things go badly very fast for the American troops. Armed groups of Somalis attack the Americans and manage to shoot down two Black Hawk helicopters. The earlier images of vulnerable and mourning Somalis that opened the film are hastily replaced with scene after scene of Somali people as undifferentiated and an unthinkable brutal threat. While American troops fight for their lives and the lives of their military ‘brothers’, they are attacked by hordes of Somalis intent on their deaths. No distinctions are made between Aidid’s militia and Somali civilians – in the heat of battle one American officer yells, ‘hostiles advancing... Be advised women and children among them... We are fighting the whole city’. Thus, the sheer magnitude of Somali casualties is depicted as completely justified. Whenever one Somali is killed, another quickly takes their place with no cinematic afterthought (another example of a contemporary interpretation of the WWII film tropes). In contrast, much like the battle scene on the Hill in *Hamburger Hill*, the camera lingers on each American death or injury. In particular, one US attack is presented so intensely that the soundtrack momentarily ceases in order to emphasise the significance of the assault on American innocence.

### **‘We Were Soldiers’ (2002)**

The justification and endorsement of war, and war’s progressive role that is seen in *Black Hawk Down* leads to a return of Vietnam to the cinema screens in *We Were Soldiers* (2002). *We Were Soldiers* suggests a re-evoking of the domino theory where intervention in trouble spots is justified and therefore, there is no room for questioning and undermining US foreign policy (Chapman, 2008, p.238). Whilst engaging with a war now over three decades in the past, *We Were Soldiers* is more closely aligned with ‘greatest generation’ combat cinema rather than the original phases of Vietnam War film: it speaks to the confidence of the American self-image at the turn of the twenty-first century where the ideal hero has returned, reclaimed his masculinity, and is ready for battle. Indeed, the way that Vietnam is represented in this contemporary context reinforces the conservative trope of this decade, which essentially removes the contentious facets of the war present in earlier Vietnam War films (as discussed in chapter one). Furthermore, the context of the film’s production creates a particular



ideological construction of both Vietnam, and the current conflict in the Middle East: 2002 was an important time to establish a unified America for the promise of 9/11 retaliation. *We Were Soldiers* produces specific depictions of the veteran, the enemy 'other', and brotherhood that together function to create a revisionist account of war, and provide a promise for the future.

Based on the memoir "We Were Soldiers...Once and Young" by US commander Lt. Gen. G. Moore, the film *We Were Soldiers*, directed by Randall Wallace (who also wrote and produced *Pearl Harbor*), automatically evokes a nostalgic sense of wholeness that perfectly captures the conservative nature of post-9/11 and 'greatest generation' Hollywood war cinema. The film presents no concession to the dominant orthodoxy of the war cinema of the 1970s and 1980s, instead, American military strategy is framed as noble and morally imperative (a key feature of the traditional WWII film). *We Were Soldiers* is centred around the first major battle between the armies of North Vietnam and the United States at Ia Drang in Southern Vietnam during three days in November 1965 between North Vietnamese and US troops. The battle was led by US Lt. Col. Moore (Mel Gibson) and witnessed by journalist Joseph L. Galloway (Barry Pepper). Like many war films, the main action in *We Were Soldiers* unfolds in three distinct stages. First, the film depicts Lt. Col. Moore's physical, mental and spiritual preparation of his young troops for combat in Vietnam, secondly, the film attempts to assault the audience with the realism of war: platoons are cut off from their units, battle lines broken, and serial assaults kill both friend and foe in the battle of the Ia Drang Valley (known by soldiers in Vietnam as the 'Valley of Death'). The final stage reflects the implications of the war in the aftermath of battle.

The film begins by situating the men in the broader context of life and family outside of the battlefield. During this segment, life at Fort Benning is extensively depicted. Unlike any of the earlier Vietnam War films, this context includes exploring the lives of the wives (and children) left behind while their husbands train and serve in combat. Interestingly, roughly the same amount of screen time is dedicated to both the soldiers' and their wives experiences on the army base. Once the men are deployed, the events at Fort Benning are centred on Moore's wife, Julie Moore (Madeleine Stowe) who cares for their five children whilst taking up the de facto role as the

leader of the other spouses. Her role primarily becomes chaplain/counsellor once the men are in the throws of battle. The Yellow Cab company are utilised by the defense force to deliver telegrams to the wives of those men who have died in battle which becomes an emotional experience as the film progresses and more spouses receive the news of the deaths of their loved ones. Moore makes herself available for support with each telegram delivery, comforting the women whose stories are seldom told in the context of Hollywood Vietnam War film. Drawing on Wallace's previous work with *Pearl Harbor*, during this sequence we see a reference to the scene in which Rafe (Ben Affleck) returns to Hawaii after being reported dead. In the instance of *We Were Soldiers*, a scene develops in which a Yellow Cab pulls up in front of a house. The wife inside automatically presumes the worst, only to find him in the cab – returning home.

By this stage, *We Were Soldiers* has established itself as a different kind of Vietnam War film – one, it seems, heavily influenced by this cycle of WWII filmic nostalgia. As such, the politics of the film are presented very differently from those Vietnam films explored in chapter one. Where texts in the dominant period of Vietnam War film engaged with the contemporary challenges of reconciling the war from a US perspective, *We Were Soldiers* attempts to treat the war as amoral and apolitical. In this film, *both* US and Vietnamese soldiers are presented as simply doing a job, not fighting for abstract political ideologies – but fighting for brotherhood, and for the love of the man standing next to them. As Hart argues, it is this representation that perfectly encapsulates the ideal contemporary attitude of a soldier in the age of the war on terror (2016, p.146). Indeed, Wallace has openly attested to the fact that *We Were Soldiers* was intended to highlight the lives of soldiers at home and in combat – to the exclusion of commentary on the politics of war. Furthermore, in the DVD featurette, author of the original text, US commander Lt. Gen. G. Moore, echoes that “the message with the movie [is] hate war, love the American warrior” (Moore, 2002, Hart, 2016, p.146).

Wallace's attempt to present the war apolitically manifests in the way he focuses not on who wins or loses the battle, but rather on the bonds of brotherhood between soldiers. One of the primary ways this is achieved is by representing the soldier subject from both sides of the frontline. Indeed, *We Were Soldiers* goes out of its way

to present the Vietnamese soldier as noble – unlike many of the Vietnam War films of the past. The North Vietnamese soldiers are neither demonised nor celebrated, but are humanised. A dedication at the start of the film paves the way for this approach of representing the enemy, whereby not only the American soldiers who fell at Ia Drang are commemorated, but also “the members of the People's Army of North Vietnam who died in that place”. In contrast to cinematic depictions of a brutal and savage ‘other’ in *Black Hawk Down*, the ‘other’ in *We Were Soldiers* returns to the 1980s Asian super-soldier stereotype whilst also adopting characteristics of the 1990s greatest generation combatant. Vietcong soldiers are shown in close-up shots where, for the first time in Hollywood cinema, the audience has the opportunity to begin to sympathise and better understand this enemy. Unlike the use of close-up shots in *Hamburger Hill* (which were used exclusively in combat sequences to accentuate the moment Vietnamese soldiers were fatally wounded), *We Were Soldiers* employs this technique to accentuate the humanity of the enemy. Subsequently, there is a sense of comradeship and brotherhood within the Vietnamese side that has not been displayed in previous Hollywood Vietnam War film<sup>29</sup>.

There is an explicit attempt to give a face and mind to the Vietnamese ‘other’ through the character of Colonel Huu An (Don Duong). For example, in the midst of the battle between the two sides, Colonel Huu An is shown on top of a deserted hill at sunrise praying for all the men who had lost their lives in the war so far. A close-up shot of the dead Vietnamese soldiers then pans across the screen. This evocation of mourning and grieving for the lost lives of these soldiers provides a stark contrast to the normal celebration of their deaths that Hollywood has represented in the past. Furthermore, *We Were Soldiers* aligns Colonel Moore with Vietnamese Colonel Huu during the immediate events that lead up to the conflict in the Ia Drang Valley, and combat itself. Both men are depicted as smart and intuitive. The enemy knows the terrain and has the advantage of surprise, but is impressed at the way the Americans improvise and exercise their own show of strength and ingenuity. Parallels throughout the film show

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<sup>29</sup> This significant reconceptualization of the ‘other’ is seen in another feature, four years later. In 2006 Clint Eastwood released two films, *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima* that both orientate around the bloody siege on Mount Suribachi in Japan. *Flags* is produced from the American perspective, and *Letters* from the Japanese. The films are significant for the combat genre as, for the first time, an historical event is depicted from the perspective of both combatants. An extensive analysis of these films is beyond the scope of this thesis but it worth noting in an analysis of the ‘other’.

that natural leadership abilities link Moore and Colonel Huu An as kindred spirits. For example, Huu An is seen on a radio commanding his soldiers to take over the creek bed, strategic to their battle plan. As he puts the radio down, the shot cuts to another hand holding a similar radio. In this scene the radio lifts to reveal that the hand belongs to Colonel Moore who instructs his own troops to protect the creek bed, stating that this will be the next area to be attacked. In essence, this parallel functions to smooth over the contradictions in traditional Vietnam War film.

Rather than being about the specificity of war, *We Were Soldiers* focuses on an isolated conflict (the battle in the Valley of Death) and situating the lead characters – from both sides of the conflict – within a framework of nobility, valour and above all, brotherhood. As a result, the film attempts to shift the whole Vietnam debacle away from the external political situation that caused the conflict in the first place: revoking any sense of responsibility. The broader conflict is seen not as a glorified act, but rather what appears to be the tragic consequence of actions out of the control of any soldier, or broader political institution. In the midst of the post-9/11 intervention uncertainty, this narrow viewpoint of wartime storytelling plays an important ideological function. Vietnam, in many ways, informs the developing war on terror narrative. Reducing Hollywood's narrative of Vietnam to a simple matter of war-making and duty helps to lay a precedent for the unravelling war on terror narrative – thus attempting to reduce animosity and hostility within public discourse surrounding another controversial intervention. In theory, it is far more difficult to oppose a war that is ideologically presented as a simple matter of honour, duty and moral responsibility, rather than another invasion, founded on misguided information about weapons of mass destruction.

The contemporary context provided the ideal place for this exploration of the 'good war' paradigm amidst the uncertainty of the post-Cold War political landscape – blending old filmic conventions with a modern reconceptualising of combat to both re-iterate the easily identifiable WWII narrative, and reconcile lingering Vietnam War animosity. In this way, we can see how the shifting social and political climate plays a vital role in the construction of war narratives. Representations in Hollywood war cinema that depict the nature of war, the cause for combat, and the strength in coming together as a brotherhood are relevant and politically necessary in order to succeed in

the war against terrorism. Whilst the terrorist attacks were unforeseen, the framework for the revision of war in its aftermath had been (conveniently) well established as exemplified in the return and reinvigoration of the traditional WWII war film (as seen in *Saving Private Ryan* and *Pearl Harbor*). It was the perfect context for the revision of other twentieth century interventions to be repurposed for the 9/11 military (government/Hollywood) campaign. *Black Hawk Down* and *We Were Soldiers* can be seen, then, as both extensions of the greatest generation revival of the 1990s, and products of a new historical and political climate. Within this framework, the Hollywood war film presented war narratives that created an immersive sense of war and verisimilitude – drawing on documentary-style, military resources, point of view and camerawork to depict the war as ‘realistically’ as possible – thus propagating a very specific government endorsed war narrative (particularly in the aftermath of 9./11). As a result, there was a very distinctive (and deliberate) characterisation of both the American soldier, and the other. In the dawn of the war on terror, Hollywood re-imagined the Second World War, the raids in Somalia, and the Vietnam War in such a way that once again, both the American and Western community can see value in their collective actions and be proud of their past.

## Chapter Three

### Hollywood 9/11 War Film

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The immediate response to the attacks of September 11 presented striking similarities to the US response to the December 7, 1941 Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor and America's subsequent entry into World War II. Both events resulted in massive military campaigns; both events affected people profoundly. Pearl Harbor and 9/11 initiated widespread public support for military retaliation and quickly spawned massive military campaigns. Hollywood was similarly affected – both events launched new film cycles that produced a series of significant texts in the war film genre more specifically (Pollard, 2011, p. 3). Chapter two described the 'greatest generation' cycle of Hollywood war films from the late 1990s to the early 2000s that immediately the Vietnam War cycle and examined the thematic content of exemplary texts and how they contributed to the consolidation of war and cinema in a revival of World War II nostalgia. In addition, the previous chapter introduced a discussion on the events of September 11, 2001 and how the terrorist attacks impacted the Hollywood film industry and the way in which war was represented in cinema. This chapter extends this by providing a more detailed examination of post-9/11 Hollywood war film in the first decade after the attacks. The focus is to explore the relationship between film, politics and context as the Hollywood film industry attempts to respond to the post-9/11 social and political climate. During this period of social crisis, the war film genre suffered extensive and repetitive failures at the box office. This chapter will attempt to understand these film failures by situating them within the broader historical context.

The inconceivable events of September 11 2001, which led to the US invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, marked a point in which the US was transformed politically, socially, and culturally. On that morning, a commercial aircraft crashed into one of the towers of the World Trade Center (WTC) in New York City. Shortly thereafter, another plane ploughed into the remaining WTC tower. Within 1 hour and 42 minutes, both 110 story towers collapsed. During that same hour, a third plane hit the Pentagon in Washington, while a fourth plane crashed in a

field in Pennsylvania (after the passengers had heard of the previous hijackings and attempted to regain control from the hijackers on their flight).

As the events of that Tuesday morning unfolded live across television networks all over the world, many people have said that watching the World Trade Centre collapse was like watching a movie – simply because they had no other frame of reference in the face of such apocalyptic destruction (Dixon, 2004, p.9). Thinking about September 11 is almost impossible without thinking about film – whether one witnessed the events firsthand, or watched them on television. Given that the event was orchestrated as a visual spectacle, there have been multiple reports of New York residents admitting their first thoughts were in fact that someone was making a film. For example, watching the attacks unfold from his car in a New York side street near the doomed buildings, a witness compared the experience to the eruption of Mount Vesuvius:

“It was like Vesuvius; there was... something volcanic about the quality of fire and smoke pouring out of the huge black gash in the building’s side, which directly faced those of us who were looking at it from the north. But at the time, the first, irrational thought that came into my staggered mind was that someone was making a blockbuster disaster movie” (Lacey & Paget, 2015).

Indeed, screenwriter for *The Siege* (1998) Lawrence Wright explained the event of 9/11 as “cinematic in a kind of super-real way. It was too Hollywood” (quoted in Garcia, 2002). Film critic David Thomson agreed:

“There was a horrible way in which the ghastly imagery of September 11 was stuff we had already made for ourselves as entertainment first. We had been gloating over [such imagery], making merry with it for a long time” (Thomson quoted in Garcia, 2002).

Comparisons to disaster movies suggest both a point of reference in an unfathomable situation, and how powerfully screen fiction helped in offering a way out of disbelief

(Lacey & Paget, 2015; Dixon, 2004, p.9). The events of that day shook conceptualisations about who Americans are individually and collectively, and what the nation represents to the rest of the world – particularly during the uncertainty that surrounded the response to the attacks. Questions about *what* the response ought to be were negotiated, but also the morality of that response. More so than we have seen before, the 9/11 attacks, and the ensuing war on terror, marked a symbolic site in which the popular narrative resources of Hollywood cinema joined with US foreign policy and objectives to contest issues of morality, and national, international and individual subjectivities (Weber, 2006, pp. 2, 4).

### **A New *New* World Order**

Today, at the start of a new century, we are again engaged in a war unlike any our nation has fought before – and today like Americans in Truman’s day, we are laying the foundations for victory. The enemies we face are different in many ways from the enemy we faced in the Cold War. In the Cold War, we deterred Soviet aggression through a policy of mutually assured destruction... The terrorists have no borders to protect, or capital to defend. They cannot be deterred – but they will be defeated... In this new war we have to set up a clear doctrine... America will not wait to be attacked again. We will confront threats before they fully materialise. We will stay on the offense against the terrorists, fighting them abroad so that we do not have to face them at home... The security of our nation depends on the advance of liberty in other nations... So we are pursuing a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East. I believe the desire for liberty is universal, and by standing with democratic reformers across a troubled region we will extend freedom to millions who have not known it – and lay the foundation of peace for generations to come...



– Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy at  
West Point, May 27, 2006<sup>30</sup>

9/11 was, of course, the most significant event in President Bush's term in office and thereby dictated his approach to military, foreign policy and national security for the remainder of his tenure. At the time of the attacks, Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals – Americans of all political viewpoints – felt an upsurge of patriotism. The country saw an outpouring of sympathy and aid for the victims of the attacks and their families, along with a rising tide of anger toward those who had inspired, planned, and carried out the attacks (Steffoff, 2011, p.12). Unified in their immediate response to the events of that day, both political parties agreed on the urgent necessity of a legislative response to 9/11. Republicans were traditionally associated with a desire for stronger law enforcement powers, but in this instance, the Democrats also believed that the American people expected them to pass new laws that would make it easier for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and other agencies to combat terrorism. Both parties knew that they would be expected to act quickly in the hope of preventing any further imminent threats (Steffoff, 2011, p.12; Etzioni, 2004, p.28).

Only a day after the attacks on September 11, the Department of Justice received instructions from Attorney General John D. Ashcroft to research and write the draft of a far-reaching legislative package. The result of this would eventually be the USA Patriot Act (expanded in full it stands for “Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001”) (Steffoff, 2011, p.13; Etzioni, 2004, p.28). The Patriot Act is a complex document but in essence it is focused on issues of national security and sanctions a number of legislative freedoms in regards to collecting information about US citizens. Highlighted in Dixon (2004, pp. 2-3). The Act has created a number of fundamental changes to Americans' legal rights (see appendix figure 1). The Patriot Act has been praised, criticised, reviewed, and revised since it was signed into law on October 26, 2001 (a mere six weeks after the attacks of September 11). During the Bush

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<sup>30</sup> Bush, G. W. (2006) *Commencement Address at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York*, May 27, 2006. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=83>

presidency, and later, the Obama Administration (when he took office in 2009), facets of the Patriot Act have been tested in court cases – some of which reached the US Supreme Court<sup>31</sup>. Today, many supporters feel that the Act is now what its authors intended it to be – America’s most powerful legislative weapon against terrorists (Steffoff, 2011, p.13). To its critics, however, it is also the greatest threat to civil liberties since the Red Scare of the 1940s and 1950s (Dixon, 2004, p.2; Steffoff, 2011, p.13; Kellner, 2010, p.1).

As a result of September 11 and the interpretation of the events of that day as an act of terrorism and war against America, President Bush shifted the domestic focus away from downplaying borders and increasing trade and economic growth (which was a characteristic of the Clinton era), to focusing more on security and military concerns (characteristic of the Bush Snr era) (Martin & Steuter, 2010, p. 105). Douglas Kellner argues that the Bush administration used the events of 9/11 to promote its agenda and build up the US military as a hegemonic force to generate the “new world order” that his father, Bush Senior, had wanted to create at the end of the Gulf War<sup>32</sup> (Kellner, 2003, p.26). 9/11 seemed to be the catalyst for the George W. Bush administration to renounce arms treaties it had already opposed and thus abandon any notion of arms control worldwide. In addition, it appeared that the administration used the September 11 attacks to legitimate an increased military budget and series of military interventions, to test and build new nuclear weapons, to threaten the likes of Iran and Iraq with military attacks, and to readjust foreign policy ideology from multilateralism to an “America first” unilateralism that threatened to generate an era of Terror War and a new post-Cold War arms race (Kellner, 2003, p.6; p.23).

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<sup>31</sup> The most notable of which was the case of *Hamdi v. Rumsfeld*, 542 U.S. 507, 2004. A habeas corpus petition was brought on behalf of Yaser Hamdi (an American citizen) who was being detained indefinitely at the US naval base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba as an illegal combatant after being captured in Afghanistan in 2001. The Supreme Court ruled that detainees, whether American citizens or not, retain their rights, at least to a legal hearing, even if held at Guantanamo. Following the Court’s decision on October 9, 2004, the US government released Hamdi without charge and deported him to Saudi Arabia (Barbash, 2004; Hook, 2016).

<sup>32</sup> See chapter two for more on President Bush Snr’s “A New World Order” ideology.

The Bush Doctrine<sup>33</sup> provided an intellectual framework for launching the global war on terrorism, including the overthrow of the Taliban government in Afghanistan and the Iraq war. It also provided the context for identifying Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as an “axis of evil”<sup>34,35</sup> that allegedly possessed “weapons of mass destruction” that could be used against the US (and was used as justification for invading Iraq on March 20, 2003) (Hastedt, 2009, p.26; Lieber, 2006, p.265). Although not officially outlined until September 20, 2002, Bush made his doctrine known in his Government address to cadets at the United States Military Academy at West Point on June 1, 2002. During his speech, George W. Bush proclaimed a new “doctrine” that the US would strike first against its enemies. This signalled a major shift in US policy from Cold War defence doctrines of deterrence and containment, to pre-emptive engagement that would “confront the worst threats before they emerge” (Bush, 2002, para. 18-19). On August 26, 2002 after a summer of debate on the US going to war against Iraq to seek and destroy its weapons of mass destruction, US Vice President Dick Cheney applied this new pre-emptive strike and unilateralist doctrine to Iraq, arguing that the leaders of the United States have a responsibility to immediately address the “mortal threat” of Saddam Hussein’s regime being in possession of weapons of mass destruction. For Cheney and the Bush administration, “the risks of inaction are far greater than the risk of action” (Cheney, 2002, para. 38). Some argue Cheney’s speech was a response to many former generals and high-level members of

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<sup>33</sup> Beginning with the earliest years of the Cold War, US foreign policy grand strategy has come to be associated with a series of presidential doctrines that set forward the goals and objectives of US foreign policy and the means that would be used to achieve them (Hastedt, 2009, p.26). The Bush doctrine was ‘officially’ outlined on September 20, 2002 with the release of ‘The National Security Strategy of the United States’. However, facets of his approach were known since his campaign for office in June 1999. The Bush doctrine is highly contentious with some arguing that there were in fact multiple doctrines. In his book “The Bush Tragedy”, Jacob Weisberg identified six Bush Doctrines: Bush Doctrine 1.0 was Unipolar Realism (07/03/99–10/09/01), Bush Doctrine 2.0 was With Us or Against Us (11/09/01–31/05/02), Bush Doctrine 3.0 was Pre-emption (01/06/02–05/11/03), Bush Doctrine 4.0 was Democracy in the Middle East (06/11/03–19/01/05), Bush Doctrine 5.0 was Freedom Everywhere (20/01/05–7/11/06), and Bush Doctrine 6.0 (08/11/06–20/01/09) is the “absence of any functioning doctrine at all” (Froomkin, 2008; Weisberg, 2008)

<sup>34</sup> This is a term coined in Bush’s January 2002 State of Union Address (see <https://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>)

<sup>35</sup> The term also connects with a later discussion on the impact of the rising popularity of comic books post-9/11. President Bush permeated political discourse with comic book terminology that engaged with the binary opposition between good and evil that dates back to World War II through his description of Iran, Iraq and North Korea as an “axis of evil” (Hassler-Forest, 2011, p.134).

the first Bush administration who had reservations about the particular unilateralist US attack against Iraq that ‘hawks’ within the administration were urging (Kellner, 2003, p.20).

On September 20, 2002, it appeared the position of these ‘hawks’ had triumphed. The Bush administration released the 35-page ‘National Security Strategy of the United States’ document that signalled some of the most significant shifts in US foreign policy since the end of the Cold War (and officially confirmed the Bush doctrine that we had seen develop over Bush’s latter career in particular). In this report, the United States announced its intention to “defend just peace against threats from terrorists and tyrants” and act “against such emerging threats before they are fully formed” (legitimizing unilateral and preemptive strikes in the name of ‘counterproliferation’). Furthermore, the United States sought to bring “the hope of democracy, development, free markets, and free trade to every corner of the world”. The strategy also made it clear that the United States “will not hesitate to act alone, if necessary, to exercise our right of self-defence by acting pre-emptively...Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equalling, the power of the United States” (United States Government, 2002; Mingst, 2006, p.131; Kellner, 2003, p.20). This strategy is proactive and includes use of the military even without international support. As Jon Western asserts, “the Bush doctrine is the first time we have had a grand strategy that combines an ambitious vision to transform the world with unrivalled political and military power” (2006, p.105).

### **Politics, Context, and the Hollywood War Film**

As demonstrated in chapters one and two, there are a number of recurring themes in Hollywood film in the past three decades that reflect some of the key events and social, political, and economic conflicts of the time. Many of these films resonate with, and can be read within the history of the social and political context of their period – providing key insights into specific historical persons, events or eras. As Kellner argues, contextualising films in their field of production, distribution and reception can help to illuminate the multiple (and sometimes contradictory) meanings of films, genre, and filmmakers (2010, p.12).

Since the early twentieth century, film and media culture has been a battleground between competing social and political ideologies with some screen media texts (film, documentary, television) advancing liberal positions, and others conservative. The screen media response to 9/11 and the war on terror is divided between those that supported the Bush administration's war on terror, and those in opposition to the war. Predictably, as Pollard argues, those that questioned and attacked the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were liberals and progressives, while those that supported the wars and the Bush administration antiterrorism policies (notably the Patriot Act) were conservative (2011, p.31).

As the war progressed, it became increasingly more unpopular both at home and with the international community – particularly after Iraq fell in 2003 and no Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) were found. Criticism intensified during 2004 and 2005 with Bush's re-election and the continuing conflict in Iraq. Film, then, reflected this variety of impulses: some films seemed to encourage the warrior spirit, others questioned it, while others avoided the issue altogether (Dixon, 2004, p.1). Furthermore, Hollywood cinema went a long way towards giving voice to the debate that had generally been muted in the public sphere, and began to more overtly reflect contemporary social discontent.

There was negative media coverage about the war as early as 2003 with *The Boston Globe* being the first media outlet to make the Vietnam War analogy in June 2003; however in many ways 2004 was the crucial year for the exploration of social discontent in screen media. In 2004, Bush secured his hugely contentious victory<sup>36</sup>, it was the year of Moore's controversial *Fahrenheit 9/11*, and it was the year that public opinion seemed to move against the Bush Doctrine and the major policy shifts it had executed (namely the Patriot Act and the way it infringed upon civil rights) (Barker, 2011, p.8). In the same year, the Abu Ghraib scandal was brought to public attention – firstly as a story aired on *60 Minutes II* on April 28, then by Seymour Hersh (who broke the story of the Mai Lai Massacre during the Vietnam War) in an expose run by *The New Yorker* (Hersh, 2004). In June, the 9/11 Commission Report was released

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<sup>36</sup> Bush's margin of victory in the popular vote was the smallest ever for a reelected incumbent president (Gizzi et. al, 2008, p.265).

and it concluded that there was no collaborative relationship between Iraq and al-Qaeda and that there was no “compelling case” that Iraq had either planned or perpetrated the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre (The 9/11 Commission Report, 2004, p.334). The Bush administration dismissed the 9/11 Commission Report by bluntly stating that commission members were not privy to the same inside information that they had access to, and that the Abu Ghraib abuses were not sanctioned by either the administration or by “upper-echelon” military personnel (Markert, 2011, p.60).

Anti-war protests gained momentum in 2004-2005. In 2004, antiwar campaigners, led by activist Cindy Sheehan, protested outside the Bush ranch in Crawford, Texas but were not given wide credence by the mass media. Only glimpses of demonstrators were seen on the news when the press covered the story – giving the impression that the sentiment to bring the troops home was limited to a small, marginalised segment of the population (somewhat reminiscent of the student protestors in the early days of the Vietnam conflict) (Markert, 2011, p.60). It wasn’t until September 2005 that the first large-scale antiwar protest took place (and was sufficiently portrayed in the press). The protest comprised over 150,000 demonstrators who marched in downtown Washington and past the White House to demand the president end the war in Iraq. It was the largest show of antiwar sentiment in the nation’s capital since the conflict in Iraq began (Dvorak, 2005).

In these heightened contentious years (2004-2005) people were discussing the war more and beginning to challenge the administration’s preeminent position. Film became an important mechanism for keeping the issue alive and encouraged audiences to consider the conflict in the Middle East more than they otherwise might. With the creation of the 9/11 Group (see chapter two) and the strengthened relationship between Hollywood and government in this politically fragmented context, the 9/11 war film functioned ideologically to legitimise contemporary action and intervention in the shadow of the violation of the September 11 attacks by a terrorist organisation comprised of a Middle Eastern ‘other’.

## **Otherness**

The notion of otherness is often more complex than generally conceived. As first discussed in chapter one, the concept of the ‘other’ exists only as a point of comparison by which we may strengthen our own sense of self: in its very essence it is part of a binary opposition. Not only can the ‘other’ be racially or culturally defined (i.e. a white, European ‘self’ and a non-white ‘other’), but it may also be an abstraction defined in gender, religious or ideological terms, between capitalism and communism, or between human and non-human forms (animals, robots, androids, extra-terrestrials, etc.) (Richardson, 2010, p.13). Reiterating previous discussions in this project, considerations of ‘otherness’ in Hollywood cinema need to begin from the recognition that there is no such thing as an accurate representation: all representations by nature distort actuality. Michael Richardson argues that there are three principal reasons why this is so: Firstly, accurate representation is impossible because it is not possible to reveal every facet of what it is representing – it is an issue of omission. Secondly, no one ever sees the same phenomenon in the same way. Thirdly, representation itself involves a process of translation by which the thing being represented is taken into the system of codes that constitute the representation – all three contentions preceding conscious or unconscious ideological bias (2010, pp. 8-9).

In chapter one, the discussion of the ‘other’ focused on the yellow peril and Asian super-soldier stereotypes as this group of people was most closely associated with the conflicts of the era – the Vietnam War and the escalating Cold War. At this crucial juncture between popular culture, politics and society after 9/11, the primary depiction of the cinematic ‘other’ shifts to Arabs. That is not to say that cinematic representations and marginalisation of an Arab ‘other’ have not been prominent in Hollywood cinema prior to 9/11. On the contrary, Jack Shaheen, the leading scholar in this particular area of research has documented and discussed virtually every film that Hollywood has ever made (more than 900 films) and identified that the vast majority of these films portray Arabs by distorting the reality of what most Arab men, women, and children are really like (Shaheen, 2003, p.172). Shaheen argues that from 1896 until the present day, filmmakers have collectively indicated that all Arabs are brutal, heartless, uncivilised religious fanatics and money-mad cultural ‘others’

focused on terrorising civilised Westerners – especially Christians and Jews (2003, p.172). Indeed, the marginalisation of an Arab ‘other’ is not new, but rather has become more pronounced in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11 – carried out by a group of men of Arab descent.

Reinforcing these problematic Arab stereotypes that have run rife in Hollywood cinema for decades is the practice of repetition. In “Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People” (2003), Jack Shaheen prefaces his argument by stating the Arab proverb: “Al tikar biallem il hmar (by repetition even the donkey learns)”. He argues that this proverb encapsulates how Hollywood uses repetition as a tool to teach audiences the insidiousness of Arab people by repeating derogatory images in film after film – thus emphasising this particular ideology (pp.171-172). From as early as 1912, dozens of films presented allied agents and military forces (American, British, French) targeting Arabs in Hollywood’s “good-versus-evil” narratives. Consistent negative portrayals in Hollywood cinema do tarnish judgement of a people and their culture. When the terrorist attack on the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City took place in 1995, less than a year after the release of *True Lies* (1994), people were quick to accuse Arab terrorists of targeting the building (Combs, 1993, p.69; Alsultany, 2012, p.36). Combined with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait that lead to the Gulf War in that same decade, Shaheen argues that some Americans genuinely believed that “all Arabs are terrorists and that Arabs do not value human life as much as we do” and that “our fellow Americans of Arab descent [are] clones of Iraq’s Saddam Hussein and the terrorist Osama bin Laden” (2003, p.189). Increasingly problematic in the aftermath of 9/11 is the way repetition as a filmic device reduces the Arab people to one type of physical description<sup>37</sup>. Equally so is the way Arabs have become synonymous with Muslims. This creates a whole host of other issues relating to the stereotyped portrayal of Muslim people in popular culture and contemporary media in light of more recent developments with the Daesh/ISIL<sup>38</sup> conflict as viewers, too, tend to link the same attributes to both peoples.

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<sup>37</sup> In fact 265 million Arab people reside in 22 different states and consist of a very diverse ethnicity including The Scots, Greeks, British, French, Romans, and English – thus some Arabs have dark hair, dark eyes, olive complexions, freckles, red hair, blue eyes (Shaheen, 2003, p.173).

<sup>38</sup> Daesh/ISIL/ISIS/IS are all acronyms used to discuss the jihadist group that controls large swathes of territory in Syria and Iraq. It is sometimes referred to by different names by



Martin and Steuter argue that in addition to the ideological proclivity to scapegoat Arabs in contemporary Hollywood, the film industry legitimises vengeful violence towards them and other people of colour such as “narcoterrorists” from Latin America (2010, p.110). *Collateral Damage* (2002) exemplifies this. The film centres on LAFD fire fighter Captain Gordon "Gordy" Brewer's (Arnold Schwarzenegger) quest for revenge against a Columbian terrorist after a bomb kills his wife and son. Ultimately the film promotes that violent revenge is an appropriate response to acts of terrorism that kill American civilians. This becomes further complicated in the historical context of the movie's release as the US seek to justify overseas military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq in response to the 9/11 attacks. Joseph Kay argues that this rationale reflects that of the war on terror – that everyone associated with alleged terrorists are also terrorists and deserve the same fatal fate (2002).

However, it is pivotal to consider that filmmakers are limited to the constraints determined not only by their knowledge and experience, but also by the ‘pact’ that exists between filmmakers, industry and audiences. Whilst we can applaud the small minority who attempt to challenge negative stereotypes of Arabs, Latin Americans and other scapegoated groups, it is regrettably inevitable that in that process, they will engender new portrayals that will contain their own biases: inevitable because by its very nature, representation reduces – it emphasises certain characteristics at the expense of others (Richardson, 2010, pp.10, 11).

### **Hollywood War Film in the Aftermath of 9/11: A Toxic Genre**

Global events and conflict in particular tend to function as a catalyst for the evolution of new cycles in Hollywood cinema. As identified in the introduction, World War II

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English speaking governments and media. In short, Daesh is an Arabic acronym formed from the initial letters of the group's previous name in Arabic - "al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa al-Sham". Although it does not mean anything as a word in Arabic, it sounds unpleasant and the group's supporters object to its use (Daesh also sounds similar to an Arabic verb that means to tread underfoot, trample down, or crush something). UN and US officials generally use the acronym “ISIL” (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant). The group has not used the terms “ISIS” itself since June 2014. It shortened its name to “Islamic State” (IS) to reflect its expansionist ambitions (Irshaid, 2015).

not only inspired a fresh wave of combat films, but can be credited for the contemporary conceptualisation of the entire war film genre. In chapter one, I highlighted that the Vietnam War elicited a new cycle of combat film driven by questions of national, international and individual subjectivities and morality. In chapter two, the end of the Cold War and the break out of small scale international conflicts – coupled with significant WWII commemorations, resulted in the development of another new cycle of Hollywood war film – a nostalgic reinvention of the good war paradigm. In a similar vein, the war on terror inaugurated a new and dynamic cycle of films depicting military and civilian aspects of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Responses to these wars have been unpopular, and transferred to Hollywood cinema, reflect ongoing opposition and cynicism about these conflicts. The 9/11 attacks marked the end of the nostalgic film era of the 1990s and inspired a new cycle of Hollywood war films.

The shift in Hollywood combat cinema after 9/11 occurred in response not only to the terrorist attacks themselves, but also to the supervening wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the enactment of the Patriot Act, establishment of the Department of Homeland Security, and increased security measures throughout the US (and most of the Western world) (Pollard, 2011, p.177). Characterising this post-9/11 film cycle is its disparity. The dynamic shifts in thematic content of this film cycle echo the diverse and conflicting political and social context as the United States and abroad attempted to navigate the chaos that ensued after September 11. Cinematic reactions to the war on terror have not been limited to the war film genre, or any genre specifically. Revenge, violence, and militarism pervaded Hollywood's portrayal of the war on terror.

Whilst not a war film text, some of the key anxieties and concerns of this contextual period are exemplified in the Bourne franchise. The original trilogy spans the first decade after the attacks on September 11 and reflects the development of ideology and contemporary anxieties in the aftermath of 9/11. Whilst the premise of the series' narrative is not unfamiliar – a CIA agent seeking redemption from past crimes – it resonated more profoundly with the post-9/11 audiences because of the way it taps into the contemporary climate, particularly after the public became aware of the mistreatment of prisoners in Abu Ghraib, the CIA's policy of extraordinary rendition,

and the extent of its surveillance programs (McSweeney, 2014, p.107). Like most spy thrillers, *Bourne* focuses thematically on power and corruption and develops the traditional secret-service-within-the-secret-service narrative that is associated with the conventional 007 narrative, but with a contemporary spin removed from Cold War ideology. The original trilogy begins with Doug Liman's *The Bourne Identity* (2002), followed by *The Bourne Supremacy* (2004) and *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007) both of which were directed by Paul Greengrass and all feature Matt Damon in the starring role of Jason Bourne<sup>39</sup>. The series is (loosely) based on the novels written by Robert Ludlum released between 1980 and 1990. However, the films differ in a number of ways – most notably from the Cold War historical period to a contemporary and culturally relevant post-9/11 world. These first three films revolve around CIA assassin Jason Bourne and his quest to discover what exactly he had been involved in prior to his unprecedented memory loss – all whilst avoiding capture and assassination from the CIA.

We are first introduced to Jason Bourne in *The Bourne Identity* when he is found amnesic, unconscious, and floating in the Mediterranean Sea with bullet wounds in his back. Upton (2014) argues that this stark opening acts as a metaphor for the 9/11 attacks through the way that in both instances there is a traumatic event that redefines the victim's world and casts shadows over everything that is to follow (p.69). Further to this, Gaine (2011) argues that just as those who witnessed the collapse of the Twin Towers are haunted by those images, so is Bourne haunted by the images of his past experiences (p.160). In Bourne, the viewer sees these images as fragments of memory in the form of flashbacks throughout the trilogy, triggered by further traumatic events. A crucial part of the development of Bourne's character is his battle to come to terms with this past – albeit premised upon these fragmented memories and secondary research. Again, we see the likeness between Bourne and post-9/11 America – just as America has struggled to come to terms with its history, culpability and claims of moral authority, so to has Bourne struggled to make sense of his own history and the

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<sup>39</sup> There are now five films in the franchise. The fourth installment, *The Bourne Legacy* (2012) was directed by Tony Gilroy and depicted another CIA assassin, Aaron Cross (Jeremy Renner), who investigates why the CIA is trying to kill him. This fourth film takes place narratively around the same time as the events depicted in *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007) and runs parallel to Jason Bourne's narrative with the exclusion of Bourne/Damon appearing this film. The latest installment of the Bourne franchise *Jason Bourne* was released nine years after the last Bourne film in the original trilogy (*The Bourne Ultimatum*, 2007) in July 2016.

consequences for his present. Throughout the trilogy, Jason Bourne embarks on a journey of self-discovery as he attempts to make sense of his past – reminding audiences that whilst the American government may have acted in ways the general US public finds uncomfortable at times, ultimately *all* Americans are complicit in those decisions because they empowered those in Government with the authority to act in such a way (Upton, 2014, p.70).

To the post-9/11 audience, the assassinations in the films (*Identity* in particular) resemble the Special Access Program (SAP) created by former secretary of defence Donald Rumsfeld in 2003. The program was run out of a secret office, its members had aliases, unmarked clothing, and advance authorisation to use lethal force. Further, according to a former intelligence official cited by Seymour Hersh, the rules of the program were “Grab whom you must. Do what you want” (Kord & Krimmer, 2011, p.122; AAP, 2004, n.p). Of course, in the Bourne universe those wrongs do not go unpunished. As soon as Jason Bourne realised the extent to which the CIA was operating through Treadstone, he endeavoured to put an end to the program (and others that emerged in its likeness such as Black Briar in *Ultimatum*). Nevertheless, Kord and Krimmer argue that Liman’s original film in the series proved more radical than many other popular films (or television shows) that were produced during that period, even through implicit allegorical references to the contemporary climate (2011, p.122).

The first crop of Hollywood war films began to appear in late 2007 and early 2008 and were largely unsuccessful. Based on disappointing box office sales, it appeared that most audiences preferred oblique and indirect references<sup>40</sup> to these events (as evidenced by the box office revival in comic book Hollywood blockbusters, and the success for films like the *Bourne* franchise that occurred within the same timeframe). Most of these films claimed a base in the real events and circumstances of the war, and with the partial exception of *The Hurt Locker* in 2008, all of them failed at the

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<sup>40</sup> Much like film/television texts in the Vietnam and Cold War eras (for example *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, 1950), post-9/11 depictions of former, distant, or futuristic wars allow filmmakers to comment indirectly on contemporary conflicts with little risk of negative ramifications. Similarly, contemporary films often address underlying fears of future terrorist activity indirectly by choosing to depict some form of cataclysmic event that threatens the complete destruction of the earth (or at least large segments of it).

box office (and just about all of them vanished without a trace) (Barker, 2011, p.1; Westwell, 2011, p.22). Known collectively as ‘Iraq War Movies’, they were, to quote one report, “box office poison” (Everhart, 2009). Certainly, for a time, the most salient feature about this cycle of Hollywood films was their failure. As films in this 9/11 cycle began to materialise, a pattern quickly emerged. Films began to be reviewed in groups, or if the focus was on a single text in particular, the key examination criteria was its success at the box office – did it look any different from the war film failures that preceded or surrounded it? Indeed, Paul Farhi of *The Washington Post* employed this approach in his article on the pending release of *Stop-Loss* in March 2008. Before launching into his observations of the new release, he outlined the failures in the ‘Iraq War Movie’ cycle by singling out the particularly unsuccessful films *In the Valley of Elah* (2007) (a total domestic gross of \$6.8 million), *Redacted* (2007) (grossing \$65,388), and *Grace is Gone* (2007) (grossing \$50,080). He continues on:

“After five years of conflict in Iraq, Hollywood seems to have learned a sobering lesson: The only things less popular than the war itself are dramatic films and television shows about the conflict. [The] latest spate of Iraq-themed movies and TV shows haven't just failed at the box office. They've usually failed spectacularly, despite big stars, big budgets and serious intentions. The underwhelming reception from the public raises a question: Are audiences turned off by the war, or are they simply voting against the way filmmakers have depicted it?” (Farhi, 2008).

These kinds of predictions, explanations, regrets and gloatings over the repeated failure of these films that sought to address the conflict were repeated throughout the industry. The issue of failure also, inevitably, became linked back to Vietnam and Hollywood’s failure to comment while that war continued. In light of this, Barker (2011) questions whether failure is now a sign that it is not possible to make successful movies while America is still militarily engaged in combat (p.70).

However, it is important to understand that box office failure cannot be equated with simple rejection of a film’s narrative and argument – people go to see (or avoid) films

for an indeterminately long list of reasons. Indeed, despite the mass audience rejection, some of these film ‘failures’ present valuable critique and should not be entirely dismissed. For example, Paul Haggis’ *In the Valley of Elah* under-performed at the box office, but contributed to Iraq War discourse in an important way – it boldly fictionalised a true story of military father’s search for his dead son and in the process, as Burris argues, “attacked American interventionism in the Middle East not simply as a failed or misguided policy decision, but as a symptom of our society” (2010, p.16). The film presents an undesirable Iraq war narrative in the midst of a contentious political climate, with Kellner echoing Burris by stating that the film’s plot exposes “how the Iraq experience has turned typical good-natured young Americans into highly traumatised individuals who are dangerous to themselves and others” (2010, p.223). Therefore, we cannot take at face value the ‘failure’ of these films, as it is far more complex than domestic box office revenue or a financially successful opening weekend. What we can take from the ‘failure’ of this cycle of films is the disillusionment with Iraq war policy.

Like the war film cycles gone before, there are some distinctive patterns in the post 9/11 war film releases. The cycle begins in late 2007/early 2008 marked by the release of a number of Iraq war film texts (in order of release): *Home of the Brave* (2007), *The Situation* (2007), *GI Jesus* (2007), *Badland* (2007), *Grace is Gone* (2007), *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), *The Kingdom* (2007), *Lions for Lambs* (2007), *Redacted* (2007), *Rendition* (2007), *Battle for Haditha* (2008), *Conspiracy* (2008), *The Lucky Ones* (2008), *Stop-Loss* (2008), *Body of Lies* (2008), *The Objective* (2008), *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *Brothers* (2009), *The Messenger* (2009), and *Green Zone* (2010). These films all engage with facets of the most recent American wars, focusing primarily on the American experience of war – either in context of the Middle East (*The Situation*, *The Kingdom*, *Redacted*, *Rendition*, *Battle for Haditha*, *Body of Lies*, *The Objective*, *The Hurt Locker*, *Green Zone*), back in America ( *Lions for Lambs*, *Conspiracy*, *The Messenger*), or the home front experience (*Home of the Brave*, *GI Jesus*, *Badland*, *Grace is Gone*, *In the Valley of Elah*, *The Lucky Ones*, *Stop-Loss*,

*Brothers*). Westwell (2011) argues that this Iraq War film cycle can be categorised<sup>41</sup> more concisely as:

“A ‘home front’ cycle (although films in this cycle do contain scenes of combat these scenes are usually short and contextualised as a flashback of some sort) and an Iraq war cycle. Iraq is the more significant of the two post 9/11 shooting wars, while the largest group of films overall is the home front cycle. So, we might observe that recent wars are being considered largely via the experience of the Iraq-based combat soldier and his/her journey from the front-line to home front and back again” (p.22).

Like Vietnam before, there is an apparent discontent with the war in many of these features – with a number of storylines engaging in some form of conspiracy regarding the war experience, or challenging the ethics, morality and hierarchical decision making surrounding many facets of the Iraq war. These films also echo some of the sentiments seen in the earlier Vietnam War film and 1990s ‘good war’ cycles – particularly through attempts to present the war through the framework of realism, and in some instances, the treatment of PTSD. Despite the ‘toxic’ environment these films were released in, a few of these titles were able to make a significant impact within cultural criticism – notably *In the Valley of Elah*, *The Hurt Locker* and *Green Zone*. The latter two titles in particular have become seminal in characterising this cycle of contemporary war film.

### **‘The Hurt Locker’ (2008)**

The most successful film in this Iraq war film cycle was unquestionably Kathryn Bigelow’s *The Hurt Locker*, released in the US in the summer of 2008/2009. The film was featured on hundreds of ‘Top 10’ lists across the globe, and in March 2010, it was awarded the prestigious ‘Best Picture’ Oscar at the Academy Awards (beating nine other films including Bigelow’s ex-husband James Cameron’s *Avatar*). Yet, like

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<sup>41</sup> There are, however, a number of ways to categorise this cycle (see Hammond, 2001; Pollard, 2011; Barker, 2011; Westwell, 2001, 2014).

its predecessors, it did not fare remarkably well at the box office – in fact it was one of the least commercially successful winners of the prestigious award in history. Despite the film’s many accolades at the 82<sup>nd</sup> Academy Awards (including nine Academy Award nominations, and wins for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, Best Editing, Best Sound and Best Sound Editing), the film had barely earned enough revenue by 2010 to cover production costs. However, since the film’s Oscar success, it achieved a substantial ‘bounce’ in pay-per-view, DVD rentals and sales, boosting the overall box office gross to 15.7 million<sup>42</sup> (Barker, 2011, p.156; IMDB, 2016). Subsequently, because of this rise in ancillary sales *The Hurt Locker* was seen by more Americans, by far, than any other movie produced about the conflict in Iraq<sup>43</sup> (Rubin, 2011, p.277).

The film was the first Hollywood collaborative project between director Kathryn Bigelow and writer Mark Boal. The idea for the project was birthed from Boal’s time in Iraq working as an embedded journalist. In 2004, Boal spent two weeks with a real EOD (Explosive Ordinance Disposal) team, and it was that “nerve-wracking experience” that inspired Boal to write *The Hurt Locker* (Rubin, 2011, p.264). Bigelow was so impressed by Boal’s unique portrait of the EOD teams operating in Iraq that she sought to present the story of *The Hurt Locker* as immediate and realistically as possible. Indeed, in an interview with Mali Elfman on June 23, 2009, Bigelow stated:

“Mark [Boal] had come back from Iraq with these incredible observations. A real first-person look at a day in the life of a bomb tech. so I kept thinking, ‘How can I preserve the reportorial quality the script has?’ His script really read like you were there... so I wanted to protect that feeling and give the audience that opportunity to be on an embed with a bomb squad”

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<sup>42</sup> Data collected on the IMDB website, “The Hurt Locker”. Box office gross figure as of 5 March 2010.

<sup>43</sup> Notably, the film was also involved in an extensive piracy leak. *The Hurt Locker* was leaked online months before its release, with Voltage Films (the company who made the film), filing a lawsuit in 2010 seeking compensation of lost revenue caused from digital piracy (Allen, 2010)



Subsequently, Bigelow decided that it would be through the point of view of three men in a fictionalised EOD unit that the audience would be introduced to what it was like to be on the ground in Baghdad in 2004. The road to producing *The Hurt Locker* was not easy. Bigelow and Boal were attempting to create an Iraq based war film within the ‘toxic genre’ of contemporary war film<sup>44</sup>. Much like Oliver Stone in the 1980s, Bigelow and Boal were faced with the challenge of selling a movie project about another unpopular war. However, in the late summer of 2006, Bigelow and Boal were finally able to acquire support for their film with Nicholas Chartier, a producer with his newly formed company, Voltage Pictures.

Based on Boal’s research among the technical specialists who defuse planted explosive devices, *The Hurt Locker* focuses on three men who are members of the Army’s elite Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) unit – Sergeant First Class William James (Jeremy Renner), Sergeant J.T. Sandborn (Anthony Mackie), and Specialist Owen Eldridge (Brian Geraghty). The film is constructed as a series of semi-connected episodes, following the arrival of new Specialist Sergeant William James to replace Sergeant Matthew Thompson (Guy Pearce) who was killed at the film’s outset by a 155mm improvised explosive device (IED) in Baghdad. *The Hurt Locker* follows James’ time in Iraq, depicting episodically his defusings. James is calm and demonstrates a level of arrogance with his uncaring attitude towards risks and his task of deactivating explosive devices. In its essence, the film is an urban, modern-day war story which blurs the boundaries between civilians and the enemy; where civilians are seen watching the action from balconies, rooftops, or storefronts; and where something as simple as a mobile phone can detonate a device and obliterate an EOD team instantaneously.

After the film’s release, there was significant critical reception surrounding *The Hurt Locker*’s representation of war. For some, the film provides a distinctively anti-war statement, while others muse over the complex way the film presents an apolitical war story in a space outside of a localised history. For example, in his seminal work “Embodiment in the War Film”, Robert Burgoyne (2012) boldly argues that *The Hurt*

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<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Hollywood’s house magazine, *Variety* responded to the news of Bigelow’s decision to make *The Hurt Locker* by questioning if she knew what she was doing by choosing to produce a film within “such a toxic genre” (Thompson, 2008).

*Locker* is “a stark reminder of the barbarism of war, its pointlessness and futility” and depicts war as “as addictive pleasure”, and “an ongoing private and collective need”. His analysis of the film is taken through the framework of bodies of war in which he concentrates on both the destructiveness and vulnerability of the body (as a weapon, as an agent). Clover (2009) likewise argues that *The Hurt Locker*’s “loose, repetitive narrative structure emulates the aimlessness of the invasion and occupation, and the circular, endless, and ultimately impossible task of imposing order” (p.9). In contrast, scholars such as Cunningham (2010) and Bennett and Diken (2011) argue that *The Hurt Locker* presents the war outside of contemporary events, as an event outside of politics and history. For Bennett and Diken, *The Hurt Locker* “reworks and defamiliarises generic images, characters, situations, and narrative structures in an attempt to place the spectator uncomfortably within, rather than safely outside the events depicted where they could be viewed from a safe critical distance” (p.186). Likewise, Cunningham (2010) argues that rather than providing commentary on the “larger” questions regarding Iraq and the war on terror, the film challenges the audience about the generic nature of the modern human experience and the extent to which we fear and crave the kind of sensory overload that only something like war can provide. Others still, such as El-Khairy (2010), Žižek (2010), and Westwell (2011) argue *The Hurt Locker* presents the US military in a way which is undoubtedly in line with the contemporary public image. For them, the way the film ignores the debates around the intervention – choosing instead to focus on the individual ordinary soldier and their narrow experience – can be read as ideology at its purest. In my view, the film works to depict a very distinctive characterisation of the male soldier (as seen through Sgt William James) that supports a pro-war reading of the film. There is no doubt that there are moments in the film that pronounce the destruction of war, and the violation of life (both civilian and American combatant), but I argue that these filmic decisions highlight the humanity of the soldier subject and function to legitimate the war experience. In this way, war is confronting, but necessary when the actions of the Iraqi other (in this instance) are highlighted.

The film opens with a black screen and the text-crawl “the rush to battle is often a potent and lethal addiction, for war is a drug” accompanied by a dramatic diegetic motif. The first clause fades, leaving only the words “war is a drug” lingering on the screen for a few seconds before the sound crescendos and morphs into a soundtrack of

eerie Middle Eastern musical wailing and frantic running. The screen fades from black to a shot from the point of view of an IED disposal robot where we see the ground go by. After several seconds, the camera transitions from this point of view to a mid-shot where we see Iraqi women screaming and fleeing the scene. “Baghdad 2004” then appears on the screen, rooting the time and place of the forthcoming narrative. This, plus the absence of titles and credits gives the film a strong documentary feel from the onset.

One of the earliest scenes in the film highlights Sandborn and Eldridge’s unspoken disdain for James’ maverick and reckless tendencies on the field, and reconciles the strained team relationship through unexpected combat. James, Sandborn and Eldridge are detonating some of the explosives they have collected on their missions in a remote desert area. As they prepare to explode another bomb, James realises he’s left his gloves at the detonation site and drives down there to retrieve them. James waves to Eldridge and Sandborn up in the security of the sand dunes, lights a cigarette and collects his gloves. It is at this point that Sandborn openly contemplates killing James by ‘accidentally’ triggering the detonator. This makes Eldridge very uncomfortable, but Sandborn ultimately does nothing. This vocalisation portrays the peak of Sandborn’s contempt for James (and likewise, the audiences’ feeling towards his character). However, in the same sequence, the hostility towards James begins to shift in what evolves as the film’s one conventional combat sequence. On their return to Camp Victory after detonating the explosives, the EOD team encounters five armed men in traditional Arab garb standing near a vehicle. After a tense encounter, the armed men identify themselves as British soldiers. They have captured two wanted Iraqi prisoners. After determining that the Brits were stranded due to a flat tire, the EOD team relaxes and helps them with the vehicle. The entire group suddenly comes under attack and one of the British mercenaries is killed by sniper fire. A battle ensues between the allies and enemy snipers (who it becomes known are firing from a distant stone building). James and Eldridge work together with one of the Brits to retaliate the cross fire, and Sandborn is able to continue targeting the building and its occupants. As a team, they manage to kill all the enemy insurgents. The incident creates a stronger bond between James and his teammates. Having found they can work well together, they celebrate in James’ housing unit with alcohol and an epic display of testosterone with the men punching each other for entertainment. The

decision to have these two events directly after one another symbolically references a type of redemption with James' character – at a point of heightened disdain James manages to redeem his character. In combat, James behaves effectively, commanding his men and prevailing over the enemy through his expertise and calm nature during battle.

Whilst depicted as an arrogant, self-serving soldier in much of the film, another facet of James' character is revealed through his relationship with 'ha', a young Iraqi boy who sells pirated DVDs in the marketplace at the US military base perimeter. The two have a playful relationship after some banter about a DVD James purchased from the boy and a resulting soccer bet. During a particularly notable scene in the film, James is leading his squad through an abandoned factory that has become a temporary bomb-making facility. The team comes across the corpse of a teenage boy whose abdomen is sliced open and packed with explosives. What unfurls in this scene, as Burgoyne identifies, is an "extreme manipulation" of emotion that evokes a distinctive melodramatic pathos. This is created by a few notable factors – film work, and the ambiguity around the identity of the teenage corpse. Firstly, the scene is filmed in extreme close-up, and often from a low-angle. This works to emphasise the intimate facial expressions of James, Sandborn and Eldridge during the particularly confronting discovery of the abandoned youthful body bomb. Accompanying this camerawork is the deliberate silence – with only James' laboured breathing breaking through the activity. There is no melodramatic music, just an intentional absence of non-diegetic sound. Secondly, pathos is generated by the manipulation of the ambiguity in identifying the teenager as Beckham (in fact, there are mixed reviews about this within film criticism<sup>45</sup>). As we have come to understand, James' relationship with Beckham demonstrates a humanity and sensitivity to his character that is not often depicted in the film. In this scene, not only is James confronted with the corpse of a teenager, but the violation of a life that he had grown attached to. Furthermore, due to the way this scene develops, the audience is left questioning the identity of the body – is it *actually* Beckham? (We see Beckham alive and well at a

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<sup>45</sup> Boal clarifies this ambiguity by explain that: "The kid on the table is *not* Beckham, although it looks like him... We see Beckham alive and well later" (Boal cited in Rubin, 2011, p.275).

later point in the film). Robert Burgoyne, believing that this scene depicts the transformation of Beckham into a body bomb, argues that:

“The destructiveness of war is condensed into a figure of atrocity with a difference: the victim is now also a weapon; the victim of terror has become the medium of terror, the body turned into a bomb... In [this] double meaning of the body of Beckham, the film creates a metaphor for war, its pointlessness and barbarism and its self-reinforcing nature” (Burgoyne, 2012, pp. 16, 17).

His statement is illuminating (irrespective of the body belonging to Beckham or not). In my view, whilst we do see this interesting blending of ideas of victimhood and weaponry, this scene emphasises the humanity of James’ character and functions to create a positive characterisation of the soldier subject (rather than function as a metaphor for the redundancy of war). James is portrayed in a state of vulnerability, making him more relatable, more empathetic, and ultimately more human. There is no question that the “destructiveness of war” is seen in this sequence, but rather than working as an anti-war sentiment, it operates to humanise a protagonist, whom up until this point, appeared to be a reckless shell of a soldier.

In a further semi-connected episode near the end of the Delta Company rotation, James and Sandborn are called out to defuse a bomb vest strapped to an innocent Iraqi civilian man (sans Eldridge who has been sent home due to a gun wound – ironically given by James). With the aid of a translator they learn that the bomb was strapped against the civilian’s will and James and Sandborn (through the translator) are begged to remove it as the man pleads for his life – he has a wife and four children. With only two minutes left on the bomb’s timer, James frantically tries to cut off the locks to remove the vest, but there are too many. He reluctantly abandons the man at the last moment who, only seconds later, is killed when the bomb detonates – throwing James in his bomb suit out of the blast area. Sandborn rushes to him thinking he’s been killed, just like Thompson. Stunned, James is roused. On the drive back to base Sandborn is distraught over the Iraqi man’s death and in a moment of intimacy (the first between these two characters), Sandborn confesses to James he can’t cope with the pressure of being in Iraq and admits he wants to go home and have a son like

James, 'someone who will notice if he dies'. In a rare return of comradeship, James comforts Sandborn and reassures him that he will make it home safely. Again, we see the development of a softer persona for James. The war appears to be breaking down his rough exterior and revealing his humanity. Whilst an unsuccessful last mission (that we see in the film), James' work of bomb disposal retains and reclaims a sense of the heroic, effective US soldier who puts his life at risk in pursuit of a mission informed by moral imperative. Indeed, with the trouble both James and Sandborn had in dealing with the death of the Iraqi civilian, James' morality is reconciled after putting Eldridge's life at risk in the previous sequence.

Throughout the film it is made very clear that James is very good at his job. His arrogance leads him to take risks and his stubbornness means that he very rarely fails to follow through with any task. But one thing he does fail at is returning to normality at the end of his rotation with Bravo Company. Once reunited with his ex-wife and son, boredom quickly sets in. James is shown aimlessly wandering through seemingly endless aisles of consumer products at the supermarket, cleaning gutters, cutting carrots for dinner: he is overwhelmed with the mundane. The filmic choices reinforce this sense of James' boredom with civilian life by employing minimal diegetic sound in the supermarket sequence and a low angle camera angle that magnifies the super-sized appearance of the supermarket aisles. One night he has an internal monologue in the form of speaking aloud to his infant son, where he says:

"You love playing with that. You love playing with all your stuffed animals. You love your Mummy, your Daddy. You love your pyjamas. You love everything, don't ya? Yeah. But you know what, buddy? As you get older, some of the things you love might not seem so special anymore, like your Jack-in-a-Box. Maybe you'll realise it's just a piece of tin and a stuffed animal. And the older you get, the fewer things you really love. And by the time you get to my age, maybe it's only one or two things. With me, I think it's one."

In the next frame, the film's closing shot, James is back in Iraq suited up, and walking jauntily towards yet another bomb. The closing crawl: "365 days for Delta Company rotation".

This final scene in particular is interesting as it is the culmination of a number of symptoms that are shown throughout the film that imply James suffers Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Most notably, his symptoms materialise in the form of addiction to war (most explicitly seen by this final sequence), disobedience to orders, and a disposition to experience lapses in judgement. Crucially, though, at the film's conclusion it becomes clear that his combat stress is not the result of a traumatic act (as is the case in a number of films in the cycle such as *Brothers* (2009), *The Messenger* (2009), *Redacted* (2009), and *In the Valley of Elah* (2007) as well as those discussed in earlier chapters such as *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998)), but rather is a manifestation of the challenge of the daily challenges associated with serving on tour (Westwell, 2011, p.29). What the film does, then, is celebrates a character that is a living embodiment of PTSD, but, interestingly is treated by the film as not disordered at all. Barker (2011) articulates this perfectly:

“James displays the full canon of symptoms by which PTSD is defined. He has just forgotten how to be its victim, and thus becomes a poster-boy of the Iraq war generation” (p.157).

Scott (2010) asserts that this focus on PTSD within Iraq war feature films is a defining feature of many of these films and results in the Iraq war (like Vietnam before it) being reduced to a resolutely American experience. Likewise, Žižek argues that this practice of focusing on the suffering of the lone soldier subject is “...ideology at its purest: the focus on the perpetrator's traumatic experience enables us to obliterate the entire ethno-political background of the conflict” (Žižek, 2010, n.p). Significantly, this reduction of the war to an existential confrontation between man and deadly threat allows it be enjoyed without ambivalence or guilt (Denby 2009, p.84). The goal, then, is to convert the complex political, ethnic, and religious conflicts that had come to define the war in Iraq into reducible and solvable problems. More specifically, what occurs in *The Hurt Locker* through these processes, is that the focus shifts to the lives saved, not how many American lives have been lost, or how many Iraqi lives have been taken (Markert, 2011, p.246).

Predictably, Boal and Bigelow argue that *The Hurt Locker* is in fact *apolitical* because it focuses on combat in a historical vacuum. They insist that the movie takes no position on the American mission in Iraq by restricting the film's focus to the men carrying out the mission (Scott, 2010). In his analysis of the film, Barker (2011) observes that *The Hurt Locker* removed almost every single moment that might be judged political, recalling that he did not see one US flag in the entire film (which is usually a marker for such politics) (p.156). Indeed, there are no moments of inserted speech, television coverage, or debate among soldiers about why they are there. However, a lack of political referents doesn't necessarily equate to an apolitical narrative: the process of inclusion and exclusion can be just as political in its own right.

This comes back to a question of film style. Boal and Bigelow rely on this historical vacuum to help reduce questions of politics in a highly contentious domestic political climate. There are two primary ways in which Boal and Bigelow achieve this – extending the “documentary style” of war film we saw in earlier cycles (most closely observed in the later Vietnam War film texts such as *Platoon* and *Hamburger Hill* discussed in chapter one, and in *Saving Private Ryan* discussed in chapter two), and point of view (the narrow experience of the US soldier). In *Platoon*, Oliver Stone combined cinema verite with Classical Hollywood to create verisimilitude. The camerawork in the combat scenes in particular were articulated with hand-held filming. In *Saving Private Ryan*, Spielberg likewise opted for hand-held camerawork, particularly when recreating the battle of Normandy. What both directors achieved was a reduction of the “fourth wall” between audience and filmmaking – highlighting both the artifice of what is being presented (clearly it is filmed), but also simultaneously evoking verisimilitude as the audience gains a sense of “real-life” action (particularly in *Saving Private Ryan* when the camera becomes defaced with blood, mud, and gore). In a similar vein, Bigelow cultivated a “documentary style” to *The Hurt Locker* in a number of ways. Like the films highlighted earlier, *The Hurt Locker* was hand-held 90% of the time, using Aaton XTR-prod cameras and Super 16mm. Notably, Bigelow designed her camera shots to replicate a typical bomb-disarmament scenario that required roughly a 300-metre containment area. As a result, her outdoor urban shooting locations were enormous. The four camera teams were given licence to roam and shoot footage as they saw fit within this huge



parameter. During filming, former documentarian Barry Ackroyd, Bigelow's lead cinematographer for this project, placed his cameras on rooftops, in building windows, in crevices, below ground, above ground, wherever he could get a unique shot of the soldiers (Rubin, 2011, p.273).

One of the more explicit ways that *The Hurt Locker* studiously avoids engaging with the politics of war is by focusing narrowly on the experience of the individual soldier. Sgt William James is the new role model of 'The American Soldier'; he is the millennial war 'hero'. As with the other heroes in the post-9/11 climate, James is not constrained by combat, but is actively attempting to save lives and establish order. As Westwell (2011, p.24) notes, *The Hurt Locker* seeks to reclaim (in the face of considerable challenges from other 'toxic films' in the cycle) a certain conventional model of male, soldierly behaviour. This also works to construct a particular form of masculinity. Whilst the predominant point of view offered in *The Hurt Locker* is James, the film also sheds light on a more generic contemporary masculine experience of combat. Time and time again we see men attempting to buffer themselves from emotional responses through stoicism and hyper-masculine expressions that is reminiscent of spectacles exemplified in the early 1980s Vietnam War films (such as the bizarre testosterone-fuelled scene in James' room after Sandborn, Eldridge, and James return from the battle in the outskirts of the city). The male characters demonstrate a consistent impassiveness to the situation in the Middle East that is reinforced by Bigelow's attempt at de-politicising the conflict.

The American point of view that *The Hurt Locker* employs in order to reduce political engagement means that, once again, the perspective of the 'other' is marginalised. Extending on the earlier discussion of the 'other', in *The Hurt Locker* the Iraqi 'other' is once again represented in prejudicial terms. Most Iraqis in the film are seen only at a distance, and often through the sights of a rifle. The first experience the viewer has with them is in the first scene of the film when Thompson is killed by an IED. Civilians are herded to the outskirts of the blast area and are viewed from a long shot where facial characteristics cannot be seen. As the scene develops, we see the Iraqi responsible for the fatal IED explosion standing in the doorway of a butcher shop. Our point of view stems from the US soldiers – he is seen from a distance, but clearly with a mobile phone detonation device. The only close up shot of this 'other' is of his

fingers as he pushes a series of numbers on the phone to activate the detonation device. Like many depictions of the other that precede him in Hollywood cinema, he is seen from a distance with no opportunity for the viewer to establish a meaningful connection with him.

Similarly, during James' first mission with the EOD team, James has an aggressive stand off with an Iraqi taxi driver who speeds through a cordoned off zone to approach James in his bomb suit near a reported IED. He is depicted as uncooperative and hostile, even when no dialogue is exchanged. As it happens, this particular Iraqi is *not* the conventional 'enemy' in this mission, but rather the enemy figure is an Iraqi man watching from behind a dark pillar on a balcony above the street. When he sees James find the network of wires and IEDs buried in the street below, this unknown enemy 'other' flees the scene. The camera follows his flight with a combination of mid- and close range shots. However, he is filmed with heavy, dark shadows and only his silhouette is ever seen with much clarity. He is an unknown enemy 'other' both narratively and visually.

One London-based Iraqi journalist Mamoon Alabasi (2009) describes otherness in this 'Iraq war movie' expertly:

“...The Iraqis in the movie appear to serve just as a background that shows how heroic the film's stars are. Almost faceless and voiceless, they are – as in the world of politics – robbed of their humanity. It would be more accurate to say that *The Hurt Locker* is an action movie that uses Iraq as a background than to brand it as an 'Iraq war movie', and less so as the 'Iraq war drama'. The film does not really address the Iraq war, the reasons for the presence of the US squad or even the bombs they are supposed to defuse, and most importantly it ignores the views and feelings of Iraqis.”

*The Hurt Locker* consistently refuses to convey any information about the Iraqi 'other'. Presumably, Westwell (2011) argues, this is intended to reflect the difficulty James faces in trying to make sense of the war, but ultimately, it casts all Iraqis as inscrutable, masked, and potentially dangerous.

### **‘Green Zone’ (2010)**

As with *The Hurt Locker* before, *Green Zone* did not fare well at the box office. The film had barely recovered its production budget during its first few months, which was particularly disappointing compared to the massive returns earned by *Spider-Man* (2002), *Twilight* (2008, 2010), and *Avatar* (2009) (Pollard, 2011, p.29). It seemed, even at the end of the decade, audiences were still wary of realistic depictions of 9/11 and the subsequent interventions in the Middle East.

However unsuccessful the film may have been at the box office, the timing of the release of *Green Zone* is significant. On August 31, 2010, President Obama announced the withdrawal of the last combat brigade in Iraq. Rather than stating that the war was won, or even over, Obama declared that the decision was a milestone and implied that things had improved sufficiently in Iraq to bring US troops home (Markert, 2011, p.325). As previously highlighted, films about the Iraq war peaked in 2007 and 2008. This coincided with the October 2007 surge when the number of troops deployed reached the highest number of 170,000. The 2010 withdrawal of troops was the culmination of a steady decrease in servicemen that began in late 2008. Thus, the 2010 setting for *Green Zone*’s theatrical release is a comfortable seven years after the start of the Iraq conflict, and when at last, it seems there is an end in sight. By this stage, 69 percent of Americans said they opposed the Iraq War and 71 percent said the result of the war with Iraq was not worth the loss of American lives and other costs of attacking Iraq (CNN/ORC Poll 2011; Keeton & Scheckner, 2013, p.98). In this way, *Green Zone* wasn’t as controversial as some of its predecessors, but it is clear from audience engagement that it was still not a favourable topic for what should have been a Hollywood blockbuster with Paul Greengrass directing the project (and particularly considering the success of his most recent cinematic venture with Matt Damon in *The Bourne Ultimatum* in 2007).

Distributed by Universal Pictures, the 2010 post-9/11 thriller *Green Zone* focuses on the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The film, Greengrass’s second cinematic foray into direct confrontation with post-9/11 themes (the first being *United 93* in 2006), is loosely based on Rajiv Chandrasekaran’s nonfiction book *Imperial Life in the*

*Emerald City*. Chandrasekaran was a former bureau chief for the *Washington Post* and had extensively covered the Middle East and the Iraq War before writing the non-fiction text that detailed, controversially, the arrogant and tragic facets of American behaviour in the Green Zone, an area of hotels and palaces in central Baghdad occupied by American forces at the onset of the Iraq War. The film stars Matt Damon as US Army Chief Warrant Officer Roy Miller and centres around his task of locating Saddam Hussein's hidden weapons of mass destruction that served as the catalyst for the US' justification of war. Frustrated with unsubstantiated intelligence, Miller digs deeper and discovers that the State Department has been channelling false intelligence about WMDs to a reporter (Lawrie Dayne played by Amy Ryan) of major US newspaper *The Wall Street Journal* whose reporting plays a seminal role in the justification of war. This narrative is loosely based on Judith Miller of *The New York Times* who, from 2002 to 2005, argued the presence of WMDs in a number of stories for the *Times* and who dutifully repeated the Bush administration's lies regarding the disclosure of Valerie Plame's identity as a CIA operative.

The film's protagonists are all based on real-life players in the WMD drama that unfolded in 2003. Joining Judith Miller's reincarnation as "Lawrie Dayne" is the source of her intelligence, Iraqi-exile Ahmad Chalabi, the head of the Iraqi National Congress, an umbrella Iraqi opposition group created by the US government in 1992 to build support to oust Saddam Hussein. In the film, Chalabi becomes "Ahmed Zubaidi" (Raad Rawi), an Iraqi exile who the US government wants to install as Iraq's new leader. Chief Warrant Officer Miller, the hero of the tale, is based on Richard Gonzalez, a soldier who led Mobile Exploitation Team Alpha, a crew of 15 to 20 soldiers, whose task it was to discover the WMD. Notably, Gonzalez also worked as an advisor to the film (Keeton & Scheckner, 2013, pp. 98,169). Whilst Damon and a host of other well-known Hollywood stars take up roles in *Green Zone*, some of the ensemble cast and all of Damon's troops are played by professional soldiers, adding to the film's visual style, verisimilitude and quest for authenticity (Bjerre, 2011, p.228).

Greengrass and screenwriter Brian Helgeland devised the storyline based on these real people, real events, and real accounts (in the form of *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*) but certainly fictionalized significant aspects of the 2003 narrative (for example

the film portrays the CIA as independent of the State Department when in fact it was the CIA that was leaking false intelligence). Through this “fictionalization” of actuality, Markert (2011) argues that *Green Zone* reaches a wider audience than any of the documentaries produced on the topic, and in the process, reinforces the idea that WMDs never existed whilst simultaneously challenging the beliefs of the minority that still assert Saddam did indeed possess weapons of mass destruction (pp.324-325). Ultimately, the *Green Zone* suggests that the White House never actually believed that WMD existed, even before the war started, and functions as a critique of this false premise upon which the Bush Administration based the intervention.

*Green Zone* begins in Baghdad on March 19, 2003, the day the Iraq War began with the invasion of coalition forces, “Operation Iraqi Freedom”<sup>46</sup>. The film opens with a black screen, with the only visual feature being the date and location printed on the bottom of the screen. Diegetically, there is a scene of chaos – bombs are falling and an emergency siren is heard in the background. News reports are layered over one another with no distinction or clarity to what is being said, until, dynamically, one news report gains audio prominence and the audience learns that “crews, artilleries, and missiles are raining down in a relentless assault on Baghdad. There is no doubt tonight that war has begun. The Iraqi capital is experiencing shock and awe”. The dialogue ends abruptly with an explosion and the black screen transitions to a scene of Al-Rawi removing a black notebook from a safe whilst explosions occur around him as he quickly evacuates the safe house. Again, the screen fades to blackness, this time with the title “4 weeks later”, before transitioning to a typical warzone mise-en-scene – Miller (Damon) driving a Humvee in full US Army garb across a Middle Eastern terrain in the outskirts of inner Baghdad with his troop in tow. Miller and his platoon are on their way to investigate what they have been informed by military intelligence is a WMD site. The site, like the two Miller and his team have visited previously to the commencement of the *Green Zone* narrative, turns up empty for weapons of mass destruction.

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<sup>46</sup> This coalition consisted of 194 troops from Poland, 2,000 troops from Australia, and 45,000 troops from the United Kingdom that joined America’s 148,000 troops (Keeton & Scheckner, 2013, p.168).

Miller spends the remainder of the film attempting to uncover the “truth” about WMDs. He eventually gets a lead when digging holes in a Baghdad street on further WMD intel when an Iraqi called Freddy (Khalid Abdalla) informs him about what appears to be a high-level meeting of Iraqi military taking place nearby. After ordering his troops to follow, Miller and his men arrive at the meeting and notice a few of the participants start to leave. A gunfire attack ensues and in the chaos Miller spots General Al-Rawi escaping through the back and identifies him as the Jack of Clubs – Saddam Hussein’s top General. Miller discovers a hand-written black notebook in his wake and with the help of a captured Iraqi man – the host of the meeting – Miller learns that the notebook contains addresses of Al-Rawi’s safe houses. After interrogation, the captive also divulges that Al-Rawi has information on WMD sites.

From this point, Miller begins his active pursuit to find General Mohammed Al-Rawi (Yigal Naor) – the one man who can prove the existence or non-existence of the alleged WMDs. Working alongside Martin Brown (Brendan Gleeson), a CIA official who has grown tired of the WMD narrative repeated by his superior Clark Poundstone (Greg Kinnear), Miller eventually discovers that Al-Rawi had met with US officials in Jordan in 1991 and confirmed that Iraq had destroyed whatever WMD they were in possession of. As a further plot twist, the US official was revealed to be Clark Poundstone – the propagator of WMD to US armed forces. After being confronted by Miller in a fast-paced Greengrass-esque chase, Al-Rawi confirms, “there are no programs, I told the US official that we dismantled everything after ’91. Your government wanted to hear a lie. Now you think the war is over because you’re in Baghdad. The war has just begun”. The chase sequences eventually culminate in General Al-Rawi’s assassination at the hand of Freddy. A dumbfounded Miller demands to know why, after all the work they invested to find Al-Rawi so he could tell the truth about WMD at last. Freddy responds with the eloquent, “It is not for you to decide what happens here”. Keeton and Scheckner argue that this line proves to be the most insightful and cogent line in the film – and turns out to be the most prophetic, as time would tell (2013, p.171). The film’s final scene is a mirror to the first – a close up of Miller in a Humvee, driving towards Baghdad. The war machine continues on, with truth dying at the hands of an Iraqi national. The truth, then, is left in the hands of the audience to decide – who is leading the conspiracy, and why?

The quest to uncover “truth” is a familiar narrative convention for Greengrass whose best-known work in recent years is the Bourne franchise, directing three out of five of the films in the series<sup>47</sup>. Miller, like Bourne, is presented as a heroic military man willing to work outside of rules and discipline because of a commitment to discover the truth. The likeness is no abstract coincidence. *Green Zone* was released with strong marketing ties to Greengrass’s Bourne portfolio, promoted as “Bourne Goes Epic” for DVD/Blue-ray release, and unofficially described by critics as “Jason Bourne in Iraq” at cinematic release. When confronted with this comparison, Greengrass has been recorded admitting that he takes this “as a compliment”. “Matt [Damon] and I share the same desire to make films that are high energy and have a lot of action, but are also intelligent, smart and contemporary. So in that sense [*Green Zone*] is like a ‘Bourne’ movie. It has that same sense of energy and hopefully the same satisfaction from the audience’s point of view” (Morfoot, 2010, p.11). Adding to the discussion, *Green Zone* producer Lloyd Levin said that by telling the *Green Zone* narrative in the familiar urgency and quality of a ‘Bourne’ movie with the Damon/Greengrass reunion, it enabled this particular story to be more entertaining, more interesting and more engaging for a wider audience (Morfoot, 2010, p.11).

For Greengrass, context plays an important role in the process of narrative development and film production. For *The Bourne Supremacy* (2004), Greengrass was inspired by the 2003-2004 period of US politics and culture so he tried to produce a film that expressed a distilled form of paranoia and mistrust in a commercial thriller. He argues, then, that the film was so successful because it perfectly encapsulated the contemporary mood (Greengrass in Smith, 2010, p.28). Going off the success of *The Bourne Supremacy*, Universal asked what the director wanted to do next. Greengrass’ response was to do something between 9/11 and the war in Iraq – to create a film that would mark a place where the Bourne world and the real world met, and to make a film about the present world, in action (Greengrass in Smith, 2010, p.28). This is

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<sup>47</sup> *The Bourne Supremacy* (2004), *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007) and the most recent chapter, *Jason Bourne* (2016). The first two grossed collectively \$702.4 million worldwide. The most recent installment is still screening in cinemas globally as this was written. *Jason Bourne* grossed \$59,215,365 in the US on opening weekend (29 July 2016) and as of 2 September 2016, has grossed \$155,162,175 in the US alone.

where we find *Green Zone* and the hunt for WMD in what seems to be the perfect marriage of Bourne and Iraq. In this way, the film, much like the *Bourne* movies, is a cinematic representation and response to our frantic and paranoid lived experience in the contemporary context.

This interpretation of the 2010 context is exemplified in Greengrass's characteristic dynamic and 'whip-lash' filmic style of shooting and editing. With an ASL (Average Shot Length) of 3.1 seconds (a slight increase from the 1.9 ASL in his 2004 instalment of the *Bourne* franchise), *Green Zone* retained this now definitive fast-paced characteristic of Greengrass' cinematic approach (Smith, 2010, p.28; Tsivian & Civjans, 2016). Of course, the role cinematographer Barry Ackroyd played in the overall stylistic production of the *Green Zone* cannot be diminished. Ackroyd, fresh from the set of *The Hurt Locker*, brought his own stylistic strategies to the 2010 Iraq war film's production. Perhaps it is in the recruitment of Ackroyd and the execution of his trademark style that we can see some similarities in both Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* and Greengrass' *Green Zone*: both films capture the Iraq War's conflict, chaos and violence through Ackroyd's dynamic camera work. It is clear that Ackroyd, as an experienced embedded cinematographer, strives to achieve verisimilitude in his work with both films (which makes *Green Zone* distinct from the *Bourne* thrillers as they feature a more abstract depiction of light and movement). As part of this process, Ackroyd employed shaky camera work at times in both films, which was signalled in reviews, such as A.O Scott's *Green Zone* critique in the *New York Times* where he noted 'the hurtling handheld camerawork' present in both texts (Scott, 2010). As a point of reference for the visual approach to the film, Ackroyd endeavoured to push his quest for authenticity further still by utilising other sources to inspire the way the combat scenes in particular were shot. "YouTube was a massive influence", reveals Ackroyd,

"If you want to know how soldiers move, then you get military advisers, but if you want to see what it actually looks like when they burst into someone's house, then you look at YouTube. We were trying to get the rawness and energy and truth of what you see in those shots. The soldier with the video camera is usually following the others and actually participating in the action, and that's what we



tried to do with our camera. We want the viewer to feel like an observer who's inevitably caught up in what's happening. Our role was to allow the 'reality' to happen in front of the camera and give the actors and Paul [Greengrass] the freedom to do what they wanted...we always shot outside the circle; that was a basic tenet" (Ackroyd in Hope-Jones, 2010, pp. 55-56).

Barker (2011) argues an interesting point when reflecting on these processes prevalent within the first decade of Iraq War films. Through the practice of verisimilitude – basing narratives upon real events, situations, people, and requirements – he asserts that rather than constructing a particular type of soldier subject, what is occurring is a specific notion of *soldiering*: soldiers are not individuals as much as kinds (p.47). Adding further complexity to the issue is that soldiers often become the sole authoritative voice in the films due to the extensive use of a single-focused soldier point of view narration. In this way, this cycle of Iraq War films offer *some* criticism of the war from a soldiers perspective – they see the government and other institutions fail to support the troops – but ultimately they fail to offer a perspective on the broader conflict beyond the view of the GI. As Keeton and Scheckner (2013) argue, despite being disillusioned by the mission, and despite coming to understand that the US military is *not* liberating Iraq, but killing many Iraqi armed forces and civilians alike, the characters in virtually all of these films in the cycle express the idea that the average soldier will be forced to remain in the military and active duty until the ruling class decides the task is done<sup>48</sup> (p.134). Miller exemplifies this in two specific examples in the film. The first, Miller is on location digging holes on orders relating to intel on WMDs. After an exchange with Freddy, Miller orders his men to follow. Wilkins, one of his men, is reluctant to leave his post and contests Miller's decision to challenge his orders and questions the premise of the war, arguing, "Chief, we are here to do a job, not question the reasons". Later, in the last few scenes after the death of Al-Rawi, in a confrontation between Miller and Poundstone after the presentation of their new US-endorsed Iraqi political leader, Poundstone attempts to placate an

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<sup>48</sup> The only exception to this in the present cycle is Sergeant First Class William James (Jeremy Renner) in Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* who reenlisted willingly – a narrative strategy that conveyed the message that soldiers *can* go to war each day, face death, and not only survive, but thrive in that context.

agitated Miller over the Al-Rawi debacle. Poundstone argues that it doesn't concern him *why* we go to war, he is merely there to do his job. Miller rebuts him by arguing that "the reasons we go to war *always* matter". The following scene is the final in the film and we see Miller return to work, driving in a Humvee around the desert terrain, stuck in the war cycle to serve the remainder of his tour – returned to his place in the hierarchy of the ruling class.

This single-focus point of view also extends previous discussion on the ability of this cycle of films to develop a consciousness about who the enemy is. While the Iraqi people have a relatively strong visual presence in *Green Zone*, their point of view is once more visually absent. Perhaps, Keeton & Scheckner argue, if the film presented Iraqi working class men and women explicitly with the same engagement as they do the American GI, viewers may be able to draw more profound insights about the class nature of the Iraq war (on both sides), and who the real perpetrators of violence against civilians in both countries are (2013, p.135). Rather, what happens is a narrow focus on the GI experience, for a whole multitude of reasons highlighted through this thesis across the scope of Vietnam to 9/11. The concern through these narrative decisions, whether deliberate or not, is that viewers feel they are getting credible unmediated knowledge about the impact of war policies on soldiers. Indeed, the dramatic narrative style invites an emotional identification with *their* challenges, frustrations, and experiences (Keeton & Scheckner, 2013, p.134).

*Green Zone* offers a partial exception to this quandary through the character of Freddy, a veteran himself of the Iran-Iraq War. Freddy is portrayed sympathetically and the viewer is made to trust him as Miller does. Freddy has a righteous indignation about the contemporary political climate of his country and the ambiguity it creates for Iraq's future. It is this fear for the long-term security of Iraq that propels Freddy to align himself with Miller and his agenda to find Al-Rawi. Though, it seems, Freddy had a very different objective once Al-Rawi had been found. Freddy's decision to shoot Al-Rawi highlights the conflict and contradiction of the situation from his perspective – he is unapologetically opposed to Saddam, his republican army and his regime, but in the same token, he is an Iraqi patriot who ultimately wants the Americans out of his country (further exemplified by his retort to Miller, "It is not for you to decide what happens here"). Whilst *Green Zone* makes an attempt to portray

an Iraqi in a positive light, Freddy's decision to shoot Al-Rawi and thus kill the only witness who could attest to the corruption of the US government and their unfounded decision to invade Iraq leaves an unpleasant impression on the viewer who spent the previous two-hours hoping to see justice come to fruition with the vital assistance of an Iraqi civilian.

Unfortunately, Freddy, Al-Rawi and his men are the only Iraqi characters given any significant screen time in the film (with Freddy being the only one partially depicted in a positive light). Throughout the film, Iraqis are only seen periodically from a distance, or with the primary focal point being various parts of the human body with the explicit exclusion of the face. In the first scene of Miller in Baghdad, the environment is hostile with many Iraqi civilians attempting to stop the US Humvees from passing through, waving empty water carriers at them, begging for water. Rather than seeing the anguish and frustration in the faces of these civilians, the camera focuses instead on the water carriers. Later, during the many chase sequences, Iraqis are only seen from above on balconies watching the chase unfold around them, or, screaming as Miller and other US GIs indiscreetly run through their private residences to chase Al-Rawi. Like the many war films that went before, it seems *Green Zone* prefers to represent a faceless enemy race.

*The Hurt Locker* and *Green Zone* characterise many of the complex war sentiments of this first Iraq War film cycle. Context played a seminal role in their construction, with *The Hurt Locker* being based upon the contemporary experience of an embedded journalist (Mark Boal) and *Green Zone* director Paul Greengrass admitting the film was written as a direct response to the contemporary social and political climate. Both films chose to present the narrative from a narrow US soldier point-of-view (*The Hurt Locker* more so) which, together with other conventions, reduces the war to a strictly American experience. Furthermore, these films (like many of the others discussed earlier) employ intentional film and narrative techniques to evoke a distinctive sense of verisimilitude. For *The Hurt Locker* this caused extensive critical discussion about the films' political stance on the war and America's role in Iraq. In *Green Zone*, it encouraged the audience to question the justification of Weapons of Mass Destruction (albeit in a much more clear-cut fictional form due to Greengrass' distinctive "Bourne" style of filmmaking). This cycle extended the conventional war film trope

of the absent ‘other’. However, the key distinction in the Iraq War films post-9/11 is the blurring between civilians and the enemy. In this context of war, the enemy is capable of both observing and destroying – without the conspicuousness of military uniform to help the “good guys” identify who they are fighting. In this way, the notion of the absentee enemy is reconfigured into a more complex and inconspicuous form.

This chapter has examined how the war film genre has evolved in the aftermath of 9/11. In this historical and political context, the Hollywood war film attempted to engage with the complexity (and controversy) of the war on terror *during* the fact (much like how the genre responded to WWII). However, despite government intervention (through the form of the 9/11 Group), the Hollywood film industry suffered extensive failures at the box office – being termed “a toxic genre” by critics. In this context, *The Hurt Locker* and *Green Zone* presented an image of war that extended the off-screen war debate and depicted a very specific (isolated) American experience of war. Here, post-9/11 cinema once again converged with historical and political context to confront the US with questions of subjectivity and morality in relation to the war on terror.

## Chapter Four

### Hollywood 9/11 War Film: Analysing the Present

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Chapter three introduced the post-9/11 Hollywood war film and situated it within the tumultuous social and political context that ensued after the September 11 terrorist attacks. The focus of discussion in this chapter is the second decade after the events of 9/11. To look at war films within this period, in the context of this conflict, requires a much more expansive viewpoint because the war on terror is not like any previous war: it encompasses both civilian and domestic populations, it is both at home and abroad. The war on terror is not a conventional war and therefore, an analysis of combat cinema cannot be restricted to conventional war films. The depiction of conventional war was altered after America's invasion of Afghanistan on 7 October 2001, and then of Iraq on 19 March 2003. The definition of any war film in the genre is the confrontation with the enemy, and whilst that fact still remains the same, war films of this century (specifically those that address the conflicts of this period) do not superficially resemble the combat films of the past, including Vietnam and WWII, where the enemy wore uniforms and battle sequences took place in terrains with combatants fighting from opposing sides armed with artillery, tanks and infantry (Keeton & Scheckner, 2013, pp.130-131). Instead of this setting of the traditional battlefield, fighting takes place in urban checkpoints, on rooftops in Middle Eastern cities, or even through drone strikes in the skies; the "bad" guys aren't necessarily in uniforms as most of the time they are armed civilians. In chapter three we saw this in *The Hurt Locker* and *Green Zone*.

In 2011 we see the new conventional war film of the Iraq and Afghanistan era, as well as unconventional war film texts that are entirely removed from the traditional battlefield. What distinguishes these texts as unconventional, and thus differentiating them from the analysis in the previous chapters, is that they look at the effects of war outside of the physical battlefield. The present conflict has created distinctive blurring between civilian and military operations whilst simultaneously collapsing the physical parameters of the intervention. This conflict has less emphasis on numbers of military personnel and more focus upon waging a more sophisticated, high-tech intervention. In addition, the use of enhanced interrogation techniques employed by US selected government institutions has become more explicit and widely publicised in popular

media. Hollywood war cinema, and in some notable cases, US television shows, explore this shifting conceptualisation of unconventional warfare with their thematic content. Consequently, the films used to exemplify the dominant characteristics of this period include both the new, post-9/11 *unconventional* war film (*Zero Dark Thirty*, 2012) and conventional war film (*American Sniper*, 2014). These texts signify a new phase of war and representation and encapsulate many of the central themes that have emerged in this period of modern warfare and cinematic representation: the relationship between military, government and Hollywood, representations of torture, counterterrorism, surveillance, and otherness. Again, through a combination of contextual and film analyses, we can see how the key moments of Obama's tenure are captured in the public imagination through the enduring artefacts of popular culture.

This contemporary era is marked with a number of changes, signalled by the transition from the George W. Bush presidential campaign, to the Barack Obama administration beginning on 20 January 2009. The America that Obama inherited was plagued with significant problems, including a traumatised national economy, intensifying housing and banking crises (resulting in the Global Financial Crisis and The Great Recession from 2008-2012), increased costs for energy, food, and healthcare, economic difficulties resulting from massive military spending, as well as two ongoing conflicts (Iraq and Afghanistan) (Cawelti, 2010, p.209; Birkenstein, Froula & Randell, 2010, p.2). Wanting to signal an immediate break from the presidency of George W. Bush, President Obama vowed to usher in a "new era of responsibility" and restore tarnished American ideals (Baker, 2009, n.p).

Four months after the conclusion of Obama's two terms in office (and subsequently four months of a tumultuous Trump presidency), we have the benefit of hindsight to reflect upon some of the significant acts Obama achieved in the oval office. These are significant, of course, as it helps to contextualise Hollywood's response to this new era of politics and American society. Obama's legacy is characterised by attempts to harness some form of gun control (spurred on by the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School gun massacre), race (unavoidable, it seems, when the weight of African-American rights falls upon the first African-American president), healthcare reform, and foreign policy.

The first significant issue Obama addressed was the withdrawal of US troops from Iraqi cities in accordance with the Status of Forces Agreement with the Nouri al-Maliki government (Keeton & Scheckner, 2013, p.155). As part of this evaluation of the war on terror, linguistically, Obama abolished the term war on terror and replaced it with terminology such as “Global Counterintelligence” (G-COIN) and “Overseas Contingency Operations”, among others. This rhetorical shift, argues Birkenstein, Froula and Randell, highlights the ways in which the post-9/11 discourse continues to be reframed even as it remains a focal point of American consciousness (2010, p.2). Whilst the linguistic changes to the Iraqi conflict occurred shortly after Obama was elected into office, the process of disengaging troops from the war was a much more gradual process – contrary to campaign assurances in the lead up to the election.

Obama’s 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns were premised on promises of change, yet the reality of taking up residence in the US top position provided a complex series of constraints. Holland (2014) argues that the reason Obama has been unable to instigate the change he desired (and promised his voters during the campaign trail) is due to a number of domestic and international structures including the relative material declining of American power, the institutionalised nature of the war on terror, and the hegemonic discourses of terror that were established shortly after 9/11 (and continue to be defended today) (p.2). We can see this in operation through the way that the President reconceptualised the notion of executive power during his presidency.

Despite being heralded as an agent of change as many had hoped at the time of his election in 2008, many of Obama’s foreign policies are essentially the same as those prominent in the Bush administration. This is evident in the case of Afghanistan. After failed attempts to see the end of the war in Afghanistan before leaving office, Obama finally conceded that the longest military operation in American history would not end during his term. In September 2015, the president halted the withdrawal of US troops and announced that he would leave thousands of servicemen in the country indefinitely. More than any other conflict, it was this one that framed President Obama’s understanding of war, peace, and the use of military power. It was here in Afghanistan, as Landler identifies, that Obama discovered his affinity for drones, sharpened his belief in the scope of American intervention, reaffirmed his suspicions

about sending American troops into foreign conflicts, and made him reluctant to use more force in Iraq, Syria, Libya and other war zones (2017, n.p).

### **Hollywood Film in the Obama Era**

Barack Obama's success in assuming office in both the 2008 and 2011 elections demonstrated, to the surprise of many, that the United States was at last ready for a black president. This is remarkable in many regards, particularly in light of the extensive discussion of the 'other' throughout this thesis. In essence, Obama's election into the highest office in the Western world signifies the validation of the 'other' as a competent (and popular) figure. Obama chose not to extensively make mention of the fact himself during office, but rather left it to others to explicitly discuss. In his inauguration address he only made passing mention to his heritage, highlighting that "a man whose father less than 60 years ago might not have been served at a local restaurant can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath" (Obama, 2009, n.p). Interestingly, Obama is himself descended (on his mother's side) from ancestors who owned slaves, and even from Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy. During his inauguration, fellow democrat Bill Clinton observed that Obama's election to office is "obviously historic because President Obama is the first African-American president, but it's more than that – this is a time when we're clearly making a new beginning. It's a country of repeated second-chances and new beginnings" (Clinton in Baker, 2009, n.p).

There have been several parallels in Obama's policy and Hollywood cinema throughout this period: race, counterterrorism, surveillance, and torture. Race, perhaps the most superficial and obvious, has been featured both overtly (*Django Unchained*, 2012, *12 Years a Slave*, 2013), and covertly disguised within subtext (*The Hunger Games* 2012-2015, *The Great Gatsby*, 2013). Counterterrorism, surveillance and torture are certainly not the most inspirational tenets of the era, but have nevertheless been significant parts of the decade. Counterterrorism and surveillance have surfaced in this period as a direct result of policies instigated by the Bush administration after the events of September 11 – namely the Patriot Act<sup>49</sup>. After inheriting the post-9/11 surveillance state from his predecessor, Obama has pulled back in some areas, and expanded in others. The key areas of contention that dominate the Obama legacy are

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<sup>49</sup> See chapter three, sub-heading "A New, New World Order"



undoubtedly the NSA spying revelations (made known by infamous ex-NSA analyst Edward Snowden) and the president's drone program (established as a part of Obama's "kill list" of terrorists targeted by drones<sup>50</sup>).

The *idea* of surveillance is certainly not new – both within Hollywood and the real world. We have consistently seen success with films that deal with the notion of surveillance and intelligence organisations (the large number of James Bond films, and more recently the *Bourne* franchise are a testament to this). What differs about surveillance in this period is the uncomfortable realisation that the far-fetched cinematic narratives we as audiences have so long enjoyed, now often play out as milder storylines compared to the reality of the jurisdiction enabled through the Patriot Act and other policies executed by government organisations headed by the US president such as the CIA, FBI and NSA.

In Hollywood, Greengrass' most recent instalment of the Bourne franchise, *Jason Bourne* (2016), features surveillance as a prominent theme. The film, the first Damon and Greengrass have worked on together since *Green Zone* in 2010, is the fifth movie in the *Bourne* series (but the fourth featuring the character of Jason Bourne). Before launching in to a new sequel for the highly successful franchise, Damon openly confessed the pair wanted to wait until the world had changed enough as the first three films were very much about the Bush years and the war on terror – they wanted any future *Bourne* films to be of their own time (Damon in Wilson, 2016, n.p). It has been nine years since the last Damon/Bourne film and understandably, much has changed in the real world since Bourne last graced our screens. This instalment follows the same general format of those gone before, but with some contemporary updates that reference the present context. Surveillance has always been a concept explored by the franchise – exemplified in the *Bourne Ultimatum* (2007) when we saw the dark side of government surveillance with the assassination of *Guardian* reporter Paddy Considine after he mentioned the name of a secret spy programme ("Black Briar") in a mobile phone conversation to his editor. In *Jason Bourne* we see the development of this theme in light of recent events and technological advancements, namely the Edward Snowden scandal, Julian Assange and WikiLeaks, Mark Zuckerberg and his social media empire, the prominence of CCTV, and the

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<sup>50</sup> For more information see <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/29/world/obamas-leadership-in-war-on-al-qaeda.html>

ever-increasing reliance on smart phone technology. The film was certainly explicit in this fact – with the trailer revealing that the CIA has “just been hacked” and it “could be worse than Snowden” (Child, 2016).

Early on in *Jason Bourne* we learn that Bourne is no longer the amnesiac hero we knew in *The Bourne Identity* (2002), *The Bourne Supremacy* (2004), and *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007) with his memory at last fully recovered. We are re-introduced to the protagonist in the opening sequence where he is off-the-grid street fighting somewhere in Europe. Whilst he has regained his memory, it seems that he has lost his purpose. Nicky Parsons (Julia Stiles) shortly re-emerges into the narrative with a proposition that draws Bourne out of his inconspicuous existence and back into the world he left behind. Parsons, Bourne’s ally in previous films, seeks Bourne’s assistance in a Snowden-esque whistleblowing operation that will expose “Treadstone” (the project Bourne himself was directly involved in, in earlier films), “Iron Hand” (Treadstone’s successor, which we learn implicated Bourne’s late father Richard Weber), and other programs yet to be disclosed. We learn that Parsons was working with WikiLeaks-style hacker Christian Dassault (Vincenzo Kiefer) who was determined to reveal the CIA’s latest scandalous dealings which point towards a new plan involving CIA director Robert Dewey (Tommy Lee Jones), and “Deep Dream” – a Facebook/Google social media hybrid that intended to provide consumers with the utmost privacy in their activities.

As the narrative develops we learn that Dewey has been secretly dealing with Deep Dream founder Aaron Kalloor (Riz Ahmed). Kalloor’s social media program offered an important (albeit illegal) platform for Dewey’s agenda with “Iron Hand” – enabling him to enhance his surveillance capabilities for the programme’s development through wholesale data mining and privacy breaching. Ultimately (after many car chases and fight scenes in true Greengrass fashion), Bourne saves Kalloor from Dewey’s attempt at assassination, Dewey is eventually killed (by Bourne’s newest CIA accomplice Heather Lee (Alicia Vikander), the head of the Cyber Ops Division), and Bourne returns to his life of necessary exile after once again refusing to “come in” to the CIA after the Dewey debacle was resolved. The film explicitly engages with a number of contemporary anxieties surrounding US policies of counter-terrorism, surveillance, and online privacy and security through the personification of

lead players in the real-world tech and intelligence scene. In the film, as with the real world it tries to somewhat emulate, the reliance on hi-tech surveillance blurs the line between national security and civil liberties and challenges us to consider, just what we are willing to compromise for our security?

Perhaps the most dramatic evolution in post-9/11 Bush era policy in the age of Obama is the way in which torture has permeated mainstream cinema and television. The revelations about torture practices in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo brought the treatment of prisoners and torture to the forefront of our consciousness and as a result, we have seen these issues negotiated in the realm of popular culture – culminating in the development of a cycle of ‘torture porn’ texts. The phrase ‘torture porn’ was first circulated in early 2006 by *New York* magazine chief film critic David Edelstein in an article written for the publication entitled ‘Now Playing at Your Local Multiplex: Torture Porn’ (Barnfield 2011, p.135). The article was written in response to a recent trend in narrative cinema which Edelstein described as “so viciously nihilistic that the only point seems to be to force you to suspend moral judgments altogether” (Edelstein, 2006). Although the examples of “explicit scenes of torture and mutilation” Edelstein highlighted came predominately from horror films such as *Hostel* (2006), *Wolf Creek* (2005), *The Devil’s Rejects* (2005), and *Saw* (2004), he also includes the religious epic *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) and the French art film *Irreversible* (2002) (Lowenstein, 2011, p.42; Edelstein, 2006, p.64). However, the label of ‘torture porn’ has continued to cling most tightly to films within the horror genre more specifically.

There have been a number of different commentaries on what exactly defines the sub-genre of ‘torture porn’ (Lowenstein, 2011, p.42; Edelstein, 2006, p.64; Wetmore, 2012, p. 97; Morris, 2010, p.45) but Jeremy Morris provides the most concise explanation, advocating for four distinct features that deem a film ‘torture porn’ despite merely containing lengthy scenes of torture (Morris, 2010, p.43). First, he argues that torture must be the primary vehicle of fear, second, the torture must be realistically depicted, third, torture must be rationalised, and lastly, the victim must be transformed into a torturer him/herself (Wetmore, 2012, p. 97; Morris, 2010, p.45).

Prior to 2006 (and Edelstein’s seminal article on the topic) this particular sub-genre was not identified. Thus, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that the perceived

emergence of ‘torture porn’ can be seen to be linked, at least in some degree, to the war on terror. Barnfield argues that the Bush Administration’s early public explanation for the 9/11 attacks popularised in the question ‘why do they hate us?’ which seemed to overlap with the central question of the ‘ordeal’ movie: ‘why are you doing this to me?’ Barnfield continues to assert that both of those questions imply the absence of a rational motive: “on screen and on the world stage those responsible are merely ‘evil doers’. Casting ‘terror’ as the enemy meant it existed solely to create hurt and outrage...” (Barnfield, 2011, p.143). What this means for the representation of torture in popular culture is that the plot descriptions derived from torture porn sometimes resonated with the wider social reaction to ‘extraordinary rendition’ and Abu Ghraib: if the conduct of the global war on terror appeared inhumane and sadistic, it informed a frame of reference for discussing inhumane and sadistic images on screen (Barnfield 2011, p.144). However, it would be overly simplistic to assert that the war on terror has somehow directly determined the existence of ‘torture porn’. Rather, ‘torture porn’ has taken shape in a social context where various audiences – film critics, movie buffs, and casual consumers of film – could be forgiven for holding the assumption that such behaviours were routine (Barnfield 2011, p.146).

According to Stanley Cohen, the atrocities performed by perpetrators and officials are not private states of mind. Rather, they are “embedded in popular culture, banal language codes and state-encouraged legitimations” (Cohen, 2001, p.76). Popular culture reflects the world as we perceive and experience it. Thus, ‘torture porn’ rose to prominence as torture rose to prominence within the media and national (and international) debates (Wetmore, 2012, p.98). It was an obvious truth known all over the world that since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, officials of the United States, at various locations around the world (Bagram in Afghanistan, Guantanamo in Cuba, and Abu Ghraib in Iraq), have been torturing prisoners (Wetmore, 2012, p.98). The US government used the term ‘Enhanced Interrogation’ which many took as a euphemised term for ‘torture’. In addition, The United States introduced a policy of ‘Special Rendition’ in which individuals would be seized and transported to an allied country where torture was not against the law, allowing them to make the argument that ‘they’ did not torture, even though the person being renditioned was taken to their destination specifically for the purposes of torture.

The Abu Ghraib torture scandal broke widely in April 2004. It was here where “acts of brutality and purposeless sadism” were committed by Americans on Iraqis (Danner, 2004, p.41). The reports and photographs of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib tortured by US military personnel appalled the world, so it is unsurprising that Edelstein expressed concerns that the representation of torture in popular culture contributes to a “self-justifying righteousness in the United States surrounding the brutal scenarios of domination at Abu Ghraib” (Edelstein, 2006, p.64; Lowenstein, 2011, p.42). Moreover, ‘torture porn’ can be seen as justifying the use of torture at Abu Ghraib, rather than critiquing it.

Interestingly, the majority of audiences would not find torture practices acceptable, but, as Wetmore argues, they go to the cinema and come to terms with the reality that these practices are being done by Americans, in the name of America, to keep Americans safe. Consequently, he asserts that the films disturb the audience, but simultaneously provide an “out”: the torture is necessary and will make a difference (a very familiar theme that has emerged with *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) that will be explored later). ‘Torture porn’ is not only disturbing because of the way torture is depicted, but because the very nature of the depiction functions to justify the use of it (Wetmore, 2012, p.115).

Edelstein’s feature article further emphasises the impact of ‘torture porn’ within the broader social debates surrounding torture:

Post 9/11, we’ve engaged in a national debate about the morality of torture, fuelled by horrifying pictures of manifestly decent men and women (some of them, anyway) enacting brutal scenarios of domination at Abu Ghraib. And a large segment of the population evidently has no problem with this. Our righteousness is buoyed by propaganda like the TV series *24*, which devoted an entire season to justifying torture in the name of imminent threat: a nuclear missile en route to a major city. Who do you want defending America? Kiefer Sutherland, or terrorist-employed civil-liberties lawyers? (Edelstein 2006).

Unfortunately, recent American use of torture neither begins nor ends with Abu Ghraib.

A theme that continues to emerge within discussions about ‘torture porn’ is the way in which it functions to justify practices and prove the necessity of torture “for the greater good”. Slavoj Žižek is one of the most vocal academics within the public sphere (and more specifically, through his writings in print media) about the way that torture is being represented within popular culture. He takes the debate further by arguing how representations of torture in film not only justify the means, but also normalise it (2013, n.p). Stanley Cohen similarly provides commentary on the normalising of torture in popular culture. Cohen argues that normalisation of torture exists as a form of official denial. He distinguishes between three variants of denial: literal (according to which nothing happened), interpretative (according to which what happened is something else), and lastly, implicatory (according to which what happened is justified) (Cohen, 2001, p.76). In the case of the third variant, necessity is defined as a form of justification, a notion that is exemplified in responses such as “we had to do it”, “there was no alternative”. The implication that emerges from this form of denial is that the government had to respond to a situation using torture practices for a myriad of reasons that all contributed to ‘the greater good’ (i.e. national survival, protection of citizens, self-defence) (Cohen, 2001, p.110). The normalising, or legitimating, of torture will form the basis of discussion as we analyse some of the predominant themes within Boal and Bigelow’s collaborative project *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) and US television show *24*.

### **Hollywood, Government, Military, and the Rise of Embedded Journalism**

As has been argued throughout this thesis, the relationship between the Hollywood film industry, the US government, and the US military is interactive and continues to be strengthened in times of war and conflict – as evidenced by the creation of the Creel committee in WWI, the OWI in WWII, and the 9/11 Group with the contemporary conflict. Significant to the success of these programs and the general reception of war, is the role that journalists play in reporting from war zones. Identified by the post-1975 US military, a major source of discontent of the Vietnam War was attributed to the work conducted by independent journalists, which often reported the US military unflatteringly (Buchanan, 2011, p.106). Going forward, a

conscious effort was made by the US military and government to reduce any media fallout by excluding them from war-zones. However, in the late 1980s/early 1990s, the Pentagon began to consider how they could facilitate an alternative way of producing news coverage that would not undermine military missions and would complement ongoing US military cooperation with Hollywood. Emerging out of this was the practice of journalistic embedding in military units (some call it ‘imbedding’, as in ‘in bed with’). The early form of journalistic embedding was trialled in the 1991 Gulf War, with favourable results. However, it was a limited program that restricted media personnel to low-risk environments<sup>51</sup>. After the decision was made to initiate a war on terror and commence military intervention in Iraq in 2003, the Pentagon’s assistant secretary of defense of public affairs, Victoria Clarke, redeveloped the initiative and transformed it into a comprehensive program for covering the war. Guidelines for the contemporary form of embedded journalism were drawn up by the Central Command (the military command responsible for the Middle East and Central Asia) and approved by the Office of the Secretary of Defense in what became official US policy (US Secretary of Defense, 2003; Buchanan 2011, p.110; Markert, 2001, pp.61-62). These guidelines established a clear framework for government institutions to offer privileged access to carefully selected individuals in exchange for a flattering story. Reporters who were embedded were invited to travel with military units, which enabled the journalist to have a ‘birds-eye-view’ of the conflict – but always from the vantage point of the personnel they were with.

This practice of embedding has been one of the most successful campaigns for the Hollywood/Government/Military relationship in the execution of the war on terror. Indeed, the military favourably regarded the results of embedding, which thereby reduced the need to censor stories when they returned to US newspapers. Writing for *The New York Times* in June 2014, former United States Army Intelligence analyst Chelsea Manning<sup>52</sup> stated that during her term in Iraq in 2009 and 2010, military

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<sup>51</sup> For a more extended history of embedded journalism, see Buchanan, P.G (2011) “Facilitated News as Controlled Information Flows: The Origins, Rationale and Dilemmas of ‘Embedded’ Journalism”. *Pacific Journalism Review*, 17(1), pp.102-118 (esp. pp. 105-111, “A brief history of facilitated newsgathering in modern US warfare”).

<sup>52</sup> In June 2013, Chelsea Manning (formerly known as Bradley Manning) was sentenced to serve a 35-year prison sentence for leaking the largest trove of classified documents in American history to WikiLeaks. On January 17, 2017 she received a presidential pardon from President Barack Obama.

public affairs officials carefully vetted all reporters. Unsurprisingly, the journalists granted embed status and access to the conflict were more likely to be sympathetic to the Administration's war rhetoric and present the war favourably in their press reports (Manning, 2014, n.p). Those that failed to follow this agenda and produced work that challenged the official line were terminated and subsequently blacklisted from gaining access again in the future. There have been numerous cases of this, including Rolling Stones reporter Michael Hastings who, in 2010, wrote an article criticising Gen. Stanley McChrystal and the Obama administration and later had his embed status and access withdrawn (CNN Wire Staff, 2010, n.p).

The government commissioned embedding program has been translated into the terrain of Hollywood cinema. 'Government-embedded filmmaking', as Peter Mass (2012) terms it, is directly derived from embedded journalism and has been made proud due to the work of one journalist in particular – Mark Boal. Boal's embedding in Iraq and Afghanistan directly resulted in the production of major Hollywood war films such as *The Hurt Locker* (2008), and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), as well as a highly successful first-person shooter video game *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare* (2014). As a freelance journalist, Boal was embedded with troops and bomb squads in 2004 during the Iraq War. After his embed with an Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team in the first months of the war, Boal wrote an article titled "The Man in the Bomb Suit" for Playboy magazine, published in September 2005. It was this piece that formed the basis for the successful film *Hurt Locker* (2008)<sup>53</sup> (Mann, 2014, p.49). His most controversial work produced from his embedding with the US military on tour in Iraq is his collaboration with director Kathryn Bigelow in 2012, *Zero Dark Thirty*.

### **'Zero Dark Thirty' (2012)**

Like many other war films, *Zero Dark Thirty* is a product of the dynamic and enduring relationship between the Hollywood film industry, the US government and the military. Boal worked closely with the CIA in the development of the *Zero Dark Thirty* narrative, drawing on extensive interviews with CIA officers, military officers, and the White House (Coll, 2013). A memo released under the US Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) shows that Michael Morell – the CIA's then deputy director

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<sup>53</sup> See chapter three for an analysis of *Hurt Locker* (2008).



and now acting chief – met with the filmmakers and briefed them on the project. According to a report by the Defense Department’s inspector general, Boal’s briefing was also conducted with the full knowledge and support of then-CIA Director Leon Panetta. Further documents released under FOIA clearly indicate that the makers of *Zero Dark Thirty* were deeply embedded in the US security world from the very beginning (Schou, 2016, p.102). Boal and the CIA were involved in a dynamic relationship of information exchange: Boal shared scripts and details with the CIA for their approval, and the CIA shared operational details of the project (Child, 2013).

This direct intervention and cooperation between script writers and government signals a pronounced entanglement between government and Hollywood industry that extends what has already been seen through the creation of the 9/11 Group in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001 (and echoes the films of WWII under the OWI). In a similarly political manoeuvre to the premature release of *Black Hawk Down* and *We Were Soldiers*, the Washington Post reported on May 1, 2012 that *Zero Dark Thirty* “has potential political implications” which resulted in Sony moving the film’s release date back amid concerns that its initial scheduled release could boost President Obama’s prospects one month before the presidential election (Miller, 2012). Obama and his politics did not have a significantly explicit role within *Zero Dark Thirty*, but his resistance and opposition to the CIA interrogation program and the use of torture as a key means of extracting information from prisoners certainly ran implicitly throughout the latter portion of the film. *Zero Dark Thirty* is a product of a complex and intertwined bond with US government, CIA, military and Hollywood. The film’s extensive engagement with the CIA in particular singles it out amidst a growing genre of post-9/11 Hollywood war films.

Directed by Kathryn Bigelow and written by Mark Boal, *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) has generated the most controversy and debate out of all its predecessors within the war on terror Hollywood film genre. The film saw the reunion of the 2009 Academy Award winning pair for their second post-9/11 war film epic (the first of course being *The Hurt Locker* discussed in chapter three). Bigelow and Boal strived to bring the same sense of “gripping reality” to this project, which claimed to depict the “story of history’s greatest manhunt for the world’s most dangerous man” (Schou, 2016, p.102). *Zero Dark Thirty* is different from other texts within this genre in the sense that the film does not explicitly deal with military conflict, but exemplifies the

contemporary nature of *unconventional* warfare. The movie follows CIA agent Maya (Jessica Chastain) and her role in Special Forces mission ‘Operation Neptune Spear’, the targeted killing of Osama bin Laden in the hours after midnight (“zero dark thirty” in military terminology). The film begins with a depiction of the Bush Administration’s secret US interrogation program and climaxes in the successful raid on bin Laden’s compound in May 2011. Whilst deviating from the conventional Hollywood war film that is set in the context of direct military conflict, *Zero Dark Thirty* deals with some of the central themes that form the defining characteristics of the war film genre in this period – chiefly, the film has been argued to legitimate and normalise torture and interrogation processes to a degree that has not been seen before in mainstream Hollywood cinema.

The film opens with a caption indicating to the audience that the story it is about to see is “based in first-hand accounts of actual events”. As those words fade, “September 11, 2001” appears and a soundtrack of emergency calls made by victims of the terrorist attacks is heard, accompanied by a blank screen. The lack of a visual subject for the audience to engage with establishes a kind of cinematic otherness at the onset of the film: an unknown, faceless entity. This opening sequence functions on a multiplicity of levels. First, it establishes the film as a revenge narrative. Those cinematic choices provide a justification for the impending depiction for the hunt for bin Laden and presents the implicit explanation for the film and the “true” events upon which it is based (“this is why we are trying to go after Osama bin Laden”). Immediately, the audience can contextualise the torture and violence that directly ensues in the proceeding scenes. Secondly, this opening sequence (and the film more generally) denotes authenticity through the adoption of these journalistic and documentary-like conventions (the subtitles used in this scene and throughout, the statement of date, time and location).

Many of the concerns that have emerged at the release of this film can be linked to the belief that *Zero Dark Thirty* authentically portrays a real life event, which is, of course, a significantly problematic assertion: any Hollywood film is a mediated product that is constructed using particular filmic and narrative conventions. However, this captioning and the strategic use of sound and footage related to 9/11 already generates an impression of authenticity – all before a single fictional word is spoken. If there is an expectation of accuracy, it is set up by the filmmakers themselves.

Indeed, both Boal and Bigelow have contributed to the discussion by asserting that the film is based on first-hand accounts of the people who were directly involved in the events that were portrayed. In an early interview, Boal also stated that all of the characters, including Maya, are based on real people. Additionally, at the movie Premiere in December 2012, Bigelow asserted that they wanted to present the story as they understood it and bring it to the screen in a faithful way, based on the “extraordinary” research that Boal conducted (Child, 2013).

A theme of contradiction begins to emerge when the tough questions get asked. On the one hand, Bigelow and Boal claim that their film, *Zero Dark Thirty*, is based on real events and is the product of “extraordinary” research that is conducted with close relation to the CIA. On the other, Bigelow, when confronted, has said that her film is a mixture of fact and fiction, “part documentary”. This blurring of the distinction between fact and fiction, documentary, storytelling and Hollywood blockbuster has created tension in the debate encompassing representation within the film. This is certainly not unique to this film, but has been seen throughout the genre, and specifically within some of the films that form exemplary texts in this thesis, particularly *Platoon*, *Hamburger Hill*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *The Hurt Locker*. *Zero Dark Thirty*, like these films that have gone before, employs documentary-like techniques which often misrepresents factual events as hyper-Hollywood spectacles – particularly when coupled with claims of authentic portrayals by writers, producers, directors. These films must be critically consumed despite the credentials of those creating re-presentations of historical moments.

There can be no mistaking that the depiction of torture within *Zero Dark Thirty* played a central role in the controversy that shrouded the films’ release. With the film containing lengthy scenes of torture (a total of 16 minutes and 36 seconds to be precise), it is unsurprising that *Zero Dark Thirty* has raised a number of concerns in the public sphere relating to the way in which torture was represented within the text. On December 19, 2012, *The New York Times* reported that three US Senators – Dianne Feinstein, John McCain and Carl Levin, had written a letter to chief executive of Sony Pictures, Michael Lynton, and argued that the movie was “grossly inaccurate and misleading”, “has the potential to shape American public opinion in a disturbing and misleading manner” and is “factually inaccurate” (Shane, 2012). The Senators requested that Lynton “consider correcting the impression that the CIA’s use of

coercive interrogation techniques led to the operation” against bin Laden (Feinstein, Levin & McCain, 2012). Further, in their letter, the group stated that:

“The use of torture in the fight against terrorism did severe damage to America’s values and standing that cannot be justified or expunged. It remains a stain on our national conscience. We cannot afford to go back to these dark times, and with the release of *Zero Dark Thirty*, the filmmakers and your production studio are perpetuating the myth that torture is effective. You have a social and moral obligation to get the facts right” (Feinstein, Levin & McCain, 2012).

The criticism was centred upon not only the way torture was represented, but the implication that acts of torture inflicted upon detainees by CIA operatives directly resulted in critical information that led to the identity of bin Laden’s courier, and eventually, the location of bin Laden himself (Child, 2013). In his article on the presence of embedded filmmaking in *Zero Dark Thirty*, Peter Maas argues that the embedded filmmaking in the production of *Zero Dark Thirty* could certainly be viewed as the reason why the film presents torture as so effective in obtaining crucial information that led to the assassination of bin Laden: the CIA have been seen as supporters of those particular methods. He asserts that if Boal and Bigelow had been embedded at the FBI (an institution very critical of torture), the film would probably have a very different message about the effectiveness of torture techniques in obtaining vital information from detainees (Maas, 2012). In reality, the CIA’s torture practices were deemed so illegal and so immoral that the director of the FBI withdrew his personnel rather than have them collaborate with it (Mayer, 2012).

In response to the hefty criticism Boal and Bigelow received as a result of the representation of torture in the film, Boal argued that critics were “mischaracterising” the torture sequences. In his view, the film shows the complexity of the debate by showing multiple approaches to gathering intelligence, not just focusing on torture as a primary method (Mayer, 2012). Despite these assertions, the film does not provide an extensive commentary on all facets to the debate on torture and the US’ detention program. *Zero Dark Thirty* does not include a single scene in which torture is questioned, even though the Bush and Obama years in office were dominated by

internal conflict over the issue. The conflict ran beyond the White House and was a significant point of concern for the FBI in particular. In reality, at some “black sites” where the CIA prisoners were interrogated, agents from the FBI were also present and vocally opposed to the interrogation techniques the CIA were employing. For example, the first ‘interrogation’ sequence in the film was based on real-life events and in the film, depicted CIA operatives forcing terrorist prisoner ‘Ammar’ (Reda Kateb) to crawl naked whilst wearing a dog collar. In contrast, in the lived encounter of that scene, an FBI agent was also present alongside his CIA colleagues and objected vehemently to the CIA’s harsh methods and warned the CIA operative proposing the plan that it was illegal, inhumane, counterproductive and morally wrong (Coll, 2013; Mayer, 2012). It seems that Bigelow and Boal considered this to be irrelevant in representing the complexity of the debate.

The single example in the film that at least acknowledged that there was a conflict regarding the interrogation program was evident halfway through the film in a scene set in a conference room in Pakistan. The entire team of CIA operatives working on ‘Operation Neptune Spear’ are watching President Obama’s *Sixty Minutes* interview on TV (aired on 16 November 2008). Obama states, “I intend to close Guantanamo, and I will follow through on that. I have said repeatedly that America doesn’t torture. And I’m gonna make sure that we don’t torture. Those are part and parcel of an effort to regain America’s moral stature in the world”. It is an eerie moment of stillness where the film’s terrorist hunters sit in silence while the clip plays, without a glance towards it or any comment regarding Obama’s declaration after the clip concludes. Not a single agent shows any sign that Obama’s statement has any meaning. Obama’s speech in this context functions as a doubly mediated representation: a mediated televised broadcast of the President of the United States declaring his position on torture, watched by characters, which is depicted within a mediated film production indirectly providing a statement on torture techniques employed for the purpose of counter-terrorism, watched by real-life audience members. It is interesting, then, that Boal and Bigelow profess to represent the debate within the film when this is the only real example of engaging with views counter to those that are being adopted in the narrative, and, ironically, they are not actually being engaged with, but rather ignored.

Another facet of the torture representation debate is that in reality, torture has been proven as an unsuccessful method of obtaining intelligence from prisoners. After yet

another unsuccessful attempt at getting Ammar to cooperate, Dan says to Maya, “everyone breaks in the end... It’s biology”. Experts on torture argue the inaccuracy of this statement, asserting that there have been many prisoners who have been tortured to death without ever revealing secrets, while many others have fabricated information whilst being tortured (Mayer, 2012). Former FBI agent Ali H. Soufan describes an argument he had with a CIA interrogator about whether torture can produce reliable information:

“These things won’t work on people committed to dying for their cause... People like [him] are prepared to be tortured and severely beaten. They expect to be sodomised and to have family members raped in front of them! Do you really think stripping him naked and taking away his chair will make him cooperate?” (Coll, 2013)

*Zero Dark Thirty* ignores what experts have proven about torture and continues to profess its effectiveness in obtaining crucial clues for a highly classified investigation.

On the other side of the torture debate, US filmmaker Michael Moore provided the most vocal rebuttal to the claims that *Zero Dark Thirty* endorses torture. In an article published in The Huffington Post on 25 January 2013, Moore provided a commentary on the “Defence of *Zero Dark Thirty*”. Moore dismissed suggestions that the film erroneously depicted torture as a vital tool in the hunt for bin Laden and disagreed with popular sentiments expressed by significant public figures that the film glorifies torture by showing its use during the search for al-Qaida’s figurehead (Moore, 2013). Moore states that he understood “why a lot of people on the Left...believe the movie endorses torture, but that is not how I saw it, I left the movie thinking it made an incredible statement against torture” (Moore, 2013). Moore argues that this anti-torture depiction within the film is echoed with the shift in political leadership (Bush – Obama) that signalled a drastic change in the approach to the war on terror. Unlike Obama’s “frat boy predecessor who had little interest in finding bin Laden, this new president was not an imbecile and all about business – Go find bin Laden and don’t use torture” (Moore, 2013). This shift in approach, Moore argues, is clearly represented through the movement from torture porn in the first part of the film, to the

latter “detective work” method for finding bin Laden<sup>54</sup>. Moore justifies his stance by claiming that it is important to move beyond the issue of whether torture “does or does not work... The film shows the abject brutality [of torture]... It doesn’t matter if it works, it’s wrong” (Moore, 2013). He continues: “*Zero Dark Thirty* is a disturbing, fantastically-made movie. It will make you hate torture. And it will make you happy you voted for a man who stopped all that barbarity – and who asked that the people over at Langley, like him, use their brains” (Moore, 2013).

Moore’s response caused a controversial response from an array of individuals, most notably, Slavoj Žižek. Whilst many facets of Moore’s assertion contain an element of truth, Žižek asks, at what cost are we “hating” torture because of what is represented in Hollywood cinema? Isn’t the very act of depiction endorsement? And through this process, are we normalising a truly horrific act against humanity? Building upon Moore’s comments and the infamous statement made by Kathryn Bigelow that “depiction [of torture] is not endorsement” (Bigelow, 2013), Žižek argues that even if the “profoundly shattering” act of torturing a human being is depicted neutrally, it already functions as a kind of endorsement (von Tunzelmann, 2012; Žižek, 2013). He attests “without a shadow of a doubt” that Boal and Bigelow implicitly advocate the normalising of torture through their narrative (Žižek, 2013). Popular imagery of torture, which places an emphasis on physical brutality, legitimises a narrow definition of torture. Through this practice, a gradual desensitising makes less severe forms of violence seem ordinary and acceptable. Consequently, these representations not only assist official government denial of the presence of torture by focusing on the technicalities of what *actually* constitutes torture, but it also manages to present the current practice of torture as progress from earlier, more brutal times (Lokaneeta, 2010, p. 246).

This is demonstrated in the film through Maya’s journey of torture practices: As she passively observes her peers employing ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’ to extract information from detainees, she is initially clearly shocked, but is later seen in a much more active role in enforcing torture methods in order to fuel her fanatical pursuit of bin Laden. Her much more portentous CIA partner, Dan (Jason Clarke), seems to shift from exerting assertive torturer behaviour to friendliness almost instantaneously once

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<sup>54</sup> Interestingly, it is this shift that critics such as Žižek and Cohen find most problematic as it appears to normalise the torture practices that had occurred.

his victim is broken. He fails to express any form of compassion or kindness towards his 'victims'. The only time Dan demonstrates anguish is when he learns that the monkeys on site at Abu Ghraib that he enjoys feeding ice cream to, have been disposed of for no apparent reason. What this implies is that torturers do in fact feel compassion and kindness – for monkeys.

What Žižek argues is most disturbing about the way Dan conducts himself in regards to these 'enhanced interrogation techniques' (and the way *Zero Dark Thirty* responds to the issue more broadly) is how he changes swiftly from a torturer in jeans to a well-dressed Washington bureaucrat. Žižek argues that this is normalisation at its purest and most efficient (2013, n.p). In response to the realist argument that suggests that torture has always existed, Žižek articulately states, "If torture was always going on, why are those in power now only telling us openly about it? There is only one answer: to normalise it, to lower our ethical standards" (2013, n.p).

This articulation of the normalising and necessitating of torture within political discourse has significant implications with ideological functions of representation in popular culture. In virtually all instances in *Zero Dark Thirty* where Maya extracts important clues from detainees, torture is portrayed as a significant (and necessary) factor. The film briefly touches on other methods of obtaining intelligence, such as bribing sources with Lamborghinis, but they are not depicted as being as successful as torture as a technique for gathering vital intelligence. These scenes also only last a few minutes, whereas the torture scenes seem to last considerably longer (the longest of which lasts almost eight minutes).

There are three scenes in particular that are oriented around the practice of enhanced interrogation techniques. The first scene (which is also the first scene of the film) centres on the detainee Ammar. Ammar is tortured extensively throughout the duration of the first half of the film by a number of highly confronting enhanced interrogation techniques including waterboarding, sexual humiliation, being forced into a tiny coffin-like box whilst wearing a dog collar and leash, and sleep deprivation.

The character of Ammar is first introduced from a high angle camera shot, which immediately places him in a position of vulnerability and powerlessness from the perspective of the audience. This is directly contrasted by the initial representation of the chief interrogator, Dan, whom is seen from a low angle (portraying him as superior



and powerful). The scene has employed minimal lighting thus requiring the audience to focus and adjust their vision, emphasising the “real” dark, physical space in which the interrogation is taking place. As the scene is being set, there are close up shots of various parts of Ammar’s bound figure, again, emphasising his powerlessness and the control of his freedom. In an attempt to extract important information from his prisoner, Dan uses verbal strategies to convince Ammar to divulge. In this sequence, the camera pans around the room and Ammar more specifically using a long shot, mimicking Dan’s physical pacing. When it becomes evident to Dan that Ammar is not going to cooperate, Dan commences the use of the first of a variety of enhanced interrogation techniques: waterboarding. Whilst the acts of torture in this scene are quite confronting, there is only a total of six seconds (in two three second intervals) where Ammar’s face is shown, covered in a cloth and having water poured, unwillingly, into his mouth (the essence of waterboarding: replicating the sensation of drowning). For some, however (this author included), three seconds is certainly enough to cause the viewer discomfort.

Prior to the explicit depiction of waterboarding, the process is more subtly represented. The camera follows Maya as she fetches a bucket of water for the use of torture on Dan’s request. At this time only the tortured cries of Ammar can be heard as he is being pinned to the ground by three male CIA operatives (Dan included). The camera moves from Maya to showing Ammar’s struggling figure, but only showing his flailing legs. The sounds of torture are very clearly articulated, but at this point, the audience is generally spared from observing the waterboarding. A close up of Ammar’s face is then shown, revealing Dan forcing water down Ammar’s mouth. After three seconds, the camera moves to show Ammar’s legs fighting against the CIA agents. Again, the camera moves to a close up of Ammar, this time he is seen spitting out water as Dan removes the cloth from his mouth. As Dan then re-binds his detainee, he is once again shown from the perspective of a low angle shot. The position of power of detainee and interrogator is represented not only through narrative conventions, but also through the selective choices around lighting and camera angles. The high/low angle dichotomy is a fairly common technique that is used throughout a myriad of filmic genres to represent a division of power. It is this repetition and clear recognition that makes it a clever device in this context as the

audience is encouraged to immediately understand where the characters are situated within a struggle of power.

In a second attempt (and the final which is shown in the film) to encourage Ammar to cooperate, a number of other “techniques” are employed to coerce the detainee. The scene commences when loud heavy metal music is heard blasting inside Ammar’s containment room and a bright light is seen shining on his face (elements of the ‘sleep deprivation’ enhanced interrogation technique). In comparison to the first torture sequence where close up and medium shots were utilised predominately, long shots play a more dominant role. This shot enables a more holistic view of the containment room, showing more of the movement that is occurring at once. Dan moves two chairs to face each other whilst two other CIA operatives begin to loosen the bounds from the ceiling that are keeping Ammar’s arms elevated. The camera moves to a close up shot of Ammar’s anguished face as Dan taunts him about which torture method to employ next if he won’t cooperate. The camera quickly moves back to a long shot when Dan pulls down Ammar’s pants and mocks him by asking, “You don’t mind if my female colleague [Maya] checks out your junk do you? Oh, what’s that? Did you shit your pants?” At this point, Maya turns away from Ammar, a reaction that is mirrored by an automatic audience response, determined by the quick move away from a long shot of Ammar’s bare buttock to a medium shot of Maya looking clearly unsettled.

After leaving the containment room temporarily, Dan returns with a dog collar. A medium shot shows Dan forcing the dog collar on to Ammar’s neck, which then moves to a low angle of Dan “walking” Ammar (much like an owner walks a dog). Again, this angle selection further emphasises the power struggle between the two and the sheer humiliation being inflicted upon Ammar. A close up of Ammar’s face jammed into a tiny coffin-like box is shown, which then moves to an extreme close-up. The latter shot allows for each trickle of sweat, and each distressed facial muscle to be clearly seen by the audience. The intensity of this act is depicted and is highly confrontational.

After an unknown period of time has lapsed since these incidents of enhanced interrogation, Dan and Maya adopt a new strategy in order to extract information from Ammar. Dan and Maya fool Ammar into divulging information by making him

believe he had already cooperated whilst delirious. The names that Ammar mentions at that point were identified as highly significant in the hunt for bin Laden and played a vital role in the eventual success of the mission. Thus, whilst the torture Ammar had been subjected to was confronting, it was eventually justified by the promise of information.

Throughout the duration of the narrative, Maya then continues on to directly question two other detainees. The first, an older man, agrees to discuss anything with her after stating that he has “no desire to be tortured again”. As Jane Mayer argues, the clear implication from that statement is that brutalisation brings break throughs (Mayer, 2012). The second was with Abu Faraj al-Libi, a well-known al-Qaeda leader. al-Libi failed to cooperate and was thus forced to endure waterboarding and physical abuse (notably not carried out by Maya, she merely observed while a male CIA operative tortured the prisoner). However, his denial merely supported what Maya already knew about the courier – he was clearly someone of great importance that al-Libi would endure torture to protect his identity. In these cases, and essentially all occurrences in the film where vital snippets of intelligence have been obtained from detainees, torture is represented as justified and legitimised because those unconventional methods directly resulted in success<sup>55</sup>.

The way that narrative structure engages with representations of torture and legitimises torture as a necessary practice is not limited to *Zero Dark Thirty* as we have seen with the evolution of the ‘torture porn’ sub-genre. In television, we also see a similar thread develop within this cultural and political context – most explicitly so in US television program *24*. The series is written by Alex Gansa<sup>56</sup> and first screened in November 2001. *24* follows protagonist Jack Bauer, a highly proficient agent for the Los Angeles based Counter Terrorist Unit (perhaps an occupation that sparked a

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<sup>55</sup> We also see this at play in the *Bourne* films. Periodically throughout the movies, Bourne has flashbacks to his past that depict behaviour modification sessions that turned him into an assassin (the objective of ‘Operation Treadstone’). The sessions look like acts of enhanced interrogation. In *The Bourne Ultimatum*, this is confirmed when it is revealed that torture played a central role in Bourne’s transformation. These films suggest that the cause of Bourne’s superhuman abilities and effectiveness as an agent is brutal torture sessions (Neroni, 2015, p.127).

<sup>56</sup> Gansa later went on to co-create and write *Homeland* (2011-), a US television show oriented around Carrie Mathison (Clare Danes), a bipolar CIA officer. Over several seasons, the popular show explored the most compelling and controversial aspects of the war on terror, from a pro-CIA point of view (Schou, 2016, p.97).

renewed fascination within the public sphere with the show premiering only two-months after the 9/11 terrorist attacks). Bauer adopts an ‘ends justify the means’ approach, regardless of the perceived morality of some of his actions. Each series is structured in real time – each episode is 60 minutes long, as well as 60 minutes within the show narrative: over 24 episodes, *24* covers a 24-hour period of time. A typical plot in each episode has Bauer racing against the clock (emphasised by a timepiece illustrated at the bottom of the screen, counting down) to overcome a myriad of terrorist plots.

Over the eight seasons of the show, torture is neither directly nor explicitly advocated, but rather signified as a necessary and effective counterterrorist practice. One way this is achieved is through inversion: torture emerges as the only option after the ineffectiveness of regular law enforcement (Nikolaidis, 2011, p. 218). This inversion is demonstrated explicitly in the depiction of Head of Counter Terrorist Unit, Erin Driscoll’s methods that result in time-consuming insufficiency. In contrast to Driscoll, Bauer’s methods are portrayed as efficient, which is precisely what enables the manifestation of necessity in the representation of torture. Consequently, torture is objectified and normalised through these terms that have been set by the narrative structure (Nikolaidis, 2011, p. 218). For example, in season four, Bauer enters the interrogation room where the suspect for the train bombing, Thomas Sherak, is being held. After refusing to answer Bauer’s question on what will occur at 8 o’clock, Sherak is shot in the knee. When Bauer moves to aim at the other knee, Sherak breaks and confides the specifics of the proposed attack. This depiction of an act of violence resulting in significant and accurate information is a narrative device that has, too, been employed in *Zero Dark Thirty*. The message that can be derived from this visual representation of torture is that the practice of inflicting bodily harm on another human being is justified because nothing else works.

Within the show, there is an attempt to differentiate between acts of torture committed by protagonist Jack Bauer, and his enemies. Jane Mayer argues that “the show’s villains usually inflict the more gruesome tortures: their victims are hung on hooks, like carcasses in a butcher shop; poked with smoking-hot scalpels; or abraded with sanding machines” (Mayer, 2007, n.p). Whilst this distinction is not always clear, what does become evident with a closer reading of the text is that while the enemy

appears to use torture with no justification, Bauer uses torture only because of the ‘necessity’ of the situation (Lokaneeta, 2010, p. 262).

Likewise, *Zero Dark Thirty* depicts a definitive contrast between formal scenes of torture (committed by the US), and other acts of violence (those committed by an ‘other’ that are centered on harming US civilians and personnel), which accentuates the ‘othering’ of the enemy figure. Prior to the war on terror, the question of the ‘other’, whilst always complex, could always be identified through various categories of identification. However, since the inception of the war on terror, the distinctiveness of the ‘other’ has become blurred. This is due, in part, to the stark difference between torture and standard military combat. More often than not in standard combat, a bullet fired from a distance kills the enemy soldier. It can be a very impersonal attack and executed almost instantly. Contrarily, torture occurs over an extended period of time and involves physical, mental, sexual, and emotional abuse on a very intimate level. What begins to happen, particularly within *Zero Dark Thirty*, a film centered on torture, is a type of moral inversion. The Vietcong’s brutal methods of torture and assassination (particularly within the tunnels) was perceived as evil and morally wrong, now, in the vast deserts on the Middle East, the ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’ being employed by US intelligence agencies is crossing into previously morally opposed territory. Thus, the ‘other’, or the enemy figure, becomes increasingly difficult to differentiate. It then becomes important when examining the notion of the ‘other’, to recognise that it can take on various forms and change in different contexts.

The first time the audience is confronted with the stereotypical ‘other’ in *Zero Dark Thirty* is in the opening torture sequence involving Ammar, Dan, and newly arrived Maya. Maya appears physically uncomfortable with the scene before her, delicately wincing as she hands a pitcher of water to Dan, the chief interrogator, so he can waterboard Ammar. Maya is also shown explicitly avoiding making eye contact with Ammar during his interrogation, crouched on the floor and bowing her head. She stands by mutely when the detainee is strung up by ropes, stripped naked and forced to crawl on the floor in a dog collar. The implication from this scene is that Maya pities Ammar – an interesting filmic choice that once again confuses the notion of the ‘other’.

Similarly to previous war films (particularly those discussed previously such as *Platoon*, *Hamburger Hill*, *Pearl Harbor*, *The Hurt Locker* and *Green Zone*), there is very little focus on the faces of those killed at the hands of US military personnel. This strategy creates an emotional distancing from the ‘other’ (we don’t see or ‘know’ them, therefore we don’t pity them). In the scenes throughout the film where US military personnel are torturing the ‘other’ (or even when they are in heavy pursuit of bin Laden), whilst it is thematically uncomfortable, it is treated significantly different to instances where a level of violence is inflicted upon civilians and US military. The film revolves around a small number of people in a very isolated location that the audience is encouraged to identify with. When there is an attack from outside this tiny community, it is represented as violent, invasive and unwarranted.

There are two instances in particular that this occurs throughout the film. Firstly, Maya and a female colleague are sharing a meal together at the Marriot Hotel when a terrorist bomb unceremoniously blows up the hotel. The two females are then seen to be running through the debris of the building in a bid to make it to safety. They were depicted as the innocent victims of a malicious attack. Similarly, at a later point in the film, Maya’s female colleague is murdered in a suicide bombing by a Jordanian doctor at Camp Chapman. The doctor falsely claimed to be willing to assist the search for bin Laden and once given access into the highly secure military base and in direct contact with the US military employee, ignited a bomb that was strapped to his body. This attack was a shock to audiences who had come to believe the best in the Jordanian. This of course sits in direct opposition to the formal torture scenes. Whilst they are more graphic and violent, the detainees are not represented as victims, but rather have their imprisonment justified by the choices that they had made prior to their capture (executing and collaborating in terrorist activity). Their circumstances were seen as a direct result of wrongdoing, thus warranting their punishment. Ideologically, torture and acts of violence inflicted upon the US are treated very differently.

Interestingly, this distancing of the other also includes the face of Osama bin Laden after his assassination. The entire film is climaxing in the capture and murder of the leader of the al-Qaeda, yet there is no celebration of his death. In fact, the closest look the audience gets of him is a blurred image through the back of a camera as a Navy SEAL photographs the body for confirmation. This speaks to another interesting facet of *Zero Dark Thirty* – the way it also challenges classical Hollywood cinema

conventions by the unconventional narrative resolution. A distinctive characteristic of classical Hollywood cinema (the dominant framework of contemporary Hollywood film), is a narrative structure based upon a series of cause and effect events. The ending, then, is the final effect in the causal chain and, as a result, should provide a denouement that resolves any loose ends the narrative may have left open – providing the film with a distinctive sense of closure (Bordwell, 1982, p.2). Bordwell argues that:

“There are usually two concluding phases of the action. First there is the resolution... This is the overcoming of the obstacle, the achievement of the goal, the solution of the problem...there is [also] a final phase, which I shall call the epilogue (this may be quite short). The epilogue functions to represent the final stability achieved by the narrative: the characters’ futures are settled” (1982, p.4)

In *Zero Dark Thirty*, the resolution takes form in the assassination of bin Laden. The epilogue, then, is the final sequence in the film following the raid on bin Laden’s compound. In these final scenes, we see a group of Navy SEALs jogging, carrying the body in a body bag before roughly throwing it onto a stretcher. The team then bags, files, and labels all the documents and belongings taken from the complex where bin Laden was found. Maya is seen in the background whilst all this action takes place. She then walks up to the stretcher where the body lays, (neglected at the edge of a military tent), opens the bag, and giving a nod to a military officer, identifies the body. All the while looking very solemn and visibly shaken and unsettled, then – relieved. The final scene is Maya walking into a US military plane (assumedly to go “home” to the US). When asked by the pilot where she wants to go, she fails to respond, but instead weeps quietly. Marion (1937) argues that the final scene of a film “should show the reaction of the protagonist when he has achieved his desire” and that “the audience be satisfied that the future of the principals is settled” (pp.85-86). In *Zero Dark Thirty*, whilst we certainly see the reaction of the protagonist when she has achieved her desire – her missions end – the audience is certainly not satisfied with the resolution. In this way the film violates a generic norm and produces what Bordwell terms an “unmotivated happy ending” in which the action has resolved, but the epilogue jars with that resolution (Bordwell, 1982, p.5).

### **‘American Sniper’ (2014)**

Controversial in its own right, Clint Eastwood’s *American Sniper* was the highest grossing film in 2014, beating *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay – Part 1* (\$US337 million), *Guardians of the Galaxy* (\$US333 million), and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (\$US259.8 million) (Box Office Mojo, 2016). With a domestic gross of \$350,123,553, the film even exceeded the box office revenue of Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* (\$216,119,491), making *American Sniper* the highest grossing war film of all time. These statistics are unprecedented in the contemporary post 9/11 war film climate, with most films bombing at the box office (as we have seen in the last chapter). Indeed, considering how unpopular the war in the Middle East has been received by the American public, it seems highly uncharacteristic that a pro-war film based around the Iraq War would fare so well at the box office and resonate with such an extensive audience. In a poll conducted by CBS and The New York Times in 2014 (the year that *American Sniper* first donned the silver screen), seventy-five percent of Americans did not think that the Iraq War was worth the cost, with the strongest opposition coming from Bush’s own Republican supporters (Dutton, De Pinto, Salvanto & Backus, 2014, n.p). Yet, box office statistics indicate that regardless of widespread opposition to the conflict the film portrays, audiences still attended – and in droves.

Critics and political commentators alike were divided over the interpretation of the film with some arguing *American Sniper* celebrated the contemporary war hero, yet others arguing the film served as propaganda that sought to provide a revisionist tale that justified a war that should not have been fought in the first place. In the second instance, New York Magazine writer David Edelstein claimed that the film was essentially a Republican “propaganda film” because the film fails to consider that the events of 9/11 and the Iraq invasion “have been yolked together by unscrupulous politicians who don’t have a clue what lies in store for American soldiers” (Edelstein, 2015). In response, high profile figures such as Sarah Palin argued that the Hollywood leftists who opposed the construction of the Iraq War in the film (like Edelstein) “spit on the graves of freedom fighters who allow you to do what you do” and “are not fit to



shine Chris Kyle's combat boots"<sup>57</sup> (Palin, 2015). Perhaps in an attempt to neutralise some of the films' critical animosity, Clint Eastwood made his own views on foreign policy known during an interview with students at Loyola Marymount University School of Film and Television in Los Angeles in March 2015:

"I've done war movies because they're always loaded with drama and conflict. But as far as actual participation...it's one of those things that should be done with a lot of thought, if it needs to be done. Self-protection is a very important thing for nations, but I just don't like to see it. I was not a big fan of going to war in Iraq or Afghanistan, for several reasons, several practical reasons. One, Afghanistan, the British had never been successful there; the Russians had 10 years there and hadn't been successful ... Iraq, I know, was a different deal, because there was a lot of intelligence that told us that bad things could happen there, and we're never sure how that ended up, whether it was pro or con. [But] I tend to err on the side of less is best." (Eastwood in Galloway, 2015)

McDonald (2015) argues that the dissension over the films' interpretation presents similarly to the political divide that was prevalent when John Wayne's *The Green Berets* was released in 1968. *The Green Berets*, the most explicit piece of Hollywood propaganda during the campaign in Vietnam, provoked demonstrations at screenings at Sydney's Regent Theatre by members of the moratorium and contemptuous reviewers. Yet, like *American Sniper*, it fared remarkably well at the box office (p.99).

It is clear that no other film has been so successful in reinterpreting the Iraq and Afghanistan wars as Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper*. Aside from the unforeseen box office success, the film garnered six Academy Award nominations including Best Picture and Best Actor (for Bradley Cooper's portrayal of the films' protagonist). *American Sniper* is based on the memoir by the film's staring character, Chris Kyle, and is co-authored with Scott McEwen and Jim DeFelice. Kyle's story has been just as successful in print form with over 700,000 copies sold in 2015 alone (in addition to

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<sup>57</sup> Palin's response is unsurprising considering Kyle spent time working as her bodyguard (Schmidle, 2013).

the 1.2 million sold in 2012 and 2013) which, like its film counterpart, made it the best-selling narrative of the year (Lewis, 2015). *American Sniper* tells the story of Chris Kyle, colloquially termed “The Legend”, who served as a Navy SEAL from 1999-2009 and fulfilled four tours in Iraq from 2003. Kyle is considered the most lethal sniper in US military history<sup>58</sup> with 160 recorded kills<sup>59</sup> in the Iraq War. Whilst known affectionately as “The Legend”, an American wartime Hercules, by his comrades and supporters, Iraqi insurgents referred to Kyle as “Al-Shaitan Ramad”, or “The Devil of Ramadi” and held a hefty reward for anyone who could kill or capture him (Sanchez, 2012, n.p; Brooks, 2014, n.p).

Unsurprisingly, Eastwood, a vocal Republican supporter, draws on the traditional American war hero trope in his curated depiction of Kyle (rather than showing the less convenient truths more explicitly showcased in his autobiography). The film provides a single-person perspective to the war on terror, which, like Bigelow’s *The Hurt Locker*, inherently de-politicises the war that contextualises the narrative. Through this framework of spectatorship, the film follows Kyle’s (Bradley Cooper) journey between the US and Iraq and depicts the moral challenges of military comradeship, family responsibilities, and the consequences of his role as the US’ deadliest sniper<sup>60</sup>. Amongst this, the film also strives to negotiate how the war can affect the everyday life of ordinary people which is showcased in Kyle’s handling of PTSD. Much like the films’ post-9/11 war genre predecessors, *American Sniper* draws on the redundancy of just (and dirty) war that evince characterises the domestic and international political dimensions of US involvement in the Middle East, and the elusive nature of the enemy ‘other’ (Jones & Smith, 2016, p.9).

Like *The Hurt Locker*, the battlefield in *American Sniper* is not the conventional pre-war on terror vignette, but rather it is a modern day scene in which enemy combatants

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<sup>58</sup> The previous US record was 109 kills, set by an Army rifleman during the Vietnam War. The global record holder is Simo Häyhä, a Finnish sniper, who reportedly killed 542 Russian troops during the Soviet invasion of Finland in the Second World War (Sanchez, 2012).

<sup>59</sup> However, in his book, Chris Kyle claims to have killed 255 people (nearly 100 more than could be confirmed by the Pentagon) (Sanchez, 2012).

<sup>60</sup> Notably, the film adaptation of Kyle’s military life avoided directly portraying the former navy SEAL’s untimely death at the hands of mentally ill veteran Eddie Ray Routh in February 2013 – perhaps out of sensitivity for the soldier’s family as the films’ release ran alongside Routh’s trial (who was eventually found guilty of murdering Kyle on a gun range and sentenced to life in prison without parole in 2015).

are disguised in civilian garb and often their most dangerous weapon is a simple mobile phone – used either as a detonator or as a direct line to allies with far more sinister weapons nearby. The distinction between a personal call to a loved one, and a call for fatal action is impossibly hard to decipher. This challenge and resulting moral and ethical dilemma for US military personnel is established from the onset of the film. Immediately the film shifts location to the Middle East as a simple horn motif reminiscent of an Eastern melody plays over opening credits. Gradually, a repetitive deep rhythmic sound replaces the horn motif, which, as the screen fades from black to imagery, is revealed to be the sound of a tank driving through a war torn Eastern city (which we are eventually informed is Iraq when the scene resumes at a latter point in the film narrative). Accompanying the tank are US ground troops warily investigating their surroundings with their weapons pointed. At this point, the camera utilises low and mid angle shots as it reveals the terrain. The camera then quickly transitions to a high angle shot which shows two US snipers lying on a roof top surveying their US comrades move through the streets below. Immediately after setting this scene, the audience is shown a close up of the men as the camera pans along the length of a sniper rifle before revealing the faces of the two men on the roof – Chris Kyle (Bradley Cooper) and an unidentified US marine serving as his military partner. What follows is one of two major moral dilemmas we see Kyle battle with across the duration of his time serving in Iraq. Whilst closely watching the scene below to ensure the safety of his colleagues on the ground, Kyle identifies an Iraqi man of military age on an opposing rooftop making a call on a mobile phone through his gun scope. After being given the “green light” by his superiors via coms to make the shot, Kyle loses sight after the man steps off the roof. Moments later Kyle (and consequently the audience) sees a woman in traditional dress and a young boy exit the same building and walk towards the US convoy. Kyle notes that the woman’s arms aren’t swinging and deduces that she is carrying something – a grenade she then pulls from under her robe and passes on to the boy. After reporting what he sees to his superiors, they cannot confirm sight from their vantage point and Kyle is advised to make a call. The marine beside him usefully states, “If you get it wrong they send your ass to [prison]”. Kyle’s heavy breathing is laboured and exaggerated on the cinematic soundtrack, indicating the great moral pressure he feels about the forthcoming decision – to shoot suspected US enemies, or reserve the bullet whilst being faced with killing a woman and child.

At the height of the climatic decision making moment, the camera cuts to a shot of a young Chris who just shot a deer while hunting with his father. His father immediately responds with “Good shot, son. You gonna make a good hunter one day”. The intentional juxtaposition of these moments both indirectly informs the audience that the most likely outcome of Kyle’s moral dilemma in the previous scene was that a shot was fired, and provides an ironic comparison between sniping and hunting. Following this scene are several sequences focused around a young Chris Kyle, his parents, and his younger brother Jeff. It establishes an important context for the remainder of the film as the audience gains a broader understanding of just how “The Legend” came to be (helped, of course, by the choice to start the film with a ‘present’ day moment before launching into the protagonists’ past). What the audience learns over this portion of the narrative is that Kyle came from a mostly functional traditional Texan family that honoured the Christian faith and valued family, military and self-protection. In one seminal scene, Kyle’s father tells his two boys that there are three kinds of people in the world – sheep, wolves, and sheepdogs.

“...Now some people prefer to believe that evil doesn’t exist in the world and if it ever darkened their doorstep they wouldn’t know how to protect themselves, those are the sheep. And then you got predators. They use violence to prey on the weak. They’re the wolves. And then there are those who have been blessed with the gift of aggression and an overpowering need to protect the flock. These men are a rare breed and live to confront the wolf... They are the sheepdog. Now, we’re not raising any sheep in this family, and I will whoop your ass if you turn into a wolf. But we protect our own. If someone tries to fight you, or someone tries to bully your little brother, you have my permission to finish him.”

The young Chris Kyle, stern faced, looks his father in the eye and obediently nods in affirmation at the conclusion of this speech. This analogy is pivotal for the rest of the film as it provides a framework for understanding Kyle’s approach to the war and his role in the Navy SEAL’s. Kyle consistently seeks to protect his men, his “flock”, by ensuring he excels in his sniper role. When Kyle fails to prevent a US death by sniper or other means, he takes it to heart – in that instance he has failed at his job as

sheepdog. In addition, the analogy helps to explain why Kyle feels the overpowering need to serve his country during the war, even at the risk of his own life (and that of his quality of life with his own family relationships); the notion of protectionism so deeply ingrained in Kyle's self-appropriation.

On another level, the analogy makes reference to America's historical stance on foreign policy and intervention. In this instance, like Kyle, the US is the sheepdog that actively seeks to protect its own interests. Similarly, if someone tries to "bully [its] little brother" the US likes to think that it, as the "big brother" of the Western world, would "finish" enemies. Read in this way, the analogy seeks to explain and justify the US' decision to go to war against terror in Iraq and Afghanistan after September 11. The US openly attests to a protectionist ideology, particularly in regards to threats on its own liberty and safety. This is illustrated clearly throughout the duration of *American Sniper* as the narrative takes place both at home, and at the frontline of battle through Kyle's single perspective.

Retrospectively, this analogy provides an interesting framework for examining the war film hero/protagonist/US entity in previous war film cycles – particularly Vietnam due to the cross-referential nature of the two wars. In the first cycle of Vietnam War film, characters like Willard (*Apocalypse Now*) present this analogy with a surrealist approach. His mission to retrieve Kurtz was fundamental to the protection of the American image in the Vietnam War (and thus minimise the US as "wolf" image that was emerging from war reporting and in this instance, leaked war photographs). Later in *Rambo*, we see this again with Rambo leading a ferocious campaign of redemption and recuse (and revision of the real war experience). However, unlike Kyle, these American heroes came with complex emotional baggage as they were deeply clothed in the complexities of the political context of their construction. Kyle is the all-encompassing American hero – likeable, relatable, heroic. In *American Sniper* there is much less of a commentary on US as a "wolf", and a notable emphasis on the "sheepdog" – the redeeming feature of America's bloody past that is exemplified in the 'good war' cycle of films (both in the aftermath of WWII, and again in the late 1990s with the greatest generation cycle).

Shortly after the childhood interaction between a young Kyle family, Chris, the man, is watching television with Jeff when they see the news of the August 1998 terrorist

attacks on the US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya unfold. Chris is visibly angered by the attacks. Immediately after this scene we see Chris in a US Navy recruitment office and he joins the Navy SEAL's in direct response to the 1998 attacks. We see Kyle go through the rigorous SEAL training process. At one point, Kyle states to his instructor, "I'm here to kill terrorists". Like the analogy that established the framework for the *American Sniper* narrative, there is a simplification of the notion of war and conflict. The politics are irrelevant as the war on terror becomes, simply, a battle between the good guys and the bad guys (terrorists).

Amongst his strict SEAL training regime, Kyle meets his future wife Taya (Sienna Miller), at a bar. At one point in their early relationship, Taya enquires, "do you ever think about who is at the end of your gun?" Kyle tells her that he just wants to protect his country (again, another reference to the protectionist ideology Kyle was ingrained with as a child). Shortly afterwards we see Taya call Kyle into their living room as the September 11, 2001 attacks are televised live. Much like the previous terrorist attack event, the 9/11 attacks are seen as a catalyst in Kyle's journey to protect his country. He is soon seen revelling at the announcement that he and his fellow SEAL's will be deployed to Iraq to fight in the war on terror (even when that announcement occurs at his wedding reception while he dances with his new bride). In this way, the social and political context of the war on terror (particularly the intervention in Iraq seen through Kyle's perspective) is reduced to a simple causal event: the bad guys attacked the US/US soil, therefore the good guys fight back. It avoids dealing with the complexities of the issue and discussion of *why* that was the best course of action to take. Through Kyle's eyes (or, more aptly, through Eastwood's vision), the war is a logical response to a series of seemingly unmotivated attacks.

After Kyle and his military colleagues celebrate the announcement of their deployment to Iraq, the film cuts to an Iraq mis-en-scene with the title "Tour One," and the location of Fallujah is offered. Instantly, the audience is transported back to the opening scene of the film where Kyle lays on the rooftop debating his moral dilemma whether to kill the woman and child carrying a grenade towards the US convoy. Kyle watches the woman hand the grenade to the boy. The boy starts to run towards the convoy with grenade in hand; Kyle makes a decision and pulls the trigger and kills him. The woman wails and runs towards the boy, with Kyle watching her closely. She runs past the boys' body, grabs the grenade he dropped, and continues

running towards the US troops. A moment before she throws the grenade towards the men, Kyle shoots her. The grenade falls short of the convoy and explodes, leaving the troops unharmed. Kyle's heroism is celebrated upon his return to base camp, with a fellow SEAL calling his victim an "evil fucking bitch". Kyle is rattled by his actions (and first kills) and dismisses the soldier's affirming pat on the back with "get the fuck off me". He admits he didn't think, "...this is what it would be like to protect my country".

The end of Kyle's first tour is marked by one of the most confronting scenes of violence in the film. Kyle and his SEAL team are travelling in a military tank to deliver money to an Iraqi man who has agreed to provide intel that will aid the US military in their quest to find and kill al Qaeda leader Zarqawi. Kyle is on the phone to Taya who informs him the baby she is carrying is going to be a boy. Kyle is elated when suddenly his vehicle is attacked by gunfire and he drops the phone while still connected to Taya. Taya listens in horror to the sounds of screaming and gunfire, unaware of her husband's safety. Kyle and his team are attacked by Iraqi sniper Mustafa (Sammy Sheik) (Kyle's Iraqi skilled equivalent). Kyle attempts to kill Mustafa but is unable to do so. The SEAL's are in the heat of battle when they witness the Butcher (Mido Hamada), Zarqawi's second in command, holding down a young boy (who we learn is the Iraqi snitch's son) with a handheld power drill held to his head. The boy is screaming. We see his father and other female family members screaming in hysteria as they try to stop the Butcher. We are saved witnessing the moment the Butcher drills into the young boy's head, killing him, but we hear the attack and the accompanying screams from his family. The Butcher screams a warning to anyone who tries to help the US military, declaring this too, will be their fate. He shoots the boy's father. The Butcher and Mustafa both flee the scene, unharmed.

A few days later, we see Kyle and his comrades return to the US and Taya tearfully reunites with Kyle. Upon his return home, Kyle struggles to adjust to civilian life. Physically, he has extremely high blood pressure (as determined at an obstetrician appointment for Taya), and emotionally, he explicitly demonstrates signs of PTSD. In one scene, we see Kyle watching a video that shows Mustafa's fatal sniper shots of US soldiers (which Mustafa himself records and sells). Taya walks in on him watching the video; Kyle scrambles to shut it off when he sees her. Taya reassures him that she has already seen it and encourages Kyle to open up to her about his time overseas. Kyle is

appalled that she has watched the footage and exclaims, “They’re fucking savages! There’s evil here and we’ve seen it”. The rest of his time home is marked by random outbursts associated with PTSD, mindless staring and inanimate objects as we see Kyle have flashbacks to incidents from his time in Fallujah. He seems to lack purpose at home, even after the birth of their first child.

This is not an uncommon thread in the war film cycle, and it has been discussed periodically throughout this thesis. Most recently, Kyle’s behaviour in *American Sniper* is reminiscent of James’ in *The Hurt Locker*: both men explicitly suffered from symptoms of PTSD, and both were fuelled by an unquenchable thirst for war, combat and military service – more so than the draw to stay home and care for family. Earlier, in *Saving Private Ryan*, Captain Miller more subtly exhibits signs of trauma in his mannerisms (hand shaking, shortness with his platoon on matters to do with service and home) – fuelled, no doubt, by the many horrors of war so vividly depicted in the film. In the Spielberg epic, it is a barely notable feature of the film as the focus was not, like these later films, on depoliticising the conflict by solely concentrating on the individual experience. Indeed, in contrast to James (*The Hurt Locker*) and Kyle (*American Sniper*), Miller *wanted* to go home to his wife – making that desire well known throughout his mission to retrieve Ryan. In the Vietnam War film cycle we see a different exploration of PTSD – this can be attributed to a few factors. Most significantly, the condition wasn’t formally recognised until 1980, when it became the name given to cover a range of conditions identified in the “Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders” (DSM-III). Prior to that, the condition existed as a minor characterisation, “gross stress reaction” in 1952, before being removed in 1968 by primary medical scholarship<sup>61</sup>. Unfortunately, then, this failure to acknowledge a formal mental illness coincided with the return of Vietnam vets in the 1970s. Consequently, PTSD manifests as a madness of war in the earlier Vietnam War films. In *Apocalypse Now*, Willard is characteristically affected by the war and his experiences. In fact, the film opens with him lying on a hotel bed, blending the image of a helicopter propeller with a ceiling fan. His decision to return to war, and the entire quest to find and retrieve Kurtz (who is likewise concernedly affected by the trauma of war), is marked by PTSD. I would argue that the surrealism Coppola employs in the narrative is an interpretation of this madness within. Notably though, the specific

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<sup>61</sup> (for a more in-depth history, see Barker, 2011, pp.42-45)



trauma that has caused the manifestation of the illness is not seen in *Apocalypse Now* – it is an assumed trauma (albeit an educated assumption). In contrast, the earlier Vietnam War film *The Deer Hunter* clearly details the trauma that caused Nick's PTSD – his captivity by the Viet Cong and the Russian roulette sequence. The depiction of war trauma is significantly different in this film, where Willard was empowered by his own madness, it ultimately leads to Nick's own suicide (ironically, by a failed game of Russian roulette).

Kyle's trauma manifests in a similar way to Willard in the sense that it seems to empower him once in the context of combat. Kyle begins a second tour in Iraq and we see him once more impassioned to hunt and kill the Butcher and Mustafa for the atrocities they committed on his first tour. The rest of the film continues this format of switching between civilian home life in the US, and Kyle's four tours of Iraq. The constant change in setting accentuates the disconnected feeling Kyle feels between his two lives. It is clear Kyle garners purpose, fulfilment and satisfaction from his work in Iraq, which is depicted in stark contrast to his behaviour between tours in the US. Kyle feels compelled to return to war time and time again. Before his final tour, Kyle and Taya fight about his draw to the Middle East. Taya demands to know if he has a death wish and argues that he has done his duty and it's now the responsibility of others to fight. The confrontation culminates in an ultimatum – if he returns to Iraq again, she and the children will not be waiting for him when he returns. The pair do resolve the conflict (somewhat) before Kyle deploys for his final tour in Iraq.

During his fourth and final tour, Kyle comes full-circle with his struggle against moral ambiguity in his sniping responsibilities. During a watch from a rooftop (reminiscent of the first scene of the film), Kyle sees a man walking out on to the street carrying a grenade launcher, aimed to shoot at nearby US troops. Kyle immediately makes the shot and kills the man before he is able to release the grenade. A young boy witnesses the shooting from a block away and runs towards the dead man. The boy seems to deliberate about what to do, looking around him, and back towards the grenade launcher a number of times. Kyle pulls away from the sniper riflescope and observes the young boy's indecisiveness. The camera then moves to a ground-level medium close up shot of the boy (which is a point of difference from the first scene where we only saw the action evolve through Kyle's riflescope), highlighting the dilemma the young boy feels about the scene before him. The camera then returns to Kyle on the

rooftop, who engages his vision with the rifle. We then switch back to visual of the boy, but this time, through the scope. The camera pans in, slowly, towards Kyle's face once more where we hear Kyle chant, "don't pick it up, don't you fucking pick it up". We see the young boy pick up the launcher (first through the scope, then again through a ground-level mid close range shot), and stumble to hold it. Looking at Kyle, we see his frustration as he says, "son of a bitch" then "fucking drop it" when he sees the boy continue to struggle to hold the launcher. The boy finally has a stable grip on the launcher as he rests it on his shoulder. Kyle prepares to fire his lethal shot and the camera provides a close-up shot of his finger on the trigger. Finally the boy reconsiders, drops the launcher and flees the scene. Kyle is sweating with anticipation, mutters, coughs, and physically relaxes as the boy runs away. As with the first scene, his breathing is laboured as he tries to recompose himself. Again, we see Kyle's inner battle of morality as the war forces him to confront the stark reality of killing not just military aged men, but women and children. Kyle's reaction to the boy in this incident indicates residual trauma from shooting the boy in the first scene. This time, however, he is spared the cost on his conscience and is able to finish his tour with the knowledge that only "savages" lost their lives at his hands. Indeed, the end of this tour sees Kyle successfully kill Mustafa, the ultimate Iraqi "savage". This marks the end of the Iraqi based portion of the film, as well as Kyle's closure for all the kills he made over the six years he spent back and forth serving in Iraq, all in a quest to finally "finish" Mustafa.

The narrative concentrates on Kyle's rehabilitation after Iraq for the remainder of the film. The audience is given resolution in the way Kyle seems to have returned to full mental health and celebrates the re-kindled union between his previously broken family unit. Kyle becomes the sheepdog for his family at last. The film concludes with interchanged real-life and fictional footage of the details following the murder of the real Chris Kyle at the hands of a fellow veteran whom Kyle was attempting to help with his own journey with PTSD. The choice of real-life footage helps to authenticate the narrative that preceded, enhanced by the lack of any diegetic or non-diegetic sound. The audience is left to watch, silently, details and images marking the end of Chris Kyle's life.

Like many of the war films that have gone before, this film provides a limited point of view that glorifies an American perspective and reaffirms the masculine hero subject.

*American Sniper* is so conditioned by its first-person shooter format that it never widens its focus to explore the “how”, “why” and “what for” questions that this intervention in Iraq so often garners. In many ways, Eastwood’s engagement with the politics of war through the single focus perspective of an American military man echoes Bigelow’s approach in *The Hurt Locker*. Both films avoid addressing the broader political, social and historical context of the war’s production, opting instead to present the war through a window into the anguished male psyche. Where *The Hurt Locker* sets this scene in the confines of a bomb disposal squad, *American Sniper* chooses long-range shooting (Hess, 2015, n.p). Importantly, however, within the confines of their political vacuum, *The Hurt Locker* justifies the unfolding narrative by describing the effects of war as a drug; *American Sniper* views the war through the framework of patriotic responsibility and revenge (the latter of which is more closely aligned with *Zero Dark Thirty*). James is motivated to return to multiple tours of duty not out of a thirst to protect his country, but more out of the addiction of war and adrenaline (mixed, of course with recurring PTSD). Significantly, Kyle’s motivation is protectionism and revenge in the form of Mustafa and the Butcher. Kyle’s two primary motivations are explicably linked, he failed to protect the Iraqi snitch’s son from the brutal hands of the Butcher, and he failed to protect the lives of two close colleagues at the hands of Mustafa on ground patrol – thus, he seeks revenge as a way of redemption for his failings as ‘The Legend’. Rather than being an exploration into the war in Iraq, *American Sniper* becomes centered on Kyle’s personal vendetta against his two primary Iraqi enemies. Justification (and politics) of the war shifts to a personal tale of good vs. evil, American vs. terrorist (a (melodramatic) trope much easier to understand than questions of war).

With de-politicising of the conflict comes reduction of the enemy subject (in typical Hollywood war film fashion). Because *American Sniper* takes place through Kyle’s experience, the ‘other’ is portrayed as Kyle tends to view them – savage, evil, and brutal (all descriptive terms we hear Kyle use at various points throughout the film). Kyle’s first engagement with the ‘other’ (and therefore the viewers’) is that seminal first scene where we see Kyle negotiating the morality of whether to shoot a woman and child. Accentuating the single focus point of view, these ‘other’ subjects are viewed solely through the scope of Kyle’s rifle (a device similarly employed by Bigelow in *The Hurt Locker* where the viewer sees the ‘other’ through the sight of a

rifle). The figures are seen from a distance where detailed features are unable to be registered. This woman and child, like all Iraqis in the film, are rendered conspicuously other – distant, dangerous and unknown (Green, 2015). Utilising Kyle’s perspective in the development of the narrative ensures the enemy figures are kept at a distance – physically and emotionally, thereby removing their experience from viewers’ sympathies. However, there are two exceptions to this distancing of the enemy figure. Mustafa and The Butcher are brought to the forefront of Kyle (and the audiences’) attention. This is done to establish a pronounced distinction between good and bad and extend the distance of emotional sympathy with this enemy race. These two figures are clearly established as bad guys. The Butcher, of whom we saw more on screen, wears a long black coat and is seen torturing a child to death with a handheld power drill. This violation of human life justifies Kyle’s characterisation of this enemy as ‘savage’, ‘evil’ and ‘brutal’. Eastwood’s cinematic construction of the ‘other’ in *American Sniper* is consistent with the historical representations of Arabs in Hollywood as outlined by Jack Shaheen (see chapter three). As Shaheen (2003) writes,

“Seen through Hollywood’s distorted lenses, Arabs look different and threatening. Projected along racial and religious lines, the stereotypes are deeply ingrained in American cinema. From 1896 until today, filmmakers have collectively indicted all Arabs as Public Enemy #1 – brutal, heartless, uncivilized religious fanatics and money-mad cultural ‘others’ bent on terrorizing civilized Westerners” (p.172).

*American Sniper*’s interpretation of the enemy ‘other’ does not provide a space in which Iraqis can be depicted as a proud people subjected to decades of totalitarian oppression, that now, are attempting to protect their homeland from brutal foreign occupiers (Green, 2015). Rather, the overriding message of *American Sniper* is that Kyle, and the US more generally, are the real victims of war (notably, this “victimhood” is a distinctive trope of melodrama). They are the good guys, modern day cowboys riding into conflict to defeat the overwhelmingly evil, savage Iraqi ‘other’. What this means, as von Tunzelmann so aptly articulates, is that “the war is a lot easier to support when no Americans ever make a mistake and everyone who opposes them is obviously horrible. You’re either with us or against us” (2015, n.p).

*Zero Dark Thirty* and *American Sniper* explore the shifting nature of combat in the post-9/11 climate and the ever-strengthening bond between military, government and Hollywood. Using the framework of simple melodramatic principles, these films engage in a discussion of good vs. evil, victimhood and reconciliation of guilt, loss and shame. These films extend on the exploration of the Iraq War in the previous decade, and provide a more expansive commentary on the shifting nature of [un]conventional warfare. Context, then, plays an important role in the construction of the Iraq War narrative in 2011 and beyond. *Zero Dark Thirty* dedicates much of the narrative to the depiction (endorsement) of the growing awareness of enhanced interrogation, engaging in scandals brought to life via the topical Abu Ghraib debacle. The film itself is the direct product of Victoria Clarke's redeveloped embedded journalism program and Mark Boal's subsequent experiences abroad. *American Sniper* provides a more conventional depiction of the Iraq experience, but just as timely. The film glorifies an American hero (made evermore prominent by his murder) and provides a sympathetic account of the effects of war trauma manifested in PTSD – both the rehabilitation of the condition (Kyle) and the destruction of it (exemplified in Kyle's murderer, Eddie Ray Routh). The film garnered significant popular appeal because of the favourable reception of Kyle's 2012 autobiography, and tragically, his murder (occurring in 2013 – during the film's pre-production). Perhaps more so than any other exemplary film in this thesis, context plays an unparalleled role in the production and theatrical release of *American Sniper* and its subsequent success and reception

Despite the fact that both films are based on “real-life experiences” (*Zero Dark Thirty* is Boal's embed, *American Sniper* is Kyle's autobiography), the former was shrouded in controversy with regards to misleading claims of realism, whereas the latter was criticised primarily for the political sentiments made implicit through Eastwood's direction. Both films employ a variety of film techniques to evoke verisimilitude – *Zero Dark Thirty* through the use of subtitles, voice-over, camerawork and external claims of authenticity; *American Sniper* through camerawork, sound, and the integration of real-life “documentary” footage. Indeed, both films seem to extend on the preferential documentary-style employed by many of the early war films (and many discussed throughout this thesis).

The second decade after the September 11 terrorist attacks is marked in Hollywood cinema by a strengthening bond between industry, text and government. This is most pronounced in the growing prominence of government embedded journalism and filmmaking which led to Mark Boal, former journalist and screenwriter, creating the controversial *Zero Dark Thirty* alongside his previous cinematic collaborator Kathryn Bigelow. In this film, we saw the impact of Obama policy on Hollywood industry and the negotiation of contemporary issues on the screen – particularly torture and extraordinary rendition. Controversial in its own right, only a few years later we saw the unprecedented success of *American Sniper*. With this film came a renewed revision of the Iraq/war on terror narrative. Again, rather than confronting issues of morality and foreign intervention, we see the heralded success of an everyday American hero in Chris Kyle – the US’ deadliest sniper. In a way not too dissimilar from the previous decade, we see how Hollywood cinema can (successfully) function to de-politicise the war. Even in a climate of hostility towards intervention in the Middle East, we see audiences seek reprieve from the difficult questions through a revisionist narrative screened in the local multiplex. After all, America has much to be proud of.

## Representation and Context in Popular Hollywood Cinema

### Concluding Observations

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The relationship between film, history and politics is enduring and intricately complex. Since its formation, the Hollywood film industry has played an important role in exploring contemporary and historical social and political issues. The Hollywood film industry has a long and complicated history with government institutions and the military. This means the central perspective of these cinematic depictions is one that endorses war and often represents war as necessary and desirable. War then, becomes a necessary part of the human experience – for America at least.

One of the aims of this thesis has been to unpack the dynamic relationship between Hollywood, government, military, and audiences. Developing an understanding of context of production proves illuminating in this endeavour. When we explore the social and political context of a film's production and release, it becomes clear that there are patterns in the way that war is represented – often in a contradictory manner that can both affirm, and contest, the legitimacy of US military campaigns. Through both contextual and textual analysis, it is evident that the treatment of war, heroism, and the enemy 'other' are prominent thematic components in propelling particular conceptualisations of war and conflict. America's (bloodied) history, then, becomes fluid and vulnerable to revision and manipulation.

The severe consequences associated with battle often make it an unwieldy topic to honestly represent in film. This thesis began with an exploration into war, representation and context on Vietnam. During this contentious conflict, Hollywood largely avoided engaging with the war. However, there were a select number of films released during the fact such as *China Gate* (1957), *The Quiet American* (1958), *A Yank in Vietnam* (1964), *To The Shores of Hell* (1966), and most notably *The Green Berets* (1968) – a propaganda-fuelled Hollywood spectacle that was explicitly made to support the US policy of sending military advisors to the frontline. In 1978, three years after the conclusion of the Vietnam War, the first wave of Vietnam War films appeared. These early films were often highly critical of the war and deeply

influenced by the social context of the time – a culture that mourned for the significant losses of war. They attempted to depict a picture of the American soldier at all stages surrounding combat, and endeavoured to deconstruct the ideological and moral implications of the war. Of course, in order to negotiate the loss of war, these films (even those more critical of the intervention) reduced the war to a strictly American experience. In these narratives, the Vietnamese became a brutal, highly intelligent, *absent* ‘other’. When present, the enemy was understood in terms of two dominant stereotypes – the yellow peril and the super-soldier. In both instances, the humanity of the enemy is removed - making it far easier to sympathise with the US soldier subject and the military campaign more generally.

During Carter’s term in office, audiences appeared more open to films that presented an alternative perspective on the Vietnam War. As such, *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) fared remarkably well both at the box office and amongst critics. Both films engaged with the darker aspects of conflict, particularly the veteran experience (including PTSD). In their attempt to recover American credibility in the context of the Vietnam War, the enemy figure was presented either as a yellow peril (*The Deer Hunter*) or absent altogether (*Apocalypse Now*). This focus on the American experience functions to redirect attention away from the human consequence of war (and US defeat).

The 1980s saw a drastic change in the political and social landscape of the United States. Ronald Reagan’s electoral victory in 1981 marked a new phase, a period of national pride and revisionism. This was reflected in shifts in cinematic depictions of the war in which the US still attempted to reconcile with the lived experience. By the mid-1980s, Hollywood was directly responding to Reagan’s reinterpretation of the Vietnam War through the revenge fantasy film. In these films, we saw the hypermasculine fictional characters of John Rambo and James Braddock reclaim the damaged American masculinity and obtain (fictional) victory for the United States. Films later in the decade adopted a different method of revisionism. Films such as *Hamburger Hill*, *Platoon*, and *Casualties of War* chose instead to focus on the subjective experience of the US grunt soldier and depicted the war as hell, rather than the adrenaline filled playground seen in the *Rambo* and *Missing in Action* trilogies. In these films, the reinterpretation of the war was seen through an extensive engagement



with memory, verisimilitude and claims of authentically depicting the Vietnam experience. These films actively engaged with a documentary-style of filmmaking to accentuate the real-life war experience – a technique we see extended upon in other war film texts as the genre evolves.

1989 marked the end of the dominant period of Vietnam War films. However, the extensive loss and cultural trauma of Vietnam continued to frame war rhetoric in the aftermath of the Cold War. Where the Cold War and the Vietnam War provided a platform in which war films could present a clear-cut binary representation of good and evil, the small-scale politically complex wars of the 1990s did not allow for this same scope of cinematic interpretation. Combined with this changed nature of war, and a number of commemorative WWII anniversaries between the late 1980s and early 2000s, Hollywood war film returned to the battlegrounds of World War II to replace the Vietnam War as the dominant paradigm in which war was understood and negotiated in Hollywood. Consequently, we see a nostalgic reappropriation of WWII film tropes within the war film during this decade.

Something of a radical shift occurred with Steven Spielberg's 1998 blockbuster *Saving Private Ryan*. The film became the highest grossing war movie of all time (until *American Sniper* stole the title in 2014). *Saving Private Ryan* was heralded as "the finest war movie of our time" by critics, veterans and audiences alike (as indicated by the huge success at the box office). Spielberg's underlying contention for creating the film was to make something that would engage and accurately depict the veteran's experience. To achieve this, *Saving Private Ryan* extends the work done in the later portion of the dominant period of Vietnam War film and creates a theatrical cinematic experience shrouded in claims of authentic and realistic representations of the Normandy landing. Ultimately though, his film did not deviate too far from the traditional WWII combat film tropes – the horrors of war were pronounced, war was represented as clear-cut and manichaeistic, the narrative was oriented around (white) male heroism, there was a show of diversity, the hero was celebrated, and the military unit was tightknit. In the film's defense, WWII is a far easier conflict to reconcile with national pride than Vietnam. After all, once the US finally did enter the war, they ensured the end of the bloodied international conflict.

*Saving Private Ryan* undeniably reinvigorated the tired war film genre. Three years later came another Hollywood blockbuster, *Pearl Harbor*. The film's subject was the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 and built on the 'realist' techniques of *Saving Private Ryan* to present a fresh take on the infamous battle that finally saw America withdraw from its promises of isolationism after WWI involvement. Much like *Saving Private Ryan*, *Pearl Harbor* conformed to the nostalgic vision of 1940s America and engaged with the traditional WWII film tropes in its contemporary revision of a historical event. The film differs from *Saving Private Ryan* in a number of ways, but most distinctively we see a romantic "Hollywood" version of history – the battle becomes more about a complex love triangle than deeper notions of war, morality and consequence. The intentional point-of-view employed by the film once again encourages US sympathies and a reduction of the complex politics of war to a romantic narrative. This nostalgia fosters a simple conceptualisation of war and likewise generates longing for those 'simpler' times of the 1940s (when America did indeed have more to be proud of militarily).

Only months after *Pearl Harbor*'s release, America experienced the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington on September 11, 2001. More than 3,000 citizens died in the attacks, dwarfing the attack on Pearl Harbor sixty years earlier. The response to the attack was comprehensive and utilised a multifaceted approach across military, domestic and foreign policy, and the entertainment industry. Through the direction of President Bush and his senior advisor Karl Rove, the immediate response from Hollywood was the creation of the 9/11 Group – the purpose of which was to deliver narratives of 'just war' in which military response was portrayed as inevitable and justified. The immediate consequences of the 9/11 Group on the industry was that film sequences featuring the World Trade Centre were cut, 'family' films were rushed in to production, and release dates of films scheduled for issue were altered. Several films were delayed because there was a fear that their thematic content might have lost its entertainment value, conversely, other films were rushed into release – notably the pro-war, pro-intervention films *Black Hawk Down* and *We Were Soldiers*. It was believed by the 9/11 Group that these films would help support and endorse the announcement to go to war (against terror) in the Middle East.

*Black Hawk Down* grounded its pro-military thematic undertones in the 1993 intervention in Somalia. In this context, battle was unashamedly portrayed as an example of US valour and heroism – a necessary depiction when the real-life raid left eighteen Americans and more than a thousand Somalis dead. Not dissimilar from *Saving Private Ryan* and *Pearl Harbor* gone before, *Black Hawk Down* features relentless (and graphic) combat for a significant portion of the film. US military engagement in the film's production was extensive and the film succeeded in propagating a narrative that glorified individual American heroism (and neglected to explain why they were there in the first place). Later that year, *We Were Soldiers* staged its pro-military narrative back in the Vietnamese terrain. The film is based around the first major battle between the armies of North Vietnam and the United States at Ia Drang in Southern Vietnam. Employing the cinematic symbols of the contemporary social and political context, *We Were Soldiers* engages with the greatest generation trope of the 1990s and provides both a nostalgic depiction of war, and reiterates the confidence of the American self-image at the turn of the twenty-first century. The film captures the war experience from a variety of angles – situating the soldiers in the broader context of life and family outside the battlefield. Unlike *Black Hawk Down* (and, in fact, most other Vietnam War films), *We Were Soldiers* presents both US and Vietnamese soldiers in battle. However, the war is ultimately presented as amoral and apolitical – both sides are simply doing a job and fighting for the love of the man standing next to them. This, of course, simplifies combat and removes the battle of Ia Drang from its political context. Once again, war becomes a distinctively American experience.

The films in this cycle of Hollywood war film reinforce the significance of context in the production of Hollywood war epics. In the first instance, we see the reawakening of the war film genre with the revision of WWII in *Saving Private Ryan* and *Pearl Harbor*. In the midst of a shifting global political economy, the US returned to the familiar tropes of WWII film – the good war – to reinvent war film in the twenty-first century. This functioned to reconcile the contentious narratives of the previous war film cycle marked by the loss of the Vietnam War. Whilst the events of September 11, 2001 were unforeseen, the framework for the positive revision of combat had been successfully laid with these highly successful films. Thus, in the aftermath of 9/11 and the growing complexity of the contemporary climate, pro-war, pro-military films

*Black Hawk Down* and *We Were Soldiers* were rushed through production to coincide with the retaliatory attack on the Middle East. Context, then, continues to play a seminal role in the production of war film texts in this cycle of war film. These films presented a revision of the war experience (Somalia/Vietnam respectively) that presented the US favourably and contributed to the war narrative purported by the Hollywood/military/government trifecta. To do this, these films (like the ones before) employed a number of narrative and camera techniques that evoked a strong sense of verisimilitude, and created a very distinctive representation of the US soldier and the enemy other.

The war film genre shifted into the next distinct cycle of films in response not only to the events of 9/11, but the subsequent wars in the Middle East, the introduction of the Patriot Act, the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, and the increase in security measures instigated throughout the US. Unlike Vietnam, where the Hollywood film industry delayed direct engagement with the war until after the war's end, Hollywood began to produce films that directly engaged with the contemporary conflict in the Middle East soon after the declaration of war. This real-time cinematic engagement with a highly contentious social and political situation was not well received by audiences or critics. In fact, the new cycle of war films spurred on by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were labelled 'toxic' and became more renowned for their spectacular box office failings, than any social commentary on the war (this is not to imply that box-office failure provides the last word in judging the significance of these films. See chapter three for more on this).

The cycle began in late 2007/early 2008 with the release of a number of Iraq war film texts. These films predominately fell into two categories – a 'home front' cycle, and an 'Iraq War' cycle. These cycles are somewhat reminiscent of the early Vietnam War films where a particular emphasis was placed on the veteran's experience back home and the psychological ramifications of contemporary warfare. Most of these films claimed a base in the real events and circumstances of the war, and all of them failed at the box office. Miraculously, despite poor box office earnings, *The Hurt Locker* made its way into many 'Top 10' lists around the world and was awarded the prestigious 'Best Picture' award at the 2010 Academy Awards – breaking the cycle of Iraq war film failures. The film was the first collaborative project between director

Kathryn Bigelow and writer Mark Boal and was based on Boal's experience as an embedded journalist. *The Hurt Locker* followed three men in the Army's elite Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) unit and depicted their experiences as a series of semi-connected episodes. The film avoids engaging with the politics of war by presenting the issues at hand in a contextual vacuum. To achieve this, the film focuses specifically on the experience of the protagonist James – through his PTSD, his masculinity, and his journey of self-discovery. Consequently, like many of the war films before, *The Hurt Locker* fails to convey any information about the Iraqi 'other' (and of course, the war more specifically).

Two years later, Hollywood's second successful Iraq War film was released – *Green Zone*. The film capitalised on director Paul Greengrass' previous success with the *Bourne* films and employed Matt Damon for the lead role. There were many similarities between *Bourne* and *Green Zone*, which undoubtedly contributed to the film's overall positive reception by audiences and critics. Based on a true story, the film follows Damon and his task of locating Saddam Hussein's hidden weapons of mass destruction that served as the catalyst for the US' justification of war. Like *The Hurt Locker*, *Green Zone* employs a single focus point of view, which helps to reinforce the American experience of the war. However, the Iraqi 'other' does play a more prominent role in this film with an Iran-Iraq War veteran playing a key role in Damon's task to uncover the WMD conspiracy.

By 2011, it became evident that the kind of war America was battling was very different from anything waged before. The war on terror blurred boundaries between civilian and soldier, frontline and domestic populations. Films of this era explored the polysemic nature of war with a blending of conventional and unconventional war film tropes. The relationship between military, government and Hollywood, representations of torture, counterterrorism, surveillance, and otherness become increasingly dominant themes of the era. Politically, this change is reflected in the transition from George W. Bush, to the Barack Obama administration – most notably, Obama's campaign to withdraw troops from the Middle East and close Guantanamo (both of which failed to come to fruition during his time in office).

The relationship between government, military and Hollywood continued to flourish in this period, exemplified in the redevelopment of the government ordained embedded journalism program. This program provided selected journalists privileged access to military environments, in return for favourable representation in the media. The program was later translated into the context of Hollywood cinema with journalist Mark Boal creating material used to aid the production of *The Hurt Locker* and the extensive development of the script for *Zero Dark Thirty*. Bigelow and Boal received significant backlash about their representations of the hunt to find bin Laden in *Zero Dark Thirty* and the adoption of enhanced interrogation (torture) techniques. Much of that controversy came from the deep entanglement between the film writers and government institutions – namely the CIA and White House officials. The film undoubtedly exemplified the unconventional aspects of the war on terror, with a war waged with strong reliance on technology and secrecy.

Contrastingly, the 2014 war film blockbuster *American Sniper* presents a much more familiar wartime narrative – engaging with battle scenes, home life and the psychological implications of war. The film broke the box office record for highest grossing war film, removing *Saving Private Ryan* from the number one position. The real-life story of Chris Kyle seemed to resound with audiences. In *American Sniper* we see a return to the American hero trope of war films of the past: Kyle is intensely patriotic, distinctively masculine, and powerful. This construction of identity is only enhanced by the limited point of view (made easier, of course, as Kyle is a sniper and the nature of his job is deeply intimate and isolated). The film is so conditioned by its single person point of view that it never widens its focus to explore the deeper questions surrounding the motivation for the intervention.

The thesis draws links between the ongoing war being waged in the Middle East, and the Vietnam War through an extensive analysis of war film cycles predominately from 1978 to the present. This analysis has identified a number of significant elements that contribute to the specific construction (and re-construction) of the combat narrative such as the hero, otherness, explorations into psychological trauma and PTSD, the intricate, intertwined relationship between government, military and Hollywood, and the use of verisimilitude and realism to validate the curated war narrative. The thesis has demonstrated the extensive way in which war film functions

to both negotiate and reconcile the complexity of war from the dominant period of the Vietnam War film, to recent engagement with the war on terror.

Although this thesis has engaged with a wide scope of scholarly literature and provided analysis on recent material, future avenues of investigation could be undertaken to extend the topic material examined. This thesis has laid the groundwork for a broader examination in the future of the role of war cinema in American cultural discourse. A larger scale project would explore in more depth related issues and approaches beyond the scope of the present dissertation. In particular the context and practices of reception could be investigated in relation to this topic. Audience studies could be developed in order to extend a discussion on the relationship between audience, text, and industry, particularly in the light of the multiple modes of media/audience interaction in the digital age. In this way, targeted audience responses (whether done through IMDB or another method of data analysis) would provide further insight into the engagement and success (or failure) of war films, particularly during tense wartime situations.

What this project offers is an extended analysis on the role that film plays in shaping our understanding of conflict, culture, politics, and society. The Hollywood film provides a space to explore notions of subjectivity, construct heroes (and enemies), revisit (and revise) the past, as well as envisage a future yet to come. However, film does not exist in a cultural vacuum – real events and contemporary issues help to form these particular cinematic constructions. Therefore, in order to analyse film more intricately, it is important to examine the context of a film's production alongside the more formal elements of a film's make up. Understanding the relationship between film and context forms an important part of widening our understanding of the role that film (and popular culture more generally) plays in the formation of dominant ideas.

## Appendix

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**Fig. 1:**

Freedom of association:	Government may monitor religious and political institutions without suspecting criminal activity to assist terror investigation
Freedom of information:	Government has closed once-public immigration hearings, has secretly detained hundreds of people without charges, and has encouraged bureaucrats to resist public records requests
Freedom of speech:	Government may prosecute librarians or keepers of any other records if they tell anyone that the government subpoenaed information related to a terror investigation
Right to legal representation:	Government may monitor federal prison jailhouse conversations between attorneys and clients, and deny lawyers to Americans accused of crimes
Freedom from unreasonable searches:	Government may search and seize Americans' papers and effects without probable cause to assist terror investigation
Right to a speedy and public trial:	Government may jail Americans indefinitely without trial
Right to liberty:	Americans may be jailed without being charged or being able to confront witnesses against them ("Terrorism")



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