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VISUAL CONSUMPTION, COLLECTIVE MEMORY, AND THE

REPRESENTATION OF WAR[1]

Richard Godfrey (School of Management and Business, Aberystwyth

University, UK) and Simon Lilley (University of Leicester School of

Management, UK) [2]

[2] Please direct all correspondence to Richard Godfrey, rdg@aber.ac.uk.

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to ongoing discussions that turn around the connections between visual representations, war and the military, and collective memory. Conceiving of the visual as a significant force in the production and dissemination of collective memory, we argue that a new genre of World War Two films has recently emerged that form part of a new discursive 'regime of memory' about the war and those that fought and lived through it, constituting a commemoration as much about reflecting on the present as it is about remembering the past. In particular we consider three explicit mediated memories that contribute to this project. First, we argue that these films seek to reaffirm a (particular conception of a) US national identity and military patriotism in the post-Cold War era by importing World War Two as the key meta-narrative of America's relationship to war in order to 'correct' and help 'erase' Vietnam's more negative discursive rendering. Second, we argue that these films attempt to rewrite the history of World War Two by elevating and illuminating the role of the US at the expense of the Allies, further serving to reaffirm America's position of political and military dominance in the current age. And third, that these films form part of a celebration of the generation that fought World War Two that may accord them a position of nostalgic and sentimental greatness, as their collective spirit and notions of duty and service shines against the foil of what might frequently be seen as our own present moral ambivalence.

Keywords: Collective memory; film; mediated representation; regime of memory; World War Two.

Introduction

[W]hen you see these films, you find out what you have to remember (Foucault 1974/1996: 124).

In recent issues of *Consumption, Markets and Culture* a discussion has begun to emerge that turns around issues of visual consumption in the context of war and the military. Thuc-Doan Nguyen and Russell Belk (2007) considered some of the ways in which visual representations are consumed in the production and perpetuation of collective, or shared, memories. Drawing on the work of Halbwachs (1980), Schroeder (1998) and Wertsch (2002) they explore the web postings of war photographs by Vietnam veterans and raise questions about how these images have been used, by the veterans, as a means of engaging with their own sense of collective memory as veterans of that war. More recently, Ann Kaplan (2008) has explored interpretive strategies and experiences in relation to consuming visual images of catastrophe, with many of her examples employing images of war and war-related events, whilst Lilie Chouliariki (see particularly 2006; 2008) has examined the ways in which our ethical sensibility is shaped through our mediated spectation of suffering, particularly that enabled and encouraged by television news.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to this on-going discussion by revisiting the theme of collective memory, but this time, in relation to films. Specifically, we are interested in thinking through some of the ways in which a corpus of war films that were released during the period 1998-2006 may potentially have come to inform wider understandings and ways of remembering the events that they re-present. In following Nguyen and Belk we recognise the significance and power of film as a form of visual representation in the construction of memory and attend to this medium in situating our discussion.

To this end, we find Hollywood's recent remembrance of World War Two (which, in itself, needs to be read intertextually against the backdrop of Vietnam: as war, discourse, and visual image) of particular relevance and interest. Starting with *Saving Private Ryan* in 1998 we have seen a continual stream of World War Two films being released through the Hollywood studio system[1]. The internal consistency of the narrative and cinematic structures on which these films have been built, and their difference from those war films that preceded them, suggest to us a new genre of the war film. We propose that this collection of films constitutes a key part of what we call a new "regime of memory" (appropriated from Foucault's notion of a regime of truth) of World War Two.

Two important points of clarification need to be made at this point. First, our choice of the phrase 'regime of memory' and its direct borrowing from Foucault's (1980) notion of a 'regime of truth' is highly significant. As is the case for Foucault in relation to discursive truth, for us, discursive memory is not to be conceived of as some kind of universalising fact or reality but is, instead, best understood as:

> "a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. [As such memory is] linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it" (1980: 133).

In the context of this paper, then, it does not matter whether Hollywood's memory of World War Two is true or false, accurate or misleading, but rather what matters is the *regime* of memory that is being disseminated through these texts. What are these texts saying about the war, the military and the military subject at this time? Why? Whose voices are being heard? For what purposes?

The second point we wish to clarify is that what is offered here is just *one* reading of these texts. We do not wish to suggest that it is the *only* way to read them. We are fully receptive to the argument that there is always a multiplicity of meanings to be found in any text. Indeed, it might be suggested that all interpretations of a (film) text are purely subjective to the point, perhaps, where each of us can take a completely different meaning from the film every time we view it. Whilst theoretically this may be the case, in practice, we would argue it is usually fairly easy to skim off at least some of the more obvious and intended meanings offered by the text, without necessarily being forced into accepting that particular meaning. What we suggest in this paper is that within this corpus of films there is a recurring set of themes, floating not too far beneath the surface, that constitute the 'regime of memory' we are suggesting. In simple terms, it seems to us that there is a fairly clear narrative trend running through these films and it is our aim to offer one reading of these themes and how they might conceivably be productive in the constitution of a particular set of discursive acts of remembrance. To echo Kaplan (2008), ours is just one reading, but we do claim (with evidence), that the reading we take is one that recurs frequently.

In order to develop our argument conceptually, we draw on the work of Maurice Halbwachs whose theory of "collective memory" (1925/1992) continues to inform many contemporary debates on social remembrance (see Misztal 2003; Storey 2003; Middleton and Brown 2005). A number of key themes contained within his writings are outlined and are used as a platform from which to launch our own inquiries into the subject area. Building on Halbwachs, we also consider Foucault's contribution to discussions of memory. Although not a major component of his work, his ideas in this area have been extremely influential with certain groups (see, for example, the work of the Popular Memory Group, 1982). And, in order to highlight the contributing role of

film in frameworks of social remembrance, we also introduce a number of Baudrillard's thoughts on the relationship between history and the media, as discussed in *The Illusion of the End* (1994). Having laid out this conceptual basis we then unpack, in more detail, the broader interest in war remembrance that appears to circulate in contemporary society.

Following this, we very briefly situate our discussion of the corpus of films under consideration by locating them within the wider war film genre. Specifically, we offer a brief overview of what we consider to be the dominant genre of war representation in American film-making prior to the inception of these texts: namely the Vietnam War genre of the 1970s and 1980s. Given the intertextual connections between these two sets of films this is a necessary first move to make.

Having established these conceptual parameters, we finally move to consider a number of 'mediated' memories that emerge in the recent retellings of World War Two. Working primarily, but not exclusively, through a close reading of Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), we explore three specific facets of the new regime of memory we see as partially instantiated through filmic re-imaginings of World War Two. First, we suggest this genre of films constructs a discourse in which World War Two can be remembered as the 'good' war; morally justified and politically unambiguous. Second, that these films present an imagery that emphasises American triumphalism and victory in World War Two. Rather than 'depicting' history, they attempt to 'rewrite' it: to borrow Jameson's (1998) phrase, they are "historicist" rather than "historical". Third, we propose that these films, in their representation of the soldiers who fought in the war, evoke a memory of sacrifice. A sacrifice endured so that future generations could live in (a particular conception of) freedom. In remembering

this sacrifice, the films also pass a moral judgement on modern moral ambivalence, individualism and consumptive greed and excess. In this way the texts go far beyond the nostalgic commemoration for a generation whose time is coming to an end, and act as a cipher for present-day ideology.

The choice of *Saving Private Ryan* as the primary text for this paper is not coincidental. The film is significant for a number of reasons. First, released in 1998, it was, arguably, the film that kick-started and revived interest in presenting war on screen.[2] Its positive, patriotic narrative also established a template that numerous films would follow. As Victor Canby (last accessed 15/07/2006) notes, Spielberg probably had not planned to "restore the [American] nation's heroic image of itself" when making *Saving Private Ryan* but seemingly that is the project that he instigated.

Second, part of the discursive power of *Saving Private Ryan* stems from the means by which Spielberg hides much of his subtle revisionism behind the mask of spectacular filmmaking. Here we refer to the infamous 'first 24 minutes', a discussion of which no review of the film could be without. The horror and brutality of war depicted in Spielberg's construction of the D-Day landings stamps the film, it seems, with a seal of authenticity, of realism. Many of the survivors of that day, who are still alive, applauded Spielberg's representation as such. Moreover, his use of handheld cameras and 35-millimetre film gives a documentary effect to the imagery, reminiscent of Frank Capra's original footage of that day, and a technique that has become commonplace in subsequent retellings of World War Two. So powerful were the scenes, and the overall representation, that the American Legion created a "Spirit of Normandy" award for Spielberg, and the U.S. Army awarded him its highest civilian decoration (Cohen 1998: 84)

In reading the films in this way, it is our contention that these visual images are not without discursive effects. Indeed, when these three memories (amongst others that are not discussed) are read across this corpus of films and then, more broadly, across the wealth of World War Two 'vehicles of remembrance' currently circulating, they construct, we would argue, a particular history of World War Two: one in which certain memories become dominant, in which certain ways of remembering become dominant. They constitute, for us, a new regime of memory on World War Two.

Theorising collective memory

> [M]emory [is] not merely a faculty with which individuals are endowed – that is a property or thing … - but also an activity – a set of social techniques or procedures (Middleton and Brown 2005: 20).

The idea of memory as a social process owes much to the work of Maurice Halbwachs who, in his *On Collective Memory* (1925/1992), outlines a social framework of memory whose main principles still influence many current debates in the field of memory studies. It is worth briefly considering each of those here.

Halbwachs' first claim is that memories are as much collective as they are individual: "there exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory; it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection" (1925/1992: 38).

In many ways, this notion is seen as Halbwachs' most significant contribution to the field of memory studies (Misztal 2003). On one level he is arguing that memory is always socially framed because, however defined, it is the group (the family, the nation) that determines what is to be remembered. However, on another level, what he is also

suggesting is that our individual memories *cannot* be untied from our discursive positioning within the group. By extension, as our positioning within groups shifts, so our memories will be informed by such moves: "my memories change 'as my position changes' and 'this position itself changes as my relationships to other milieux change'" (Halbwachs 1926/1950: 48 cited in Misztal 2003: 51).

Importantly, whilst Halbwachs' attention was normally drawn toward the local level, that is, he was most interested in how small intimate groups such as the family remember, he also suggests that collective memory operates on a larger (societal) level. Misztal (2003) summaries the argument thus:

> Although he is aware that 'Ordinarily, the nation is too remote from the individual for him to consider the history of his country as anything else than a very large framework with which his own history makes contact at only few points', he argues that there are certain events that 'alter group life' and therefore that collective memory can play a solidifying role in societies. So, despite the fact that 'between individual and nation lie many other, more restricted groups', each with its own history, there is the possibility of a link between collective memory and social solidarity on a national scale (p. 52).

Conceiving of memory in this way creates the conditions of possibility for thinking about memory as discursively produced and therefore the subject of power/knowledge regimes. As Gross (2000) has noted: "Of the nearly infinite number of things any collectivity could designate as memorable, comparatively few are actually retained and made accessible as social knowledge" (p. 77): What is remembered and why become important points of inquiry.

Consideration of the operation (and manipulation) of memory in this way marks Foucault's point of entry into the debate. Foucault (1974/1996), in situating a tension between dominant and resistant memories, employs the term "popular memory" to describe those methods by which resistant or "counter-memory" emerges as a force against dominant representations of the past. Counter-memories are the memories of the

marginalised, the repressed, the unheard: "This popular history was, to a certain extent, even more alive, more clearly formulated in the 19th century, where, for instance, there was a whole tradition of struggles which were transmitted orally, or in writing or songs, etc" (Foucault 1974/1996: 123).

Foucault argues that memory-formation can be conceived of as a 'discursive practice' (Misztal 2003: 62) and as such becomes: "a very important factor in struggle (really, in fact, struggles develop in a kind of conscious moving forward of history), if one controls people's memory, one controls their dynamism" (Foucault 1974/1996: 124). When read in the wider context of his work on power/knowledge, memory becomes another discursive tool through which dominant and resistant truths engage.

Interestingly, Foucault notes the emergence of film as an important site in the battle over memory: "Today, cheap books aren't enough. There are much more effective means like television and the cinema. And I believe this was one way of reprogramming popular memory, which existed but had no way of expressing itself" (*Ibid.* p. 123).

Foucault's theory of popular memory has been influential. In invoking the Popular Memory Group[3], (much of whose work was built on Foucauldian foundations), Ashplant *et al.* (2000) suggest that the relationship between individual and collective memory is one of a: "hegemonic relationship process of ideological domination and resistance" (p. 13). Individual memories, they suggest, cannot in themselves be separated, or unscrambled from, wider dominant historical discourses. Such discourses provide the context through which individual memories come to be understood. However, importantly, at the same time, dominant collective memories can only be

sustained if they in some way connect with, or relate to, individual memories: "Only if it continues to engage with individual memories does cultural memory retain its political effectiveness, while personal memories are in part shaped by pre-existing national and local cultural memories" (*Ibid.* p. 18).

In recognising this complex and shifting relation, Halbwachs' second component of collective memory asserts that remembrance is always an active process of (re)construction and (re)presentation. That is to say, in acts of remembrance we do not retain and retrieve pure, unadulterated memories of past events but rather they have to be reconstructed by our (shifting) selves in order to be retold. In part the way in which we perform this act or reconstruction is determined by our group affiliations and our discursive positioning but Halbwachs suggests other significant factors are also important. Perhaps the most obvious being time itself.

Most of our memories are affected by time: "[A]t different periods of our lives, they [memories] have lost the form and the appearance they once had" (Halbwachs 1925/1992: 47). Difficult, painful memories may soften, or be reworked, or recontextualised to make them more bearable. Memories of happy times may be further exaggerated, or placed in relationship to our current situation, or circumstances. In this way, memories cannot be seen as fixed or static but are fluid; continually changing and developing. They are also, by extension, open to manipulation or, as Foucault (1974/1996) terms it, "reprogramming".

Third, according to Halbwachs, memory is always 'present-situated' (Storey 2003: 103). Halbwachs remarks that "the past does not recur as such … everything seems to indicate that the past is not preserved but is reconstructed on the basis of the

present" (Halbwachs 1925/1992: 40). This is a significant point; the present becomes the fulcrum upon which understandings and definitions of the past turn. When considered in this way certain questions emerge: for what reason is the past being reconstructed in the present? What particular version of the past is being told? Who is telling the story, and why? Such questions, in relation to Hollywood's recent turn to World War Two, are what drive this paper forward.

Fourth, and relatedly, Halbwachs claims that collective memories are embodied in "mnemonic artefacts" (Storey 2003: 104). In other words, collective memories cannot be sustained purely through verbal communication but must also take some material form. For Halbwachs, writing in the first quarter of the twentieth century, this meant artefacts such as shrines, war memorials, statues, and so on. Today, arguably, it is the mass media that undertake a primary role in this regard.

Of course, the notion that memories can emerge out of mediated representations is not new. However, in following Baudrillard (1994), it might be said that their (re)productions through such means have intensified under the conditions of global media and communications technology: "history cannot now be separated from its model, its simulation" (p. 6). Our relationship to pasts, presents and possible futures, may now be most fittingly considered as a *mediated* one. In this regard, Schudson refers to the media, and all tools of collective memory as 'cultural vehicles' of remembrance (1992: 20). Such vehicles transport the past across time and space and deliver it into projects of the present.

To summarise: we would suggest that through a complex weaving together of individual and collective memory, motivated by the technologies of the mass media, a

new social framework of remembrance on World War Two is currently under construction. It is to outlining specific elements of this framework, which we will term a "regime of memory", that the discussion now turns.

Towards a new regime of memory on World War Two?

The relationship between war and remembrance is as old as the act itself. Past deeds, heroes and battles are continually dug up, drawn upon, reinterpreted and used in a variety of different spheres and contexts. What is of interest here, however, is the almost obsessive attention given to remembering war since the late 1990s; attention primarily focused on World War Two: "It is not overstating matters to claim that for the last three years we have been awash with World War II reminiscences and cultural memorabilia the extent of which we haven't experienced since before the Vietnam War" (Moses 2002, last accessed on 15/07/2006).

This attention is indexed through films, books, commemorations, re-enactments, and numerous digital TV channels and serial publications that almost exclusively deal with representations of World War Two; as well as web-based communication, TV dramas and a whole new genre of video games. Such attention has caught the eye of scholarly writers too, with a wealth of publications stemming from a variety of academic disciplines including History, Sociology and Media Studies (*cf.* Ashplant *et al.,* 2000 and Evans and Lunn, 1997).

As a collection of popular cultural artefacts many of these texts wallow in a sentimentalised nostalgia for a time when it seemed that people had a purpose, a fight worth fighting and the moral righteousness to see it through; a time when the whole nation rallied together in the 'war-effort.' In reading such texts it is difficult not to be

charmed and touched by the oral testimonies and the attitudes and behaviours of those who lived through these events. The concern here, however, is with what lies behind this widespread phenomenon of remembrance and commemoration. Why is it that a particular regime of memory of World War Two is under construction at this time? Ashplant *et al.*, in the introduction to their edited collection *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration* (2000) offer several reasons:

> First, its most powerful, transnational manifestation has been the emergence into public visibility of the Shoah, through a variety of projects ranging from the establishment of new museums and the production of documentary and fictional films, to the campaigns to trace and bring to justice Nazi war criminals, and to restore the so-called 'Nazi gold' and other stolen property to the Jewish victims and their families (p. 3).

Fascination with the Holocaust has ignited such attention that Norman Finkelstein (2000) has coined the term "The Holocaust Industry" to describe the phenomenon. Books and testimonies have packed shelves, and filled many slots on the various documentary channels on TV. The Holocaust has been re-introduced into the cinema via Steven Spielberg's powerful *Schindler's List* (1993) and Roman Polanski's *The Pianist* (2002), amongst others. Former concentration camps are now open to the public as, what might conceivably be termed, 'tourist attractions'. The Imperial War Museum in London has a permanent Holocaust exhibition.

A second feature of this interest in war and memory that Ashplant *et al.* recognise is the increasing demand made by individuals, families, activist groups and legal entities for recognition of trauma suffered directly, or indirectly, through war. Most recently this has taken place with reference to conditions such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The need to talk about 'survivors' and 'victims' and the increasing number of legal cases filing for some kind of compensation, functioning as part of a wider litigation culture, helps keep war in the public, and media eye. Interestingly, conditions such as PTSD now even extend to non-combatants, such as aid workers and even, it

seems, news reporters and war correspondents. To this can be added Kaplan's (2008) notion of an equally pervasive "trauma culture" which emerges largely through what she sees as the almost obsessive media reporting of catastrophe.

Third, and functioning as part of a wider commemoration boom, which is, in itself, a significant element of the recent turn to memory, is the increasing number and mediation of anniversaries and commemorations of World War Two. The 60th anniversary commemorations of the D-Day landings held in 2004 were significant not just in their size and scale, nor just for the wealth of commemorative newspapers and magazines, TV programmes and films released, but also in the way in which they were used to further prevailing political concerns: a notable example being the attendance of Gerhard Schroeder; the first German Chancellor to attend such commemorations.

A significant event, not just because it demonstrates the place of Germany in the current world order, and the forgiveness implied in Germany's invitation, but also for the way Schroeder used the event to thank the Allies for beginning the process, on the beaches of Normandy, of freeing his homeland from the tyranny of Nazism. Careful not to diminish the sacrifice of ordinary German soldiers, Schroeder set out to renegotiate his country's relationship to its past, to create a new memory, by suggesting that Germany had been 'enslaved' by Nazism and that the Allies had set it free. The occasion also served as a platform for George Bush, in honouring the fallen, to galvanise support for current war efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. More recently, the 60th anniversary commemorations of VJ day were again used as a means of bringing up the past into projects of the present when George Bush compared the situation in Iraq to World War Two by contextualising both as a struggle for freedom. As David Morris (2007: 96) has observed: "The darker the news from Iraq gets, the more we need our

sanitized view of World War II to make us feel better about ourselves." Whilst most of

the films under consideration here were released, or under production, prior to the

attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan it is certainly not

unreasonable to suggest that their reception may well have been influenced by these

events.

Finally, Ashplant *et al.* suggest:

> [P]ublic concern with the memory of war has been stimulated by the collapse of the Soviet Union
> and the so-called 'Eastern bloc' in Europe (1989-91), the consequent ending of the Cold War and
> the realignment of power relations in what were once polarized spheres of influence throughout
> the world (2000: 5).

In the post-Cold War era we are, arguably, witnessing a new type of warfare,

possibly a 'postmodern' warfare (see Hables Gray 1997), which we are struggling to

appropriately apprehend. At a time of such uncertainty, a turn to 'the' war with clear

political objectives and a just cause is far easier to negotiate, especially in the shadow of

Vietnam (as war, discourse and image). To this relationship we now turn.

Situating the war film genre: the legacy of Vietnam

In considering the films produced during the 1998-2006 period it is important that they

be read against the backdrop of Vietnam. The Vietnam War, and its representation, have

had a significant effect on both the military actions of the United States and on the way

in which war, the military and the military subject have come to be depicted in film ever

since. As such, the current genre is inseparably connected, intertexually, with Vietnam.

Anthony Easthope (1988) argues that the World War Two film genre that

emerged in the 1940s (and continued to dominate filmic representations of war

throughout the 1950s, 1960s and well into the 1970s) was distinguished by four key

narrative themes: enemy, leadership, fraternity and victory. The enemy were always the, often inhuman, other. Allied leadership was always trustworthy and dependable. There was a strong sense of unity and fraternity amongst the key protagonists, often emerging as the characters were transformed from civilians into, if you like, a 'band of brothers'. Finally, the mission was always successfully completed and victory achieved. For Easthope, these four features worked together to form a unifying narrative structure on which many World War Two films were based.

By the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, however, World War Two was replaced as the dominant paradigm of war representation by films depicting the Vietnam War. In the filmic representation of this war, the above-mentioned narrative structure was called into question, perhaps even turned on its head. Instead, a more critical narrative emerged (*cf.* Easthope 1988, Walsh and Louvre 1988).

During the Vietnam War itself, which lasted over ten years, only one film, depicting the war, was made; *The Green Berets* (1968). This film, structured in the patriotic and positive mould of the World War Two genre outlined above, sees John Wayne in the role of a tough Marine Sergeant leading a group of new recruits through a 'tour' of Vietnam. However, the film was heavily criticised at the time for presenting something of a propagandist treatment of the war, or as Tim Dirks describes it: "a shamelessly jingoistic, heavy-handed, ... ultra-patriotic, anti-Communist ... gung-ho action film" (Last accessed on 27/11/2007). Roger Ebert, in his review of the film, noted that:

> It is not a simple war. We all know it is not simple. Perhaps we could have believed this film in 1962 or 1963, when most of us didn't much care what was happening in Vietnam. But we cannot believe it today. Not after television has brought the reality of the war to us. Not after the Fulbright hearings and the congressional debates and the primaries. Not after 23,000 Americans have been killed (Last accessed on 03/10/2007).

It was not until the end of the 1970s that Vietnam became a suitable topic for filmic representations. The reasons for such a delay are subject to debate. Walsh and Louvre (1988) speculate on a number of causes: "guilt, despair, television overkill, the need for a period of mourning and contemplation, wounds inflicted upon the national psyche" (pp. 5-6). Whatever the reasoning, the release of four films in 1978 (*Boys in Company C, Go Tell the Spartans, The Deer Hunter,* and *Coming Home)* signalled the inauguration of a new genre of war representation, marking "a radical shift in the ways in which [war] ... and its soldiers have been represented and narrated" (Jeffords 1989: 170).

When read collectively, Vietnam films seem to lack coherence and unity in their vision. Frequently parodying the war, they are full of contradictions, ambiguities and conflicting concerns. Films in this genre range from those that deal with the psychosis of the war (see *Apocalypse Now,* 1979) through those that address the issue of American-instigated atrocities (see *Casualties of War,* 1989) to those that critically reflect on the failure of (American) bureaucratic control (see *Rambo: First Blood Part 2,* 1985), and those that focus on the hostility encountered by many returning veterans (see *Born on the Fourth of July,* 1989).

Despite these differences they do at least agree on one thematic trope: "a vision of the war as a problem within American culture" (Desser 1991: 81). For Alasdair Spark, Vietnam was a profusion of wars: "[A]n imperialist war fought by a superpower against an underdeveloped country, a war of revolution, a civil war, a war for national reunification, a guerrilla war and a media war" (cited in Walsh and Louvre 1988: 1). Uncertain feelings about this war were so widespread that, for the ordinary American people, the war became shrouded in a sense of confusion. Such a feeling was felt

especially keenly given the backdrop of World War Two, against which the Vietnam War was continuously measured. When considered in this sense, the Vietnam War could not easily be translated into film, certainly not in the template that had come to dominate representations of earlier conflicts, as revisitation of Easthope's four themes of the World War Two genre reveals.

Enemy

The notion of the enemy is a deeply problematic one in this genre. Across the range of Vietnam films, numerous groups and individuals have been labelled as 'the other', 'the enemy'. First, and most obviously, there is the Vietnamese enemy, but also within this corpus of films there seem to be numerous 'internal' enemies, such as (the bureaucracy of) the American government, the American public, even American soldiers themselves.

Leadership

Whereas World War Two films regularly celebrated and commemorated the leaders of the war, both factual and fictional, what distinguishes Vietnam films is their often-negative representation of military and civilian leadership.

To take first the civilian leaders, numerous Vietnam films made during the 1980s centre on what Storey (2003) calls the "war of betrayal". The narratives in films such as *Missing in Action* 2 (1984) and *Rambo: First Blood Part 2* (1985) centre on the failure of government agencies to fully support the soldiers on the ground during the war, and on the subsequent abandonment of prisoners of war in its aftermath. The narrative is invariably one in which the lone 'warrior' then corrects such actions.

In other films it is military authority that is called into question and scrutinised. In

Platoon, for example, the inexperienced Lieutenant Wolfe is frequently undermined, ignored and ridiculed by those under him. In *Good Morning Vietnam* (1987) Lieutenant Hauk is presented as inept, incompetent and rigidly steadfast in his adherence to military protocol and discipline.

Fraternity

In Vietnam films, as Powers *et al.* (1996) note:

> The sense of community or fraternity, once a prominent feature of the military movie, barely survives, or if it does, becomes a source of sadism and evil. No better example can be found in our sample of the complete breakdown of loyalty and trust among soldiers than Barnes' murder of Elias in *Platoon* (pp. 95-6).

Whilst many World War Two films involved narratives in which the 'band of brothers' breaks down or comes into conflict with one another, another significant trope was the way such differences and tensions could then be put aside whilst all of the men come together to accomplish their task. Indeed as Dittmar and Michaud (1990) note, frequently the whole purpose of dissension within the group was precisely to show that "only by working together could Americans hope to defeat their common enemies" (p. 5).

In Vietnam, however, such coming together seems impossible. Divisions between individuals and groups are too great and deep to be reconciled. Numerous films pursue these themes to extreme levels. For example, in *Platoon*, it is indexed through Barnes' attempted murder of Elias, for which Taylor then murders Barnes. In *Casualties of War*, Ericsson's decision to 'frag' on his platoon after they kidnap, rape and kill a young Vietnamese girl results in numerous attempts made on his life by members of his unit.

Victory

The issue of victory is one of the most ambiguous within Vietnam films. The war itself

never officially ended. There was no clear declaration of victory or defeat. Few of the films within this genre consider the ending of the war. Most often, the films begin and end in the midst of the conflict. As such, many of these films 'end' instead with some reflection on the cost of the war, the failures, and the losses. In many ways:

> [T]his is a discourse in which there is nothing to explain but American survival. Getting 'Back to the World' is everything it is about. It is an American tragedy and America and Americans are its only victims. The myth is expressed with numbing precision in Chris Taylor's narration at the end of Platoon (Storey 2003: 110-11).

> **Taylor**: *I think now, looking back, we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves. And the enemy ... was in us. The war is over for me now but it will always be there, the rest of my days, as I'm sure Elias will be, fighting with Barnes for what Rhah called possession of my soul. There are times since I've felt like the child born of those two fathers. But be that as it may, those of us who did make it have an obligation to build again, to teach to others what we know, and to try with what's left of our lives to find a goodness, and meaning, to this life.*

Having situated the corpus of films under consideration within the wider war film genre, we now move to undertake our detailed analysis of the films and the mediated memories we see emerging within their cinematic reimagining of World War Two[4].

The Good War, restoring national identity and erasing Vietnam

Perhaps the boldest act that these films attempt in their remembrance is to 're-imagine' US national identity, or at least a version of it (albeit one subject to challenge, resistance and struggle). Furthermore, and in doing so, we would argue, they seek to engage with, apologise for, erase, rewrite and/or eclipse the mediated memories of the Vietnam War.

The specific choice of World War Two as the narrative template on which to re-image/imagine America can be explained in a number of ways. First, in relation to the end of the Cold War, Moses (2002) suggests that the post-Cold War period has left filmmakers in something of an historical lull. The Cold War had provided a clear narrative template for structuring war films. However, the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact and the disassembling of the Eastern bloc created a

vacuum in the arsenal of the action and war film producer. Efforts not to 'celebrate' the victory over the Soviet Union, recognising the political and commercial dangers in doing so, made it difficult to continue demonising the East in order to celebrate the West.

Second, since the end of World War Two no conflict has inspired the nation to rally together in anything like the same way. Perhaps the most significant conflict during the 1990s (for the US) was the first Gulf War and whilst this served as a platform on which President Bush Sr. could proclaim an end to the 'Vietnam Syndrome' the quick defeat and the carefully managed mediation of the war left few memorable images except for the images themselves. The Gulf War did not warrant excessive celebration, particularly when considering that Saddam Hussein was left in power at the end of the conflict and the disastrous consequences of Bush's calling to arms of the Iraqi Shiites and then their subsequent abandonment and slaughter. This was a celebration of technology and of television war. Equally, the conflict in the former Yugoslavia has not received a great deal of filmic attention, perhaps because of the ambiguity of the role of the UN in this conflict and for the lack of clear political alliances and notions of 'victory'. Seemingly then, since the end of the Cold War no conflict has stood up to the demands of capturing the sustained attention and interest of the film industry. In order to celebrate and restore a sense of nationhood and military prowess, Hollywood has turned to the good war, the war with clear distinctions between goodies and baddies, between evil dictators and world saviours, to a victory that was clear and without (at least in its re-presentation) moral ambiguity. By focusing attention on the 'good war', it is possible to encourage a sense of national pride and patriotic zeal in a nation still shrouded under the veil of Vietnam.[5] A detailed discussion of *Saving Private Ryan* will help illuminate this position.

Notwithstanding specific scenes, *Saving Private Ryan* exudes a patriotic fervour and basks in American symbolism. From the opening and closing shots which exhibit a close-up of the stars and stripes, to the depiction of the home front (see below), to the general nobility and courage of the average American soldier, *Saving Private Ryan* is a film to be proud of for American audiences because it shows 'ordinary' Americans doing *extra*ordinary things in the most difficult of circumstances. There is little negative imagery that cannot be justified or excused. Even the images of US soldiers shooting surrendering Germans is portrayed in a way that suggests they are experiencing more a kind of temporary war shock or trauma (of the kind that now functions to serve legal claims for compensation) than any homicidal tendency. This scene also features as an isolated incident, suggesting that it was not a common practice amongst American soldiers, but resulted from an explosion of emotion at having experienced the madness and brutality of the beach landings that day. Such narrative ploys can be read as a reaction against the almost gleeful massacre of enemy forces and civilians depicted in many Vietnam films.

There is also an expansive dedication to American sources within the film, from Abraham Lincoln, to Emerson, and, as Auster (2002) notes:

> … Spielberg and screenwriter Robert Rodat go a step further, invoking the worldwide consciousness of American popular culture even among denizens of the master race. Thus, a terrified German soldier captured by the squad tries to curry favour by hysterically parading his knowledge of Betty Boo, Betty Grable ("Nice gams"), and, in a last desperate attempt to save his life, finally blurts out the ultimate in American obscenities, "Fuck Hitler!" (Last accessed on 07/08/2006).

Beyond this, there are certain scenes that stand out particularly and are worth exploring for the narrative and cinematographic tactics they employ in re-imagining America. The first we wish to consider is what shall be referred to as the 'Bixby Letter' scene.

This scene, which follows the Omaha beach landings, sets the context for the film and reveals the reason why there is a need to save a certain Private Ryan. The scene opens in a US war office, full of female typists, (one of the few appearances of women in the film) preparing telegrams that tell of fallen soldiers. The room is awash with a radiant sunlight that penetrates the room and fills it with a soft glow; a warming contrast against the bitter cold and greyness of the beach landings. The mournful score is replaced with a more uplifting string arrangement. As the anonymous voiceovers read out the telegrams of the dead, merging and over-lapping to signify the sheer numerical wealth, one typist notices a correlation between names and then discovers that three brothers by the name of Ryan have all been killed in the space of one week, and that the mother of these three will receive all of the telegrams together.

To reinforce what we can only imagine will be the response of Mrs. Ryan upon receiving this most unwanted of mail, Spielberg cuts to a scene of the telegrams arriving, with Mrs Ryan otherwise going about her ordinary, everyday chores. No dialogue is heard but we feel her pain as she crumbles to the floor in response to the news.

What is interesting here is less the narrative, but the composition of the scene, an opportunity for Spielberg to gorge himself on an excess of American imagery and symbolism. The choice of setting - a single farmhouse surrounded by cornfields, bathed in a golden autumn light, somewhere in the mid West - exudes a nostalgic vision of America. Mrs Ryan herself is a kindly, gentle-looking woman, with rosy cheeks, well-groomed hair, wearing a summer dress; a motherly figure if ever there was one. As one film reviewer noted, this scene "symbolises all that is 'true' and good about America –

it is earthly, honest, hard-working and God-fearing, the heartland of the USA" (Anon. cited in Plato's Cave, last accessed on 08/06/2006). This clichéd imagery sets forth a clear context in which to view Spielberg's vision of the past. It is a pastiche; it is somehow false, too good, and too real to be true. As Jameson (1998) notes:

> In such films the very style of a period is the content and they substitute a fashion-plate of the age in question for its events, thus producing a kind of generational periodization of a stereotypical kind which is not without its impact on their capacity to function as narratives (p. 129).

This type of periodisation is a strong feature across this genre of films. In *Pearl Harbor* it manifests itself in the play on the youth and innocence of 1940s USA; 'kids' date and share a milkshake, they go to dance halls and make-out in the back of cars. There exists a moral purity and innocence that comes to typify this generation. The horror and brutality of war becomes an epiphenomenon against which to situate the idealisation of non-war America at the time. Absent from such scenes are any negative aspects of US society at the time, such as the general racial inequality and segregation that was institutionally widespread.[6]

Back to the story. Concerned at the suffering caused to Mrs Ryan, a case is brought before General George C. Marshall, the US Army Chief of Staff, to bring home the fourth and final Ryan brother who is currently somewhere in Normandy, behind enemy lines. During a heated debate between a group of senior military officials on the practical and moralistic value of attempting such a rescue mission, Marshall draws their attention to a letter-of-condolence written to a Mrs Bixby, who suffered a similar loss when all five of her sons died on the field of battle. As Marshall reads the letter, one he can recite from memory, it is revealed that the war in question is the American Civil War, and the letter written by none other than Abraham Lincoln.

This scene is fundamental to the patriotic power of this film and of its attempts to

work into a memory of an essentialist, perpetual American national identity. Invoking one of the key events in the making of the American nation, and one of its greatest men of history, a figure charged with American symbolism: "takes the film out of the realm of mere realism and bathes it in the more luminous power of a sublime nationalism that has come to be associated with Lincoln" (Auster 2002, last accessed on 07/08/2006).

The room goes quiet; no more debate is necessary. The mission has to go ahead. Even the most ardent dissenter gives a stoic nod of acceptance; after all, who can argue with Abe? Not only does this scene add historical weight to the mission, and to the film, but as Canby (1998) notes:

> Here we have evidence that the world's most powerful country has a heart. The nation being run not by scallywags and rascals, … but by towering father figures, men firm of purpose, measured in their conduct, who grieve as we grieve (Last accessed on 15/07/2006). [7]

Significantly, the scene also works to help revise one of the most publicised and damaging memories of the Vietnam War, and a significant trope within its critical representation; that of leaving men behind. By placing such importance on a single life the film creates a memory of the value placed by the US Army, and presumably therefore the Administration, on the lives of its soldiers. They are not just names or bodies or numbers but, damn it, they're our boys and if we can, as Marshall says, "*we'll get [them] the hell out of there*."

Continuing this theme, the mission to save Private Ryan also sets up one of the key tensions played out in the film, namely are eight lives (the number of men in the platoon sent out to find Ryan) worth one: Ryan's? Whilst Spielberg never directly answers this question, it seems to us that it is implicitly answered in the positive, for by the film's conclusion, Sgt. Horvath (the rescue-platoon's Sergeant) claims: "*Someday we might look back and decide that saving Private Ryan was the one decent thing we*

were able to pull out of this whole God-awful, shitty mess." Even Private Reiben, the most vocal dissenter in the platoon, finally but silently acknowledges and accepts Ryan and, implicitly, their mission.

What seems to be happening here is that Spielberg is injecting the film with a memory that establishes these men, these symbols of the greatest generation,[8] as true, good, men. Whenever dissent or difficulty arises, it is always resolved through some narrative technique that reminds us how good these men truly are - an important move when read against the shadow of Vietnam (much more will be said on this theme later in the paper).

To sum up this memory, what we have suggested here is that these films, of which *Saving Private Ryan* is an excellent example, imagine World War Two as the good war, a war fought with clear moral imperatives and fought by men with courage and honour. Yet, the films do more than simply commemorate this war. They seek to celebrate war and the military by employing a narrative that seeks to erase the memory and the representation of Vietnam as the dominant template of war in American popular culture[9]. In erasing Vietnam, these films also allow narrative space for notions of victory to re-emerge and it is to this concern that discussion now moves. The second memory we explore is one of US triumphalism and victory in World War Two. It is here that we tackle the ways in which these films directly attempt to engage with, and rewrite, historical events and work toward a new simulation of World War Two.

American triumphalism and effacement of history

> Today, in the post-Cold War world, Hollywood seems to have taken on a new role framing
> America's history. It is now not only simply constructing patriotic contexts for its military past or
> rescuing victory from defeat, it is laying claim to other nation's victories … we are witnessing the

emergence of a distinctly new Hollywood war film genre (West 2000, last accessed on 05/09/2007).

One of the most politically charged debates surrounding this new genre of war films is their controversial treatment of history. Baudrillard (1994) argues that we live in a time of historical redundancy; a time in which simulation has replaced history. We have not reached the end of history (Fukuyama 1992), he argues, more a reversal of it, as if watching a video in rewind from end to start: We "summon all past events to appear before us, to reinvestigate it all as though we are conducting a trial" (Baudrillard 1994: 11). Whilst the interrogation of the past has always been a common practice it is Baudrillard's suggestion that "a mania for such trials" (*Ibid.*) has taken hold in recent years.

Baudrillard warns that what we are attempting, through the processes and practices of commemoration and remembrance is not just an investigation of the past, of history, but also an effort to 'correct' it. In sum, these films and commemorations are seeking to produce a new history of the events of World War Two and in doing so, they seek to clear away the untidy bits, tie up the loose ends, a process which, as Baudrillard puts it:

> [consists of] … reviewing everything, rewriting everything, restoring everything, face-lifting everything, to produce, as it seems, in a burst of paranoia a perfect set of accounts at the end of the century, a universally positive balance sheet … and, if possible, the obliteration of all 'negative' events from our memory (*Ibid.* p. 12).

We have already noted certain ways in which these films attempt to erase, or put into shadow, certain 'negative' memories, such as racial segregation during World War Two, however, these films go much further than this. In this section we look primarily at the way these films produce a narrative of World War Two that is essentially reducible to a (virtually) solely American victory.[10]

In this respect, part of the discursive power of *Saving Private Ryan,* as a piece of

knowledge, comes from the subtle way in which it attempts its revision of World War

Two under a cloak of patriotic fervour and stunning special effects. For instance, much

of the critical acclaim for the film comes from its depiction of the D-Day landings: the

horror, the randomness, the senselessness, and the brutality of war depicted more

realistically then ever before. However, this scene also carries with it the subtext that

the D-Day landings were a US-only affair. Bremmer (1998) explains the details of the

actual operation:

> The history is clear: Britain and her empire contributed the bulk of the naval and air force units in
> Operation Overlord;[11] Britain and the US each provided two reinforced divisions for the first
> waves in, with one coming from Canada. It is true that over half of the Allied casualties suffered
> on D-Day landed at Omaha; the bulk of the rest, several thousand in number, landed and bled on
> the Anglo-Canadian beaches. The success of Overlord derived from co-operation between the
> Allies; crucial parts were played by these nations, plus supporting Polish, French and Allied units
> (p. 50).

Not only does *Saving Private Ryan* fail to acknowledge the role of the Allies in

the actual landings, the film goes further than this and fails to exhibit any notion of the

role of the Allied forces in the whole of Operation Overlord. There is only one reference

to the British, and that is in the derogatory sense in which Captain Miller describes the

British military commander, General Montgomery, one of the key architects of the

invasion plan, as "*overrated*". The French are represented only in the form of a helpless

family who need to be saved from German sniper fire by Miller's platoon. The film

positions the whole Normandy invasion as a strictly US versus Germany affair. These

omissions and revisions sit somewhat awkwardly in a film that went to great lengths to

ensure 'authenticity':

> He [Spielberg] sent people to scour all available material, copying the archive images and sources.
> He hired the highly respected Steven Ambrose as historical advisor and went to extreme lengths to
> equip his men with the correct uniforms, webbing and weapons. The lead actors spent a week in
> boot camp, being abused by a former US Marine officer and veteran of the Vietnam War. They
> ate, slept, exercised and got wet in authentic uniforms, eating the appropriate rations; even being
> 'shot' at (*Ibid.*).

Whilst *Saving Private Ryan* attempts to exclude other nations from participating

in the war, *U-571* (2000), another film in this genre, actually seeks to rewrite events in which the US had no original involvement. Here, director Jonathan Mostow completely revises history in portraying the capture of the German Enigma code machine, not by the British Navy as contemporary accounts suggest actually happened, but by US submariners. Mostow's continual defence for this is that he sought to dramatise events that "could" have happened. However, listening to the director's commentary on the DVD version of the film, this argument wears a little thin. Especially as his preferred topic in his narration is his attempts for authenticity and credibility in the detail of the film. Deeply concerned to ensure that he depicted life on a submarine realistically and that all operations on the submarine are carried out "as they actually were" he is less concerned to ensure any sense of historical accuracy over the whole mission itself. The British are only offered a single line of recognition in the film's credits.[12]

U-571 also seeks to reinforce a sense of triumphalism in the narrative by clearly sign-posting the good guys and the bad guys. It is not sufficient that the Americans are the heroes who daringly capture the code machine and escape with a captured submarine after having lost most of their own crew and ship. This imagery is made more explicit by Mostow's decision to show the Germans as the brutal and aggressive 'other', captured best in his portrayal of a German submarine Captain who kills and injures numerous members of the American crew in a bid to thwart their mission, despite their 'noble' decision to take him prisoner rather than dispose of him.

What else would you expect, Mostow informs us, "*… the Nazi submariners were the most pro-Nazi Germans there were. All volunteers who thought they were fighting directly for Hitler.*" Against this, Mostow situates the "*can-do American spirit. Against the odds. It's what our country's built on and we pride ourselves on it. It's what you get*

when you see U-571; that rousing US patriotic feeling." Through simple and clichéd techniques *U-571* becomes little more than "*an audience pleaser for Americans*" (Nesbit 2002, last accessed on 06/07/2006).

Interestingly though, this treatment of the enemy in *U-571* sits awkwardly in a corpus of films that, for the most part, in a revision of one of the key thematic tropes of the Vietnam film, go to great length not to demonise the 'Other'.[13] *Saving Private Ryan* is careful to portray the Germans as ordinary soldiers, employing just one individual SS soldier as signifier of the evil element of the Third Reich. In *Pearl Harbor*, great lengths are taken to present the Japanese in a positive light.[14] The film positions the Japanese as having no other option but to attack Pearl Harbor and in doing so "virtually absolves Japan of any wrongdoing" (Null 2001, last accessed on 06/07/2006).

Considering this (market-driven) restraint, *Pearl Harbor* then has the difficulty of representing one of America's greatest defeats during World War Two without employing the easy trope of demonising the enemy. In order to circumvent this obstacle, and instil a sense of triumphalism, director Michael Bay tags on an extra half hour to the film depicting the Doolittle Raids against Japan. The message: "No action against the home of the free can go unpunished, even if it means the retaliation – as it does in *Pearl Harbor* – seems like pretty damp squibs compared with the full-metal showstopper that prompted it" (Pevere 2001, last accessed on 06/07/2006).

So why the Doolittle Raid? Well, unless we include America's ultimate retaliation for Pearl Harbor, the dropping of two atomic bombs over Japan (it seems Bay, and the profit motive, were not prepared to invoke this military act) then Doolittle is one of only a few potentially triumphant options to end the film. Conveniently, this particular

episode is also much more in keeping with the narrative structure of the "against the odds, can do spirit" that pervades this genre in general. The choice also allows for the introduction of another of America's heroes of World War Two, Jimmy Doolittle (see below).

One theory put forward to explain this situation, in which Hollywood seeks to elevate the US in triumphant superiority over its allies, is offered by West (2000) who suggests that during the Cold War there was a clear distinction, a divide between East and West, "us" and "them." That divide has now collapsed (or, at least, been reconfigured) and political alliances are being re-evaluated and reassessed and the space has opened up for what West suggests is a situation in which both the victors and the losers are having to reframe their notion of national identity. In this space we find: "Amongst the victorious nations [a] level of competitiveness in claiming their role within the successful alliance" (West 2000, last accessed on 05/09/2007). With America's dominance of the visual forms of popular culture, notably cinema, it seems to be winning this political and cultural war. Such sentiments have been felt elsewhere:

> Part of the explanation for Hollywood's especially negative and negligent treatment of the English in the last few years might lie in the end of the Cold War. Whereas Hollywood war films used to concentrate on waste and psychosis in Vietnam, now filmmakers are more confident about depicting Americans winning (or borrowing) military honour. American audiences have always been much keener to see films about Americans than about foreigners (Anon., The Economist 15/07/2000: 54)

A key feature in this construction of victory is the representation of those who fought in the war. For the final mediated memory we suggest that this genre produces a new (old) imagery of the soldier hero; one that suggests that these men were the 'greatest' generation.

The Greatest Generation[15] and the notion of sacrifice

> In a world in which moral certainties and principled action have given way to murkiness of national purpose, moral expedience in foreign policy, and personal self-indulgence, *Saving Private Ryan* is both homage to those sacrificed and an expression of longing for a time when moral distinctions were far less problematic (Ehrenhaus 2001: 323).

In one of the final scenes in *Saving Private Ryan*, Captain Miller, with his dying breath, looks to Private Ryan and says, *"Earn this*." This simple phrase has become a euphemism for this whole store of filmic history and is one of the key messages being championed by a celebration of the World War Two generation. Miller's speech enables the greatest generation to become, in effect, the embodiment of the morality, ideals and behaviours that have set the standard for future generations to be measured by.

These words take on further political significance when considering the current era in which we live. As Canby (1998) notes: "How war movies are accepted by the public reflects the times in which they're released." (Last accessed on 15/07/2006). One way of reading this turn to memory is as a reflection on the lack of history in the present time. It is for this reason, Baudrillard argues, that our history now only appears on the cinema screens: "the historical stake chased from our lives by this sort of immense neutralization, which is dubbed peaceful coexistence on a global level – this history exorcised by a slowly or brutally congealing society celebrates its resurrection in force on the screen" (1981: 43).

For Baudrillard, previous generations, especially *the* greatest*,* lived "in the march of history" (*Ibid.*) and whilst we may take issue with the version of history played out on the cinema screen, we also welcome the representations, or in Baudrillard's terminology, "simulations", of a time when "at least there was history" (*Ibid.* p. 44). Even if the greatest generation does "only exist in our imagination" (Hasain 2001: 352), we cannot deny the events through which they endured, and the sacrifices they made.

In order to celebrate the greatest generation, Spielberg constructs a military platoon that is: "the very essence of American civilization and its values" (Auster 2002, last accessed on 07/08/2006). Described by Doherty (1998) as:

> A multiethnic sampling of homo americanus, the combat squad sent to extricate Private Ryan fits the Warner Bros. mould: the idealized everyman leader Captain Miller (Hanks); the grizzled Sgt. Horvath (Tom Sizemore); the cynical tough guy Pvt. Reiben (Edward Burns); the emotional Eyetal-ian Caparzo (Vin Disel); the edgy Jewish guy Mellish (Adam Goldberg); the compassionate medic (Giovanni Ribisi); the Johnny Reb marksman (Barry Pepper); and the milquetoast clerk pressed into infantryman's boots, Corporal Upham (Jeremy Davis). Bearing the symbolic weight of the moral and statistical stakes, the elusive Ryan (Matt Damon) is an Iowa farm boy issued from the pages of Guadalcanal Diary (p. 70).

Not only is the platoon a melting pot of American masculinities and identities, excluding any black characters of course, it is also infused with purpose and strong religious connotation: Private Jackson, the platoon's sharpshooter, recites a prayer before every shot. Furthermore, their sacrificial mission imbues them with a kind of spiritual righteousness:

> [Spielberg] depicts U.S. troops (and only U.S. troops) as – almost literally - "God's warriors." Phrases like "altar of freedom" and "God's on our side" are bandied about with regularity … At one point, Captain Miller even refers to a squadron of P-51s as the "angels on our shoulders." … In Spielberg's vision, U.S. troops are on a holy crusade that will end only when the evil despot, Adolf Hitler, has been unseated (Hodgkins 2002, last accessed on 05/06/2005).

In elevating this generation to greatness Spielberg portrays unlikely heroes: a schoolteacher, a farm boy from Iowa. Not men looking for fame or fortune but the classic (uncommon) common men who will rally together, led by strong yet compassionate leaders, and with a history of great men and God on their side, they will be victorious. This is the picture Spielberg paints. Its narrative function? Perhaps to ignite those passions, those images, for younger generations?

> Because the Spielberg film attempts to preserve the memory of patriotic sacrifice more than it desires to explore the causes of the trauma and violence, however, it is more about restoring a romantic version of common-man heroism in an age of moral ambivalence than about ending the problem of devastating wars (Bodnar 2001:817).

In this sense, Captain Miller becomes the idealised form of who we would like

these men to be. He is a capable leader of men, compassionate and sympathetic. However, these are not qualities born out of a lifetime of military service. He is no Rambo-esque vet who has only ever known war. He is a schoolteacher, he has a wife, and coaches' kids' baseball. The importance of Miller's background is fundamental to the film. He is ordinary, a *typical* American citizen who can step up when the time comes.

To further reinforce his *normalness* he exhibits both the physical and psychological scars of war as seen through the uncontrollable tremors he suffers in his right hand, or when he breaks down in tears following a daring raid on a German radar position in which one of his platoon is killed. However, he hides the effects of this trauma from his men. He is their leader and must appear strong.

The choice of Tom Hanks is also interesting for the role of Captain Miller. In many ways Hanks *is* Miller. He embodies the patriotic, moral, righteous man; something of the uncommon common man that he portrays in *Saving Private Ryan*. Hanks becomes Miller; Miller, Hanks. They become intertwined. As the audience, we are aware of and familiar with Hanks' work and we read him into the character; that could have been Tom that did those things and if war ever comes again Hanks will probably be a Miller. He is a simulation of himself.

In contrast to Miller's unassuming but unswerving devotion to duty, his loyalty to his men, his pragmatic and realistic attitude to war, Spielberg introduces the character of Corporal Upham; a translator enlisted into Miller's platoon. Upham has yet to see 'action' and has never fired a rifle since basic training. He is clumsy and incompetent at soldiering. In simple terms Upham is naïve, inexperienced, a 'rookie'. He has yet to

prove himself in combat and so is not yet fully accepted by the rest of the platoon.

His view of war is romanticised and idealistic, for Upham: "War is the testing ground of righteousness, revealing the true moral order of the world; it is the context in which men bond and can express their essential masculinity" (Ehrenhaus 2001: 333). However, this romanticising and fantasising is soon put to the test when he is confronted with the horror of war. It is Upham who persuades Miller that they cannot execute the captured German prisoner at the radar site; an act highly significant for the rest of the film, and for Upham's personal journey.

This German soldier, released at Upham's protest, returns to take part in the final fight at the bridge. He appears in two instances. First it is he who Mellish fights in a hand-to-hand struggle whilst Upham cowers outside the room, frozen in terror. He has a rifle and could easily assist his comrade. The camera switches between the close-up and desperate struggle between Mellish and the German soldier, and of Upham, pitifully cowering in fear outside. The struggle finally comes to an end as the German soldier pierces Mellish's chest with a bayonet. A horrific scene, uncomfortable to watch, as two men, who do not even know each other, are locked in a deadly battle from which only one of them can emerge alive.

The German soldier leaves the room, dusts himself off and idly walks past Upham, without fear or hesitation.[16] Upham's moral righteousness at one point (at the radar position) is replaced now by his cowardice and inaction. Yet this is not the last death that Upham could have prevented. As the final fight draws to an end, Upham finds himself separated from his unit and hidden amongst the German line. He has another opportunity to kill the offending German soldier, but again he freezes and this

time the German soldier commits the ultimate atrocity, he fatally wounds Miller. Two deaths now for Upham to bear; one of them our hero, our embodiment of the greatest generation.

Upham's inaction can be read in a number of ways. In certain scenes he is seemingly positioned as a signifier of those who objected to (the) war. In other scenes, of those who acted in cowardice (however that might be defined in such situations). Or perhaps he is a reflection of how future generations might act.[17] Spielberg himself suggested that he sees himself most in Upham. Perhaps we all imagine ourselves as Miller but are more likely Upham.

Something significant then happens in the film. As the fight draws to a close, when US reinforcements arrive and turn the tide of the battle (and 'victory' is achieved) and the overrun German troops are raising their hands in surrender, Upham emerges from his hiding hole and points his gun at the German captives, whose number include the offending SS soldier. On recognising Upham, he calls his name, thankful it is him and not another who might do him harm. At this point Upham shoots the SS soldier before ushering the others away. Upham is now calm, determined, without remorse. What does this scene mean? Has Upham finally become a 'man', because he has shot somebody? Is he simply punishing the SS soldier, and himself, for his own inaction? Is the message that cowardice and 'difference' is wrong and needs to be punished – Upham's punishment being the death of a friend, and his mentor?

The film raises many such questions in its representation of the World War Two soldier, none of which are easily answerable. However, such complexities are few and far between in this genre of films as a whole, most relying instead on a more overt,

nostalgic construction of its (masculine) heroes. In *Pearl Harbor* it is Colonel Jimmy Doolittle who serves as the symbol of the greatest generation; his stoic, unflinching devotion to duty and his men, ever present. On the eve of their attack on Japan he addresses his men:

> **Doolittle**: *My friends in the War Department don't want me to lead this raid. They say I'm too valuable. They don't want me up there in the air flying with the men I've chosen, that I've chewed out, cursed out, pushed to the limit, and come to respect. They want me to stand on the flight deck and wave you off. Well, I don't see it that way – so I'm going with you.*

In *Hart's War* it is the figure of Colonel McNamara who epitomises the greatest generation. The senior ranking (captive) American officer being held in a German POW camp, McNamara is a fourth generation military man; a West Point graduate. Throughout the film he displays concern and compassion for his men and in the film's final twist shows that even when interned in a prison camp he can still 'fight the good war'. McNamara has been overseeing an escape plot but the objective is not freedom but the near-by factory which, whilst posing as a shoe factory is in fact a munitions depot. Once the men have 'escaped' and blown up the depot McNamara returns to the prison to accept responsibility for the act, knowing full well it will mean his execution. However, he does this willingly in order to save the lives of other POWs who may be punished for the action. He commits the ultimate sacrifice for his men and for the war. In Hart's voice-over that concludes the film he notes that, through McNamara, he has come to understand: "*honour, courage, duty, sacrifice.*"

Beyond the variable constructions of masculine performance, a common theme reflected across these films is the sense of sacrifice that these men (*sic*) come to signify. Rightly so, one might say, millions of men (and many thousands of women) did sacrifice their lives, from a great many countries and for a great many different beliefs and causes. In these films, however, beyond the recognition of this fact, the notion of sacrifice can also be read as a message to younger generations, for in Miller telling

Ryan, the young fresh-faced future of America, to earn this, he is talking to us all.

This message is reinforced in the final moments of *Saving Private Ryan* in which we return to the old man standing in the war cemetery,[18] and in a neat twist he turns out not to be Miller as perhaps we originally thought, but Ryan, standing over Miller's grave.[19] Ryan turns to his wife, breaks down, and asks if he's been a good man; if he's earned their sacrifice. This scene is loaded with a sentimentality and powerful guilt-laden rhetoric that seems to be designed to make each member of the audience question whether *they* have earned this. Indeed, few of the newspapers commemorating the 60th anniversary of the D-Day landings in 2004 were complete without at least one article asking the question: 'Could we have done what they did?' The answer seems to be a resounding no. For Peter Hitchens, writing in the *Mail on Sunday:* "you only have to ask the question to know the answer" (06/06/2004).

Conclusion

Building on the work begun by Nguyen and Belk in the pages of this journal, this paper has sought to contribute to discussions that turn around visual consumption and collective memory.

From a starting point that conceives of film as a significant force in the production and dissemination of collective memory, we have argued that out of Hollywood there has emerged a new genre of World War Two films. These films, together with a wealth of similar texts that flood our TV screens, bookshops and video stores, and with the political rhetoric and scale of the 60th anniversary of the D-Day commemorations, are contributing to what might be conceived of as a new discursive 'regime of memory' about the war and those that fought and lived through it. Especially significant is the

way this commemoration is as much about reflecting on the present as it is about remembering the past.

We have considered three explicit memories that contribute to this project. First, it has been argued that these films seek to reaffirm a particular conception of US national identity and military patriotism in the post-Cold War era, and that they seek to import World War Two as the key meta-narrative of America's relationship to war and in the process 'correct' and help 'erase' Vietnam as a negative discourse. Second, these films also attempt to rewrite the history of World War Two by elevating and illuminating the role of the US at the expense of the Allies, further serving to reaffirm America's position of political and military dominance in the current age. Third, these films, as part of a wider project, seek to celebrate the generation that fought World War Two, a generation whose youngest members must now be in their twilight years, to a position of nostalgic and sentimental greatness. Furthermore, the example they set, of collective spirit and notions of duty and service, also serves as a warning in the current period of moral ambivalence. A period in which: "The psychodrama of congestion, saturation, super-abundance, neurosis and the breaking of blood vessels which haunts us - the drama of the excess of means over ends – calls more urgently for attention than that of penury, lack and poverty" (Baudrillard 1994: 71).

It is important that the memories produced by these texts be reflected upon critically. In their remembrance, in their celebration, they also obscure, marginalise, and produce new truths: Truths that not only structure a particular conception of history, but may also diminish the achievements of the past, as Ward (2001) notes:

> The visual derivativeness casts the bankruptcy of Hollywood's remembrance of World War II into clear relief: each time the war's pictures are represented in a different order they are further diluted … in the meantime, the stories of those who actually served move that much further into obscurity (Last accessed on 06/07/2006).

Notes

1 Films in this genre include: *Saving Private Ryan* (1998); *U-571* (2000); *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (2001); *Charlotte* Gray (2001); *Enemy at the Gates* (2001); *Enigma* (2001); *Pearl Harbor* (2001); *The War Bride* (2001); *To End All Wars* (2001); *Hart's* War (2002); *The Pianist* (2002); *Windtalkers* (2002); *Saints and Soldiers* (2003); *The Great Raid* (2005); *Flags of* Our *Fathers* (2006).

2 Especially World War Two which had not received a great deal of attention by Hollywood since the end of the Vietnam War.

3 A research group established within the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Culture Studies in the 1970s.

4 Whilst recognising the limitations of such a brief review our purpose here has merely been to set up the films that are the focus of this paper. For a more extensive review of the Vietnam genre the reader is directed to the work of Easthope (1988), Walsh and Louvre (1988), Jeffords (1989), Desser (1991), and Storey (2003).

5 As West (2000:61-62) notes, the Vietnam War challenged America's very sense of nationhood. Its identity "since independence [has] been closely reliant on a sense of superiority demonstrated in successive military victories" (Last accessed 05/09/2007).

6 Something Spielberg conveniently side-steps by simply having no black characters in the film at all. Elsewhere in this genre of films, however, such issues are addressed: In Hart's War the experience of black service men in the US military during World War Two are explored; *Windtalkers* does something similar but in the context of the Navajo code talkers.

7 An important scene when juxtaposed with the representations of Vietnam during the 1980s, which frequently lay the blame for defeat squarely at the door of the bureaucracy of the military and political hierarchy.

8 A term employed by Tom Brokaw to describe the generation that fought World War Two.

9 Recognising the multiplicity of readings of any given text, Moses (2002, last accessed on 15/07/2006) offers an alternative reading of Saving Private Ryan that is worth considering briefly. For Moses, the project of Saving Private Ryan is one far removed from erasing Vietnam but actually one that reinforces the dominant narratives in its reconstruction on film. Moses highlights the numerous scenes in Saving Private Ryan which turn around the decision of whether or not to shoot unarmed German prisoners (specifically, as discussed with regard to the opening scenes but also during the radar assault and in the final scenes in which Upham shoots the SS soldier, discussed below). This narrative structuring depicts, he argues, "Spielberg's greatest generation, in spite of its bravery and patriotism … in a manner more closely resembling that of American troops at My Lai than that of John Wayne in World War II epics of an earlier age." Moses further suggests that the key element of the radar site scene is not the way that order is finally restored but the dissent and near mutiny of Miller's troops (reminiscent of many a Vietnam film). The decision to release the SS soldier at this point, only to have him return later in the film to kill both Mellish and Miller, Moses suggests, can be read as a moral justification for the shooting of prisoners, in the context of war.

Upham's final resolution to shoot the SS soldier then can be read as a necessary and acceptable action.

This view is also supported by Hammond (2002). He argues that the depiction of the soldier in films such as *Saving Private Ryan* is structured in such a way as to offer an "equivalence" between the World War Two and Vietnam genres. He goes on to argue that his reading of the middle section of the film, the hunt for Private Ryan, whilst indeed resembling the: "B-movie plot in its deployment of all of the conventions of the 1950s combat film" (p. 71) also resonates with the Vietnam genre: the break-up of the band of brothers at the radar site; the continual resistance the men show to a mission they don't understand. These, Hammond argues, are classic tropes of the Vietnam film. He goes on to cite Spielberg who claims that: "Without Vietnam I never could have made *Ryan* as honestly as I did because Vietnam sort of showed everybody, and sort of prepared audiences to accept war for what it was" (*ibid*).

10 Although, it is important to note that not all films in the genre are American-centred: Charlotte Gray (2001); Enigma (2001); The War Bride (2001) and To End All Wars (2001), for example, all recount stories of British exploits in World War Two. However, in thinking through the discursive effects of this genre, the big-budget Hollywood films that depict America's involvement in the war have certainly been the most popular and widely seen (based on box office receipts).

11 The codename used for the Normandy invasion.

12 The following year, Michael Apted's Enigma would be released. This film tells a 'British' version of events surrounding the Enigma code machine, albeit one equally tainted by historical revisionism. The historical figure Alan Turing, one of the real Enigma code-breakers, is replaced in the film by the fictional character of Tom Jericho: Turing was a homosexual who later committed suicide. Replacing this figure with the fictional Jericho enables the story of the code-breakers to be told in the context of a (heterosexual) love-story.

13 An interesting representation of this theme occurs in To End All Wars, a film that tells the story of British POWs in a Japanese prison camp. Whilst the film recounts the brutality of the Japanese guards, it does so in a way that seeks to 'justify' their actions, most forcefully through the idea that this is simply 'Japanese culture': That it is a product of their warrior history, as codified in Bushido. The film also moves to suggest that all 'men' are capable of such actions. At the film's end, when the prisoners are liberated, we see some of them exacting their revenge on their captors by employing the same forms of brutality and violence that they have experienced themselves: "When I look into my enemies eyes I see a reflection of myself" muses Gordon, the film's key protagonist.

14 Although this may have more to do with the marketability of the film: Japan is the second largest importer of Hollywood film and a negative representation of its nation will not receive a warm welcome at the box office. In fact certain scenes and dialogue were reshot for the Japanese cut of the film.

15 A term coined by American journalist Tom Brokaw's (1998) for his book The Greatest Generation in which he (seemingly uncritically) elevates and celebrates the generation that was born in the aftermath of World War One, lived through the Great Depression, fought during World War Two and gave birth to the 'baby boomers'. This

generation, captured by Brokaw in photos, oral histories and testaments becomes the apotheosis of human moral righteousness, courage and decency, set against the individualism, lethargy and greed that is often used to describe younger generations.

16 Interestingly, at this point, we learn a little more about the identity of the German soldier. His insignia identifies him as a member of the SS, the faction of Hitler's army responsible for the conduct of the Holocaust. Is the slow torturous death of Mellish (a Jew), at the hands of an SS soldier, in some way an acknowledgment of that terrible persecution?

17 We see many 'copies' of Upham in Vietnam films.

18 The opening scene of the film is a present-day shot of an elderly man, and his family, visiting a war cemetery, in Normandy. As he stares at a specific gravestone, whose details we cannot yet read, the camera slowly zooms into the man's eyes and when they zoom out we have gone back in time, to the morning of the D-Day landings and the face we see is Captain Miller's, who we now presume to be the elderly man at the grave-site. So whatever else happens in this film, we know Tom will make it!

19 Miller's death in the film is an interesting one. First, it adds that shock component; we don't expect Tom Hanks to die. Second, the nature of his death is symbolic. Stunned by an explosion, Miller staggers to his feet and walks around aimlessly until shot by the SS soldier. His death serves no purpose, there is no point to it; he did not die to save a buddy, or to block an oncoming assault. His death is a waste and to have Miller die in this way, I would argue, is symbolic of the waste of all human life in this, and indeed all conflicts.

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