The WWII Film Experience in America, Past and Present

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Abstract

World War II was a challenging time for the United States. The country was at war with two nations that were polar opposites in geography, but socially aligned in ideologies. Americans were able to ease into the conflict with Germany in the European theatre. The conflict with Japan in the Pacific theatre was anticipated, albeit, no American could have dreamed of how it actually unfolded. This paper will examine the WWII filmmakers and their impact during that era and analyze WWII movie directors of the 21st Century. Each generation produces variant styles and genres, with the goal of giving the viewer a particular cinematic experience. While the country was engaged in war, the propaganda films were vehicles to boost morale and disperse information on the home front. During the 1940’s, the cinema was the dominant form of entertainment for Americans. Today’s WWII movies honor those who are owed a debt of gratitude, in addition to reminding citizens of the sacrifices made to protect their freedom. The United States government, with scripts that leaned towards propaganda, heavily influenced the films of the 1940’s; conversely, modern filmmakers experience more autonomy and artistic freedom to explore all the peripheries of combat cinematically.
War & Film

The author of *Specters of War* claims that cinema functions as a privileged site of recollection, where American culture continually renegotiates the traumatic traces of its historical past, reconceiving current social and political concerns in the light of previous military conflicts (Bronfen, 2012, pp. Intro 54-56). Additionally, research documenting cinematic narratives of military conflict, question the necessity of depicting America’s involvement in violent conflicts (Slocum, 2005, pp. 35-36). Slocum’s research examines whether the combat film can evoke the same emotional responses without the excessive violence. Combat film narratives of the 21st century are not short on violence, however, they incorporate themes from various genres.

Technological advances of the 21st Century enhance the audience’s visual experience in the combat genre. Spielberg impressed his contemporaries with his shutter technique which mimics the disorientation of the battlefield soldier in *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg, *Saving Private Ryan*, 1998). Director Michael Bay’s *Pearl Harbor* lacks unique cinematography, but casts the biggest actors in Hollywood. *Pearl Harbor’s* blockbuster Hollywood plot ensconses the range of emotions associated with war, such as, intimacy, fear, and camaraderie (Bay, 2001). In the absence of first hand combat experience, the viewer can merely imagine what is real or fanticized. Bronfen contends:

That recapturing was in the codified language of popular cinema functions like a protective fiction, mediating violence by blocking out its full impact and tranposing its force into the conventions of genre narratives, this apotropaic shield is inevitably tarnished. (Bronfen, 2012, pp. 97-98)
WWII films both past and present employ a sense of collective identity and pride for some Americans while reminding others of the nation’s ugly past regarding racial divisiveness. The nostalgia of WWII, specifically the battles waged in the Pacific are symbolized in propaganda and the, Noir, Drama, and Musical genres.

WWII Films

Following the success of his *Why We Fight* documentaries, Frank Capra was named the best director in Hollywood (Rogin & Moran, 2003, p. 216). Prior to his arrangement with the United States government, Capra directed several blockbuster films; *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), won critical acclaim mocking the interworkings of politics in the nation’s capital. Film historians assert that it shifts the political authority from politics to film (Rogin & Moran, 2003, p. 219). America’s entry into WWII prompted a partnership between Hollywood and Washington D.C. The Office of War Information (OWI) housed the Bureau of Motion Pictures (BMP). The BMP monitored film production for appropriate political content and produced education/propaganda films (Rogin & Moran, 2003, p. 39).

America’s isolationist posture following WWI necessitated President Roosevelt and other legislators to recruit the power-brokers of Hollywood into the war effort. The *Why We Fight* series were instructional narratives that persuaded young men of their obligation to serve and protect the country from the villainous Nazi’s and Japanese (Belton, 2009, p. 208). They also functioned as coherent narratives for the citizens on the homefront; emphasizing the importance of rationing and conservation. The Japanese film industry produced post WWII films utilizing a different posture from that of the United States.

Japan’s directors were careful with how they presented the United States and their allies. In *The Longest Day* (1967), director Nagaihi, presents his country during a very austere time,
nonetheless, it is a part of their history (U.S. Naval Institute, 2012). The movie, *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970), is a collaboration between American and Japanese directors and historians. It is based on events leading up to the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941 (Fukasaku & Fleischer, 1970). The movie has nuances of an education film, showcasing the shrewdness and discipline with which the Japanese planned and executed the attack. It is reticent and void of love stories and tomfoolery and contains footage of actual bombings chronicled by the Japanese pilots. The script based on personal testimonies and journals, did not glorify their attack on the United States, however, it did showcase the skill and bravery of the Japanese pilots (Fukasaku & Fleischer, 1970). The film is chocked full of ceremonial and dramatic sequences and more history lesson than star appeal or raw entertainment.

American filmmaker Michael Bay’s movie *Pearl Harbor* (2001), is a montage of drama, romance, and documentary. The combination of big name actors, beautiful love interests, and exceptional special effects are a large part of the attraction. It addresses the racism towards the Japanese, as well as its own African-American citizens in an abstract manner. According to WWII historians, Japanese leaders like Tojio and Hiroshito were encensed by the United States’ unwillingness to acknowledge them on equal international footing (Coetzee & Shevin-Coetzee, 2011). The movie does not explore the historical political tension that existed between the American and Japanese governments. The second half of the movie is dedicated to the Japanese attack on the Pacific fleet and America’s retaliatory response (Bay, 2001).

American director Martin Scorsese delivered a modern film based on WWII era events in the *Aviator* (2004). It was not marketed as a combat film; however, affords the audience a historical narrative through the life of Howard Hughes (Scorsese, 2004). The film chronicles significant themes during that Era with relation to Hollywood and the government. It addresses
Hollywood blacklists, FBI investigations, defense contracts, and the control of the U.S. Senate over any industry. The mise-en-scene pulls the viewer into the rapid narrative with visual elements that rouses nostalgia or conjecture based on the viewers’ generation. Modern filmmakers have artistic and financial autonomy from big Hollywood studios and the American government. Edward Zwick’s *Glory* (1989), Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993), and Spike Lee’s, *Miracle at St. Anna* (2008), are phenomenal war films that provide their audience with vivid historical accounts. The shot angles, lighting, editing and sound mixing all worked to resuscitate the images of the past in each respective film (Zwick, 1989; Spielberg, *Schindler’s List*, 1993; Spielberg, *Saving Private Ryan*, 1998; Lee, 2008).

**Conclusion**

The World War II film enjoys multicultural and generational appeal primarily because it evokes sentiments of collective mourning, passion, and national pride. The “Total War” nature of battle exposes the unpleasant side of human nature and conversely, the “Good War” label reflects the reverie of a unified America. Brofen asserts, The past that haunts us is also a past we can never fully master (Bronfen, 2012, p. 199). While the *Why We Fight* (1941-1945), series educated and informed, the *Sound of Music* (1965), entertained and convinced the viewers that good triumphs over evil ultimatley (Wise, 1965).

The Post 9/11 era has reigned war interest in the Americans psyche. It has facilitated a platform for another generation of filmmakers to chronicle the trauma of war. Americans are enundated with horrific images from the Middle East daily. The war mantra of “God and Country first” is lost to the Frank Capra years. The young soldiers are selling their stories to Hollywood before the missions can declassify. This is evident in current films such as, *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *Seal Team Six: The Raid on Osama Bin Laden* (2012). While Americans
witness daily combat images today, the yearning to return to the “Good War” and its cinematic portrayal stills persists for many.
Bibliography

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