

A Critical Analysis of World War II in Film

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INTRODUCTION

A prevalent and significant aspect of cinematic history has been the portrayal of conflict, especially World Wars I and II. The way society views war, national identity, bravery, and pain is both reflected in and constructed by these movies. Filmmakers have struggled with the intricacies of war from the beginning of cinema to contemporary blockbusters, frequently portraying warfare as a source of moral uncertainty, human pain, or national pride. The purpose of this essay is to critically examine how the World Wars are portrayed in movies, with an emphasis on how these representations both reflect and influence how people view conflict.

Historical Context: World War in Early Cinema

Early depictions of war in cinema were often idealized, mirroring the sentiments of nationalism and heroism that characterized early 20th-century attitudes. The World War I films, for instance, were initially framed within a narrative of noble sacrifice and national duty. However, as the decades passed, the portrayal of war began to shift, influenced by the trauma and disillusionment that followed the wars. The late 1930s and early 1940s saw a surge in propaganda films during World War II, with movies such as *Why We Fight* (1942), directed by Frank Capra, designed to boost morale and justify the United States' involvement in the war.

While early war films were often optimistic and nationalistic, later representations became more nuanced, reflecting a growing awareness of the devastating human cost of war. The post-war period, particularly after the Vietnam War, brought about a more critical examination of the role of military conflict in society.

Representation of Heroism and Sacrifice

One of the most enduring themes in World War films is the concept of heroism. Characters in these films are often depicted as embodying noble values such as courage, loyalty, and sacrifice. In Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), for example, the narrative focuses on the sacrifice of a small group of soldiers on a mission to bring one soldier, Private James Ryan, home. The film's portrayal of the horrors of war is balanced by a sense of duty and honor, which has become a hallmark of war cinema. As Spielberg's film suggests, the ultimate cost of war is not simply the loss of life, but the moral quandaries that accompany it.

However, not all war films reinforce such glorified views of heroism. In *Paths of Glory* (1957), directed by Stanley Kubrick, the film critiques the concept of heroism by exposing the brutal and senseless nature of war. Set during World War I, *Paths of Glory* tells the story of French soldiers who are ordered to carry out an impossible attack, resulting in mass casualties. The film challenges the traditional narrative of heroism by showing how the soldiers' sacrifice is in vain, manipulated by the military hierarchy. Kubrick's depiction of war highlights its futility, suggesting that heroism can often be a dangerous illusion.

The Trauma of War: Psychological and Emotional Impact

A key theme in post-World War II cinema is the psychological and emotional toll of war on individuals. Films such as *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) explore the lasting effects of combat on soldiers' mental health. In *The Deer Hunter*, director Michael Cimino portrays the psychological scars left on three working-class men from Pennsylvania who fight in the Vietnam War. The film's depiction of the Russian roulette scene is an iconic representation of the trauma that soldiers endure, both physically and emotionally.

Similarly, *Apocalypse Now*, a loose adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, examines the journey of Captain Willard as he is sent to assassinate the rogue Colonel Kurtz in the jungles of Vietnam. The film critiques the dehumanizing effects of war on soldiers, showing how the experience of combat gradually strips them of their humanity. The visceral and surreal nature of *Apocalypse Now* reflects the internal conflict and disillusionment that many soldiers experience when faced with the horrors of war.

Both of these films illustrate how the trauma of war extends beyond the battlefield and permeates the mental and emotional states of soldiers long after the conflict has ended. The brutal nature of war in these films is not only a physical confrontation but a psychological one as well, underscoring the emotional scars that persist even in times of peace.

War and Nationalism: Propaganda and the Shaping of Public Opinion

World War films, particularly during the 20th century, often served as vehicles for nationalistic propaganda. In the United States, films such as *The Battle of Midway* (1942) and *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970) were made to boost morale during World War II and to solidify the image of the United States as a righteous defender of freedom. These films were characterized by their glorification of the Allied forces and their demonization of the enemy, reinforcing simplistic narratives of good versus evil.

Critics, however, have argued that war films can be used as tools of propaganda to justify military intervention and foster support for war. As noted by film scholar Jean-Louis Comolli, “Cinema is never innocent: it is always a political act, both in its production and in its reception” (Comolli, 1971). This perspective suggests that war films do more than just depict the realities of combat—they actively shape public opinion and influence the ideological climate surrounding military conflicts.

While many of the early films on World War II presented a highly patriotic narrative, more recent depictions of war have become more critical. *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), another Kubrick film, offers a scathing critique of the Vietnam War, exposing the brutality of military training and the dehumanizing effects of warfare. The film’s portrayal of soldiers as both victims and perpetrators of violence suggests that the machinery of war often serves to strip away individual agency, reducing soldiers to mere instruments of a larger geopolitical agenda.

Gender and War Cinema

War films have also been an important space for examining gender roles, often reinforcing traditional stereotypes of masculinity and heroism. Most World War films center on male soldiers, with their emotional experiences often marginalized or overlooked. In films like *Saving Private Ryan*, men are depicted as stoic and resilient, embodying traditional notions of masculinity that emphasize strength and self-sacrifice.

However, recent films have started to challenge these conventions by offering more nuanced representations of gender in war. In *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), directed by Kathryn Bigelow, the character of Maya, played by Jessica Chastain, is a portrayal of a woman in a high-stakes intelligence operation, defying expectations of gender roles in both military and cinematic contexts. *Megan Leavey* (2017), based on the true story of a female Marine, further complicates traditional gender dynamics by centering the experiences of a woman in combat, highlighting her emotional and psychological challenges.

These films suggest that while traditional war films often foreground male experiences, there is an increasing shift toward recognizing the varied and complex roles that women can play in wartime narratives.

CONCLUSION

The depiction of war in cinema, particularly the World Wars, has evolved significantly over time. From the early heroic portrayals of warfare to more critical and nuanced examinations of its effects, war films provide a unique lens through which we can understand the social, emotional, and political dimensions of war. While these films have often been used for propaganda purposes, they have also served as powerful vehicles for critiquing the cost of human conflict. Through their exploration of heroism, trauma, nationalism, and gender, war films offer an ongoing commentary on the nature of warfare and its profound impact on individuals and society.

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