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‘FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT’:

The Real and the Moral in the Contemporary Hollywood Combat Film

By Philippa Gates

Film critics have identified distinct phases of the Vietnam War film: from 1975 to 1980, there was the “tale of moral confusion and the returning vet” like Apocalypse Now (Coppola 1979) and The Deer Hunter (Cimino 1978); from 1980 to 1985, there was the “revenge film” like Rambo: First Blood Part II (Cosmatos 1985) and Missing in Action (Zito 1984); and from 1985 onwards, there was the “realist combat film” like Platoon (Stone 1986) and Full Metal Jacket (Kubrick 1987) (McKellar B6).¹ The returning vet films of the late 1970s established the idea of the Vietnam vet as a victim of the war—one who fought for his country and then was rejected by it—while the revenge film of the first half of the 1980s, like Rambo, presented him as a victim but one who had his revenge. Through spectacular displays of hypermasculine violence, the revenge hero like Rambo reclaimed his masculinity—and victory for the United States—by returning to Vietnam, retrieving American POWs, and defeating the enemy. The Vietnam War films of the second half of the 1980s—like Platoon—offered the subjective experiences of the “grunt” in combat and an image of war-as-hell rather than the playground for cartoon-like superheroes. With the end of the 1980s, war receded to the background for films like The English Patient (Minghella 1996) and Paradise Road (Beresford 1997),² but with the release of Saving Private Ryan (Spielberg) and The Thin Red Line (Malick) in 1998, the combat film returned to the forefront of Hollywood film and a new cycle of war films appeared, marking a new phase of the genre.

With the advancement of digital cinematography and computer graphic technology, the new Hollywood war film (from 1998 to present)—whether set during the Second World War, Vietnam, or more recent conflicts in the Persian Gulf, Bosnia, or Somalia—is able to offer audiences increasingly dramatic and violent images of combat—images praised by audiences and critics alike for their realism and authenticity. As critic Stephen Hunter states, “Black Hawk Down is the next worst thing to being

there. That's how real it feels" (C01). However, while these "authentic" and "realistic" combat sequences that define the new Hollywood war film may further the goal of the realist combat films of the late 1980s, they do not necessarily offer a more *accurate* portrayal of war and most often merely mask increasingly idealistic moral assertions.

This cycle of war films includes Three Kings (Russell 1999), Tigerland (Schumacher 2000), Behind Enemy Lines (Moore 2001), Pearl Harbor (Bay 2001), Enemy at the Gates (Annaud 2001), Windtalkers (Woo 2002), Black Hawk Down (Scott 2001), Hart's War (Hoblit 2002), We Were Soldiers (Wallace 2002), and Tears of the Sun (Fuqua 2003). In some ways, a film like Cold Mountain (Minghella 2003) can be seen as belonging to this group because its combat sequence is filmed in the same style despite being set during the Civil War. The one exception to this dominant trend—war films that use visual realism to disguise heightened moral assertions—is Malick's The Thin Red Line. It was acclaimed by critics but not so popular with audiences precisely because it did not follow this formula. As John Hodgkins notes, the film is very much concerned with exploring and questioning the metaphysics of war—i.e. to be proud or devastated about killing the enemy (81). The film also interestingly subverts audience expectation through its use of stars—unlike Saving Private Ryan, Pearl Harbor, Black Hawk Down, and We Were Soldiers—by introducing George Clooney only to give him a few minutes on screen or Woody Harrelson only to kill him off early in the film. As Jimmie Cain states, critics argue the movie's failure is due to the fact that Malick did not replicate the directorial style of Spielberg in Saving Private Ryan (35). The focus of this paper is on the growing number of combat films like Saving Private Ryan, Black Hawk Down, and We Were Soldiers that have come to dominant the new cycle of war films. Hart's War is in many ways a World War II POW camp film and Three Kings is a dark comedy with a heist plot at its centre. Windtalkers and Pearl Harbor both have substantial combat sequences; however, neither garnered the acclaim that Saving Private Ryan or Black Hawk Down have because their plots are more contrived and their combat sequences more like those from an action movie rather than ones that masquerade as realist pseudo-documentary.

Gaylyn Studlar and David Dresser argue that, although at first glance the comic-book heroics of the revenge film like Rambo or Missing in Action seem antithetical to the purported realism of the realist combat film like Platoon, they are actually alike in their “dependence on the strategy of victimization”—so the war-as-hell, the American G.I. as sympathetic, and the veteran as victim (104-5). However, the new cycle of Hollywood war films since the late 1990s can be seen as antithetical in many ways to *both* these trends of the 1980s, as the new war film is dependent very much on a strategy of idealising heroism. The new Hollywood war film sees a shift from the war films of the 1980s in terms of the representation of heroism—from hypermasculine heroes to idealistic ones. While the realist combat film of the 1980s often employed brutal battle sequences to question or critique America’s involvement in Vietnam and encourage empathy for the grunts that fought the war, the new Hollywood war film glorifies its heroes with their desire to “do the right thing.” In other words, these are heroes who are simultaneously part of the “army of one”—a brotherhood—looking out for one another and individuated as moral men who think for themselves and, no matter what their orders, act humanely and heroically. These films also share a common aesthetic in their portrayal of combat: an immediate, chaotic, and claustrophobic representation of battle made possible through the advances in digital and CGI filmmaking technologies of the last decade. Thus, the new Hollywood war film offers an image of war with an unprecedented degree of realism but a narrative presenting a degree of moralising and glorification of war not seen since the mid-1980s revenge film. I will examine how these two contrasting impulses in the contemporary trend that is dominating the genre are worked through in relation to one another—namely, how the “realism” and “authenticity” of the images serve to mask the extreme conservatism of the films’ themes.

THE REALIST COMBAT FILM

Many of the realist combat films of the 1980s, like Platoon (Stone 1986) and Hamburger Hill (Irvin 1987), were lauded for their realism and for telling the “truth” about Vietnam. One of the taglines for Hamburger Hill was “The most realistic portrayal of the Vietnam War ever filmed. Because it’s the only

one that's true." Platoon was described in reviews by Frank McGrady as "brutal, vicious, surpassingly ugly—in a word, realistic" (3) and by Sheila Benson as "rated R for its realistic, bloody scenes of war" (1). Steven Spielberg declared that Platoon was "more than a movie; it's like being in Vietnam," and the cover of Time referred to the film as "Vietnam, the way it really was, on film" (Qtd in Stone). Michael Lee Lanning argues that Platoon was the film that "convinced the majority of the moviegoing public that it was seeing the 'real war' on the screen" and that each new release of a realist combat film resulted in media interviews *ad nauseum* with veterans who proclaimed, "That's how it really was" or "That's exactly how it happened" (94). Similarly, Hamburger Hill was praised by David Denby for its "deranged realism [...] the filth and terror of battles and Irvin's way of overlapping the dialogue, which brings out the peculiar speeding mental style of men caught between dread and depression" (108), and by Candice Russell as the "most realistic" of the late 1980s Vietnam films (6). Films like Hamburger Hill and Platoon were seen as a new generation of Vietnam war films that had a claim to authenticity that the previous films did not because their directors and/or screenwriters had been there: Hamburger Hill's scriptwriter, James Carabatsos, had served in Vietnam and its director, John Irvin, had been a documentary cameraman covering the war (Floyd 242). Similarly, Platoon's writer-director, Oliver Stone, had been a soldier and the film was seen as semi-autobiographical (Sturken). In other words, the realist combat film was seen as offering a "true" representation of the war.

Nevertheless, as author Tim O'Brien suggests in his short story—"How to Tell a True War Story"—no war story can offer an objective or knowable truth; instead, the true war story is about that which is less definable. "It's about love and memory. It's about sorrow. It's about sisters who never write back and people who never listen" (84-5). The stories about Vietnam that are most acclaimed and heralded as "true"—for example, the stories of Michael Herr and Tim O'Brien, and the films of Oliver Stone—are personal stories told from the perspective of the grunts that suffered through the chaos and confusion of both combat and why they were fighting in the first place. According to Tom Wolfe, Michael Herr's experimental non-fiction Dispatches was the product of the New Journalism movement

of the 1960s that engaged the reader through the use of literary realism when writing about current events (Qtd. in Gordon 16). This blending of fact and fiction was similarly employed to engage audiences in the realist combat film with a film style that could be labelled “docudrama.”³ As Marita Sturken notes:

The docudrama succeeds as a form of popular culture specifically through its exploitation of the dual role of cinema as a representation of the real and a source of fantasy and identification. At the same time, it is a form of cultural reenactment and as such shares in larger cultural processes of memory and healing.

Similarly, just as the stories of Michael Herr and John Del Vecchio utilised literary techniques such as subjective point of view, stream of consciousness writing, and the present tense to give a sense of “being there” so too did the documentary feel of the combat sequences—marked by shaky, hand-held camerawork—offer audiences a sense of immediacy, claustrophobia, and realism—but, more importantly, the subjective point of view of the grunts. Platoon suggests that “the true story of war” can only be told from the perspective of the grunt soldier” (Sturken), and this identification with the soldiers was solicited and developed through the use of closely framed shots tied to specific characters, especially in the battle sequences (Lanning 98). Or as Auster and Quart suggest Platoon’s

greatest strength lies in its social realism—its feeling of verisimilitude for the discomfort, ants, heat, and mud—of the jungle and brush: the fatigue of patrols, the boredom and sense of release of base camp, the terror of ambushes, and the chaos and cacophony of night firefights. Filmed in tight closeup and medium shots, this powerfully evokes the murderous immediacy of the world into which the GIs are thrust. (132)

Tight framing and shaky camera movements created a sense of immediacy and claustrophobia as well as a close alignment with the main characters as they suffer through the explosions, gunfire, panic, and death that surround them. The combat sequences take up a lot of screen time and are unrelenting, never giving viewers a moment to come to terms with one shocking scene before being exposed to another. This documentary style of filmmaking modified with character close-ups for emotional impact presented

audiences with narrative grounded in fiction but presented with an unprecedented degree of realism—and the new Hollywood war film is more than conscious of this tradition.

Toby Haggith in Film History outlines in detail how Steven Spielberg achieved the realism of Saving Private Ryan's opening battle sequence by copying the style of the documentary combat films shot by Allied cameramen during the Second World War. Spielberg went to great lengths to make the battles look and sound historically authentic, using less-saturated film stock, lenses without glare-reduction coating, and authentic World War II ammunition (Haggith). Three Kings' director David Russell also used bleached-out film stock to make the film look like “the color photos in the LA Times” and special effects to reproduce the damage of real shooting (Hammond 73). Documentary-style filming combined with desaturated colour and deafening soundtrack has become the standard for today's war films, and an unprecedented amount of screen time in films like Black Hawk Down and We Were Soldiers is devoted to relentless combat sequences: a minimum of one half to two-thirds of each film is spent in combat. Cold Mountain (Minghella 2003) saw the new aesthetic of war being applied to pre-World War II conflicts—here the Civil War—with its combat sequence defined by the deafening chaos of explosions, cries, and trademark bullets whizzing past the audience's heads in stereo, as well as its camera set down in the middle of the action—aligned with the point of view of the film's hero (Jude Law)—and its lens splattered with blood, mud, and gore. The “look” of war that was initiated by the realist combat film in the second half of the 1980s has reached maturity in contemporary Hollywood film with a fully developed and defined set of visual and aural conventions.

Rick Groen of The Globe and Mail argues that technology is at the heart of contemporary conflicts and contemporary war films: the technology that allows a superpower like the United States to fight and win an “unequal war” in which the other side suffers all the risk and damage while the superpower experiences a minimum of casualties—i.e. through the use of satellite surveillance—is the same that allows filmmakers to depict war graphically. “Movies are now capable of an awful verisimilitude, or portraying the sheer horror of battle at close quarters—severed hands, bisected torsos,

orgasmic arteries, the swirling chaos, the tragic miscalculations, the paralysing fear” (Groen R15). As Hodgkins notes, Saving Private Ryan was described by critics and reviewers less as fiction and more as a pseudo-documentary report or reproduction: “Saving Private Ryan’s first twenty-five minutes, like television’s Gulf War reportage, is a new kind of ‘journalism,’ one whose goal is to highlight the heroism and technology of the United States” (76). The critical and commercial success of the film has been attributed to the film’s “uncompromising realism” (Landon 58). And this is where realism comes up against fiction; while the new Hollywood war film may offer this realistic or “true” portrait of battle, this realism merely masks the fictitious account of war the film simultaneously offers. It is these two warring impulses in this new cycle of the genre with which I am concerned: the realistic and the moralising. Simon Houpt argues that

Wallace, who wrote, directed and produced We Were Soldiers, sought to make as realistic a portrait of the battle as possible. That kind of docudrama approach is in vogue, most recently in the film Black Hawk Down. True stories told truly seem to be what audiences want right now. (R1)

However, while the visual style of the new Hollywood war film may present a realistic image of combat through immediacy and chaos, it does not mean that the narrative it presents is a “true war story.”

The majority of contemporary reviews of Platoon praised the film as the most realistic war film yet; similarly, the visual realism of films like Saving Private Ryan and Black Hawk Down seems to blind many viewers and critics to the lack of address of the larger issues of the conflict. The focus on the subjective experience of the grunt on the ground finds the politics of the war being evacuated from these representations, and this model, taken from the films of the 1980s, serves contemporary filmmakers well as it allows them the ability to present a seemingly “authentic” vision of war without having to tread on potentially controversial ground—ie. why America is, or should be, involved in these conflicts? Instead, these films focus on the fact that—whether the conflict itself is right or wrong—the men fighting it are

doing so for the right reasons. These are not political wars being presented on the screen, but moral ones, and the hero who fights them is the idealistic youth.

DOING THE RIGHT THING

In the 1980s, war films were concerned with a crisis of masculinity incited by the American failure in Vietnam, and this crisis was worked through along the lines of gender—masculinity was honoured and femininity reviled. Feminised men were either killed off as the more manly men survived, or they too became masculinised. As Susan Jeffords notes, despite the variety of types of masculinity that popular film offered audiences in the 1980s, audiences chose to watch films that were concerned with portrayals of white, male, action-heroes like Rambo (Hard 12): the “hard-body” hero represented a backlash against the seeming feminisation of society, but he also represented a revisioning of the impact of Vietnam on American masculinity—from failure to triumph (ibid 192). The revenge film starred action-heroes played by manly men like Sylvester Stallone (Rambo) and Chuck Norris (Missing in Action) while the realist combat film most often saw a young and inexperienced hero who must become a “man” in order to survive the war and perform heroically. Chris (Charlie Sheen) in Platoon and Joker (Matthew Modine) in Full Metal Jacket (Kubrick 1987) are initially portrayed as feminised. Chris describes himself as the child of two fathers—the violent and hypermasculine Sergeant Barnes (Tom Berenger)—and the kind and feminised Sergeant Elias (Willem Dafoe). Only through toughening up, becoming men, and abandoning the feminine can these young heroes survive: Chris must become like Barnes in order to kill him and avenge Elias’s murder, and Joker must kill a female sniper. The war film of the 1980s offered a hero that symbolically re-fought—and often won—the war in Vietnam and, in doing so, regenerated American conceptions of masculinity or—as Jeffords describes it—offered a “remasculinization of America” (Remasculinization 168).

Film critic Harlan Jacobson argues that, with Black Hawk Down, director Ridley Scott attempts to complete the rehabilitation of the U.S. military in the post-Vietnam era (28). Rather than focusing on the

victimisation of the American G.I., the new Hollywood war film focuses on his idealisation. The new Hollywood war film sees a shift away from this revilement of feminised masculinity and offers the idealistic youth as a successful integration of the feminised into masculinity and, as such, represents the ideal hero for the new millennium. The heroes of the new Hollywood war film tend to be played by younger stars like Matt Damon (Saving Private Ryan), Josh Hartnett (Black Hawk Down), Josh Hartnett and Ben Affleck (Pearl Harbor), and Colin Farrell (Hart's War and Tigerland). While the war films of the first-half of the 1980s offered a right-wing revisionism, and those of the second half a realistic portrait of the horrors of war, the new Hollywood war film displaces a deliberation on politics to one on morals. No longer is Vietnam the war that should not have been fought, or U.S. military intervention questionable, because the grunts that put their lives on the line for their country are fighting for the “right” reasons. This moral choice and self-sacrifice is a more feminised image of American militarism, and the youth can offer a site for the expression, working through, and often resolution (albeit a fictional one) of the crisis that “men” face on the battlefield because any feminine qualities that the youth betrays can be contained by the fact that he is not yet a man: the youth occupies a liminal space between boyhood and manhood. The youth has the ability to embody the conflicting notions of masculinity that result from crisis—from physical and emotional vulnerability to *machismo* and violence. Whether because of anger or fear, the youth may act rashly, putting his life and the lives of others at risk, but his impulsiveness, rather than being labelled as folly, can instead be put down to his youth and, thus, be recovered. We expect “real” men to be in control especially of their emotions, whereas we forgive the youth because his impulsiveness is seen as stemming from a desire to get the job done at any cost: in one moment the youth can be confident, even arrogant, about his abilities as a soldier (or a young man) and the next cry for his mother as he lies dying. He chooses to leave home to fight for his country with a blind idealism and patriotism that can lead to disillusionment when faced with the realities of war or can fuel his courage: the realist combat film of the 1980s tended to focus on the former while the new cycle of war films highlight the latter.

These boys are not just doing their duty, but doing, as Private Caparzo (Vin Diesel) in Saving Private Ryan calls it, “the decent thing.” Captain Miller argues: “We’re not here to do the decent thing; we’re here to follow fucking orders.” But of course, by the end of the film the company do the decent thing, which is to help Ryan and his company defend a key bridge against German invasion. Following Ryan’s refusal to leave his post, Sergeant Horvath (Tom Sizemore) says to Miller that maybe if they stay and help, then that is the one decent thing they can do that may earn them the right to go home safely. Even Three Kings, which does begin with questioning American involvement in the Persian Gulf War, soon turns its focus to the moral as the three heroes sacrifice their share of a fortune to save a handful of innocent civilians. In Black Hawk Down, as the “boys” prepare for their mission, the film’s young hero, Sergeant Eversmann (Josh Hartnett) is ridiculed for his idealism.

Soldier 1: Well, ask Sergeant Eversmann. He likes the “Skinnies.”⁴

Soldier 2: Sergeant Eversman, you really like the “Skinnies?”

Eversmann: It’s not that I like ‘em or I don’t like ‘em...I respect them.

Kurth: See what you guys fail to realise is the Sergeant here is a bit of an idealist. He believes in this mission right down to his very bones, don’t you Sergeant?

Eversmann: Look, these people, they have no jobs, no food, no education, no future. I just figure that, you know...I mean...we have two things that we can do: we can either help, or we can sit back and watch the country destroy itself on CNN. Right?

Kurth: I don’t know about you guys but I was trained to fight. You trained to fight, Sergeant?

Eversmann: Well, I think I was trained to make a difference, Kurth.

Soldier 1: Like the man said, he’s an idealist!

This idealism could be regarded as feminising and, thus, in opposition to manly heroism, but it can be embodied unproblematically by the youth who stands on the brink of manhood. Eversmann is idealistic and then is exposed to the horrors of war and, while he does mature through his experiences, he also

retains his moral conviction at the end of the ordeal and is prepared to go back into battle if necessary. Tigerland, an advanced infantry training camp and last stop before Vietnam, has a tough young hero, Roland Bozz (Colin Farrell) who is decidedly not idealistic. He has been drafted and has no desire to follow orders or fight, or more importantly die, for his country. However, he is inspired by the bravery and loyalty of his fellow recruits to become a good leader and, in the end, to take his best friend's place to Vietnam. These films are concerned less with men doing their duty as prescribed by their superiors—superiors who often have little idea of the realities on the ground—and more with their following a more important moral code—even if following that code means disobeying orders. This focus on moral choice and self-sacrifice is a more feminised image of American militarism and heroism. Thus, the youth is needed as a site for the expression, working through, and resolution—albeit a fictional one—of the themes of the new Hollywood war film, namely heroism defined as self-sacrifice in the interests of the brotherhood.

THE BROTHERHOOD

Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud argue, World War II films before Vietnam showed how American men needed to work together in order to defeat the common enemy; however, the Vietnam war films of the 1980s, like Platoon and Missing in Action, argue that working together is impossible (5). Instead the films focus on the conflict that arises *between* the men, and it is that conflict that must be resolved through the course of the film. The majority of new Hollywood war films, however, reject this conflict model and, instead, return to the cooperation model of the World War II film. One of the key themes in this cycle of films is that of brotherhood—including the Spielberg-produced television mini-series “Band of Brothers” (2001). The theme of brotherhood is central to the new Hollywood war film, and the heroes of these films do not just form a bond but consider each other brothers—and their company—their family. As Joe Galloway (Barry Pepper), the young reporter in We Were Soldiers, says: “They went to war because their

country ordered them to; but, in the end, they fought not for their country or their flag—they fought for each other.”

In Saving Private Ryan, Captain Miller (Tom Hanks) and his men are sent on a mission to rescue the last of four brothers—Private Ryan (Matt Damon). However, when told that the company is there to send him home to his mother, Ryan refuses to leave. He declares that he needs to stay, to fulfil his orders, and—most importantly—to help his men defend their post. He says: “Tell her that when you found me, I was here and I was with the only brothers that I have left—and that there was no way that I was going to desert them.” In Pearl Harbor, the narrative stresses several times that Rafe (Ben Affleck) and Danny (Josh Hartnett) are not just best friends, but in many ways brothers having grown up and then gone to war together. They fall in love with the same woman, a nurse (Kate Beckinsale), and their love for her drives them apart; however, the bombing of Pearl Harbor brings them together and they fight side by side to save their country and, later, to exact retribution on the enemy. In the aftermath of that act of retribution, Danny, dying, asks Rafe to be father to his unborn child. “You’re going to be a daddy,” Rafe tells Danny in order to make him fight to live. “No, you are,” Danny replies as he dies in the arms of his friend and “brother.” Pearl Harbor is one of the few films of the new cycle of Hollywood war films to have a female love interest for the hero (a result of the film trying to copy the successful coupling of romance and action in Titanic [Cameron 1997]); however, the romance between Evelyn and Rafe, although central to the first third of the film, pales in comparison to the male bond between the “brothers” that is cemented in the second two-thirds. Pearl Harbor’s realistic and spectacular combat sequence of the attack on Pearl Harbor was lauded by critics while the film’s melodramatic plot was not. The film merely highlights more obviously than films like Black Hawk Down and Saving Private Ryan the moral and political underpinnings of the narrative: the boys of these films must band together to fight the common enemy, often knowing they will die because of their efforts.

Jeffords argues that many of the realist combat films of the 1980s like Platoon and Gardens of Stone (Coppola 1987) focused on a father/son relationship at the centre of the narrative through which

masculinity reproduces itself without women/mothers—the man guides the youth to manhood (“Reproducing” 207). The male bond formed under extreme duress is a common theme in Hollywood films—especially the war film; however, the new Hollywood war film replaces the father/son model that defined many of the realist combat films of the 1980s with a focus on the bond of brothers amongst the youth and an inverse relationship with older men. At the centre of its narrative, the realist combat film also starred the youth who began the film naïve and innocent and had to become a “man” by the end of it; in other words, he had to embrace and emulate hypermasculinity and reject the feminising impulse of the 1980s, led or inspired by a father-figure who embodied the manly ideal. On the other hand, in the new Hollywood war film, rather than older men functioning as father figures to lead the youth on his journey to manhood, it is the youth as an idealist who maintains his moral conviction at the end of the film and inspires his jaded superiors to embrace the moral and also act heroically.

The 1980s action-hero star returns in the new Hollywood film, bringing with him the associations of the hard-body hero but only in order to make his transformation to a sensitive and idealistic hero all the more appealing. Bruce Willis appears in Hart’s War and Tears of the Sun and Mel Gibson in We Were Soldiers; however, they play roles very different from the superiors of the realist combat film. The “men” in the realist combat film served as father figures to the “boys” under their command: in Platoon, Barnes and Elias offer Chris two types of masculinity to emulate; in Full Metal Jacket, Gunnery Sergeant Hartman (Lee Emery) tries to transform his “ladies” in basic training into men including Private Joker; and in Gardens of Stone, Clell Hazard (James Caan) mentors young Jackie Willow (D.B. Sweeney) about the perils of war. In the new Hollywood war film, however, it is the young men that are empowered through their belief in their role as soldiers and it is the older men—Captain Miller (Tom Hanks) in Saving Private Ryan, Sergeant Enders (Nicholas Cage) in Windtalkers, and Lieutenant Waters (Willis) in Tears of the Sun—who are inspired by the idealistic youth and gain a renewed desire to fight a “good” war. They may not be allowed the degree of vulnerability and optimism that the youth is able to possess; however, even the most jaded of “men,” in the new cycle of war films, feel the desire to do “the decent

thing”—or in Tears of the Sun “a good thing”—an impulse inspired by the naïve youth that they come into contact with during their experience of war.

In Hart’s War, Colonel McNamara (Willis) is the foil to the film’s hero, the young and idealistic Lieutenant Hart (Colin Farrell). Hart struggles against corruption and injustice in their World War II POW camp only to discover that McNamara is a part of both: he killed a man, framed another, and assigned himself prosecutor in the trial in order to keep his secret. Hart, however, convinces the Colonel that the “right” way is the only way, and the Colonel confesses to the crime, sacrificing his own life in order to save the accused’s. Similarly, in Tears of the Sun, Lieutenant Waters (Willis) begins the mission obeying orders and saying they are there just “to get the job done”—in this case, that is to get Dr. Kendrick (Monica Belluci) out of a missionary in Africa as civil unrest flares up. When Waters does not follow orders and goes back to save a group of innocent civilians, his superior (an even tougher and older Tom Skerritt) accuses him of failing his mission. However, Dr. Kendrick—an idealistic woman fulfilling the role of the idealistic youth—praises Waters for his moral conviction: “You did a good thing today,” she says. Waters, somewhat cynical from his years in the military, replies: “I don’t know if it was a good thing or not. It’s been so long since I did a good thing...the right thing.” Tears of the Sun is set in the midst of a fictional civil conflict in Nigeria where the U.S. intervenes. Like the majority of the other new war films, Tears of the Sun does not debate whether or not U.S. intervention is good or right. Instead it displaces that debate with a moral one of whether or not the men fighting are doing the right thing—in this case, Waters all but disobeys his orders by helping a group of civilians reach the border safely instead of just rescuing the white doctor and missionaries he was sent to extract.

We Were Soldiers differs from the others and, in some ways, falls back into the pattern of the 1980s realist combat film, perhaps because, unlike the other contemporary films, it is set in Vietnam. One of the noticeable throwbacks is that the protagonist is not an idealistic youth but Lieutenant Colonel Moore (Mel Gibson)—a God-fearing, family man and fearless leader. His duty, he feels, is to guide and protect the boys under his command, echoing the father figures of Elias, Hartman, and Hazard. While

chaos surrounds him, Moore keeps his cool and, at one point, he turns around to see one of the enemy rushing at him with his weapon raised. He calmly, at the last possible moment, shoots the man down and goes back to his conversation on the radio without even flinching. In battle, the young Sergeant Savage finally understands why Sergeant Major Plumley (a grizzled and tough Sam Elliott) scorns his cheery salutation of “Good Morning!” Plumley, who fought in World War II and Korea, returns each of Savage’s daily greetings with a cutting comment like, “So you’re a weather man now?” After their first night of hard fighting in the Ia Drang Valley, Plumley spies a shocked and frightened Savage and says: “That’s a nice day, Sergeant Savage!” Like the realist combat film, We Were Soldiers presents two options for youth in war: it either kills you or it makes you tough.

In keeping with the themes of the other contemporary war films, however, We Were Soldiers sees its fearless leader, Moore, inspired by the youth that rise to the challenge rather than the youth disillusioned by his experiences. Despite being ill-prepared, boxed in, outnumbered, and exhausted after hours of fighting, many of the young soldiers—like those in Black Hawk Down—choose to go back in and fight again in support of their brothers. Despite the star power of Gibson, in many ways Joe Galloway (Barry Pepper) is the hero of the film. His is the voice-over that narrates the film as a reporter assigned to the mission, but one who picks up a gun and fights alongside the soldiers he was meant only to interview. He becomes a hero who not only fights well and survives the battle but also reports “the truth” about it—including co-writing the novel on which the film was based with Colonel Moore. And like the other new war films, We Were Soldiers avoids any address of the politics of the war, helped in part by the film’s action being set at the beginning of the conflict with the first military engagement in 1965. Instead of questioning American intervention in Vietnam, the film offers a nostalgic rendering of American heroism before the nation’s loss of innocence that the war incited. Rather than shots of homefront protests or boot camp hell, the film proffers perfectly turned out wives that keep the home fires burning and soldiers that are treated with respect and dignity by their superiors. Unlike the Vietnam films of the 1980s—whether the tale of the returning vet like Coming Home, a revenge film like Rambo,

or a realist combat film like Hamburger Hill—We Were Soldiers is not critical of the war. Instead it promotes a uniform glorification of the war with young men who died bravely on the battlefield; one young soldier says as he lies dying in the valley, “I’m glad I could die for my country.” As Brian Johnson notes, “As if Apocalypse Now, Platoon, and Full Metal Jacket had never happened, writer-director Randall Wallace revises American’s Vietnam experience as noble sacrifice” (60). The soldiers in recent war films are portrayed as saints; as Houpt states, “This, apparently, in the new truth of Vietnam” (R1).

GLORIFICATION OF WAR

As Sue Williams says, Black Hawk Down becomes “an astonishing glorification of slaughter that makes the tragedy look like a majestic triumph for the brotherhood of man, rather than a humbling defeat for the United States” (41). The war films of the 1980s, according to Dittmar and Michaud, used Vietnam vet heroes to unmask the racist, economic, and patriarchal institutions that sustained a war that was seen—by American society at large—as unjustifiable (4). In contrast, the new cycle of Hollywood war films has no such critique to offer its audiences—no debate about U.S. military intervention, no contemplation of race, gender, and class, or the demonising of the racial “other.” Instead, they offer a relatively uniform glorification of American patriotism and heroism, not unlike the pre-Vietnam World War II film.

Critics seem divided in their response to the realist combat film. On the one hand, the films were praised by some for their realistic portrayal of the war-as-hell and their exposure of the problematic institutions that underpinned the war. For example Janet Moore argues that Full Metal Jacket explores boot camp training, the group mentality, and the ideal of hypermasculinity demanded by the army in order to critique them (39-41). On the other, the films were also criticised for their focus on the personal experience of the grunt and their lack of address of the bigger picture of the war—the politics behind the war and homefront protest of the war. As Sharrett argues, the realist combat films of the 1980s like Hamburger Hill that “presume a more ‘realistic’ depiction of the war [...] are especially problematic” because they promote an image of realism (64). Similarly, the increased surface realism of the new

Hollywood war film threatens to mask its moral certitudes as “truth” or “natural” rather than as the constructions they are of contemporary social attitudes towards heroism and war as well as Hollywood’s generic conventions. As McGrady argues,

The horror of the cinematography may lead some to conclude that this is an anti-war film but no conclusion could be farther from the truth. Hamburger Hill loves war, glories in carnage, dotes on destruction. Sure, almost everyone is killed, maimed or wounded, but that is the price a real man is willing to pay for glory. (3; emphasis in the original)

The same holds true for Saving Private Ryan, Black Hawk Down, and We Were Soldiers—these films love war. When in danger and fighting for their lives, men not only bond together but also have the opportunity to prove their masculinity to each other and, more importantly, to themselves.

The new Hollywood war film offers a postmodern fusion of the tropes of the war film cycles that have preceded them: from the World War II film, they borrow the cooperation model of male bonding and from the 1980s Vietnam war film, the realistic visualisation of combat. Just as some critics drew attention to the morality play at the heart of Platoon (Hoberman 79; Floyd 121), so too have critics like Phil Landon described Saving Private Ryan “as much a morality play as a faithful recreation of World War II” (62). On the other hand, critics saw the orderly, coherent narrative of Saving Private Ryan as an extension and/or resuscitation of the World War II combat genre film with the film employing many of the same dramatic devices as Hollywood’s “classic” combat films (Hodgkins 78-9). The wound that Vietnam inflicted on American society seems still not to have healed. Rather than exploring America’s failure in Vietnam like the war films of the 1980s—whether tales of the returning vet like Coming Home, or the revenge film like Rambo, or the realist combat film like Hamburger Hill—the new Hollywood war film chooses a fight it can win as its focus. Each of these films begin with a battle, mission, or event that sees America as the victim with American casualties and damage—the attack on Pearl Harbor (Pearl Harbor), Omaha Beach (Saving Private Ryan), the battle of Ia Drang Valley (We Were Soldiers), and Mogadishu 1993 (Black Hawk Down)—that can then be countered by heroic fighting and some kind of

victory, whether by the end of that battle as in We Were Soldiers or in some other form of retaliation as with the attack on Japan at the end of Pearl Harbor or defending the bridge at the end of Saving Private Ryan. Unlike the Vietnam war films of the 1980s, the new Hollywood war films (with the exception of The Thin Red Line) end with clear-cut heroes and moral—if not military—victories.

The tagline for Black Hawk Down—“Leave no man behind”—is the mantra of many of the new war films as soldiers go back into the fray for their brothers and echoes the revenge film in which John Rambo, Colonel Braddock, or Colonel Rhodes (Gene Hackman in Uncommon Valor) went back to Vietnam to rescue the American POWs that the government had left behind. These recent war films could be dubbed “Common Valor” as the revenge film’s few heroes now seem to populate the whole of the American on-screen military. Whereas McKeller names the cycles of the Vietnam war film “tales of moral confusion,” “revenge films,” and “realist combat films,” the new cycle of Hollywood war films might be better described as “tales of moral certitude” or “moral realist combat films.” But why this focus across the board on positive militarism? Films like Black Hawk Down and We Were Soldiers seem like advertisements for military recruitment with their glorification of heroism and war. Joe Morgenstern argues that patriotic films like Black Hawk Down and We Were Soldiers were in production before 9/11 and attracted financing because of the success of Saving Private Ryan (W5). However, the cycle of films has also appeared because the turn of the millennium occurred at a cultural moment in which American society was increasingly supportive of proactive militarism, and with 9/11 and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan we are likely to see more new Hollywood war films being produced and consumed. Digital cinematography and CGI effects offer a graphic vision of the horrors of war, like the realist combat film of the late 1980s, an image of war that *appears* founded in realism while actually purporting myths of heroism and war as fictional—and spectacular—as those of the revenge film of the early 1980s like Rambo—with idealistic heroes who are just trying to fight what they see as “the good fight.”

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Notes:

1. McKellar identifies these three distinct phases. Studlar and Dresser identify two waves of Vietnam films: the right-wing revisionist wave, including Uncommon Valor (1983), Missing in Action (1984), Rambo: First Blood Part II (1985)—which coincide with McKellar’s “revenge film” phase—and the more realistic wave, including Platoon (1986), Hamburger Hill (1987), Full Metal Jacket (1987)—McKellar’s “realist combat film” phase (104). The revenge film is typically focused on the rescue of POWs and MIAs rather than combat.
2. See Hodgkins 75.
3. Sturken uses the term “docudrama” and critics like Christopher Sharrett and Mike Felker comment on the style of Full Metal Jacket as almost a “documentary” or “documentary-style” approach.
4. “Skinnies” is an epithet used to refer to the Somalis.

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