Suffering with Honour: The Visual Brutality of Realism in the Combat Film

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A genre of films depicting the action, drama and violent bloodshed of combat has flourished since World War II. Films such as *Wake Island* (1942) and *Bataan* (1943) sought to bring a sense of the experience of war to viewers in the United States and other parts of the Western world. Likewise, re-creations of the Vietnam War in *Platoon* (1986), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) or the less critical *Missing in Action* (1984) presented explicit scenes of bloodshed and injustice to a still troubled American viewing public. Cinema and other visual technologies have also impacted on the way war has been fought or 'staged'. Since its industrialisation modern warfare has been closely tied to what Paul Virilio calls the mechanics and informatics of vision and perception, where the target area of war has become "a cinema 'location', the battlefield a film set out of bounds to civilians" (Virilio, 1989: 11). [1] Between the use of visual technologies in warfare, and the continuing presence of an ever growing genre of combat films, there is a widespread desire to see and control the image of the vulnerability and suffering of bodies in war.

Combat films have attempted to convey a sense of the experience of war along a complex continuum between narrative and literal or 'indexical' reproduction. Accordingly, recent depictions of combat in World War II such as Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) or Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998) have been framed by a public and critical discourse of 'realism'. Well before World War II, the genre's goal has been to relay, or 're-present' those experiences to audiences geographically, historically, and subjectively dislocated from war (see, for example, Rollins and O'Connor, 1997). The success of this process during and after World War II in the close association between news media and fictional forms raises important questions that fall between film theory and media and cultural analysis. The link between cinema and history, the camera and human experience, is both pursued and problematised by the combat film genre – a style of narrative that profits from the re-production of history and experience like no other genre. In its close relationship with wartime documentary newsreel footage the combat film has a history that is unique in Hollywood production (Schatz, 1998; Basinger, 1986). [2] However, it is not only the cinematic conventions and 'documentary' or first-hand style of filmmaking that carries the genre's historicising function for contemporary audiences. In the violently excessive corporeality of its imagery of combat, the genre pairs the suffering and bodily trauma of its subject matter with a traumatic viewing experience. This pairing of 'eye witness' style and physical confrontation signals the role of bodily pain in the process of historical memorialisation, and indicates one key aspect of the role of the combat film genre for contemporary audiences: its 'realising' of the horror of past experiences of war.

Drawing on the case of Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, this paper looks at the way the combat film genre attempts to generate a corporeal, cinematic realism out of the physical suffering and brutality of the experience of combat. After raising questions about the nature of cinematic realism in the context of the combat film, I review historical accounts of the link between the combat film genre and the newsreel and documentary footage that became

widely accessible during World War II. I emphasise that corporeality and the brutality of combat have been taken as indicators of verisimilitude and indexicality throughout the genre's history. The primary aim of this paper, however, is to point to the role of 'visual brutality' and the aversive quality of bodily pain in conveying the horrific qualities of past experiences of combat and re-presenting them to contemporary audiences. It is also to draw attention to the combat film genre as a persistent cinema of corporeality that takes the quality of bodily pain and physical vulnerability as an expressive strategy and goal.

Realism, Combat Cinema and Corporeality

In the post-Vietnam and post-Cold War period there has been a renewed urgency in the need to understand the visual conventions and representational practices of the coverage and narrativisation of war. The conduct of the two Persian Gulf Wars between U.S. led forces and Iraq has explicitly demonstrated the extent of the technology of combat fought over vast distances and the malleability of war reportage. In that context, media coverage was sanitised and explicitly censored of the images of the suffering and death that lie at the heart of all war. Following Virilio, John Taylor sees in the reporting of the first Gulf War a marked disappearance of what he calls 'body horror', that is the images of the maimed and dead bodies of combat (Taylor, 1998: 180-3). The noteworthy exception with the second Gulf War was the images of civilian death and suffering that became part of the more amorphous political debate about the right of the U.S. led invasion. However, the obvious irony here is that as bodies disappeared from news images of certain wars they have proliferated in the form of cinematic recreations.

Throughout the 1990s, while televised reports of war were being sanitised, the horrific bodily experiences of military combat re-emerged more visible than ever in Hollywood's big budget recreations such as *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line*. In presenting body horror on a large scale, *Saving Private Ryan* achieves what Matt Tubridy sees as an assault on the viewer with "an experience of fear and discomfort that produces a sense of being there, of experiencing the uncensored and unmediated reality of the combat experience, the thing in itself" (Tubridy, 2000: 181). As with Oliver Stone's *Platoon* a decade before, the public reception of *Saving Private Ryan* exemplifies the same obsession with the connection between what is regularly referred to as 'realism' and violence. Visual brutality and body horror are often described as technical 'achievements' in contemporary filmmaking that move these films further (in a positivistic sense) toward the actual experience of combat itself; to the extent that the wounded bodies mostly censored from the coverage of the two Gulf Wars have come to define the realism of the combat film. In both *Saving Private Ryan* and *Platoon*, for example, the 'actuality' of combat is established early on, not through narrative, but through the image and sound of bodies in pain. In *Saving Private Ryan* a twenty-five minute scene of horrific combat is filled with mass slaughter and individual moments of physical agony. *Platoon* introduces us and its characters to Vietnam with the now iconic image of body bags being lined up on a runway for return home. Wounded and dead bodies lend significance to, and build an inherent danger or vulnerability into, the images of combat action presented in these films and others like them.

One of the driving characteristics of the combat film genre is its presentation of long action sequences drawn from the historically specific experiences of war. The perceived success of this aspect of the combat film, for example, oriented public discussion and debate about *Saving Private Ryan*, as well as *Platoon*. Such discussions are usually framed by loosely defined notions of 'realism'. Realism is a term that, in film theory, has referred to both

particular aesthetic styles and film making movements, as well as questions of historicity, ontology, and what André Bazin saw as film's indexicality and contingency (Margulies, 2002; Hallam and Marshment, 2000). [3] It is the latter set of issues that are most pertinent to the combat film genre, where films such as *Saving Private Ryan* seem to take on the role of 'historical document' for contemporary audiences moved by the power of the film's representation of the conditions and experiences of the war. This project of realism has been taken by some film theorists as fundamental to all film since at least World War II. For Colin MacCabe, "whether we look to Hollywood, where realism is purchased at almost any price, or to the Italian neo-realist cinema, we find that the struggle is to represent reality as effectively as possible" (MacCabe, 1992: 80). But for the combat film there are added questions about the role of photographic verisimilitude or indexicality in the broader context of the coverage, relay and re-presentation of the horror of war. The blurred boundaries between film narrative, aesthetic styles, image and material world, have come to be of urgent concern for a range of theorists. Margulies, for example, argues that "renewed interest in notions of visible evidence and the rhetoric of authenticity of documentary modes" follows a "firm desire to safeguard images as indisputably linked to truth" (Margulies 2002: 10; see also Petro, 1995).

Ultimately, the concern with realism in cinema revolves around questions of how one "can recall an event's concrete peculiarity or reproduce its original urgency through a medium that so clearly defers" (Margulies, 2002: 1). On the other hand, drawing heavily on the work of David Bordwell, Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment see realism as a "dominant form of representation," a strategy of mainly generic popular fiction (Hallam and Marshment, 2000: x). Hallam and Marshment take a position that is closer to that of Colin MacCabe, who drew on the Marxist framework of Louis Althusser to see realism as "a set of discourses which (in the positions allowed to subject and object) produce a certain reality" (MacCabe, 1992: 82). Along with Nöel Carroll, Hallam and Marshment argue that realism is not merely about the relationship between films and the world but "a relation of contrast between films," one that is interpreted as analogous to features of the material world (Carroll cited in Hallam and Marshment, 2000: xi). This contrast is also played out across filmmaking traditions, between certain British or European films and Hollywood cinema for example. However, despite their focus on popular cinema in the questioning of realism as "part of a discursive struggle to make sense of our realities" (Hallam and Marshment, 2000: xii), Hallam and Marshment pay almost no attention at all to the combat film genre, a genre where certain films such as *Saving Private Ryan* or *Platoon* are often lauded in public discourse as 'realistic' portrayals of the experiences of World War II or Vietnam.

Scholarly accounts of the combat film genre often refer to its consistent attempt to present, in ever more detail and traumatic self-identity, the actions and suffering of soldiers in battle as a way of presenting a sense of the experience itself. Traditional histories of Hollywood output during and after World War II focus on the unprecedented relationship between the film industry and the war effort, and Clayton Koppes and Gregory Black's *Hollywood Goes to War* is a primary example of this (Koppes and Black, 1987). However, the issue of realism in the combat film in particular has been only indirectly explored. Jeanine Basinger's work outlining the World War II combat film genre, along with Thomas Doherty and Thomas Schatz' work on the emergence of the combat film in relation to the newsreel presentations of the war and the frontline, are in their own ways notable exceptions (Basinger, 1986; Doherty, 1993; Schatz, 1998). Such work points to the notion that alongside its ideological and mythologising intentions the combat film has attempted to situate itself as an historical image of the 'real', not simply by narrating events of the war, but by re-creating the sense and

experience of combat. As I describe in more detail below, combat films have always attained a form of symbiosis with what was 'captured' by combat photographers and cinematographers and presented in the documentary form of the newsreels (Doherty, 1993; Schatz, 1998). And war has become an ever more staple cinematographic subject since the availability of images of combat generated by World War II. The status of realism that is often conferred upon particular combat films and drives the aesthetic form of this mode of filmmaking comes about in part because of these links to the newsreel traditions of relaying images of combat. It is also, I argue, tied to the corporeality of its subject matter, and the brutality of its images of the suffering of war. In this sense, as is evident in recent combat films such as *Saving Private Ryan*, and despite its flaws in the historical accuracy of many of its combat narratives, cinema attempts to play its part in providing widespread access to this elusive, corporeal quality of war that has been characterised in recent times by its disappearance.

Filming Combat

Cinema technologies have moved audiences steadily closer to the horrors of warfare. World War I saw the widespread visualisation in cinematic and photographic images of the experience and landscape of nations at war (see for example Rollins and O'Connor, 1997). Documentary and first hand footage was soon enmeshed with wartime and post-war filmic story-telling that took The Great War and its infantry, air and sea experiences of combat as its specific subject matter. This link between combat and cinema became even more pronounced during and after World War II. With advances in film recording and delivery technologies, there emerged a more direct and seamless, if highly politicised, link between the war and photography, newsreel and Hollywood cinema output. Hollywood's involvement in promoting 'the good war' is well documented (Beidler, 1998). Its close relationship with the Office of War Information brought about an explicit, if at times testing continuity between the official government line and the output of the film industry (Koppes and Black, 1987). However, the relationship between Hollywood cinema and the war was more than ideological. By midway through the war, with the success of newsreels and a host of feature films about war and combat being made in the U.S. – most notably the series *Why We Fight* (1943) directed by Frank Capra – the potential for bringing moving images of the war to the general public was beginning to be realised. Alongside the ideological positioning of the combat film, a close relationship developed between cinema and documentation, where aesthetic style and actual newsreel images of combat have merged (Doherty, 1993; Schatz, 1998). The outcome of this is that in addition to furthering the war effort, Hollywood spawned a genre of films that have sought to substantiate the experiences of war, and in particular, combat.

One of the most significant events of World War II to be covered by the mass media in the form of photography, newsreel and later, film narrative, was the 'D-Day' Normandy invasion on 6 June 1944 – the invasion depicted in Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* fifty-four years later. Anticipation of the invasion led to an inflated public desire to know exactly what was to take place there (Doherty, 1993: 241). In response to this growing desire, an extensive media presence accompanied the soldiers at the invasion:

> military photographic units covered the invasion like a blanket, assigning a total of four hundred men and designating twenty-one for motion picture photography and 190 for still shots. In addition, two cameramen from the newsreel pool went in with the troops . . . Exposed negative was immediately

flown stateside by fast plane, and within sixty hours of embarkation, invasion pictures were being screened in Washington (Doherty, 1993: 242-3).

These first invasion pictures would not reach audiences for several days, however, after the briefest possible censorship and production delays. A complete newsreel vision of the invasion was released on Thursday 15 June, nine days after the event (Doherty, 1993: 243). This level of 'direct' coverage of a conflict was itself a significant feat that since the Vietnam War has become an assumed accompaniment to war. In the most recent war in Iraq similar methods of blanket coverage were employed in the so-called 'new' solution to informing the public of the events of war through 'imbedded journalists' (journalists accompanying troops into the combat zone). In the context of World War II, however, coverage of the D-Day invasion signified an enormous improvement on the newsreel coverage of the war up to that point in time. Radio was still the fastest medium for conveying events as they unfolded, but by the time of the invasion, the newsreel industry had developed the means of overcoming some of the problems it faced in getting images into cinemas quickly.

Until March 1943 the efficacy of newsreels as a means for relaying images of the war from the frontline to audiences at home was hindered by two main problems that Doherty has summed up as production delay and deletion through censorship (Doherty, 1993: 238). New developments at this time were seeking to generate a more substantial 'use' for war images. The desire at the level of both production and consumption was to reveal or see the events that were taking place – as they were taking place. However, for some time, there was no way of keeping up with the round-the-clock reporting of radio and the production and printing ease of photographic images. Similarly, there was significant pressure from the Army's public relations and censorship offices as to the type of footage that could be released. Eventually, complaints from motion picture producers, a need to relieve tensions about lack of information, and the favourable situation of the war in 1943 led to a freeing up of the type of images shown and the speed of their production. The problems of speed were alleviated by the instigation of a 'fast plane' taking combat footage straight to Washington for processing, censorship and public viewing (Doherty, 1993: 238-9).

Technological and social developments that were bringing images of combat home with increasing speed point to not only a primacy of the desire to *see* what was taking place, but also reveals the desire for a new type of 'participation' in the often horrific experiences of combat. These developments were also bringing about a convergence between 'documentary' and narrative film forms in a way that was shaping the emerging combat film genre. In his work on the emergence of the genre of the war film and the particular form of the combat film in World War II, Thomas Schatz argues that there are significant aesthetic and stylistic aspects of these films that link them to the emergence of the new documentary and newsreel culture (Schatz, 1998). An intersection between these two forms – one that dramatises events and weds them to cinematic spectacle, the other as a means of bearing direct witness to the experiences at the front – were essential to the development of both.

With Hollywood's wartime features more focused than ever before on real-world events, the lines between factual and fictional films steadily blurred. This was most pronounced in combat films, which often included documentary footage and depicted events that were widely covered in various news media (Schatz, 1998: 91).

The war period, Schatz argues, was a unique era for film production in the U.S., and was one of the most genre-driven periods of film making in the country: "Never before or since have

the interests of the nation and the movie industry been so closely aligned, and never has Hollywood's status as a national cinema been so vital" (Schatz, 1998: 89). As Doherty notes, there was uniformity to film as a mass medium in this period that, since the introduction of television, has not been matched – with an estimated eighty-five to ninety million weekly moviegoers in the U.S. alone (Doherty, 1993: 11). [4]

The combat films of the war period remind us that images of combat were unavoidably violent depictions of injury and horrific forms of death, and this is what audiences wanted to see. John Farrow's *Wake Island* (1942), for example, dramatised the defeat of a contingent of marines on an island outpost near Hawaii, and was a watershed in its combination of dramatic fiction and reproduction of actual U.S. military combat (Schatz, 1998: 112; Basinger, 1986: 30). Catherine Kane compares war era combat films to those made in the decades following and highlights the graphic brutality in images of injury, death and physical destruction in war era films (Kane, 1982). Her description of the combat film emphasises the body horror Taylor sees as missing from media images of the 1991 war in Iraq. For example, Kane refers to the 'brutality' of *Bataan* (1943):

> The face of war is here unrelievedly brutal, as becomes evident from the first scene. A surprise air attack in a tiny Philippine village makes a target of the refugees – women and children, wounded soldiers and stragglers. One blinded soldier, left by his guides during the attack, gropes his way under a burning house until a falling timber crushes his neck and he dies, screaming, arms flailing. A jeep receives a direct hit, debris flies out of the smoke, dismembered legs lie on the road. Death comes suddenly and unseen, as mysterious and threatening – and as ever present – as the fog, yet its brutality continues to horrify, its swiftness to shock (Kane, 1982: 62).

A desire to see the experiences rendered 'out of bounds' to civilians may have driven the strong association between film narratives and the images of the war and combat made available through newsreels at a scale and pace never before achieved. The political implications of this have become apparent in the use of corporeally intense combat imagery in narrative accounts of the Vietnam War that extended the combat film genre into the late 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. Bodily violence and combat took on a vigorous urgency in films such as *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket* and *Hamburger Hill* (1987). In many ways the Vietnam War combat films were a vehicle for an even more intimate, and often more critical view of the physical repercussions of war (Dittmar and Michaud, 1990).

In his analysis of *Platoon*, Douglas Kellner regards the visceral depictions of the experiences of warfare and combat as a central feature of the film's cultural significance (Kellner, 1995: 117-122). The central character Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen) and his fellow new recruits to the war, along with the viewers, are 'transported' into the "reality of combat without any preparation or background" (Kellner, 1995: 118). A significant aspect of the 'shocking transportation' into the scene of combat in *Platoon* involves crossing the path of several corpses in body bags being taken home. Similar images have achieved renewed political significance in the aftermath of the second Gulf War. Images of the coffins of American soldiers killed in combat in Iraq have become the sobering sign of the human cost of war, and have provided clear, and politically volatile, associations with the Vietnam War. In *Platoon*, through this reminder of mortality and in the intense combat that follows, the characters and the viewer are introduced to the war in a way that does not hold back the details of the corporeal effects of war on the soldiers fighting.

Kellner understands the 'realism' of the film as a set of conventions constructing a picture of the world of combat, rather than imitating or providing actual access to it. However, he takes an approach to cinematic realism that is closer to Hallam and Marshment and MacCabe's emphasis on conventions and norms of discourse than the notions of verisimilitude, indexicality and contingency that also concerned Bazin in his theorisation of cinematic realism. For Kellner, the realism of *Platoon* derives in part from the types of images shown and particularly the vivid depiction of the physical effects of combat. However, he also sees realism as ideological, where a 'balanced' political position is taken by the narrative in exploring the dubious nature of U.S. involvement in the war. 'Realism' here derives, in part, from the film's relation to other less 'critical' depictions of the war, such as *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985), *Missing in Action* and *Missing in Action II* (1985) (Kellner, 1995: 118). Kellner also stresses the relationship between the film and audiences as one that reveals a general acceptance of a type of 'correlation' between *Platoon* and the Vietnam War. Echoing many aspects of the popular and critical reception of *Saving Private Ryan* more than a decade later, Kellner points out that reviewers, critics and veterans alike bestowed the status of realism upon the film. And Kellner himself argues that "Oliver Stone's *Platoon* is arguably the most realistic and critical Vietnam combat film yet to appear", deferring to the cultural significance of the film's shocking combat footage (Kellner, 1995: 118, 122). Although he does not explicitly explore the link, this claim to realism is linked to the film's staging of combat and its 'violent' imagery of wounding, suffering and death. Claims to realism are justified for Kellner on the grounds that "Oliver Stone's focus in the film is on the experience of combat, and the film brilliantly recreates the environment and atmosphere within which U. S. troops fought in Vietnam", experiences apparently drawn from Stone's time in Vietnam during 1967-8 (Kellner, 1995: 118-9). The violence of warfare and the reverence paid through first hand accounts also came to lend weight to claims of 'authenticity' levelled at Speilberg's vision of World War II in *Saving Private Ryan*. Perhaps more difficult to understand is the way in which the quality of suffering and brutality is both the subject matter of these films and their realistic affect.

Saving Private Ryan and the Combat Film Genre

While it is often professed to have broken new ground and to have distanced itself from the traditions of previous war films, it is certainly not in terms of plot, narrative or character that *Saving Private Ryan* could be described as distinctive. The film reproduces many of the thematic conventions, archetypes and myths of the traditional World War II combat film. These films, Kane argues, test out a set of values through the actions and situations of the groups of soldiers, and the individual characters (Kane, 1982: 16-23). They explore notions of freedom, the sanctity of the homeland, honour, cooperation and duty, for example, through a variety of plots and combat situations. *Saving Private Ryan* begins in the 'present' in a memorial cemetery with the elderly veteran and his extended family. It then shifts back in time to the horrific combat of the D-Day landing at Omaha Beach in Normandy. Lasting more than twenty minutes of film time the opening combat scene forms a central part of the film's memorialisation of World War II and focuses the film's action around intense battle experience rather than home front or non-combat drama. Immediately after the D-Day landing scene, the film's plot is introduced. The Army Chief of Staff is informed that three out of four Ryan boys have been killed in action and the mother is to be informed that afternoon. A small squad consisting of Captain Miller (Tom Hanks) and several soldiers who featured in the opening battle scene are given the task of going into France to find the remaining Private Ryan in order to return him home. The film contains elements of the traditional World War II combat film in its portrayal of the small band of ethnically diverse

Americans, an objective that needs to be accomplished, and in the heroism, individuality and comradeship that Basinger sees as inevitable for the combat film genre (Basinger, 1986: 73-82).

Despite its obvious resemblances in narrative style, in discussing the influences on the aesthetic and narrative style of *Saving Private Ryan*, Spielberg states that he was not inspired by the early World War II combat films. Rather, he claims to be influenced by the work of the photographers that landed with the Normandy invasion, particularly Robert Capa, and documentary and newsreel films made at the time, as well as by interviews with veterans. The 'authenticity' drawn from the reflections and experiences of veterans is taken further in Spielberg's spin-off television series *Band of Brothers* (2001), where interviews with former members of 'Easy Company' are incorporated into the re-presentations of the combat and events experienced by the company as it moved through the north of France in the latter part of World War II. Such experiences and memories are suggested to be more important to Spielberg than films of similar events and experiences, despite the generic nature of most of the action-combat sequences and plots in both the television series and *Saving Private Ryan*. Spielberg lists several World War II films that inspired him: Wellman's *Battleground* (1949), Fuller's *The Steel Helmet* (1951) and Siegel's *Hell is for Heroes* (1962). However, he states that, aesthetically, he wanted to take a different direction:

> From a visual perspective, I was much more influenced by various World War II documentaries – *Memphis Belle*, *Why We Fight*, John Ford's [*The Battle of*] *Midway* movie and John Huston's film on the liberation of the Nazi death camps – than I was by any of Hollywood's representations of the war. I was also inspired by [photographer] Robert Capa's documentary work, and the eight surviving stills he took during the assault on Omaha Beach. (Speilberg, quoted in Pizzello, 1998: 45)

Indeed, the cinematography of the initial landing scene and the combat-adventure that follows is saturated with pallid olive, khaki, greys and browns in a fashion that brings it closer to Capa's photography and other World War II documentary footage than recent Vietnam War combat films. Resonance with Capa's famous photographs is also strongly carried into the opening combat scene through the focus on the cross-like tank traps strewn along the beach, and the smoky confusion of the scene.

Later images of partially destroyed French villages and towns are also a means for moving the film beyond the 'film set' to the physical landscape of the war and its documented depictions. Similar images of villages and towns torn apart by the effects of war were put to use by Stanley Kubrick in his rendering of conflict in Vietnam in *Full Metal Jacket*. It is also a central feature of the German World War II film *Stalingrad* (1993). The ruins in each case become another indexical trace of the catastrophe of war. In linking the film to the documentary form, Spielberg attempts to call upon the authority those images and landscapes provide as documents of the event. This visual 'authority' is the social acknowledgement of the referentiality of documentary images, the link between the indexical sign and its historical and material referent (Nichols, 1994). In addition, *Saving Private Ryan* situates itself in relation to an audience that has lived with the steady circulation of similar images since the war. In this sense the film is continuing a tradition that Schatz sees as central to the emergence of the cinematic style of the combat film (Schatz, 1998: 98-9). That is, although Hollywood was initially tentative in portraying the war in feature films, there was eventually a strong desire to produce and see dramatised images of war in fictional cinema based on

'actual' images of combat relayed from the battlefield in the form of newsreel and documentary photography.

Public debate and discussion about *Saving Private Ryan* was constantly preoccupied with the notion of the film's realism as an effect of the way it puts a viewer *there* on the beach at the D-Day landing. The significance placed on veterans' approval of the realism of *Saving Private Ryan* was elevated to the level of a marketing strategy. There were also reports of a hotline set up by Spielberg's film company to counsel veterans affected by seeing the film (Guardian, 1998: 10). Likewise, the goal of realism was understood as a valid reason for the extent of the 'violent' images of combat; as if Spielberg owed it to those who fought in World War II to re-present the horrors of their experience in accurate detail. This claim for the film also sat uneasily for those who would highlight its mythologising tendencies in the classical dramatisation of the plight and value of the individual, and its historical inaccuracies in erasing soldiers of any other nationality from the D-Day invasion and elsewhere in the film. However, the use of Capa's few field photographs of Omaha Beach taken at the landing as a model for the film's documentary style, along with the high budget effects used to visualise wounding and death on a vast scale, were enough to secure a virtually unanimous public consensus about the film's 'realism'.

The British newspaper, the *Guardian*, claimed that because of its graphic depiction of war, Spielberg banned his teenage son from seeing it. In addition, the paper points out that "it has triggered traumatic memories for so many American veterans that a hotline has been set up to help them" (Guardian, 1998: 10). In Rick Lyman's description in the *New York Times* of the detail and attention paid to producing a sense of realism in the making of the film, there is specific allusion to the aesthetic history of the genre:

> Spielberg describes his role in directing the hundreds of extras in the battle scenes as largely inspirational, and he tried to convey to them the importance that he felt about doing it properly. 'Steven told them that people don't die like they do in Rambo films,' [military adviser Dale] Dye says. 'And he's right. People turn inside themselves, into the pain. There isn't a lot of throwing out their arms and crying for Mama' (Lyman, 1998: 10).

The contrast with films such as *Rambo: First Blood Part II* is significant. Like *Platoon* in the previous decade, *Saving Private Ryan* has a different agenda to the right-wing revisionist films about the Vietnam War such as *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, or *Missing in Action* and *Missing in Action II*. Unlike the latter films, the emphasis of *Platoon* and *Saving Private Ryan* is in part at least, and in different ways, to display the enormity and complexity of the suffering experienced in battle in these wars. *Saving Private Ryan* is somewhat more ambiguous, reproducing the conservative sense of righteousness about war itself in its vivid de-glorification and demystifying of battle through its excessive imagery of wounding, suffering and seemingly pointless death. On the release of the film in Australia, review and feature articles had a similar focus on the vivid and horrific precision of the battle scenes. In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Richard Jinman interviewed a young soldier and two ex-servicemen who previewed the film, comparing their experiences of combat with the experience of the film, and reinforcing the significance of the film's fidelity to actual combat (Jinman, 1998: 15).

In the public discussions surrounding the film at least, the vivid corporeal and material details accompanying the combat scenes both horrified and fascinated, and were considered a key

aspect of the film's achievement. One newspaper article, for example, emphasised touches to the film that Bazin might describe as 'the quotidian' as a means of adequately presenting the reality of the D-Day battle:

> When Spielberg noted that many D-Day survivors vividly remembered the thousands of dead fish that washed ashore with the dead soldiers, he ordered kilograms of fish to be bought at the local market and strewn among the immobile extras. Other details were borrowed from the memoirs of survivors of the battle. One man remembered seeing a Bible floating in the surf, so Spielberg had a Bible added to the scene. (Lyman, 1998: 10)

The technical and logistic elements that went into producing the visible brutality of the opening battle scene, and its traumatic effects on those creating it, became a part of the marketing strategy as well as critical discussion surrounding the film. Reminiscent of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) the production itself was likened to a battle; those involved were portrayed as experiencing physical tests similar to those of the soldiers in the actual battle (Probst, 1998: 31- 42). *American Cinematographer* carried two feature articles and an interview with Spielberg on the technical details that went into producing 'accuracy' in the battle scenes (Probst, 1998: 31-42; Pizzello, 1998: 44-51; Magid, 1998: 56-66). This public and critical attention to detail could be seen as a confirmation of the film's representational project, reinforcing the legitimacy of its aim to 're-present' and allow audiences to encounter the experiences and horrific qualities of war for themselves more than fifty years after the events took place. For *Saving Private Ryan*, much of this attention to the experience of combat and the quality of the combat experience was centred on the twenty-five minute opening combat scene.

As much of the post-release commentary seemed to point out, the imposing intensity of the opening combat scene provides more than a stylistic re-enactment of the events at the D-Day landing; it presents a means for *involving* contemporary audiences in those experiences represented. The images and the cinematographic techniques used in the scene contribute to this goal. In the landing scene, a mobile camera follows the soldiers almost randomly through the chaos of the beach landing. The transport boat is sprayed by bomb blasts as it heads into the shore, and all we see is the immediate surrounds, hidden from us is any sign of what is up ahead on the beach. When the armoured door is quickly lowered to feed the soldiers forward onto the beach we see a machine gun bunker and soldiers instantly torn apart by bullets. Quick reverse angle shots emphasise the visibility and vulnerability of the soldiers. Eventually the camera follows some of the soldiers over the side of the boat into the fairly deep water. There is no protection here, and in the relative silence the zip and thud of bullets is still audible. Some soldiers are shot before they can resurface, one drowns. The camera struggles to the surface with some of the men and the sound and confusion returns. The mobile camera jolts from one direction to another as it seeks cover with the soldiers behind the thin metal tank traps. Along with the pallid greys and greens there is a saturation of the brown-red of blood on the sand, in the water and covering the soldiers. Bodies either dead, wounded or confused crowd every section of the screen just as the sound is crowded out with the zip, thud and concussion of endless gunfire and explosion. Long, continuous mobile shots are cut together with confused angles and speeds as the vision is continually distorted, seemingly traumatised at points. In one part of the scene the point of view of Captain Miller is explicitly taken by the camera as a muted concussion that emphasises the incomprehension of the bloodshed and death taking place all around him.

Within the larger scene and with increasing consistency throughout the film, there are episodes of individual pain and suffering. This focus on the details of individual suffering is used in a way that brings specificity to the more general slaughter across the beach. It provides in even more affective detail the specificity and the quotidian that Bazin saw as central to the perceptual shift generated by neo-realist filmmaking (Bazin, 1971). Here, individual experiences of suffering serve the purpose of providing a crucial corporeal access point to this complex overall experience of combat. In one part of the landing scene, we see several medics trying to help the wounded, to stabilise them and ease the overwhelming force of their suffering. One of the medics who later becomes part of the small group looking for Private Ryan, works on a soldier whose shoulder is torn open, the artery exposed and gushing blood all over him. This soldier's experience provides an apt analogy for what might be expected of the film's spectator. As the medic tries to clamp the artery the soldier screams in agony, "Oh my God it hurts… I'm going to die… God… Jesus…" Reassuring him, the medic plugs the massively torn flesh and yells: "You're not going to die," and warns "don't look at it… don't look at it". If the role of the combat film is to bring to audiences the traumatic experiences of war as if they were felt first hand, it is the trauma of looking at horrific bodily wounds that defines this process. Even with the medic's warnings not to look, perhaps also as a response to this explicit challenge, it is more than looking that is encouraged by the close-up view of the shoulder's torn flesh. Both the landing scene and the film as a whole encourage a type of participation or integration that is meant to involve the taking on of that suffering and the *sensing* of the full power of violent combat. The torn flesh of the soldier's open shoulder is one of many such images of graphic wounding, dismemberment and open flesh the viewer is expected to 'endure' throughout the film.

Conclusion: Body Horror and the Trauma of Combat

In his analysis of Pierre Braunberger's *The Bullfight* (*La Course de taureaux*, 1951), André Bazin focuses his attention on the qualities of the experience of the bullfight and the representation of death. Bullfight lovers, he affirms, will rush to see the film, "while the uninitiated will go out of curiosity" (Bazin, 2002: 28). What interests Bazin in this film is not the "documentary or didactic value" of its images, but the question of how it could "give us back the essence of the spectacle, the mystical triad of animal, man and crowd" (Bazin, 2002: 29). He goes as far as to argue that the film:

> gives me its essential quality, its metaphysical kernel: death. The tragic ballet
> of the bullfighter turns around the presence and permanent possibility of death
> (that of the animal and the man). That is what makes the ring into something
> more than a theatre stage: death is played on it. (Bazin, 2002: 29-30)

The paradox of cinema's ability to endlessly repeat or reproduce such corporeal specificity is one of its primary achievements for Bazin. It seems almost mundane to argue that combat films such as *Saving Private Ryan* and *Platoon* attempt to memorialise the quality or experience of war through its graphic representations of combat. But here, in the intersection of history, bodily pain and contemporary cinema we can understand something of the potential and volatility of moving images. Foregrounding and even sanctifying the suffering of war, the combat film continues to draw on the body's vulnerability and receptiveness to 'violent' images as a way of presenting its stories, its accounts of the historical past.

The opening combat scene of *Saving Private Ryan* takes the horrific bloodshed of one of the most famous battles of World War II as a way of reinscribing the wound of war upon

contemporary audiences. The D-Day invasion becomes a twenty-five minute scene of chaotic, almost directionless slaughter until the invading force breaches the German defences to take the beach. This invasion scene provides the historical specificity, or "a determinate social and historical setting" as Colin MacCabe puts it, that is a requirement of a text appealing to an accepted realism (MacCabe, 1992: 80). Cinematically, and following the traditions of the combat film genre, legitimacy is also gained by drawing on the aesthetic characteristics and 'authenticity' of documentary photography and footage, as well as first hand reflection and the quotidian detail that brings specificity to the context and landscape of the experiences depicted. However, it is the bloodshed and the instances of mass and individual suffering that most insistently ties the experiences depicted to the present.

Realism here has both historicising and aesthetic goals. But this is aesthetics in the sense that Susan Buck-Morss uses the term: as a perception 'by feeling' (Buck-Morss, 1997: 378). That is, the brutality of the combat scenes of films like *Saving Private Ryan* and *Platoon* engages the whole corporeal sensorium in a way that integrates viewers with its shocking and graphic images. Consistently highlighting the brutality of the D-Day landing scene in particular, public and critical responses reveal the more significant corporeal project and cultural significance of the film: combat cinema as a means of re-activating the trauma of war. Its body horror and violence is justified as an act of memorialisation, as a way of shocking 'complacent' U.S. and Western audiences into a new process of remembering the past and confirming the moral right of 'the good war'. Discussion and debate about the horror of *Saving Private Ryan*'s opening scene of combat indicate that it is not just the vividness of the images of wounding and death that generated widespread interest in the film. Also clearly at stake is the trauma of the viewing experience, the affect of the film on the senses of its audience. This is not surprising given the attention paid by Spielberg to the effects of the combat scenes. In the bombardment of images in the beach landing combat scene and throughout the film, *Saving Private Ryan* attempts not only to present the accurate detail of war's horrific bodily suffering, but also to affect a sense of the experience upon the body of the viewer. This is a matter of going beyond the documentary footage and the reported details of battle to provide an experience that is rarely possible or permissible in the media coverage of war.

Although they are presented in clear, unifying and naturalising terms, the pro-U.S. orientation of the narrative and the traditional themes of individual heroism, comradeship and honour, are really the background to what was more widely celebrated about *Saving Private Ryan* at the time of its release. In fact, the epic twenty-five minute depiction of the D-Day landing did 'break new ground' for the genre and for action cinema in general. More than this though, the primacy of visual brutality in this film (while not new for the genre as such) holds the key to the film's deeper cultural significance. In the context of an increasing level of disappearance in the coverage of war, *Saving Private Ryan* serves a role in presenting war as the traumatic wound of history. This is a process of locating war in suffering, and reigniting a *sense* of the pain and death of war, even while naturalising the traditional narratives of the place of World War II in U.S. history. In other words, the combat film genre achieves its goal of memorialisation not necessarily through symbolic or narrative means, but primarily through affect, by generating a traumatic form of integration with the corporeal experience of the horrors of war. In this sense at least, the genre presents an element of the actual trauma, pain and vividness of death in war – like the quality of death that Bazin refers to – bodily experiences that are increasingly disappearing from the media coverage of contemporary conflict. During the World War II period, film makers were restricted by the well-documented political constraints placed on the film industry, but also in part, by the reverence

placed upon the distinction between 'real' battle footage, and recreations (Doherty, 1993: 250-264). What is this reverence for if not the actual qualities of the bodily experiences depicted? When we revere we sanctify. It is this sanctification of bodily experience of suffering that drives filmmakers such as Steven Spielberg and Oliver Stone and the combat film genre as a whole.

Notes

[1] Virilio also argues that the development of photography and cinema accompanies the development of forms of warfare that are fought increasingly at a distance, making the extensions to human vision and perception afforded by cinema and later television and satellite vital to the conduct of war (Virilio, 1989).

[2] There is significant variety in the types of plots and aesthetic styles of what are considered war-related films, but for Schatz and many other scholars, "the key to Hollywood's war-related output and the dominant formulation of the war film by 1942-1943 was the combat film – dramatizations of U.S. soldiers in actual battles . . ." (Schatz, 1998: 90) Schatz sums up the widespread appeal of these films, emphasising their fidelity to the experiences of those at the frontline:

These films were altogether unique on several counts – and not only as genre films but also as Hollywood features. First, they evinced an extraordinary sense of historical immediacy, far beyond that of any other cinematic genre or cycle in movie history. Second, the fictional combat film developed a genre in direct symbiosis with the war-related documentaries and newsreels, which also saw heavy production during the war. Indeed Hollywood's fiction and non-fiction treatments of the war represented, in Lewis Jacobs's evocative terms, a 'vast serialization' of the American and Allied war effort. (Schatz, 1998: 90)

[3] Indexicality here refers to the photographic base of cinema, which, along with the language of film, Bazin saw as central to what cinema is. Likewise, in the semiotics of C.S. Peirce, an indexical sign is a sign that assures the existence of something else. In other words, they are "signs that bear a physical trace of what they refer to, such as the fingerprint, X-ray, or photograph" (Nichols, 1994: ix). It is this relationship between image and the material world that also forms the basis of recent theoretical "sensitivity to the conjunction of cinema and history" (Margulies, 2002: 10).

[4] Thomas Schatz cites figures produced by Dorothy Jones of the Office of War Information (OWI) Film Reviewing and Analysis section and Russell Shain on the number of World War II-related Hollywood films made during the period (Schatz, 1998: 102). From 1942 to 1944, 376 films or around thirty percent of the total film production of this period were war-related. There are multiple reasons for the growth and popularity of Hollywood in the war period of 1942-1944, but central to this widespread participation in the cinema going experience is both a heightened desire to know and be informed of what was happening in the war.

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