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## Violence for a Cause: How Mainstream American Cinema Thrives on its Spectacles of Violence

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Violence for a Cause:  
American Cinema and its Spectacles of Violence

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of the Arts  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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Dedication:

*This project is dedicated to all the friends, family, and teachers that challenged me to think critically, and helped me cherish the power and privilege of learning.*



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*To my Family, thank you for all the support, love, and advice that you provided me throughout my time at Bard and during this project. I would not be here without you all and I am so grateful for everything you've done for me.*

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*“Sanitized violence in movies has been accepted for years. What seems to upset everybody now is the showing of the consequences of violence.” - Stanley Kubrick*

## Introduction: Violence, Cinema, and the Franchise Era

In 2008, Marvel studios (in association with Paramount) released *Iron Man*, the first in a long line of superhero films to come in the Marvel cinematic universe. It was received with resounding applause by audiences and critics alike, specifically acclaimed for its action sequences and visual effects. This was reflected no doubt by its box office margins, well exceeding half a billion dollars. Now, over 22 films in the MCU have been released, each averaging a production budget of almost 200 million dollars, with worldwide returns averaging 980 million.<sup>1</sup> It has become the highest grossing franchise in cinema history, reaching over 22 billion dollars in revenue, with individual films also breaking financial records. Alongside the Marvel Universe, other major box-office franchises of the 21st century include: *Lord of the Rings*, *X-Men* (produced and distributed separately from Marvel), *Star Wars* (beginning with Episode I), and *Batman*, as well as a rival superhero cinema in the DC Universe; all of which are renowned action/adventure film franchises.

What is interesting about this grouping of films is the redundant narrative themes and characters that seem to run through all of them. Each one of these franchises is focused around heroic white male figures (with specific and few films deviating). Each film in these franchises is based around a humanitarian crises of events that threaten the protagonist, their social space (either homeland or community), and their way of life. Each hero is incredibly adept physically and mentally, and of a somewhat invincible character, and each narrative is steeped within the demonstration of these skills through multiple fighting sequences. All of these details come

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<sup>1</sup> “Marvel Cinematic Universe Franchise Box Office History.” *The Numbers*, [www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/Marvel-Cinematic-Universe#tab=summary](http://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/Marvel-Cinematic-Universe#tab=summary).

together in the major focus point of every one of these films and their franchise; the spectacle of violence.

Considering that violence has been a prominent piece of American cinema since its beginning, this is not exactly surprising, from boxing flicks to slapstick comedies, it has always existed in some form. However, what clearly defines the difference between much of the cinema of the 20th century, and that of the 21st, is both how this violence is represented and how it influences the relationship between the viewer and the plot. Over the last 20 years depictions of violence have not only become extensively graphic (that has been true for much longer), but from a mainstream standpoint, they have exceedingly taking a larger role in the narrative. This saturation of violence calls for massive budgets geared towards extensive special effects and animation, leading to film franchises such as those above taking the forefront of studio distribution and advertisement. As journalist and historian Robert Kolker states in his book *A Cinema of Loneliness*: “aesthetics, prosthetics, CGI, cinematic ritual, and cultural consent sutured violence into the very structure of cinema”.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, all of the franchises stated above construct their characters and their narratives around imminent scenes of physical conflict. As each franchise progresses, their subsequent films contain larger battles of longer duration, with more characters and higher stakes. Whether its the 40-minute war in *Return of the King*, or the 20-minute battle in *Avengers: Endgame*, the culmination of these franchise narratives depends on grandiose and extensive battles. This reliance is founded in the ability of violence to offer maximum satisfaction to the viewer, and therefore maximum profits for the studios. With narratives built around epic battles between good and evil, the stories themselves can remain quite base, recycled and minimally altered for

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness : Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman* (Cary: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2011), 47.

the next film. This seamlessly occurs because the major attraction of these films, acknowledged by both audiences and industry alike, are these exciting spectacles of violence. They offer an effortless movement towards closure, where the imminent battles have imminent endings, found in the victory for the “good guys”.

Overall, what arises from this plethora of films and their respective franchises is a very specific form of movie violence, that has become a standard for the mainstream action/adventure film. This convention revolves around intensely detailed and mostly unfiltered violence that is made exciting, and what Stephen Prince refers to in his book *Savage Cinema* as, “numbing”.<sup>3</sup> Their violence is primarily based on spectacle, and does not ground itself in reality nor in real moral dilemma, thus subjecting the viewer to intense forms of violence lacking any nuance in their display.

The element of spectacle is key to understanding how this stylized violence influences the viewer, and so should be understood on a common ground. In his book *The Society of The Spectacle*, Guy Debord examines the idea of spectacle (physical and theoretical) within the modern western world, highlighting how in its many forms and presentations, it establishes an objectified truth, that passively engages the viewer with its material; “The spectacle presents itself as a vast inaccessible reality that can never be questioned...[it] keeps people in a state of unconsciousness”.<sup>4</sup> Within American cinema, mainstream spectacles of violence seemingly emanate from this paradigm, where viewers are presented with exciting scenarios that affirm what is “obvious”, while simultaneously preventing a space for conversation; “It is the opposite of dialogue...within the spectacle activity is nullified”. Ultimately, these spectacles of violence

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Prince, *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies* (Univ. of Texas Press, 2010), 243.

<sup>4</sup> Debord, Guy, and Ken Knabb. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014, 4,9.

dictate the relationship between the viewer and the film, dominating the cinematic space and reaffirming simple beliefs, thus depriving the material of any ambiguity or reflection.

Of course, physical violence in American cinema is not confined to *The Avengers* and its competitors, as it takes on many forms, in many contexts. Major 21st century franchises such as *Saw* or *Final Destination* are steeped in violent spectacles, yet their narratives do not revolve around this theme of justified violence. Indeed, these franchises lean more towards the horror genre, where people are at the mercy of the violence, outside of its control and hoping to escape it. These films still boast violence to engage the audience, yet ultimately it lives as an exterior force influencing the characters. Action narratives, however, such as those stated above, place violence directly within their character studies. The events of the films ask for action, where something needs to be done that can only be achieved through immediate physical acts. Characters are placed in a position where they must commit violence so as to achieve something bigger. In other words, these films are constructed around violence for a cause, that transcends the immediate action by constantly focusing the viewer on what it is for and what it will achieve. It both engages the audience through thrilling violence, while simultaneously sanitizing the consequences.

This growing cinematic relationship to violence has been reflected on by multiple film critics & historians. Stephen Prince states that: “By adopting a dispassionate approach to ultraviolence, contemporary films inoculate by numbing their viewers to the graphic displays of gore.”<sup>5</sup> J. David Slocum makes a similar observation, where: “violence in contemporary cinema has lost depth and any meaning accrued through traditional relations to the real world. Even the most graphic instance of violence in these films potentially becomes like any other image,

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen Prince, *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies* (Univ. of Texas Press, 2010), 248.

homogenized and emptied of meaning or seeming originality.”<sup>6</sup> In discussing this current form of cinema violence, it is important to understand the legacy that it evolves from.

In the introduction to the collaborative work *Violence and American Cinema*, J. David Slocum refers to the 1960s and 70s as: “the golden age of American film violence”<sup>7</sup>, which manifested out of the tumultuous era that was the 60s-70s, both in mainstream American cinema and society as a whole. Stephen Prince writes: “The factors which would help produce a new cinema in Hollywood in the late 1960s are complex, but they coalesce around two watershed events: the revision in September 1966 of Hollywood’s thirty-six-year-old Motion Picture Production Code and the creation two years later of the Code and Rating Administration (CARA) with its G-M-R-X classification scheme.”<sup>8</sup> This revision essentially provided a new found creative freedom for the directors of the period, where the very strict codes dating back to the 1930s were heavily revised into more general terms, allowing directors to discuss formerly prohibited topics of American society: “the impetus for this new climate of creative freedom was the gale winds of social protest and countercultural values after 1966...the sizable youth audience...and of a younger generation of studio executives who were willing to flout motion picture conventions.” For the studios, this granted opportunities for financial gain: “No theater circuit in the country would now back off from a film with a condemned rating if it showed clear profit potential.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> J. David Slocum, *Violence and American Cinema* (Routledge, 2001), 21.

<sup>7</sup> J. David Slocum, *Violence and American Cinema* (Routledge, 2001), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Prince, *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies* (Univ. of Texas Press, 2010), 12.

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Prince, *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies* (Univ. of Texas Press, 2010), 14.

A major area of exploration in this creative freedom, stemming from the watershed moments of the 60s and 70s, was around perceptions and depictions of violence. Kolker, Prince, and Slocum all refer to four films and directors that are constantly related to the new exploration of violence during this period; *The Wild Bunch* (Peckinpah,1969), *Bonnie and Clyde* (Penn,1967), *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese,1976), and *A Clockwork Orange* (Kubrick,1971). These films have been continually marked for their extraordinary and intense depictions of violence. Prince highlights that Peckinpah's focus was: "to undermine viewers' conventional vantage points for watching movie violence". He elaborates that it was framed in a: "constructive and enlightening way" quoting Peckinpah saying: "we should understand the nature of our affliction and channel it."<sup>10</sup>

While discussing *Bonnie and Clyde*, Kolker remarks: "The real changes it makes in the conventions of melodrama involve the extent of the suffering the viewing subject must endure and the extent of the violence that provokes that suffering"<sup>11</sup>. In reference to *A Clockwork Orange*, Kolker highlights Kubrick's focus on "the outrageous contradictions of freedom and violence", and how through his adolescent character Alex, he is able to extract "the ambiguities of violence"<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, despite the grotesque events displayed in the first half of the film, most of the second half focuses around the direct consequences of Alex's (the protagonist) previous actions. Overall, the defining and correlating feature of these films is their exploration of violence; yet in a way that specifically engaged with the audiences perception of it, how it

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen Prince, *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies* (Univ. of Texas Press, 2010), 31.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness : Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman* (Cary: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2011), 47.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness : Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman* (Cary: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2011), 108.

influences them, and how to attach the very real and human qualities of ambiguity and suffering to it.

As Peckinpah, Penn, Kubrick, and Scorsese moved out of the spotlight, their films did not: “These works remain at the heart of today's cultural imagination of violence and either merit continued study as precursors to the graphic productions of our own time or emphasize a discontinuity between earlier cinematic bloodletting and that of contemporary productions.”<sup>13</sup> The formal traits of this period — utilizing slow-motion, bloody images, and the unique effect of bullets (squibs) hitting a body — can certainly be found in the franchises highlighted before. What has changed on a larger scale, however, is the place of ambiguity and suffering — the human and real traits of this violence — within these films. Where the spectacle of violence has continued, its intellectual and emotional engagement with the viewer has faltered. During an interview about the 1980s franchise *Rambo*, Sylvester Stallone said; “we kept going until we’d eliminated characterizations, eliminated the story, and had only stunts and explosions.”<sup>14</sup>

What is interesting is how this new treatment of physical violence seemed to arise with what Slocum refers to as the “Blockbuster mentality”, (a mentality no doubt found in *Rambo*) beginning with films like *Jaws* (1975), and the original *Star Wars* (1977):

“This new mentality drove many studios to reduce creative risk-taking in search of huge returns from more formulaic entertainments...So-called ‘Reaganite entertainment’ eventually featured a return to immensely profitable and popular but mostly innocuous films with violence bolstered by special effects technology though emptied of its antiestablishment tenor.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> J. David Slocum, "Film Violence and the Institutionalization of the Cinema." (*Social Research* 67, no. 3, 2000), 671.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Prince, *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies* (Univ. of Texas Press, 2010), 242.  
Rob Tannenbaum, “Stallone.” (*US* no.233, June 1997), 85-86.

<sup>15</sup> J. David Slocum, "Film Violence and the Institutionalization of the Cinema." (*Social Research* 67, no. 3, 2000), 661.



The emotional and ambiguous violence that defined “the golden age” became lost in its spectacular elements. The role of violence within these Hollywood action/adventure films became the conventional centerpiece, and thus, normalized.

A major contribution to this normalization is how violence is positioned in respect to the viewer. Current Hollywood films like to place the viewer in a secure location over the course of their narratives by creating situations that fit neatly into the dominant ideology of American society, reaffirming what the viewer has been told to believe. These narratives both uphold the values established by the ruling class through their white demographics and moral messages while simultaneously incorporating violence into the story as a key catalyst for the events and as, “a surrogate for social action”.<sup>16</sup> The result is narratives containing sweeping objectivism and a lack of moral ambiguity, that require little participation by the viewer. Kolker highlights how Steven Spielberg — a major blockbuster director — creates this cathartic space for the viewer:

“Spielberg’s films ‘hail’ the spectator into a world of the obvious that affirms the viewer’s presence (even while dissolving it), affirms that what the viewer has always believed or hoped is (obviously) right and accessible, and assures the viewer excitement and comfort in the process.”<sup>17</sup>

In other words, these mainstream multi-million dollar action films play out scenarios that reaffirm dominant beliefs, without requiring intellectual or emotional work by the viewer. The content simply washes over them as they focus on the form and style of the spectacle, often founded in violence: “its insulation from psychological pain and emotional consequence helps

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness : Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman* (Cary: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2011), 275.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness : Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman* (Cary: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2011), 275.

promote a sense of security and invulnerability in its spectators. It comforts those viewers who do not mind its graphic nature.”<sup>18</sup>

To keep the subliminal message clear however, this violence is constantly placed within the binary of good and evil, action and reaction, where an established (usually white) hero defends his (more often than not a man) beliefs and his home from an exterior threat through violent vengeance. This vengeance is positioned to be totally justified, or what Slocum refers to as “legitimate” and therefore morally sound. Going back to Stallone’s interview: “The bad guy must go up in flames, the planet must explode, everything must end in a bang.”<sup>19</sup>

In this explosive process, the viewer finds a direct connection between justice, liberty, honor, and violence. The story and its messages become subliminal as violence takes the main role, teasing these patriotic themes along as narratives rely on violence as the means to closure. Violence becomes the point of engagement as well as the point of resolution. Of course, this is a wholly unrealistic representation of violence, and so the question is how does this relationship between the viewer and its portrayal extend into the real world?

2020 was no doubt an extremely tumultuous year, and it has been noted many times for the political climate that surrounded it. The current social sphere within the US has been full of protests and ideological division, with massive criticism against the government’s use of violence and its subsequent justification. Interestingly enough, American cinematic representations of violence, whether connected to real events or not, tends to position its

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<sup>18</sup> Stephen Prince, *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies* (Univ. of Texas Press, 2010), 242.

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Prince, *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies* (Univ. of Texas Press, 2010), 242.

Rob Tannenbaum, “Stallone.” (*US* no.233, June 1997), 85-86.

antagonists outside of the belief system that drives the film, existing within an ideological framework that Slocum describes as “otherness”;

“Political scientist Michael Rogin, for example, elucidates some of the founding images of otherness in Hollywood history. For him, *The Birth of a Nation*, *The Jazz Singer*, and *Gone with the Wind* establish a system of differences—between men and women and whites and blacks, enforced by physical violence or its threat— whose purpose was to guard against the breakdown of difference in contemporary society...Technology, workers, youth, race, and, especially, sexuality are among the ideological issues that return in monstrous form to threaten some sense of social or psychic normality”.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, otherness is used similarly within politics, such as with war-time enemies, or by targeting groups that are then “othered” through fabricated or objectified logic (South and Central American Migrant workers and Muslim and Middle Eastern people are recent examples). Within the US itself, people become placed within a space of otherness through criminal labels, which itself perpetuates the idea of necessary violence against an enemy. America’s main form of national security comes out through force, where systemic institutions such as the military, jails, and the police act as the primary authorities within America for “keeping the peace” and “serving justice”, institutions constructed around the use of legitimated force. Moreover, this systemic violence has and continues to be justified through rhetorics of good vs. evil, such as the wars on drugs and crime. On a civilian level, the 2nd amendment is a heavily debated topic with a range of perspectives, a major one being private arms for protection.<sup>21</sup> Within this network of laws and beliefs there lies a heavy focus on violence as a means of security and a tool for freedom.

Much of this country’s current division is around the inherent violence within these systems and institutions, and how it is publicly accepted through normalization, as well as disproportionately effects non-white Americans. Many Americans have become so desensitized

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<sup>20</sup> J. David Slocum, *Violence and American Cinema* (Routledge, 2001), 12.

<sup>21</sup> Interestingly enough, the amendment was created during the countries fundamental crisis, for a specific purpose, yet it has continued to exist as a defining feature of the United States from both internal and external viewpoints.

to violence that they are numb to its permeation throughout the country, relating it to a sense of necessity rather than reflecting on its role in society. Because there has been no self-reflexive or intellectual debate underlying the violence, inside and out of film, individuals do not position themselves in relation to the issues at hand. They remain within a secure viewing space through media and virtual platforms. This acceptance of violence is no doubt reflected in mainstream cinema, both in its normalization and its targeted satisfaction towards white audiences. Indeed, the “ruling” class of America are the same people that Hollywood ultimately caters to. The viewers who “don’t mind” the violence are the same ones who are being represented positively within these films. Ultimately, white America’s leading citizens, the ones who run (or are soon to run) the country and its studios, are the same group that is being placed within a position of constant comfort and reaffirmation in these films and their viewing spaces. Of course, cinematic violence is not the defining cause of this relationship to societal violence, but it would be ignorant not to discuss its place in it, nor acknowledge the parallels between the demographic on screen, watching the screen, and normalizing this societal violence.

I chose to discuss the spectacle of violence within cinema specifically for several reasons. Besides for its immense popularity in art and entertainment throughout the world, my focus on cinema is due to the inherent qualities of film in respect to the viewer and its ability to communicate with them. Cinema is extremely sensory. It engages the viewer by immersing them within an experience of sight and sound, and holds the unique ability to manipulate these senses and their experience of the world. As Maya Deren iconically conveyed, time and space become tools for discussion in film, that can be transformed to communicate experience and emotion within a new reality. Cinema can seamlessly draw from history and other mediums in its exploration of the world, mixing together to offer the viewer a new perspective on what makes

up the world. Moreover, the accessibility of cinema in its most basic form is unparalleled, and its platforms only continue to grow in the digital age. It can penetrate even the most private spaces, spreading all types of perceptions throughout the world. Of course, this truth about film has a double-edge. As history has shown us, cinema is an invaluable tool in creating a social consciousness, that has been used time and time again by Governments and factions alike to stimulate an ideological message. Through film's sensory experience, viewer's can be subconsciously led to strategic conclusions, that communicate a specific message on a colossal scale. Indeed, a major threat to any country's practices and politics is cinema, and to this day *Birth of a Nation* is a crucial reference point for historians, social analysts, and filmmakers alike in discussing the development of America's systems and its rhetoric on race and freedom. Overall, cinema has been ingrained into global communication, and continues to spread. If any medium is to be discussed in its influence on individuals, nations, and the world, especially in relation to violence, cinema is one of them.

As for American filmmaking, what it now requires is a realignment of cinematic narratives in relation to violence and accountability, and most of all how this engages the audience. The mainstream viewership must encounter violence that exists past its immediate display, that establishes realistic moral dilemmas and conflict. Viewers must confront narratives that do not simply reaffirm their beliefs but rather challenge them, and contrast them against the countless other ideologies that live within the US and the world at large; removing them from a secure position and actively engaging them in a discussion on what they believe: "What needs to be located is a contemporary filmmaker who moves out of the mainstream of American production and looks at it, even for a moment, with foreign eyes".<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness : Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman* (Cary: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2011), 19.

The role of violence in this is extremely prevalent. There is no doubt that violence will seemingly persist in American Cinema, yet its representation, specifically in relation to the viewer, must transform. Violence has to be lifted out of its recent justified and stylized framework, pumped full of studio funds and A-list names. It must be placed into narratives where it's tangible effects and consequences become a significant element of its contribution. Viewers should actively confront the violence they witness, and reflect on its effects within the film past the immediate moment. As Wim Wenders states in an interview with *Sight & Sound*: "My argument is that it should be treated as what it is, so people can understand it instead of savoring. Violence is strictly a consumer product in movies now, not a story element."<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, the characters subjected to this violence must become more diverse and accurate. Representation on screen must shift towards a more realistic and inclusive representation of America in who confronts this violence and how it effects them. Other cultures and ethnicities must be represented with complexity and care, and be given the same patience and liberty that has been mostly granted to straight white American men alone.

Overall, American cinema needs to create situations where their audience is not coddled and comforted by recycling the same narratives with the same violent conclusions. These narratives must extend outside of their films and imbed themselves within the viewers life so as to promote reflection. Ambiguity should be a valued piece of these films, where a single understanding is not the focus, but rather a multitude of possible reactions, that can be deconstructed and explored. Since the turn of the 21st century we have seen these narratives emerge in all forms, yet more often than not under the radar of the mainstream viewer.

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<sup>23</sup> Manohla Dargis, "Sleeping with Guns" (*Sight and Sound* 7, no.5, May 1997), 21.

The rest of this project will look over 3 action/drama films from the last 20-25 years based in American history or the country itself, that grapple with violence in a way that refutes its dominant American ideology, as well as engages with the viewer on a more intellectual and emotional level. These three films are all vastly different in structure, narrative, and style, yet they all expertly display violent stories by focusing in on the character's identity, their individual experience, and the consequences of violence on that experience. Each film uses violence as a key point of their narratives, yet primarily as a form of exploring and unpacking the characters and their interior spaces. Each story breaches the vacuum of cinematic entertainment, reaching into history and the present to establish their narratives and its issues. They are acutely aware to the ideology that surrounds violent Hollywood films, deconstructing tendencies to connect violence to a sense of freedom and justice, and denying audiences a secure viewing space enveloped in visual excitement and closure. Indeed, they all position the viewer from an uncertain, ambiguous viewing point. Nothing is offered to the viewer without an underlying complexity that moves past surface-level viewing. The film I will be beginning this analysis with is Lynne Ramsay's 2017 film *You Were Never Really Here*.

Trauma, Memory, and Innocence: Joe's Violence in *You Were Never Really Here*

*You Were Never Really Here* (*YWNRH*) is a unique example of how film can approach violence by focusing on its emotional and lasting experience, rather than its immediate physical spectacle. The film follows the damaged war veteran and ex-FBI agent Joe (Joaquin Phoenix), who works as a hired mercenary of sorts that saves young girls from the underground sex trafficking system in the US. His methods are brutal and bloody, using a hammer as his main weapon. After saving a politician's daughter, Joe becomes caught up in a political conspiracy spearheaded by the New York Governor, that permanently alters his life and those of his immediate circle. I will begin this analysis with a specific scene.

At an hour and thirteen minutes in, *YWNRH* is in the midst of its climactic moment. Joe is moving to kill the Governor, save Nina (the politician's daughter), and rid himself of the syndicate he has become caught up in, thus ending the narrative. Through a medium-shot on the door, we watch Joe timidly walk into the bedroom the Governor has created for Nina, with the sound of "My Angel Baby" by Rosie and the Originals faintly playing (image 1). Ramsay cuts across the space to the hammer hanging at Joe's side, as he lets out a slight chuckle (image 2). She cuts to low-angle close-up of Joe's face as he looks down and around room, still chuckling, with a slight smile on his face. Ramsay then cuts to the subject of Joe's stare, a close-up angled shot of the dead governor on the floor, throat slit open with dry blood everywhere (image 3). After several seconds on the corpse, Ramsay cuts back to Joe looking down, and cuts from a

Images 1-3





medium shot into an angled closeup on his face, as he processes the scene before him. Ramsay follows Joe as he makes his way to the bed. The music fades as he slouches onto the bed, and we watch his face contort with a mix of emotions, as well as hear his weapon drop to the floor (image 4). During this moment Ramsay never leaves his face. His eyes fill with tears, as he clasps his face and breaths shakily.

Finally, Ramsay moves outward again, facing Joe straight on, from a medium-shot, as he rocks back and forth (image 5). He reaches for the bed post, but then drags himself down to the floor, and sits cross legged at the end of the bed (image 6). There is no sound, save his body against the blankets. As he sits on the floor, he begins to sob. We remain in this shot, as he pulls off his shirt, still sobbing, and again holds his face in his hands, repeatedly saying “I’m weak, I’m weak” (image 7). Ramsay then cuts to a wider side angle of Joe, head in hands, legs shaking, and we hear his father’s voice; “stand up straight, stand up, only fucking pussies and little girls slouch”. In the midst of this Joe falls to the floor, and Ramsay abruptly cuts to him walking out of the room, serious, silent, and cold.

Images 4-7



Top left (4), top right (5), bottom left (6), bottom right (7)

The evolution of this scene is unexpected, and the role of violence within it is deeply contorted from mainstream conventions. No doubt, this scene has all the possibilities of one's final heroic endeavor, found in most Hollywood films. To fight through endless henchman, vanquish the "bad guy", and rescue the innocent victim. It is often the pinnacle moment of violence in these films, that will grant our hero his well deserved freedom, as well as the viewer the simple satisfaction of a fulfilled revenge narrative, and closure. However, as Joe moves in on the Governor the entire scene collapses, and rather than witnessing Joe's triumph, we see his deterioration.

The progression of the film up to this point, as well as the scene itself, are indicative of how Joe's violent acts do not represent *real* strength, or at least not the type of strength that Joe requires. He has killed many, and has reached his final "enemy", only to find himself crippled emotionally, mentally, and physically. It is the violence that got him there, both into that room, and into his own suffering. This triumphant moment is anything but. Joe is at the opposite point of conventional heroic strength, bent over, head in hands, repeating "I'm weak". The viewer's security within an invincible hero is completely discarded, as they are forced to witness Joe's deep vulnerability in what would conventionally be his strongest moment. There is no exulting music, no allusion to freedom, we merely sit with Joe as he sheds his clothing and sobs.

Where the viewer sees no other enemy, Joe is at his peak point of struggle, found within himself.

Indeed, Ramsay has formally positioned the viewer in this moment realize Joe's obscure and morbid relationship with violence. The scene spans three minutes, yet with only five cuts. It is a slow experience of Joe's degradation, positioned both sonically and visually in a way that requires the viewer to experience every piece of it. We have no break from Joe's anguish, as his face fills the screen, and are given no allusion to an achievement of freedom or peace. As the

scene ends, Ramsay suggests how this struggle with violence will not end here, represented through past violence that continues to damage him, manifested in his father's piercing words. Indeed, during this scene Joe is positioned as a child, a theme that is carried throughout the film. He is cross-legged on the floor, half naked, sobbing in a pink bedroom at the end of the bed, with a stuffed animal against the pillow (image 7).

This scene ultimately displays violence by focusing on the victim, and how it continues to influence their life long after the act itself has been committed. It analyzes the relationship between violence and humanity within the space of trauma, rather than freedom or regeneration. As Ramsay states in an interview with film journalist Leigh Singer; "what drew me in was the character Joe, this middle-aged guy. He's scarred up, suicidal in this kind of blackly comic way and he lives with his mum. So it's the antithesis of all those movies you're talking about, the indestructible guys. This is a very fallible man...instead of having this big set piece about vengeance, it was about impotence."<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the impotence that arises is not in Joe's lack of action, but in the lack of stability and freedom found *within* those actions.

A major aspect of Joe's "fallibility" is in his relationship to trauma, and how Ramsay uses trauma within the film as a whole to define the dynamic between violence and those encountering it. Trauma drives the narrative, and so the events of the film become expressed by their disturbing and emotional component. Action and violence becomes less about spectacle and more about how their effects will or have already altered the life of those involved with it. Rather than using these moments of violence to display the physical strength and power of the protagonist, Ramsay uses them as catalysts for unravelling him and his trauma. Joe's past is informed by traumatic experiences that he grapples with throughout the film, that have corrupted

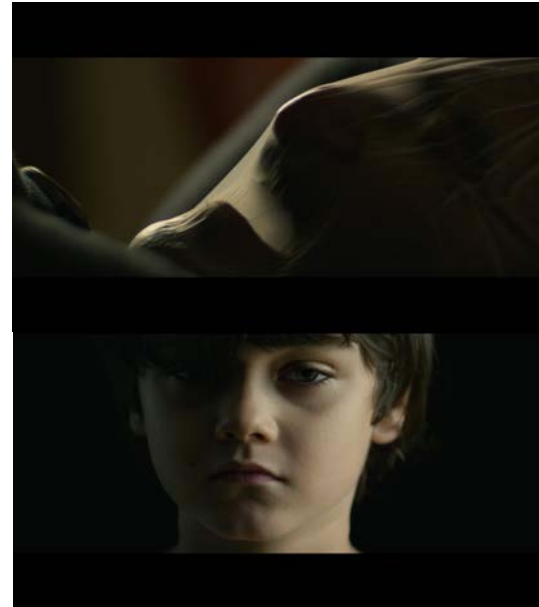
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<sup>24</sup> Leigh Singer, "Killer Joe." (*Sight & Sound* 28, no. 4, April 2018), 35.

his relationship with reality. In the Governor's house this seeps in through his father's harsh words, a recurring sound that has plagued Joe and the viewer.

Image 8 &amp; 9

Joe's trauma is evident from the beginning of the film, as our first image is a close-up of Joe's face submerged within a plastic bag (image 8). This shot is no doubt grim to the viewer, a symbolic image of a dead man, and yet Joe himself is not only calm, but relaxed. A position that looks so distressing is in fact the position that grants Joe the most security. Ramsay then cuts to an image of Joe as a young boy (an identification we learn soon after) within a void-like space, looking into the camera (image 9). She then cuts back to Joe's current self, and he lets out a soft whimper, insinuating



a reaction from him to the image of the boy in classic shot counter-shot fashion. In other words, the boy was in his mind, an isolated memory that he correlates to his self-prescribed asphyxiation.

This position for Joe is recycled throughout the film, and is often preceded or succeeded by an image of trauma from his life. When he returns home for the first time, Ramsay presents us with a match cut between current Joe in a bag, and childhood Joe in a bag (image 10 & 11). In the moment we see his younger self, the viewer is flooded with the sound of screams, that quickly turn to silence as we return to his present self. These two images are in succession, and occur within the same space, spatially and temporally representing how raw this memory remains. Ramsay then does another match cut, from Joe looking down inside of the bag to him waiting for the Subway, with the same face (image 12 & 13).



Top left (10), top right (11), bottom left (12), bottom right (13)

We now have 3 distinct spaces over the course of three cuts, Joe's childhood at home, his present in the same space, and him in the outside world, all of which are brought together by his continued suffering. This brings trauma into the spaces of the film where there is no imagery directly showing it. By match cutting from Joe within his memories to him in the outside world, we gain a sense of the continuation of his struggle. It becomes a consistent part of the narrative, existing within all spaces of the world just as it does in Joe's life.

Ramsay takes this element of trauma further by interlocking it with the narrative as a whole. Several characters confront trauma over the course of the film, and we have multiple moments within the film where Ramsay unfolds traumatic experiences, that also act as intersecting points between Joe and the people he encounters. His relationship with Nina, for example, is founded within the fact that she is a young girl being trafficked, and so is based within an experience that will no doubt traumatize her. Ramsay highlights this relationship by mirroring Joe's childhood with that of Nina's. At the beginning of the film, during Joe's distorted contemplation of his childhood, we hear the sound of a child counting. We then hear this counting again during Nina's moment of introduction as Ramsay unveils the disembodied voice

as hers. Time and space have thus been condensed between Joe and Nina to suggest the cyclical nature of violence in creating victims and distorting reality. Nina's suffering is highlighted by its relationship to Joe's, who continues to grapple with childhood trauma that Nina (though under different circumstances) has just recently experienced. It insinuates that Nina will grow into a person similar to Joe because of the foundational violence they both experienced.

Ramsay expertly weaves the narrative together to focus on the corrupted realities of its characters, which creates a viewing space that requires an engagement with more than what is simply on screen, asking the viewer to piece the characters together from their specific viewing position. The mental and emotional spaces of these figures seep into the actual images, allowing for a contemplation on their lives that exists outside of the narrative events of the film. As Gina Telaroli describes in her *Film Comment* review of the film; "Ramsay avoids exposition and background, instead providing impressions in the form of images: a battered and bloated body, quick and vague flashbacks of an abusive father, jelly beans smashed between two fingers, and a man with his head in a plastic bag desperately trying to breathe."<sup>25</sup>

The film's use of trauma opens up its characters, granting them an atmosphere of vulnerability that complicates the viewer's emotional attachment to the film and their viewing space. Ramsay constantly creates vulnerability within Joe through the different positions he is placed in. He is not pushed into a singular role but rather exists within multiple personalities. With his strength and intelligence there comes corresponding moments of fragility and helplessness, where he is as much at the will of the story as the viewer is. When he is at home, he transforms from the ruthless hired killer to a caring son, contrasting violence with tenderness. After he returns home from his first mission, he washes the bathroom floor (image 14); When he

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<sup>25</sup> Gina Telaroli, "You Were Never Really Here." (*Film Comment* 54, no. 2, March 2018), 73.

is waiting to rescue Nina, he sits with his head out the window, feeling the raindrops against his face (image 15); And his most triumphant moment of violent justice at the Governor's house is contrasted with deep vulnerability, as he shrouds his face and repeats "I'm weak"(image 7). In a more conventional narrative, Joe is no doubt there to save Nina, to bring her out of her pain and suffering. And yet, when he finds her at the dinner table, Joe is the one who shrinks down, and Nina, the child who killed the governor, is the one saying to him; "It's ok, Joe" (image 16).

Image 14-16



These moments of vulnerability help to deconstruct the invincible hero narrative, by presenting Joe within spaces where he is disarmed or without control. He exists in the narrative as several different people, as a son, a friend, and a murderer, and with these positions comes moments of intimacy that are not congruent with the mainstream idea of an action hero. There is deep degradation and vulnerability in his character, that is intrinsic to the narrative and the viewer's awareness of him. Ramsay does not construct Joe to be numb to the bloodshed, and we are not meant to see him as such.

The vulnerability and ambiguity within the film constructs a multi-faceted representation of violence. The refusal of Joe as a typical Hollywood hero means that the violence enacted does not live solely within a space of clean justice, as the fluctuation of his character creates a fluctuation in his actions. Of course, a major contribution to this is Ramsay's focus on trauma and its victims. Rather than multiple scenes of violent triumph working toward a final test of

strength, Ramsay uses trauma, over time, to show the toll of violence on the human psyche and body. With every moment of violence there is an ensuing one of entrapment and suffering. The moments of violence in Joe's memory live long after the actual event, and yet seem to be just as devastating to him as when they happened.

Similarly, his memories of the war are surrounded by the death of a little girl. Many Hollywood films place a sense of glory and strength around veteran figures, the "old but gold" killing machine that is not washed up, proven through extensive fighting and technical skill (Schwentke's *Red* (2010) being a recent example). Ramsay alludes to this figure in Joe through his skillful killing abilities, and strategic talent, but in his military flashbacks what she focuses on is how this organized violence destroys people, both the girl literally, and Joe's identity. His memories of his father enact the same purpose. When characters come from "difficult" backgrounds, it attaches a sense of natural strength and perseverance to them. It grants them a simple yet serious explanation as to why they can be so violent and remain a hero: "when in doubt, explain the character's personality by giving him or her an unhappy upbringing"<sup>26</sup>. In *YWNRH*, however, Joe's "difficult" childhood is constantly expanded upon within the film, never used to justify his violence without also representing its extreme toll on his life. These memories do not harden Joe, they trap him.

This entrapment is demonstrated in real world scenarios, that show the viewer how disastrous it can be. For example, as Joe sits with his contractor McCleary, McCleary talks about taking his boat (named after his dead wife, which again alludes to the characters' relationships to trauma) out for its maiden voyage. He paints an image of peace and normalcy for Joe, inviting him to live a regular life: "You and me, a couple of steaks, cold beers, setting sun...what do you

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<sup>26</sup> Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness : Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman* (Cary: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2011), 52.



say to that?”. After a pause, Joe turns to him, and quietly says, “what?”. He is so detached from reality because of his past that moments like these do not exist for him. He cannot imagine himself in this scenario because he is too caught up in unsettled trauma. This arises again when Joe is taking a photo of some tourists (image 17). Their joy and laughter transforms into crying and screams, creating a surreal simulation of how the violence in Joe’s life mutates happiness and normalcy (image 18).

Finally, at the end of the film, when no physical threat remains, Joe is still trapped. Even though he and Nina are safe, he does not feel any freedom from the violence that achieved it. Rather, as he sits within the brightly-lit diner booth we witness his delusion of suicide (image 19). This final moment definitively aligns Joe’s experience with the suffering that violence has caused. There is no allusion to freedom at the end of the film. In fact, Joe’s imaginary suicide insinuates that his suffering will only end when he is dead, coldly illustrating the permanent damage of violence. It does not lead to a greater sense of life for Joe, but rather further closes him off. It does not provide freedom, it removes it.

By walking us through these scenes of both violence and isolation, *YWNRH* detaches violence from its Hollywood legacy of justice and places it within the space of its survivors. At the same time, Ramsay separates violence and freedom, de-tangling them in the eyes of the viewer so as to convey how they are not neatly and inextricably linked. *YWNRH* represents the complicated and taxing relationship

Image 17-19



that a person can have with violence, regardless of what the violence is directed towards. It cannot grant someone strength without also affecting their psyche.

The American cinema standard for violence has made it excess, where the protagonist is made invincible so as to constantly and seamlessly fight throughout a majority of the film without losing their attractive character. A major part of Joe's character is how the violence in his life wears him down, causing him to be further removed from a sense of normalcy or community and become unattractive as a hero. As film critic Justin Chang states in a *Fresh Air* review of the film; "the deadness we see in his eyes - the sense of a human being shattered beyond repair - comes from a deeper place of torment"<sup>27</sup>.

This "place of torment" that Chang refers to is not only found within Joe's character, but is formally injected by Ramsay into the film as whole. The composition, shot progression, and auditory mechanisms of the film are crucial in establishing violence within a place of torment, in its capacity for suffering and degradation, rather than within its spectacular abilities. Ramsay's implementation of violence within the film compliments her use of trauma by focusing on the degradation of Joe and the people around him. Her use of sound and image removes the viewer from security and demands them to engage intellectually and emotionally. The rhythm and style of the film mimics Joe's interior space and his interaction with the world, highlighting vulnerability, suffocation, anxiety, and sadness.

The largest formal contribution to this is through Thomas Townend's (the cinematographer's) compositions. The film constantly unfolds in very tight shots that are often obstructed or distorted, leaving the viewer to dig for something deeper while simultaneously being restricted from any sort of comfortable viewing. The first few minutes of the film are built

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<sup>27</sup> Justin Chang, "A Tormented Veteran Rescues Kids From Abuse In 'You Were Never Really Here.'" (*Fresh Air (NPR)*, April 13, 2018).

entirely of these compositions. Everything Joe does is obscured by the composition of the frame. Every shot is close and suffocating, and we are never given a master shot, but rather focus upon tiny details of the scene; The hammer, the picture, the necklace (image 20, 21, 22). These frames force the viewer into a space of active engagement, through hyper fixation as well as lack of information. They cannot remove themselves from the image and cannot be comforted by knowing what is going on or what is to come. Even the first image of Joe's face is both an extreme close-up and is distorted by the plastic bag, removing the viewer from a secure viewing point while simultaneously depicting the suffocation, both physical and mental, that Joe experiences (image 8).

Image 20-22



Another piece of this formal process is the score that Johnny Greenwood provides for the film. Known for his contribution to the band *RadioHead*, and the film *Phantom Thread* (Anderson,2017), he imbeds a surreal yet jaunting rhythm in the film, that gives considerable support to the manifestation of Joe's mental and emotional expanse on screen. His use of piercing tones and polyrhythmic melodies builds anxiety and uncontrolled stress within each scene, mimicking Joe's traumatic anxiety. His score is very limited within the film, as the narrative thrives on silence, appearing at very specific moments. Nonetheless, the atmosphere

Greenwood creates in those few scene emphasizes the ambiguity of the violence, obscuring any sense of triumph or defeat and refusing a sense of security or affirmation for the viewer.

In the beginning of the film, as Joe exits the hotel room, Greenwood heightens the ambiguity of his character with a sort of cold strumming guitar. Mixed with the close-ups, the atmosphere of the scene fluctuates between Joe's ominous actions and a conventional lone hero figure provided by the guitar, that winks towards classic western themes. However, this atmosphere is obscured by the score's transformation, as the cool western rhythm begins to falter, sounding as if the guitar is stumbling. The mixing of close-ups and this deteriorating melody places the viewer in a very specific understanding of the scene. There is an acknowledgement towards the mysterious hero figure that Joe embodies, yet this position is by no means stable or certain.

These formal contributions help to break down the heroic narrative by establishing the "fallibility" of Joe within the shots and the score. In major Hollywood cinema, heroic narratives are often depicted through shots that are both clear and enticing, paired with heavy-handed music communicating a certain feeling. The viewer knows the hero, where he is, and what is going to happen. Shots feed into the binary of good and evil that drives the arc, where clear shots means a clear hero with a clear ending. Ramsay however, subtly moves Joe around the world, and positions him as cutoff from the camera, ambiguously toying with the viewer's information. As he is leaving his house for the first time, for example, we follow Joe as he goes to meet Angel (the middleman). In this moment we do not know where he is going, and this lack of information is

Image 23 &amp; 24



reflected on screen by Joe constantly disappearing from the frame. Cars are constantly obstructing our vision, and Joe walks off of the screen on the left, while we remain (image 23). Ramsay then cuts to a subjectless image, and Joe re-enters from the left side, now going in the opposite direction (image 24). The fragile state of the image works as a reflection of the fragile state of Joe. He is drifting in and out of the viewer's eyes like he is drifting in and out of reality. His sense of suffering and disconnection is founded through images that visually highlight the suffering or disconnect for the viewer, projecting his interior space onto the outside world.

The triple match cut of Joe (see page 5, images 10-13) is a clear example of this. After we have seen his suffering brought into reality, he begins leaning over the tracks looking down, and Ramsay does a sort of counter-shot looking up at Joe through the tracks (image 25). This shot is

Image 25-27



a tableaux of Joe's personal diminishment, with lines cutting through the frame against dark colors, closing him off from the viewer and offering only a piece of the frame to show his face. We see this sort of obstruction multiple times in the film (images 26,27), allowing for interior conflict to be expressed visually, while simultaneously asking the viewer to engage with the composition so as to understand why it is there and not substituted for a "clearer", more easily digestible image. Through these formal tactics the entire representation of violence within *YWNRH* is distorted, so as to remove any sort of satisfaction of the viewer in seeing the action take place. Throughout the film violence occurs, yet the viewer is not granted an omnipotent position as it unfolds. We are not given

every angle and possible position to witness the fight, but are rather obstructed from it, with Ramsay alluding to the scene without giving it up easily. Paired with Greenwood's score, the film complicates any definitive conclusions for the viewer to hold onto.

This is clearly found in the flashbacks of the film. Rather than showing us the specific moments of violence, Ramsay alludes to their destructive component. For example, our understanding of the girl's death during the war is composed through specific closeups, most of all of her feet (images 28,29). Rather than having medium shots of the space and close-up shots of the little girl's face or her suffering, we are simply given a close-up of her feet moving and then still, a very intimate yet unconventional representation of the loss of life. This is similarly depicted in Joe's flashbacks to his childhood. The domestic violence that could be used to drive a protective element of Joe's character (spurred by a "bad childhood") is never utilized, because it would simply spectaclize the violence so as to easily feed Joe's arc. Rather, in these memories, there are specific things highlighted. Screams, his mother hiding, feet shuffling, his father with the hammer. These reflections on Joe's past help us to understand the violence that has consumed his life without focusing on the actual moments of violence. It highlights the suffering it has caused Joe and his mother by showing us what *he* focuses on in these memories, rather than making the message of these memories clear or exciting to the viewer.

Images 28 &amp; 29



Despite these moments of allusion, Ramsay still places overt acts of violence within the film. However, they are constantly positioned or framed in a way that does not create catharsis



## Images 30-33



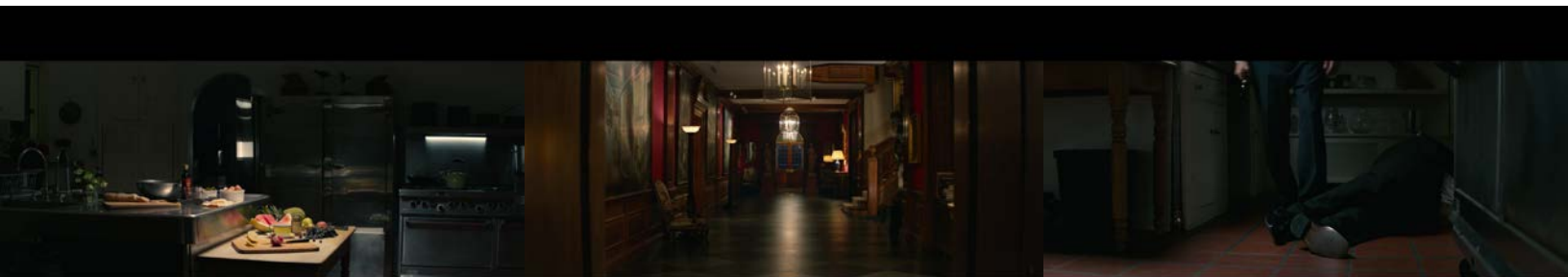
Clockwise

within the viewer, but rather fear, disgust, and sadness. The entire brothel sequence, besides for Joe's arrival at Nina's room, unfolds through gray, noisy security camera footage. We are not viewing the scene from one camera, but multiple, and the cuts to each camera are not following the action. Instead, Ramsay is mimicking the classic rotation of security camera footage as if we were watching the security feed, and so there are multiple moments when we are viewing an action-less space, or a space where action has already occurred (images 30,31). Even when we do witness Joe in the act, we remain obstructed from it, constantly blocked, distanced, or removed (images 32, 33). Joe's infiltration is altogether detached from the possible spectacle of the scene by way of formal tactics. The viewer finds no assurance or satisfaction in Joe's acts of violence, as they are positioned to be constantly interrupted from any sort of rhythm in the scene. Indeed while we are watching from the security cameras, we hear "Angel Baby" by Rosie & The Originals, which not only contrasts the extremely dark context and contents of the scene, but also

itself gets interrupted with each cut, either skipping forward, or jumping back. These details are constantly throwing the viewer out of sync with the violence, creating a surreal and confusing space of action that further plunges them into the narrative's turbulent space, without relying on violence to do so.

Ramsay replicates this formal strategy in the governor's house. Again we watch Joe dispense the henchmen through a cycle of shots that mimic the brothel scene. They do not follow the action, but merely rhythmically reveal what has or has not happened in the space (from an empty kitchen, to other shots, then back to the kitchen with Joe's lower-half standing over a body) (images 34-36). This shot progression relates back to its original context through visual and auditory cues (as "My Angel Baby" also plays in the governors house). The compositions and progressions reminds us of the brothel, and the child trafficking that has brought us to the Governor's house. This helps to keep the regenerative and cathartic tendencies of America cinema violence in check. It is very easy to relate this scene more to Joe's revenge narrative of his dead friends and family than to Nina's situation, which means that the violence could be used to satisfy and justify Joe's (and the viewer's) loss. By recycling the composition from the Brothel, it reminds us of the horrific acts going on, and keeps the emotional and mental dialogue between viewer and story imbedded in the film. It holds the viewer to a perception of violence that remains human, rather than allowing violent and bloody emotions to run wild without any sense of consequence or contemplation. As Chang states in his review; "Ramsay is well-above

Images 34, 35, 36





mining violence for cheap shock effects. More than once, she skips the gory details and cuts to a body on the floor, as if to emphasize the finality of all this killing.”<sup>28</sup>

Despite Ramsay’s tactic of removing “cheap shock effects”, *YWNRH* by no means steps around the blood and gore related to film violence. Rather, in moments where the viewer has been heavily restricted from any sort of action or bloodshed, Ramsay gives them too much of it, emphasizing the “finality” that Chang is referring to. Rather than inserting blood and gore within the action packed moments, Ramsay places it within moments that are removed from wining and losing, from victory and failure, where there is simply a cold yet insistent gesture to what violence leads to. Dark and claustrophobic exposures of blood and violence are repeated multiple times in the film; with Joe’s mother, Mcclary, the Governor, and finally, with Joe himself. In each of these moments, the atmosphere of the scene is already extremely dark, and the shock of these gruesome images only causes the viewer to further feel the degradation of life through chaotic violence. Indeed, the satisfaction of seeing the Governor die is denied to us, and all we have is his mutilated body, which provides us no sense of assurance or closure, but is merely a contemplation of death. It is anything but clean violence.

The torment that Ramsay places within the film is no doubt extensive. Over the course of this film trauma and suffering in their darkest contexts seem to take up most of the space in the film. The flow of blood and sadness that take over the screen can create a certain chill in viewer, that places the film in a space of the most limited and depressing forms of living. When presenting it as such to the viewer, with a constant insistence on suffering and helplessness, it can become too much, and can even remove humanity from the film itself. It can create a melodramatic depression that moves away from reality in a way that creates a different form of

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<sup>28</sup> Justin Chang, “A Tormented Veteran Rescues Kids From Abuse In ‘You Were Never Really Here.’” (*Fresh Air (NPR)*, April 13, 2018).

spectacle. One of the ways that Ramsay expertly counteracts this over saturation, yet without delegitimizing the experience, is by creating a versatile relationship between trauma and childhood.

The mixing of trauma and childhood within the film creates an exploration of stolen innocence. The conventional role of childhood has always symbolized an innocence in life, and Ramsay places this conventionality into a narrative that explores its corruption. With violent trauma unfolding in morbid narrative's of childhood, the film boldly inserts humanity into the events of the film that are extremely cold. The play on innocence permits different levels of empathy to be enacted, mixing together happiness and despair, hope and struggle, lightheartedness and depression. It allows for Joe to maintain his complex humanity, while effectively relating violence to its permanent effects rather than any sort of bloody spectacle.

This mix of childhood, trauma, and innocence is detrimental in building a cohesive and empathetic narrative, and it works as a major aspect of Joe's relationship with his mother. Their interactions are *the* narrative example of how Ramsay stretches this trauma across time and space and connects it to the innocence of childhood, as well as general emotion. She puts trauma, humanity, violence, and innocence in dialogue with one another in the narrative, and Joe's relationship with his mother is a swirl of these themes coming together in his interior space. His mother is the lasting piece of his innocence, directly tied to his childhood. However, his relationship with her is also stained by the trauma and violence that they both experienced together. He cannot have this innocent relationship without the ensuing trauma from it that corrupted his childhood and continues to disengage him from reality.

Indeed, because the film is full of dark, distorted images, shots that are clear and well lit become quite significant, emphasizing a sense of peace and normalcy. Ramsay uses these shots almost always in relation to Joe's mother. His return home is our first well lit and stable shot, a

master shot, which grants the viewer a sense of the space and a security that they have been deprived of (image 37). Furthermore, it is within the house that we are able to see Joe clearly, unobstructed and still (image 38). This has a similar effect as the relationship between distorted imagery and Joe's trauma, where the stability and clarity of these shots highlights the stability and clarity of Joe's life with his mother. Ultimately, this space becomes linked to an idea of living unobstructed, where both Joe and the viewer can find security. Even as he takes his mother to her grave, the shots in the car offer us clean imagery without obstruction, reminding us of the corrupted peace that was his relationship with his mother.

This dialogue forces the viewer into a particular space of perception. The simple isolation of events, memories and their influence on the character (a recurring piece of mainstream violent narratives) is complicated, where all of the events of Joe's life converge on him in these moments with his mother. Rather than selecting and highlighting certain pieces of the character's identity at certain times to establish a clear direction for the viewer, Ramsay lets them flood in all at once. She places the viewer within Joe's internal space, and immerses them within Joe's identity from the conflicted position that he himself struggles with it. There is a distinct security and stability within his mother's house that is inevitably destroyed because of the context that surrounds the immediate space, and as the narrative goes on we see the toll that this destruction takes on Joe. Because of its tranquility, the corruption of this space becomes that much more devastating and unmooring for the viewer. It creates a similar dynamic between viewer and character to that of Penn's

Images 37 &amp; 38



*Bonnie & Clyde* (1967): “Penn makes the audience love them, share the intimacy of their gaze, and then severs the tie violently. The result...leaves the viewer desolate, shattered, and alone”<sup>29</sup>. Of course, these two films are vastly different, yet this sentiment remains the same. The intimacy that is violently taking away brings us closer to Joe’s interior space, and engages the viewer past a surface-level that is predicated on violence.

Overall, *You Were Never Really Here* is an exploration of violence from a human level, focused on a deeply disturbed protagonist who’s entire life has been influenced by it. Ramsay’s use of trauma reconnects the interior and exterior space of Joe, while unfolding this dynamic to the viewer. As Leah Singer writes: “she [Ramsay] burrows deep within a central character, turning physical surroundings into a psychological landscape and evoking an emotional state, often without them having – or even being able – to articulate a word.”<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, by relating the story to trauma, the ensuing violence becomes placed in a more complex position. There is no clearly justifiable violence within the film, because the focus has been removed from its purging abilities. It does not live within a context of regeneration, but rather degradation, and so the viewer cannot witness any moment of action without considering the lasting and debasing effect it has on those involved with it.

*YWNRH* breaks down the conventional American hero and its surrounding narratives by injecting ambiguity and perversion into it, so as to create a narrative that vaguely resembles Hollywood cinema, yet fundamentally disowns it. The viewer is removed from security and is placed in a position of confrontation, as they must actively engage with the narrative so as to understand what is happening and why. Ramsay has gutted the common traits of action films that

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<sup>29</sup> Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness : Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman* (Cary: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2011), 44.

<sup>30</sup> Leigh Singer, “Killer Joe.” (*Sight & Sound* 28, no. 4, April 2018), 35.

feed messages of freedom and assurance, replacing them with ambiguity and struggle. There is no direct message for the viewer to grasp on to, they must directly engage with the film and respond to what strikes them, so as to formulate an individual understanding of Joe's position and his actions. The viewer does not know what is going to happen, because the indications of a triumphant hero and an evil villain have been cast into the gray area. We do not know that Joe will win, and indeed, Ramsay makes the viewer rethink what "winning" even means.

Through this approach, Ramsay brings the viewer to reconsider what violence achieves. The ideology of freedom and justice that it is so often tied to in major films is turned sour, as we follow a deeply emotional yet fierce character, whose violence only grants him more suffering. Joe in a sense, is not really alive; a motif strewn throughout the narrative and exorcised in the final moments of the film, as he hallucinates himself, dead and covered blood at the diner booth, surrounded by unphased customers. Altogether, these moments reflect the entire psyche of Joe in relation to reality and violence, most succinctly stated by the title, *You Were Never Really Here*.

One film that has continuously been considered as a touchstone for *YWNRH* is Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976). In her comparison of the two films, Leah Pickett observes that: "each film explores the seedy underworld of its contemporary Manhattan through the fractured mind of a traumatized war veteran."<sup>31</sup> There is a clear dialogue between Joe and Travis Bickle (*Taxi Driver*'s protagonist). The bulk of both characters is exhibited through their interior space, either through Joe's flashbacks or Bickle's voice-overs as he cruises the city. Much like Joe, Bickle exists within a multitude of personalities, coming together in a broken and violent figure ultimately consumed by loneliness. Both dismantle a sex trafficking ring by infiltrating and killing, looking to save a particular person. Overall, both films look towards the darker elements

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<sup>31</sup> Leah Pickett, "You Were Never Really Here Updates Taxi Driver to an Even Colder Urban Landscape." (*Chicago Reader*, 12 Apr. 2018, [www.chicagoreader.com](http://www.chicagoreader.com))

of violence when attached to people's psychology. They use detailed character-studies to unravel complex relationships between, violence, psyche, and humanity.

However, in terms of the viewer, it seems that Ramsay is more focused on placing them within the discussion and comprehension of the protagonist. Bickle is no doubt a controversial figure, and one that we can relate to, yet ultimately we are disconnected from him through a certain fear, as his psychopathic tendencies seem to consume his character. Part of this arises from the agency that Scorsese provides him. Travis' voice-overs offer the viewer a direct access to his interior space, that shapes his opinions of the world through his own words. His psychosis arises as much from his actions as it does from how he describes the world to us. In other words, the viewer's perception of him becomes less diverse and individual as he elaborates. Moreover, by the end of the film we do not feel a change in Bickle's character, he remains within his aloof and chaotic character. As Prince describes: "The concluding orgy of violence has no consequences. The climactic massacre produce no shift of moral perspective in the film with regard to Bickle and by implication with regard to the filmmaker's view of the material."<sup>32</sup>

Joe, however, is much more silent. Our ability to understand him is not through his own words, but rather through images that Ramsay provides us. Joe's memories connects us to his emotional state without telling us how he feels or what he believes. His persona is something that Ramsay is constantly playing with. The chaotic and cruel nature of Joe's character is present, yet it does not define him. We are afraid of him, but there is also pity. Indeed, the end of the film shows Joe at his lowest point, wholly consumed by the consequences of violence. The intimate and complex relationship that we see between Joe and violence is not fully achieved in *Taxi Driver*, because Bickle's emotional and psychological relationship to violence feels stagnant.

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<sup>32</sup> Stephen Prince, *Savage Cinema: Sam Peckinpah and the Rise of Ultraviolent Movies* (Univ. of Texas Press, 2010), 238.

Nonetheless, the affiliation of Ramsay's film to a staple of the "golden age" of cinema violence is both encouraging and informative. It connects Ramsay to a period of major filmmaking in which the human identity in relation to violence was extremely provocative, as well as underlines how she is moving out of the confines of the current ideology surrounding American cinema. Part of this could be Ramsay's foundation outside of American ideology to begin with, as her Scottish accent shines through in her interviews. Indeed, she seems to fit into the category of directors that Kolker believes is required to shift the American ideology, one: "who moves out of the mainstream of American production and looks at it, even for a moment, with foreign eyes".

There is most definitely a foreign perspective on conventional cinematic ideals within *YWNRH*, both politically and cinematically. The threat portrayed is by no means an exterior one, and is in fact imbedded within American politics and democracy. The entire conspiracy that Joe becomes caught up in is based in the corruption of American politics. Rather than conventionally positioning Joe as an American, and the threat as anything but, Ramsay imbeds both directly within the United States and its democracy. There is no terrorist threat or organization bent on destroying America. Instead, we follow the protagonist (a patriotically detached character) as he uncovers corruption and outright sin within American politics. The figures of democracy that are so often the ones being protected in Hollywood films (Presidents, Senators, Governors, etc.) are now the ones causing the problem. The archetypes that represent justice and freedom now represent the opposite, and the viewer is forced to see both semi-satirical hypocrisy in these figures as well as irrational and selfish violence.

Joe's wartime experience is another way Ramsay represents the corrupted American spirit, where she contorts the conventional depiction of a wartime hero by representing Joe's

suffering rather than strength, as well as using his war experience to expand on his psyche rather than his physical abilities. Of course, Joe himself represents a sentiment felt by many US veterans, of not being heard and not being seen, detached from reality and tormented by their memories uncompensated. Not only does Ramsay's film undermine the cinematic relationship between violence and freedom, but she contorts the ideological framework between action and actor that gave rise to their conventional relationship.

This comes across strikingly within *YWNRH*, yet nuanced and subtly. Ramsay creates a dialogue between the narrative and its characters that focuses on their mental processing and navigation, rather than physical. Indeed, her previous films have been noted for their character dissection, especially around violence. In reference to her previous film *We Need To Talk About Kevin* (2011), Leah Singer parallels Ramsay's exploration of Eva's (Tilda Swinton) interior space with that of Joe's: "Joe, reliving the horrors he's seen in Gulf War combat and on FBI duty, as well as childhood beatings by a violent father, recalls Swinton's shell-shocked Eva; both suffer from shards of memory that re-emerge unbidden to knife at their conscious minds."<sup>33</sup> Ramsay's concentration on the "conscious minds" of her protagonist is a defining feature of how she re-invents the relationship between violence and cinema. It highlights how violence both does not live only within the immediate action, as well as establishes the narrative within the emotional complexity that surrounds it.

Rather than having enduring action scenes built around slow-motion blood and bullets, granting the viewer every moment of action, *YWNRH* gives the viewer fragmented sections of it, denying a cathartic gaze and stressing all the qualities of violence that can arise in different circumstances. As journalist Anthony Lane states in a 2018 *New Yorker* review; "Joe dispenses

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<sup>33</sup> Leigh Singer, "Killer Joe." (*Sight & Sound* 28, no. 4, April 2018), 35.



justice whenever it is required, but such righteous vengeance brings him no relief; every deed, thanks to Phoenix's frighteningly glum performance, is done with a penitential air."<sup>34</sup> Another film which achieves a similar result — that is bound to an ideologically moment yet transcends it through individual psyches — is Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1999).

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<sup>34</sup> Lane, Anthony. "You Were Never Really Here." (*New Yorker* 94, no. 11, April 30, 2018), 5.

Reflections in War: Individual Experience in *The Thin Red Line*

*The Thin Red Line* is period piece set in World War II, and focuses on the US mission to capture Guadalcanal from the Japanese in the Pacific theater. The film begins by following Private Witt, a soldier who left duty to live on a nearby island with an indigenous community. But after he is found by an American battleship and redeployed, the film follows multiple soldiers and their experience of the mission. As with the first chapter, I will begin this analysis with a singular scene.

About halfway into the film, Malick has just exhibited an extensive battle, ending with a small group of soldiers clearing out a bunker. After exchanging a series of gazes between the Japanese and the Americans at the bunker, Malick moves to the main group. He cuts to a wide shot of Lieutenant Col. Tall, the platoon leader, marching through the smoke of a burnt forest cackling, and shouting “look at ‘em move!” (image 1). He is followed by the young Capt. Gaff, congratulating the young soldier for the attack. There is no music, just the sound of the men moving and the wind through the broken trees. Malick tracks with the two men as they walk through the forest, passing weary soldiers and Japanese prisoners. They stop, surrounded by smoking trees, as they talk about medals for the battalion and for Gaff, which Malick exhibits through a conventional shot counter-shot sequence (image 2 & 3). Tall is ecstatic, while Gaff remains quiet and solemn. Tall decides it's time to move, scanning for the next point of attack, when Gaff interrupts him requesting water for the battalion, as soldiers

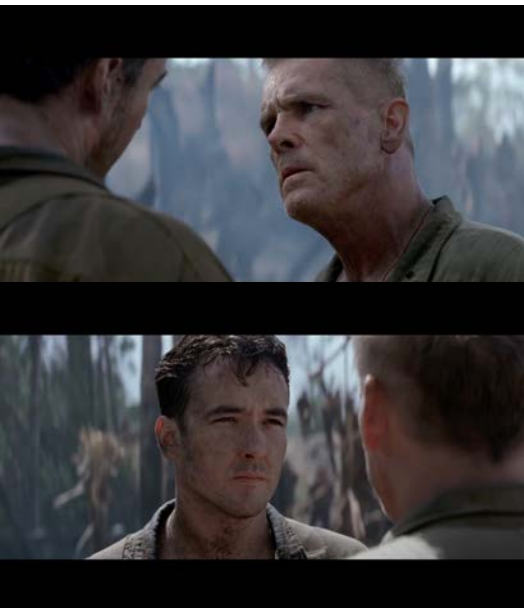
Image 1-3



continue to march by. Malick begins to move in on the two soldiers as their disagreement rises. He cuts back and forth between Gaff's solemn piercing stare, and Tall desperately shouting remarks to gain his approval: "They're all tough boys...I've waited all my life for this!" (image 5). Tall pauses, and after telling Gaff that he is like a son to him (to no avail), he breaks, and screams for runners to fetch water. Angered by his concession, he hollers: "We're going all the way! Nothing's stopping us it's high ground by night fall!"

Malick finally breaks from his two subjects, and cuts to a shot of Capt. Staros whose face resembles Gaff's, silent and worrisome, staring straight (image 6). The direct sound begins to fade, leaving us with the drifting noise of the wind. Malick cuts, seeming to follow Staros' gaze, to a medium shot of a Japanese soldier crouched and naked, looking around the smoldering trees (image 7). The man looks towards the left, and we cut to Cpl. Fife, framed against weary and

Image 4 & 5



dead soldiers as he seems to return the stare (image 8). Malick disconnects sound and image as Fife's voice takes over the soundtrack while he silently looks around, whispering: "you seen many dead people?" Malick remains on Fife's anxious face, surrounded by death, as the bodiless voice of Sgt. Storm replies: "plenty...They're no different than dead dogs...once you get used to the idea." Malick then cuts to the corpse of a Japanese soldier, with his comrade kneeled over him, praying (image 9). Over this shot Storm speaks again; "They're meat kid". The voices fade, as soft music begins to play and Malick reconnects sound and image through the crackling of the smoking forest.



Top left (6), top right (7), bottom left (8), bottom right (9)

We cut again, now to Pvt. Witt, viewing him from a low-angle close-up as he looks down (image 10). Malick then cuts to the subject of Witt's gaze, a close-up shot of a dead Japanese soldier buried within the dirt, with only his face protruding (image 11). The voice of a Japanese soldier speaks over the sound of the burning forest, muttering: "Are you righteous? Kind? Does your confidence lie in this? Are you loved by all? Know that I was too. Do you imagine your sufferings will be less because you loved goodness? Truth?". Malick cuts back to Witt, in the same position warily looking down, then cuts to the forest in flames, and the sun faintly shining through the thick smoke (image 12).

Similar to Ramsay's film, Malick has placed this story and its violence within the space of its survivors, and their experiences of it. The film subtly glides from soldier to soldier in their comprehension of their life in and around the war, creating a web of human fears and curiosities bound together by shots of the surrounding world, that are interspersed with intense violence and grim images. The defining feature of the film in its exploration of this historic moment, is its concentration on and dissection of the plethora of American soldiers introduced into the

narratives. Malick drifts between the subjectivities of several American soldiers, highlighting the multitude of reactions to the destruction they caused. This network allows for the charged experience of World War II to exist within a more reflective space, released from violent spectacles and their perpetual nature in war films.

Malick creates this shift in perspective within the actual film, and indeed in the scene above. It begins with Tall, blazing through announcing their stupendous victory and the medals he hopes to get for the platoon, projecting a stereotype of the glory of war. His thoughts are consumed by a military identity neglected by his superiors, that ignites desperation during his conversation with Capt. Gaff. He treats the war as a means to a promotion, as a means for recognition through victory, rather than as a struggle for survival. His ambition for more battle, ordering his men to move forward, recalls the American standard of war films to move from conflict to conflict. Indeed, for almost the entire battle, Tall remains at the communications center, altogether removed from the violence. Gaff, who is fresh out of this devastating battle where he watched his friends die, cannot move on to the next attack without tending to those who still remain. The event that the young soldier just experienced gives no value to medals and recognition. In the face of Gaff, Tall's desperation for military prowess becomes increasingly stale.

Indeed, at this moment Malick contrasts Tall's position of conquest with the platoon's very real experience, moving into their individual recognition of the events that occurred. He cuts from Tall's tunneled position, and begins to float between the perspectives of different

Image 10-12



soldiers. We move from Staros, to the crouching man, then to Fife as they all quietly survey the scene. We watch a Japanese soldier pray over his dead friend, overlaid with Fife and Storm's past discussion on death. Malick moves close to Witt's face, isolating his exchange with the buried man while a bodiless voice tells us it's all useless. Tall's military and honorary focus becomes small in the image of the decaying bodies, and the powerful words from the bodiless voice. His obsession with the overall mission, with victory, is offset by the direct experience of these soldiers. The binary of the war, of good vs. evil, is disassembled as the voice seems to tell us 'all that you are I am too', and rather than connecting this moment to American victory, Malick uses the voice to highlight its inevitable damage: "Do you imagine your suffering will be less because you loved goodness? Truth?" Winning or losing becomes insignificant as the voice tells us that victory or defeat, we will all suffer. Malick then cuts to the battlefield in flames, and the distant sun shrouded by thick clouds of smoke, visually describing the imminent loss for all through the destruction of nature. The loss on both sides becomes an element for rumination in the soldiers, founded in the individual interactions between the infantry and the wasteland. The aftermath of the battle provides no sense of comfort or triumph, and Malick shows us disturbing images that will no doubt linger with us as well as the soldiers.

Using this technique within a war film works against the conventional approach to such a narrative, where each soldier is caught up within the political rhetoric surrounding the war and are at its mercy in the battlefield. These films focus on the connection between freedom and the fighting at hand, between the war and American democracy, embodied in a few elite soldiers who become an extension of the military rhetoric that justifies their actions. In their book *American War Cinema and Media since Vietnam*, Patricia Keeton and Peter Scheckner elaborate on this,

“simple ideological paradigm: Americans are the good guys battling to save civilization”.<sup>35</sup> This theme is central to war films because it represents American war cinema and its social ideology in its most simple and cohesive form; violence for an objective good.

Such films offer an overwhelming sense of satisfaction through historical victories, easily immersible by extensive spectacles of violence and close-up cinematic experiences of weaponry and battle. It is a fight for freedom that regardless of the narrative and its contents, will inevitably end with a win for the good guys. Their suffering is seen as the ultimate sacrifice, and live or die they are immortalized through their fight for their country. As Kolker states: “Heroism in American film conventionally displays an individual who can conquer oppressive odds and adversity; if the hero loses, the struggle of his fight...transcends the victory of his adversaries”<sup>36</sup>. This transcendence offers the perfect gateway into brutal and gory battles, that the audience can seamlessly enjoy because of their symbolism. The suffering and paranoia that are imbedded within war become overshadowed by emotional glory, and so the viewer can enjoy what ensues without losing any security in the outcome of events.

However, in the wake of the Vietnam war this cinematic paradigm around the genre was transformed, as the piercing loss and its psychological damage permeated throughout the American public:

“America’s intervention in Vietnam was soon understood as a discretionary intervention in a domestic civil conflict...future wars, like the one in Vietnam, could not be defended on moral or political grounds as threats to the homeland.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Patricia Keeton, Peter Sheckner, *American War Cinema and Media since Vietnam: Politics, Ideology, and Class* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 11.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness : Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman* (Cary: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2011), 35.

<sup>37</sup> Patricia Keeton, Peter Sheckner, *American War Cinema and Media since Vietnam: Politics, Ideology, and Class* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 11.

The conflated and conflicted relationship that America had with Vietnam could not mesh with the ideologically packed representation of war in Hollywood cinema. The ulterior motives of the US government became increasingly present, both within depictions of warfare, as well as the wars themselves, causing the military to lose its one dimensional position; “The cinematic iconic vision of exceptional men of courage taking on the barbarian hordes is probably over.”<sup>38</sup> However, this shift was very much demarcated by the post-Vietnam era and the ensuing wars. World War II, what Sheckner and Keeton describe as “the quintessential good war” remained in the paradigm of good vs. evil, men of courage vs. barbarian hordes, and indeed thrived in it. Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), for example, released in the midst of a string of American interventionist wars, seemed to return to this paradigm with overwhelming success. Despite the increasing transparency in America’s new military imperial agenda, the good war narrative and its place in WWII was holding firm.

This is in part what brings Malick’s *The Thin Red Line* to a very interesting and provocative standpoint. His depiction of the soldiers and their psyche is altogether removed from the narrative bind of “the good war”. He attaches the interior conflict of war that is mostly highlighted in post-Vietnam war cinema within WWII. “Doubt, anxiety, madness, and post-traumatic stress belong in Vietnam, not amongst the brave fighting men of World War II”.<sup>39</sup> However, Malick’s film should not be understood as a response to this new era of war cinema, as *The Thin Red Line* is based off of the book by James Jones (1962), and so is firmly rooted within the second world war. Rather, Malick is reclaiming the inevitable ambiguities and issues of

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<sup>38</sup> Patricia Keeton, Peter Sheckner, *American War Cinema and Media since Vietnam: Politics, Ideology, and Class* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 10.

<sup>39</sup> Ian-Malcolm Rijdsdijk, “Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*: Some Historical Considerations.” (*Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 41, no. 1, June 3, 2011), 42.



warfare, that are clearly present in the book, yet becomes lost within cinematic representations of World War II. Indeed the foundation of the film within Jones' book attaches it to the direct experience of individual soldiers in this war, rather than to any national narrative.

This allows for Malick's characters to break out of their symbolic position within American idealism and exist on a personal level, that is separate from the war and yet still intrinsically affected by it. He enters the war through his characters, and uses their perspectives and identities to frame the narrative: "the film focuses more on the fragmentary subjectivities of the soldiers than the coordinated efforts of a group of soldiers towards a tactically and ideologically established end".<sup>40</sup> It removes the dominance of patriotism from the film and rather creates a space for meditation on the human spirit through these soldiers. It becomes a chaotic yet rhythmic struggle between the individuality of its characters and their assimilation into a national effort for their country.

This struggle is wholly manifested through Malick's signature stream of consciousness structure, found in many of his films. His use of slow-paced existential contemplations, laid on top of stunning shots of nature and the world, offers a reflective space that opens up its characters by hearing them in (what is presumed to be) their most intimate and vulnerable space, their minds. *The New World* (2005) and *To The Wonder* (2012) are two films in which Malick uses this structure. In the *Thin Red Line*, however, Malick expands this structure onto a majority of the film's characters. Instead of focusing on one or two protagonists, Malick grants a group of American soldiers this reflective, vulnerable space. He jumps between the psyche of each individual, entwining their mental strifes and converging them in the viewer. The disconnected sound and their fragments of memory break down past and present, working simultaneously to

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<sup>40</sup> Ian-Malcolm Rijdsdijk, "Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*: Some Historical Considerations." (*Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 41, no. 1, June 3, 2011), 36.

construct the identity of each soldier past the immediate physical experience. The viewer witnesses the struggle between individual and nation permeate throughout all the characters and the narrative. Rather than using the historical moment as the foundation of the story and its figures, Malick uses his characters to initiate the historical scene and the film's narrative, projecting the interior spaces of these figures outwards, and attaching existential qualities of life to their experience.

Malick establishes this in the beginning of the film. We open to the sound of the forest, which is slowly consumed by a single musical note droning on. As the music rises, an image comes as well; A crocodile slowly submerging itself within the water, which then dissolves into shots of a tropical forest. The music begins to fade as we look around the canopy, and the sound of the forest takes over again. Private Witt's voice then slowly overlays the scene, rhetorically asking about the "war within nature" (image 13 & 14). The next 10 minutes of the film follow Witt and his stream of consciousness around the island that he has taken refuge on.

Through a dream-like montage Malick shows us the community of indigenous people that live there and Witt's interactions with them, interspersing flashbacks of his home with images of the natives on the island (image 15-17). Then, Witt spots an American battleship

sailing by, and with his re-introduction into the army, comes the viewer's introduction into the war. Indeed, we are not introduced through the symbolic fight for American freedom, and Malick

Image 13-15



does not use grandiose notions of justice and sacrifice to set the stage for the film. We simply are introduced to Witt as he ponders his life and nature on an island in the South Pacific.

Image 16 & 17



The beginning of *The Thin Red Line* can be compared with Spielberg's film of the same year, *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), to gain a greater understanding of how Malick is subverting the classic American approach to war films and the role of violence within it. Spielberg's film begins with an extremely symbolic image, an American flag waving in the wind. He then cuts to the older Private Ryan as he tracks down the grave of Captain Miller (the man who came to find him) in the Normandy American Cemetery, one of the most historically famous graveyards and one of the major sacrificial

symbols of WWII. Ryan is followed by his family, an emblem of what the war was for and the sacred piece of American society: "it is what the men are fighting to preserve"<sup>41</sup>. Indeed, by beginning the film long after its subject the ideological imperatives of American victory have already been imbedded within the film. The war-time violence can be gory and extensive, as victory has been assured from the start in the image of a veteran and his thriving family.

As Private Ryan reaches the grave, he breaks down, and Spielberg moves in on his eyes, dissolving into his memory of the war. Spielberg then cuts to the infamous Czech hedgehogs on Normandy Beach, with the infamous date June 6, 1944; D-Day. The film is 3 minutes and 40 seconds in, and is already placed within the conventional American ideology that surrounds the "good war" narrative. We have been introduced to Private Ryan mostly through his connection to the war and to American patriotism (besides for Spielberg's recognition of the French site of the

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<sup>41</sup> Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness : Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman* (Cary: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2011), 303.

memorial). Indeed, as we are introduced to the platoon, their existence is predicated on their position in the war. We mostly understand who they are by how they react in combat. This trend continues throughout the film, as the entire narrative revolves around a platoon's sacrifice to get one man home, immortalized in the image of Captain Miller's grave; "he becomes a Spielbergian Christ surrogate, sacrificing himself for a larger purpose."<sup>42</sup>

Spielberg is no doubt one of the leading figures of American cinema, and *Saving Private Ryan* retains the same title within the American war film genre. Kolker creates a distinct connection between "Spielbergian film" and "American film", stating: "while he may no longer be a central figure, he remains a touchstone of contemporary filmmaking."<sup>43</sup> Indeed, Scheckner and Keeton highlight this film as "the quintessential Hollywood war movie that validates personal heroism, loyalty, duty, and patriotism."<sup>44</sup> Its influence is so strong due to Spielberg's ability to envelope the audience within a story and assimilate their beliefs to its message.

"Spielberg and American cinema in general achieves a number of results: it provides narrative closure without having to reach any definitive conclusions... it gives men an excuse for their behavior; and, most obviously, it hails the redeemed character (and presumably the spectator) into the ideologies of testing, heroism, love, marriage, and family—without the audience having to act on anything but their ability to look at the screen."<sup>45</sup>

He is so close to the popular conception of American cinema because he masterfully does what Hollywood looks to do with every film, to create a semi-comedic, semi-emotional story that

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<sup>42</sup> Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness : Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman* (Cary: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2011), 303.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness : Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman* (Cary: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2011), 262.

<sup>44</sup> Patricia Keeton, Peter Scheckner, *American War Cinema and Media since Vietnam: Politics, Ideology, and Class* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 112.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness : Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman* (Cary: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2011), 341.

attaches all viewers to one ideology, and then leads them toward an ending with the utmost completion and satisfaction. “American filmmaking, Spielbergian filmmaking, still tends to affirm the isolation of the spectator within the spectacle on the screen. It is called entertainment, but it is in fact ideology reproducing itself.”<sup>46</sup>

Of course, to say that *Saving Private Ryan* is merely American war ideology incarnate would be misinformed. The film no doubt represents real struggle and quite accurately, and it highlights the strain between individual identity and national effort through the vulnerability of its soldiers. The images of violence are not simply to excite the viewer on a surface level, and indeed leave them quite disturbed past the end of the film. However, though these themes are present, the film is so focused on the historical moment within an American historical context that it cannot fully exist as anything else. It is so deeply tied to the American war effort that any notions of individuality or specificity becomes lost in the overarching ideology. Despite the realistic sequences of violence, they are inevitably framed through American victory and a monotone sacrifice for freedom.

What is so powerful and refreshing about *The Thin Red Line*, is how Malick explores his characters outside of the historical context and its ties to the war, without neglecting them. His character exploration manifests on several levels, just one of them being the soldiers’ development within battles. Where Spielberg’s film engages with these characters in a very realistic war-time experience, Malick focuses on the experience above all else, and how these characters process it mentally. “Rather than confirming the revival of the World War II model as seen in *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Thin Red Line* moves from the initial mythic pattern of

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<sup>46</sup> Robert Kolker, *A Cinema of Loneliness : Penn, Stone, Kubrick, Scorsese, Spielberg, Altman* (Cary: Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2011), 348.

consolidation to the psychological pattern of contradiction”.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the setting of each film is significant to this balance between consolidation and contradiction. Malick’s film is set in the Pacific theater, while Spielberg’s is in the European theater. The national narrative surrounding the two areas directly informs the viewers relationship to the film. The US consciousness around the European theater is much more concrete, and is more suitable for a binary of good vs. evil. America’s intervention against Germany has become a quintessential example of American freedom being injected abroad, and the vanquishing of an objective enemy in the Nazi party and its leader. Despite the ambiguities and confusion present in both theaters (and both films), the European one becomes defined by an American mission to free the world from: “tyranny and oppression” (as the Chief of Staff writes in *Saving Private Ryan*), an overarching message that Spielberg uses to comfort the viewer within the chaos.

The Pacific theater, however, contains much more ambiguity, and the national narrative that surrounds it is much less prominent. Outside of the attack on Pearl Harbor and the two nuclear attacks, the Pacific campaign is largely unbroadcasted. Despite these events being the beginning and end of the American war effort, the campaign in the Pacific is not where this effort is defined. Likewise, the internal and external American response to Japan’s attack becomes secondary to the rest of the war. The Japanese-American internment camps and the absolute massacre of Japan from American bombing (excluding of the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki) are wholly exterior to how Americans remember the war.

The murkiness of this history is a major piece of how *The Thin Red Line* explores its narrative. Much like the soldiers, the viewer has a less definitive understanding of the overarching goal outside of retaliation. Confusion takes over the narrative, as right and wrong

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<sup>47</sup> Ian-Malcolm Rijdsdijk, “Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*: Some Historical Considerations.” (*Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 41, no. 1, June 3, 2011), 30.

become lost in the overarching chaos of the soldiers' experiences: "the questions posed by the film in voiceover are muttered doubts about the spiritual cleansing of the national character through most World War II revival films" (Risdisjsk).

*The Thin Red Line* is no doubt a war film, filled with gruesome violence and loss, but it transcends the historical moment and its violent baggage to try and understand what it is like to not just be an American soldier in war, but to be a human in war. As Michael O'Sullivan's review in *The Washington Post* puts it (although limitedly): "'The Thin Red Line' is the thinking person's 'Saving Private Ryan.'"<sup>48</sup> The "thinking" that O'Sullivan is referring to works in tandem with the thinking required to bring violence out of its one-dimensional spectacular quality. *The Thin Red Line* is removed from this convention and has been placed within a space of reflection, for both the viewer and the characters, denying violence to be detached from its direct consequence. The battles do not simply wash over us during the film, because Malick deliberately imbeds moments where we and the soldiers *focus* on their consequences. It shifts the narrative away from its cleansing potential: "reminding the viewer of the trauma of conflict for everyone involved".<sup>49</sup>

Even outside of the battle scenes, Malick strives to create a space for contemplation through his examination of the soldiers. Witt's meditative introduction is no doubt mimicked as we are introduced to multiple other soldiers through this same device. An example is after panning around the battleship that Witt has boarded, Malick moves into its belly, bouncing around the sleeping quarters full of high-strung men preparing for the assault (image 18). We meet Private Bell, once a General within the engineer corps., who gave up everything to be home

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<sup>48</sup> Michael O'Sullivan, "Red Line': Above and Beyond" (*The Washington Post*, January 8, 1999).

<sup>49</sup> Ian-Malcolm Rijdsdijk, "Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*: Some Historical Considerations." (*Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 41, no. 1, June 3, 2011), 42.

with his wife. Now drafted as a private in the army, he holds an impartial attitude towards his

Image 18 & 19



rank and the military system. After meeting him on the boat, Malick moves into his memories of his wife. The images of their affection mix with Bell's disconnected voice, showing that it is not simply an indifference towards the war, but an insignificance in comparison to his love for her, who acts as the symbol for his stable identity and his calm attitude: "why should I be afraid to die? I belong to you"(image 19).

The weight of these meditations also arise from how Malick positions the audience. In many war films of the late 20th and early 21st century, there is a habit to remove the audience from a single position and allow them to view the war from multiple points, moving in and out of certain battles and certain debates. Indeed this is a major tendency of Spielberg films in general. In Malick's film, however, he not only remains within the space of the characters we are introduced to, but he unfolds the narrative and all its information along with the characters' experience of it. In other words, the perspective of the audience never breaks from the perspective of the soldiers. We gain as much information as they do. In the first battle on Guadalcanal, we don't see the enemy until they have, only gaining omnipotent glimpses of the battering machine gun. We jump between the soldiers caught up in the battlefield, sharing the experience of receiving orders and watching bodies fall. This tethering between the audience and the soldiers allows for the space of the film to focus on their direct experiences. We are never removed from their position, and so become fully immersed into the surreal, chaotic space that they are enduring, only breaking from the action when they can, or when Malick moves into a more internal and liminal space. The



comfort of impending American victory becomes moot within such an experiential narrative, as the audience's relationship is directly tied to the soldiers'. The violence within cannot be seamlessly attached to a national narrative, as Malick moves us around multiple perspectives, using the positions of the soldiers to plot the multitude of experiences, rather than assimilating them to any singular one.

Malick takes this perspectival shift further by embracing Witt's eyes as a dominant space of reflection, which provides him with the spiritual foundation that begins on the island. Throughout most of the narrative, Witt seems to maintain a compassionate look of curiosity, representing his partial transcendence from the immediate world. He assumes a guardian angel figure by constantly volunteering for the most dangerous missions so as to look over the other soldiers (image 20 & 21). While being reprimanded on the ship, Witt himself says "I have seen another world", alluding to his transcendence from the war that has consumed the world he comes from. His point of view embodies the narrative struggle between individual and nation, between the immediate and the lasting, the physical and the spiritual. His meditation on the world brings forth a discussion of human nature that uses the war as a reference point. Malick uses this dynamic between Witt and the audience to visually open up a reflective space. In multiple moments Malick follows Witt with the camera as he moves through his surroundings, using classic shot counter-shot as he looks upon bodies, children, plants, and dirt. These shots are then overlaid with individual thoughts from different soldiers, connecting Witt's visual rumination with the psyche of each soldier, as subjectivities mix together.

Image 20 &amp; 21



Malick's use of composition, editing, and montage, also detach the film from conventional violent depictions, without discarding them altogether. *The Thin Red Line's* pacing is noticeably slow, and works counter to the fast-paced conventions of American war cinema. In multiple scenes of battle, Malick pauses to allow emotional development between the soldiers. He takes great patience in enveloping his audience within the overall stream of consciousness, breaking from the physical space through disconnected voices that drift across the scenes, and using shots that inform their words. Fife and Storms conversation on bodies, for example, is contrasted by the sight of the Japanese soldier praying over his friend. Their dissociation from the lost souls is injected with an image of spiritualism and religion.

Malick also uses formal tactics to represent moments that are caught up within the war, yet transcend it, or to simply show the world exterior to the battles. After a vicious counterattack against the platoon, we closely watch a young soldier submerged in the grass gently touch a Sensitive Plant and watch it close (image 22). During the same battle, Malick cuts to a baby bird dying in the dirt, dogs eating bodies, and light shining through smoky trees, representing nature within the confines of war (image 23-25). There are also several moments within the battle scenes that Malick simply shows an empty field or a cloud in the evening sky, punctuating the intensity with surreal moments of bliss.



Top left (22), top right (23), bottom left (24), bottom right (25)

The pacing and editing help to remove the narrative from a one-dimensional perspective on war, allowing time for reflection, as Malick points his lens towards things that are affected by the war but are not a part of it. He focuses the viewer in on the individual through multiple contexts — in themselves, in a group, and in nature— by moving in and out of the soldiers’ subjectivities and connecting them with the world around them. The effect is a liminal world for the viewer to exist in, where they are caught within the ebb and flow of these soldiers’ emotional stability as they weave in and out of the physical world and the war. Surreal shots of faces against the dirt and deep blue images of the moon, mixed with the slow words asking about life, death and God, allows for the emotions and psyche of these individuals to shine through above all else. The narrative often lacks a grounded reality, jumping from soldier to soldier, thought to thought, allowing for the interior spaces of these characters to become projected onto the landscape, swirling together the interior with the exterior.

Similar to Ramsay’s film, this liminal space grants these soldiers ambiguity and complexity. Much like Joe, these characters allude to a Hollywood stereotype, yet are nonetheless “fallible” men, existing on multiple levels of emotion and vulnerability. This is

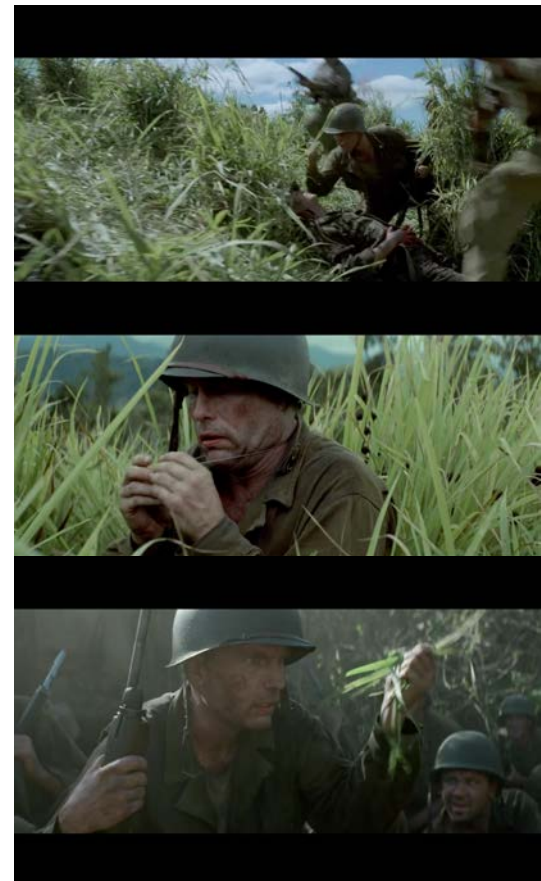
crucial to exploring the narrative outside of American conventions. Vulnerability in and of itself is a major part of most war films. It gives space for suspense in battle, allowing for the characters to remain mortal and have the war seem very real. However, in most American war films this vulnerability exists only within the space of the war and more specifically in battle sequences. In other words, the vulnerability of these men solely exists within moments where their existence is threatened. It is in the barrage of bullets and blood that these figures show fear, and a fear that rests primarily on the physical. Malick refutes this by bringing fear and vulnerability into all parts of the narrative. The soldiers we encounter feel conflicted from the start, and even before we witness any fighting, we can already sense their vulnerability through their words and the reflective moments that Malick allows the audience. The fear we gain from Bell is not from the threat of death but of the threat of losing his wife; Tall is not threatened by the battle, but rather the idea of not gaining anything from it; and as Fife looks over the dead bodies he is terrified, not by the threat to himself, but by the carnage that now sits in senseless stillness. This grants the viewer a more realistic perspective on how taxing war is on the individual, as well as how reactions fluctuate. The direct experience of these soldiers defines how we understand the film, and so grander notions of justice and victory cannot provide cleansing.

The permeation of this vulnerability brings these figures out of a one-dimensional character trait and establishes a complexity that is often ignored within major war films, or is reserved for the leading white man who will inevitably conquer it or go down with it in a blaze of glory immemorial. Furthermore, the sense of vulnerability that Malick establishes is not solely one of weakness, a convention of the war film. Rather, the vulnerability and degradation we see taking over these figures is based around an assault on their identity and relationship to the world, their existence past a physical level.

An example of this is during the first barrage of mortars, as Malick moves around the scene showing the battle from different perspectives. His camera glides along the bloody grass, and we pass an anonymous soldier shouting to another soldier on the ground; “Get up Nicky you’re still alive! Keep moving, keep moving!” (image 26). The glimpse of this soldier reflects a sense of courage and perseverance in the sight of battle, conventional heroics that we expect from a war film. However, as Malick continues to move around the space, he returns to this same soldier, now submerged in grass shakily looking around. After another slow motion montage of the battle, he again returns to this soldier, who is now fumbling his dog tag as he tries to read it (image 27). This image represents a man who has lost his sense of reality, turning to his dog tags, his identity physicalized within the war, as a means to ground him.

Image 26-28

After more harrowing images of the battle, along with a discussion of leaving a soldier to die, he jumps into the trench where the rest of the platoon is. He feverishly looks around at the soldiers, yanks some grass up, and says: “that’s what you are...that’s all there is for us” (image 28). His rant continues, erratic and aggressive, as he screams: “I don’t know who’s in charge! But don’t let him go!”. He finally lets go of his weapon, and through a thick New York accent (a familiar sound in the unfamiliar confusion) says: “I’m outta here!” Later, Malick returns to him, walking along the bodies saying: “Show me how to see things the way you do...we’re just dirt”. The development of this soldier’s character represents a deep psychological degradation in the sight of the war. His transition from screaming commander to wary survivor represents how this



moment does not only destroy some people's existence, but for the survivors their idea of existence, of living, becomes degraded. Malick also represents the strain between national duty and individual identity, as the soldier transitions from pushing his men forward, to realizing that he himself is just dirt. This strain is a major part of how Malick depicts the emotional and mental crisis that the characters go through, as the intense warfare and the demands from their superiors crash against their drifting psyche. It again shifts the film towards a very existential perspective that counters the spectacle of the battle and the violence that ensues.

In the midst of the first battle, we follow a heated argument between Capt. Staros and Lt. Col. Tall, where Staros refuses to send his men to die by a frontal assault, despite it being Tall's direct order. His refusal of Tall's command comes out of his instinctual reaction to protect his men; a fear for their lives, but not one of weakness. However, later into the film Tall dismisses Staros from duty, simply saying, "you're too soft". His opinion of Staros is built around his ability to follow orders, a one-dimensional perspective enveloped in American military standards ("If I say jump you say how high"). These exchanges bring the characters out of the conventional American depiction, assimilated to a national narrative, and grant them humanity (both beautiful and ugly) in the sight of heavily politicized and historicized event.

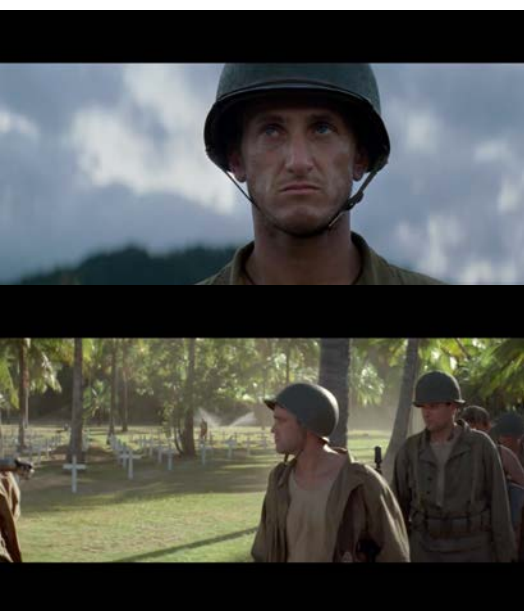
Even Tall's character, the embodiment of the American military standard, is not a one-dimensional war dog. As the film progresses his desperation for glory grants pity, where his life has been manipulated to be dedicated to justified death, either in the enemy or in his own men. Indeed, after finally taking the hill and completing his mission, Malick frames him sitting alone in the ruined Japanese camp, and he subsequently disappears from the rest of the narrative (image 29).

Image 29



The end of the film remains within the space of the soldiers and their experience. After private Witt dies and his body is buried, Malick moves to the American basecamp where the new Captain addresses the men. During this scene Malick attaches the viewer to Welsh, a familiar figure in the new recruits. Over the direct sound of the scene, as Malick focuses on Welsh's face, his voice-over begins: "Everything's a lie...They just keep coming..." (image 30). We sit with Welsh as he watches the new recruits get prepared for battle, sharing his disdain in the wake of

Image 30 & 31



the devastating narrative. In this moment Malick is unfolding Welsh's dark realization of his country and the war, the final strain between his own experience and the national effort. As Welsh looks around at the soldiers, we hear his voice again: "They either want you dead or in their lie". Malick then dissolves to the platoon marching back to the boats, framed against the graves in the sun. A tableaux of the dichotomy that Welsh just explained (image 31). His voice returns over the ragged soldiers: "Only one thing a man can do, find something that's his...make an island for himself". In the last words of Sgt. Welsh, Malick has succinctly placed the idea of home that has kept these men going. A piece of their life external to the nation

and its lie, their own island. This is reminiscent of Witt, the transcendent figure of the film, who lived above the war and his national duty, who we indeed met on an island that he found sanctuary on.

Malick then follows the soldiers to the boat, as we hear Private Train describe the life that he is going to live to another soldier. We then move into Train's internal space, as Malick moves around the boat, showing the soldiers quietly looking out (image 32). He asks about the brother



that he once walked with, and the darkness and light that could be of the same mind, the same face. There is no rejoicing, no exulting music, there is simply quite against the sound of the waves and Train's muttered words. We watch from the end of the boat as Guadalcanal disappears from view, and Malick returns to the island we met Witt on, idyllic and calm. He ends with a young coconut tree submerged in the sand against the water (image 33). The ending to *The Thin Red Line* no doubt captures the essence of the film, as a surreal contemplation of life and light in a world of violent darkness. It does not move outside of the space we have existed in, and only alludes to a future through Train and the young boys going home. We know life will go on, but we remain on the shore of that island, along with Witt, the dead, and the memories from the survivors who will be forever changed by this experience.

Comparing this ending to that of *Saving Private Ryan*, we can see how Spielberg gives his audience a distinct sense of closure in victory. The American planes swoop over the bridge dropping bombs of victory, as the young Corporal Upham finds his regeneration in killing the unarmed German captive he previously advocated for. Captain Miller says his last words to Private Ryan, "earn this" and after much grief over the lost father figure, we return to the old Ryan in the present, looking over Miller's grave. For both his sake and the audience, he now provides words of comfort and closure to Miller's grave, saying that he never forgot what he said, and that: "I hope that at least in your eyes I've lived a good life". His wife comes over, and assures him that he did, as private Ryan gives one last symbolic salute, and Spielberg cranes over the grave. He then dissolves to the final image, which is where we started; an American flag

Image 32 &amp; 33





waving in the wind to the sound of strings and brass. It is an ending overwhelmed with closure, for the audience, for Ryan, and even for Miller, as the waving flag represents the victory for America against, “tyranny and oppression”. Where Malick leaves his audience in the immediate space of the narrative, in the thoughts of God and of life against the south pacific beach, Spielberg leaves his audience in the image of America, of the fight for freedom by the country that we are told most represents it.

Again, this does not discredit the narrative that Spielberg created. *Saving Private Ryan* holds the chaos of war close to his characters and their internal space, bringing the viewer into their degradation with conflicted emotions. However, the transcendence of the film that is found in Ryan and American victory halts the transformation that the chaos began. In other words, our image of the war does not really change, or is at least not left ambiguous for the viewer. We finish where we began, as Spielberg zooms out from the immediate war and attaches it to its patriotic cause, showing us what the sacrifice was for. *The Thin Red Line*, however, shows a distinct change in how war is viewed, both for the audience and the characters, and indeed does not allude to its goal. Welsh’s disdain acts as a different view of the American military, one that manifested through the war. As we are on the boat at the end, Train talks about the life he is going to live, and how this experience has made it clear for him: “I’m young but I’ve lived plenty of life, and I’m ready to start living it good”. We not only remain within the immediate space of the war, but through the discrete thoughts of the soldiers, bound together through sound and montage, we gain a different perception of what this historical moment was. It remains in this history, but extends into the present through universal pieces of humanity.

Malick demonstrates this transformation within Witt during the film. After taking the Japanese basecamp, and witnessing a gruesome treatment of prisoners by the US soldiers,

Malick cuts to Witt squatting, pouring water down a leaf with a slight smile on his face (image 34). Malick cuts from the water in the pool to Witt bathing in the waterfall of the island we met him on, as the past sound of the island (the song the indigenous people sing) plays over the soundtrack (image 35). Malick cuts around the idyllic island, showing peace and tranquility. The music slowly fades, and we return to Witt crouched over the pool, mournfully staring into the water in his hands as it drips down (image 36). This montage of Witt and the island visually represents what has been explored throughout the previous battles.

Image 34-36



Witt has been the solid rock of spirituality within the film, and this moment tells us that even he, in his peace, has been changed by the war. The imagery of water by the pool and on the island connects the two places, symbolizing Witt's peaceful relationship with the island that has re-imagined life and the world for him, expressed through his innocent grin. But as we leave the island and return to Witt, his expression becomes somber, and the water leaving his hands becomes the visual expression for the life that he cannot have with this island. His memory of it will always be devastated by the surrounding war. It visualizes words from *Private Train* that overlaid the previous battle, of the evil that is: "robbing us of light and life...mocking us with the sight of what we might have known". From beginning to end, it is a film of reflection and perspective in the sight of violence, within a historically and politically confined narrative.

Despite the detail and patience that Malick takes in *The Thin Red Line*, there are indeed issues with the film that negatively effect its ability to demonstrate American war cinema from a more intimate and vulnerable perspective. Malick is well known for authenticity in his films, his greatest example being his use of Native American actors in *The New World*, and financing an Algonquin language course for them to accurately represent the natives who unfortunately came in contact with early European colonists. *The Thin Red Line* represents the same, as Malick would have shot all of the film on Guadalcanal (A large part of it was shot in Queensland, Australia) if not for major production difficulties, and indeed hired Melanesian actors to play the indigenous roles.

It is not so much an issue of authenticity in production, but more an issue of respect in the narrative. It is the role of the natives within the narrative scheme of life, nature, god, and death, that raises issues. In Malick's exploration and depiction of nature, he seems to include the native people of the area within this exploration. This initiates of course in the beginning of the film, as Witt's idyllic paradise lies within a fold of water, plants, animals, and the community he is taking refuge in. Of course, this moment is located in Witt's perspective rather than acting as an extension of the director's gaze. Later on however, outside of any individual perspective, Malick creates a similar sentiment. As the soldiers are marching to battle on Guadalcanal, they pass by a sole native man walking the opposite direction, who seems to take no notice to their presence. In the theme of nature outside of the war yet affected by it, this surreal figure neatly fits in. The film's depiction of the native population ultimately seems to be influenced by the Rousseauian idea of the "noble savage".<sup>50</sup> Their position exterior to the events seems to represent them as a population "untainted" by the world-consuming war. Their presence in the film alludes to a sense

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<sup>50</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Donald A. Cress, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (Hackett Pub. Co., 1992) 26-27.

of purity and innocence, a problematic tendency of western ideology when encountering those outside of its dominion.

Nonetheless, Malick's ability to pierce the hegemonic veil of such an ideologically packed moment is noteworthy. *The Thin Red Line* represents a shift away from stylized violence and national narratives, in an area of film that has increasingly relied on them. The film creates specificity through characters that are deeply human, within moments of profound reflection. At the same time, it moves into vast and limitless spaces of spirituality, light, and energy, all of which come together within a realistic and physical war-time experience. The film is steeped in violence, yet Malick's focus on the soldiers' experience realigns its role for the viewer. Rather than working as the point of engagement with the audience, and as the foundation of the narrative, it becomes the catalyst for opening up the characters and deconstructing their identity, both in their own eyes and that of the American military system. Indeed, the film is hard to follow, and somewhat open ended, yet it's ability to engage the audience within such a chaotic atmosphere represents a reframing of the American war narrative. For the viewer, it provokes reflection and debate through ambiguity, within a historic event that has increasingly been defined and unfolded from one position, through an objective story of good and evil: "As an event grows more distant in time, so the memory hardens particular aspects and lets slip others, providing the impetus for the generation of myths, which sacrifice individual experiences to a collective narrative."<sup>51</sup>

The final chapter of this project will be focused on Alex Rivera's *Sleep Dealer* (2008). Much like Malick's film, Rivera is breaking down the objective story of good and evil that is

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<sup>51</sup> Ian-Malcolm Rijdsdijk, "Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*: Some Historical Considerations." (*Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 41, no. 1, June 3, 2011), 34.

projected onto the US military endeavors. He uses individual experience to connect the two sides of the binary, so as to exemplify the violence the rhetoric justifies and consequently creates.

Deconstructing Violence on “the other”: Perspectives in *Sleep Dealer*

*Sleep Dealer* is a sci-fi film set around the borderlands between Mexico and the US, in a future where this border is fully closed from migration into the US (although Americans can go into Mexico). In this futuristic world, the global economy is built around a form of virtual labor where workers remotely control robots all over the world. Metal pieces are injected into one's body (called nodes), and then electrified needles are placed within these metal sockets, connecting the worker to these robots. In VR fashion, their movements become mimicked by a robot thousands of miles away. Much like the real world, this labor practice is done both legitimately — as is the case for US soldiers and their government funded job — and illegally, where people must go to blackmarket exchanges to get them implanted and then find work.

15 minutes into the film, we are sitting with Memo (the protagonist) and his brother, as they flip through futuristic TV shows at their Uncle's house in Oaxaca, Mexico. They come to a show just starting, that they both know. Its logo spells out *DRONES!*, with the “O” being replaced with crosshairs, and an American flag waving in the background. A middle-aged white American man comes onto the screen, and in a cool tone says: “This show contains depictions of graphic violence against evil-doers. If you have any young children at home, you won't want them to miss it.” (image 1). Rivera cuts from the TV to the brothers as they chuckle at the joke. The show begins with a drone shot over a dam: “The southern sector water supply is in constant crises, and dams all around the world are a security risk for the companies that build them, and often come under attack by legions of aqua-terrorists”. On screen we see a woman in a black ski-mask with a headset on, tightly framed, with CGI fire billowing at the bottom of the screen (image 2). Rivera holds on the TV as the host explains how these companies are forced to fight back.

The show then shifts to a singular individual, Rudy Ramirez: “a rookie drone pilot who works protecting the assets of Del Rio water”. During his introduction the silhouette of a virtual crowd cheering replaces the flames on screen (image 3). We gain a brief backstory on how both Ramirez’s mother and father were in the military, as he says with a childlike smile: “I’m following in their footsteps”. A bodiless voice explains the mechanisms of Ramirez’s aircraft, as he plugs himself into the drone system and takes flight (image 4). The location of the drone comes on screen, and Rivera cuts back to Memo as his brother says: “dude...that looks like Santa Ana”, their home town. The host then explains his mission: “eliminate a terrorist-intercept which was spotted last night”, and an image of Memo’s house comes on screen. Rivera cuts to a close-up of Memo’s face, as he realizes that his hobby of hacking into random communication systems like he was the night before, has serious consequences (image 5). Over his terrified look Memo’s internal voice says, “no way” before Rivera cuts back to the host, now surrounded by an explosion, saying: “and blow the hell out of the bad guys”. Rivera cuts back to Memo as he whimpers, “Papa” and runs out the house.

The rest of the scene is split between multiple perspectives, that of Memo and his brother running back to the house; their father in the house; Ramirez piloting; and the drone’s view, which doubles as the view of the show’s audience. From the drone’s perspective, we watch Ramirez blow up the house, and through a virtual frame surrounded by a virtual audience, we watch Memo’s father crawl out of the doorway. Ramirez hesitates, as he looks into the eyes of

Image 1-3

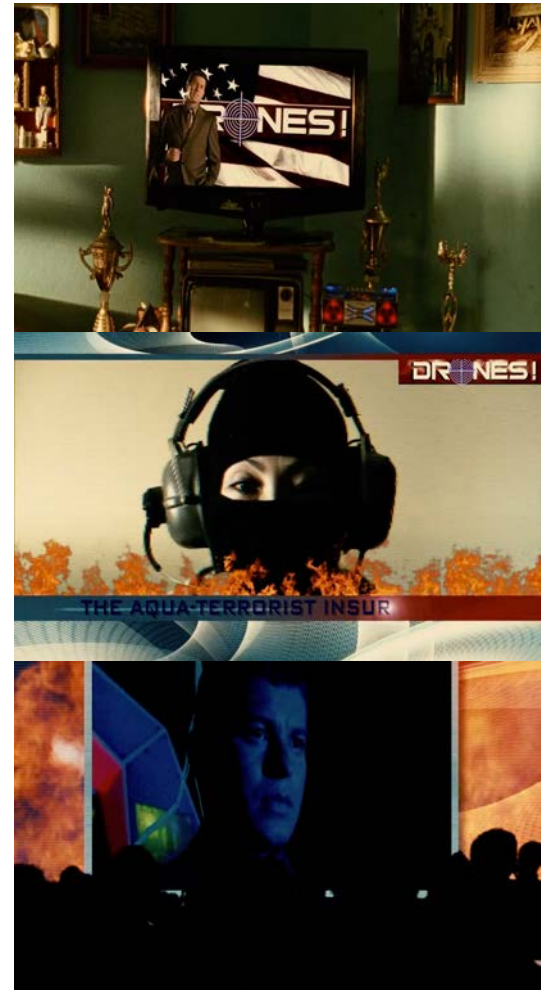


Image 4 &amp; 5



the man, and a bodiless voice from the show remarks on how unusual it is, “to see the enemy face to face”. After a pause, Ramirez fires, Memo’s father explodes, and Rivera cuts to black.

Within this scene Rivera is mimicking the objectification of threats by the American military, and the subsequent process of how that threat is handled and then conveyed to the public. Before this scene, we have been following Memo around Santa Ana, where the US government has built a dam that pumps water out of Mexico and into the US. Memo’s dream has been to leave his family’s farm, despite the insistence by his father that Santa Ana is where he

belongs. His connection to the outside world comes through his hacking, a small oasis where: “you pretend to be somewhere you’re not”. However, when he unknowingly hacks into US Military communications, he becomes defined as a terrorist.

Rivera then uses the show *DRONES!* to dramatize a futuristic military response to Memo’s breach, filtered through livestream American public television. Instantly, Rivera has established within *DRONES!* a dichotomy of American warfare in its depiction to the public. Images of weapons, soldiers and explosions collide together on the screen, yet the language of the host establishes it in the realm of justice, using terms like “heroes” and “bad guys” to convince the viewership that what is occurring is for the greater good.

The objectivity of the show in its representation of good and evil, hero and villain, is no doubt intended by Rivera, and the deconstruction of this binary begins with Rudy’s attack on Memo’s home. During the attack the viewer knows the intel of the American military to be false, describing Ramirez’s mission as the elimination of “a terrorist intercept”. It was not a terrorist



intercept, it was Memo hoping to connect with the outside world. As Memo races home to try and save his father, we hear cheers from the virtual audience, and as his father drags himself out of the burning home, we have the contrast between different perspectives on one moment. This is Memo's father, a farmer who has spent his life in this place, who was stripped of his prosperity by an exterior force (the dam). However, to the *Drones!* audience he is a terrorist, stealing the resources of American companies that they try to protect.

This division is established through a single shot during the attack. As Memo's father crawls out of the house, Ramirez sees his face, yet only through the sights of his drone (image 6). The connection between Ramirez and Memo's father, or even Memo's father and the audience, is mitigated by American weaponry. The view Ramirez has of Memo's father resembles one that has become normalized in American media, as well as speaks to the hostile nature of American intervention.

Rivera expertly uses *Drones!* to represent how American entertainment is predicated on violence, and on manipulating that violence so as to bring maximum satisfaction to its viewership, and maximum profit to the show. He takes this one step further by imbedding the military within this relationship as well, so that with the fictional audience's satisfaction (an extension of the real ones), comes an approval of military missions, and the maintenance of their hyper-militarized treatment of the outside world. It is a cinematic depiction of how America's current tendencies are on economizing war, while simultaneously making it a moral spectacle for those at home through shows, movies, and videogames.

Image 6



Within this sci-fi world, Rivera's narrative focuses around the Oaxacan native Memo, a young hacker and farmer who dreams of a life outside of the small town of Santa Ana Del Rio, where his family farms beans and corn. After an accidental hack into US military comms, Memo's house is targeted as a terrorist threat, and while he, his mother, and his brother are visiting family, his father is killed by a US drone strike. From here,

Memo travels to Tijuana to make money for his family, and Ramirez searches for information on his deceased target. Ramirez learns of Memo through Luz, a writer who uploads her stories (really her memories) to a platform called "TrueNode" through the electrical node system implanted in her body (image 7). TrueNode offers real memories to paying customers all around the world. Luz, looking for stories to pay her college debt, sticks with Memo due to her new paying customer Ramirez. Luz helps Memo get nodes implanted, so he is able to work as a "cybracero" in a "sleep dealer" factory

(image 8). They become close, and eventually build a romantic relationship, which is tested by Memo's realization that Luz is using his trauma for financial gain. At the same time, Ramirez decides to go and find Memo, driving down to Tijuana to meet his victim face to face. As the three connect, Luz and Ramirez help Memo to destroy the damn in Santa Ana, freeing the water supply from the US market.

The foundation of the narrative is clearly established within the Bracero program of the 1940s and 50s that occurred between Mexico and the US, and the illegal migration that it

Image 7 &amp; 8



produced.<sup>52</sup> Where in Jim Crow America these migrant workers were deemed Bracero's, with those who were illegally employed guided across the border by Coyote's; they are now "Cybraceros", illegally implanted with nodes (the access to labor) by "Coyoteks". The clear correlation between the film and this history represents a direct continuation of the exploitation of migrant labor by US businesses. Indeed, the violence around the Bracero program was cinematically explored at the height of its implementation, with films like *Border Incident* (Anthony Mann, 1949) highlighting the violence and economic focus that drove the practice and its illegitimate counterpart. Now, by placing this historic event within the future, Rivera is representing how this past has and will inform the future of border policies.

However, despite the grander themes around history, technology and connection within the film, *Sleep Dealer's* major focus is around people, using individual experience to engage the viewer with these themes. The film presents three protagonists (Memo, Luz, and Ramirez) and their struggle with identity, heritage, and history within a futuristic, economically-driven borderlands. They all struggle to establish themselves as people within a world driven by economic connection and marketable traits. Rivera's film analyzes the politically packed area of the borderlands and the institutional violence that surrounds it, through individual experience. Similar to *The Thin Red Line*, Rivera uses the disconnected voice of Memo over images of his present to enter his psyche, and grant us access as to how this violence influences his reality past the physical. Through Memo, Rivera addresses the systems surrounding US-Mexico relations from a non-US perspective, representing how these policies directly impact the individual.

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<sup>52</sup> The Bracero program was setup between the United States and Mexican Governments as a way to provide agricultural labor to US farms. Workers would come from Mexico to the US for the harvesting season. It allowed workers to have room, board, and pay for the period of time that they were working on the farm, but it did not grant them citizenship in the country.

For example, as Memo enters the sleep dealer factory, exposed to the wires and the sickly green lighting for the first time, the manager says; “This is what America always wanted. All the work without the workers.” This line is a clear summation of the marginal perspective on US immigration policy, where immigrants are valued by their ability to work. It is a futuristic continuation of the bracero program, which would grant access to migrants only as long as there was work for them, now furthering that practice by directly extracting the work from the worker.

The other side of this economically driven policy, which Rivera explores quite intentionally, is the ideological rhetoric that criminalizes migrant workers (specifically coming from the southern border), and subsequently sustains and justifies US border policies. As writer/ethnographer Ande Davis states in his article “Consumed by El Otro Lado: Alterations of the Neoliberal Self in *Sleep Dealer*”: “The entirety of US society simultaneously relies for its survival on Latinx labor and buying power while insisting on the criminality, unassimilability, and alienness of the Latinx/ Chicanx Other”.<sup>53</sup> This criminalization of people like Memo is clear during the drone-strike, yet from the beginning of the film, the relationship between Memo’s family and the US is predicated on violence and profit.

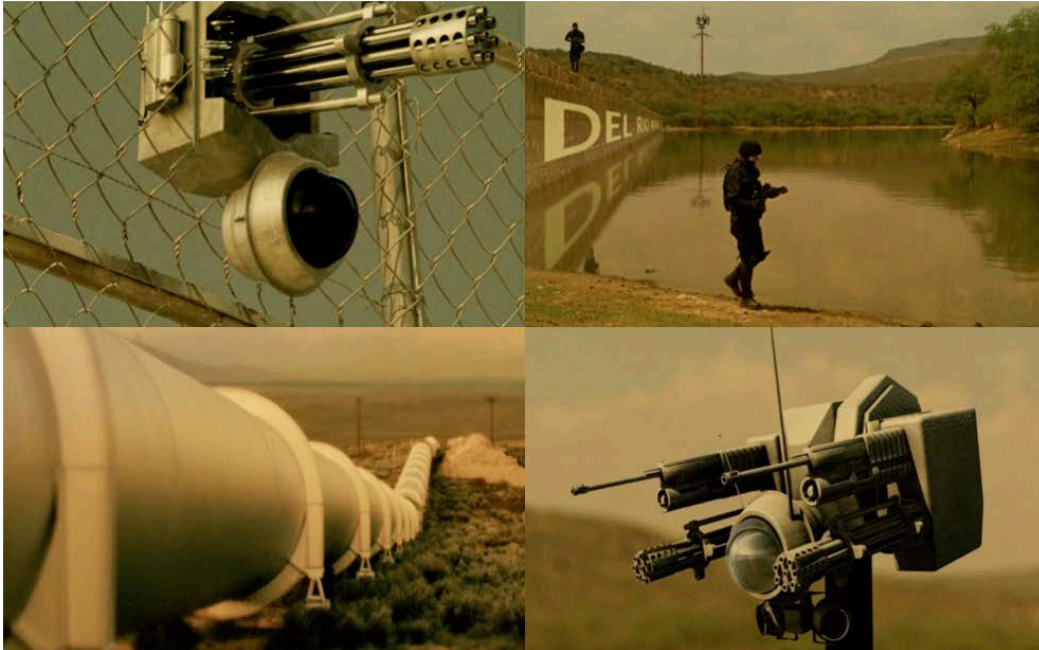
As Memo and his father go to buy water from the US dam, they are greeted at the fence by a surveillance camera topped with a machine gun (image 9). As they fill up their bags (3 dollars a liter), Rivera cuts around the space, showing armed guards, drones overhead, the pipeline syphoning the water away, and more heavily armed cameras (image 10-12). At first contact, Rivera represents the cold relationship between the US and Mexico, experienced by a singular family. There are no people to exchange with, as everything is filtered through surveillance and weaponry. Their only access to this water, a natural resource of the area, is

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<sup>53</sup> Ande Davis, "Consumed by El Otro Lado: Alterations of the Neoliberal Self in *Sleep Dealer*." (*Chiricú Journal: Latina/o Literatures, Arts, and Cultures* 4, no. 1, 2019), 42.

through first dispensing their money into the surveillance camera in a vending machine style, and being granted access by the US controlled surveillance system. The Mexican population is presented as a constant threat to US resources, despite the fact that the US is the one threatening the lives of families like Memo's.

Image 9-12



Top left (9), top right (10), bottom left (11), bottom right (12)

Indeed, as they are making the trip to the dam, a voiceover from Memo describes Santa Ana as “dry, dusty, and disconnected”. He goes on to describe the area before the dam, and the prosperity his father experienced as a farmer. This conversation on the past takes place as they are walking through an old river bed that is clearly dried up from the US extraction of water, visually manifesting the experience that Memo's father is living. Santa Ana's current state, and the state of Memo's family, is directly tied to US resource extraction, and the violence that sustains it. The very real conditions of their desperations are predicated on a violent seizing and

subsequent guarding of resources, which is sustained through the fabrication of constant threats within the native population that needs to be guarded against.

The US ideological criminalization of Mexico and its population is most succinctly represented when Ramirez crosses it. As he is making his way across the border, there is a massive sign that says “WARNING: ENTER MEXICO AT YOUR OWN RISK”. Ramirez then reaches the end of the border tunnel, and another armed camera scans him, and asks about the purpose of his travel (image 13). Once he is approved, the camera states: “There are 212 rebel organizations, lots of thieves, and the drinking water is lethal.” This not only extends from the current surveillance and rhetorical tactics around the border, but it also frames these tactics from a US perspective on Mexico, which above all measures the country through its threat level. Of course, Rivera is not insinuating that these threats are wholly fabricated by the US government.

Memo’s first interaction in Tijuana consists of being lied to, knocked out, and robbed, showing how crime is indeed rampant in the area. However, by focusing in on the individual experiences of Memo, Ramirez, and Luz within the political turmoil, Rivera seems to represent what happens on a personal level when one country defines another country by how threatening they are.

Image 13



Similarly, *Sleep Dealer* dramatizes the very real experience of the United States from an outside perspective. The intense criminalization that is countered by the honesty of Memo’s family delineates how border policy is viewed from both sides, and directly impacts people. Indeed, Rivera’s extension of this relationship into the future works towards expectations from the other side, from Memo and his father, from those who have been influenced by this policy and its transformation for years and who will indeed know where it is going much better than the

average US citizen.<sup>54</sup> By representing US-Mexico policies from the other side, and extending it into the future, Rivera depicts its legacy in a world further dominated by violence and profit.

However, Rivera's use of the science fiction genre works both ways. As Davis states: "science fiction often is cast off and derided as pop cultural detritus, though in its rhetorical privilege it is able to position ideas about a societal future that can simultaneously speculate on potentialities while guiding our path as we create it".<sup>55</sup> Indeed, Rivera's futuristic setting both speaks to the continuation of the decades long struggle between accessibility for migrants and US capitalist domination, as well as offers an alternative to a world connected and founded by profit and accumulation. In the early parts of the film, Memo looks outside of Santa Ana, hoping to connect to the world on a global scale. He seeks a life that is involved in the future, rather than the one his father has which feels in the past. His sentiment towards a different future brings hope within this sci-fi world, particularly in such a dark narrative that consequently exploits Memo for his dream.

Despite his sentiments for an alternative future, Memo's only access to the "connected" world is predicated on exploiting him for profit. Because of the existing situation between Mexico and the US, he is only able to seek the global world as a means of providing for his family. His future becomes contingent on survival, rather than living. This is succinctly stated as Memo begins working at the sleep dealer factory, where his foreman says to him, "your future starts today". With this small line, Memo's search for a future becomes confined to an American

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<sup>54</sup> This sentiment comes from Davis' article, and is directed towards Trump's policies on the US-Mexico border, and how though it was a shock to "middle-class white voters", it came as no surprise to "people who are targeted by these policies".

Ande Davis, "Consumed by El Otro Lado: Alterations of the Neoliberal Self in Sleep Dealer." (*Chiricú Journal: Latina/o Literatures, Arts, and Cultures* 4, no. 1, 2019), 44.

<sup>55</sup> Ande Davis, "Consumed by El Otro Lado: Alterations of the Neoliberal Self in Sleep Dealer." (*Chiricú Journal: Latina/o Literatures, Arts, and Cultures* 4, no. 1, 2019), 38.

based economic system, that only allows him access to the global world when it profits the system. The rhetorical privilege offered by the sci-fi genre is combined with the very real relationship between the US and Mexico, so as to demonstrate how it feeds the violent destruction of Mexican past and future, as well as to suggest an alternative.

Rivera is also inserting Latinx and Chicanx identities as alternatives to the discriminatory space of most film genres (science fiction or otherwise). Where the western imaginations of the future have been filled with conventional white characters, Rivera considers the future from what Altha Cravey, Joseph Palis and Gabriela Valdivia refer to as “the margins”; “Rivera proposes a relational understanding of how the world works. Encouraging viewers to identify with Memo... Memo, Rivera insists, and others who appear to possess little control over their destiny, are capable of imagining and creating their own future.”<sup>56</sup> The sense of individual agency that Rivera grants to his characters allows them to re-imagine the world around them, and communicates this agency and its power to the viewer. Moreover, the film is primarily in Spanish, targeting a different viewership than that of conventional sci-fi films such as *The Matrix* (1999) or *Blade Runner* (1982).

Furthermore, Rivera’s use of the sci-fi genre is quite informative, imbedding historical markers and real places within the film to keep it tethered to reality. Where many sci-fi films point towards reality, they often tend to remain within the genre’s fantastical dimension, keeping the audience secure from contradictions or ambiguity in their viewing space, and therefore satisfied. A major example of this is James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009) released just a year after *Sleep Dealer*. The film contains several important topics that can be directly connected to the United States. Themes of colonization, exploitation and economic warfare are all present, and

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<sup>56</sup> Altha Cravey, Joseph Palis, and Gabriela Valdivia "Imagining the Future from the Margins: Cyborg Labor in Alex Rivera's "Sleep Dealer"", (*GeoJournal* 80, no. 6 2015), 867.



there are moments of violence that certainly inform the characters. Yet the film's setting on an alien planet, involving an alien species, allows it to exist generally as spectacle: "In short, it could talk freely about economic exploitation and imperial conquest, safely removed from planet earth."<sup>57</sup>

Rivera's interconnected narrative is key to moving outside of the mainstream notion of science fiction and the future, and all the ideological imperatives that come with it. The notions of capital and military that swirl around the American psyche are consequently both reimagined and deconstructed from this perspective. The most poignant deconstruction of this psyche in the film is of course through the fictional TV show *Drones!*. It is essentially a front line look at US drone strikes, built up with the propaganda of freedom, justice, and democracy that is linked to Government acts of violence. The first instance of the show is early on at Memo's house. His brother and his mother are flipping through the channels as Memo comments: "my brother is addicted to American television". His brother stops on *Drones!*, and our first image is a massive

Image 14



explosion, with drones flying away, as a 3-person silhouetted family (the infamous refugee image) runs across a set of crosshairs that becomes the "O" in the name of the show (image 14). The explanation of the show is this: "Every night on drones, we take you live to the frontlines, where hi-tech heroes use cutting edge technology, and blow the hell out of the bad guys."

Our perspective of the show is significant in the fact that the viewer is Memo's brother. Even though the show is clearly contingent on American ideologies, promoting American military exceptionalism, Memo's brother is the one we hear saying, "Right on!". The show acts

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<sup>57</sup> Patricia Keeton, Peter Sheckner, *American War Cinema and Media since Vietnam: Politics, Ideology, and Class* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), vii.

as an escape for Memo's brother from his real circumstances, much like hacking does for Memo. Yet despite their wishes to be involved in these worlds, they are inevitably cut off, by the same ideology that depicts them as the "bad guys". This binary that they are forced into grants easy representation for Memo's punishment. For the viewer of *DRONES!*, the moral and ethical ambiguities surrounding such force are seamlessly sidestepped by the clear definition of the attacker as hero, and the victim as villain, granting them a viewing space that rests primarily on the spectacle of the violence, and its ideological connections to American exceptionalism.

Indeed, Rivera gives a relative glimpse of this cinematic process within US history, so as to remind the viewer that what is occurring comes from direct experiences. As Memo's brother is flipping through the channels, he quickly passes an old technicolor film before coming to *Drones!*. In this brief moment, we see a classic piece of the western genre, white settlers shooting down native Americans, with all the sound effects, jumping, and collapsing horses that are at the foundation of that genre's action. By jumping from this film to *Drones!*, Rivera is no doubt establishing a continuation of that historical cinematic moment within the futuristic tv show; The manipulation of violence through cinema and narrative, so as to establish a general division of good and evil, that will no doubt provide satisfaction to the viewership, profit to the studios, and a clean easy going understanding of the historical and unprecedented slaughter of a diverse group that was wholly defined as "savages". Similar to *Sleep Dealer's* narrative as a whole, Rivera is taking this historical relationship and extending it into the future. He establishes a multitude of perspectives on a singular moment, using a "relational understanding" to represent how American defines its use of violence, and how that definition is manipulated for public approval.

The marginal perspective that drives the film is reflected onto the viewer in their comprehension of the narrative and of US-Mexico relations, confronting them with multiple

positions on a subject that is publicly confined to a singular one. The power of agency is likewise moved from the screen onto the viewer, as the imaginations of the future within the film challenges them to question what they imagine for the future, and what they have absorbed into their daily lives as inherent: “Rivera's filmic strategy invites viewers to assess their own situation, their own personal values and reflect on the future they might choose to imagine”.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, Rivera conveys this agency through Ramirez in his choice to help Memo.

As we are introduced to Ramirez, right before he strikes Memo’s home, there is a definitive assimilation narrative that Rivera ties to his story. Rudy Ramirez is described simply as a rookie pilot, whose background is directly tied to his Mother and Father’s military service, “I’m following in their footsteps”. The irony of Ramirez’s Mexican heritage as he takes out Memo’s father is not lost on the viewer, and indeed represents the careful manipulation of the story by the tv show, so as to maintain a clear gap between the heroes (Americans) and the villains (Mexicans, or really anyone outside of the western world). As Davis writes, Ramirez is: “doing violence to someone who could be his own father, who shares his cultural origins, and whose body is read within the same political ontology as his own despite the large border wall between them”. This assimilation narrative arises again as we gain a glimpse of Ramirez’s full name when he is driving to the border: “Rudolfo Ramirez Jr.”. The more consistent name of “Rudy” that we hear, that is presented to the *Drones!* audience, marks the assimilation of Rudolfo into an American identity, seemingly referencing the heroic football figure from *Rudy* (1993, D. Anspaugh).

Later on into the film, as Ramirez is processing his attack, he seeks advice from his parents. Rivera uses this interaction to represent the American assimilation that Ramirez was

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<sup>58</sup> Ande Davis, "Consumed by El Otro Lado: Alterations of the Neoliberal Self in Sleep Dealer." (*Chiricú Journal: Latina/o Literatures, Arts, and Cultures* 4, no. 1, 2019), 51.

Image 15



born into, and that his parents are also immersed in. As they are sitting at dinner Ramirez hesitantly asks: “Hey pop, do you ever have doubts, about what you did in the war? I didn’t think I would. Most of the time I don’t feel anything. I killed a man”. At this moment his mother quickly says, “and we are so proud of you!”

Rivera cuts back to Ramirez with a surprised look on his face, as his father says, “You don’t know what that man was going to do. And you don’t know how many people you saved.” Rivera cuts from his father back to Ramirez, who now has a hollow look, and his parents quickly dismiss the conversation by saying, “now, eat”(image 15).

Since the attack Ramirez has been lamenting on his actions, and his connection to Memo through Luz (the writer) helps him to pierce through the ideological veil of justice and democracy that surrounds them. Indeed, the consoling from his parents is not enough, as he searches for his own answer by going to Tijuana to find Memo. This action represents Rudy’s choice to break away from his American identity that is founded upon his military status and heritage, his access into a global lifestyle on America’s terms. No doubt, this choice seems to resonate with Sgt. Welsh’s final voice-over in *The Thin Red Line*, mentioned in the second chapter: “They either want you dead or in their lie”. Indeed it feels like Ramirez, in his choice, is coming out of that lie.

*Sleep Dealer* holds violence within a very poignant role, as we have seen with Rivera’s use of *Drones!*. The violence within the film is by all means strategic, and is pivotal to the plot. The catalyst of the narrative is the deadly drone strike by Ramirez on Memo’s father, which Rivera uses to begin the connection between his three characters. Yet this violence is not simply a means to begin the film. Ramirez’s mission is always present, and the consequences of the

strike remain at the forefront of the film's dialogue, analyzed and reflected upon through each protagonist's individual experience. Furthermore, Rivera creates a distinct correlation between this justified yet questionable violence and American ideology. Violence in *Sleep Dealer* is both the pinnacle of entertainment within American pop culture, as well as the pinnacle of foreign policy and government action. Rivera connects the two sides of this event through perspective, using *Drones!* as a sci-fi fiction example of how America handles exterior problems and subsequently shows them to the public, specifically framed through Memo and Ramirez's eyes. Moreover, the different perspectives represent the disconnect between what this violence is meant to achieve, and how it is described to the American public and its soldiers. Where Memo's family sees the continuation of a violent extraction of livelihood, Ramirez, his family, and the American public sees a military shield around democracy from "aqua-terrorists", "gangs", and the overall "bad guys". Again, it injects ambiguity into a relationship that is constantly defined through crosshairs. It connects normalized cinematic violence with its tangible, lasting effects on the classified "other", through a reflection on the perspectives of all three protagonists, as well as American media. In other words, Rivera creates a web of contexts for a singular act of violence, to show how violence as justice, and violence as exploitation, often exist within the same action, only to be objectified and moralized through ideological filters, especially within media and entertainment.

This application of violence also speaks to its cyclical nature, most prominently within the context of war and labor. Warfare often creates further crises, only to be solved by other violent solutions. Likewise migrant labor, especially within a US-Mexico context, is predicated on desperation and exploitation founded within violence. Like Memo, many real people must seek out whatever work they can because of their desperate circumstances, often created by some

form of violence. For Memo this violence is a combined aspect of their exploited resources and Ramirez's drone attack, which leads to a job that causes further violence to him. His search for work comes to an end only by injecting metal into his nervous system, and subsequently sticking himself with electrified needles (image 16). His virtual work extends from the very real conditions for migrant laborers today. Not only is the work extremely strenuous, but the utter lack of health and safety regulations leads to further injury and violence: "The equipment at the sleep dealers is prone to electrical shorts, leading to severe injuries, blindness, and death of its workers, indicating the disposability of the people employed there". This propagation of violence represents how violence feeds into itself in different forms, a key message that Rivera stretches throughout the narrative and links to history through Memo's story. There is no direct connection between the drone attack and Memo's strenuous job, but through his individual journey and the perspectives connected to it, Rivera depicts how this American military feeds the economy Memo becomes a part of.

Image 16



Furthermore, Rivera develops multiple perspectives on the catalyst of the film to convey the massive disconnection between people within a hyper-connected world. "Prosthetic labor - in allowing for an infinite distinction of worker from final commodity - deepens Memo's experience of alienation, isolation and exploitation. Rudy and Luz gain similar insights via their own experiences of prosthetic labor in drone warfare (Rudy) and commodified, artistic production

(Luz)<sup>59</sup>. Interestingly enough, each protagonist is only able to breach this system by realizing their situation, and reaching out for direct human connection. Ramirez, Memo, and Luz come together because of Ramirez’s yearning to close the gap between himself and a victim of his attack (Memo). Likewise, Memo’s ability to live with the trauma around his father’s death only arises out of his ability to talk through it with Luz, and understand the position of Ramirez. Luz is only able to realize again why she wanted to be a writer by connecting with Memo outside of a capitalist mindset. These elements show how systems dictate people’s relationships, and again points to the power of individual agency and direct connection when confronting such issues.

Rivera indeed establishes this realization for Memo within the film. Just after a factory accident with an unknown worker, Memo begins to contemplate the situation he is in, and likens it to the situation of his home town; “My energy was being drained...sent far away. What happened to the river, is happening to me.” Rivera visually replicates this thought by cutting between Memo’s arteries and the pipeline taking away the water (images 17-19), connecting his body to Santa Ana as spaces of identity and commodity.

Image 17-19



<sup>59</sup> Altha Cravey, Joseph Palis, and Gabriela Valdivia "Imagining the Future from the Margins: Cyborg Labor in Alex Rivera's "Sleep Dealer""", (*GeoJournal* 80, no. 6 2015), 875.

Indeed, there are multiple moments within the film where Memo has a reflective moment on the position he is in, such as the pause he takes as he lifts a mirror during construction, and stares back at himself. What he is seeing of course is the robot he is controlling, hundreds of miles away (image 20). Now, however, Memo is connecting the pieces, between his past, his present, and what will be his future. Through his internal space, Rivera depicts his reflection on the violence that surrounds his life, and how it has forced him into a particular way of living. This scene becomes the turning point in the film, the key element of this futurist narrative, where Memo decides to change his fate and offer an alternative. Indeed, because of the web of perspectives and connections within the film, it ultimately becomes the turning point for Luz and Ramirez as well.

Image 20



Up to this point, Luz has been finding and sharing stories for the sake of profit. Of course, as we learn in the beginning, this is to pay off her college debt, which not only threatens her legitimacy, but also her physical surroundings, as a debt collector threatens to take her belongings. Ultimately, Luz is selling her identity, to live and hopefully thrive within the capitalist scheme. Memo becomes caught up in her agenda, as she finds a buyer (Ramirez) for her interactions with him. Their relationship changes her understanding of the people she is collecting stories from, as their connection becomes less about extracting information, and more about actual connection between people. However, as Memo discovers her “TrueNode” platform, and realizes her exploitation of his story, he leaves, losing the one real connection they both had.

At the same time, Rudy has made his decision to seek out Memo, to come out of the American lie and find truth on his own terms, by meeting face to face with his victim and facing the consequences. As he and Memo become acquainted, and devise a plan to destroy the dam,



Memo seeks out Luz for help. Now, the three protagonists come together, not for profit or familial duty, but for real connection, that forms the foundation for an alternate future. The emotional relationship between Luz, Memo, and Rudy is what comes out as triumphant within the narrative, representing the power and importance of human connection within a world driven by violence and profit. Rivera puts this into words through Luz, as they prepare to take out the dam: “I have never met one of my readers before.” It is the phenomena of real connection, outside of an ulterior motive, that both brings these characters together, and gives them the strength to imagine a different future.

Indeed, as the film comes to a close, Rivera offers the viewer an open ending. A sense of closure in Memo’s attack on the dam is only partial, and is indeed positioned in a way to offer the viewer the ability of assessment. After the attack on the dam, Memo’s brother says, “no one knows what’s going to happen next”. The futuristic setting and the open ending provides a dialogue for the viewer to engage in. “The next step” is the concept that the viewer is meant to take outside of the film, and indeed into the future.

*Sleep Dealer* offers nuance and ambiguity within a very politically and historically charged narrative, so as to remind its audience of how life cannot be constantly objectified, split between right and wrong, good and evil, specifically when violence is involved. The attack on the dam would no doubt be defined as an act of terrorism to this American community, manipulated and conformed to sustain the two countries’ relationship. It is itself an act of violence, yet we as the viewer know it cannot be accurately defined from one perspective. Moreover, it is not an act to be understood as final, but rather as the beginning of something new, a transformation. Because of this act none of the three characters can return home, and Memo’s final internal words are a question towards this consequence on his life: “maybe there is a future

Image 21 &amp; 22

for me here. On the edge of everything. A future with a past...if I connect". During these lines Rivera shows Memo growing a garden, once again connecting his identity to the land around him and his heritage (image 21,22). The film ends on a question, that reaches into the future, ripe with alternatives to what exists and is branded as "necessary".

Overall, *Sleep Dealer* attempts to connect history and the future within a very specific area, from a deeply neglected perspective. Through Memo, Luz, and Ramirez, Rivera establishes a connection between the "developed" and the "undeveloped" as a means of showing the damage that is done in the political shadows. The role of violence is extremely precise, as Rivera uses it only as a means to pierce the psyche of his characters and extends it from the very real relationship between the US and Mexico on their border. With every moment of violence, there is not only an individual contemplation of its role, but also a historical connection to be made, constantly positioning the viewer in a relational understanding of how these two countries interact and how that interaction is broadcasted, as well as how it effects people. Rivera inevitably reminds the viewer of the racial and xenophobic conditions that have defined US immigration policy, and how this perspective not only limits the abilities of migrant workers, it literally destroys them. In a sci-fi world that is so connected, Rivera represents what these connections are predicated on, profit and violence, and how the result is ultimately disconnection. Where everyone is so connected, almost nobody knows each other. When money brings people together, nobody is seen as human.



*Sleep Dealer* is no doubt firmly rooted in a specific place, and a specific history, yet this detail does not remove accessibility for a wider audience. Within the confined narrative, Rivera is reaching out to grapple with universal topics. As much as the film is concerned with the US-Mexico relationship around profit and labor, it raises more general questions about the future, and the development of technology, warfare, labor, and overall connection. Rivera's narrative is surely inspiration towards depicting the history of many countries that have had labor and resources extracted by the western world (such as India's growing IT industry), yet Rivera's specificity offers it tangible connection to reality, and engages the viewer emotionally through his character-studies. The narrative's deep historical roots, refined to a specific area, bring it outside of the phantasmal "pop culture detritus" of the science fiction genre and places it within the very real dynamic of US immigration policy and Mexican migrant labor. No matter how blocky the special effects are, or how fantastical the gadgetry may seem, the key historical markers that Rivera imbeds within the film are a constant reminder for the viewer of how this film does not merely live within the vacuum of an imagined future, but is an amalgamation of fear and experience brought into that future.

### Conclusion

In the latter half of *You Were Never Really Here*, after Joe's immediate social circle has been killed, he leaves the city to bury his mother. Ramsay shows a montage of Joe driving out of the city to a lake, as a flowing, non-rhythmic melody builds over the surrounding sound of nature. By the shoreline, Joe begins to fill his mother's body-bag, as well as his pockets, with stones. The music rises as he submerges himself into the water (image 1). Ramsay cuts below the surface, to Joe suspended in the abyss, illuminated by a single beam of light from above (image 2). The sound of his younger self counting begins to rise under the music. He lets go of his mother, and the counting turns into his present voice, as he sits suspended in the water. Suddenly, the voice-over switches again, to Nina counting. The music fades out, and Joe's eyes open to see a hallucination of her in the water, sinking (image 3). Ramsay cuts to him removing his weights and rising to the surface, then she cuts once more, to Joe walking along the road with a determined stare.

I wanted to highlight this scene because it shows the development of Joe's character through his own reflection. It transforms his experience of violence through an extremely emotional context. He has just lost everyone close to him, and in this moment he is mourning a key piece of his existence. The violence surrounding his life has left him with nothing meaningful, and so he chooses to drown himself with his mother's body. Within the void-like water Ramsay collapses the border between the interior and exterior world of Joe, between Joe's

Image 1-3



memories and his present, and within his swirling psyche he sees Nina. Their relationship reconnects him to reality, and he chooses to continue living, literally rising up once more. This moment then leads to Joe's infiltration of the Governor's house and his subsequent breakdown. Despite this scene's regenerative qualities, we see that the outcome at the Governor's house provides him (and the viewer) no sense of security in his actions. What could become his ultimate moment of transcendence is checked by his trauma, and the question of suicide arises again at the very end of the film. Through Ramsay's focus on his interior space, the viewer recognizes his existential struggle and the emotional connection that grounds him.

There is a similar moment of reflection for Witt and Memo in *The Thin Red Line* and *Sleep Dealer*. Interestingly enough, both are activated by water as well, and its ability to create a timeless and liminal space in film. On Guadalcanal Witt watches water fall from a leaf into a pool, and Malick cuts to the waterfall on the previous island. When we return to the present, Witt is holding water in his hands, somberly watching it drip down. We enter Witt's internal space through this pool, and its relation to the island. His reflection arises through the connection between memories and present, and the change in his fixated stare. Through this brief exchange, we realize along with Witt that the joy he felt on the island can never be separated from the suffering he witnessed by that pool of water.

Likewise, Memo's choice to change his fate and destroy the damn comes out of his connection to the water in his town, and his realization of the violence being done to both of them. Rivera establishes a link between Memo's blood and the town's water, using Memo's interior voice to convey how the consequences of this systemic practice are embodied in his character: "what is happening to Santa Ana is happening to me". Their tethering speaks to

Memo's existential connection to his home — his family — and how his freedom is directly tied to the theirs.

All of these reflections are founded in the direct focus on the character's individual experience, and how it is influenced by the violence that surrounds them. There is a specific realization within each moment by the character, that is communicated to the viewer within their most intimate space. It expresses how these figures process this violence, mentally and emotionally.

In 2019, *Empire Magazine* held an interview with Martin Scorsese about his life as a filmmaker. During the interview the Marvel franchise was brought up, to which Scorsese remarked: “that’s not cinema. Honestly, the closest thing I can think of them...is theme parks. It isn’t the cinema of human beings trying to convey emotional, psychological experiences to another human being.”<sup>60</sup> This should not be seen as the be-all end-all opinion of the marvel universe, yet it does represent an interesting perspective on cinema, and grants an informative connection to the topic of this project. Whether or not a viewer finds an emotional experience within these films is debatable, as that is up to the viewer. But what is clear is that the element attracting record numbers of viewers to these films is this “theme park” aesthetic, manifested through expensive spectacles of violence. This attraction inevitably casts away specificity in its practice, as viewers are less focused on the characters and their identities, and are more focused on their actions in combat. Consequently, the loss of the individual within these narratives means an overall loss of their mental and emotional state. Even when a viewer creates an emotional connection, it is filtered through battle, as the characters’ interior spaces become overshadowed by the spectacles they engage in. Without the concentrated exchange of emotion that Scorsese is

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<sup>60</sup> Nick De Semlyen, “The Irishman Week: Empire's Martin Scorsese Interview.” *Empire*, Empire, 7 Nov. 2019, [www.empireonline.com/movies/features/irishman-week-martin-scorsese-interview/](http://www.empireonline.com/movies/features/irishman-week-martin-scorsese-interview/).

referring to, there is nothing lasting within these films for the viewer to carry outside of the cinematic experience. They are focused on the immediate and physical space of the film, and that is where their relationship to the material generally remains.

If anything is to be gained from the three films highlighted in this project, it is this exchange of emotion. Within each narrative, there is a direct focus on the individual (whether one or multiple), and the development of their characters over the course of the film. This development primarily takes place within their interior spaces, through their: “emotional [and] psychological experience”. Whether through Joe’s memories, or Witt and Memo’s respective voiceovers, each film’s experiential focus creates a relationship between viewer and character that is founded in universal emotions. Through the individual, these films draw out of their specific moment to convey to the viewer something we all experience, that exists inside and out of cinema. If this emotional exchange remained at the heart of these films, then cinematic violence could never exist solely as spectacle, or as a justified means to an end. It would always arise with a price, a reflection, a consequence.

*You Were Never Really Here*, *The Thin Red Line*, and *Sleep Dealer* all establish this relationship between the characters, the violence, and the viewer. Their expressions of violence work to develop each character, and deconstruct their interior spaces. Its purpose within each narrative is always towards the complex development of their characters’ experience. Furthermore, this violence draws from reality. No matter how disconnected and surreal the narratives become, they are contextualized in real situations, binding their struggles to the world beyond cinema, and positioning the viewer to engage with them past the immediate experience.





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