

**SCREEN COMBAT: RECREATING WORLD WAR II IN AMERICAN FILM AND
MEDIA**

by

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“Screen Combat” interrogates how the cultural mythology of the Second World War as the “Good War” surfaces in the American war film by examining the change in the aesthetics of combat sequences over time. By juxtaposing 1940s documentary and fiction films with contemporary cinema and video games, this dissertation argues that the World War II combat genre is not the conservative, coherent, “classical” genre that previous studies have assumed it to be. Rather, combat films and video games are complex, polysemic texts that challenge our assumptions about Hollywood filmmaking and mainstream American media.

This dissertation contends that the combat sequences of World War II films give voice to a counter-narrative of the war, breaking away from the typical plots of noble sacrifice and dedicated heroism to show literally explosive images of devastation and annihilation. Even seemingly conventional cinematic histories of the war—movies like *Destination Tokyo* (1943) and *Pearl Harbor* (2001) and video games like *Call of Duty* (2003)—contain jarring and exhilarating combat sequences that undercut our usual notion of the Second World War as a morally righteous undertaking and replace it with a dangerously fascinating portrait of awesome destruction. It is in these moments of action that the contradictions of war come bubbling to the surface, convulsing and even rupturing the body of the text as it seeks to simultaneously contain and unleash the violence of battle. In combat-centered films and video games, heterogeneous messages about the experience of war converge in the body of the spectator/player, who is

caught up in both the spectacle of fantasy and the visceral sensation of “being there” on the front lines. Beyond the realism of historical fidelity or visual mimesis, these texts activate a “corporeal realism” that exists at the very base of specular experience—that of bodily sensation.

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PREFACE

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1.0 INTRODUCTION: SCREENING THE “GOOD WAR”

How does one represent something as vast as worldwide war and as overwhelming as the experience of combat? War—particularly in the twentieth century and beyond—presents a challenge to conventional ways of seeing and telling stories, with its novel perceptual technologies, enormous scope, mass death, and destruction on a colossal scale. Hayden White has argued that “‘holocaustal’ events”—and he includes the two world wars alongside industrially organized genocides like the Shoah—function like psychological trauma for the groups that experience them: “This means that they cannot be simply forgotten and put out of mind, but neither can they be adequately remembered; which is to say, clearly and unambiguously identified as to their meaning....”¹ According to White, these modern events do not lend themselves to conventional histories. Yet, for the last sixty-five years, American culture, through various means and media, has sought to establish a clear and unambiguous account of World War II in order to modify a traumatic event into a foundational event for a certain narrative of national destiny. Cinema has been a major instrument in the rehearsal of particular narratives of the war that affirm previously established myths of nationhood: a rugged, frontier spirit, a manifest destiny driving expansion, the necessity of fighting for freedom, a

¹ Hayden White, “The Modernist Event,” in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event*, ed. Vivian Sobchack (New York: Routledge, 1996), 20.

moral righteousness, the inevitable victory of America's military might, and a sense of consensus as the whole nation works together.

The media writ broadly and cinema in particular have helped to shape the American myth of World War II as the “good war.” This myth involves the idea that the United States was not openly belligerent, but only responded when attacked. American motives were pure: we fought the war to preserve democracy, freedom, and humanity itself from the grip of fascism. The whole culture was thought to be allied in this just conflict. Furthermore, the war had a “happy ending”—the Allies won definitively, and the end of the war ushered in an unprecedented era of prosperity and power for the United States. Although based in historical actuality, this mythology stems from a magnification of national virtue and a neglect of America’s culpability in the war’s atrocities.

In *The Best War Ever: America and World War II*, Michael C. C. Adams claims that over time, “the war years have come to seem a golden age, an idyllic period when everything was simpler and a can-do generation of Americans solved the world’s problems. In this mythic time of the Good War, everyone was united: there were no racial or gender tensions, no class conflicts.”² In his series of books on World War II veterans, Tom Brokaw locates the virtue of the war in those who fought it, claiming that they were part of the “greatest generation any society has ever produced.”³ To achieve this unique status, their task was nothing less than to “save the world,” and they succeeded by winning the war.⁴ For James Bradley, author of *Flags of Our Fathers* and son of one of the Iwo Jima flag-raisers, the men who fought the war were simple, loyal, dutiful, and virtuous. His book concludes with the lines, “They were boys of

² Michael C. C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), xiii.

³ Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998), xxx.

⁴ Ibid., xix.

common virtue. Called to duty. Brothers and sons. Friends and neighbors. And fathers. It's as simple as that.”⁵ Much of this myth has been bestowed in retrospect, after a failed war in Vietnam and unpopular American military interventions in places like Somalia, but the “good war” mythology was openly constructed during the war itself via the propaganda agencies of the government.

Yet, as White attests, the war was not always endowed with such clarity of meaning. Nationalist and triumphalist narratives require much repetition in order to overcome the trauma at their origins. It has taken a wholesale rewriting of the war to turn one of the most destructive and deadly enterprises in human history into the “good war.” Paul Fussell’s groundbreaking work *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* devotes itself to undermining the myths that have accumulated about the war. He writes, “For the past fifty years the Allied war has been sanitized and romanticized almost beyond recognition by the sentimental, the loony patriotic, the ignorant, and the bloodthirsty.”⁶ For Fussell, who fought as an infantryman in the war, World War II was “indescribably cruel and insane”: “It was a savage, insensate affair, barely conceivable to the well-conducted imagination (the main reason there’s so little good writing about it) and hardly approachable without some currently unfashionable theory of human mass insanity and inbuilt, inherited corruption.”⁷ Similarly, Edward W. Wood, Jr., another veteran of the war and author of *Worshipping the Myths of World War II*, writes that “World War II was about one thing and one thing only: killing.”⁸

⁵ James Bradley and Ron Powers, *Flags of Our Fathers* (New York: Bantam Books, 2000), 353.

⁶ Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), ix.

⁷ Ibid., 132.

⁸ Edward W. Wood, Jr., *Worshipping the Myths of World War II: Reflections on America’s Dedication to War* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2006), 19.

This view of the Second World War as one of cruelty and killing has rarely found expression outside of a handful of revisionist histories and novels. However, it is my contention that some of this counter-narrative of the war is embedded in even the most conventional texts within Hollywood cinema and mainstream media. Primarily, this submerged voice can be found in combat sequences, which depart from the flow of a film's plot to show literally explosive images of devastation and annihilation. This dissertation examines World War II combat films and media that appear to be conventional cinematic histories of the war—movies like *Destination Tokyo* (Delmer Daves, 1943) and *Pearl Harbor* (Michael Bay, 2001) and video games like *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward/Activision, 2003)—and locates in them an opposing narrative of World War II. This narrative speaks the language of spectacle; it revels in images of violence and obliteration; it inundates the spectator with kinetic action and sensory overload.

This story, told via highly aestheticized recreations of combat, undercuts our usual notion of the Second World War—the “good war” with moral clarity and justified force—and replaces it with a dangerously fascinating portrait of awesome destruction. By attending to this secondary voice, I question the assumptions we have made about the World War II combat film and about Hollywood film, more generally. I argue that combat is central to the genre in heretofore unexplored ways. It is in these moments of action that the contradictions of war come bubbling to the surface, convulsing and even rupturing the body of the film as it seeks to simultaneously contain and unleash the violence of combat. These ruptures are often visible on the surface as jarring juxtapositions of documentary footage, special effects, reenactments, and digital simulations. Representations of World War II combat participate in the extravagant and theatrical spectacle of the war, aggrandizing the massive mobilizations of humans and machines, the explosive fireworks of artillery and bombs, and the breathtaking perspectives afforded by

airplanes, submarines, and tanks. At the same time, however, they have an investment in the visual transcription of history, of “real war.” By interrogating the volatile relationship between these two aspects of visualizing war, I reveal how World War II combat films construct multiple narratives of the war, mythologizing its triumphant history while also relishing the sensationalism of action and extermination. These heterogeneous messages converge in the body of the spectator, who is caught up in both the spectacle of fantasy and the visceral sensation of experiencing what war is “really” like. My driving questions are these: How do American films and media from the 1940s and today represent combat? What techniques are used to give the impression—with both perceptual and moral authority—of “real” combat? What are the ramifications of the jarring juxtapositions of realist strategies and bombastic spectacle found in the genre? Furthermore, what kinds of history do these diverse visual and aural practices allow?

The American film industry and the U.S. military have evolved alongside each other over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For Paul Virilio, the signifying moment of modernity is the synchronic emergence of mass media and the industrial army, resulting in a “melding of military, cinematic, and techno-scientific logistics of perception.”⁹ Cinema, from its very inception, has taken up the task of visualizing war. Since the Spanish-American War, warfare and cinema have been indelibly linked in the American context. Historians have pointed out that without the outbreak of war at the tail end of the nineteenth century, cinema may have fallen by the wayside as a popular entertainment. But the thrilling—and primarily staged and reenacted—moving images of military exercises, parades, training, raids, and charges reinvigorated the fledgling medium.¹⁰ World War I was also instrumental in cementing

⁹ Paul Virilio, *Desert Screen: War at the Speed of Light* (New York: Continuum, 2002), viii.

¹⁰ Charles Musser, *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 225. For more on the prevalence of staging in early American documentary films, see Kristen

American cinema as a dominant, global force. Before the war, European films flooded American distributors, but after the devastation of European economies and film industries during the war, American cinema assumed the role of leading film producer and distributor for the world markets.

World War II extends substantially the links between war, cinema, and the state. Thomas Schatz writes of the era, “Never before or since have the interests of the nation and the movie industry been so closely aligned, and never has Hollywood’s status as a national cinema been so vital.”¹¹ All of the war’s major powers perfected the use of film for propagandistic purposes. As much of the war as possible was recorded with cinematic technology for a variety of uses—enemy surveillance, reconnaissance, intelligence, training, news, entertainment, indoctrination, morale, as well as more amorphous motivations, such as posterity, history, and visual evidence. In the American context, the war represents a vast expansion of the Signal Corps past its usual function to safeguard the military’s communication capabilities (via radio, etc.). The Army Pictorial Service (as well as similar services in the U.S. Navy, Marines, and other branches) oversaw the training and deployment of hundreds of still and motion picture photographers onto the front lines in all theaters of the war. While the film footage taken by these active servicemen was assimilated into newsreels and military training and intelligence films, the U.S. government also sought to oversee the development of fictional films produced by Hollywood. The Office of War Information sent representatives to influence the film industry to create films that would “help win the war,” presenting America and its allies in the best

Whissell, “Placing the Spectator on the Scene of History: The Battle Re-enactment at the Turn of the Century, from Buffalo Bill’s Wild West to the Early Cinema,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 22, no. 3 (2002), 225-43.

¹¹ Thomas Schatz, “World War II and the Hollywood ‘War Film,’” in *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 89.

possible light.¹² During the war, Americans at home went to the movies more frequently than they ever had before, making the war years an enormous financial boon to Hollywood.

The Second World War also led to innovations in cinematic technology, with the profusion of lightweight, handheld, 35 and 16 mm film cameras, like the Bell & Howell Eyemo and Filmo. The availability of footage taken in combat zones changed the aesthetics of how war was represented. Whereas the Vietnam War was known as the “living room war” for its pervasive presence on network television (and the Gulf and Iraq Wars can be associated respectively with 24-hour cable news and Internet video), World War II is the cinematic war par excellence. Combat footage from the war seems virtually inexhaustible, appearing in documentary films, television shows, fictional films, video games, and more. New footage is constantly “discovered,” promising a new view of the conflict—but such new footage is likely to be old footage repackaged (the “World War II in Color” special DVDs are a prime example of such remediation).

The war remains a popular subject for feature films, as recent films like Spike Lee’s *Miracle at St. Anna* (2008) and Quentin Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) demonstrate. The conventions associated with representing World War II in Hollywood cinema have become so pervasive that these recent films can reference a whole body of cinema in shorthand, evoking a predictable set of expectations from audiences. For instance, *Miracle at St. Anna* begins with the main character, an African American former infantryman, watching John Wayne in *The Longest Day* (1962). He mutters to himself, “We fought, too.” With this intertextual reference, the scene relies on the spectator’s built-in pop-cultural knowledge of what to expect from a

¹² For more on how the Office of War Information influenced Hollywood filmmaking during the war, see Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

World War II film—John Wayne, spectacular heroics, sentimentality, themes of honor and sacrifice—while also offering a corrective: that black soldiers also contributed to the war effort and have been ignored in previous cinematic representations.¹³ The generic conventions of World War II combat films have been so influential on other war films and other genres (such as science fiction films like *Aliens* [James Cameron, 1985] and *Starship Troopers* [Paul Verhoeven, 1998]) that they are often conflated with those of the war film more generally. Although Jeanine Basinger, in her study of the World War II combat film genre, argues that “different wars create different genres,” most scholars of the war genre agree that World War II serves as the Ur-text for all subsequent war cinema, including Vietnam and Gulf/Iraq War films (which reference the standard generic conventions associated with the earlier war, even if they depart from them).¹⁴

Despite the genre’s association with Hollywood narratives and set generic conventions, it has also been closely associated with cinematic realism. Taking as their subject the war most commonly linked with celluloid representation, World War II combat films rely on the associations audiences bring to this technology. The nature of photography and film has led to certain assumptions about the truth value of photographic media, such as “the camera cannot lie.” Representations of combat—despite their spectacle—are often associated with the *verité* of photographic depiction even when the rest of the film is criticized for sentimentality or Hollywood make-believe. This is true both in the founding films of the genre during wartime as well as in contemporary films. A case in point would be *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg,

¹³ Later episodes of the film, particularly those which depict an unlikely friendship between an African American GI and an Italian orphan boy, explicitly reference Roberto Rossellini’s *Paisan* (1946), contributing the additional contextual frame of Italian neo-realism. In this, Spike Lee implicitly compares the white-washed version of World War II found in American cinema with the critical portrayal of American racism in Italy’s cinematic visions of the war and its aftermath.

¹⁴ Thomas Schatz in particular has called the World War II combat film “Hollywood’s military Ur-narrative.” See his “Old War/New War: *Band of Brothers* and the Revival of the WWII War Film,” *Film & History* 13, no. 2 (2002), 75.

1998), which received accolades for its documentary-inspired opening combat sequence on Omaha Beach and criticism for the heavy-handedness of its morality-play narrative.

The stakes of representing “real” history are especially high when portraying such a momentous event that led to so many deaths. Filmmakers and critics have linked cinematic realism with an attempt to “do justice” to those who fought and died or were victims of war.¹⁵ While Vietnam War films are more prone to experiment with non-realist styles, reflecting the ambiguity of the motives and outcomes related to the war, World War II has been represented most often in Hollywood’s classical realist style. As the “good war,” associated with honor, integrity, military justification, and triumph, its association with realism—understood discursively as a moral as well as an aesthetic position—makes sense. Realist representation thus becomes associated with hazier notions such as accuracy, authenticity, and truth.

Instead of classical Hollywood realism, the form of authenticity most at work in the World War II combat film is what I will call “corporeal realism,” focusing on the perceptual and sensual experience of the spectator who is immersed in the action onscreen.¹⁶ In its emphasis on bodily sensation, I contend that the combat film qualifies as a “body genre,” Linda Williams’s term for a corpus of films that evoke particularly strong, embodied reactions in spectators. In the three genres that she examines—horror, pornography, and melodrama—the body of the spectator

¹⁵ Scholarship relating to visualizing the Holocaust has followed a somewhat different approach to cinematic realism. As Miriam Bratu Hansen has explained, realist representations of the Shoah—particularly in the classical Hollywood style, like *Schindler’s List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993)—violate a taboo on representation by depicting that which “defies depiction, whose horror renders any attempt at direct representation obscene” (301). This type of popular narrative is seen as incompatible with the “singularity” of the Shoah, “an event that is totally and irrecuperably Other” (302). See Hansen, “*Schindler’s List Is Not Shoah*: The Second Commandment, Popular Modernism, and Public Memory,” *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 2 (Winter 1996), 292-312.

¹⁶ My notion of “corporeal realism” is a much more specific formulation than Ivone Margulies’ “corporeal cinema,” as delineated in her edited collection, *Rites of Realism: Essays in Corporeal Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). While her anthology deals with the multiple dynamics of the profilmic body and the body of the film itself, I use the term “corporeal realism” in a more delimited way to refer to the sensual intensities of the spectator’s body when assaulted by the destructive spectacles of the combat genre.

is caught up in mimicking the emotions or sensations enacted onscreen.¹⁷ Like the horror film, the combat film shows bodies in pain or terror, and spectators also feel these sensations vicariously. But while the horror film often operates through adrenalized fear, the combat film often works through downbeat sensations of mourning and loss. At the same time, however, scenes of combat excite the eyes and thrill the senses. They strive to make the spectator feel the same intensity of experience that a soldier might feel in a war zone. In addition to evoking the helpless impression of waiting to be wounded or killed, combat sequences, as a function of the potent prosthetic technology of cinema, evoke a sense of power and astonishment resulting from the peculiar juxtaposition of technology and death in modern warfare. Every combat sequence in a film, from an “anti-war” film to a jingoistic propaganda film, has the capacity to produce “shock and awe” for spectators. These sequences combine the terror and exhilaration of facing the possibility of death while also having the power to take life. They constitute the “destructive sublime” at work within the war film’s corporeal realism—the intense, perverse pleasure taken in violence and obliteration.¹⁸

The experience of combat has often been understood as somehow being more “real” than everyday existence. Geoffrey Klingsporn puts it this way: “A large part of war’s cultural power, its attraction and seeming inevitability, is rooted in the belief that war is a privileged path to reality.”¹⁹ The conflation of combat and reality is what John Limon calls the “synecdochic

¹⁷ Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (Summer 1991), 2-13.

¹⁸ The term “destructive sublime” originates in Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, [1757] 1968), and it previously has been linked to the pleasures of war cinema by J. David Slocum. See Slocum, “General Introduction: Seeing Through American War Cinema,” in *Hollywood and War: The Film Reader*, ed. J. David Slocum (New York: Routledge, 2006), 17.

¹⁹ Geoffrey Klingsporn, “War, Film, History: American Images of ‘Real War,’ 1890-1920,” in *Hollywood and War*, 40.

fallacy of war theory.”²⁰ In combat, the usual strictures governing social behavior are suspended, lifting certain taboos, such as the rule against killing. This puts the soldier in touch with the base realities of existence—life and death, pain and exhilaration. But at the same time, for this very reason, combat can seem surreal. It has been described as a seduction, an addiction, a “high,” but also a nightmare, a horror show.²¹ Veterans often describe the modern combat experience as being “like a movie,” evoking the sense of dissociation that one feels in battle.²² Combat films reflect both the horror and the libidinal thrill of combat. War seems to give those who wage it access to some “raw” experience—reality stripped of its illusions—while it also envelops them in the “fog of war,” distorting one’s sense of what is real.

Paul Virilio’s work further illuminates this confluence of the real and surreal in the camouflage, spectacle, and deceptions inherent in modern war. He examines how war and cinema are linked by their interdependence on manipulating perception: “*the history of battle is primarily the history of radically changing fields of perception*. In other words, war consists not so much in scoring territorial, economic or other material victories as in appropriating the ‘immateriality’ of perceptual fields.”²³ Weapons work as much on the perceptual apparatus of the enemy as on their bodies and the materiel of war: “Weapons are tools not just of destruction

²⁰ John Limon, *Writing After War: American War Fiction from Realism to Postmodernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 33.

²¹ J. Glenn Gray, for instance, discusses the “powerful fascination” and “secret attractions” of war in *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle*, 2nd ed. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 28. Chris Hedges, in *War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2002), calls war a “deadly addiction” (16), and he writes about getting a “combat high” in *What Every Person Should Know about War* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 89. James William Gibson calls the Vietnam War both a “horror show” and a “nightmare” in *The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2000), 3.

²² U.S. Navy Seaman First Class James J. Fahey, who covertly kept a diary during World War II, wrote, “We knocked out pillboxes etc. It was just like a movie. You could see big explosions everywhere.” See Fahey, *Pacific War Diary, 1942-1945: The Secret Diary of an American Soldier* (New York: Mariner Books, [1963] 2003), 197. Veteran-authors like Norman Mailer and James Jones also reference movies when describing the experience of combat. See Mailer, *The Naked and The Dead* (New York: Picador, [1948] 1998), 36, and Jones, *The Thin Red Line* (New York: Delta, 1998 [1962]), 351.

²³ Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Verso, 1989), 7, italics in original.

but also of perception.”²⁴ War then works *as* cinema, making its victims into spectators. Taking Virilio’s work as a starting point, I will argue in the pages ahead that the World War II combat film has also tried to assault the spectator perceptually, by offering shocking and immersive scenes of war.

Beyond the realism of historical fidelity or visual mimesis, these films and media activate a realism that exists at the very base of specular experience—that of sensation. Psychoanalytic theories of identification touch upon this relationship, but what can be located in these films is more of a free-floating affect, not tied to any one character or point of view. Indeed, in many combat sequences, the point of view is constantly shifting, among characters and even among the technologies of war, as in the example of the gunsight camera. I agree with Steven Shaviro that the psychoanalytic emphasis on lack does not fully account for the dynamics of spectatorship; rather, a more fruitful perspective focuses on the “primordial forms of raw sensation: affect, excitation, stimulation and repression, pleasure and pain, shock and habit.”²⁵ My notion of corporeal realism is also indebted to the phenomenological approaches of scholars like Vivian Sobchack and Jennifer M. Barker.²⁶ As Barker claims, cinematic “meaning and significance emerge in and are articulated through the fleshy, muscular, and visceral engagement that occurs between films’ and viewer’s bodies.”²⁷

Combat films, especially in battle sequences, create an intense sensation of “being there” on the front line. They do this with various cinematic techniques that result in agitation of the spectator’s perceptual apparatus: rapid editing, shifting points of view, graphic images,

²⁴ Ibid., 6.

²⁵ Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 27.

²⁶ See Vivian Sobchack’s *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992) and *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). See also Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

²⁷ Barker, 4.

percussive sounds, unexpected camera angles or movement. Realism is often thought to consist of stylistic uniformity, narrative consistency, fidelity to actuality, sobriety of discourse, and transparency of mediation. Although aspects of these realist qualities can be found in the World War II combat film, a more significant realism in this genre takes the spectatorial form of visceral engagement and bodily sensation stemming from agitation and disorientation. This corporeal realism is based in the gut instead of in the eyes or in the mind. It can be found in moments of action and spectacle, in scenes where the narrative dissolves into kinetics, visual patterns, and felt thrills or tingles.

The spectacular and sensual aspects of the World War II combat film have been neglected by other scholars in their focus on narrative structures and genre conventions. Many critics, like Jeanine Basinger, Steve Neale, and John Belton, have sought to establish and analyze the ideological consequences of the generic conventions of the war film conceived most broadly.²⁸ Others, like Thomas Doherty and Clayton Koppes and Gregory Black, focus on the intersections of the film industry, wider popular culture, and government intervention during World War II.²⁹ Another set of scholars, such as Lawrence Suid and Robert Rosenstone, consider how war films represent historical events, to evaluate their accuracy or to distinguish how cinematic texts narrate history in different ways.³⁰

By considering documentary and fictional films made during the war alongside video games and recent World War II films, this dissertation puts as much emphasis on contemporary media as on the founding films of the genre—the almost exclusive concern of previous

²⁸ Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*, 2nd ed. (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2003); Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (New York: Routledge, 2000); John Belton, “War Film,” in *American Cinema/American Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994).

²⁹ Koppes and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War*; Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

³⁰ Lawrence H. Suid, *Guts and Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film* (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2002); Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History* (Harlow: Pearson, 2006).

scholarship. This approach has certain advantages. My juxtaposition of 1940s films with contemporary moving images allows for an intensive study of how cinematic style changes diachronically, as well as how aesthetics relate to the historical or experiential events to which they refer in particular synchronic moments. Furthermore, my focus on combat sequences—often understood to stand apart from the film’s story as intrusions into the plot, much like musical numbers—entails an exploration of visual style and realism apart from narrative. This methodology allows for an appreciation for the spectacular nature of war cinema, with its corporeal engagement in excitement, horror, and disgust, rather than a primary emphasis on plot structure or semantic elements.

My goal is not so much to disagree with earlier scholars as to add something that they have neglected, and in doing so, shed new light on the function and appeal of the World War II combat genre. I cannot disagree with Basinger’s lists of common characteristics of the genre (the uniforms, the stock characters, the settings, the typical plot points) or with Doherty’s exploration of how the war films of the 1940s reflected American culture. But my focus on combat does reveal something new about the genre in attending to just those sequences that are thought to be at the core of the genre, yet strangely neglected in other scholarship. An emphasis on combat requires attentiveness to the function of spectacle in the war genre and to how these films convey meaning through the body of the spectator.

In the following chapters, I will look at a series of case studies in the World War II combat genre and the changing aesthetics and rhetoric of realism. The first two of the following chapters investigate the first American documentary and feature film depictions of World War II made while the war was ongoing. In Chapter 2, “Staging War: Wartime Military Documentaries and the Discourse of Realism,” I examine the combat documentaries produced by the U.S.

military during World War II, focusing on four in particular: Gregg Toland's (with John Ford) *December 7th* (1943), John Ford's *Battle of Midway* (1942), John Huston's *San Pietro* (1945), and producer Louis de Rochemont's *The Fighting Lady* (1945). This chapter asks: How do we understand cinema's relationship to contingent events and to the recording of history? What is at stake in a state-sponsored attempt to capture "real" war as it happened?

To begin answering these questions, I trace a history of representational strategies designed to produce a sense of proximity and presence in the spectator when confronted with "real" images of war. In particular, these documentaries contain the origins of the erratic handheld camera jolts (shaking in response to an explosion, etc.) that have been so influential for the aesthetic development of cinematic combat scenes. In focusing on these exemplary moments, I probe the basis of documentary realism in the "indexical" nature of celluloid.³¹ On the one hand, these instances of camera shake would appear to be examples of indexicality par excellence—proof of the camera's recording of a profilmic event. But they also contribute to a sense of excitement and proximity to the action. I argue that the fact that these images were often staged means that the effect of presence is an aesthetic one rather than an ontological one. The foregrounded shaky cinematography, now found in almost every war or action film, is a very particular realist *effect* relying, with other effects like self-reflexive acknowledgement of the camera, on the viewer's reactions to a camera perceived to be in a "real" war zone.

From an analysis of this originary documentary footage, my dissertation then turns to a study of the "afterlife" of this footage in subsequent media, from its insertion into fictional films'

³¹ Like Tom Gunning and other scholars, I do not believe that the term 'indexicality' fully accounts for the photograph's claim to the real. However, the dominance of the concept of indexicality in theorizations of cinematic realism still makes it something that must be dealt with before alternative forms of realism can be explored. For more on Gunning's consideration of indexicality, see his "What's the Point of an Index? or, Faking Photographs," in *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, ed. Karen Beckman and Jean Ma (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008) and "Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality" *differences* 18, no. 1 (2007), 29-52.

combat sequences to its simulation via analog and digital reenactments in contemporary films and video games. In Chapter 3, “Classical Hollywood Cinema Goes AWOL: Space, Time, and Perception in Wartime Combat Films,” I look at two American feature films made during the war—*Destination Tokyo* and *Wing and a Prayer* (Henry Hathaway, 1944)—that are particularly good examples of how classical Hollywood cinema was not so classical after all. The World War II combat film—having originated at the very height of the studio system—is often used as a prime example of classical Hollywood filmmaking, with its associations of coherence, balance, and clarity. Moreover, the genre is often assumed to be politically and aesthetically conservative, reflecting a culture of consensus. In an extension of Dana Polan’s study that showed the inconsistencies and fissures in the narratives of 1940s war films, my chapter examines how the aesthetics of the films, and particularly their combat scenes, also break with classical norms, such as continuity, spatial and temporal uniformity, and closure.³² This chapter shows the inadequacy of the theory of realism associated with classical Hollywood cinema, arguing instead that the strains and difficulties of attempting to represent war pushed the limits of cinematic representation, even in supposedly classical films.

The almost hallucinatory combat sequences in *Destination Tokyo* and *Wing and a Prayer* create invigorating perceptual experiences for spectators that do not conform to theories that emphasize the uniformity and consistency of classical Hollywood cinema. Instead, these films present incoherent representations of space and time, juxtapose various kinds of footage (such as documentary, fictional, and special effects) in disjunctive ways, and disorient the spectator with unexpected points of view, rapid editing, and erratic camerawork. Although the narratives of the films may cohere on the surface, the ruptures of aesthetic experimentation reflect *not* a consensus

³² Dana Polan, *Power and Paranoia: History, Narrative, and the American Cinema, 1940-1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

culture, but rather one of fractured views, cultural tensions, and contradictory desires. I conclude that the aesthetic exhilaration and freedom found in 1940s combat sequences demonstrate the extent to which even “classical” Hollywood cinema serves as a purveyor of visceral thrills, bodily sensations, and novel perceptual experiences.

The final two chapters move ahead to contemporary cinema and visual media, exploring how these current texts use the 1940s films discussed in the previous chapters as primary intertexts. Moving ahead in time more than fifty years, these chapters discuss a particular moment in cinematic history when the very substance on which World War II films previously relied to create a sense of realism and authenticity—celluloid—is disappearing as the core of the medium of cinema. The replacement of the material strip of film with digital technologies brings with it new discourses of realism, as well as new possibilities for the visualization of war. The final two chapters explore the ramifications of this technological shift on the stories and spectacles of American films and media which represent World War II combat. As the war itself was a turning point in cinematic representation—introducing new styles, new technologies, and new relationships with the state—cinema faced another turning point in the mid-1990s, as digital technologies replaced analog ones. This shift coincided with a return to the World War II film genre in American cinema and visual media. How do new digital technologies allow for a different narrative of World War II combat? Further, how might these technologies have led to a renewed interest in the world conflict fifty or more years before?

Chapter 4, “Nostalgia for Combat: World War II at the End of Cinema,” explores the nostalgia that current World War II combat films demonstrate for their earlier counterparts in the 1940s. This chapter focuses on three Hollywood productions that combine the “shaky-cam” techniques of the military documentaries discussed in Chapter 2 with cutting-edge digital special

effects: *Saving Private Ryan*, *Pearl Harbor*, and *Flags of Our Fathers* (Clint Eastwood, 2006). In doing so, they demonstrate a nostalgia for celluloid at the same time that celluloid is being replaced by digital technologies of film production, editing, and distribution. These heterogeneous visual registers—the expansiveness of computer-generated images with the marked (and even exaggerated) deficiency of documentary-inspired images—combine with graphic depictions of violence and wounded bodies to bombard spectators with shocking images that arouse vicarious sensations in their bodies. This visceral spectatorship allows the films to integrate corporeal realism with melodrama, making the virtuous suffering of American soldiers felt in the spectator's bodies. I argue that while the 1940s films presented American soldiers (and sailors and marines) as active agents, who sometimes chose to sacrifice their desires or their lives for the common good, contemporary films present American soldiers as suffering victims beset by the unexplained forces of war. While on the surface this reversal would seem to be a sign of “anti-war” sentiment, the films—with their spectacular combat sequences and awe-inspiring special effects—actually revive the bellicose war spirit by offering thrilling depictions of battle.

In the fifth chapter, “Shoot to Kill: World War II and the First-Person Shooter Video Game,” I move to a different visual medium, but one that carries on many of the same concerns as cinema—the video game. I focus in particular on the games of the *Call of Duty* series (Activision, 2003-) that are set during World War II, which take the point of view of a soldier fighting in some of the most famous battles of the war. By actively engaging the player’s body—who not only watches the screen, but manipulates control mechanisms to effectively create the experience of the game—these games enhance the sense of immersion and visceral response created by cinematic scenes of combat. I argue that these games focus relentlessly on

action, and in particular the activity of aiming and shooting. In this they reflect a fantasy of the combat experience, making it out to be a game of precision firing that can be manipulated and controlled. The World War II context of the games adds a sense of moral justification to the simulated killing, and the video game format allows for the honing of shooting skills without the threat of death or injury. But at the same time as the World War II shooter relies on its historical context to provide it an ethical rationalization of violence, it also demonstrates the extent to which World War II is sometimes utilized in popular culture precisely for its association with mass death. I discuss this idea further in my conclusion. Recent depictions of World War II, such as *Inglourious Basterds*, stem from the dark underside of the story that we tell ourselves about the war—that it was justified, that it was necessary, that we triumphed, that we were motivated by the fight for freedom and justice. In opposition to this honorable narrative, another reason the war continues to hold a fascination for us is exactly its technologies of violence, its automated death machines, its sense of total and inescapable warfare.

Ultimately, World War II combat films (and their legacy in video games) are very much *about* violence, action, kinetics, and spectacle. This would not seem to be such a revelation were it not for the notable avoidance of these issues in most of the commentary about these films. Certainly, these impulses may be regulated, in a sense, by conventional narrative structure, likable characters, traditional morals, and generic conventions. But the point of these films is the very tension between these opposing impulses, this push and pull between attraction and disgust. The desire to revel in the free-for-all of weaponry and war exists in tension with the desire to contain this dangerous “excess.” But that does not mean that the forces of containment win out, or that the two desires cancel each other. Rather, these films and video games are multivalent, offering various modes of pleasure to different audiences. They mix sentimentality with

violence, kinetic action with character development, a sensation of repulsion with a feeling of patriotism.

By paying attention to how American visual media present scenes of combat, we can be attuned to how such scenes correspond to, or subvert, the conventional narratives of war that have been purveyed in American culture. More often than not, they reveal a “destructive sublime” at the heart of the combat genre working against our impulses to idealize and moralize the waging of war. The screens on which World War II appears to us—cinema screens, television screens, computer screens—reveal as much as they hide, or screen *from* our view. This dissertation looks into this projective and reflective surface to find the aspects of the World War II combat genre that have been overlooked: the spectacle and sensation, the drive to violence, the excitement and horror of combat.

2.0 STAGING WAR: WARTIME MILITARY DOCUMENTARIES AND THE DISCOURSE OF REALISM

The flourishing of military- and government-produced films during World War II made the early 1940s witness to one of the most important documentary movements in American history.³³ Millions of Americans on the home front, as well as millions of American and Allied servicemen and citizens of Allied and Axis nations, viewed these films, learning as they did about the causes, impacts, and progress of the war, as well as about American values, ideologies, and histories. These films not only provided news and information, they also brought popular attention to the possibilities of recording history as it happened and the potentialities of nonfiction cinema to make an impact on world politics. Documentaries became so prominent in American screen culture during the war that many contemporary critics predicted that the documentary filmmaking practices of wartime would grow during peacetime into an essential cultural form, a prediction that never quite materialized, or at least not in the form that they expected.³⁴ In part

³³ In addition to the newsreels, combat reports, training films, and other nonfiction films that the military produced during World War II, the government's Office of War Information also produced a series of films about American life, primarily to be sent overseas to illuminate American culture, democracy, and beliefs.

³⁴ An excellent example of the belief that documentaries would continue to be popular and influential after the end of the war is Samuel Goldwyn's lengthy editorial in the *New York Times* discussing how documentary and educational films will figure prominently on screens in peacetime. He writes, "For many years now my job has been to present drama. Now [in England during the war] the drama was being presented to me. I watched. I saw what a V-bomb had done." See Samuel Goldwyn, "The Future Challenges the Movies," *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* 22 Apr. 1945, 8, 39. Unlike what Goldwyn predicted, the documentary film was not prominent in commercial theaters after the war, but it did gain an important role in the classroom and in industrial arenas with the growth of educational and training films. Documentary programming also filled the airwaves in television broadcasting during the late 1940s and 1950s. It was not until the direct cinema movement of the 1960s that full-

for this reason, the American documentary cinema of World War II is often marginalized in histories and theories of documentary. Far more weight is placed on the ethnographic films of Robert Flaherty and government-sponsored films of Pare Lorentz before the war, and the direct cinema movement that emerged almost fifteen years after the war. Yet World War II presents the distinctive situation of widespread popular engagement and interest in nonfiction film forms—from newsreels and battle reports to training films and films about American life—at a moment when the technologies and techniques of documentary filmmaking were radically changing.

The documentaries made by the U.S. armed forces during World War II present to film historians and critics a peculiar hybrid of narrative and nonfiction modes, mixing Hollywood stylistics with battlefield cinematography and overt propaganda with unadorned reportage. Made in large part by Hollywood directors and technicians who temporarily left the film industry to join the military, these documentary films stand out in tone, quality, structure, and style from the American nonfiction films that both preceded and followed them. While many of these films contain attributes expected of documentaries during this time—“voice of God” narration, combat footage, direct-address persuasive techniques—they also challenge our assumptions about documentary by relying on such practices as reenactments and special effects. As a result, film historians have struggled to determine their place in, and influence on, the history of American cinema.³⁵

length documentary films again gained attention in America, though this was in part due to new technology: the availability of 16mm cameras and portable tape recorders.

³⁵ Discussions of military-produced documentaries appear both in genre studies of fictional war films and in histories and theories of nonfiction film. Jeanine Basinger's *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*, 2nd ed. (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), for instance, considers how these documentaries “taught viewers what real combat looked like,” but her focus is primarily on how these films impacted narrative filmmaking during and after the war (112). Histories of nonfiction filmmaking hardly do these films more justice, tending to treat them as a brief interlude in between the early American documentaries by Robert Flaherty and Pare

In addition, the tendency for World War II combat documentaries to include staged, recreated, and reenacted material has complicated efforts to taxonomize these films within nonfiction filmmaking. Examining how one combat report consisted of mostly staged recreations of historical events, historian James M. Skinner, for instance, rejects the label of documentary, lamenting how “totally spurious images have passed into the collective consciousness as authentic accounts of events.”³⁶ Other critics have negotiated the revelation of staging by justifying the filmmakers’ choices in terms of artistry or auteurism, rather than documentary’s claim to the real.³⁷ This latter impulse results from the kinds of films most often chosen to represent World War II combat documentaries—usually those attributed to famous Hollywood directors, like William Wyler, John Huston, Frank Capra, or John Ford, instead of the omnibus motion pictures coordinated by anonymous individuals working for the various branches of the military.

Instead of exposing the practice of staging in order to discredit the films that employ it, this chapter examines reenactment in military documentaries while acknowledging the prevalence of dramatization and recreation in all forms of nonfiction filmmaking leading up to

Lorentz and the postwar flourishing of *vérité*-inspired documentary. For instance, *The Documentary Tradition: From Nanook to Woodstock*, ed. Lewis Jacobs (New York: Hopkinson and Blake, 1971), includes only one chapter devoted to American military documentaries, but four devoted to Robert Flaherty, three related to Pare Lorentz, and more than ten devoted to direct cinema and *cinéma vérité*. A more recent anthology of writings about documentary film, *Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary*, ed. Kevin Macdonald and Mark Cousins (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1996), also contains about ten times more articles on direct and *vérité* cinema than the World War II documentaries I discuss.

³⁶ James M. Skinner, “December 7: Filmic Myth Masquerading as Historical Fact,” *The Journal of Military History* 55, no. 4 (Oct. 1991), 507.

³⁷ Lance Bertelsen writes, for instance, that John Huston’s *San Pietro* is “one of the most harrowing visions of modern infantry warfare ever filmed.” For him, the staged scenes contributed to an “accuracy of effect rather than authenticity of material.” See Bertelsen, “San Pietro and the ‘Art’ of War,” *Southwest Review* 74, no. 2 (Spring 1989), 230-56. Gary Edgerton dismisses the possibility of staging in light of the “poetic truth” Huston is able to achieve in *San Pietro*; he also analyzes Huston’s military documentaries in relation to his development as an artist and filmmaker. See Edgerton, “Revisiting the Recordings of Wars Past: Remembering the Documentary Trilogy of John Huston,” in *Reflections in a Male Eye: John Huston and the American Experience*, ed. Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 33-61.

and throughout World War II. The production and reception histories of three films in particular—*December 7th* (Gregg Toland/John Ford, 1943), *The Battle of Midway* (John Ford, 1942), and *San Pietro* (John Huston, 1945)³⁸—demonstrate not only that staging was a common practice, but that it was often perceived to be preferable to “raw” combat footage. As an exemplar of this kind of “raw” footage integrated into a film, I then turn to Louis de Rochemont’s *The Fighting Lady* (1945), to explore the ramifications of a theory of film as record. Instead of an unfortunate or regrettable circumstance, staging is at the core of how these films sought to envision the experience of combat and visually document historical events shortly after they occurred. Furthermore, a look at contemporaneous writings from such scholars as André Bazin and John Grierson shows that far from being easily duped by techniques of realism into evaluating documentaries as unvarnished truth, critics and scholars in this period had a sophisticated understanding of staging and a healthy skepticism about the ability of these films to reveal the truth of war.

During World War II, the cinema took on the grand task of making visual sense out of the war for both the armed forces on the battlefield and those on the home front. The new aesthetic techniques of *The Battle of Midway* in particular—its striking moments of erratic handheld camera movement and the film jumping out of the sprockets in response to explosions—originated specific codes of realism that enhance the audience’s sense of vicarious participation in the action. Techniques popularized by combat photographers during World War II, such as handheld cinematography and first-person point of view, continue to influence our expectations of what modern war looks like. But these techniques had more than just aesthetic consequences; they also demonstrated a shifting sense of how films could reconstruct history cinematically.

³⁸ Many sources, including John Huston’s autobiography, refer to the film as *The Battle of San Pietro*. However, following the title as it appears in the credits of the film, I will use the abbreviated title, *San Pietro*.

Throughout the war, military-produced documentary films exhibited a conflict between the desire to provide an omniscient overview on an event and a fragmented, individualized view of history. In their complex negotiation of point of view, these films innovated new styles for representing combat, often departing from both Hollywood and documentary conventions, and consequently, they modified existing models of visual historiography and pioneered new ones.

In looking at the discourse surrounding nonfictional film practice in this period, this chapter attempts to recoup what the term “documentary” connoted in the early to mid-1940s. The idea that documentary film practice could create a record of events as they happened has had a powerful impact on how we perceive the limits and boundaries of documentary as a practice and an object. But to assume that this was the purpose or the practice of documentary dehistoricizes it and substitutes a set of unchanging values for a highly variable set of practices, intentions, and products. By shifting the focus to an earlier period—to, in fact, a time of transition within documentary practice—I will demonstrate the necessity of thinking historically about the material basis of film and its relation to the contingent. The “indexical,” “documentary,” or “archival” image has so often been made to stand in for the idea of the objective record, the unmediated image, the real, or the authentic, that the heterogenous effects of specific film images are lost. Rather, I will argue that the documentary image straddles the line between the visible and the invisible, the present and the absent, the staged and the contingent.

2.1 REENACTMENT AND THE DOCUMENTARY IDEAL

Popular critics as well as documentary film scholars often work with or against a “documentary ideal” based on what Brian Winston has labeled the nonfiction film’s “claim to the real.”³⁹ Unlike narrative films, documentaries are thought to deal with fact not fiction, work from images recorded from historical reality, and eschew artificial sets, scripted dialogue, and the use of actors. Frequently, the documentary ideal duplicates the most extreme formulation of direct cinema: objectivity, no reenactments, observation without intervention, recordings of contingent events as they transpired in front of the camera.⁴⁰

This ideal stems as much from an overemphasis on this *vérité*-inspired moment in documentary history as it does from definitions of documentary that claim for it a privileged relationship to the historical world that it purports to represent. Key to these definitions are a discussion of film’s “indexicality,” which describes its status as an analog medium capable of creating direct impressions of the events and objects that appear in front of the camera’s lens. Bill Nichols, for instance, speaks of “an indexical bond between what occurred in front of the camera and its historical referent.”⁴¹ For Nichols, film’s indexicality grounds the sense of authenticity that audiences grant to documentary.⁴² While both fiction and nonfiction films rely on indexical images, the difference is generally understood to pertain to the referent for those images. Documentaries refer to historical reality; fiction films refer to a fabricated reality. As

³⁹ Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: The Documentary Film Revisited* (London: BFI, 1995).

⁴⁰ Criticism and analysis of *cinema vérité* and Direct Cinema are vast. For an overview, see Lewis Jacobs, “Documentary Becomes Engaged and Vérité,” in *The Documentary Tradition*, 368-80. For a pointed critique of the discourse of Direct Cinema, see Brian Winston, “The Documentary Film as Scientific Inscription,” in *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993), 37-57.

⁴¹ Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 29.

⁴² See especially Nichols’ *Representing Reality*, 149-55. Nichols is careful to specify that the documentary image’s relationship to the historical world is only an inference or assumption that audiences make.

Michael Renov argues, “At the level of the sign, it is the differing historical status of the referent that distinguishes documentary from its fictional counterpart not the formal relations among signifier, signified, and referent.”⁴³ The referent of documentary is “a piece of the world plucked from its everyday context” rather than an artificial reality constructed for an imaginary screen world.⁴⁴ More than Charles S. Peirce, the philosopher and semiotician who devised the term “index,” scholars invoke French film theorist André Bazin to explain the concept of indexicality. Commonly, scholars cite his famous essay, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image”—specifically, the passage including his controversial claim that “the photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it.”⁴⁵

Reenactments challenge the assuredness of these definitions, however. In his *Introduction to Documentary*, Nichols uses shots from *San Pietro* to illustrate the concept of an “indexical whammy,” an image whose affective power stems from its origin in real events. The close-up shots of dead soldiers in *San Pietro*, Nichols argues, impact the spectator more forcefully than a fictional film’s dead bodies because the spectator knows them to be “real.” But what happens to the notion of the indexical whammy if those documentary images are revealed to be staged? (As I will show later, the majority of images in *San Pietro* were indeed staged or reenacted.) Can the line between fiction and nonfiction cinema be so assuredly drawn? Do documentaries that contain reenactments have the same “claim to the real” as other nonfiction films?

⁴³ Michael Renov, “Introduction: The Truth About Non-Fiction,” in *Theorizing Documentary*, 2.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 151, and Renov, “Toward a Poetics of Documentary,” in *Theorizing Documentary*, 22. The passage originally appears in André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in *What Is Cinema?*, vol. 1, ed. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 14. For Daniel Morgan, however, this passage in particular demonstrates how the concept of indexicality is inadequate to explain Bazin’s realism. See Morgan, “Rethinking Bazin: Ontology and Realist Aesthetics,” *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Spring 2006), especially 446-50.

In his own recent essay on documentary reenactments, Nichols suggests that the answer may be no. He labels the unacknowledged reenactments in such films as *Nanook of the North* (Robert Flaherty, 1922) and *Mighty Times: The Children's March* (Robert Houston, 2004) with words like “fraud,” “deceit,” and “fabrication.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, he writes that the reenactment “forfeits its indexical bond to the original event,” meaning it has lost that link to historical reality that supposedly anchors the documentary mode.⁴⁷ Nichols asserts, “Viewers *must* recognize a reenactment as a reenactment even if this recognition also dooms the reenactment to its status as a fictionalized repetition of something that has already occurred.”⁴⁸ Since Nichols goes on to analyze only those reenactments in recent documentary films that cannot be mistaken for “authentic” footage, it is not clear what happens if viewers do *not* recognize reenactments as reenactments, if the fabricated or staged footage is taken for records of actual events.

In later sections of this chapter, I will look at earlier moments in documentary history that blur the line between staged and unstaged images, when recreations were not only acceptable, but in many cases preferred to the “real thing.” In doing so, however, I do not imagine historical spectators merely as dupes of cinematic magic, unable to distinguish among various kinds of cinematic practices. Rather, World War II presents a fascinating case study of a time when documentaries “shot on the spot” capturing contingent world events were newly possible.⁴⁹ This era of screen reportage resulted from the profusion of cameras (for both still and moving images)

⁴⁶ Bill Nichols, “Documentary Reenactments and the Fantasmatic Subject,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Fall 2008), 72-3.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 74.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 73-4, my italics.

⁴⁹ Newsreels before World War II often contained footage of contingent events, though most frequently, newsreels depicted events planned ahead of time and “staged” for the cameras in a particular way, like parades or coronations. The most impressive unplanned and unpredictable events caught on newsreel cameras, like the explosion of the *Hindenburg*, were the exception rather than the rule. Raymond Fielding’s impressive work on newsreels and *The March of Time* demonstrates, furthermore, how common staged recreations were to early nonfiction cinema. See his *The American Newsreel: A Complete History, 1911-1967*, 2nd ed. (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2006) and *The March of Time, 1935-1951* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

and trained soldier-cameramen throughout all theaters of the war. But as I will show, while these developments led to what one might consider steps toward the documentary ideal—easily portable, handheld cameras, cameramen embedded in fields of action—it did not mean the end of staging and reenactment. Furthermore, spectators and critics did not hail these new developments immediately and uncritically as more “real” or more authentic. Instead, this was a period of negotiation and reevaluation of the terms and values of documentary.

2.2 “THE DRAMA TAKES PLACE ‘FOR REAL’”: BAZIN AND DOCUMENTARY REALISM

Although writing in France, one contemporary critic—André Bazin—was attuned to the changes in American (as well as European) documentary and narrative filmmaking brought on by the Second World War. Before moving on to specific examples of military documentaries, I will briefly focus here on Bazin’s immediate postwar writings in order to shed light on how shifts in documentary practice were perceived at this time. Additionally, Bazin’s own writing on American military documentaries (specifically Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight* series) introduces key concerns about filmed “facts” and the possibility of capturing “history-in-the-making” that are still relevant in today’s discussion of documentary recreation.

In the early 1950s, Bazin declared, “the documentary-film-by-reconstruction is dead.”⁵⁰ This transformation was due directly to “the prevalence of objective reporting following World War II.”⁵¹ Bazin places reenactments securely in the past, as part of a set of déclassé practices:

⁵⁰ André Bazin, “Cinema and Exploration” in *What Is Cinema?*, vol. 1, 156.

⁵¹ Ibid., 158.

“The fact that reconstructions of actual events were acceptable in the earliest days of the cinema is a clear indication that there has been an evolution in the attitude of the general public.”⁵² In these statements, Bazin confirms his reputation as a realist who believes the function of cinema is to record and reveal something of the world. As he writes in the “Ontology” essay, “The aesthetic qualities of photography are to be sought in its power to lay bare the realities.”⁵³ Earlier in this essay, he remarks upon the objective nature of photographic media, which benefit from their automatic nature without the mediating subjectivity of an author. It is thus hardly surprising that he would later celebrate the end of reenactment in documentary in favor of a detached reportage of cinematic “facts.”⁵⁴

In an early essay, “On Why We Fight: History, Documentation, and the Newsreel,” Bazin explores the psychological need underpinning the enthusiasm for the film “facts” found in wartime documentaries. Conceived around the same time as his “Ontology” essay near the end of the war, this piece—first published in *Esprit* in June 1946—seems at first to correspond to his later statements on reconstruction in documentary.⁵⁵ He notes “a decisive new reevaluation of documentary reporting” stemming from the wartime situation, when “facts have an exceptional amplitude and importance” (187). These facts take the form of the contingent events of war captured by newsreel or military cameras: “Nothing suits us better than the unique event, shot on

⁵² Bazin, “The Virtues and Limitations of Montage,” in *What Is Cinema?*, vol. 1, 51.

⁵³ Bazin, “Ontology,” 15.

⁵⁴ Bazin uses the term “fact” several times to denote concrete rather than symbolic use of cinematic images, especially in neorealist films. In his analysis of *Paisà* (Roberto Rossellini, 1946), for instance, Bazin contrasts the shot, “an abstract view of a reality which is being analyzed,” with the “image fact,” described as a “fragment of concrete reality in itself multiple and full of ambiguity” (37). See Bazin, “An Aesthetic of Reality: Neorealism,” in *What Is Cinema?* vol. 2, especially 34-8.

⁵⁵ According to Dudley Andrew, “Ontology of the Photographic Image” was composed at the end of the Occupation in late 1944 and published in 1945. See Andrew, *André Bazin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 72. “On Why We Fight” was first published in *Esprit* in June 1946 and then was reprinted in the first volume of *Qu'est ce le cinéma* (Paris: Édition du Cerf, 1958-62), 31-36. Citations here refer to the English translation printed in *Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Reviews from the Forties and Fifties*, translated by Alain Piette and Bert Cardullo (New York: Routledge, 1997), 187-92.

the spot, at the very moment of its creation” (187). In this image culture, “the cruelty and violence of war have taught us to respect—almost to make a cult of—actual facts, in comparison with which any reconstitution, even made in good faith, seems dubious, indecent, and sacrilegious” (188).

The wording of this last passage—discussing the craze for war images as a kind of cult—points to the aspects of this essay that do not fit as well into our assumptions about Bazin’s seemingly simple theory of realism. Bazin’s use of sarcasm and caustic humor here, surprising in comparison to the tone of many of his more widely reproduced and cited essays, undercuts the sense that Bazin is making a dispassionate argument about documentary during wartime. Rather, some of his statements suggest an opposition to, and even a disgust at, particular war reports and the enthusiasm with which they are received. Singled out for particular criticism are the *Why We Fight* films (U.S. War Department, 1943-5), a series of American orientation films designed to educate (or indoctrinate) soldiers and citizens in the ideological stakes of the war against the Nazis and the Japanese. Bazin classifies *Why We Fight* as part of a new genre of filmmaking: “the edited ideological documentary.” At first it appears that Bazin’s objection to these films is their manipulation of preexisting newsreel footage (“the most historical and the most concrete kind of document”) by editing in order to serve a propagandistic purpose (191). He notes how fragments of combat footage have been arranged to correspond to continuity editing conventions, so that opposing armies occupy different parts of the screen and maintain consistent screen direction, even when the real battle occurred in no such fashion. He questions the “moral honesty” of the method of editing these filmed fragments, suggesting that “the very structure of the means renders [the ends] illusory” (191).

However, in other sections of the essay, Bazin warns of the danger of taking these seemingly impartial records of war as objective facts, whether or not they have been distorted by editing or voiceover. The voracious appetite for facts in wartime entails both physical annihilation and moral devastation. He points to the “Nero complex,” a perverse pleasure taken in witnessing our own destruction, broadcast to us on screens everywhere, akin to what I have referred to as the destructive sublime elsewhere in this dissertation (188). This psychological condition also values the objective record of war over the lives of those who capture such images: “The cameraman runs as many risks as the soldiers, whose death he is supposed to film even at the cost of his own life (but who cares, as long as the footage is saved!)” (188). With this comment, Bazin reveals what fundamentally separates reenactments of combat from footage taken on the field—the possibility of filming death. In a later essay he writes that “studio reconstructions reveal a mastery of trick work and studio imitation—but to what purpose? To imitate the inimitable, namely risk, adventure, death.”⁵⁶ But the prurient lure of witnessing death (potentially over and over again, as in the title of another essay by Bazin, “Death Every Afternoon”) causes him great concern when built into American propaganda films.⁵⁷ Furthermore, these films demonstrate a disconcerting ability to mix fictional film conventions with even the rawest of film “facts,” scenes of bodily harm and actual death.

From the very beginning of the essay, Bazin describes the vast landscape of war in theatrical terms: “Such a theater of operations [that of the war itself], when compared to the other one [a theatrical stage], has the invaluable dramatic superiority of inventing the play as it

⁵⁶ Bazin, “Cinema and Exploration,” 158. Also see Rosalind Galt’s extended analysis of this essay, “‘It’s So Cold in Alaska’: Evoking Exploration Between Bazin and *The Forbidden Quest*,” *Discourse* 28, no. 1 (Winter 2006), 53-71.

⁵⁷ In “Death Every Afternoon,” an essay considering the depiction of bullfighting in cinema, Bazin remarks upon cinema’s perverse ability to record death and to repeat it. See Bazin, “Death Every Afternoon,” trans. Mark A. Cohen, in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 27-31. For more on Bazin’s fetishistic investment in cinema’s affinity with death, see Serge Daney, “The Screen of Fantasy (Bazin and Animals),” trans. Mark A. Cohen, in *Rites of Realism*, 32-41.

spontaneously unfolds. It is a kind of *commedia dell'arte* in which the scenario itself is always being reworked” (187). The “colossal *mise en scène*” of the war far overshadows the efforts of a film like *Intolerance* (D.W. Griffith, 1916), which “looks as though it were the set for a small show touring the provinces” (187). Unlike in other works, this essay attests to a deep discomfort in the overlay of history and cinema. Foreshadowing Paul Virilio’s treatise *War and Cinema*, Bazin discusses the “irremediable intermingling of the technological means of communication and destruction” (188).⁵⁸ Far from being a route to the ambiguity and mysterious aspects of reality, cinema is here a participant in the “apocalypse,” or, in another passage, “the rape of the masses” (187, 190).

Bazin questions these films’ supposed recording of historical facts. He writes, “The drama [of war] also takes place ‘for real,’ for the protagonists have agreed to die at the same time as they are shot by the camera, like enslaved gladiators in the circus arena” (187). Compare such skepticism about the reality quotient of a documentary film with his high praise in a later essay for *Kon-Tiki* (Thor Heyerdahl, 1950), a fragmentary record of a risky sea voyage which lacks images of crucial events because the sailors were too busy fending off danger to record the action.⁵⁹ *Why We Fight* and related films are for Bazin an abomination not only because of their frequently deceptive editing and overwhelming didactic voiceovers, but because in the guise of “History” they purport to offer unadorned fact. Instead, they provide obscene spectacle and Hollywoodized drama. He makes this clear when he considers Roger Leenhardt’s suggestion that “next time, Commander Humphrey Bogart or Sergeant Spencer Tracy, playing the parts we have come to expect of them, would be the protagonists of some grand semi-fictionalized report. A crew of cameramen would be responsible for filming the course of the actual military

⁵⁸ Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema* (New York: Verso, 1989).

⁵⁹ Bazin, “Cinema and Exploration,” 160-3.

operations that Bogart or Tracy would really command at the patriotic peril of his life" (188-9). This kind of semi-fictionalized bravado can be found in the American military documentaries discussed below, which were all directed by well-known Hollywood insiders who turned their wartime experience into publicity for their films and for the military in general.

The *Why We Fight* films prompted Bazin to a skeptical take on documentary realism. He warns us of the moral dangers in an uncritical belief in, and enthusiasm for, the supposedly objective records of war reports. He ends the essay on a negative note: "I think that, far from moving the historical sciences toward more objectivity, the cinema paradoxically gives them the additional power of illusion by its very realism" (191). Thus the realism of cinema—the impression of reality being recorded "on the spot" by the camera—can serve illusion as much as the task of the discovery or revelation of the real. Far from being naïve or uncritical in his stance, Bazin complicates his theory of cinematic realism by examining those documentary films which mix illusion with reportage, all without resorting to recreations.⁶⁰ As the following sections will show, the line between "real" and "fake" cannot be drawn simply between those films that rely on "objective" records of actual events and those that rely on reenactments. Rather, like *Why We Fight*, the American military documentaries of the Second World War challenge the stability of those lines and the distinctions between those categories.

⁶⁰ A number of recent essays have begun to reevaluate Bazin's theory of realism. See, for instance, Morgan; Tom Gunning, "What's the Point of an Index? or, Faking Photographs," in *Still Moving: Between Cinema and Photography*, ed. Karen Beckman and Jean Ma (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), and "Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality" *differences* 18, no. 1 (2007), 29-52; Adam Lowenstein, "The Surrealism of the Photographic Image: Bazin, Barthes, and the Digital Sweet Hereafter," *Cinema Journal* 46, no. 3 (Spring 2007), 54-82; and Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

2.3 PEARL HARBOR IN HOLLYWOOD: GREGG TOLAND AND JOHN FORD'S *DECEMBER 7TH*

In discussing the vast mise-en-scene of war, Bazin could have been referring to the documentary *December 7th*, which recreated the attack on Pearl Harbor on studio backlots. A prime example of the confluence of Hollywood narratives and military documentaries, *December 7th* has often been treated as an anomaly in accounts of World War II documentaries because of its reliance on reenactments and special effects. Yet these techniques, while more pronounced in this film, only demonstrate the prevalence of staging and recreation in 1940s documentary. More pertinent here is *December 7th*'s presentation of recent history as that which can be definitively chronicled, visualized in its entirety, and placed within a reassuring narrative of triumph.

World War II represents the first time the major world powers fully embraced cinema as an essential part of waging war, particularly in America which lagged behind both Germany and Great Britain in sponsoring and producing official cinematic propaganda.⁶¹ Movies provided the government and military effective means by which to train and educate soldiers, inform and entertain civilians, and motivate and inspire workers in war industries. Furthermore, films taken in the field provided information about the enemy, their strategies, and resources, as well as data about the effectiveness of Allied equipment, raids, and maneuvers. Once declassified, much of this footage was turned into newsreels, combat reports, and other documentaries to provide news, illustration, and explanation of the events of the war.⁶² By the end of the war, the U.S. Army

⁶¹ For an overview of film propaganda among both the Allied and Axis powers, see Kenneth R. M. Short, ed., *Film and Radio Propaganda* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1983).

⁶² Combat reports were special newsreels created to give information about a particular battle. These were created both for the military and for wider release to the public.

Signal Corps alone had produced more than 2,500 films of various types.⁶³ The National Archives contain more than 13.5 million feet of uncut documentary footage made during the war.⁶⁴

The various branches of the military took charge of the production of their own films, and to do so they turned to their national resource—Hollywood. The military successfully recruited or put back in uniform Hollywood filmmakers such as John Ford, John Huston, William Wyler, Frank Capra, George Cukor, and George Stevens, as well as many other technicians and famous actors, such as Clark Gable, Jimmy Stewart, and Henry Fonda. Instead of turning to the artists of the budding American documentary movement—filmmakers like Pare Lorentz, Joris Ivens, and Robert Flaherty—the U.S. military relied on Hollywood fictional filmmakers to act as advisors and instructors and to take commissions to make films for the military.⁶⁵ Hollywood studios also donated the use of their facilities and some personnel to the military, and the military contracted with Hollywood to create training, orientation, and informative films for those in uniform.

December 7th began as the project of John Ford and his Field Photographic Branch, a group of Hollywood elite—writers, producers, camera operators, actors, and others—whom Ford had unofficially recruited into the U.S. Navy. Under the auspices of William J. “Wild Bill” Donovan, head of the Office of Strategic Services (O.S.S., predecessor to the CIA), this group

⁶³ Jeff Souder, “The Army Pictorial Service’s Films as Information-Operations Tool in World War II,” *Army Communicator* 26:3 (Fall 2001), <http://www.gordon.army.mil/AC/Fall/Fall%2001/APSWW2.htm> (accessed October 31, 2007).

⁶⁴ Basinger, 113.

⁶⁵ During the war, Pare Lorentz worked for the War Department’s Air Transport Command, “supervising aerial photography and the production of flight-route films for pilots.” Experienced documentary filmmakers like Irving Lerner, Helen van Dongen, Willard van Dyke, Alexander Hammid, Henwar Rodakiewicz, and Irving Jacoby worked for the Office of War Information creating films about American life. They were not tapped to help the military make their films. See Murphy, 2. Joris Ivens, who while of Dutch origin was an important part of the 1930s American documentary movement, made pro-Allied films during the war for the National Board of Canada and Russian War Relief. He also worked with Frank Capra’s unit for a brief time and helped produce the orientation film *Know Your Enemy: Japan* (1945).

produced reconnaissance and documentary films throughout the war. For *December 7th*, Ford handed the reins over to Field Photo member and novice director Gregg Toland, the groundbreaking cinematographer of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941). His plans for what was then titled *The Story of Pearl Harbor: An Epic in American History* were far grander, however, than a brief newsreel on military security.⁶⁶ Toland and his crew wrote a lengthy screenplay, hired well-known actors, staged elaborate special effects and massive reenactments, and crafted a nearly feature-length film.

Toland's film begins and ends with extensive scripted scenes featuring familiar actors playing American archetypes. There were no credits identifying the actors and their roles, but many of them would have been recognizable to audiences. Furthermore, the style of the film does not differ substantially from a typical Hollywood fictional film. In no way does *December 7th* attempt to "fool" audiences into thinking that these were "real" events captured first-hand by a camera. In the first third of the film, Uncle Sam (Walter Huston) wrestles with his conscience, "Mr. C" (Harry Davenport), over the vast number of Japanese citizens living in the Hawaiian Islands—many of whom are later depicted as spies for the villainous Japanese Consul-General. Toland paints an ominous portrait of the islands through montages of Japanese cultural centers, deceitful Japanese saboteurs masquerading as chauffeurs or gardeners, and an "interview" with a Shinto priest who confirms that the Japanese worship their emperor as a god. The second part of the film reenacts the Pearl Harbor attack, using massive reenactments, miniature models, practical special effects, and a small amount of newsreel footage. After the advancing Japanese are finally "beaten back," the film honors fallen soldiers, shows an emotional funeral service, and lauds the efforts of those repairing the ships damaged in the attacks. A final section consists

⁶⁶ Joseph McBride, *Searching for John Ford* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001), 353.

of a conversation between two dead soldiers walking in a cemetery: Dana Andrews as an anonymous young sailor who died at Pearl Harbor and Paul Hurst as a cynical soldier who died at the Marne. The Great War veteran morosely discusses the futility of endless war and fears the return to isolationism. Using an extended baseball metaphor, Andrews displays his optimism, declaring that he has faith in “the Roosevelts, the Churchills, the Stalins, and the Chiang Kai-sheks” to make the world safe, “to call a fair ball fair and a foul ball foul.”

When studio executives and military officials were finally shown the film, they found much of it objectionable. Apparently, however, the theatrical dramatizations and sophisticated special effects recreating the battle were not the source of controversy. Rather, Admiral Harold Stark, head of naval operations at Pearl Harbor, objected to how the Navy was represented in the film: “The picture leaves the distinct impression that the Navy was not on the job, and this is not true.”⁶⁷ Julian Johnson, head of production at Twentieth Century-Fox, where much of the film had been made, gushed, “This is the most powerful American war film I have ever seen far and away,” yet he claimed that the ending scene, returning to the issue of America’s isolationist past and the stalemate horrors of the First World War, was “bad anti-climax.”⁶⁸ Only one response seemed to object to the film’s reliance on dramatic reenactments and scripted allegories of Uncle Sam. Lowell Mellett, head of the Office of War Information Bureau of Motion Pictures, complained about the government’s involvement in the production of what was to him clearly a fictional motion picture.⁶⁹ His objection was not aesthetic or even moral, but rather related to commerce. In producing a semi-fictionalized version of American history, the military was

⁶⁷ Quoted in William T. Murphy, “John Ford and the Wartime Documentary,” *Film and History* 4 (Feb. 1976), 7.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁶⁹ Skinner, 513.

stepping on Hollywood's toes, creating unfair competition for the eyes and ears, not to mention dollars, of the American public.

The Navy, nervous about what these Hollywood big-shots were creating under the aegis of the government's intelligence service, confiscated Toland's film. A year after its seizure, John Ford got hold of a copy of the film and, with Field Photo editor Robert Parrish, shortened it to thirty-four minutes, excising the most politically controversial parts—the scripted scenes with Uncle Sam and Mr. C and the conversation between the two dead soldiers—while making editorial changes to emphasize the success of America's response. The great majority of the battle scenes in both the full-length and condensed versions are reconstructions, created by extensive reenactments using both Pearl Harbor personnel and actors in costume as well as sizable special effects overseen by Ray Kellogg, who went on to produce the special effects for dozens of Hollywood films in the 1950s. Special and visual effects used in *December 7th* include optical process shots, practical effects like explosions and simulated gunfire, and significant work with miniatures, including model aircraft moved on wires and rigged with explosives and detailed recreations to scale of military ships filling an immense water tank at the Twentieth Century-Fox studios.⁷⁰

These reenacted scenes provide what could not have been captured in the fragmentary footage taken on the day of the attack: images of the Japanese planes as they approached the islands, scenes of destruction on all of the major airfields and ships, and, perhaps most importantly, close-ups of American soldiers and sailors as they fought back and (acted like they) were injured and killed. The reenacted sequences “fill in” what was not, and could not have

⁷⁰ Outtakes of the original special-effects footage and photographs of the water tank filled with mock-up battleships for *December 7th* appear in Richard Schickel's documentary about World War II combat cameramen, *Shooting War* (DreamWorks, 2000), which originally aired on ABC on December 7, 2000 (the forty-ninth anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack). Steven Spielberg served as the film's executive producer and Tom Hanks as its host.

been, recorded on film during the battle, but also shape the events to emphasize certain elements, such as the valiant effort to defend the islands. Instead of mimicking the look of handheld combat footage, the recreations present these events in a style much more familiar to audiences, following the conventions of action and combat scenes in Hollywood narrative cinema. *December 7th* constructs sequences using the continuity strategies of shot/reverse-shot, the 180-degree rule, and cause-effect linearity, forming an omniscient perspective of the battle that provides visualizations of important events occurring in various places across the islands, as well as close-up views of the impact of these events on anonymous enlisted men and officers.

Considering how the military—via Toland, Ford, and company—“stole” Hollywood conventions of combat cinematography, narrative construction, and invisible style, it is easy to see why Lowell Mellett might have felt threatened by the prospect of dozens of films like *December 7th* being produced solely by the military, particularly after it had already siphoned off some of Hollywood’s best talent. And, considering the extensiveness of the reenactments, dramatizations, and special effects, as well as how little actuality footage was used in the film, it is also easy to understand why the film has been marginalized in accounts of documentary practice in this period. The film’s reconstructions of events have prompted some critics to denounce the film or to deny its documentary status.⁷¹ However, the film was conceived by its creators and received by audiences *as* a documentary, and it received the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science’s stamp of approval as the recipient of the 1944 Academy Award for Best Documentary Short. *December 7th* may *look* more like a fiction film than a documentary film, and some of this is surely due to the Hollywood personnel who created it. But to assume that the documentary must have a different style, must provide historical traces of events, or

⁷¹ See, for instance, James M. Skinner’s tellingly titled essay “*December 7th*: Filmic Myth Masquerading as Historical Fact.”

must only use unscripted, spontaneous material not only diminishes the diversity of documentary practice, but also misconceives how documentary was defined and constructed during this period. As I will show in the next section, other World War II documentaries innovated new techniques and styles, but they still practiced staging, reenactment, and narrativizing, as well as using special effects, animation, and other cinematic “trickery.”

2.4 RECONSTRUCTING COMBAT: DEFINING DOCUMENTARY IN THE 1940S

Filmmakers have recreated combat sequences using miniature models since the very first war films. For their 1898 film *The Battle of Santiago Bay*, J. Stuart Blackton and Albert E. Smith of Vitagraph crudely reconstructed the battle with cut-out photographs of battleships floating on bits of wood in a shallow water tank. Specks of gunpowder provided minuscule explosions and cigarette smoke added to the haze.⁷² Reenactments of combat were widespread in nonfictional films and newsreels through World War I and beyond. Technical limitations meant that footage of combat taken during actual battles was very rare. Heavy, bulky cameras required tripods and other equipment, making travel with this unwieldy apparatus difficult and expensive. Cameramen were generally disallowed from the front; even if they were able to get near to the action, their large cameras were often mistaken for weapons, making them prominent targets for the enemy. Filming could only proceed if the lighting conditions and terrain were suitable, and filmmakers would have had to set up cameras and equipment ahead of time. With these

⁷² Fielding, *The American Newsreel*, 20.

constraints, recreations were understandably preferable—especially when actual combat footage tended to be blurry, far away from the action, or less exhilarating than an actor's reenactment.

British and American documentary filmmakers of the 1930s and 1940s saw their films as more complex and artistic than mere newsreels, which British documentary pioneer John Grierson disparaged as “just a speedy snip-snap of some utterly unimportant ceremony.”⁷³ But Grierson and his British cohorts, as well as Robert Flaherty, Pare Lorentz, and others in the American movement, were just as likely to stage actions for the camera. Grierson defined documentary as the “creative treatment of actuality,” and as Brian Winston has shown, dramatization of events was a distinguishing feature of Grierson’s documentary practice: “Drama was not only already present in Grierson, it is the ontological mark of the Griersonian documentary, the essence of what is meant by ‘treatment.’”⁷⁴ These filmmakers constructed sets, scripted dialogue, and coached or directed their “actors” to perform particular deeds for the camera. Technological limitations, especially those of synchronized sound, meant that sets were built for the trawler’s cabin in *Drifters* (John Grierson, 1929) and for the mail train in *Night Mail* (Harry Watt/Basil Wright, 1936).⁷⁵ In Humphrey Jennings’s celebrated documentary *Fires Were Started* (1943), firefighters reenacted their valiant efforts during the Battle of Britain on abandoned buildings with fires set ablaze specifically for the filming.

As these examples demonstrate, “reconstruction” was a necessary component of most documentary filmmakers’ production methods through the 1930s and 1940s. Since events often needed to be shot from different angles for full coverage and continuity editing, actions were

⁷³ John Grierson, “First Principles of Documentary,” in *Grierson on Documentary*, ed. Forsyth Hardy (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1947), 99.

⁷⁴ Winston, *Claiming the Real*, 54.

⁷⁵ Lacking the lightweight tape recorders that enabled the direct cinema movement in the 1960s, filmmakers had to set up their heavy and space-consuming cameras and audio equipment in specific conditions, preferring large, indoor spaces with controllable light and sound conditions like soundstages.

frequently performed more than once for the camera. Winston summarizes Grierson's position: "Reconstruction of events which had actually taken place was distinguished from reconstruction of events which had never taken place. The latter were dismissed as unacceptable—fiction. It followed that reconstruction of events which had not necessarily taken place but could have, because they were typical or were syntheses of different actual events, was acceptable also."⁷⁶

Robert Flaherty's ethnographic films are well known for depicting "natives" reenacting traditional rituals and practices that had died out generations before, such as the walrus hunt in *Nanook of the North*; Lorentz's films like *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1938) also utilized reconstructions and "stock" footage.

Therefore, in the 1940s documentaries were not defined by the camera's presence "on the spot" as history unfolded before its lens. Rather, the film's social purpose or message was thought to be essential. Grierson wrote that "a mirror held up to nature is not so important in a dynamic and fast-changing society as the hammer which shapes it. ... It is as a hammer not a mirror that I have sought to use the medium that came to my somewhat restive hand."⁷⁷ Documentaries in this period commonly followed scripts, used reenactments and recreations with special effects, employed actors and sets, and followed rules of continuity editing. Likewise, fictional films routinely incorporated stock footage or newsreel footage to provide views of events and objects that could not have been obtained during production. Thus, it becomes difficult to distinguish definitively between documentaries and fictional films on the basis of film style or by their use of "actual" versus recreated footage. Noël Carroll has argued that "the distinction between nonfiction film and fiction film cannot be grounded in formal technique, because, when it comes to technique, fiction and nonfiction filmmakers can and do imitate each

⁷⁶ Winston, *Claiming the Real*, 120.

⁷⁷ Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary*, 20.

other.”⁷⁸ Furthermore, if 1940s documentaries filmed reenactors on specially built sets as often as (or actually, far more often than) shooting “on the spot,” then the assumption that documentary cinema differentiates itself through a privileged relationship to reality based on the materiality of film and the camera’s presence at historical events does not hold, at least not until after the World War II period.

Frankly, to many contemporary reviewers, documentaries were known first and foremost for being boring—in other words, for not being entertainment films. Instead their purpose was understood to be information, instruction, and education, and thus they were sometimes called “think films.”⁷⁹ Philip Dunne, in his 1946 *Hollywood Quarterly* article on “The Documentary and Hollywood,” acknowledges that documentaries share many production methods with fictional films, but claims that “most documentaries have one thing in common: each springs from a definite need; each is conceived as an idea-weapon to strike a blow for whatever cause the originator has in mind. In the broadest sense the documentary is almost always, therefore, an instrument of propaganda.”⁸⁰ Although some filmmakers, like John Ford, reviled the term “propaganda,” John Grierson overtly adopted the term as a description of the social message he posited as essential to documentary films.⁸¹ In the same issue of *Hollywood Quarterly*, printed just months after the end of the war, Grierson echoes Bazin’s critique of the *Why We Fight* films: “The presence of the actual does not make a documentary film, because what one does with the actual can be as meretricious and synthetic and phony as Hollywood at its worst.” For him, the

⁷⁸ Noël Carroll, “Nonfiction Film and Postmodernist Skepticism,” in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 286.

⁷⁹ *New York Times* columnist Thomas M. Pryor wrote that Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight* films “were part of the military and politico-social education of more than 10,000,000 civilian-soldiers, and, for the majority, these ‘think’ films were an entirely new kind of cinematic experience.” See Pryor, “Back to Work: William Wyler, Out of the Army, Returns to Directing Pictures in Hollywood,” *The New York Times* 16 Sept. 1945, X3.

⁸⁰ Philip Dunne, “The Documentary and Hollywood,” *Hollywood Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (Jan. 1946), 167.

⁸¹ Robert Parrish, editor for *The Battle of Midway* and a member of Ford’s Field Photo group, attests that Ford hated the term propaganda. See his *Growing Up in Hollywood* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 144.

defining characteristic of the documentary is its social function; he even suggests that John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) could be considered a documentary.⁸² Thus, the special relationship thought to pertain in documentary cinema between the camera and an event as it happened was not only technically difficult in this era, it was not a defining characteristic of documentary.

The use of recreation, in Grierson's view, would only enhance the social message of the film, not detract from it. Grierson, like Bazin, was skeptical about the possibility of any film to simply record actuality. New techniques emerged in World War II documentaries, however, that appeared on the surface to guarantee their presence "on the spot" during a battle. Bazin reveals the dubiousness of these techniques, and a full reception and production history of the films that seem to attest to the camera's presence in a war zone demonstrates the danger of assuming that these techniques signal the simple recording of history in the making.

2.5 “NO FAKing HERE”: THE BATTLE OF MIDWAY AND DOCUMENTARY AESTHETICS

Despite his involvement in *December 7th*—a film that has often been taken to be a pinnacle of artifice—John Ford's next major film, the eighteen-minute combat report *The Battle of Midway*, produced a new aesthetic for combat documentaries, a style that emphasized the failure to produce a glossy, Hollywood-like product as evidence of its authenticity. While Ford's film contains no overt reenactments, this nevertheless does not prove that documentary filmmakers or

⁸² John Grierson, "Postwar Patterns," *Hollywood Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (Jan. 1946), 159. For more on Grierson's views on the social function of documentary, see Ian Aitken, *Film and Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement* (New York: Routledge, 1990). For a more critical view, see Winston, *Claiming the Real*.

audiences thought that the techniques of reconstruction in *December 7th* were unacceptable for nonfiction films. On the contrary, a study of the reception of *The Battle of Midway* reveals that many lamented the loss of the coherence, comprehensiveness, and conventional narrative provided by a Hollywood-style film like *December 7th*. While *The Battle of Midway* does signal the emergence of a new aesthetic for representing combat, which highlights the process of recording itself, it in no way marks the end of staging, reenactment, or special effects in wartime documentaries.

The Battle of Midway was filmed primarily during an air raid on Midway atoll during the three-day naval battle, a turning point in America's war against Japan. The film departs from documentary practice at the time by foregrounding its lack of polish and its failure to provide a full and conventional account of the battle. The departure from traditional documentary aesthetics can be found first and foremost in the film's visuals. In what appears to be a reaction to an explosion, the camera shakes violently, so hard as to dislodge the film strip from its track, jerking it out of position and exposing the frame line. Such a radically jarring image appears three distinct times during the film's combat sequences. Other images display "errors" in film grammar and convention, such as blurry focus, canted angles, prominent lens flares, overexposure, or awkward composition. One famous scene shows a group of soldiers raising an American flag as the battle rages around them. A long shot of the flagpole is overexposed and at a slight oblique angle. A large lens flare partially obscures a close-up of the flag, as, redundantly, the narrator remarks, "Yes, this really happened."

Ford's account of filming *The Battle of Midway* tends to exaggerate his bravado in single-handedly shooting the film even after being wounded by shrapnel, which later earned him a

Purple Heart. Ford boasted to Peter Bogdanovich, “I did all of it—we only had one camera.”⁸³

In fact, Ford was aided by photographer’s mate Jack MacKenzie Jr., a former RKO cameraman, and some of the naval and aerial footage included in the film was shot by U.S. Navy Lieutenant Kenneth M. Pier. Ford points to the visual quality and style of the film as evidence of its authenticity: “I shot film and continued to change the film magazines and to stuff them in my pockets. The image jumps a lot because the grenades were exploding right next to me. Since then, they do that on purpose, shaking the camera when filming war scenes. For me it was authentic because the shells were exploding at my feet.”⁸⁴

His later comments aside, it does not appear that Ford intended a new style from the outset or that he had rejected the production strategies of *December 7th*. Before the shooting started, Ford told MacKenzie, “Photograph faces. We can always fake combat footage later.”⁸⁵ Even after the footage was developed and a rough cut completed, Ford’s crew considered adding special effects recreations. In a letter to Ford describing the reactions of studio executives to the rough cut, naval attaché A. J. Bolton wrote that Harry Cohn, president of Columbia Pictures, “was quite upset that you didn’t have any miniatures of … plane crashes. Bob [Parrish] and I thought we might cut in a few but decided not to until consultation with you.”⁸⁶ As Ford biographer Scott Eyman put it, “Ford wisely opted to keep the film completely authentic; no studio recreations, no miniatures.”⁸⁷

Other parts of the film followed Hollywood style more closely. In fact, upon seeing Ford’s film, Gregg Toland and producer Sam Engel were outraged that Ford “stole” some scenes

⁸³ Peter Bogdanovich, *John Ford* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 82.

⁸⁴ As quoted in McBride, 360.

⁸⁵ Dan Ford, *Pappy: The Life of John Ford* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1979), 170.

⁸⁶ Quoted in Scott Eyman, *Print the Legend: The Life and Times of John Ford* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 261.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 261.

from *December 7th*, such as the images of parents back home and a burial at sea accompanied by “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee.”⁸⁸ *The Battle of Midway* also employs various voice-overs, including “omniscient narrators” voiced by Hollywood actor-directors Donald Crisp and Irving Pichel, as well as “character” voices by actors Jane Darwell and Henry Ford. (None of these actors is credited in the film, but their voices would have been familiar to viewers from other Hollywood films.) Reminiscent of her character Ma Joad in Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, Darwell’s contribution accompanies an image of the wounded: “Get those boys to the hospital, please do! Quickly! Get them to clean cots and cool sheets. Give them doctors and medicine, a nurse’s soft hands....” Along with this melodramatic sentiment, light humor is attempted by pointing out the only inhabitants of Midway, some quirky island birds whom “Tojo had sworn to liberate.”

Editor Robert Parrish has claimed that it was the most melodramatic parts of the film—Jane Darwell’s voice-over, for instance—that prompted the most emotion from the audience at the film’s premiere at Radio City Music Hall.⁸⁹ Critics, however, tended to praise the film’s realistic style, demonstrating the obsession with “facts” that Bazin described in relation to the war. Nelson Bell in the *Washington Post* called the film “18 minutes of actuality.” For him, the film was “not a ‘production,’ it was a *fact* depicted in all its heroic glory.”⁹⁰ *The Washington Post* remarked, “‘The Battle of Midway’ undoubtedly marks the beginning of a new epoch in war pictures,” and *The New York Times* elaborated, “for eighteen tingling and harshly realistic minutes the spectator is plunged into the frontline amid the thunder of exploding bombs, the angry whine of fighter planes locked in combat and the relentless bark of anti-aircraft guns

⁸⁸ Robert Parrish, *Hollywood Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1988), 18-19.

⁸⁹ Ford, 174.

⁹⁰ Nelson B. Bell, “Screen Goes Realistic; ‘This Is the Army’ Means It,” *The Washington Post* 4 Oct. 1942, L3.

aboard the surface vessels.”⁹¹ The most commented-upon moment was the image (or, actually, multiple images) in which the film strip is jarred out of its sprockets by a nearby explosion. These images were taken as evidence that the film was absolutely authentic. Bosley Crowther wrote, “No faking here; this is the real thing. When those bombs hit, the cameras shivered, the film went wild and debris was hurled in perilous showers right in front of the lens.”⁹²

Other reviewers, however, seemed to lament the lack of conventions made familiar to them in other “war pictures,” their terminology already blurring the distinction between fictional and documentary films of war. Although Crowther gave *The Battle of Midway* high praise, he described the film as “a lot of random footage” that the filmmakers were able to salvage because of “sheer mastery in film construction and an artistic use of the sound track.”⁹³ An editorial in the *Washington Post* opined, “It does not, and, of course, could not, despite skillful montage, give more than a confused idea of the actual development of the battle....”⁹⁴ Although the editorial praises the film’s authenticity, it does remark on how the film lacks “continuity and completeness,” which traditionally would have been provided, as in *December 7th*, with a voiceover, titles, reenactments, or miniatures. A letter to the editor printed in the *New York Times* railed against the film; the viewer wanted “an illustrated account rather than a purported motion picture of the battle,” and he suggested adding just those conventional elements missing in the film, such as the “use of ‘library’ shots, of animated maps and of miniatures such as those

⁹¹ Editors, “The Midway Movie,” *The Washington Post* 20 Sept. 1942, B6; “Film of ‘Midway’ Released by Navy,” *The New York Times* 15 Sept. 1942, 19.

⁹² Bosley Crowther, “Citation for Excellence,” *The New York Times* 20 Sept. 1942, X3.

⁹³ Ibid., X3.

⁹⁴ “The Midway Movie,” B6.

made by Norman Bel Geddes for Life Magazine, to fill in the gaps in the film made at Midway.”⁹⁵

The reference to Bel Geddes is of interest because it demonstrates the extent to which miniature recreations had provided Americans with visualizations of the battles that servicemen were fighting continents away. A theater and industrial designer, Norman Bel Geddes rose to prominence with the miniature Futurama displays of American cities and highways he created for the 1939 New York World’s Fair. During the war, he created dioramas of naval battles, photographs of which appeared in *Life* magazine with information about Bel Geddes and how he created the dioramas. The framing of the Battle of the Coral Sea diorama, for instance, mimics the view from a fighter plane. The bird’s-eye-view photograph includes the blurry frames of the cockpit windows, as if taken by a pilot as he tipped his airplane nose-down.⁹⁶ Simulated waves surround more than a dozen ships of various sizes, representing both sides of the battle. Although the view is very precisely staged, it is hard to believe that it would eradicate doubt as to how the events transpired. With so many ships crammed into a very small space, presumably to condense many actions into one scene, it is impossible without the accompanying text to follow the course of the battle. Despite this, the diorama seems to reduce the complexity of a multistage battle into one tableau, which had the effect of convincing some, like the *New York Times* letter writer, of the efficacy of this technique for clarifying the course of combat.

Although *The Battle of Midway* pioneered a new style of representing combat—an aesthetic that linked realism to a series of unpolished camera techniques that connote that “this really happened”—it did not necessarily change the public’s views on documentary, which emphasized the social message or political function of the film over its use of “the actual,” to use

⁹⁵ Sam Harold, “Disappointed in ‘Midway’ Film,” Letter to the Editor, *The New York Times* 18 Oct. 1942, X5.

⁹⁶ “Norman Bel Geddes’ Models Re-enact Naval Battle: The Battle of Coral Sea,” *Life* 12, no. 21, 25 May 1942.

Grierson's terms. Even those critics who praised *The Battle of Midway*'s realism usually ended their remarks with approval of the message of the film and its effectiveness in providing motivation, inspiration, and obligation to continue to support the war effort. The enhanced realism, or more "authentic" style of the film, did not necessarily make *The Battle of Midway* into *more* of a documentary. In fact, for some, it was less so. For instance, Bosley Crowther wrote, "It seems downright callous and presumptuous to apply the term 'documentary' to films which show victims actually dying and soldiers battling grimly for their lives."⁹⁷ It appears that, to Crowther, 'documentary' was a pejorative term that connoted manipulation, excessive jingoism, or dramatization. For this film reviewer in 1942, the term "documentary" meant the absolute opposite of Bazin's films of "fact," "shot on the spot" with the danger of death. Rather, Crowther appears to expect a documentary to be an informational film without such shockingly real images.

Yet the fact that Crowther makes a distinction between what might be considered an old-fashioned view of "documentary" and the "graphically immediate" *Battle of Midway* demonstrates that the film did do something new that would influence how the public perceived the role of cinema in war and the possibilities of recording events as they occurred. We can see in this film the seeds of a new style of representing combat. This style seems to guarantee authenticity because the shaking camera, off-kilter angles, and "errors" in composition and exposure imply a connection between the camera and the action taking place around it. By breaking with the polished, professional, "invisible" style of classical Hollywood cinema, *The Battle of Midway* calls attention to its jarring visuals and to the implied presence of a camera operator, making the spectator aware of the production of the images—an awareness heightened

⁹⁷ Crowther, "Citation for Excellence," X3.

by the popular press extolling the heroism of Hollywood celebrity directors like Ford, who braved the dangers of battle to bring back “authentic” pictures of the action. The authenticity conferred by this style ultimately stems from its *failure*—to create a professional, “invisible” style and to provide the omniscient view of the battle given by *December 7th* or a Bel Geddes miniature. We can see here the beginnings of the fervor for filmed “facts,” but the new techniques on display in *The Battle of Midway* are not guarantees of objectivity and immediacy; rather, they are components of a style that brings intensity and visual interest to the material and aids viewer engagement with the experience of battle.

2.6 GRIM FAIRYTALES: JOHN HUSTON’S *SAN PIETRO*

One of the most prominent films to use these new codes of combat realism is John Huston’s acclaimed documentary *San Pietro*. Upon its 1945 release, the film was hailed as a “grim and gripping document” and praised for its accurate representation of the experience of the fighting men.⁹⁸ One reviewer wrote, “The picture brings the audience closer to the grim realities of infantry action than almost any other.”⁹⁹ *San Pietro*’s renown has only grown over the ensuing decades. Much of the praise has come from its perceived authenticity as a thorough record of one battle, its portrayal of the experience of combat rather than just strategic maneuvers and abstractions, and what has been considered an “anti-war” stance in the guise of a wartime propaganda film. In a *New York Times* article in 2000, filmmaker Midge Mackenzie writes, “*The Battle of San Pietro* stands alone in the history of documentary filmmaking. Presenting the battle

⁹⁸ Bosley Crowther, “‘San Pietro’ Is Given ‘A Bell,’” *New York Times* 15 July 1945, I9.

⁹⁹ Edwin Schallert, “‘San Pietro’ Brilliant Film of Bitter Battle,” *Los Angeles Times* 27 Feb. 1945, A2.

in the Liri Valley as a costly continuing campaign rather than in retrospect as a strategic victory, it is the only complete record of an infantry battle.”¹⁰⁰ Much of the reputation of the film appears to have been crafted by the comments Huston made about its production history and its reception by the army. Huston claims to have shot the film personally with a group of army photographers during the actual battle, defying bullets, artillery fire, and shells to get up-close coverage of the experience of combat. Like Bazin’s example of Commander Bogart undertaking a mission, Huston followed John Ford’s lead in emphasizing his personal experience and thus bringing Hollywood and war into close quarters. He also relates that the military brass objected to his film, threatening to ban it. His autobiography provides a famous anecdote: “The War Department wanted no part of the film. I was told by one of its spokesmen that it was ‘anti-war.’ I pompously replied that if I ever made a picture that was pro-war, I hope someone would take me out and shoot me.”¹⁰¹

San Pietro has seemed to support Huston’s version of events because of its style, which appears to show evidence of battle conditions surrounding the shooting. For instance, many of the shots of combat employ rapid swish pans, vacillating erratically across the open sky and ground as if reacting to an explosion, showing jarring shots of the sky or blurry landscapes in motion. These shots are paired with images of explosions. Significantly, soldiers often appear in the frame with the explosion, adding continuity and a sense of imminent danger. One American soldier appears to have been shot and perhaps killed in front of the camera. In a long shot, a soldier moves up a hill with his back to the camera; suddenly, he crumples to the ground, without any of the Hollywood theatrics of, for instance, *December 7th*’s simulated deaths. Other shots

¹⁰⁰ Midge Mackenzie, “An Antiwar Message from the Army’s Messenger,” *New York Times* 16 April 2000, AR23.

¹⁰¹ John Huston, *An Open Book* (New York: Knopf, 1980), 119. For more on how Huston’s wartime experiences affected his following films, see Edgerton, and David Desser, “The Wartime Films of John Huston: *Film Noir* and the Emergence of the Therapeutic,” in *Reflections in a Male Eye*, 19-32.

demonstrate a roughness that connotes an amateurish quality, lacking the polish of professional studio cinematography. Most of the shots of combat appear to be hand-held, with extremely jerky camera movement and a relatively low angle, as if a soldier-cameraman were filming while moving, falling to the ground, or peering out of a foxhole. Many shots are slightly out of focus, and the scenes of combat in an olive grove are obscured by branches directly in front of the camera, approximating the view of a soldier hiding from live fire. By using subjective techniques such as these, the film places the spectator into the combat boots of one of the American soldiers—specifically that of the camera operator, who seemingly dodges the fire of the enemy.

The last image of the film presents a disclaimer: “All scenes in this picture were photographed within range of enemy small arms or artillery fire. For purposes of continuity a few of these scenes were shot before and after the actual battle of San Pietro.” However, a look at the production history proves that *most*, if not all, of the scenes were staged, often months after the battle or in other parts of Italy. The National Archives’ records of outtake footage taken by Huston’s team demonstrate not only that the majority of the footage was taken in the weeks or months following the battle, in various locations in Italy, but that most of these scenes were staged or reenacted for the camera.¹⁰²

Gordon Frye and Sam Tischler, two army cameramen who were assigned to Huston’s film crew in Italy, confirm that Huston staged a great part of the combat scenes far from the front lines, including all the sequences of men throwing grenades, the battles in the olive groves and

¹⁰² These cards are reprinted in David Culbert, ed., *Film and Propaganda in America: A Documentary History*, vol. 3 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990).

on Mount Sammucro, and the dramatic (and cinematic) explosions of white phosphorus shells.¹⁰³ The erratic swish pans were the result of Huston hitting their cameras with his hand, not the effect of the (planted) explosions themselves. One shot purporting to show a dead German soldier in a foxhole while American troops moved in the background actually depicted a live American soldier playing dead in a German uniform.¹⁰⁴ Some scenes, though shot “on the spot,” were used completely out of the original context of their creation. Combat photography historian Peter Maslowski has shown, for instance, that the “scene of a dead woman being dug out of the rubble after a German booby trap supposedly exploded [in San Pietro] was actually taken at Caiazzo after *American* planes accidentally bombed it, wounding Frye and killing many civilians.”¹⁰⁵ As Maslowski has explained, based on his interviews with the cameramen who took part in the battle, the terrain, weather, and other conditions during the actual battle were uncomplimentary to filming. In order to obtain the dramatic and exciting scenes of combat that the Signal Corps desired, they had to be staged away from the front lines.¹⁰⁶ The commanding officer of one of the regiments that provided the “actors” for Huston’s film wrote, “You just can’t photograph some of those scenes in actual combat and live to get the film back to the lab. As a matter of fact, you wouldn’t live to even photograph them.”¹⁰⁷

Furthermore, the correspondence on file at the National Archives related to the reluctance of the army to release *San Pietro* to the public does not corroborate Huston’s story about its

¹⁰³ The documentary *Shooting War* contains an interview with former World War II cameraman and later Hollywood producer-director Ed Montagne of the 163rd Signal Photo Company, U.S. Army, in which he confirms that Huston staged the majority of combat footage in *San Pietro* away from the front lines.

¹⁰⁴ Peter Maslowski, *Armed with Cameras: The American Military Photographers of World War II* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 89.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 90, his emphasis.

¹⁰⁶ Conditions in the Pacific were more amenable to filming—sunny days, open space, closer contact with the enemy—and thus many of the more “authentic” documentaries were filmed there, including *To the Shores of Iwo Jima* (1945) and *With the Marines at Tarawa* (1944).

¹⁰⁷ As cited in Maslowski, 90.

“anti-war” sentiment.¹⁰⁸ Alterations and cuts were required before it was released, but this appears to have had as much to do with the film’s running time (originally five reels, or approximately sixty minutes) as it did with its message or content. Army Chief of Staff General George Marshall, who, according to Huston, saved *San Pietro* from the dust bin, suggested a few changes before it was released, but these were merely editorial; he felt the ending sequence could be shortened, some of the repetitive battle scenes from the middle could be eliminated, and “perhaps some of the map animations were unnecessary.”¹⁰⁹ Far from remarking on its “anti-war stance,” other correspondence from military and government officials showed their concern for almost trivial changes. Under Secretary of War Robert Patterson dispatched a number of memos discussing the possible confusion in the voice-over between the words “Italian” and “battalion.”¹¹⁰ A number of officers objected to the depiction of the Italian children at the end of the film, rejoicing at their salvation at the hands of the Americans. These officers felt this section could be cut for length, “having little to do with the American soldier and conveying little information about him to the public.”¹¹¹

In interviews and his autobiography, *An Open Book*, John Huston has been candid about the production histories of some of the other documentary films he worked on during the war. He admits that while working on the British co-production *Tunisian Victory* (1944) for Frank Capra’s unit, almost all of the American footage had to be fabricated in the Mojave Desert and Orlando, Florida, after the genuine footage was lost on a sunken ship. Huston rejects the recreations as “trash” in his autobiography, but he was most likely aware that most of *Desert Victory* (1943), the successful British documentary they were trying to emulate, was also

¹⁰⁸ This correspondence is also reprinted in Culbert, Documents 84-113, 227-299.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., Document 92.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., Document 90, 103.

¹¹¹ Ibid., Document 97.

staged.¹¹² Huston also comes clean about his first military documentary, *Report from the Aleutians* (1943), which purports to record a particular bombing raid in which everyone comes back unscathed. Huston calls the film “tainted” because it splices together footage from multiple raids, the vast majority of which had heavy casualties.¹¹³ However, in all interviews and accounts of the filming of *San Pietro*, Huston maintains that he personally shot much of the footage alongside the troops under fire as they fought for control of the village.

Why was it so important to Huston to insist on *San Pietro*’s absolute authenticity? This certainly has to do in part with its reputation, even at the time, as a record of the soldier’s experience. The style of the film—the shaking camerawork, erratic movements, blurry focus, extreme low and canted angles—emulates *The Battle of Midway*, but takes the aesthetic even further because the majority of the film consists of combat footage. The camera movements are even more exaggerated, the sense of subjective camera even more emphasized. There is a promise of authenticity in this cinematic style. Huston’s comments seem to suggest that because the earlier films were filmed like Hollywood fictions, their propaganda value was written on their surface; thus, their status as reenacted fictions can be acknowledged. But the style of *San Pietro* breaks with the Hollywood norm, using a self-consciously visible style that calls attention to the actions of the cameraman as he appears to react to the events around him. To admit that this style *is* a conscious choice and not necessitated by the filming situation is to reveal the impact of style on realism, demonstrating a cynicism about the ability of the camera to serve as a record of events.

Yet, to what extent were audiences “duped” by the style of *San Pietro*? Certainly, the critical and journalistic discourse responding to this film appears to acknowledge a difference in

¹¹² Huston, 103; Maslowski, 66.

¹¹³ Cited in Mackenzie, AR23.

how this film was presented, associated for them with “grim realities,” “the cold, relentless violence of war,” and the “taut, nervous ‘feel’ of the actual battle.”¹¹⁴ It is unclear, however, to what extent these comments referenced the film’s visual style and cinematography—the shaky camera, blurry shots, low angles, and erratic movement—or, alternatively, its narrative, voiceover (performed by John Huston himself), or perhaps most importantly, the story spread by Huston and the press about how the images were obtained in the line of fire.

The stylistic effects of *San Pietro* seem to be markers of the authenticity of the image, evidence on the surface and within the style of the film that it was taken during combat. But we now know that those events were staged and those effects manufactured. Does this eradicate or contradict their claim to be records of war? How audiences determine the answer to this question is based as much on cultural influences—their expectations about the functions of cinema and its relationship to history—as on their knowledge of how technologies of film function. Thus extrafilmic discourses, such as critical reception, advertisements, and the disclaimers or announcements tacked to the beginning or end of the film, are crucial in contextualizing how these films were meant to be read, and how they gained a special credibility among audiences. Eventually, these unpolished stylistic effects came to be read as codes for realism, for a screen experience that mimicked the actual experience of soldiers in the battlefield. As future chapters will demonstrate, this conception of this style—as a way of manufacturing vicarious experience, rather than as evidence of actual events—was by far the most influential on the continuing development of the aesthetics of combat in film and media.

¹¹⁴ Schallert, A2; Bosley Crowther, “The Screen: ‘A Thousand and One Nights,’ Costume Show, With Cornel Wilde, Opens at the Criterion—Army Film at 55th Street,” *The New York Times* 12 July 1945, 8.

2.7 TWO PARADIGMS OF HISTORICAL RECREATION

The American military documentaries discussed above employ two different styles of realism to represent history as it was being made. The first style, represented by *December 7th*, emulates Hollywood in its production values, heightened acting, omniscient point of view, use of special effects, and classical editing. The second style, illustrated most effectively by *San Pietro*, rejects Hollywood polish and instead represents the chaotic, unpredictable nature of combat photography. Only fragmentary images of the event are present; thus, the cause-effect chain of continuity editing is minimized, if not rejected. Instead of adhering to the “professionalism” espoused by both Hollywood and newsreel practice, this style replaces stable, tripod-centered camerawork with mobile, shaky handheld cinematography. Other forms of damaged or imperfect footage—such as images with blurred focus, oblique angles, over- or underexposure, lens flare, or unbalanced composition—are not rejected, but instead foregrounded, as apparent evidence of the camera’s presence in a combat zone. These imperfect images are thus thought to be *more* authentic than the previous model; they have the look of “facts,” evidence that “this really happened.”

The first style—that of *December 7th*—presents history as a triumphant and omniscient narrative, a story can be told completely and from all perspectives. This style places combat within a causal trajectory, contextualized within a larger story that contains a coherent beginning, middle, and end. These narratives tend to focus on victory or grand sacrifice for the cause of righteousness. The second style—that of *San Pietro*—fragments the totalizing narrative into bits and pieces, suggesting the ineptitude of coherent storytelling to encapsulate the experience of war. The voice-over of *San Pietro* makes this clear: “Many among these you see alive here have since joined the ranks of their brothers in arms who fell at San Pietro. For ahead lay San Vittori

and the Rapido River and Cassino. And beyond Cassino, more rivers and more mountains, and more towns, more San Pietros, greater or lesser, a thousand more.” Huston’s narration represents the war as an endless stream, without a strong narrative arc to give this battle climactic meaning.

Instead of an omniscient perspective, the point of view of *San Pietro* and those films that follow the same style tends to be personalized. The erratic camerawork appears to mirror the perspective and movement of the camera operator; thus, it gives an individualized, singular view on the events. Films which espouse this fragmented style give the spectator a different kind of historical access to the images on screen. Unlike the style of *December 7th* and Hollywood fictional films—which aimed to give the viewer a cohesive, complete, and overarching view of the event and keep him or her informed through a balanced and continuous flow of story information—the style of *San Pietro* and *The Battle of Midway* presents restricted information, usually only through one perspective, or shifting among multiple, individual perspectives that do not add up to a whole, complete view. As Stella Bruzzi has shown, the use of “voice of God” narration in these films could be understood as an attempt to make up for the fractured and necessarily multivalent montage of images, rather than evidence of the filmmaker’s control over the film’s reception and meaning:

Narration could … be viewed as a mechanism deployed to mask the realisation that this mode of representation, and indeed its inherent belief in a consistent and unproblematic truth, are perpetually on the verge of collapse, that commentary, far from being a sign of omniscience and control, is the hysterical barrier erected against the spectre of ambivalence and uncertainty.¹¹⁵

However, both of the styles that I have described above—the cohesive and the fragmentary—have been used with *staged* footage, based on real events, but not recorded during their historical unfolding. Both sets of techniques are available for either documentary or

¹¹⁵ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 52.

fictional filmmaking. Yet the rough techniques of the fragmentary style are often taken as confirmation of the evidentiary quality of film. That is, markers of unprofessionalism, like shaky camerawork and blurry focus, seem to prove that the camera acts as objective witness to events, transcribing the actions and objects before it into a visual record. The production history of *San Pietro*, in particular, demonstrates the error of this assumption.

Examining the history of recreation in documentary films prompts us to challenge definitions that treat documentary and narrative films as mutually exclusive and opposing categories. With their long history of reenactments and recreations, documentaries cannot simply be defined by their stylistic practices, their use of historical material, their production values, or a privileged indexical relationship between the film footage and the event it depicts. Instead of using the tradition of staging to disregard certain films or reject them from central positioning in documentary studies, we must consider staging as a central component of all films which attempt to dramatize history. Although all three films discussed above used a modicum (or more) of reenacted and recreated material, they used staging in different ways to produce particular kinds of realistic effects and distinctive perspectives on the cinematic recreation of history.

At stake then is not whether or not their footage is “real,” but what kind of history they narrate. The important transition occurring between 1941’s production of *December 7th* and 1944’s production of *San Pietro* was not the rejection of staging, reenactment, or special effects for a more gritty and “authentic” realism, but the espousal of a model of history that emphasizes a limited and personalized, rather than omniscient, perspective. This model downplays the overarching view of history, the assured narrative of an event that can be understood in context and accessed rationally. Instead, in mimicking the optical point of view of the soldier, it

emphasizes the experience of an individual soldier in confronting a bewilderingly violent situation, without knowledge of the larger plan in which he is engaged. The trajectory of this style, and this version of historiography, leads towards the shaky, handheld cinematography of *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998) and the first-person perspective of video games like the *Medal of Honor* series (Electronic Arts, 1999-2007). To some extent, this transition might be judged a positive move away from the grand narratives and false assurances of totalizing history. Yet in glorifying the personal and particular experience of the common serviceman, these texts ignore the broader scope of the war, the fate of the enemy or the plight of the innocent victims, and the significance of these events to a larger history of the twentieth century. Although the emphasis on the soldier's experience seems to be apolitical—minimizing the larger issues of strategies and blame in favor of the personal and individual, yet seemingly universal difficulties of the combat soldier—this choice of perspective only serves to naturalize the political and ethical messages of the film.

In adopting the realism of individual experience and rejecting the realism of invisible, omniscient style, a fresh representation of history emerges in the combat documentary, leading to a new style of “authenticity,” but not to the rejection of staging and recreating events. While it is unlikely that Bazin saw *December 7th*, *The Battle of Midway*, or *San Pietro*, these films would have undoubtedly confirmed his observations about a wartime shift in documentary style.¹¹⁶ The emergence of unvarnished techniques of combat photography—blurred focus, shaky cinematography, etc.—demonstrates changing cinematic styles due to the profusion of cameras into the theaters of operation. Bazin wrote, “One can conclude from this that Dziga Vertov’s theory of the Cine-Eye is beginning to be confirmed in a sense that even the Soviet theoretician

¹¹⁶ None of these films are referenced in his writings.

had not foreseen.”¹¹⁷ Yet Bazin prompts us to recognize that these visual “facts” are already fictionalized by their circumstances of filming and their editing into particular narratives. The use of staging and reenactment—including the recreation of certain battlefield photographic tricks like shaking camera and blurred focus—does not demonstrate that these films are illegitimate documentaries. Rather, films like *San Pietro* reveal complex negotiations amongst various models of truth-telling and truth-showing. While a rough style of combat realism may have emerged in *The Battle of Midway* and other films, filmmakers during World War II did not—and could not—succeed in relinquishing the recreation of events and embracing “objective” filmmaking. If such a thing had been possible, it still may not have been desirable for those who sought to “document” the war. The next section will examine a World War II documentary that challenges a simplistic notion of the combat film as record of “history in the making.”

2.8 “A WHOLLY NEW KIND OF SIGHT INSTRUMENT”: *THE FIGHTING LADY* AND THE CINEMATIC RECORD

The film *The Fighting Lady* was the first of a series of “journalistic news features” that Louis de Rochemont,¹¹⁸ producer of the newsreel *The March of Time*, decided to make to capitalize on

¹¹⁷ Bazin, “On Why We Fight,” 190.

¹¹⁸ *The Fighting Lady* was produced by Louis de Rochemont and lists credits for technical direction (Lt. Cmdr. Robert L. Middleton, USN; Lt. Dwight Long, USNR; and Philippe de Lacy) but not for direction. Many accounts of the film, including most DVD and video covers and the Internet Movie Database, claim that the director was an uncredited William Wyler, who directed two other wartime documentaries, *The Memphis Belle* (1944) and *Thunderbolt* (with John Sturges, 1945). However, none of the press materials or reviews from the time period mention Wyler’s involvement.

and extend the growing interest in nonfiction films during the war.¹¹⁹ This marked the first time that a commercial studio, Twentieth Century-Fox, produced and released a war documentary on its own, instead of following its traditional function as a distributor for the films produced by the War and Navy Departments. *The Fighting Lady*, a 62-minute documentary feature, presents the trials and tribulations of an aircraft carrier and its crew from its commission through its first year of service. The film follows a familiar story, the maturation of the crew and the ship from inexperienced “greenhorns” to blooded, confident soldiers. They are tested in a number of Pacific naval battles, from Marcus Island to Truk and from the “Marianas Turkey Shoot” to the Battle of the Philippine Sea. Rochemont and his team—including noted photographer and naval commander Edward J. Steichen, who oversaw the shooting—had unprecedented access to the ship and its crew.¹²⁰ Navy photographers shot more than 60,000 feet of 16mm Kodachrome film (magnified into 35mm Technicolor for release prints) over fourteen months to provide the raw material for the film, and cameras were placed on and synchronized with machine gun sights and bomb sights on eighteen of the fighter, bomber, and torpedo planes stationed on the ship.¹²¹

Much of *The Fighting Lady* follows standard documentary conventions of the time. To provide illustration for the narrative trajectory, representative footage is shown. Waiting for their first military engagement, for instance, is illustrated by a brief montage of groups of

¹¹⁹ The next film in the series was *The House on 92nd Street* (Henry Hathaway, 1945), a “semi-documentary” (mostly fictionalized, with a substantial amount of expository documentary information and footage) about a double agent working for the F.B.I. to keep the atomic bomb from the Nazis. It appears that Rochemont’s attempt to create a series of “journalistic news features” fizzled out after this, though he did then produce a number of “torn from the headlines” dramas, such as *13 Rue Madeleine* (1947), *Boomerang!* (1947), and *Lost Boundaries* (Alfred L. Werker, 1949).

¹²⁰ The carrier was the CV-10 *Yorktown*, but for security reasons the name was withheld for the film. This also allows the film to be taken as the general experience of all aircraft carriers.

¹²¹ Production details can be found in the following press articles: Thomas M. Pryor, “By Way of Report: Fox to Experiment With ‘The Fighting Lady’—Aurora Miranda Kisses the Air,” *The New York Times* 24 Sept. 1944, X3; Fred Stanley, “Hollywood Faces Facts: Fox Plans to Make ‘Journalistic’ Film Series—Man-Made Desert—Other Items,” *The New York Times* 18 June 1944, X3; and “Filming ‘Fighting Lady,’” *The New York Times* 14 Jan. 1945, X3.

anonymous sailors talking in groups or passing the time by playing cards. After the date approaches and anticipation increases, the servicemen are shown at briefings, preparing their aircraft, and writing letters home. Similar sequences of representative shots are used for the battle dawn, the manning of stations, taking off against the sunrise, and so on.

Somewhat less conventional for a wartime documentary is the attempt to turn some of the men into characters that the audience can follow throughout the film. Although other films often honor the soldiers who have served and died by showing their faces and perhaps their parents back home (as in *December 7th* and *The Battle of Midway*) or show some of the illustrious names who were involved in the battle (*The Battle of Midway* includes a close-up of Major James Roosevelt, the president's son), *The Fighting Lady* introduces a number of characters that we see repeatedly. The most prominent of these are "Jocko," the skipper who has to make the tough decisions and make announcements to the crew, and "Smoky," a young naval pilot who mans the radio plotting room instead of flying through the first few missions. These characters are given voices and dialogue, but it is clear that these speeches are scripted imitations of what they might have said performed by (uncredited) actors over unsynchronized visual images of the characters. The characters are barely recognizable, however, and there is not enough footage of them to reinforce their presence as real characters. Jocko is promoted to admiral halfway through the film and replaced by the new skipper "Dixie," who is barely mentioned again, and when it is revealed at the end of the film that Smoky went missing during the last battle, the impact of his death is only slightly heightened by the spectator's vague familiarity with the name and face.

The attempt to structure the film into a more narrativized, Hollywood-style feature also seems half-hearted. The real innovation of the film is its remarkable emphasis on gun- and

bomb-sight footage along with other spectacular images, especially images of the crash landings of American aircraft returning to the carrier after battles. Instead of conventional narrative, the more prominent structure of the film is categorical: different sequences provide representative images, most likely taken out of their original chronology or context, of various types or categories, such as the different jobs held on the ship, the strafing of ships, successful landings of planes onto the carrier, dive bombing, relaxing after a battle, dogfights, unsuccessful landings of planes onto the carrier, and so on. These categorical sequences are overlaid with the narrative of the men's maturation into soldiers and the order of the battles fought, but it is obvious that much of the footage does not actually conform to that chronology and is presented to the spectator out of order.

Previous sections of this chapter have demonstrated that the purpose of documentary films during the early 1940s was perceived to be, primarily, education, information, and propaganda (a term both defended and despised during the 1940s). *The Fighting Lady* certainly provides much information about how such a large "floating community" functions, yet this hardly captures the appeal of the film. Like many other documentaries, *The Fighting Lady* was also popular because of its spectacular nature, participating in the "Nero complex" critiqued by Bazin. Reviews from the period called the film "thrilling" and "incredibly exciting"; one recognized in it "the most spectacular aerial combat pictures yet made in this war."¹²² Reviews tended to recount their author's favorite sequences. One critic enthused: "The camera takes you right down to the frantically zig-zagging Jap fleet as it tries desperately to evade the destruction pouring from the bomber, dive bomber, torpedo and rocket planes of the famous Task Force 58. You see the flak belching from Jap guns as our fighter bore in to strafe battleships, cruisers,

¹²² Nelson B. Bell, "Mother of an Angry Brood: 'The Fighting Lady' Is Vivid Action Story of U.S. Carrier," *The Washington Post* 28 Jan. 1945, S6; "Thrilling Action in 'Fighting Lady,'" *The New York Times* 18 Jan. 1945, 15.

carriers, destroyers, etc.”¹²³ Not only did *The Fighting Lady* and other war documentaries show exciting images of “real” combat, but they also provided a perceptual experience never before seen. Part of this involved witnessing great and unfamiliar new machines in action—tanks, ships, aircraft. *The Fighting Lady*, for instance, introduces audiences to a brand-new *Essex*-class aircraft carrier, the largest then built.¹²⁴ The narration expresses awe at the size of the ship: it is “enormous, wonderful, and strange to us.” It is described as a vast body, with a brain, eyes, and ears.¹²⁵

Yet the greatest machines featured in *The Fighting Lady* are not ships, but airplanes—in particular, their placement and tracking through radar, their spectacular take-offs and landings, and their maze-like organization on deck with folded-up wings. Not only are the aircraft visually striking in and of themselves, but they also provide a different kind of perceptual experience for the spectator. Aerial views had been available before World War II, but new visual experience was on offer as audiences got a chance to witness dogfights and bombing runs from the plane’s point of view. Almost a full quarter of *The Fighting Lady* consists solely of footage obtained from cameras attached to gun and bomb sights, automatically triggered by the mechanism that controls the gun’s firing or the bomb’s drop.¹²⁶ To be clear, the body of the airplane to which the camera is attached is not visible in any of these shots; thus, the view is of exactly what the plane would “see” if it had eyes, witnessing the Zeroes fly by, the ships being strafed, and the results of bombing on islands below. Taking the plane’s point of view is different from taking

¹²³ “Thrilling Action,” 15.

¹²⁴ Although aircraft carriers had been in service since World War I, massive flat-top carriers like the *Yorktown* were relatively rare until the great building boom prompted by the Second World War. The *Yorktown* was only the second *Essex*-class carrier to be commissioned; the first, the *Essex*, was commissioned in 1942.

¹²⁵ Significantly, it is coded as a female body; the ship is described as a “cave” and is both strange to the sailors who make their home in it and is a protective womb-like space that must be defended.

¹²⁶ The film is sixty-two minutes long and contains almost fifteen minutes of sequences consisting solely on automatic gun- or bomb-sight footage.

the pilot's point of view—his perspective is far more mobile, being able to turn around, follow an object through the sky, and split attention amongst multiple objects and events. His point of view also necessarily implies a view of the cockpit, controls, and parts of his own body. The automatic gun- and bomb-sight footage, on the other hand, is disembodied—from both a personal point of view and from a human operator. The narrator of *The Fighting Lady*, actor and naval lieutenant Robert Taylor, announces, “Our eye is now the very eye of our fighting airplane.”

As this example makes clear, one of the extraordinary marvels of the modern war machine is the camera itself. Made portable, reduced in size and weight, attached to novel equipment, and synchronized with the weapons of war, the camera was innovated and brought into situations never before thought possible. This confluence of military and cinematic technology brings into being what Paul Virilio has named “logistics of perception.” Human vision is displaced by machine vision. The narration of *The Fighting Lady* addresses the issue outright: “In an almost vertical dive, the pilot may black out or go blind for a moment when he pulls up and out of the bottom, but the camera won’t black out.” The camera is made to be an infallible eye—like a pilot’s eye, but more consistent, more precise, lacking in human flaws of inattention or lack of stamina.

The gun- and bomb-sight footage provides spectacular battle sequences in *The Fighting Lady*. Six different sequences—anywhere from one to five minutes in duration—consist solely of a montage of these images, representing bombing runs, attacks by Japanese fliers, dogfight sequences, and invasions of Japanese-held islands. Since the footage is automatically generated with no intervention by an operator or artist (other than the pilot or bomber who inadvertently triggers the camera with the weapon’s trigger), it would seem to function as a privileged

demonstration of the film image's indexicality. As in *San Pietro*, this footage contains certain markers of authenticity, such as blurriness, shaky cinematography, off-center composition, and so on; however, unlike *San Pietro*, this footage cannot be accused of being staged away from the front lines. The automatic nature of the images seems to preclude any kind of manipulation or tampering, at least before editing. If this is so and these images could be taken as examples of the cinematic record par excellence, it is worthwhile to look at exactly what kind of recording this is and what kind of information is imprinted on the image.

The images within these sequences are often hard to make out; they tend to be blurry, over- or underexposed, or rendered indistinct by the shaking of the camera from the vibrations of the aircraft. Often the intended focus of interest is merely a dark smudge moving within the frame, which the voice-over narration identifies as an enemy plane. With aerial footage, particularly of dogfights, it is often impossible to tell which way is up. Unlike the experience of a pilot who senses gravity physically, for the spectator looking "through" the camera, the movement of the airplane through the sky is only legible in the relation of the image to other objects. When those other objects, such as the ground, are out of sight, the manner in which the plane is careening through the sky is not necessarily apparent; and when those other objects, especially enemy craft, are also moving, the sense of direction and orientation is lost (but it is not necessarily vertigo-inducing, and thus visceral, as it would be for the pilot). Furthermore, the angle of the camera is static, but the movement of the plane produces unclear, unbalanced, or barely legible compositions. Enemy aircraft rarely stay in frame, since it is difficult to train one's guns/camera at them for long considering defensive maneuvers. Thus, montages of aerial footage break all rules of continuity editing. In one shot the enemy plane might be in the upper left corner of the frame moving right; in the next, it might be lower right moving left. After

several other shots, if an extreme long shot shows an explosion over the water, it must merely be assumed that this is the same plane, or a plane at all.

The most extreme and disorienting aspects of the aerial footage in *The Fighting Lady* are the tracer lines. Wavy scribbles decorate most of footage, often in different colors and shapes, further marring the decipherability of the image. The narrator of the film explains this strange and spectacular phenomenon to the audience: “These red balls floating up at us so lazily are anti-aircraft fire. There is three times as much of it as we can see, because only one shell in three is a tracer. What look like firing pollywogs are traces from our own wing guns. The ack-ack [slang for anti-aircraft fire] is much heavier than expected, but through it we go to knock out enemy bombers on the ground.” The anti-aircraft “red balls” appear in the image as pink dots with little, tadpole-like tails, seeming, through an optical illusion, to be traveling slowly toward the airplane and thus towards the screen. The wing gun tracer fire takes the form of two white, mostly straight, intermittent lines, entering from the upper right and left sides of the frame and shooting down toward the center of the frame.

The tracer bullets, along with the camera, provide a visualization of something invisible—the bullets that move too quickly for the human eye or the camera to perceive. These invisible weapons are nonetheless some of the most important and most destructive of the battle. The tracer fire allows one to perceive the invisible bullets, yet the bullets are not actually made visible. Instead they leave a pyrotechnic trace behind them. What is made visible then is an explosive ballet of lines and colors, shapes and squiggles. For those in the “line” of fire, these lines are legible in terms of the placement of the enemy and the accuracy of one’s shots, but for the spectator they become part of the spectacle, a component of the mysterious workings of war.

If one were to disregard the historical context of how these images were made, these sequences could be considered experimental or abstract in form. With only the scantest voice-over to motivate, explain, and contextualize these images, the pleasure in watching them is only partly inspired by the sense that one is watching a life-and-death battle in the air. The other component to their appeal is the perceptual experience of feeling as if one is high above the earth, careening up and down, surrounded by unfamiliar, abstract shapes and colors. If we focus on this aspect of the image, should these images still be thought to be, primarily, records of actual events? If they are so fragmentary, indistinct, and abstract, of what exactly do they provide a record? If we cannot read the images, are they still worthy documents?

Additionally, these images remind us that the camera is also a weapon and that war is waged not only with bullets and artillery, but with perceptual and communications technologies. Paul Virilio has described the increasing derealization of war throughout the twentieth century—via the replacement of human perception in warfare with fully automatized machine vision, the development of light-based and electronic weapons, and the conflation of communications and weapon technologies like satellites, to give a few examples. These technologies strive to make the waging of war invisible to the naked eye. Concomitant with this, however, is the similar, yet inverse strategy of making the invisible visible. Radar is the best example from this period of making what cannot be perceived by any eye—human or optical lens—visible through invisible waves. Radar became commonplace during World War II, but regular film cameras also made the invisible—the bullets, the impact of bombs, the experience of flying—in some way visible. The images produced by the documentary camera can then be reexamined in their historical context alongside devices such as the X-ray, which also render to our sight objects that cannot usually be seen.

The “logistics of perception” at work during World War II, providing new and varied perceptual experiences to soldiers and spectators alike, brought the special “vision” of the camera to the fore. A two-page spread in the *New York Times* Sunday magazine, written by Iris Barry, curator of the Museum of Modern Art Film Library, in January 1946, discusses how the documentary film has revealed that “this instrument [the camera] basically is one for seeing better and seeing more.” She describes how documentary cameras have “revealed the unseeable, the invisible. Eclipses and volcanic eruptions, a star in its path, a rare medical operation were grist to this machine. They photographed the unfolding of a rose, synthesized the flow of movement in bird’s wing or horse’s canter: the inmost secret of life was brought forth for all to marvel at when a living cell was first recorded by photomicrography.”¹²⁷ Irving Pichel, writer and narrator for *The Battle of Midway*, published an article in the second issue of *Hollywood Quarterly* about “Seeing with the Camera,” in which he discusses the camera as analogous to the human eye—yet, “Like the microscope of the telescope or field glasses, it extends the capacity of the human eye.” The camera “is a wholly new kind of sight instrument, as fabulous as radar and free from most of the limitations that hedge about human sight.... It goes where no human eye could possibly go. It moves according to laws, if any, which apply not to the human eye or the human consciousness, but to itself.”¹²⁸

For this reason, the film image must be considered to be something more than just a record of an event. It in some ways exceeds the capabilities of the record—producing not just the objective or the actual, but the uncanny, the abstract, and the spectacular.¹²⁹ The gun-sight

¹²⁷ Iris Barry, “Challenge of the Documentary Film,” *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* 6 Jan. 1946, 9, 46.

¹²⁸ Irving Pichel, “Seeing with the Camera,” *Hollywood Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (Jan. 1946), 140, 142.

¹²⁹ In his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin discusses how the camera introduces to the viewer “unconscious optics,” that is, vision that is free of human preconceptions or perceptual limitations: “Evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye—if only

images in *The Fighting Lady* produced, paradoxically, records of optical illusions—bullets as floating pink balls and streaks of white light. As Bazin's essay "On Why We Fight" shows us, reality is always already infused with the false, the theatrical, the fictional. How could an objective document be created from material that is already not objective, not true, not real in itself? Thus, we should not see a great distinction between films like *San Pietro* and *December 7th*, which were staged, and films like *The Fighting Lady* and *The Battle of Midway*, which were not. The process of staging and reenacting actions for the camera demonstrates that the authenticity of the documentary image—especially when it appears to bear the traces of combat such as blurry focus and off-kilter angles—should not be taken at face value. But even when images are not staged, the recording function of the camera does not just create an objective imprint of an event, but a very particular kind of sight—the vision of the camera itself—that distorts the event as much as it reveals it.

The ideals of the direct cinema movement have led us to believe that *verité* style—the origins of which can be found in these 1940s documentaries with their hand-held camera and "unprofessional" techniques—can be associated with objective recording and the impartial testimony of the camera, as if, like a "fly on the wall," the camera could record actuality without any interference or impact on the events it captures. Yet, the military documentaries I have examined demonstrate that the documentary image does not just function to bring things to light, to provide a visual record or a kind of visible evidence. It also conceals reality in blurry, dark images, in the danger that lurks off the screen, in the guns and body of the aircraft that are invisible but appear to be "seeing." Like the tracer fire that stands in for the bullets, the

because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man." See Benjamin, "Work of Art," 236-7. I am trying to suggest that we should not reduce this process, which in addition to revealing something of reality, transforms it into something mysterious and new, to the creation of an objective record.

documentary image too stands in for reality, but it also distorts the impression, replaces the reality that exceeds any attempt to represent it in its totality with a strangely colored, possibly illegible substitution. Like any other visual image, the documentary image makes visible *and* invisible; it conceals *and* reveals.

If we think of the cinematic medium in documentary as merely that which is capable of producing historical visual records, we also miss the way in which the discourse of realism is used (and abused) to justify war. Bazin's essay begins to suggest that the discourse of realism is complicit with the waging of war. Realism elides its own constructedness; it covers over the circumstances of its own making and the ideologies that undergird it. The classical Hollywood style, as I will explore in the next chapter, aimed to do so by "invisible" editing and external verisimilitude, using conventions that subordinate the style of the film to its substance. The documentaries I have discussed here all return the spectator to awareness of the moment of filming, acknowledging the camera's presence in the space of war, whether through the voiceover or through shaky or blemished images that respond to the circumstances of shooting. Although this appears to make the filming apparatus more evident, exposing the workings of the film, it actually ends up hiding it even more. By relying on this ideology of surface reality—the idea that the events of the war can be recorded objectively, often, as in *The Fighting Lady*, without a cameraman—these documentaries only cover even more fervently their own ideological underpinnings. Thus they are taken as "truth" rather than as a particular point of view, a biased account, or a piece of persuasive propaganda. They can then only more effectively present a particular image of the war as natural, apparent, and righteous. Realism can then be used as a tool to perpetuate ideologies of combat that in turn support or perpetuate the war itself. As J. David Slocum has pointed out, "it is through the cinematic and critical

privileging of specific standards of realism—that is, of image-based authenticity grounded, finally, in the visceral, personal experience of battle and not the overarching power relations organizing war and militarization—that war cinema also reinforces the representational practices aligned with the prevailing social order.”¹³⁰

As *The Fighting Lady* and my other examples here make clear, photographic and film images made during the war cannot merely be considered transparent documents of combat. Even while taking reality as its object, the camera brings its own way of seeing to the representation, altering how the spectator sees the object. When combined with the mechanisms of war, new images of reality are available, but they are also abstracted through the lens of the camera and through the lens of war. This produces images that fall into the category of the destructive sublime—labeled by Bazin as the “Nero complex”—images that are supremely exciting, thrilling, and spectacular, but also which are complicit in the destructiveness of war. Thus, when we look back at the military documentaries produced during World War II, they cannot be understood merely as propaganda or merely as objective records. Rather, they mark the emergence of a new aesthetics of realism that provides a different view—the view of the camera mechanism itself—of the pleasures and tragedies of modern war.

¹³⁰ J. David Slocum, “General Introduction: Seeing Through American War Cinema,” in *Hollywood and War: The Film Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 13.

3.0 CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD CINEMA GOES AWOL: SPACE, TIME, AND PERCEPTION IN WARTIME COMBAT FILMS

The last chapter demonstrated the difficulties of adapting contemporaneous documentary conventions to the visualization of combat. In contrast, war would seem like a subject naturally suited for narrative films within the classical Hollywood system: combat promises action, suspense, and adventure, along with heroic deeds worthy of well-paid leading men. However, war—and the Second World War in particular—introduces far more difficulties to classical Hollywood conventions than might be expected. As John Belton has pointed out, just as song and dance sequences interrupt the narrative of musicals, elaborate scenes of combat punctuate the war film, disrupting the flow of the film away from narrative concerns and toward spectacle.¹³¹ In addition, the conventional Hollywood protagonist (typically a psychologically motivated hero who strives for a personal goal) is displaced by an emphasis on character types (the father figure, the comic relief, the skeptic, the minority representative, and so on), as well as the ethos of teamwork and collective action of the group (the squad, unit, or platoon). Furthermore, the frequent exclusion of any female characters from the war film frustrates typical romance plots in which the creation or reunion of the heterosexual couple drives the narrative. Instead, combat films explore homosocial bonds and project the feminine onto technology: not only are almost all war vehicles (tanks, airplanes, aircraft carriers, battleships, etc.) designated

¹³¹ John Belton, *American Cinema/American Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 164.

“she” and often given female names, but they are also more subtly referenced as maternal, nurturing, safe, loyal, and dependable or, alternatively, seductive, promiscuous, dangerous, or fatal.

Even the presence of combat itself cannot be assured. Studies of the war genre in narrative cinema tend to treat combat as an essential feature of the war film, if not its defining characteristic, yet their analysis of combat rarely goes beyond this assertion. Steve Neale’s definition is commonly accepted: “For the most part, the category ‘war film’ is uncontentious: war films are films about the waging of war in the twentieth century; scenes of combat are a requisite ingredient and these scenes are dramatically central.”¹³² He continues that in these films, “combat with the enemy, however infrequent, usually determines the fates of the characters” (126). Jeanine Basinger argues that the label “war film” is not specific enough: “The war film itself does not exist in a coherent generic form. Different wars inspire different genres.”¹³³ Nevertheless, she still considers the depiction of combat as fundamental to the constitution of a more specific genre, which she labels “the World War II combat film.” Beyond noting the presence of combat situations in the films and their frequent insertion of a climactic battle near the end of the narrative, however, Basinger does not explore the significant role combat plays in the genre.

Critics who take the presence of combat for granted ignore the challenges representations of modern warfare pose to classical Hollywood norms. Combat presents a difficulty for filmic visualization: How can one reconstruct cinematically the experience of facing and fighting the enemy? What perspective should be taken—an omniscient point of view, the perspective of the

¹³² Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 125.

¹³³ Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*, 2nd ed. (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 9.

common soldier, or the strategically informed view of commanding officers? How does one reenact for the camera such a vast, expensive, and horrific undertaking? Conventions from previous war films were certainly available to those dramatizing the Second World War, such as the Quirt-Flagg relationship (two men fighting over the same woman) from *What Price Glory?* (Raoul Walsh, 1926) or the depiction of heroic aviation in such films as *Wings* (William Wellman, 1927). However, the combat of World War II demanded different kinds of representation—the collective action of a whole society demanded by “total war,” an emphasis on the group instead of the individual, and a more extensive reliance on technologically advanced warfare in the form of airplanes, aircraft carriers, tanks, submarines, and so on.

Through close readings of film form and archival research into the production and reception histories of two particularly complex combat films from the 1940s—*Destination Tokyo* (Delmer Daves, 1943) and *Wing and a Prayer* (Henry Hathaway, 1944)—I argue here that the wartime combat film is far less uniform and unified than usually thought. As a result of narratives that were under strain to resolve the contradictions and competing discourses of wartime experience, these films displayed cracks of tension and dissonance in their visual and aural form. Often these cracks reach their breaking point when it comes to the representation of combat, the style of which often departs substantially from the rest of the film. The issue is not only one of spectacle interrupting the narrative. Combat introduces the possibility of contingency and death which must be heavily circumscribed within the narrative, as well as visually censored according to strictures of the Production Code. Basinger’s work explains well how genre conventions ritualize the intrusion of death into the story; a strict order in which characters die is maintained—first the father figure, then the expendable minority characters, finally the noble sacrifice, leaving only the primary heroes (52-3).

The fact that combat, which is always shown to be deadly—if only for the enemy and lesser-known characters—is so often spectacularized demonstrates the extent to which mortality itself presents a threat to narrative. The effort to control that which in the war itself cannot be controlled—death—reveals a potential source of incongruity and rupture. Indeed, combat scenes can often be seen as fissures in the fabric of the narrative in which the heretofore repressed contradictions of war spill out onto the screen in a wave, perhaps paradoxically, of thrills and sensations. The breaks in narrative seen so prominently in combat sequences appear on the surface of the film most readily in the juxtaposition of documentary footage, miniature models, full-scale recreations, and practical special effects like explosions. The visual register of each of these modes is distinct from the others, introducing perceptible breaks in visual quality, cinematography, editing, and constructions of space and time. Although an *attempt* to seamlessly integrate various forms of footage is apparent, the radically different senses of scale, movement, quality, and perspective rarely succeed in cohering into a unified spatial and temporal impression. In effect, these stylistic ruptures depart not only from the narrative trajectories of the films, but also the homogeneity of techniques associated with the “classical Hollywood cinema.” Whether or not these breaks in visual quality are intentional is not the issue; rather, I am interested in how these fissures parallel the films’ diegetic depictions of mistaken perception and the spatiotemporal confusion of combat.

The combination of documentary footage, full-scale recreations, miniatures, and other special effects results in a fragmentation of the space and time of 1940s war films, thereby disorienting the spatial and temporal markers that audiences use to construct a sense of coherent diegesis. In the first section below, I examine the theory of “classical Hollywood cinema” put forward by David Bordwell and others to show how war films are poised to challenge this

model. Objections to this theory have been put forth by such scholars as Rick Altman, Linda Williams, and Dana Polan, but they have tended to focus on analysis of filmic narrative. In contrast, the following sections of this chapter examine how the construction of cinematic space, and to a lesser degree time, in combat films defies the conventions associated with classical Hollywood cinema, violating rules of continuity, coherence, and uniformity. I argue that scenes of combat—more often than not built out of diverse visual materials such as miniature models, stock footage, documentary footage, and even scenes taken from other films—not only contest conventional narrative models, but introduce dissonant and ultimately competing constructions of diegetic space and time.

While combat may indeed be key to the definition of the war film, its effects on the narrative, the diegesis, and the space-time of the film cannot be taken for granted. The combat films I examine below exhibit an attempt to make the space of war orderly, rational, and controlled and to eschew traces of the irrationality, fear, confusion, and loss of spatial awareness that are endemic to wartime. Yet these conflicting sentiments and spatial orientations finally reach their breaking point in moments of combat, which often present radically incoherent and unstable constructions of space, unleashing the antagonisms of war within the confines of Hollywood narrative cinema. Breaking from classical norms of clear spatiotemporal continuity and unity, 1940s war films present disorienting amalgamations of different levels of verisimilitude, from full-scale reenactments to miniature recreations to historical footage. The sense of a unified diegesis—a consistent world with its own laws of possibility—is particularly undercut by the apparent intrusion of sequences that seem to be from different cinematic worlds, or different films entirely.

3.1 THE COMBAT FILM AND CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

André Bazin found in the French and American cinema of the 1930s “all the characteristics of the ripeness of a classical art.” He pointed to “a common form of cinematic language,” “a well-balanced stage of maturity,” and “a complete harmony of image and sound.”¹³⁴ In the 1970s, as film critics and theorists turned to psychoanalytic, ideological, feminist, and structuralist/poststructuralist critiques of Hollywood cinema, “classical” narrative and “classical cinema” were opposed to resistant and experimental practices. Peter Wollen’s essay on Jean-Luc Godard’s *Vent d’Est* (1970), for instance, contrasts the narrative transitivity, transparency, and single diegesis of Hollywood cinema to the narrative intransitivity, foregrounding, and “multiple diegesis” of Godard’s “counter-cinema.”¹³⁵ The most influential consolidation of the characteristics and context of mainstream American cinema, however, appears in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*, written by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson and published in 1985.¹³⁶

Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson argue that Hollywood filmmaking from 1917 to 1960 constitutes a “unified mode of film practice,” “a coherent system whereby aesthetic norms and the mode of film production reinforced one another” (xiv). Their book presents a chronological history of the emergence and development of “classical Hollywood cinema,” as well as a

¹³⁴ André Bazin, “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema,” in *What Is Cinema?* vol. 1, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 28-9. This essay is comprised of three shorter articles that were first published in France in the early 1950s. Miriam Bratu Hansen cites instances of the term “classical” being used to describe Hollywood cinema as early as 1926 in French criticism. See her “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 335.

¹³⁵ Peter Wollen, “Godard and Counter-Cinema: *Vent d’Est*,” in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, ed. Philip Rosen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 120.

¹³⁶ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

formalist analysis of the stylistic rules and patterns established and followed by this film mode. By choosing the word “classical,” the authors intentionally rely on that term’s associations with “decorum, proportion, formal harmony, respect for tradition, mimesis, self-effacing craftsmanship, and cool control of the perceiver’s response,” all of which they felt were appropriate to describe the standards of and intentions behind Hollywood style (4). The basic stylistic continuities of the mode laid out by Bordwell in Part One of the book rely heavily on a theory of narration and plot development. In summary, Bordwell posits that these films present a string of events linked by cause and effect, driven by a psychologically motivated protagonist. A classical Hollywood film ends with narrative closure, leaving the viewer with a comprehensive knowledge of the story of the film. The “realist” effect of classical cinema stems from the causal motivation of each action and event in terms of the plot.

For Bordwell, the techniques used to construct cinematic space and time are subordinated to narrative causality. Film technicians follow certain rules derived from the creation of perspectival space in painting to create a balanced and centered construction of cinematic space. The techniques of centered composition, camera movement to frame and center characters, and editing to construct visual relationships amongst characters and objects function as narration because they shape story action for the spectator. Bordwell treats the screen as a “plate-glass window,” providing a picture with clearly delineated planes of action, made legible by techniques of lighting and focus to create a sense of three-dimensional depth (55). Editing reinforces spatial and temporal orientation in the narrative. As the authors go on to explain, a system of editing techniques evolved to reinforce a coherent sense of scenic space. Techniques like shot/reverse-shot, match on action, eyeline matches, and the 180-degree rule all serve to create the illusion of a continuous space and time playing out before the viewer. Norms like

beginning a scene with an establishing shot keep audiences from being confused about where events on screen are happening, but, importantly for Bordwell, they also provide story information: “The classical scene must immediately reveal two things about the characters: their relative spatial positions and their states of mind” (63). Aberrant techniques like flashbacks or montage sequences, when they do appear, are limited and motivated by narrational necessity or by generic expectation.

Since a number of challenges to Bordwell’s theory have revolved around issues of genre, it is worth looking at what he himself has to say about generic variation. For Bordwell, elements that would seem to work against “compositional” (that is, story-centered) explanation may still be motivated by generic conventions. Singing in a musical, for instance, may be extraneous to the development of the plot and may work against realistic motivation, but it can be justified by the conventions of the genre. These generic differences are limited, however, by the demands of classical norms and reduced to aesthetic variants that still work within narrative causality. Furthermore, “classical cinema tended to unify each genre’s disparate appeals and to limit the genre’s stylization” (71). For Bordwell, “Most instances of apparent transgression in the classical film are … intrusions which momentarily contest causality but which are motivated in other ways” (70). For instance, Bordwell dwells on film noir, which has been understood as a strong challenge to classical Hollywood conventions. He argues, on the other hand, that film noir’s seemingly deviant characteristics, such as unreliable narration, low-key expressionistic lighting, and reliance on flashbacks, can still be motivated by the themes of crime and abnormal psychology, the conventions of literary crime fiction, and the new codes of realism influenced by documentaries.

Christopher Williams has critiqued Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson's classical Hollywood system as a "monolith": "Nothing is allowed seriously to qualify it. Differences between genres and studios, variations in the uses of lighting and colour, and differing uses of the long take and depth of field are all briefly glanced at before being crushed into conformity."¹³⁷ A major challenge to Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson's elaboration of classical Hollywood cinema has come from a group of scholars whose work on genre—especially melodrama—has located alternative values and functions of popular cinema beyond goal-oriented narration and stylistic uniformity. Rick Altman, for instance, has argued that what the theory of classical Hollywood cinema considers "textual excess" may itself be organized into a system: "Unmotivated events, rhythmic montage, highlighted parallelism, overlong spectacles—these are the excesses in the classical narrative system that alert us to the existence of a competing logic, a second voice."¹³⁸ While Altman links Hollywood cinema in the classical era to 19th-century melodramatic theater, Christine Gledhill argues further that it was Hollywood which modernized melodrama and brought it into a symbiotic relationship with realism: "Americanization and Hollywood in particular facilitated the modernization of melodrama in a transformation that depended on its relationship *with* realism rather than its antithesis to it."¹³⁹ Linda Williams takes the argument one step further, claiming that melodrama is far more than merely excessive to the dominant; it is rather "the fundamental mode of popular American moving pictures."¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Christopher Williams, "After the Classic, the Classical and Ideology: The Differences of Realism," in *Reinventing Film Studies*, 213.

¹³⁸ Rick Altman, "Dickens, Griffith, and Film Theory Today," in *Classical Hollywood Narrative: The Paradigm Wars*, ed. Jane Gaines (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), 34.

¹³⁹ Christine Gledhill, "Between Melodrama and Realism: Anthony Asquith's *Underground* and King Vidor's *The Crowd*," in *Classical Hollywood Narrative*, 131.

¹⁴⁰ Linda Williams, "Melodrama Revised," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 42.

Dana Polan's study of American films of the 1940s, *Power and Paranoia*, published one year after *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, does not specifically argue against Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson's theory, but it does delineate how films of several genres, including the war film, challenge any notion that cinematic narrative in the 1940s was coherent, assured, straightforward, or singular.¹⁴¹ Because of the popularity of cinema in the 1940s—attracting 85 to 90 million moviegoers per week—this era is often considered the “golden age” of classical Hollywood. Fallout from the 1948 Paramount anti-trust legislation and the challenge from television meant that most film historians date the decline of the Hollywood film industry and the upending of some of its storytelling conventions to the 1950s and 1960s. Polan locates this shift earlier, however, and finds evidence of the failure of cinematic narrative conventions as early as World War II: “What historians have described as the breakdown of the classic studio system may also be the breakdown of that system’s ability to confidently tell its stories. . . . [N]arrative can seem to turn fundamentally unstable.”¹⁴² In his attention to how narratives break down, displaying cracks in their logical structure, Polan demonstrates that war films in this decade were fraught with contradiction, disunity, and fantasy.

Polan illustrates the dominance in the 1940s of what he calls “war-affirmative discourse,” a rhetoric of justification of the war and the inevitability of America’s triumph. Yet he also describes the fissures in that seemingly irrefutable surety: “even at its most emphatic, or perhaps because of that very emphaticness, the representation of war unity can be read as contradictory, a

¹⁴¹ Dana Polan, *Power and Paranoia: History, Narrative, and the American Cinema, 1940–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). Polan does take on Bordwell’s discussion of film noir in a footnote, however: “I would generally agree with Bordwell about *noir*’s lineage but contend that the borrowing of conventions is not enough to make an artform classical.” Polan argues that the conventions that film noir borrows from crime fiction “are frequently ones that take a certain distance from those in the paradigmatic range of classic narrativity. . . . I would argue that new detective art (both literary and cinematic) can represent a defamiliarizing of the conventions of action-narrative” (323-4, note 27).

¹⁴²Ibid., 31.

fictive attempt to not so much describe a state of affairs as to empower a state of affairs that it wants to have seen as already empowered” (105). As Polan argues, the sense of justification, consensus, and inevitable victory that can be found in these films results from a desire for these qualities, rather than a reflection of the presence of these qualities in social reality.

If classical Hollywood narrative is thought to unproblematically advance war-affirmative ideology, Polan demonstrates how war films often work against classical narrative conventions and thereby any uncomplicated diffusion of those ideological messages. According to Polan, war films of this era tend to work against the Oedipal trajectories of traditional Hollywood narrative, especially in their exclusion of women and regression to fantasies of male empowerment and autonomy. The difficulty of the conclusion of war films also presents a challenge to the suturing function of typical Hollywood endings, in which the hero wins out, the couple reunites, and all loose ends are resolved. Since the war was ongoing and certain audience members (men and women of the armed forces) were concurrently enacting the broader war narrative on the battlefield, films dealing with the war attempted to avoid definitive endings. Many combat films explicitly renounced an ending: Fritz Lang’s *Hangmen Also Die* (1943) joined other early war films in inserting the word “NOT” before the final title of “The End.”

As Polan demonstrates, war films of the 1940s can fruitfully be seen as fantasies of consensus, community, and ultimate triumph, which often in moments of narrative stress—for example, climactic moments of combat—break down and reveal themselves to be the attempt to bring about a situation rather than to describe one that already exists. In these films, “triumph undercuts itself through its very artificiality” (221). Polan investigates the artificiality, strangeness, or flimsiness of film narratives from the 1940s. However, he agrees with the argument of Bordwell or Barry Salt that there was a strong degree of *stylistic* uniformity during

this era. This chapter, on the contrary, will demonstrate the stylistic irregularity and formal hybridity of combat films in the 1940s.

Scholars like Rick Altman and Linda Williams have challenged the totalizing theory of “classical Hollywood cinema” by focusing on alternative narrative structures, particularly those of melodrama. Moreover, Polan has demonstrated that even the narratives of war films in the 1940s—often assumed to be conservative both ideologically and formally—show inconsistencies, contradictions, and a reliance on coincidence and spectacle. These critiques have tended to look at characterization, narrative pattern, use of emotion, and plot development, but have left film style relatively untouched, as if Bordwell’s formal analysis were correct but his conclusions were misguided. I will argue below, however, that the stylistic norms taken for granted in “classical” Hollywood cinema were routinely broken in wartime combat films, particularly in their scenes of combat. One of Bordwell’s major tenets is that in the classical mode cinematic space and time are subordinate to narrative causality—that is, constructions of space-time serve the function of advancing the story in the most efficient manner. The awkward, disjointed, and sometimes even phantasmatic insertion of combat scenes in the war films discussed below, on the other hand, demonstrates how these films produced incoherent, incomplete, and contradictory spaces and times, rather than one unified diegesis. By focusing on these films’ constructions of space, I will show how space did not subordinate itself to the narrative, but took on a life of its own, eventually challenging the perception of both the characters within the film and the spectators in the audience.

3.2 INSIDE THE BLUE GROTTO: SPACE AND PERCEPTION IN *DESTINATION TOKYO*

TOKYO

Upon first glance, Warner Brothers' late 1943 release *Destination Tokyo* appears to be a typical World War II combat film, following all of the major conventions of the genre. Most importantly, according to Jeanine Basinger's analysis of the genre's formula, it follows the exploits of a group of diverse servicemen as they undertake a specific mission.¹⁴³ The U.S.S. *Copperfin* submarine's mission is to journey to Tokyo, where they will aid in the Doolittle Raid's bombing of the city. The group, which learns to set aside personal grievances to work as a team, includes: Captain Cassidy (Cary Grant), the fatherly and down-to-earth leader; "Wolf" (John Garfield), the boastful ladies' man; "Cookie" (Alan Hale), the cook who "mothers" the men; "Tin Can" (Dane Clark), the Greek American who wants to revenge his uncle's death at the hands of the Nazis; "Pills" (William Prince), the pharmacist's mate who believes in science, not religion; Tommy (Robert Hutton), "the kid"; and Mike Conners (Tom Tully), an Irishman who mentors young Tommy. Along with the iconography of military equipment and uniforms, it also contains such generic elements as a burial at sea, a "last stand," deceitful enemies, and discussions of women and home.

Like others in the genre, this film involves a journey—both the physical journey to Tokyo and the metaphysical journey the crew undergoes from a collection of individuals to a

¹⁴³ See Basinger, especially 67-75. Along with *Air Force* (Howard Hawks, 1943), *Sahara* (Zoltan Korda, 1943), *Guadalcanal Diary* (Lewis Seiler, 1943), and *Bataan* (Tay Garnett, 1943), *Destination Tokyo* is one of five films that Jeanine Basinger considers foundational texts in the construction of the World War II combat genre. Delmer Daves' casting of John Garfield and John Ridgely, both of whom had starred in *Air Force*, led critics to note that *Destination Tokyo* meant to model itself after the earlier Warner Brothers success, which Basinger has called "perhaps the purest combat film ever made about the air service" (39). See, for instance, Edwin Schallert, "Drama and Film: New 'Monte Cristo' Feature Announced; John Garfield, John Ridgely Will Join Cary Grant in 'Destination Tokyo,'" *Los Angeles Times* 18 June 1943, 15.

unified and experienced fighting force. The journey entails finding and fighting the enemy, but also resolving internal conflicts, represented by Pills' atheism, Tommy's excessive grief over Mike's early death, Wolf's outlandish stories about women which distract from the mission, and Tin Can's disproportionate hate of the enemy. All of these potential threats to the cohesion of the group are resolved through later events—after Mike's death, Tommy steps forward to defuse an unexploded shell lodged in the hull of the submarine; Pills learns the power of faith when his patient Tommy wakes up from a successful appendectomy operation reciting the Lord's Prayer; Wolf commits to the mission by undertaking a risky mission on shore in Japan; and Tin Can learns to rely on others during a depth charging. *Destination Tokyo* also contains overt propagandistic speeches, as when Capt. Cassidy contrasts Mike's recent gift of roller skates to his five-year-old daughter with the supposed Japanese tradition of giving daggers to their ultra-militarized five-year-olds.

These generic conventions say little, however, about the pacing and structure of the plot. Beyond the larger motif of the journey, the film's narrative is episodic, moving from situation to disparate situation and packing in moments of spectacle. Before voyaging to Tokyo, the submarine travels to the Aleutian Islands, where they battle Japanese fighter pilots, shooting down two of them. Mike is killed when he is literally stabbed in the back by a shot-down Japanese pilot as he tries to rescue him from the icy waters. One of the planes scores a direct hit on the submarine, but the bomb fails to explode and it must be defused by Tommy, who is slim enough to crawl into the hole. As they approach Tokyo Bay, Capt. Cassidy develops the ingenious strategy of hiding the submarine underneath Japanese ships so as not to be detected as they pass through the nets guarding the bay. Once inside the bay, however, Tommy comes down with appendicitis and Pills, the pharmacist's mate, must operate on him with modified kitchen

knives.¹⁴⁴ Meanwhile, a team goes ashore to conduct aerology tests and surveillance, which they transmit to an aircraft carrier filled with bombers waiting in the wings. After the successful bombing raid—conducted by pilots who have not been introduced as characters—the *Copperfin*'s mission is complete. Still, they manage to sink two Japanese ships single-handedly and survive a depth charging before returning to San Francisco Bay. Throughout all this, the backstories of each of the major characters are explained through dialogue—sometimes in grandstanding speeches—as well as through flashbacks and even visualizations of Wolf's fanciful stories about women. They also consider and work through issues as weighty as atheism, marriage and family, the evils of Nazism, the nature of Japanese imperialism, grief over the death of a comrade, and the necessity of sacrifice.

Even critics at the time recognized that the film was “too much,” complaining about its excessive length (135 minutes), clichéd gags, and jam-packed plot containing an implausible amount of action and circumstance for one patrol of one crew. Bosley Crowther wrote in *The New York Times*, “The chief fault, in our estimation, with the Warners’ ‘Destination Tokyo’ is that there is just too doggone much of it and is all too conventionally crammed in.”¹⁴⁵ The *Washington Post* reviewer concurred with Crowther’s sense of an overabundance of plot: “Delmar [sic] Daves and Albert Metz, the scenarists, have packed into this one plot nearly all the

¹⁴⁴ A number of appendectomies were performed on submarines during World War II, providing inspiration for this sequence as well as other films which included a similar scene, such as *The Ghost Ship* (Mark Robson, 1943). The most famous was an appendectomy performed by a pharmacist’s mate on the U.S.S. *Seadragon* on September 11, 1942. See the Naval Historical Center’s report at <http://www.history.navy.mil/faqs/faq87-3a1.htm>, accessed April 20, 2009. George Weller won a Pulitzer Prize for his article about the appendectomy, which appeared in the *Chicago Daily News* on December 14, 1942. See his obituary by Richard Goldstein, “George Weller, 95; Won a Pulitzer Prize in ’43,” *New York Times* 29 Dec. 2002, 34.

¹⁴⁵ Bosley Crowther, “Catching Up: Some Late Afterthoughts on ‘Madame Curie’ and Two Other Current Films,” *New York Times* 9 Jan. 1944, X3.

exciting incidents involving submarines that have hit the front page during this war.”¹⁴⁶ As an accomplished screenwriter before getting a chance to direct *Destination Tokyo*, which he also wrote, Delmer Daves knew how to provide plausible motivations for set-pieces of spectacle or propagandistic speeches: the need to pick up Lt. Raymond (John Ridgely), an aerology and Japanese language specialist, motivates the *Copperfin*’s detour to the Aleutian Islands; Mike’s death prompts Capt. Cassidy’s diatribe about the differences between American and Japanese societies.

But what motivates the submarine’s implausible single-handed sinking of an aircraft carrier, other than the desire to visualize such an astonishing scene and to dramatize such a triumphant success? The motivations that lead the *Copperfin* to Tokyo Bay in the first place are tenuous at best. The ostensible goal is to place agents on the ground in Tokyo to perform crucial tests and provide imperative data to the bomber pilots. The idea that using a submarine towards this purpose would be a reasonable way to get the data was acknowledged by both military advisors and film critics to be outrageous. One Navy advisor complained that the submarine’s penetration of Tokyo Bay was “only possible in the movies—too far fetched even for [the] public to swallow—already used in *Crash Dive* [Archie Mayo, 1943] and was ridiculous. Could never get out. The assignment of a modern fleet submarine to penetrate Tokyo Bay for weather data is wholly unsound.”¹⁴⁷ But did this invalidate the film for audiences or even the Navy? No. The drive to illustrate such a daring feat of infiltration of the enemy’s territory and such a

¹⁴⁶ Marjorie Kelly, “An Action-Packed Submarine Melodrama on Screen at Earle,” *Washington Post* 1 Jan. 1944, B4. In fact, producer Jerry Wald was known for taking story ideas directly from newspaper and magazine articles. See, for instance, Thomas M. Pryor, “Jerry Wald, the Big Idea Man; Being a Resume of the Phenomenal Success of a Producer Who Finds His Movie Plots in Newspapers and Magazines,” *New York Times* 19 Jan. 1947, X5.

¹⁴⁷ J. W. Coe, “Suggested Constructive Criticisms of Temporary Script—*Destination Tokyo* (From a Submariner’s standpoint),” cited in Lawrence Suid, *Sailing on the Silver Screen: Hollywood and the U.S. Navy* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1996), 65. A submarine was used to provide weather information to the U.S.S. *Hornet* prior to the Doolittle Raid, but it did not enter Tokyo Bay or put anyone on land. See Suid, *Sailing*, 63.

thrilling triumph outweighed practical concerns about a credible storyline or unity and balance amongst narrative threads.

Instead of the cause-effect chain of story actions motivating the ending, it seems that often the filmmakers worked backwards from the desired ending, spectacular set-pieces, and bits of visual and character detail towards figuring out enough narrative glue to put them all together. Early story notes and research materials gathered by the filmmakers suggest that the elements they considered key ingredients of the film were the submarine, a trip to Tokyo, sinking ships with torpedoes, and a reference to a large and important real-life battle.¹⁴⁸ Although the plot of the finished film leads up to the Doolittle Raid, earlier drafts indicate that the filmmakers' original plan involved the *Copperfin* in the Battle of Midway, which was planned to occur halfway through the film instead of at the end.¹⁴⁹ If it fulfilled the desire for an action-filled battle, which battle it was did not seem to be so important.

Contrary to Bordwell's theory of classical causality, the need for spectacle appears to motivate the construction of the plot, not the other way around. Instead of spectacle serving and subordinating itself to narrative, it seems that in this instance the narrative was built around finding plausible ways to include as much spectacle as possible. Even Bosley Crowther acknowledged an inkling of this: "the Warners wanted to show us as much as they possibly could

¹⁴⁸ The first three elements were all present in early reference materials collected by Daves in early 1943, including a typewritten copy of *Life* magazine article "West to Japan," dated 15 March 1943, and "Via U.S. Sub to Japan – And Back," by "a Navy Submarine Skipper as told to Stanton Delaplane," dated January 3 [1943] with annotations by Daves, Stanford University Special Collections, Delmer Daves Papers (Manuscript Collection 192), Box 14, Folder 16 and 17 [hereafter, Daves Papers]. This latter contained a number of plot elements from the finished film, including a trip to Japanese waters, torpedoing several ships (though not hitting or sinking all of them), the mistaking of a sea bird for an enemy aircraft, a celebratory roast turkey dinner (after sinking a ship, not for Christmas), and a depth charging.

¹⁴⁹ See, for instance, "Destination Tokyo Revised Treatment," 13 May 1943, no author listed, Daves Papers, Box 15, Folder 5. Pages 17-18 describe the *Copperfin*'s discovery of a Japanese naval task force: "The Captain has picked up something – something big – maybe as big as Midway!" Although the battle changed, the plan to use documentary footage for their biggest combat sequence did not; a parenthetical statement in the treatment notes: "We have the film on this action."

of the ever-present perils and excitements of life in a fighting submarine.”¹⁵⁰ This emphasis on *showing* is reflected in the pacing of the plot and the episodic and sometimes disjointed structure of the narrative. Early “Story Notes” for the film praise the earlier Warner Brothers success *Air Force* (Tay Garnett, 1943) so that it might be duplicated: “Very skillfully done the ‘Air Force’ picture had repetitive periods of quiet story telling, then WHAM, ACTION! Back to routine again, then like a hypodermic needle jabbed without warning, a new emergency appears.”¹⁵¹ As this comment suggests, *Destination Tokyo* follows more of a cyclical structure than a progression from obstacle met to goal achieved. The film alternates between thrilling action and a respite from action with “quiet” scenes. The journey of the film also follows the circle from San Francisco Bay to Tokyo and back again.

The desire to *show* reflects both a need for visual spectacle and, at the same time, the perceived need to educate the audience about the submarine service in general. The prologue to an early story treatment indicates that the film will be “a factual kind of story”: “We want the public to realize more fully than it does that the submarines, the silent service, are of much greater value to the Navy and the nation than as, simply, sinkers of ships.”¹⁵² The production design included details intended not only to create a realistic environment, but to educate audiences about how submarines worked. A brief publicity piece in the *Los Angeles Times* titled “Submarine Life Depicted” discussed how the film “reveals” aspects of daily life on a U.S. Navy submarine, such as the presence of showers “similar to those of a Pullman train” and “plenty of fresh water furnished by condensers that make fresh water out of salt water.”¹⁵³ The fact that neither of these devices is explained or discussed in the film only goes to show how much both

¹⁵⁰ Crowther, “Catching Up,” X3.

¹⁵¹ “Story Notes,” author and date unknown, Daves Papers, Box 15, Folder 8.

¹⁵² “Destination, Tokyo Revised Treatment,” front page.

¹⁵³ “Submarine Life Depicted,” *Los Angeles Times* 17 Jan. 1944, 7.

the film's producers and the press treated the film as a source of information about the submarine service, rather than just a piece of entertainment. In an attempt to gain authentic detail, writer and director Delmer Daves claims to have spent a week aboard a submarine at Mare Island Navy Yard gathering ideas for the screenplay, and his team worked closely with the Navy to model their sets and recreations as closely to actual submarines as possible.¹⁵⁴

Engaging almost in a technological fetishism, critics praised the film's accuracy in terms of its depiction of submarine equipment. Crowther remarked, "The interior scenes are fascinating—the gadgets and all that sort of thing."¹⁵⁵ *Destination Tokyo* encouraged this attention by showcasing their recreations of submarine technology in their control room set, which was budgeted at a whopping \$18,500 with an additional \$7,500 for a steel frame and rocking platform to simulate a submarine's movement (together almost one-sixth of the total budgets for sets).¹⁵⁶ Capt. Cassidy's repeated use of the periscope in the film and the crew's reliance on a radar system, the appearance and operation of which was still a classified military secret of the time, highlights the importance of technologically enhanced perception aboard the submarine.¹⁵⁷ Unlike real radar systems, the system in *Destination Tokyo* is modeled after an

¹⁵⁴ For Daves' claim to have traveled to Mare Island to "live with the submariners," see his letter to Steve Trilling, 20 May 1943, Daves Papers, Box 15, Folder 9. The document "Destination, Tokyo Summary of Scenes to Be Shot Which Require Navy Cooperation" details the parts of the film that were shot using Navy equipment and locations, Daves Papers, Box 16, Folder 5. Another document contains a list of the parts of a submarine the production crew wanted to be photographed, as well as questions about submarine procedure, such as, "When all lights are out of commission – what do the emergency lites [sic] look like – and where are they located?" "Photographs and Information Required," Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library Special Collections, Leo "K" Kuter Collection, Box 8, Folder 90 [hereafter, Kuter Collection].

¹⁵⁵ Crowther, "The Screen: 'Destination Tokyo,' a Highly Eventful Submarine Drama, With Cary Grant and John Garfield, Opens at the Strand," *New York Times* 1 Jan. 1944, 9.

¹⁵⁶ This set cost about 16 percent of the entire \$161,325 budget for set construction. See art director Leo Kuter's budget dated 28 May 1943, Kuter Collection, Box 8, Folder 90.

¹⁵⁷ Lawrence H. Suid explains that the Navy demanded explanation of how Daves came to construct a realistic radar set, but were mollified when he explained the designs were based on his own research and he had invented an oscilloscope display instead of the electronic sweeping display of actual radar systems. See Suid, *Guts & Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film*, revised and expanded edition (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 81-2.

oscilloscope and therefore provides a far more abstract visual representation of what the radar “sees.” While actual World War II radar systems visually marked the placement and movement of objects on a circular electronic screen continually updated by the sweep of a radial line, the system on the *Copperfin* displays a modulated sine wave, as of a frequency of sound, against a gridded background. When ships are very near, the line shrinks down into a single dot. This system gives signs, if abstract ones, of external happenings, but unlike a real radar system, it does not give pictorial or spatial representations.

Although the crew appears to gain information from this device, it would be hard for audiences to “read” the radar, as its operation is never explained to audiences. Indeed, it seemed far more important for the production crew for the radar to provide visual interest than actual information. Producer Jerry Wald wrote to art director Leo Kuter: “I think we can certainly take a dramatic license with the Radar equipment, since up to date nobody has seen a Radar machine, and I doubt whether they will see it until after the war. ... It should have some trick lights on it and look very busy.”¹⁵⁸ Although the production designers took liberties with the look of the radar system, the technological spectacle of the control room set complemented, rather than opposed, the educational function of the film, teaching viewers about relatively newfangled gadgets like the radar, as well as the periscope, fathometer, and various other control mechanisms.

The control room set, while perhaps more “busy” than other places within the vessel, exemplifies the cool, rational, and organized sense of space inside the submarine. The article about the water condensers and Pullman train-like showers works alongside the film’s emphasis on the control room devices to give the impression that the submarine is technologically

¹⁵⁸ Letter from Jerry Wald to Leo Kuter, 7 June 1943, Kuter Collection, Box 8, Folder 90.

modern—and thereby safe, working against the association of the submarine service with its extremely high casualty rate during the war.¹⁵⁹ The main impression given by the film is that the interior of the submarine is clean, orderly, and quite roomy. In addition to the emphasis on gadgets in the control room, this meant a simplification of the submarine into a series of discrete spaces, as well as the removal of clutter (including additional technical equipment) and the general expansion of space. The World War II submarine was undoubtedly a cramped, if not claustrophobic, space. The film works against this sensation through clean lines, expansive areas that could easily fit all of the major characters, and a reduction of gadgets to only those that would be highlighted by the plot, such as the radar and periscope.

Along with its emphasis on modern, clean lines and advanced technology, the beginning of the film also portrays the submarine's interior as being a relatively homey space. In an early scene, Capt. Cassidy writes a letter to his wife, explaining his orders for immediate departure, meaning he would miss their Christmas celebration the next day. He sits at a small desk in his captain's cabin, already personalized with his personal papers, books (including one called *Racial Theory*), and pictures of his wife and children. The night after the submarine disembarks, the crew celebrates Christmas with a traditional American dinner, making the submarine a home away from home. A menu on the wall lists fruit cake, roast turkey, gilet gravy, oyster dressing, candied sweet potatoes, apple pie, and more; the list ends with "Milk (while it lasts)," reminding the audience and the crew of the difference between this Christmas dinner and those at home.

Another visible disparity is the lack of women. "Cookie," the cook played by then-51-year-old Alan Hale, stands in for the maternal presence traditionally found at a family gathering. As the men eat, Cookie comes in dressed as Santa, with a mop for a beard and red pajamas,

¹⁵⁹ The submarine service had the highest casualty rate—almost 22 percent—of any U.S. military branch during the war. See Suid, *Sailing*, 69.

bearing gifts. When the men make fun of his cooking, he theatrically protests, “Who practically mothers all the guys on this ship? I do. Who bends over a hot stove all day long for you guys? I do. Who’s gonna get all the glory when you sink a Jap ship? You, that’s who. ...And what am I gonna get? Nothing but varicose veins and dishwater hands!” They then show respect to their “mother” by presenting him with a Christmas gift—the kitchen knives that will later be honed down into surgical instruments for Tommy’s appendectomy.

The feminine is also mapped upon the submarine itself, which like other warships is always referred to as “she.” The personification of the submarine as a woman is made concrete in the inclusion of a female “character” in this all-male adventure: Nita, a doll dressed in a skimpy dress, matching hat, and sparkly jewelry. Wolf, who entertains the crew with his outlandish stories about female conquest, brings the doll aboard specifically to make up for the lack of women on the submarine: “She’s a Liberty gimmick. Makes the gals jealous.” As a prop only briefly shown and unimportant for the development of the plot, the doll received a remarkable amount of press. Hedda Hopper reported overhearing discussion of “a doll so lifelike and sexy it will probably be censored by the Hays office. It’s the only female in the submarine in ‘Destination Tokyo.’ ... Wait till you see it. It does everything but say ‘Sugar Daddy!’”¹⁶⁰ John Garfield claimed in the press that the only picture he would send in answer to servicewomen’s requests would be one of him clutching the doll with the inscription “Till the girls come home.”¹⁶¹ The doll substitutes for the girls back home (and serving in the military elsewhere), but it also serves as a double for the submarine itself. In a fantasy sequence visualizing one of Wolf’s fabricated stories of prowess with women, Wolf uses marine

¹⁶⁰ Hedda Hopper, “Looking at Hollywood,” *Los Angeles Times* 29 June 1943, 13. In the film, the doll is only about two feet tall and more cartoonish than lifelike.

¹⁶¹ Marjorie Kelly, “D.C. Theaters Get Their Bond Drives Under Way,” *Washington Post* 6 Jan. 1944, B7.

metaphors to describe the woman he desires: “She was built for speed, but kinda compact too, like a submarine.” Later, when he returns to the submarine after a dangerous on-shore mission and then when the sub survives a depth-charging, Wolf twice kisses the submarine’s wall and exclaims, “Sweetheart, I love ya!” As a substitute for women, the submarine is both sexualized, as in Wolf’s story, and sublimated, as the womb-like space that protects them from the outside world.

The representation of the interior of the submarine as home-like, safe, secure, and maternal contrasts with the representation of the exterior—the open ocean, the Aleutian Islands, and finally Tokyo Bay—as foreign, threatening, and full of danger. Interior and exterior spaces are closed to one another; when the men are inside the submarine, they cannot directly perceive the outside and must use mechanical instruments like radar, sensors, and the periscope to sense what is happening. The schism between outside and inside, home and foreign land, friend and enemy becomes a schism in perception between what can be directly experienced and what must be mediated through technology. Cut off from direct perception of the world around them, the crew instead relies on technology to determine where they are, where they are going, and what surrounds them.

This division between interior and exterior and the technology that mediates between them leads to a crisis in perception that becomes a major motif running throughout the film. *Destination Tokyo* constantly broaches the possibility of not being able to see or mistaking one’s perception for something else. The first indication of the unreliability of perception is when the young rookie, Tommy, mistakes an albatross for an enemy aircraft through his binoculars. Only after the submarine dives and Capt. Cassidy is able to use the periscope do they realize his mistake. Early in the film it appears that hearing is more reliable. After Mike’s death at the

hand of the Japanese pilot, his friends realize that he had been sneaking off on his own to listen to a record of his wife's voice expressing her love and devotion. As the grieving faces of Mike's friends reveal as they listen to the record, her voice is a sincere testament to her feelings; there can be no misperception here. Shortly after this, Capt. Cassidy recounts how he met his wife on a—literally—blind date. Remarkably, Cassidy claims that he never saw her face, but he fell in love with her voice. The very next scene, however, demonstrates the potential of the aural to mislead. Cookie hears a voice speaking Japanese in a nearby part of the submarine. Arming himself with a pot of hot coffee, he sneaks into the room, only to find Lt. Raymond demonstrating his prowess with the Japanese language.

In the previous examples, it would appear that the female voice is always trustworthy, while the male voice can be deceptive. However, later in the film, the crew listens to a “Tokyo Rose” radio broadcast spewing lies about the strength of the Japanese navy and trying to seduce the Americans into giving up. The real difference among these examples seems to be whether the audio or visual data comes from home/America or from outside the safety of home. In the war genre, women often serve as representatives of home; they are reminders of “why we fight.” For instance, hazy flashbacks interrupt the film illustrating Capt. Cassidy’s memories of his wife and children back in the United States—his son’s first haircut or his kids playing with a toy periscope. The Japanese appropriation of the female voice in Tokyo Rose, speaking in English with no apparent accent, demonstrates, in the logic of the film, their deceit and perversity in manipulating something so seemingly sacred. As one of the crewmen remarks in an early version of the script: “There oughta be a law against a female like that using our language!”¹⁶² Tokyo Rose stands as the negative counterpart of Nita, the doll, and the submarine “herself.”

¹⁶² Script dated 31 July 1943, Daves Papers, Box 14, Folder 18.

While Nita and the *Copperfin* combine to represent both the sensual and the maternal aspects of femininity, Tokyo Rose represents a deficient and deceitful form of femininity. As the “spokeswoman” for the Japanese, she feminizes the enemy, but in a way that associates that gender with danger, seduction, deception, and ultimately death.

While the American submarine combines feminine contours and a womb-like sense of security with masculine technologies—the control room machines and phallic torpedoes—the exterior landscapes present a vast shift away from the sense of security, homeyness, and order experienced inside the vessel. As the *Copperfin* moves farther and farther away from home, the danger increases, represented by the growing opportunities for perceptual confusion, beginning with Tommy’s albatross mistake and ending with a depth charging in which the crew’s visual and aural perceptions cannot be trusted as accurate locators for the enemy craft that pursue them.

The outside of the submarine represents a radical exteriority that cannot be controlled and manipulated by the desires and actions of the protagonists. Unlike stretches of beach that can be invaded, secured, and taken over by advancing marines, the ocean discourages such determinism through its fluidity. As opposed to surface vessels, the submarine is most frequently to be found fully immersed in water, completely surrounded by a life-affirming but potentially deadly substance. The most horrifying moment in any submarine film is likely to be when the pipes burst and water starts flowing into the submarine, threatening the crew with drowning. *Destination Tokyo* includes such a scene, acknowledging this danger, but under calm and assured Capt. Cassidy, it never threatens to get out of control. The one member of the crew who cracks under the pressure is tackled and punched by the others to get him to calm down. They care for him, but will not tolerate panic. “We can’t win if we can’t take it,” they explain. The liquid flow of the ocean becomes associated with the enemy, which can appear from any direction, from

above or below. Combining with “Tokyo Rose,” the fluid danger of the ocean demonstrates the feminization of the enemy and the association, in this instance, of the feminine with the deceptive and deadly.

The divorce between the home-like, as well as rational and controlled, interior of the submarine and the enemy-laden and undefined space outside the submarine also appears through the differing visual material used to envision these two spaces. The *Copperfin*’s interior is represented by sets built on soundstages; the editing follows conventional patterns of continuity editing (shot/reverse-shot, establishing shots, 180-degree rule, and so on). Outside the submarine, however, the events of the film are more likely to be presented with miniature models, stock footage (from both fictional and documentary sources), and newsreel footage.

The encounter with the Japanese pilots in the Aleutian Islands stands out as a very odd combination of visual material. On the one hand, about half of the scene was created through miniature models—a tiny, scaled-down submarine; a miniature landscape of water, fog, and ice-covered mountains or rocks made out of papier-mâché; and Japanese planes in miniature, run on fishing line and rigged with explosives to blow up on cue. A second part of the scene was constructed from conventional shots of actors on a set, mostly on a full-scale mock-up of the top of a submarine built in a backlot water tank surrounded by matte paintings of rocks and fog. A third part of the scene consisted of stock or second-unit footage shot in a separate place and time, including an image of a man bailing out of a plane with a parachute and several shots of an American seaplane landing and maneuvering on the water.¹⁶³

¹⁶³ Amongst the archived papers of art director Leo Kuter is a thick, bound document titled “Continuity Sketches—‘Destination Tokyo’—Process-Miniature-Straight” (Kuter Collection, Box 8, Folder 87). In this document, small hand-drawn storyboards overlay frame enlargements from miniature and stock footage and descriptions of each shot, demonstrating how miniatures, stock footage, and full-scale recreations with actors were to be processed together into the same shot.

Early in the scene, as the submarine emerges from underwater, it appears that these three kinds of images will be combined through montage. We first see an undersea shot of the (miniature) submarine rising to the surface and another shot of the model sub breaking the surface from above.¹⁶⁴ Then we see the actors coming on deck on their full-scale set, and we switch back to the miniature sub moving in the snowy model landscape. After these first few establishing shots, however, the miniature models and the full-scale sets are combined within the same shot. The next shot returns to the actors on set, but composited into the background is the miniature landscape of rocks and fog. A few shots later, the submariners spot an aircraft in the distance. A point-of-view shot through the binoculars shows a model aircraft approaching, combining miniatures and full-scale dramatizations within the logic of point-of-view editing. In shots that follow in the scene, the actors fire at a miniature Japanese plane approaching them, which exists only in the footage that is composited into the background of the shot. This combat scene is cut together with rapid montage and an alternation between long shots of the submarine (provided by the scale model), close-ups of the faces of the firing submariners (on set) and reaction shots of the Japanese pilots (either stock footage taken from another fictional film or actors being filmed in yet another location), and medium shots of the actors on the submarine deck. By adopting conventional strategies of action or combat sequences like quick cutting, this scene attempts to override the vast differences amongst these three (or more) spaces. But the lines between them remain visible, creating a disjointed sense of space and causality. Although the action is made clear, the sense of space, especially in composite shots, is flattened. By

¹⁶⁴ Kuter collaborated in the construction of two model submarines for *Destination Tokyo*, one at the scale of one inch per foot and one at the scale of $\frac{1}{4}$ inch per foot. Much of the correspondence between Kuter and director Daves and other production crew members entailed matching the model submarines to the exterior submarine set and footage taken of actual submarines at Mare Island Naval Yard outside San Francisco. For instance, Kuter discusses the miniature model submarines in a letter to producer Jerry Wald dated 1 July 1943, Kuter Collection, Box 8, Folder 90.

placing full-size actors “within” a miniature landscape through compositing and editing, the film cannot help but create an almost hallucinatory sense of dimension and scale.

Later in the film, as the *Copperfin* travels farther and farther from home and closes in on enemy territories, the spaces inside and outside the submarine are more often linked by editing, rather than combined within composite shots. The cut separating these two spaces represents the further distance between the sense of security within the submarine and the fluid and indeterminate danger outside. As the submarine approaches Tokyo Bay, we see more shots of the submarine from the outside, visualized by a miniature model moved in a shallow tank with a sandy or rock-strewn bottom. Despite skillful craftsmanship, the model cannot help but seem artificial; these shots look more like animated illustrations with miniatures than realistic depictions of actual events. The space of Tokyo Bay has been condensed considerably, showing a tiny, constricted sink-like space that the miniature submarine must travel through, dodging rock formations, floating mines, and the underbellies of Japanese ships. The claustrophobia that one would expect to feel *inside* a submarine has been projected *outside* onto the bay. Here, the submarine faces the continual danger of being trapped, being detected, or bumping into a mine or enemy vessel, and thus being destroyed.

Although the underwater miniatures may be less convincing today than they were in the 1940s because of advances in cinematic technology, audiences and critics at the time were aware of how these scenes were created. A number of contemporary reviews mentioned and usually praised the model work. Bosley Crowther opined, “the undersea model work is graphic, for all its inside-the-Blue-Grott [sic] look.”¹⁶⁵ His sardonic reference to the Italian sea cave suggests that he thought the miniatures looked inauthentic, but his choice of the word “graphic” highlights

¹⁶⁵ Crowther, “The Screen,” 9.

the function of the models to provide additional visualizations of the activity of the submarine beyond what could be shown on sets of the submarine's interiors. In a way, the models work to secure and corroborate the experience of the crew inside, demonstrating that their guesses about where they are and where they are going are correct. They do so, however, through their illustrative function, not through a realistic sense of commonality between the inside and the outside of the submarine. These two spaces are separated by more than editing; they appear to be two different kinds of worlds altogether.

The most jarring scene in the film, though, could also be considered the film's climax—the Doolittle Raid on Tokyo. Writer-director Delmer Daves must have faced difficulties in deciding how to visualize the raid. Because of the plot of the film, he needed to show the submarine's contribution to this spectacular and important battle, but in actuality submarines were not involved in the bombing. The *Copperfin* completes its (fictional) mission of gathering data for the bomber crew on a nearby aircraft carrier and thereafter has nothing to do but get away safely and return home. But omitting the raid itself would deny the audience the spectacular "pay-off" of all the plot events leading up to it, as well as a dramatization of the triumphant success of the American military, which had very much been in doubt during the first two years of U.S. involvement in the war. This difficulty in the plot resulted in the inclusion of material from another film altogether, further undermining the attempt to create a cohesive diegetic space out of miniatures, full-scale sets, and stock footage.

The raid scene starts with two stock shots from documentary footage: an extreme long shot of an aircraft carrier moving over open water and a view from the deck showing a line of bomber planes. Then the scene switches to a ready room within the ship, where the bomber pilots and crew gather to prepare for their mission. The production quality and acting style of

these shots—lasting for about one minute—match the rest of *Destination Tokyo*; archival documents corroborate that a set was constructed for this sequence and pages of dialogue written.¹⁶⁶ However, the shots that follow of young aviators running to their planes and preparing to take off do not match the previous interior images. The next two minutes consist of edited footage that appears to have been taken en masse from another film. Considering the excessive scratches on the celluloid—often a dead giveaway that shots within fictional films come from stock or documentary footage—and the fact that a series of shots shows real bombers taking off from the deck of an aircraft carrier, one might assume that this sequence was taken from documentary footage, perhaps shot during the Doolittle Raid itself. John Ford claimed to have filmed the Doolittle Raid; could this be his footage?¹⁶⁷

Yet, much of this material appears to be scripted and staged. Although they are not characters introduced in *Destination Tokyo*, the young men act like individuated characters from another film. Their glances to each other, their comments to one another, their distinctive differences in dress, and their framing in a series of close-ups—these all suggest that in another film, the film from which they were excerpted, these would be recognizable characters referencing back stories and relationships that we do not have access to here. In one striking shot, one man yells, “Go get ‘em, Butch!” The man we assume to be Butch turns around with a goofy look on his face and makes a strange, exaggerated gesture with one hand up and down, as if mimicking the undulations of ocean waves. This is clearly an inside joke that only makes sense within the world from which these characters were taken. The end of this sequence,

¹⁶⁶ Letter dated 25 August 1943 from Jerry Wald to Tenny Wright, Kuter Collection, Box 8, Folder 90.

¹⁶⁷ Biographer Joseph McBride reports that John Ford was on deck on the U.S.S. *Hornet* filming the Doolittle raiders take off: “Cutting in the camera, Ford alternated views of planes taking off with shots of cheering, waving, and saluting sailors and marines.” The rest of McBride’s description does not match the footage that appears in *Destination Tokyo*. See McBride, *Searching for John Ford: A Life* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2003), 356-7.

though, contains images taken from the deck of a carrier of actual airplanes taking off from the deck. Could the documentary and scripted images have been put together for a previous fictional film, or for a documentary film produced by the U.S. military?¹⁶⁸ The source of this sequence remains unclear, but it seems to spring from a different cinematic space and time, a different diegesis, than the rest of *Destination Tokyo*. The combat climax of the film thus appears to be the climax to another film, inserted whole into this one with little connection to the main narrative. Although this momentous battle represents triumph, in mismatching the rest of the film visually, spatially, and temporally, this scene only represents a fantastical triumph, not one grounded in the film's diegetic reality.¹⁶⁹

This sequence demonstrates the extent to which cinematic space does not anchor narrative causality in *Destination Tokyo*. The amalgamation of miniature models, full-scale dramatizations, and stock or documentary footage in this and other scenes results in a disruption in the continuity of cinematic space. Instead of following the “classical” drive towards unity and balance, these scenes seem off-kilter or fragmented amongst various kinds of spaces. Furthermore, they work against the maintenance of a coherent, singular diegesis. The Doolittle Raid sequence provides the most clear-cut example of another diegesis—the cinematic world that these other characters come from—interrupting the original one. Other parts of the film, though, like the Aleutian Islands section, question the possibility of constructing a consistent or harmonious diegetic world out of disparate materials like models and stock footage. In World War II films, the diegesis is already a mixture of historical reality (the major events of the war

¹⁶⁸ The origin of this material is not made clear in the archival sources related to *Destination Tokyo*. One letter written by Jerry Wald to Tenny Wright references Wald’s trip to the Air Force Motion Picture Unit to find additional stock footage for the Doolittle Raid sequence. Letter dated 25 August 1945, Kuter Collection, Box 8, Folder 90.

¹⁶⁹ *Destination Tokyo* follows the typical American portrayal of the Doolittle Raid in representing it as a triumph, despite the fact that all of the bombers were destroyed, a good percentage of the American fliers died, and the raid did little damage to the Japanese war industry.

providing, at the least, a backdrop for narrative) and the fictional world of the invented characters and their actions. *Destination Tokyo* reminds us that cinematic worlds are constructed out of various snippets of space and time, and if they do cohere, it is only in the mind of the viewer. This process of mental reconstruction would appear to allow for a variety of techniques that do not conform to Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson's emphasis on continuity, balance, and uniformity.

3.3 FUSING FICTION AND THE “REAL THING”: *WING AND A PRAYER* AND THE SPACE OF THE SCREEN

Like *Destination Tokyo*, the 1944 film *Wing and a Prayer* also attempts to visualize an important battle, but instead of primarily using miniature model special effects, this film relies heavily on preexistent documentary footage. Films made later in the war (1944-45) and postwar films tended to move away from a prominent use of miniatures, following the general postwar cinematic trends of integrating newsreel footage and using more outdoor or location shooting. These shifts in film style—along with the inclusion of omniscient voice-over narration, unknown or nonprofessional actors, and handheld cinematography—demonstrate the impact wartime documentaries, like those discussed in Chapter 2, had on Hollywood. Their influence is nowhere greater, though, than in the wholesale incorporation of scenes from documentaries into Hollywood fictional films. The growing availability of combat footage taken by military cameramen overseas did not alleviate the problem of representing combat, however. In their extensive use of documentary footage, films like *Wing and a Prayer* challenge conventional

Hollywood editing techniques that privilege transparency and uniformity, creating combat scenes that stand out both visually and narratively from the rest of the film.

This departure from classical norms has been overlooked by previous theorists and historians of the war genre and the World War II film. That Hollywood would utilize combat footage taken by U.S. military cameramen has retrospectively been taken as a given. Certainly, quality military footage—available for free or for cheap and depicting just those weapons, military vehicles, or events that Hollywood found it difficult to convincingly or cost-effectively recreate—would have been attractive to producers trying to keep their bottom line in check. But the stylistic and structural effects of the inclusion of this footage into Hollywood narrative features have yet to be analyzed.

Genre critics have generally interpreted the use of documentary footage in fictional combat films as an attempt to authenticate the film's grounding in historical reality and add to its verisimilitude. Kathryn Kane discusses newsreel footage as one of several devices, along with maps, specific dates and places, and the portrayal of historic persons, which seek to establish authenticity and foreground the film's "basis in historical fact."¹⁷⁰ For Jeanine Basinger, the inclusion of documentary footage in postwar films marks a strategy of "put[ting] reality into the genre" (110). Basinger argues that by combining fictional recreations with documentary footage of real events, the films mediate between the screen memories of those who spent the war in America and the combat experience of returning veterans.

However, the insertion of documentary footage into Hollywood features often had unanticipated consequences, particularly the tendency of documentary images with their striking new codes of realism to make the rest of the film look phony. Combat films of the mid- to late

¹⁷⁰ Kathryn Kane, *Visions of War: Hollywood Combat Films of World War II* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1982), 117.

1940s intercut documentary footage not only with scripted recreations on Hollywood sets, but also with miniature model recreations, second-unit material shot on location or outdoors, and stock footage from both nonfictional and fictional films. Frequently, as in *Destination Tokyo*, these various levels are combined in the same shot, often resulting in the preternatural flatness of composited or rear projected images. These juxtapositions, whether created through editing or montage within the shot, tend to produce particularly unstable constructions of cinematic space and time.

For *Wing and a Prayer*, director Henry Hathaway merged footage shot on a shakedown cruise of the brand-new aircraft carrier U.S.S. *Yorktown* with documentary footage taken during World War II combat, a few miniature models, and full-scale recreations with actors on sets. As one newspaper article reported, the film spent \$60,000 building a “‘flattop’ set” on Twentieth Century-Fox property to correspond with the footage taken on the *Yorktown*.¹⁷¹ The documentary footage and the fictional scenes are integrated through both montage and compositing. Editing techniques attempt to bridge the gaps between the documentary and fictional footage, but the film also uses process shots and rear projection to join the two types of footage in one shot. The result is a very sophisticated amalgamation of footage pieced together from various spaces and times to represent a historical moment. While it could be argued that almost all films use editing to create the illusion of a continuous space and time, the difference here is the degree to which these spatial fusions are visible on the surface of the film and how they prompt viewers to contemplate the relation each of these kinds of footage has to historical

¹⁷¹ Fred Stanley, “Hollywood Turns to ‘Hate’ Films,” *New York Times* 6 Feb. 1944, X3.

reality.¹⁷² If, as Kane and Basinger claim, the inclusion of documentary footage works to add authenticity, it is not by invisibly boosting the quotient of realistic-looking images. Rather, it is only by being recognizable as documentary footage ostensibly shot under combat conditions that these images posit their authenticity. Thus, although filmmakers worked to integrate documentary footage into the fictional mise-en-scène, they also benefited from choosing images that were visibly marked as combat footage and thereby allowing these images a certain amount of visual autonomy. Hybridity in space and time was thus built in stylistically to films like *Wing and a Prayer*, and as we shall see, the film self-reflexively considers the implications of cinematic spectatorship on the imagination of the space and time of war.

The vast amount of documentary footage in *Wing and a Prayer* led to confusion in the press as to whether this film was a documentary, semi-documentary, or fictional film. An early report claimed that Twentieth Century-Fox aimed to make *Wing and a Prayer* “an authoritative document,” but the report referenced as a predecessor of this approach *Guadalcanal Diary* (Lewis Seiler, 1943), a fairly conventional narrative film that was based on Richard Tregaskis’s war memoir but which contained almost no documentary footage.¹⁷³ Another early story claimed that *Wing and a Prayer* “will be almost 100 per cent documentary.”¹⁷⁴ The day before the film’s Washington, D.C., release, *Washington Post* reviewer Nelson B. Bell described it as “the semidocumentary of the now famous ‘Carrier Z.’”¹⁷⁵ After seeing the film the next day, however, Bell felt the need to apologize in print for this description: “Apologies and

¹⁷² Most conventional edited scenes are comprised of shots taken out of time-order and, somewhat less often, in different physical spaces, as when different parts of a set are built in separate locations, but filmed in such a way as to suggest a continuous space.

¹⁷³ Edwin Schallert, “Janis Carter Named Star of ‘Girl in Case,’” *Los Angeles Times* 12 Jan. 1944, A10.

¹⁷⁴ Stanley, X3.

¹⁷⁵ Nelson B. Bell, “Russians Find Time For an ‘Escape’ Film; Notes of the Theater,” *Washington Post* 25 July 1944, 4. He has the name of the anonymous aircraft carrier incorrect. The subtitle of the film is “The Story of Carrier X.”

genuflections for the misconception that caused ‘Wing and a Prayer’ ... to be designated here yesterday as even a ‘semidocumentary.’” Yet his explanation of which elements were worthy of that label and which were not is even more telling: “Yesterday’s preview disclosed it to be ‘documentary’ only in its revelation of the naval strategy exercised by this country’s Navy high command....” He later describes the aircraft carrier sequences as “accurate to the last detail,” based on the comments of two high-ranking Navy officers who watched the film with him, and praises the “over-all faithfulness of the picture to what will appear in the history books as fact.” Speaking about how the film dramatizes actual battles and historical events, he then reconsiders his original assessment of the film: “Come to think of it, perhaps that comes under the heading of ‘documentation,’ but the purpose of immediate importance is to identify ‘Wing and a Prayer’ as a whale of an entertainment.”¹⁷⁶

The uncertainty regarding *Wing and a Prayer*’s documentary content reflects both an ambiguity about what ‘documentary’ meant at this time in mainstream film culture and an apprehension on the part of reviewers about how to label and appraise fictional films that relied upon documentary footage. These reviews acknowledged the heightened presence of documentary footage in this film as something new, but differed in their assessments of its impact. For Bell, the film’s portrayal of events and situations that he supposed were based in fact (such as the naval strategy shown in the film, the veracity of which other reviewed doubted and which does not appear to have any reference in reality) were the characteristics that made the film documentary-like, rather than its use of documentary footage taken on an aircraft carrier or in actual combat. The film’s incorporation of documentary footage goes unremarked in his review, suggesting perhaps that the impression of reality produced by this footage led him

¹⁷⁶ Bell, “Strategy of Midway Makes Exciting Film; Notes of the Theater,” *Washington Post* 26 July 1944, 9.

unconsciously to believe the historical basis of the film's plot and characters. Other reviewers also related *Wing and a Prayer* to government-produced documentary films, but the comparison was unfavorable. One wrote, "Though the film's battles are spectacular they suffer, as do most of those in Hollywood productions, by comparison with the real action of the government features."¹⁷⁷ Thomas Pryor of the *New York Times* acknowledged and praised the use of documentary footage: "Director Henry Hathaway has so skillfully woven documentary film footage into the story that it is difficult at times to spot the ending of an incident out of history and the beginning of an episode fashioned on the typewriter of Scenarist Jerome Cady." It appears that reviewers were influenced by the quite obvious use of documentary footage to either take the rest of the film's story as fact or to disparage it as not as real or effective as government or military-produced documentary films. Pryor concludes that *Wing and a Prayer* "misses out on the epic sweep of the actual Midway campaign. The Navy's own documentary, 'Battle of Midway,' remains the classic screen account of that historic engagement."¹⁷⁸

Wing and a Prayer deploys a particular kind of realistic style—linked to the visual aesthetics of combat footage discussed in the last chapter—but the plot strays from the strategies of narrative realism associated with classical Hollywood cinema. Like *Destination Tokyo*, *Wing and a Prayer* attempts to be both one specific story and all stories about the contribution of the aircraft carrier in the war. The subtitle of the film, *The Story of Carrier X*, marks both a claim to historical reality and a distancing from it. The use of the generic letter as stand-in for the carrier suggests that the film tells the true story of a particular aircraft carrier, whose identity cannot be

¹⁷⁷ Schallert, "'Wing, Prayer' Exploits Ship Adventures," *Los Angeles Times* 4 Aug. 1944, 11.

¹⁷⁸ Thomas M. Pryor, "The Screen; At the Globe and Gotham," *New York Times* 31 Aug. 1944, 14. He refers here to John Ford's documentary, *The Battle of Midway* (1942), discussed in the last chapter.

revealed for reasons of national security.¹⁷⁹ Yet, since the film does not name a specific ship, it can combine as many stories from various carriers in wartime as its plot would allow. Pryor notes that *Wing and a Prayer* is “a composite reflection of the adventures of such gallant ships as the Enterprise, the Lexington, the Hornet and Torpedo Squadron 8.”¹⁸⁰ As such, it, like *Destination Tokyo*, follows an episodic structure that is as much based on the cyclical nature of training and combat as it is based on a progression from the beginning to the end of a mission.

The mission of Carrier X is one of deception and secrecy, devised to fool the Japanese navy’s perceptions about the strength, size, and geographic deployment of the American fleet, which had been so badly damaged after Pearl Harbor. In the first scene of the film, an admiral explains that the carrier will travel around the islands of the Pacific, running away from any engagement with the enemy but making sure to be spotted by him at specific points. This movement will create the optical illusion that Carrier X is not one American ship going back and forth among islands, but several aircraft carriers disconnected from one another and staffed by demoralized sailors who lack the will to fight. The officers hope that this will lure the Japanese Navy into a false sense of complacency, which the American fleet will take advantage of when they finally go on the offensive at the Battle of Midway.

This mission motivates the plot, but does not comprise it. Rather, the main antagonism of the film consists in the relationship between the hard-nosed flight commander (Don Ameche) and the pilots and other crew of Torpedo Squadron Five, who chafe at military discipline and their inscrutable orders, as yet unexplained as to their rationale, to turn away from the enemy instead of fight. Yet even this conflict remains the in background, as instead we watch the men

¹⁷⁹ Lawrence Suid has shown that the story of Carrier X in *Wing and a Prayer* has no basis in reality; no aircraft carrier was used as a decoy in the Pacific to deceive the Japanese into thinking the American fleet was scattered and afraid to fight. See Suid, *Guts & Glory*, 89.

¹⁸⁰ Pryor, “The Screen,” 14.

form relationships, deal with the space and structure of the military, engage in hijinks, train, and, eventually, fight.

For the men, their mission is no mission. They are told to perform reconnaissance and training tasks, but to avoid engagement in the war at all costs—in effect, to do nothing. Therefore, their actions and psychological goals do not drive the plot in the same way those of a “typical” protagonist of classical Hollywood would. Instead, their actions are determined by commands from unseen authorities, and their desires—mostly, to fight or to return home—are constantly thwarted by their orders and their presence on the ship. When at last their mission “succeeds” and the trap is sprung on the Japanese fleet at Midway Atoll, the men finally fulfill their desire to openly fight the enemy. Yet this climax was brought about only surreptitiously by their own actions. Instead of being presented as the achieved goal of a psychologically motivated protagonist, this key moment of combat appears to be less motivated by the skillful construction of the plot than by the perceived necessity to include a spectacular and triumphant combat sequence near the end of the film. In fact, Twentieth Century-Fox head Darryl Zanuck urged the producers of *Wing and a Prayer* to “avoid plot, otherwise we will destroy the value of the honesty that we must maintain.” Instead, he suggested they focus on engaging characters and thrilling combat scenes to create “the feeling that our characters are actually in battle.”¹⁸¹

The “plot” of *Wing and a Prayer*, such as it is, mythologizes history in presenting the beginning months of America’s involvement in World War II as being determined by a covert and coordinated plan masterminded by the military’s top officials. The first images following the title sequence show a montage of newspaper headlines asking “Why Won’t Our Navy Fight?” The suggestion that the U.S. Navy did not or would not fight in the first six months of

¹⁸¹ Quoted in Suid, *Guts & Glory*, 87-8, from the minutes of a November 19, 1943, meeting.

the war neglects the history of the battles that they did fight in this time, including the Battle of the Coral Sea, American attacks on Japanese-held islands like Kwajalein and New Britain, and the Doolittle Raid on Tokyo (dramatized in *Destination Tokyo*). These engagements were, however, mostly failures for the U.S., until the Battle of Midway, which many historians have called the “turning point” of the Pacific war. Thus, the question of the time was not “Why Won’t We Fight?” but “Why Aren’t We Winning?” Construing this period as one of lack of involvement on the part of the U.S. Navy—and, more importantly, revealing this surface appearance of uninvolvement to be a ruse—covers over the more painful memory of a war that was in danger of being lost. *Wing and a Prayer* transforms this failure into a clandestine success that can be celebrated only in retrospect. In this crypto-history, the failure of the U.S. Navy was an illusion masking a victorious reality.

Going hand in hand with this triumphalist teleology of American victory is a lack of concern with the enemy. Unlike *Destination Tokyo*, *Wing and a Prayer* does not show the enemy in anything more than extreme long shots of Japanese ships and airplanes.¹⁸² The film includes no discussions of the necessity of fighting the war, does not mention Pearl Harbor, and imparts no information that disparages the enemy. Rather, the war is taken as a given, its reasons already understood by *Wing and a Prayer*’s 1944 release date. But the lack of focus on the enemy means that the obstacle facing the film’s protagonists shifts from external to internal forces, foreign to domestic disputes. The issue confronted in the film most directly is military discipline. *Wing and a Prayer* seeks to reconcile the hierarchical and autocratic structure of the military and the discipline and self-control that it requires with America’s cultural emphasis on the individual and his (and to a lesser extent, her) personal freedom.

¹⁸² More often than not, enemy aircraft are actually American aircraft painted to look like Japanese technology.

The latter is personified most forcefully in the character of Hallam Scott (William Eythe), an Academy Award-winning actor turned torpedo bomber pilot. A charming but self-centered playboy, Scott routinely clashes with the harsh flight commander, Bingo Harper (Ameche). The problem of freedom versus discipline is solved by the experience of combat, which appears to have a magical and instantaneous effect on once-skeptical characters, prompting them to finally recognize the necessity of sacrifice. At the end of the Battle of Midway, after Scott and his crew are nearly killed by flying too low over a torpedo blast, they are stranded without the coordinates of the carrier's new position. But Scott, after an unshown and unremarked change of heart, refuses to endanger the carrier by breaking radio silence, and therefore he runs out of gas and crashes into the ocean. The stern commander also experiences a change of heart, hardly motivated by the plot, as he finally breaks down and explains how his stringent exterior masks the emotional difficulties he faces sending men to their possible deaths. Both miraculous conversions aid the characters in the plot, as Harper gains the respect of his pilots and Scott and his gunner (Richard Jaeckel) are reported to be alive in the final scene, having been rescued after their crash.

Jeanine Basinger has argued that air force films from the World War II era deal most commonly with issues of professionalism, duty, and the difficulties of leadership, while naval films frequently explore issues of a domestic nature, such as tensions between the men and discussions of the homes they left behind.¹⁸³ The aircraft carrier film combines both of these functions and thus examines both of these themes. While ostensibly the plot of *Wing and a Prayer* revolves around the strict air officer (Don Ameche is listed first and above the title), his storyline is overshadowed by the boisterous personalities of pilots like Scott. The film is far

¹⁸³ Basinger, 20.

more interested in domestic disputes on board the ship and the creation of a community of men. Like *Destination Tokyo*, *Wing and a Prayer* imagines the vast carrier as a home away from home for the sailors and airmen on board. Although the size of the ship gives it the appearance of strength and authority that the submarine in *Destination Tokyo* lacks, “Carrier X” is continuously labeled as feminine. The carrier and the airplanes on or within it are referred to as “she” and are coaxed and caressed with care and admiration, even love. When the pilots are first shown in the air, Dana Andrews looks down at the carrier and remarks over the radio: “Pilot to crew: there’s mama.” Later, landing on the carrier is compared to “putting a baby to bed.” Other aspects of home are simulated on the ship, including agriculture. One pilot starts a vegetable garden on the flight deck using leftover materials and chemicals. When he dies in aerial combat, the camera sweeps over the pots of now-ripe tomatoes and herbs. Like the *Copperfin*, the carrier is a place of safety and security that can be personalized and inhabited like a home.

The importance of home is represented in an advertisement torn from a magazine found amongst the personal effects of pilot Gus Chisholm (Richard Crane) after his death. The ad includes a picture of a small house under the words, “Your Ideal Home for \$6500.” When Scott finds the picture, he initially folds it inside the picture frame holding a large photograph of Chisholm’s sweetheart, prominently displayed by his bed, but then thinks better of it—perhaps sadly realizing that Chisholm’s American dream of home and family would never be fulfilled—and puts it in the wastebasket. Although the ship is only a surrogate for home, the carrier called “mama” must be defended as one defends a wife or mother when it is threatened. At the end of the film, “Cookie” Cunningham (Kevin O’Shea)—a Pearl Harbor hero who now suffers from an unnamed nervous condition—makes the ultimate sacrifice, crashing his plane into the oncoming torpedo that threatens to both destroy and, in the logic of the film, defile the mother ship.

Cookie (who shares the same nickname as the “maternal” cook in *Destination Tokyo*) reveals his fragile mental state by, earlier in the film, failing to properly launch his plane off the carrier deck and crashing into the ocean before a routine patrol; in the not-so-hidden symbolism of the film, he cannot “get it up.” His failure illustrates the film’s association of the sky with masculinity. Cookie’s masculinity had been in crisis ever since he was placed “on the sick list” after Pearl Harbor; the film implies that Cookie’s illness is psychological instead of physical. Cookie is soft-spoken and meek, lacking bravado even after he receives word he won the Navy Cross for valor during Pearl Harbor. His inability to get into the air reflects his symbolic impotence more than his lack of flying prowess. Opposed to the maternal and feminine space of the ship, the sky represents an unbounded canvas, full of danger but also power and freedom. In *Wing and a Prayer*, only men—and only those with a secure sense of masculinity—are allowed in the air. When Scott, whose narcissism and association with Hollywood also puts his masculinity in doubt, nervously approaches the aircraft carrier to land, he does not look at a picture of a girl back home to soothe his nerves, but instead pulls out his Oscar statuette—a little golden man—for good luck. Even (or especially) at moments of weakness, women are forbidden in the cockpit, in the pilot’s thoughts or otherwise.

Beautiful long shots of American airplanes flying in formation in front of clouds are common in *Wing and a Prayer* and almost every other war film dealing with the air service. These shots are designed to evoke a sense of awe at the command these pilots have of their technology and of the sky. Their movement seems limited only by their discipline in flying in formation. The sky represents freedom of action and motion, but in its openness, it can also be deceiving to the eye and threatening in its access to the enemy. Like the ocean in *Destination Tokyo*, the sky here represents an unbounded, indefinite space. Unlike the ocean, a full and

heavy space, the sky is distinguished by its lightness and seeming emptiness. It is a frontier of sorts, represented as mastered by men with their death-defying daring and complex machinery. It is a space of movement, but also a space where one's perception of direction and orientation can become easily confused—hence the focus in many wartime films, which would seek to downplay this possibility of disorientation, on the orderly airplane formation. But as much as this aerial bewilderment is suppressed by the films, it emerges again in scenes of combat. For Scott, the Japanese planes during a patrol in which his roommate Chisholm is killed just “came out of the sun.” While in an infantry film, the soldiers often find themselves, disconcertingly, to be sharing the same space as the enemy—as when an unseen sniper shoots down one of the team—the spatial connections between opposed combatants in naval and air force films are more fluid and dispersed. In these spaces, the danger of contact with the enemy often takes the form of mistaken perception—albatrosses for airplanes, enemy craft emerging from the sun.

One way that *Wing and a Prayer* meditates on the problem of perception is by including a consideration of cinematic space within the diegesis. In other words, the film self-reflexively explores the nature of cinema and its relationship to the war. The most direct way the film does this is by focusing much of the narrative on Hallam Scott, the Hollywood actor. Scott personifies the tension between entertainment and duty, personal freedom and the necessity of sacrifice, reality and fiction. Since Scott gets along well with the other pilots, the film treats him as if the audience gets a glimpse “behind the scenes” at what the Hollywood star is really like without all the glitz and glamour. He also symbolizes Hollywood’s contribution to the war effort. Yet, predictably, Scott, whose nickname is “Oscar” after his Academy Award, is self-involved and unwilling to put the safety of others above his own careless behavior. In the first scene of the film, Scott ignores a wave-off and lands on the deck anyway, risking the lives of the

crew. When confronted about it, he thinks nothing of it, failing to recognize the danger of his irresponsibility. Later he continues to act erratically—for instance, firing his airplane's machine guns in the air to the tune of “Deep in the Heart of Texas” while flying a patrol.

Scott’s behavior prompts a speech from his squadron leader (Dana Andrews) that explicitly refers to the difference between the individualism espoused by Hollywood and the teamwork necessitated by war: “As for you, Scott, there are no stars out here; this isn’t Hollywood. When the time comes for you to take the bows, we’ll turn on the spotlights. In the meantime, you’re just a part of a team and you’ll play as the team plays. Is that understood?” Hollywood appears symbolically in *Wing and a Prayer* as a space of fascination and fame, but this kind of attitude does not fit into the military space of war. By explicitly rejecting some of the qualities associated with Hollywood, the film covers over its own existence as a Hollywood product. It implies that the films Scott makes may be frivolous, but this film is a true reflection of reality.

This opposition is made explicit in a scene in which the crewmen gather to watch a film on the ship, predictably a Twentieth Century-Fox production starring Betty Grable: *Tin Pan Alley* (Walter Lang, 1940). Excited to see the film, they assemble around the film projector as a frazzled projectionist tries to get it to work. After they are shooed away and sit in front of the screen, the projector starts, showing the opening titles of *Tin Pan Alley*. After the title, the audience (of *Wing and a Prayer* and the diegetic audience of sailors) sees the “Sheik of Araby” number from the film, as if this were the first scene. In this sequence, Grable and Alice Faye sing and dance wearing veils. Along with snippets of the projected film, *Wing and a Prayer* shows us the men’s faces, grinning, shouting, clapping, or leering at the women onscreen. Then the diegetic filmstrip breaks, and the men stand up shouting in protest. Finally, the projectionist

gets the film going again, but this time, the image is upside-down, resulting in another near riot. When he finally gets it running properly, the men are once again interrupted from their enrapture with the screen—this time by a call for battle stations. The necessities of the real world draw the men away from the fantasies of the screen world, represented by Grable and Faye in this dream-like, Arabian Nights-type number. Thus, the scene illustrates the very process of sublimation as the men quickly turn from leering at scantily-clad women to waging a battle.

Cinema, here represented as an illusionistic fantasy projected onto a screen, is opposed within *Wing and a Prayer* with authentic experience, which can only, at least within combat films, be attained through being at war and, especially, fighting the enemy. This scene celebrates Hollywood's (and particularly Twentieth Century-Fox's) role in providing much-needed entertainment to the troops, but ultimately *Wing and a Prayer* is critical of this frivolous distraction from the war. Escapist entertainment is represented as flat—the cinema screen or a picture Scott's fellow pilots spot of him kissing Betty Grable in a magazine—while the “real” adventure that the men experience in the war takes place in a space as vast and unlimited as the sky. Scott's explanation of the circumstances behind his Hollywood smooching mirrors this distinction. He begins by painting a romantic scene, describing a girl in a beautiful black negligee leaning in to the kiss. But then he breaks the mood:

Well, then the hairdresser yelled out, “Don’t hold her so close, you’re mussing up her hairdo.” The director screamed, “Hey, take your arm from around her neck, you’re tilting her collar.” The cameraman said, “You can’t kiss her square on the lips like that, I can’t see her nose.” So, I just kissed her way off center and smacked the air! So, you see, gentlemen, if you wanna kiss a girl and kiss her right, you gotta join the Navy!

This speech reveals to the men listening that Hollywood glamour is a product of artifice, created through lighting, makeup, costuming, and unnatural posing. His last line, however, privileges the visceral and authentic (or “right”) experience associated with life in the Navy. Since there

are no women in the film (other than desubstantialized images like Alice Faye or Chisholm's girlfriend) and no scene in which the men take or discuss taking a leave where women might be found, the Navy of *Wing and a Prayer* is clearly not an ideal place to find girls to kiss. But Scott's speech suggests that unlike deceptive Hollywood magic, the military provides the kind of genuine life experience that increases one's masculinity to the extent that one can finally kiss a girl "right."

The skepticism that Scott's brothers in arms learn about the illusory magic of cinema is explicitly gendered. Through the device of fan letters, the film shows that women naively believe the fantasy they see on screen. Early in the film, Scott receives a huge stack of fan letters that had been sent on from Twentieth Century-Fox Studios, and throughout the film, his fellow crewmembers open them, look at the photos sent, and mockingly read the letters out loud. One fan writes: "Dearest Hallam, I couldn't sleep a wink thinking of how lucky the girl was in your picture I saw last night, and thinking of how wonderful it'd be if I could have been her and feel your strong arms around me and your lips pressed close to mine." Although the men are titillated by the women's attraction and gullibility, they also renounce this kind of romanticism as indulgence in fantasy. Unlike these girls, they, as men and particularly as military men, have serious and grave work to do. Furthermore, *Wing and a Prayer* shows naïve belief in a cinematographic or photographic image to be a sign of weakness. Chisholm, the first pilot to be killed, talks to the picture of his girlfriend, saying "Good morning" and "Good night" to her each day. This sentimentalism and preoccupation with a picture are shown to be shortcomings when the work of war is involved. Similarly, the men are drawn away from the screening of *Tin Pan Alley* to do the "real" work of fighting. They are entranced by the image only at their own peril.

These scenes self-reflexively construct the space of Hollywood to be shallow, narcissistic, illusory, and feminine—a dream image projected on a screen. *Wing and a Prayer* contrasts this space of fantasy to the rational, “real,” and masculine space of combat, war, and the military, in this way disavowing its own status as an artificially constructed, cinematic product. Danger appears in the film not just when the masculine space is confronted with the feminine, but when these two worlds collide, narratively and stylistically. Scott and Cookie do not manage to fit comfortably within the masculine space of combat because of their narcissism and/or impotence—at least until they make the ultimate sacrifice, choosing to accept death rather than endanger their comrades. Commander Harper, on the other hand, does not gain the respect of the crew—and thus keep them from acting against him and thereby jeopardizing the mission—until he reveals his emotion in wanting to protect the crew.

Stylistically, schisms between masculine and feminine, real and artificial, superficiality and depth also appear on the visual and aural tracks of the film, especially in scenes of combat. The most bombastic, and also phantasmatic, instance of spatial and temporal fragmentation in the film is the major combat sequence encapsulating the Battle of Midway. The scene begins simply enough, adding to conventional stylistics only the unusual touch of omitting any musical score during combat. After a montage of images of pilots and crew preparing their aircraft and themselves for the mission, we see the planes take off, fly in formation until they spot the enemy convoy of ships below the clouds, and then dive down to begin the torpedo bombing. The first part of the battle follows basic spatial and temporal continuity—the American planes generally travel from right to left; the dropping of torpedoes and explosions closely follow images of pilots scoping their targets and pushing the appropriate buttons. After only two minutes of this fairly rational and fully visualized depiction of combat, however, the sense of order, cause and effect,

and spatial and temporal clarity breaks down. First, the film neglects the visual spectacle of battle to focus attention on the act of imagining the battle from a distance. Then the film creates a bizarre and complex amalgam of various kinds of footage to represent the final stage of the battle.

After the relatively brief illustration of the torpedo bombers doing their job, the focus shifts back to the aircraft carrier, the crew of which must wait to hear back from the pilots and air crew that they launched before the battle. The captain of the ship, listening to the pilots speak to each other over the radio, decides to broadcast this flow of sound to the rest of the ship over the loudspeakers. Three minutes follow without any combat images. A sound montage dominates this scene as voices and sound effects implicitly narrate the battle: “How many are there?” “Smack ‘em down, kid!” “Let ‘em come around, let ‘em come around!” “Alright, alright!” “Swing us around, skipper, swing us around!” “Got ‘em, got ‘em, got ‘em!” “Seven o’clock!” The film explicitly represents the process of imagining a battle. Listening intently while staring at the audio speaker or into empty space, the crewmembers react with visible joy when the pilots report hitting their targets, tension when the outcome is unclear, and sadness when one of the Americans is hit or faces death. For instance, in one exchange between a bomber pilot and his radio operator, the latter says that the plane is on fire and that he cannot move, urging the pilot to bail out. He responds, “I haven’t got the altitude, Mike. We’ll take this ride together.”¹⁸⁴ One of the listeners looks sorrowfully over at the pilot’s vegetable garden. In one repeated shot, a secondary character whom we know likes to box punches the air, imagining the aerial battles he

¹⁸⁴ Lawrence Suid reports how Ronald Reagan throughout his political career often recounted a story of a B-17 pilot who refused to bail out after finding that his wounded gunner was unable to move. Said the pilot, “Never mind, son. We’ll ride it down together.” According to Suid, there is no historical record of any such thing occurring, leading Suid to conclude that Reagan had taken the anecdote from *Wing and a Prayer*, not from the actual war. See Suid, *Guts & Glory*, 89-90.

hears as boxing matches with invisible foes. With the sound montage on the aural track, the image track focuses on the faces of the men listening and reacting. The Battle of Midway is denied to the audience visually; instead, the film focuses on the act of imagining combat, drawing a parallel between those crewmembers listening on the ship and the spectators listening (and watching others listen) in the audience.

But if this earlier part of the scene asks viewers (acting, in this case, as listeners) to visualize the battle in their heads, the next part of the scene brings the process of cinematically visualizing combat to the fore. For the climax of the combat scene—when Japanese bombers attack the aircraft carrier (aka “mama”) herself—*Wing and a Prayer* combines conventional scripted scenes with stock or second-unit footage of generic activities like the firing of anti-aircraft guns, special-effects shots of miniature models, and documentary footage. Although many wartime combat films utilize these kinds of footage—*Destination Tokyo* included—what is remarkable here is the continuous use of compositing to insert actors from the fictional diegesis into (or, more accurately, on top of) documentary footage of actual events.

This last segment of the battle scene begins with documentary footage of airplanes in the sky, large guns firing on deck, and a remarkable panning shot of an airplane on fire crashing into the ocean. The next shot breaks with this pattern, however, and establishes a new one: It shows a similar documentary shot of an explosion in the ocean, but into the left part of the frame leans one of the secondary characters, as if he sees the explosion and turns back toward the camera (almost, but not completely frontal) and smiles. The rest of the scene includes a series of images that also composite fictional characters into the foreground of documentary shots, as if the characters were reacting to the events in the background footage. Commander Harper’s medium close-up is superimposed over a grainy documentary shot of an aircraft carrier deck that has been

bombed and is covered in smoke and fire; as if he were looking at the deck from above, he delivers orders. The air-boxing crewman appears again pulling a fire hose in front of a documentary naval combat scene in the background.

In these composite shots, often the background image contains camera movement or editing that does not match the foreground material. In one example, an officer stands in front of a doorway that frames a documentary image of an airplane in the sky, as if it is falling into the ocean. The background shot has a slight downward movement to follow the plane as it falls, while the foreground image remains completely still. In another example, there is a subtle jump cut in the background documentary material between a shot of the deck on fire and a slightly different shot of the deck being splashed with water from a nearby explosion. The character in the foreground reacts to the explosion, but does not react to (or participate in) the jump cut.

The visual differences between foreground and background are not limited to discrepancies in camera movement or angle. The documentary footage used in this sequence—unlike in the earlier parts of the film which heavily utilized footage of actual maneuvers and equipment shot by the *Wing and a Prayer* crew on a shakedown cruise—diverges severely in quality, clarity, visual tone, exposure, and lighting from the fictional material acted out on a set. The scene utilizes extraordinary shots of airplanes on fire, falling from the sky, and exploding, as well as a series of shots documenting the results of bombing and fire on an aircraft carrier deck. Visually and stylistically, however, they are estranged from the rest of the visual material of the scene; they are shot on gritty film stock, and because of lighting and filming conditions, they tend to be washed out and lack sharp focus. Finally, because this footage is provided by the U.S. military, which kept combat film in badly organized archives without necessarily providing the

best care for reels of celluloid, it contains scratches and visual blemishes that are lacking in the foreground images.

The disparity between foreground and background in this series of shots works against a sense of stable space and time. Not only do the backgrounds tend to shift in disconcerting ways, but their differing clarity and quality prove that they represent a different space and time than the foregrounds superimposed on top of them. Although the sequence appears to make an attempt to integrate fictional scenes with documentary images—in shots of actors on a set meant to mimic the damaged carrier deck from the documentary footage, for instance—other spectacular images appear even if they do not make logical or spatial sense. An aerial shot captured by a machine-gun camera on an airplane in the midst of a dogfight is inserted into the sequence, even though such a shot is completely unmotivated by the rest of the scene. The shot is so brief, it would not be likely to jar the spectator; rather, it provides a thrilling and visually interesting illustration of combat, regardless of whether it corresponds to the rest of the sequence visually or narratively.

The clear distinction between documentary and fictional footage throughout the scene, in both composited and other shots, cannot be overlooked. Although it would be a stretch to assume that the filmmakers aimed to disrupt diegetic space and time, this scene works to expand the space and time encompassed by the film to include historical events and past temporal durations. This leads the spectator to contemplate the spatial and temporal representations in the film, whether to integrate them in his/her mind or to enjoy the spectacular disjunction on display in this most fantastic of combat sequences.

Earlier scenes in *Wing and a Prayer* drew lines between the dream world usually offered by Hollywood—represented by the actor-turned-pilot, his fan letters, and the onboard screening of *Tin Pan Alley*—and the reality of warfare on display in this film. On the one hand, the heavy

and perceptible use of documentary footage in this last sequence corresponds to the film's attempt to distinguish itself not only as serious entertainment, but as a credible representation of the real thing, even leading critics to call it a semi-documentary. In this way, despite its visual disparity, the documentary footage stands out as "real," proving its authenticity *by* its difference in style and quality. On the other hand, however, the use of documentary footage framed by characters reacting to it in the foreground *parallels*, rather than opposes, the visualization of Hollywood cinema earlier in the film. When *Tin Pan Alley* is screened for the men, the whimsical image is framed by the heads of the crewmembers watching and reacting. In the final combat sequence, the documentary footage is similarly framed by observing characters, demonstrating an interrelationship much like that at work in cinematic spectatorship—one of reaction, rather than intervention.

This visual parallel suggests that the line between frivolous entertainment and authentic document can become blurred as types of footage, with their unique circumstances of filming and distinctive durations of time and space, are merged within *Wing and a Prayer* and other combat films. The result of this merging is not a continuous space and time, but rather a disjunctive amalgam of views. Instead of creating a singular and stable diegesis, using the documentary footage to place fictional events into a timeline of history, the film produces a *layering* of spaces and times, some of which seem to match and others of which create jarring or spectacular juxtapositions. While at first glance it may seem that *Wing and a Prayer* works to enforce a distinction between the artificial simulation of fantasy worlds in Hollywood cinema and the authentic and masculine depiction of a wartime world, the last combat scene introduces, if not a skepticism, then an uncertainty about any cinematic product to create a "real" image of war. The film's self-reflexivity in considering issues of perception and cinematic

spectatorship—the deceptive mission aiming to confuse the enemy’s perception, the meditation on imagining and visualizing war, the parallelism between fantasy and “actual” cinematic images—demonstrates a complex engagement with issues of truth and fiction, appearance and reality.

3.4 DIEGETIC INCOHERENCE

In *Destination Tokyo* and *Wing and a Prayer*, as well as other war films from the period, the promise of combat was hampered by technical and aesthetic difficulties, as well as governmental censorship. Filmmakers not only faced the problem of obtaining the materials, manpower, and funds necessary to restage particular battles, but they also ran into the historical problem of imagining and visualizing the experience of war cinematically. The presence of combat in the World War II “combat film” cannot be taken for granted as an inevitable generic ingredient. These films struggled to represent combat and often thematized their inability to adequately portray the combat experience by presenting challenges to the characters’ sensory perception. To represent combat, these films turned to other cinematic material, most prominently miniature models, stock footage from both documentary and fictional films, and full sequences from documentary films.

The heterogeneous visual materials used to create scenes of combat in turn fracture the coherence of the film’s diegetic world. When miniature models are used to recreate events, the juxtaposition of models with full-scale objects and actors creates dissonance in the spatial relationships formed by objects in the world of the film. Visual cues related to proximity, relative size, perspective, and shadow differ in between those shots with miniature models and

those with full-scale sets and locations. Documentary footage intercut into a fictional film also introduces temporal incongruity along with varying visual and spatial relationships. The diegetic world of the film fractures between the space and time of the staged recreations of actors and the space and time of the historical event. A past moment—whether one considers this moment as the recording of an historical event in progress or a past moment of film viewing—interrupts the imagined “present” of the fictional film. When films combine miniature or documentary footage with narrative scenes within the same shot—as with rear projection or process shots—the spatial, temporal, and visual qualities of the disparate materials often conflict, resulting in both a hallucinatory, insistently cinematic, and incoherent construction of space and a sense of flattening as the various kinds of images appear to be layered over one another.

The multiple and conflicting diegetic worlds also present contradictory modes of realism, ranging from attempts to present omniscient and overarching views of all aspects of an event to an emphasis on the movement of a camera in a war zone. Critics and audiences were attuned to the various shifts among different cinematic material and aesthetic codes, acknowledging the use of documentary footage or the use of models. Even when the breaks between these kinds of visual material were perfectly clear, critics routinely praised these films for realism; rarely were complaints lodged about fragmented space and time or inconsistent cinematic worlds. We should not assume, therefore, that the films ultimately managed to contain and blend different kinds of material imperceptibly or that audiences were duped by narrative tricks into accepting incoherent filmic worlds as coherent and complete. Instead, the critics’ response can be explained by their acceptance of the limitations of cinema and cinematic worlds and their expectations for entertainment that do not necessarily rely on the formulation of a coherent cinematic world and plausible narrative. Critics often focused on the sensations provided by a

particular film—the thrills, excitements, tensions, and pathos—as well as its meanings, themes, or messages regardless of how these were achieved cinematically or narratively.

For the authors of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, narrative causality in classical cinema is paramount: “In the Hollywood style, … space and time are almost invariably made vehicles for narrative causality” (6). David Bordwell’s opening segment of the book argues that the classical Hollywood style standardizes methods of creating the impression of continuous space and time—though such strategies as cross-cutting, shot/reverse-shot, and cutting on action—in order to create a homogeneous canvas on which to paint the narrative. Although Bordwell regrets the passivity that it imputes for the spectator, he admits, “In perpetuating the playing space of post-Renaissance bourgeois theater, classical editing makes the spectator an ideally placed onlooker” (58). Bordwell addresses exceptions to the rules of classical cinema—visual stylization, artistic flourishes, atypical narratives, lighting, or editing strategies—as limited expressions of generic codes and auteurship that were constrained by the strictures of the classical mode. Despite “patterns of nonconformity” (75) in particular genres, Bordwell believes that these features are still “motivated,” “codified,” and “unified” by generic and classical conventions.

However, the war films discussed here present powerful challenges to the theory of a cohesive and homogenous classical Hollywood cinema. Combat, when it does appear, stems as much from narrative causality as from a desire to show the spectacle of war. In producing these spectacles, the films routinely break rules of continuity and disrupt the sense of unified diegesis usually maintained by the classical structures of time and space. They often present incoherent plots, flimsy narrative causality, narrative gaps, and cinematic space and time that break open and fragment the diegesis of the film. These ruptures seem too immense to be explained away as

generic possibilities codified by genre conventions and unified by classical structures. While combat may indeed be a central part of the war film, the disjunctions in cinematic space and time caused by combat sequences are too a fundamental part of the war film.

The war film can then in a sense be *defined* by its departure from classical norms. Combat films may thus be considered a vast exception to the theory of classical Hollywood cinema. On the other hand, instead of an exception, these films can be understood as a prime example of how classical cinema was not as classical as we thought. Along with other genres—like film noir, the musical, and melodrama—war films depart from some of the basic tenets of classical Hollywood cinema, at least as laid out by Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson. All of these generic “exceptions” comprise less a coherent and consistent system of homogeneity and balance, and more a varied repertoire of techniques to thrill, delight, engage, and move viewers. Instead of an “ideally placed onlooker,” “classical” cinema addressed multiple audiences, trying to produce something for everyone and appeal on multiple levels. With this perspective, the incoherent diegetic worlds produced and the fragmented spaces and times of war films are not problems; rather, they reflect the attempts of a truly mass art form to address a large, heterogeneous audience. Therefore, it would be a mistake to perpetuate the myth that “classical” war films reflect a consensus culture unified in its support for the war. If some of the war films sought to visualize, and thereby bring about, such a consensus, the ruptures in diegetic space and time demonstrate the contradictions and dissonances in American views on the war, even during wartime.

4.0 NOSTALGIA FOR COMBAT: WORLD WAR II AT THE END OF CINEMA

This chapter moves ahead to examine the resurgence of the World War II combat film in the 1990s. After the debacle of the Vietnam War, it may have seemed unlikely that World War II would return to mainstream American cinema screens. While the Second World War was a bloody, vicious, and traumatic conflict, it had been written and rewritten in popular culture over a series of decades as the kind of honorable, justified use of military intervention that Vietnam was most definitely not. The heroic cinematic tales of the mid-century war, particularly those films released in the 1950s and 1960s starring such larger-than-life figures as John Wayne, helped to convince young people preparing to be sent into Southeast Asia about the nobility and heroism of combat. However, what they experienced there and what the nation went through as cultural battles raged on the home front contradicted the rosy images of combat and national consensus found in many a World War II film.

By the 1970s and 1980s, cinematic depictions of World War II fell by the wayside in America, as the unpopularity and failure of the Vietnam War turned Hollywood filmmakers away from war stories. The combat film returned at the end of the 1970s, but these films adapted the genre to tell a new brand of war stories more attuned to the ambiguity and senselessness of the more recent conflict. Thus, *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979) on one level tells the familiar story of a reluctant warrior asked to venture into harm's way to achieve a particular military objective. But it revives this convention only to throw into doubt the whole apparatus of

military objective-making and to shed light on the horrendous monstrosity of the love of war. *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986) and *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987) recuperate the narrative of a group of soldiers who move from atomized individuals into a unified force, but twist the stories into tales of betrayal where the enemies are the Americans themselves.

This chapter examines the reemergence of the World War II combat film in the late 1990s, beginning with *Saving Private Ryan* and continuing until today. The decade following *Ryan's* release saw the production of a number of World War II films that primarily adhered to traditional combat film conventions, including *U-571* (Jonathan Mostow , 2000), *Enemy at the Gates* (Jean-Jacques Annaud, 2001)¹⁸⁵, *Pearl Harbor* (Michael Bay, 2001), *Band of Brothers* (HBO miniseries, 2001), *Windtalkers* (John Woo, 2002), *Hart's War* (Gregory Hoblit, 2002), *Saints and Soldiers* (Ryan Little, 2003), *The Great Raid* (John Dahl , 2005), *Flags of Our Fathers* (Clint Eastwood, 2006), *Letters from Iwo Jima* (Clint Eastwood, 2006), and *Miracle at St. Anna* (Spike Lee, 2008).¹⁸⁶ On first glance, many of these films seem to ignore all together the often cynical and critical portrayals of combat familiar from Vietnam War films, returning instead to the unabashedly pro-American and seemingly pro-war associations of World War II combat films. However, I maintain that the Vietnam War has a constant, if shadowy, presence in contemporary combat films about the Second World War. To some extent, the films I will

¹⁸⁵ *Enemy at the Gates* was a German-UK-Irish coproduction with a French director. A number of American actors (including Ed Harris and Ron Perlman) appeared in the film and much of the financing came from Hollywood's Paramount Pictures. For more on transnational European film production and *Enemy at the Gates* in particular, see Randall Halle, "German Film, *Aufgehoben*: Ensembles of Transnational Cinema," *New German Critique* 87 (Autumn 2002), especially 18-23.

¹⁸⁶ War films set during other conflicts were also popular during this period (especially 1998-2003); they include *Three Kings* (David O. Russell, 1999), *Tigerland* (Joel Schumacher, 2000), *Behind Enemy Lines* (John Moore, 2001), *Black Hawk Down* (Ridley Scott, 2001), *We Were Soldiers* (Randall Wallace, 2002), *K-19: The Widowmaker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2002), *Buffalo Soldiers* (Gregor Jordan, 2003), *Tears of the Sun* (Antoine Fuqua, 2003), *Cold Mountain* (Anthony Minghella, 2003), *Gods and Generals* (Ronald F. Maxwell, 2003), *Jarhead* (Sam Mendes, 2005), *Flyboys* (Tony Bill, 2006), *Home of the Brave* (Irwin Winkler, 2006), *In the Valley of Elah* (Paul Haggis, 2007), *Redacted* (Brian De Palma, 2007), *Rescue Dawn* (Werner Herzog, 2007), and *Generation Kill* (HBO miniseries, 2008).

analyze in depth here—*Saving Private Ryan*, *Pearl Harbor*, and *Flags of Our Fathers*—evoke Vietnam films in order distinguish themselves from them, rebuking their portrayals of American soldiers as trigger-happy murderers. On the other hand, though, contemporary World War II combat films draw from the aura of the destructive sublime that is particularly strong in some Vietnam combat films. While filmmakers like Steven Spielberg would likely deny any perverse pleasure taken in such scenes as *Apocalypse Now*'s annihilation of civilians via helicopter, set to Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries," the influence of the extreme violence tied to the bold aestheticization of war can be found in recent World War II films. Thus, one lens through which to view the reemergence of the World War II combat film is the renegotiation of the memory of the Vietnam War in the cultural imagination of the U.S., as well as a renegotiation of the aesthetic history of the conflict. In this way, while my dissertation in a sense skips over the decades of the 1950s through the 1980s, their cinematic representations of warfare are still present in the films discussed in this chapter.

Another lens to illuminate contemporary war films is the contemporaneous technological shift occurring within the medium of film in the late 1990s and today. As the World War II generation, whom Tom Brokaw called the "Greatest Generation," has aged and reached its twilight, so has the medium of film, specifically celluloid, appeared to be reaching its end. This "end of cinema" describes the replacement of film by digital imaging technologies in the production, distribution, and exhibition of the movies. Although this process had been ongoing since the first uses of computer-generated imagery and computer-controlled cameras in the late 1970s, a number of films in the early 1990s, such as *Terminator 2* (James Cameron, 1991) and *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993), called attention to the use of digital techniques to supplant traditional optical processes. The academic as well as mainstream critical communities

responded to this shift by wondering about the future of the medium of cinema. Would the introduction of digital filmmaking redefine how we conceived of cinema, particularly in its function as a record of reality?

As this chapter will demonstrate, the contemporary World War II film has a complex relationship to digital technology. The plots and the aesthetics of the films I analyze here valorize the celluloid image, whether in terms of the documentary motion picture camera filming in the midst of the action or the still image capturing a contingent moment. *Saving Private Ryan* goes out of its way to emulate the look of 1940s combat documentaries like the ones I described in Chapter 2; *Pearl Harbor* includes the minor character of a motion picture cameraman who captures the attack (as well as the protagonists' heroics) on film; and *Flags of Our Fathers* celebrates the flag-raisers of Iwo Jima, immortalized in the famous Joe Rosenthal photograph. In this way, they evince a nostalgia for the film and photography practices of the 1940s, dependent upon the material of celluloid, at the same time as this material was on the wane in favor of the virtual environments of the digital age. Conversely, though, these films also revel in the new spatial and temporal possibilities afforded by digital technologies, particularly in their combat scenes. These new, computer-aided techniques create a novel kind of realism—allowing the digital simulation of historical events with a comprehensiveness never before possible. Yet the films hold this new realism in tension with the realism associated with celluloid, the truth value accorded to film because of its indexical relationship to the real-world objects and events that it records. The combat sequences of the films thus evidence a push and pull between respecting—and in some instances, even fetishizing—the celluloid recording of the war and celebrating the new perceptual tricks afforded by digital technology.

In the first part of this chapter, I will contextualize contemporary World War II combat films within a larger cultural nostalgia in the 1990s (and in a somewhat different valence, after September 11, 2001), theorizing nostalgia via such scholars as Svetlana Boym and Fredric Jameson. I will show that these films are nostalgic both in their melodramatic narratives of innocence lost and redemption gained as well as in their aesthetic emulations of styles from the 1940s. In particular, they mourn the potential loss of celluloid as a recording medium. Yet they are also forward-looking in their espousal of digital techniques, particularly in scenes of combat that use computer-generated imagery for ever more realistic violence and gore, a consequence of the newly graphic depictions of violence from the Vietnam War era. In fact, these films have been criticized for wallowing in the blood and guts of wounded and dying soldiers. While their excessive violence has usually been justified by historical fidelity and the moral associations of the subject matter, from another perspective, these films provide just the kind of perverse fascination with death and gore (the destructive sublime) that can be found in Vietnam War films, exploitation films, and horror films.

One distinction of these films, which distinguishes them from the wartime films discussed in Chapter 3, is their masochistic emphasis on the suffering of American soldiers, not that of the enemy. Indeed, the Axis forces are rarely shown or portrayed with a sense of equality and sympathy when they are depicted. The emphasis on the bodily suffering of the American soldiers both punishes them for their earlier (cinematic) sins of the Vietnam War and sets them up for melodramatic redemption, gained through abject victimhood. I conclude the chapter by examining the intense, visceral engagement and immersion such scenes of violence generate in the spectator. This corporeal realism produces incongruous narratives of the American

experience of World War II—on the one hand, a story of suffering, death, and pain, and on the other, a tale of worthy sacrifice and honorable redemption.

4.1 NOSTALGIA FOR WAR

In the late 1990s, the World War II combat film reemerged in American cinema in a dramatic fashion, after being in decline for nearly three decades. Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) became a cultural phenomenon, reflecting the zeitgeist of World War II nostalgia that infused the fiftieth anniversary commemorations of the war during the early 1990s. Along with the decision to create a World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C.¹⁸⁷, this nostalgia materialized in books like Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation* (1998) and James Bradley and Ron Powers' *Flags of Our Fathers* (2000), as well as Stephen Ambrose's history bestsellers *D-Day* (1995), *Citizen Soldiers* (1998), *Band of Brothers* (2001), and others. Although less of a success financially, the release of Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* just months after *Saving Private Ryan* meant that much of 1998 showcased big-budget, big-name World War II films on the nation's theaters. Although first a cultural nostalgia experienced primarily through print and television—in news programs and documentary specials—cinema played a considerable role in bringing World War II back to the forefront of popular consciousness in the late 1990s.

The World War II nostalgia of the 1990s helped to shape how Americans responded to 9/11. After the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the film *Pearl Harbor* was rereleased into theaters (after an initial release in May 2001 during Memorial Day weekend).

¹⁸⁷ Plans for the National World War II Memorial were first authorized by President Clinton in 1993, but construction on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., did not commence until 2001. The memorial opened to the public on April 29, 2004.

Other war films like *Black Hawk Down* (Ridley Scott, 2001) had their release dates pushed up to capitalize on the patriotic fervor of the time. The 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was used several times by journalists, news anchors, and politicians as an analog to the 9/11 attacks. In making this connection, they imbued current events with the perceived moral clarity and national outrage provoked by the Japanese attack. As Marcia Landy explains, the analogy between the two events emphasizes “a sense of uniqueness, manifest destiny, paradise lost and regained, and the righteousness granted by divine mandate to set wrongs right” associated with “visions of American exceptionality.”¹⁸⁸ Thus, the evocation of Pearl Harbor and World War II in light of contemporary events returns us rhetorically to the myths of American nationhood enveloped within so many World War II films—America as benevolent leader, reluctant warrior, ethical guide to the wayward nations.

The appearance of this analogy at this time demonstrates the contemporary temptation to see American foreign relations in terms of Manichean conflicts between good and evil, victim and perpetrator, righteousness and deviousness. World War II combat films from the last decade perpetuate these oppositions by relying on melodramatic frameworks and moral structures. They nostalgically return to a moment of American history that has since been constructed as an era of ethical certainty, national consensus, justified belligerence, and complete military and ideological victory. Nostalgia, as an experience of longing and an engagement in sentimentality, functions like a melodrama, centering on a lost space of innocence and dwelling in pathos. Melodramas too are frequently nostalgic for a utopian time and space where virtue is finally recognized. Nostalgia and melodrama are both built around a retrospective temporality, looking toward the past as an idealized place to which to return. Both also involve a longed-for, but

¹⁸⁸ Marcia Landy, “‘America Under Attack’: Pearl Harbor, 9/11, and History in the Media,” in *Film and Television After 9/11*, ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), 96.

irretrievably lost, object—whether that be a time, a place, a feeling, or a physical marker of these things—leading to the pathos experienced by nostalgics and melodramatic characters (and audiences).

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the words “nostalgia” and “melodrama” both emerged in the late seventeenth century, gaining wider use in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁸⁹ Both concepts arose out of the same historical and cultural circumstances and can be seen as responses to modernity. “Nostalgia” was originally coined in the late seventeenth century to describe a medical condition commonly afflicting soldiers fighting in foreign lands. This “homesickness” plagued groups of soldiers like an epidemic, causing melancholy and confusion and reducing the fighting spirit.¹⁹⁰ As Svetlana Boym has explained in her exploration of the subject, nostalgia involves both a temporal and a spatial dislocation. Nostalgia is a desire to return to an earlier time, “the edenic unity of time and space before entry into history.”¹⁹¹ In this, it is a consequence of a notion of time that is unrepeatable and irreversible; the only way back to the time of innocence is through longing. But nostalgia also entails a desire to return to a particular place—to the homeland, to a place of origins, to a utopian space of memory. For this reason, nostalgia became an integral part of the development of nationalism in the nineteenth century, as the heritage of nations became institutionalized in museums, memorials, and songs. “The *nostos* of a nation is not merely a lost Eden but a place of sacrifice and glory, of past suffering.”¹⁹² Time and space fuse together in nostalgia to create a mythical past associated with a homeland and shared history. Yet, as Susan Stewart points out, nostalgia is “a sadness without

¹⁸⁹ Melodrama originally referred to Italian opera. It does not seem to refer to a specific form of theater until the early nineteenth century. Ben Singer writes that melodrama “emerged as a distinctive dramatic form almost exactly around the year 1800.” See Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 11.

¹⁹⁰ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 3-4.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁹² Ibid., 15.

an object”: “the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as a felt lack.”¹⁹³

Nostalgia can be understood as a response to modernization and a product of nationalism. As Bryan S. Turner has argued, the process of industrialization and the development of capitalism have led to a market-based, secular society characterized by the fragmentation of social unity and the decline in community values. Nostalgia serves as a defense mechanism against these effects, attempting to counter “the loss of rural simplicity, traditional stability and cultural integration following the impact of industrial, urban, capitalist culture on feudal social organization.”¹⁹⁴ For Turner, nostalgic discourse laments the decline of a sense of history, returning instead to a “golden age of ‘homefulness.’”¹⁹⁵ This past era is associated with the moral certainty, communal human values, individual autonomy, personal authenticity, and simplicity thought to be lost in the modern age. These common values, while perceived to be in the past, nevertheless help to define what is distinctive about a nation—those cultural specificities that are longed for when they are gone.

For Fredric Jameson, nostalgia is a key component of postmodernity. In the postmodern era—the origins of which Jameson locates in the post–World War II shift from industrial to multinational capitalism—historical thinking is in crisis. Jameson describes both a “weakening of historicity” and a “waning of affect” in the postmodern.¹⁹⁶ Historical understanding has become pastiche—a collection of images, citations, and pop-culture representations of the past without meaningful connection to our experience of today. Jameson argues that we live in a

¹⁹³ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 23.

¹⁹⁴ Bryan S. Turner, “A Note on Nostalgia,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 4, no. 1 (1987), 152.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 150.

¹⁹⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991), 6, 15.

continuous present in perpetual flux, unable to effectively perceive the cultural, political, and economic networks governing our world. What we need, according to Jameson, is a “cognitive map,” an aesthetic practice that would “enable a situational representation on the part of the individual subject to that vaster and properly unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of the society’s structures as a whole.”¹⁹⁷ Without such a map, we lack historicity, which Jameson defines “first and foremost … as a perception of the present as history.”¹⁹⁸ In other words, historicity would allow a critical distance from the ever-changing present, placing our current situation in perspective as one historical period related to others. In postmodernity, however, historical understanding is replaced by pastiche, merely “a list of stereotypes, of ideas of facts and historical realities.”¹⁹⁹

Nostalgia emerges as a symptom of this “historical amnesia.”²⁰⁰ The plentitude of a (mythical) past era substitutes for the paucity of meaningful, historical experience today. In particular, Jameson discusses the “nostalgia film,” which conveys the past in terms of specific fashions and the glossy surface verisimilitude of historical reconstructions rather than any significant engagement with history. Films like *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973) and *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974) serve as prime examples of nostalgia films for Jameson because their efforts to reconstruct the detailed look of the “fifties” or the “thirties” work towards a superficial approximation of the past “without affect.”²⁰¹ These films not only approximate the look of the past, but reference other filmed and pop-culture representations of that past. For instance, one of Jameson’s key examples, *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977), while set in the

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 51.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. 284.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 279.

²⁰⁰ Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998), 20.

²⁰¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, xvii.

future, participates in the pastiche aesthetic by emulating the visual style and plot conventions of old-fashioned adventure and sci-fi serials. *Star Wars* taps into a “deeper and more properly nostalgic desire to return to that older period and to live its strange old aesthetic artefacts [sic] through once again,” rather than enacting a critical parody of these out-dated conventions.²⁰²

Nostalgia films not only avoid a complex negotiation of the past; they also fail to lend insight into the present. By retreating to a bygone utopian space, nostalgia films can only confront the problems of the present with the solutions offered by the past. According to Jameson, they evacuate historicity by failing to prompt viewers to conceive of “the present as past.” We can then read the nostalgia film as “a kind of distorted form of cognitive mapping,” an effort to create meaningful aesthetic structures that explain the individual’s relationship to the whole of society, but one which locates those structures in the past rather than the present.²⁰³ In effect, these films may try to tackle contemporary issues, but their responses are ineffectual because they are determined by obsolete conventions.

Counter to Jameson, Anne Friedberg has objected that, because cinema involves the projection of a past event onto a screen in the present, “*every* film has the jumbled relation to the historical referent that Jameson finds exclusively in the ‘nostalgia film.’”²⁰⁴ She argues that nostalgia “is an inherent feature of the photographic and cinematic apparatus itself.”²⁰⁵ Cinema is, for her, “a machine for virtual time travel,” allowing spectators to experience the fluid and

²⁰² Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” 8.

²⁰³ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 283.

²⁰⁴ Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 169.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 168.

mobile temporality created by montage and repeated viewings.²⁰⁶ Cinema “serves up the past as present and virtual,” engaging a cinephilic form of spectatorship imbued with nostalgic desire.²⁰⁷

Jean Baudrillard has also commented on the postmodern convergence of history, cinema, and nostalgia. Like Jameson, he understands the contemporary fascination with history as evidence of its ultimate displacement in favor of images and simulations of history. Thus, although Baudrillard does not use the term “nostalgia film,” he sees cinema’s obsession with historical representation—particularly depictions of fascism and war—as a mythologization of history, which is now gone, “our lost referential.”²⁰⁸ The cinematic turn to historical periods of turbulence reflects a desire “simply to resurrect the period when *at least* there was history, at least there was violence (albeit fascist), when at least life and death were at stake.”²⁰⁹ Furthermore, Baudrillard finds in the nostalgia film an obsession with recreating cinema’s own past, in remaking, reenacting, and referencing its aesthetic history: “Cinema plagiarizes itself, recopies itself, remakes its classics, retroactivates its original myths, remakes the silent film more perfectly than the original, etc.: all of this is logical, *the cinema is fascinated by itself as lost object as much as it (and we) are fascinated by the real as a lost referent.*”²¹⁰

Baudrillard’s theory of the hyperreal—that cinema and reality have merged to the extent that we cannot adequately distinguish the two—goes beyond the claims I want to make in this chapter. However, his comment above about cinema as a lost object echoes Friedberg’s statement about the nostalgia inherent in film. The technology of cinema inevitably introduces a temporal incongruity: the camera records an event as it occurs, but the projection of the image of

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 103.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 187.

²⁰⁸ Jean Baudrillard, “History: A Retro Scenario,” in *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 43.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 44.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 47, italics in original.

the event necessarily (with celluloid film) takes place at a later time.²¹¹ The film's images (and sounds) thus reference both a past time and a distant space. Yet the projection process endows these images with a remarkable sense of presence—in the space and time of the now. Thus the cinematic apparatus might be said to be intrinsically nostalgic, by involving spectators in the temporal and spatial displacement at the heart of nostalgic longing.

The World War II films of the 1990s correspond to both the narrow and the broader definitions of “nostalgia film” proposed by Jameson, Friedberg, and Baudrillard. Like the seventeenth-century soldiers pining for their homelands, these films about soldiers evince a desire to return to an earlier era (the 1940s) and place (an idyllic America of close-knit rural communities and family values). At the time these nostalgic films begin to appear (the 1990s), agro-business had put the individual farmer out of business and the culture wars surrounding issues such as feminism and gay rights had put conservative family values under threat. As if to counter these developments, the fiftieth anniversary commemorations of World War II offered a return to a period that had become associated with moral clarity, national consensus, community values, personal integrity, and simplicity—all those elements though to be left by the wayside by modernization and, especially, postmodernity. In this schema, World War II represents the height of the modern age, combining the industrial might of mid-century America with the last gasps of national imperialism, before a post-Fordist economy replaced the previous industry- and market-based system and a new form of globalization took root. It may appear odd, at first, that American culture would evince a nostalgic longing for a period of wartime, but this makes sense when the era has been rewritten as a time of innocence and virtue, shattered by the shocking

²¹¹ The essays of Jameson, Friedberg, and Baudrillard that I cite above were all originally written before the rise of computer-generated imagery and high-definition digital video changed the circumstances of filming. With these technologies, a delay between image capture and playback is no longer technically necessary.

attack on Pearl Harbor. Furthermore, as Baudrillard points out, a period of violent upheaval, like a war, provides a sense of “real” history and struggle when so much seems virtual in the postmodern era.

4.2 “MOMMA! I WANT TO GO HOME!”

One of the major nostalgic characteristics of contemporary war films is their obsession with home, particularly the rural farm or small town. In this, these films work melodramatically to restore lost innocence. Because of its indulgence in emotion as well as its emphasis on family, especially young women and children (who stand as emblems of unsullied virtue), melodrama has been thought of as a genre associated with the feminine. For this reason, war films are not usually classified as melodramas. With their almost total exclusion of women, they do not engage with women’s issues, female subjugation, or the role of the family in the same way as a women’s film or family melodrama. In upholding traditionally male-centered institutions like the military, contemporary World War II combat films also tend to be conservative in their assessments of American culture—unlike Douglas Sirk’s family melodramas, for instance, which have been critically reevaluated as sophisticated critiques of American society.²¹²

²¹² The bigger-than-life characters, Technicolor stylistics, and sensational narratives of Douglas Sirk’s series of family melodramas in the 1950s led critics in the 1970s to reevaluate the critical potential of the form. According to these critics, these films self-consciously reveal the rotten core of American consumer capitalism and, in particular, the plight of women in navigating this terrain. Instead of pulp fictions that traded on women’s fears and drew upon their emotions, melodramas were reevaluated potentially critical reflections of the difficulties women face in modern society. In this retrospective reassessment of the genre, the sensationalism, pathos, and emotional display of melodrama were no longer considered markers of a failed realism, but rather clues to a hidden critique of American society. For examples of this reevaluation, see, for instance, Paul Willemen, “Distanciation and Douglas Sirk,” *Screen* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1971); Thomas Elsaesser, “Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama,” in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1987), 43-69; Laura Mulvey, “Notes on Sirk and Melodrama,” in *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, 75-9;

However, Steve Neale, among others, has challenged the association between the women's picture and the term "melodrama." In his study of the use of the term in the trade press up to 1960, he argues that the term is "neutral," rather than disparaging; it was used to describe such disparate productions as *Notorious* (1946), *Son of Frankenstein* (1939), and *Bataan* (1943). He writes, "The mark of these films is not pathos, romance, and domesticity but action, adventure, and thrills; not 'feminine' genres and the woman's film but war films, adventure films, horror films, and thrillers, genres traditionally thought of as, if anything, 'male.'"²¹³ Expanding the definition of melodrama past the women's film allows for a broader look at how melodramatic conventions have permeated many forms, including typically male-centered genres like the war film.

Moreover, Linda Williams has argued that melodrama is *the* fundamental mode, not just of American cinema, but of American popular narrative broadly conceived.²¹⁴ As Williams has defined it, melodrama involves a dialectic between pathos and action, with either, or both, operating to effect the recognition of virtue that is the moral imperative of the form. The war film is a perfect example of a genre which relies heavily on both pathos—in emotional scenes of loss and pain—and action—in exhilarating battle sequences. In rewriting the narrative of a past conflict, the war film also contributes to a sense of American national identity; these films work to define what America is in the act of defending it. But the war film demonstrates what it is the

and Lucy Fischer, ed., *Imitation of Life: Douglas Sirk, Director* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991). Barbara Klinger discusses the pitfalls of this reevaluation in her book *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1994).

²¹³ Steve Neale, "Melo Talk: On the Meaning and Use of the Term 'Melodrama' in the American Trade Press," *Velvet Light Trap* 32 (Fall 1993), 69. A. Nicholas Vardac had noted this phenomenon as early as the 1940s, in his book *Stage to Screen: Theatrical Method from Garrick to Griffith* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949).

²¹⁴ Linda Williams writes, "It is time, then, to make a bolder claim: not that melodrama is a submerged, or embedded, tendency, or genre, within classical realism, but that it has more often been the dominant form of popular moving-picture narrative, whether on the nineteenth century stage, in twentieth-century films or ... in contemporary media events." See Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 23.

soldiers are fighting for at the moment when we fear it may be lost. This is often individualized in the case of the soldiers and what they yearn for back home, as the clichéd example of Mom's apple pie as symbol of Americanness demonstrates. America is described in terms of domesticity and the feminine. National identity is defined in absence here, in the sense that idyllic images of home are rarely shown. What American soldiers fight for is the exact opposite of the situation the soldiers currently face—safety, security, peace, personal freedom and expression, familiarity, domesticity, comfort, home. Further, the image of home is presented as a past memory that the soldiers fight to return to.

In *Saving Private Ryan*, home is truly an obsession for the men. The bulk of the film narrates the story of Captain Miller (Tom Hanks) on D-Day and the days following. After witnessing—and surviving—the carnage of Omaha Beach, Miller leads a small group of men on a mission to find a Private Ryan, whose three brothers have been killed in action and who, in what the film portrays as decidedly not a publicity stunt, gets a ticket home to save his mother from further grief. Although the vast majority of the film takes place on the front lines of Europe, a brief scene showing the “home front” is crucial in setting up the moral and sentimental imperatives of the film. Home appears visually only one time in the film, portraying the rural farm as the epitome as America.²¹⁵ In the scene, a black car drives up to Mrs. Ryan’s farm to bring her death notices for three of her sons. We first see the house—a red farmhouse with a barn and silo, surrounded by crops—in a long shot. This domestic space is revealed as belonging to Mrs. Ryan, as we see her through the lace curtains in the window washing dishes and then

²¹⁵ Although supposed to capture something distinctly American, this farmhouse scene was actually shot in Salisbury, England. According to art historian Simon Schama, “there was nowhere in the Midwest that was like the Midwest anymore. So in Wiltshire, where I actually live, you see the fake façade of the house, and there’s an American windmill.... Spielberg clearly, perversely thought place was transposable and believed that the authenticity of this particular place could be achieved only by actually exporting it, by finding it and devising it and controlling it and re-creating it in Salisbury.” As quoted in “Talk,” in *Art Works: Place*, ed. Tacita Dean and Jeremy Millar (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 190.

watch the car drive up the windy, dusty road from her point of view. As the car pulls up, Mrs. Ryan walks out onto the porch, totters on her feet as she feels the shock and grief, and finally sits down as she lacks the strength to stand.

The scene with Mrs. Ryan demonstrates the extent to which the homeland is denoted by the maternal. Many soldiers discuss their mothers or other women back home, as in one pertinent scene devoted to Medic Wade (Giovanni Ribisi) lamenting how his mother worked late at night and he regretted not waking up to talk to her more when she got home. And in two different scenes showing soldiers in their death throes, they both cry out, “Momma! I want to go home!” As in many genres, the symbolic register of the home in the contemporary war film is taken up by women—mothers, girlfriends, daughters, and wives. Captain Miller divulges that what he misses most are his hammock in the back yard and watching his wife cutting their rose bushes in his old work gloves. Paradigmatically, Private Reiben (Ed Burns) relates a memory of a woman from his town—significantly, a slightly older, married woman—who, catching him looking at her chest, told him, “If you’re ever scared over there, close your eyes and think of these” (her breasts). Home is thus represented as the ample maternal bosom.

Pearl Harbor’s narrative is also structured around the homeland (which, in this instance, too, is also the “heartland,” or rural center of the country). Because of its reliance on a romantic plot and its inclusion of a woman as a main character, *Pearl Harbor* may be the most obvious melodrama of the three films I will analyze in this chapter. It tells the story of two childhood friends, Rafe (Ben Affleck) and Danny (Josh Hartnett), both of whom love flying airplanes and, eventually, the same woman, Evelyn (Kate Beckinsale). Joining the Army Air Corps before the war, the two friends end up participating in both Pearl Harbor (both managing to get fighter planes off the ground to go after the attacking Japanese) and the Doolittle Raid on Tokyo.

Before the Japanese attack, however, Rafe flew for the Royal Air Force in the Battle of Britain and was thought dead, allowing Danny to begin a romance with Evelyn. When he returns, he and Danny fight over Evelyn, but are drawn back into alliance against a common enemy, the Japanese. After the Doolittle Raid at the end of the film, Danny and Rafe take turns saving each other's lives, until Danny finally sacrifices his life for Rafe. Before Danny dies, Rafe reveals to him Evelyn's secret—that she is pregnant with Danny's child.

The film begins, and ends, in the archetypal American “space of innocence”—the rural farm. The first images show a golden sunset and a biplane flying over idyllic farmland, showing the compatibility of military technology (the airplane) and the American landscape in this utopian space, but also foreshadowing the eventual threat of war. A title announces that this is “Tennessee, 1923,” reassuring the viewer that the war is still a long way off and this rural paradise can be enjoyed with the innocence displayed by Rafe and Danny as children. The two boys play pilots in an old plane—Rafe’s father flies a cropduster—and accidentally start it, managing to fly for a short distance and engaging in their first adventure together. This idealized setting is interrupted, however, by the appearance of Danny’s father, a physically and verbally abusive drunk whose cruelty to Danny is linked explicitly to his traumatic experience fighting in the trenches in World War I. For the first time, the specter of war intrudes to threaten innocence and virtue.

This pattern repeats throughout the film. Rafe’s seemingly perfect courtship of Evelyn—replete with romantic moments in moonlight as well as embarrassing gaffes that are recalled fondly—is broken off by Rafe’s decision to volunteer for the RAF, with the war in Europe looming large over their carefree time together. Later, Hawaii becomes the ideal home, a beautiful paradise filled with handsome people, sunshine, and little thought for the world outside.

This landscape—able to stand in for the American homeland only through the almost complete exclusion of any of its native Hawaiian or Asian inhabitants—fosters the romance between Evelyn and Danny, despite their grief over Rafe. Their luscious love scene, as they hide amongst parachute silk hanging from the rafters, shows how even the material of war can be idealized and made dreamy and unreal by the youthful ignorance of war and death.

In the spectacular climax of the film, however, war irrevocably intrudes with the surprise attack on Sunday morning, December 7th. Finally, Evelyn and Danny (and to a lesser extent, Rafe, who had already faced combat) must “grow up,” give up their charmed, adolescent lives, learn to sacrifice something of themselves, and participate in the “adult” reality of war. Evelyn in particular suffers through the horrors of treating all the wounded in the hospital. She is charged with deciding who among the wounded can be saved and marking their foreheads with her lipstick (a conspicuous misuse of such an “innocent,” feminine product). Danny and Rafe find planes to fly and manage to fight off the Japanese in part by playing “chicken” (flying directly at one another and then turning away at the last second), their childhood game. Danny does not complete his full growth into maturity until the end of the film, when he sacrifices himself for Rafe and learns he is a father.

The last images of the film return to the idyllic landscape of the rural farm, flashing forward to the postwar period. Rafe flies a cropduster, just like his father, presumably at his family farm back in Tennessee, while Evelyn takes care of “their” child, Danny, named after his biological father. With the war concluded, the nuclear family is finally united in the glowing sunset of the Southern farmland. Danny finally gains maturity, shaking off self-doubt and fear, choosing to sacrifice himself for this friend, and he is “reborn” as the child Danny, to be raised by his former lover and best friend (who had always “mothered” and protected him). With the

love triangle thus resolved, Rafe returns to Evelyn, reestablishing the romance from the beginning of the film. They return to the idyllic landscape of the past—and to the first images of the film—thus completing a full circle and expelling the horrors of war from the diegesis. As Cynthia Weber argues, “What *Pearl Harbor* and Pearl Harbor offer America is what appears to be a traditionally gendered, closed moral grammar, the movement of which reassures Americans that it is only a matter of time before threats to their moral economy, whether played out in personal, familiar relationships or in relations within and among states, are rendered harmless.”²¹⁶ Thus, *Pearl Harbor* parallels the threat of war to the threat to moral failure (the conception of the illegitimate child), but these can both be neutralized by the return to an idyllic past, buttressed by the formation of a nuclear family and the translation of wartime material (fighter plane) to peacetime equipment (crop-duster).

Pearl Harbor exemplifies the nostalgic impulse to return to a space and time in the past that is thought to contain a locus of innocence and virtue. The narrative of the film explicitly models itself on this process, beginning and ending in the same idyllic space, the rural farm. While the war introduced chaos and violence into the lives of these charmed young people, it was merely an unfortunate interlude that could be made up for by the re-creation of the nuclear family. The film thereby glorifies the American values and ideologies that are thought to be contained in this mythic past—pastoral virtues, the bedrock of the family in American life, the earnestness and idealism of America’s young men, who strive to change the world single-handedly. *Pearl Harbor* also exemplifies Jameson’s “nostalgia film.” Its glossy production values and movie-star handsome protagonists replace the past with the fashions of the past,

²¹⁶ Cynthia Weber, *Imagining America at War: Morality, Politics, and Film* (London: Routledge, 2006), 19.

emphasizing props and costume pieces like aviator sunglasses, the garter belt with seamed hose, red lipstick, old-fashioned bathing suits, hand-painted icons on fighter planes, and the like.

This nostalgic emphasis on the superficial appearance of the 1940s can also be found in the design of the four-disc *Pearl Harbor* Director's Cut DVD set (Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2001). Constructed of paperboard instead of plastic, the oversized DVD case approximates the look of a worn leather folder. The flaps inside display still frames from the film manipulated to look like old photographs affixed (with yellowing scotch tape) to the inside of the leather binder. The set also contains a 24-page, color brochure; a letter dated December 8, 1941 with a quotation from President Roosevelt; and the four discs in individual paperboard sleeves made to look like Army-issued mission folders—all designed to look worn and aged, as if they were authentic 1940s materials recently rediscovered in an old trunk or attic.

Furthermore, included underneath a khaki-colored elastic strap with a metal buckle are four postcards that emulate the style of 1940s propaganda posters featuring the major stars of the film. One features the chiseled visage of Ben Affleck peering over his shoulder from the cockpit of a World War II-era fighter plane. The main text, in an old-fashioned font, exhorts the onlooker to “Man the Guns. Join the Fight.” (Smaller text at the bottom of the poster names the film, *Pearl Harbor*, without including any other information that would reveal this to be a poster for a new film, such as release date or stars’ names.) The poster prominently displays Affleck’s pilot cap, oversized military headphones, and leather bomber jacket—an incoherent amalgam of 1940s-style military gear that would never have been worn together in the cockpit of a fighter plane. Other postcards, featuring Kate Beckinsale and Josh Hartnett, encourage viewers to buy war bonds and sign up for the U.S. Nurse Corps. The fourth postcard, with the simple slogan “Victory,” anachronistically spotlights Cuba Gooding Jr., who plays a version of “Dorie” Miller,

the African American cook who won the Navy Cross for bravery during the attack on Pearl Harbor. These postcards epitomize the film's fetishization of objects from the past (in the artificial aging of the photographs and folders) and its attempt to combine contemporary glamour with the styles of the past. To do so, they have to rewrite the racial politics of the era, ignoring the historical context of the era that made women and African Americans second-class citizens. In this and everything else, the postcards ignore historical reality and instead focus on the recognizable icons of the 1940s—such as bomber jackets, uniforms, fonts, and colors—familiar to us from old movies and popular culture. The DVD set illustrates how, in Baudrillard's terms, cinema “plagiarizes itself,” mourning a lost past via its mourning of the lost object of cinema itself.

As this example demonstrates, *Pearl Harbor* and other contemporary World War II films display a nostalgia for cinema itself, particularly the style and technology of 1940s films, as I will demonstrate in the following section. By using (and simulating) archival footage and borrowing techniques first made popular by the documentary combat films of the 1940s—especially the “shaky-cam” effect discussed in the Chapter 2—these films are indebted to the cinematic look of the 1940s. Yet their production practices involved significant amounts of computer-generated imagery and digital manipulation. Instead of using the style of the 1940s to reflect upon cinema history in a critical or parodic way, these films mourn the “death of cinema,” the shift from celluloid to the digital techniques.

4.3 NOSTALGIA FOR FILM

Saving Private Ryan presents the most extreme example of a contemporary war film that attempts to emulate the visual style of 1940s films. Director Steven Spielberg has discussed how he was influenced by the look of World War II newsreel footage, the combat photography of Robert Capa and others, and documentaries like John Huston's *San Pietro*. The most apparent borrowing from "documentary" footage appears dramatically in the notable, thirty-minute Omaha Beach sequence: the handheld, shaking camera that stays low to the ground, as a real soldier-cameraman would. In Chapter 2, I discuss the origin of these techniques in John Ford's *The Battle of Midway* and their development into markers of proximity to the action. Despite the fact that many of these techniques were used with staged footage, or were staged themselves (as in *San Pietro*), they came to represent a new style of realism that connoted an unvarnished truth about what war was really like. Spielberg drew not only on these techniques, but on their connotations of immediacy, transparency, and contingency—ignoring their history of staging.

Spielberg and his production team also utilized various contemporary techniques to approximate the look of films from the World War II era, especially these documentary images. For instance, Spielberg stripped the camera lenses of their protective coating, since the utilitarian cameras of combat cameramen lacked this coating. The result is a blurred, overexposed look in many of the shots that approximates an "accidental" feel. He also used both chemical and digital processing to drain sixty percent of the color from the image, creating an extremely washed-out color palette. In addition to mimicking the handheld, erratic movement of the original newsreel footage, Spielberg actually adds a grainy texture to make his modern film stock look more like the cheap documentary stock that the military used in the 1940s.

Additionally, one of the most prominent features of Spielberg's cinematography is his choice to allow water, "blood," and dirt to cloud the lens. Certainly, this corresponds to the difficulty actual cameramen would have faced keeping their lenses clean, but, as Toby Haggith has pointed out, in including these shots, the film "commit[s] the cardinal sin of making the audience aware of the camera."²¹⁷ This audacious stylistic choice (which has in intervening years become more common) exposes a fundamental contradiction within *Saving Private Ryan* and the contemporary war film more generally between transparently revealing what a battle "actually" looked like and following a set of conventions set up by 1940s combat documentaries that *signify* reality but do not necessarily give unmediated access to it.

In utilizing these techniques, Spielberg aims not just for perceptual realism, but to make his film look like a document. The blood and dirt on the lens make spectators aware of the presence of the camera—but in this instance, unlike classical Hollywood cinema, the acknowledgement of the camera actually contributes to a sense of realism. The dirty lens and shaky camerawork reference the invisible filmmaker, who in the battle sequence, acts like an historical combat cameraman. Although Spielberg does not fool anyone into thinking that *Saving Private Ryan* is an actual lost piece of footage from the war, he relies on the visual and visceral impression that such aesthetic choices make. As in the original documentary footage (which was also often staged), the erratic cinematography and other visual approximations of 1940s documentary film stock give the spectator the illusion of watching an historical event unfold. This style also engages the viewer on a gut level, creating the sensation of being the cameraman himself, dodging bullets in the middle of a war zone.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 335.

Spielberg's attempt to visually create a "definitive document" illustrates the film's nostalgia, not merely for an earlier time and an earlier war, but for an earlier form of film and filmmaking.²¹⁸ As World War II has become the "Good War," so has documentary footage come to seem like the ultimate honest and unmediated form of representation. Although the credits of the film reveal that he did use computer-generated imagery, Spielberg went out of his way to *not* use digital imagery and effects in *Saving Private Ryan*, even to the point of hiring real amputees to play the soldier extras whose limbs are blown off. This extensive effort to avoid the digital is another example of nostalgia for film as a medium. Since the digital image has a connotation of changeability, forgery, and (post)modernity, it is linked to a cynicism about the truth value of the image that celluloid (retrospectively) is still believed to have. Film is associated with transparency, immediacy, and a recording property that the digital lacks. This has resulted in a certain fetishization of the visual signifiers of documentary footage (the shaking camera, dirt on the lens, gritty film stock).

Pearl Harbor, on the other hand, follows the more traditional convention of using montages of archival footage in order to convey historical information or denote the passing of time. The first of these montages bridges the gap between Danny and Rafe's childhood and the years leading up to the Pearl Harbor attack. The sequence begins with a close-up on Rafe's face as a child. This image then fades to black and white and dissolves into archival footage, including images of Hitler and shots taken from *Triumph of the Will* (Leni Riefenstahl, 1935). A voiceover is laid over the images mimicking that of a newsreel announcer from the 1940s,

²¹⁸ Tom Hanks describes the goal of the film: "Regardless of what the words on paper were and regardless of how we worked out the story, [*Saving Private Ryan*] was going to be some brand of current, definitive document about a day of decision unlike any other, certainly in the history of the world." As quoted in "Into the Breach: The Making of *Saving Private Ryan*," a special feature on the *Saving Private Ryan* Special Edition DVD (Dreamworks Video, 1999).

explaining the build-up to and outbreak of war in Europe. The last image—also in black and white and with faux grain, scratches, and projection lines to artificially age the image of an air field—transitions to color, as if an archival image were “coming to life.”

In partitioning off the archival footage in intermittent montage sequences, *Pearl Harbor* treats such black-and-white footage as both a stand-in for history and an old-fashioned and now-antiquated way of conveying information. The montage of archival footage may show history “as it really happened,” but only modern movies—the film seems to suggest—with their vivid colors and more mobile cinematography can fully transport the viewer into the past. The transition from monotone to color at the end of each sequence reminds the viewer that the events depicted in the film belong to this earlier time, but it also calls attention to the discontinuity between past conventions of filmmaking and present ones. In their lushness, their variety, and their placement within a personalized narrative, the color images are *like* history, only better. The vibrant colors, reminiscent of Technicolor, along with the mise-en-scène, rich costuming, period hairstyles, and old-fashioned props, transport the spectator into the past. Yet this past is a fully cinematic past distinguished from “real” history by the break from black-and-white to color.²¹⁹

The film’s obsession with archival footage also invades the diegesis. Danny and Evelyn reunite after both walking out of a movie theater showing a newsreel about the Battle of Britain.²²⁰ In another scene, an intelligence analyst (Dan Aykroyd) projects aerial surveillance

²¹⁹ *Pearl Harbor*’s cinematographer John Schwartzman explains his color choices: “Our idea was that we were making a modern movie in 1941. A lot of early photo books from the war had these kinds of dye-transfer prints made from old photographs that had a beautiful, aquamarine, overall color palette that we liked. We wanted the love story to have a very classic, traditional feel and not be heavy-handed.” Quoted in Christopher Probst, “One Nation, Under Siege,” *American Cinematographer* 82, no. 5 (May 2001), 39.

²²⁰ Although it contains a Movietone News title screen and archival footage of Japanese ambassadors and Winston Churchill that were clearly shot by newsreel cameras of the time, the newsreel itself is a fabrication with a contemporary voiceover imitating the news announcers of the 1940s.

footage to demonstrate that the Japanese naval fleet has disappeared, leading him to later propose that they intend to attack Pearl Harbor. Finally, a newsreel cameraman briefly becomes a minor character in the film. He records some of the action during the Pearl Harbor attack, including Danny and Rafe's efforts to defend the island from the attackers. Images from the newsreel camera are intercut into the regular action, showing the events as if through the camera's lens. The images are shaky, low to the ground, and handheld, as well as being monochromatic. Although this filmmaking style (other than the black and white) in no way resembles any of the footage that actually was taken during or directly after the Pearl Harbor attack,²²¹ these faux-newsreel images mimic the documentary-inspired techniques that influenced the combat sequences of *Saving Private Ryan*.

By showing the filming of the diegetic reenactments of the Pearl Harbor attack as if they were real, these faux-newsreel images make the process of recording and documenting history a part of the film, bringing this issue to the foreground. While this could be considered a self-reflexive move that is designed to make the audience question the reality of exactly what is being filmed, instead it seems to work here to impress spectators with a sense of realism. After all, with the ubiquity of video recording technology today, contemporary spectators seem to have been convinced that something is not history unless it has been recorded in audiovisual media in some way. So the only way to turn the fictional actions of Danny and Rafe into official "History" is to show them in the process of being recorded for posterity. The film also shows, however, why more of the attack could not have been filmed, as the newsreel camera's images betray that the camera has been blasted from the cameraman's hands by the attack. When the

²²¹ Very little footage of the attack exists and the footage that does exist was taken by trained cameramen who used tripods to stabilize the image. These documentary images were also taken from far distances away, not in the midst of the action.

camera lands, it shows the cameraman's dying face, enacting another cliché about how the newsreel camera captures a truth of war and death that transcends the life of the cameraman himself.

Flags of Our Fathers also uses the documentary-like techniques of *Saving Private Ryan*, especially in its desaturated colors and use of shaky, handheld camera for combat scenes. But it also mixes these techniques with dream sequences, diegetic reenactments, and extensive digital effects. The first images of the film show a young man in combat gear (who, we later learn, is medic John "Doc" Bradley [Ryan Phillippe]) running through a deserted landscape of black sand, trying to locate the source of the voice yelling, "Corpsman!"²²² The next shot reveals this to be the dream of "Doc" as an old man. The majority of *Flags of Our Fathers* takes place in 1945, during the Battle of Iwo Jima and the "Mighty 7th" Bond Drive that commenced shortly after. It follows the fates of the flag-raisers in the well-known photograph, particularly the three who survived the fighting on Iwo Jima: "Doc" Bradley (Phillippe), Rene Gagnon (Jesse Bradford), and Ira Hayes (Adam Beach). The film plays with the spectator's perception by initially blurring the lines between memory, dream, reenactment, and actual event. Soon after the initial dream sequence, we see "Doc," Rene, and Ira climbing a rocky hill in their combat gear, surrounded by smoke, sounds of explosions, and lights in the distant night sky. As they get to the top and put up the flag, the sounds of explosions shift to sounds of cheering. As the camera tilts down, we realize they are not in battle, but rather taking part in a vast reenactment on a papier-mâché set in the midst of fireworks and a football stadium full of cheering fans. When the film returns to this scene later in the film, the walk up the faux-mountain, the bright

²²² In World War II, corpsmen were U.S. Navy medics who provided battlefield medical services for the U.S. Marine Corps, who did not have their own trained medical staff. John Bradley was a Pharmacist's Mate Second Class in the U.S. Navy, but served with the 2nd Battalion, 28th Marines, of the 5th Marine Division during the Battle of Iwo Jima.

lights, and the pops and bangs of the fireworks trigger memories for the three surviving flag-raisers and, subsequently, the film transitions to flashbacks of the traumatic deaths of the other flag-raisers. Because the combat scenes are often placed within the film as memory-triggered flashbacks, the quaking camera and flat colors seem more subjective than the objectivity supposed by them in *Saving Private Ryan*. This same cinematography and color palette are used in the dream sequence that opens the film, as well. The scenes set during the bond drive, however, look quite different, with bright colors and more conventional cinematography. The documentary-type style is associated then with traumatic memory, more than merely “reality.”

Flags of Our Fathers thematically opposes reenactments with photographic evidence. When the main characters reenact the flag-raising during the bond drive, it is presented as a bastardized version of the real thing. Ira, the moral conscience of the film, accuses the tour of being a farce. Everything in the reenactments has a bright and shiny look, in stark contrast with the washed-out, dirty look of the combat sequences. The perceptual trick played on the audience at the beginning of the film—making their stadium reenactment appear like the actual battle—only reinforces the difference between them. One is a nightmare, while the other is a safe and cheery celebration without any of the danger, violence, or fear present at the original. Perhaps the most disturbing, and most damning, “reenactment” takes the form of miniature cakes made in the shape of the flag-raising pose. At a gala celebration as part of the bond drive, the three flag-raisers are given the option of strawberry or chocolate sauce for the cakes. “Doc” watches the blood-red strawberry syrup being poured over their likenesses, triggering a gruesome flashback showing the wounded on Iwo Jima.

More than the other films, *Flags of Our Fathers* acknowledges how photographs act not only as records, but also as symbols. The whole conceit of the film is an investigation into the

circumstances behind the famous flag-raising photograph taken at the top of Mt. Suribachi on Iwo Jima. The film shows that photographs create myths and mystify history as much as they document it. The celebrated Iwo Jima photograph—itself something of a reenactment, since it depicts merely a replacement flag, the second flag to be put up that day—does more than capturing a moment in time; it captures the hopes of Americans, the desire for victory and the necessity of working together to achieve it. It symbolizes the unity and consensus assumed to be the public zeitgeist of the World War II era in the U.S.

On one level, *Flags of Our Fathers* challenges the photograph, seeking to explain and perhaps undermine its power to gloss over the actual history in favor of a more “heroic” narrative. However, it does not discredit the photograph and its power. A voiceover early in the film concludes with the statement: “The right picture can win—or lose—a war.” He mentions the famous Eddie Adams picture from the Vietnam War of a Vietnamese officer executing a Viet Cong prisoner: “That was it. The war was lost.” In this one explicit reference to the Vietnam War, the film evokes the horror and bloodshed of the conflict only to contrast it with the received narrative of World War II, the “good war.” The film shows that the Iwo Jima photograph maintains its power to inspire, despite its less than heroic origin as a mere replacement flag hoisted by everyday servicemen. Even as the film tries to demystify the photograph, it still celebrates it and its sentimental intensity. As the actors reenact the pose in the film, it briefly pauses, letting the audience contemplate the immortalized moment. *Flags of Our Fathers* also displays original photographs of the flag-raisers and combat on Iwo Jima during the credit sequence at the end of the film. While it shows pictures of the first flag-raising and other lesser known photographs taken before, during, and after the famous flag-raising, the last image that the film dwells on and returns to is the famous Iwo Jima photograph itself. Instead of being

discredited, the photograph stands, after viewing the film, as an even more powerful testament to the honor and virtue of the servicemen who defended their country.

Like *Saving Private Ryan* and *Pearl Harbor*, *Flags of Our Fathers* is nostalgic for celluloid in the form of photographs or film. For each of the films, celluloid is associated with the eye-witness account, with a transparency of experience; film seems unmediated, to give an unvarnished truth. The photographic gives a glimpse of the real—the real nature of the enemy (as in *Flags'* photographs of Japanese beheadings that the soldiers pass around), the reality of death, the reality of combat and fighting for survival, the reality of war. It is thus linked melodramatically and symbolically with the film's attempt to honor soldiers and to recognize their virtue. These films seem to suggest that only celluloid can produce a visual truth about these honorable soldiers.

4.4 DIGITIZING THE PAST

The fact that these films employ digital special effects, however, implicitly works against their adulation of conventional, celluloid-based photographs and films. What *Flags of Our Fathers*, in particular, does not acknowledge is its own status as one large reenactment of the Battle of Iwo Jima and the Mighty 7th Bond Drive. Thus, in the words of Ira Hayes, it is itself a “farce,” simulating the past with the tools of the present. As with the other contemporary films discussed here, the production team of *Flags* assembled a wealth of historical reference material, including photographs and films taken at Iwo Jima during the battle, and studied them closely before and during the making of the film. According to visual effects supervisor Michael Owen:

We never looked at the iconic images in those photographs and in the moving footage [of combat on Iwo Jima], and said, ‘Okay, we’re going to create this specific shot.’ We just emotionally digested all of these images, and went out and shot the movie. But, strangely enough, when it was all done, the shots from the movie looked *just like* the documentary and still shots from the real Iwo Jima. It was uncanny.²²³

Yet the only way for them to achieve this “uncanny” reproduction of historical reference material was through the use of digital effects.

A significant way the historical reference material interacted with computer-generated reconstructions is through the creation of digital set extensions. The massive beach landings on Iwo Jima, for instance, were shot on a black-sand beach in Iceland with the primary cast and hundreds of extras. Although the beach visually matched that of Iwo Jima, computer-generated imagery was necessary to extend Iceland’s three-quarter-mile beach into Iwo Jima’s three-mile beach, as well as to extend it inland.²²⁴ Backgrounds with Mt. Suribachi or other parts of the island were created completely digitally. Because Eastwood and his cinematographer, Tom Stern, used a constantly moving, handheld camera to depict much of the combat, these digital “set” extensions had to be built within the computer using 3D graphics, so that as the camera moved around the actors in the foreground, the backgrounds would shift accordingly as well.²²⁵

Thus, despite all the nostalgia for celluloid—in their visual style, their references to documentary photographs and films from the 1940s, and their inclusion of photographs and films in the narratives—these contemporary war films were all made, and increasingly over time, with

²²³ Quoted in Jody Duncan, “One for All Time,” *Cinefex* 107 (Oct. 2006), 46.

²²⁴ The production chose not to film on the actual Iwo Jima beach because it is still considered sacred ground to the Japanese. Iwo Jima is also far too lush with vegetation today; during the 1945 invasion, the island was mostly devoid of greenery because of days of bombing. With its colder climate, Iceland’s lack of vegetation better matched the 1945 Iwo Jima beachhead. See Duncan, “One for All Time,” 44-5.

²²⁵ “3D” computer graphics are mathematical representations of three-dimensional objects and spaces stored within a computer. Although ultimately 3D models are usually displayed in two dimensions on a computer screen or when rendered in a film, they differ from 2D graphics by containing spatial data. They can be rotated, animated, and modified within virtual space along three axes, whereas 2D graphics may have the appearance of three dimensions (through shading, for instance) but exist only on a “flat” plane.

digital effects. *Flags of Our Fathers*, made in the mid-2000's with the most advanced technology, is the most extreme example, utilizing digital landscapes, vehicles, explosions, water, and even people. (*Flags* used the Massive software originally created to create vast digital armies in the *Lord of the Rings* films to generate crowds of people, usually seen in long shot, for combat scenes as well as scenes of the bond drive.) But even *Saving Private Ryan*, made in the 1990s and specifically rejecting many digital technologies that had even then become standard²²⁶, used digital effects to manipulate the mise-en-scène, including applying digital gore to wounded bodies. As in the example from *Flags of Our Fathers*, in which digital set extensions were necessary to fill out the backgrounds of handheld shots, some of the stylistic efforts to mimic the effects of a particular style of celluloid documentary (such as artificial lens flares) were only possible through the use of digital effects.²²⁷

The films are thus torn between a nostalgic homage to 1940s films and the look of celluloid, on the one hand, and a playful indulgence in those cinematic images only available through the use of digital technology, on the other. Part of the goal of these films is to reproduce what audiences have come to associate with “truthful” images of World War II, and thus they recreate documentary or documentary-like images: the desaturated colors of the combat sequences²²⁸; the faux-newsreels of *Pearl Harbor*; the erratic, handheld, and low-angle cinematography used to represent combat in all three films. Yet their other goal is to wow viewers with a never-before-seen experience, to reinvent and update the war for contemporary audiences. Therefore, they utilize the wide-angle shots of computer-generated ships; the

²²⁶ For instance, *Saving Private Ryan* was the last film to win an Academy Award for film editing that was edited by hand, rather than using a nonlinear, digital editing system like Avid.

²²⁷ While *Flags of Our Fathers* was shot on film, it was processed using a digital intermediate, allowing the filmmakers to digitally alter aspects of the image in postproduction, such as contrast, color, and lighting.

²²⁸ Even the combat sequences in *Pearl Harbor* utilized a washed-out color palette. Cinematographer John Schwartzman explains: “My goal was to create a rich, colorful movie, then have everything turn almost black-and-white during the bombing.” Quoted in Probst, 42.

swooping, bird's-eye-view shots that could only be created with virtual cinematography over a digital landscape; the images of limbs or heads violently torn from bodies, created or altered through computer-generated imagery. One of the most memorable sequences from *Pearl Harbor* includes the remarkable shot following a bomb as it drops from an airplane, as if the camera were attached to the back of the bomb. Everything in this shot had to be computer generated, including the ships and people on the ground, the water, the sky, and even the bomb itself. Visual effects supervisor Ed Hirsch explains how they devised the shot:

That was a very difficult shot because the design of it was so stylized, so unrealistic. It was something you could never do in real life—shoot that bomb coming out of the plane and then follow it all the way down—so that meant we had to work that much harder to make it look real. ... We worked on it a long time to make it look as if a camera operator was really shooting this—getting it not too perfect, with just the right kind of camera wobble.²²⁹

Digital technology allowed the filmmakers to create a completely impossible shot, but one that is visually engaging and viscerally thrilling, as the viewer seems to fall along with the bomb, all the while knowing that it will end in a vast explosion. At the same time, though, care was taken to ensure that the shot would “look real,” and this entailed mimicking the “camera wobble” that would result from a traditional handheld camera following the bomb from behind.

The explosive results of this bomb are shown in a shot remarkable for how it combines the opposing impulses to nostalgically emulate documentary footage and to create with digital techniques something that, in words attributed to director Michael Bay, “looks cool.”²³⁰ The bomb falls on the U.S.S. *Arizona*, whose historical sinking was famous and emblematic of the destruction caused during the Pearl Harbor attack. The explosion and sinking of the *Arizona* killed more than 1,000 sailors (nearly half of all the American deaths during the attack), but the

²²⁹ Quoted in Jody Duncan, “More War,” *Cinefex* 86 (July 2001), 88.

²³⁰ “Make something that looks cool” were the instructions given to visual effects art director Alex Jaeger by Michael Bay and visual effects supervisor Eric Brevig. See Duncan, “More War,” 88.

Arizona is also well known because the enormous explosion that sank it was captured on film by a Fox Movietone cameraman.²³¹ The explosion was particularly impressive since the bomb ignited thousands of pounds of ammunitions being stored on the ship. When designing their recreation of this infamous event, Bay and his visual effects team consulted the extant footage of the *Arizona*'s explosion. However, despite the authenticity and quality of the footage, they found that it was not dramatic enough; it did not give enough of a jolt to the viewer, even though it showed the actual event causing the death of hundreds. Visual effects supervisor Eric Brevig explains, “It was a big explosion, but it wasn’t interesting visually. Battleships are so big that they actually stress when they blow up, so we [decided we] wanted to see this 600-foot metal ship ‘flex’ briefly before the explosion ripped through its skin. That’s something we could only do with CG.”²³² In this instance, a desire to mimic the documentary footage of the actual event was trumped by the desire to create something that looked “cool.” The historical footage was “improved upon” to visually represent the flexing of the ship’s hull, something that happened too quickly for the human eye to perceive. With digital technology, however, these temporal limitations do not restrict what can and cannot be represented.

In their unique and occasionally contradictory uses of celluloid and digital effects, contemporary World War II combat films hold in tension a drive to show something never before seen with a drive to nostalgically recreate something familiar from the past. Although the examples of digital effects described above went beyond what a traditional, celluloid camera would have been able to capture, they also added to the sense of immersive realism that contemporary war films are known for. A shot like the one following the bomb as it falls may

²³¹ As I note in Chapter 1, this shot was intercut into John Ford’s abbreviated version of *December 7th*. For more about this famous shot, see my Chapter 1, as well as Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 231-2.

²³² Quoted in Ron Magid, “Allied Powers,” *American Cinematographer* 82, no. 8 (Aug. 2001), 73.

momentarily disorient the spectator, but it effectively plunges the spectator's senses into the virtual space and time of the film. Thus, digital techniques and nostalgic, documentary-inspired techniques work hand in hand to create an engrossing form of corporeal realism. Accordingly, the realism of these films' combat scenes stems as much from their approximation of the subjective experience of war as from their attempt to objectively "document" the settings and events of the war.

The documentary-inspired techniques of shaky cinematography, blurred focus, and low-to-the-ground angles add a sense of realism because of their association with earlier cinematic records of combat. But they also aid the vicarious impression that you as spectator are right there on the ground with the soldiers, as if you were seeing through the eyes and hearing through the ears of one of the participants in the action. The use of slow motion and "point of view" sound in *Saving Private Ryan* emphasizes this impression. In the first combat scene on Omaha Beach, slow motion is used to represent Captain Miller's experience of shock and horror as he watches the carnage on the beach in front of him. Through the slow motion, we see Miller with a stunned look on his face, as well as point-of-view shots of some of the things he sees, such as a man whose arm has been blown off wandering around as if in a daze. The dampening of the sound—eliminating all diegetic sound except for a slight buzzing hum—also aids the sense of perceptual identification with Miller. Other innovations, such as blood and dirt on the camera lens, enhance the sense of "there-ness," but also acknowledge the existence of the camera. Paradoxically, this does not seem to distance viewers, but rather draws them deeper into the sense of immersion.

In each of the films discussed in this chapter, combat is represented as a shock for which the characters are unprepared. Consequently, combat is placed within the plot of each film so

that the spectator is unready to experience it. In *Saving Private Ryan*, the longest and most brutal combat scene occurs not at the end of the film (as was standard practice in most combat films), but at the very beginning, following only a very brief sequence showing an old man (later revealed as Private Ryan) at the Normandy military cemetery. The fact that spectators have not yet been introduced to the film's characters heightens the engagement with the experience of battle, untied to the specific motivations and consequences attached to particular characters. In *Flags of Our Fathers*, the combat sequences are generally motivated by flashbacks, so the spectator never knows when something might trigger Ira or "Doc" to mentally return to violent moments of their past. *Pearl Harbor* is somewhat more predictable, since audiences most likely know to expect the surprise attack on the Hawaiian island on December 7, 1941, and there are plenty of clues as to when that date will arrive. Yet the concussive explosions and the extreme violence (even with its PG-13 rating) are surprising in their departure from the slow-paced drama of the love story preceding the attack.

These combat scenes are designed to break down the barrier between the film and the audience. The combination of ultrarealistic violence with subjective cinematography (and sound) enhances the sense that the violence is being inflicted on the audience as well. The suffering of the soldiers that goes a long way to prove their virtue becomes the suffering of the audience, as they are made to cinematically identify with the onscreen pain. The spectator might cringe, wince, or look away, mirroring some of the expressions on screen. The suffering is not just seen, but felt in the spectator's own body, becoming aware of its vulnerability and fragility.²³³ The violence enhances empathy with the soldier, as the shocks the spectator receives

²³³ Linda Williams has explored this kind of character/spectator mirroring in her study of "body genres," specifically pornography, horror, and melodrama. In these genres, she notes, "the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen." See Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender,

at the images and sounds of suffering mirror the shocks a soldier would feel. At the end of these combat sequences, spectators feel like they have been through something, that they have emerged (relatively) unscathed along with the other lucky survivors within the film. This sense of perceptual identification and corporeal realism, however, only assists in the melodramatic workings of the film, as this makes the recognition of virtue more close and urgent.

4.5 “EARN THIS”: AMERICAN SOLDIERS AS VICTIM-HEROES

In addition to increasing the sense of perceptual and sensual realism, digital special effects increase the ability to create graphic depictions of wounded and dying bodies. Filmmakers were able to justify upping the gore quotient in combat sequences by relying on the same tropes of realistic discourse previously established. Only through historical realism can the heroic deeds of war be truly acknowledged and honored. Only by “getting it right” can justice to those who served and died be done. Showing such extreme violence is thus rationalized not only by an aesthetic decision, but a moral one. Many film reviewers defend the use of grisly and repugnant images in war films that they would rail against in other genres as assaults on public decency. Many critics called for the most graphic scene of *Saving Private Ryan*—the Omaha Beach combat sequence—to be shown in every high school in America, echoing President Clinton’s statement of similar sentiment. Realism thus must be contextualized within these complex cultural, aesthetic, and ethical discourses in order to understand the pass given to these gruesome images of violence in a culture that has previously blamed violent imagery in other popular

Genre, and Excess,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, 5th edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 704.

sources for juvenile delinquency and crime. Meanwhile, the highest cultural gatekeepers in the land—from the president to the mainstream news organizations—are calling for youth who are likely too young to watch an R-rated film like *Saving Private Ryan* in the theaters to view the most intense and shockingly horrific scene of the film.

To watch such imagery is presented, in this context, as an ethical and patriotic duty, rather than a prurient or deviant act. To consider such imagery in another way, it is useful to imagine the same images—bloody intestines hanging out of an abdomen, a mutilated and detached limb lying on the ground, blood dripping on the lens of the camera—in a culturally disreputable genre, such as a low-budget slasher film. Why is it that one usage of horrific imagery is acceptable and the other is not, when the images themselves might be the same? It is in these scenes of violence and horror that the specter of the Vietnam War comes into play. While episodes in any war of the twentieth century had the potential to be just as ghastly, the Vietnam War was in part responsible for the loosening of restrictions regarding the depiction of violence in American cinema. Although, as Stephen Prince argues in *Classical Film Violence*, the World War II combat film in the 1940s opened the doors in the first place to more graphic portrayals of violence, it was the Vietnam War that inspired filmmakers like Sam Peckinpah to push the envelope even further.²³⁴ Prince argues elsewhere, “The savage bloodshed of the Vietnam War established a context whereby filmmakers felt justified in reaching for new levels of screen violence. Moreover, the war and the political assassinations of the 1960s fed a general cultural fascination with violence to which the movies responded.”²³⁵ The influence of 1970s

²³⁴ Stephen Prince, *Classical Film Violence: Designing and Regulating Brutality in Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1968* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), especially 155-64.

²³⁵ Stephen Prince, “Graphic Violence in the Cinema: Origins, Aesthetic Design, and Social Effects,” in *Screening Violence*, ed. Prince (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 8.

directors like Peckinpah and Arthur Penn can be seen in the close-up and slow-motion shots of violence frequently found in contemporary war films.

In evoking the Vietnam War in this way, however, contemporary World War II films reference a body of cinema with very different representations of the American armed forces. Many Vietnam War films, generally from the 1970s and 1980s, paint the U.S. military system as being dehumanizing, soul-crushing, authoritarian, racist, and imperialistic. In films like *Apocalypse Now*, *Casualties of War* (Brian de Palma, 1989), and *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986), American soldiers are often presented as villains themselves for participating in the rape and murder of innocent civilians. At the same time, however, a number of films—including *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (Oliver Stone, 1989)—portray Vietnam veterans as victims, either physically or psychologically wounded by the war.

In their nostalgic return to World War II, films like *Saving Private Ryan* reach back to a previous time and earlier war whose atrocities, civilian deaths, and war crimes committed by the U.S. have been whitewashed over time. By revisiting the character of the honorable World War II soldier, these films could pretend that events like the My Lai massacre never occurred. The American soldier could thus be redeemed by moving back in time. But more was necessary to make up for the more recent cultural memory of Vietnam. These soldiers are thus shown to suffer—with all of the extreme gore available to filmmakers since the Vietnam War—and it is through this suffering that they are both punished and redeemed. American servicemen are thus turned into what Linda Williams calls “victim-heroes,” whose virtue is finally recognized in the melodramatic narratives of these war films.²³⁶

²³⁶ Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 29.

In the 1940s films I discussed in earlier chapters, U.S. soldiers showed heroism by taking courageous action or choosing to sacrifice themselves for a larger cause. The meaning of this cause was explicitly delineated in propagandistic speeches and government-approved dialogue. The conversion narrative played a large role in these films, as once-reluctant soldiers, sailors, and marines learned the virtue of this larger cause and the value of sacrificing themselves for it.²³⁷ In contemporary films, on the other hand, virtue is linked to what the soldiers endure—physical and psychological pain, the gruesome deaths of friends, unexpected ambushes, a brutal and practically unseen enemy—not what they accomplish. To a large extent, the transition occurred because of the war in Vietnam and its cinematic depictions, showing American soldiers engaging in murder, drug abuse, rape, prostitution, and wanton destruction. However, Williams argues, melodrama “has long been the alchemy whereby we turn our deepest sense of guilt into a testament of our virtue.”²³⁸ Thus, showing the suffering of soldiers turns them into victims, thereby deserving of our sympathy. This display of bodily suffering is linked both to redemption and to punishment. American soldiers must be shown to “pay for” their (cinematic) sins. The extreme violence of the Omaha Beach sequence of *Saving Private Ryan*—as well as the combat sequences of *Flags of Our Fathers* and even the December 7th attack in *Pearl Harbor*—participates in a visceral shock, but also a Christian iconography of virtuous suffering. This is made most explicit at the end of *Pearl Harbor* when Danny is tied up by his Japanese captors

²³⁷ Often this sacrifice was only to give time to others that may succeed where they failed. Thus in films like *Wake Island* (John Farrow, 1942), *Bataan* (Tay Garnett, 1943), or *Objective Burma!* (Raoul Walsh, 1945), the missions fail, leading to the deaths of many if not all, but their sacrifice allowed others to escape or to gain some ground elsewhere. For more on the conversion narrative, see Lary May, “Hollywood and the World War II Conversion Narrative,” in *Hollywood and War: The Film Reader*, ed. J. David Slocum (New York: Routledge, 2006), 183-94.

²³⁸ Williams, “Melodrama Revised,” in *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 80-1.

with his arms outstretched like Jesus on the cross. He then sacrifices his own life to save Rafe's.²³⁹

At the same time, the excessive, corporeal violence of these films can be seen as a kind of punishment, what Williams describes as the “trial by ordeal” which is sometimes covertly embedded into melodramatic spectacles.²⁴⁰ Violence serves as a way to purge the sense of guilt over Vietnam and other conflicts in which the American military is the “bad guy.” Through the depiction of war as a depersonalized and apolitical force that accosts soldiers unrelentingly and seemingly without reason, however, the “bad guy” becomes the victim and secures the sympathy of the viewers. It is significant in all of these films that the enemy is so rarely seen, particularly in the large-scale combat sequences, which focus on massive explosions (*Pearl Harbor*) or a wall of gunfire punctuated by larger explosions (*Saving Private Ryan* and *Flags of Our Fathers*). None of this weaponry seems motivated or directed so much as random and unpredictable. Thus, the issue of guilt is made almost irrelevant, as American soldiers face an overwhelming and seemingly unchangeable force. Unlike earlier World War II films, the emphasis is not on the heroic action that resolves the violence (like John Wayne single-handedly blowing up a bunker²⁴¹), but instead the experience of the violence itself. The success of the victim-heroes in fending off the enemy can only be fragmentary and partial at best.

²³⁹ *Saving Private Ryan* also includes Christian symbolism, especially the rows of crosses in the cemetery that open and close the film. As Molly Brown points out in her dissertation, “Nation, Nostalgia and Masculinity: Clinton/Spielberg/Hanks” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2009), the cross motif reoccurs in the scene in which Mrs. Ryan receives word of her sons’ deaths. As she looks out the window at the approaching car, the reflection of a white picket fence seems to be transformed into a row of white crosses (316). Also, Captain Miller has been read as a Christ-like figure: he “arrive[s] from the outside with a group of disciples on an errand of mercy and eventually lays down his life so that another might live.” See Robert K. Johnston, *Reel Spirituality: Theology and Film in Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2000), 61.

²⁴⁰ Williams, “Melodrama Revised,” 81.

²⁴¹ As he does in the Battle of Tarawa in *Sands of Iwo Jima* (Allan Dwan, 1949).

This trial by fire transforms the soldier from deadly weapon to vulnerable target. Instead of tough guys, these films are filled with sensitive citizen-soldiers. Captain Miller in *Saving Private Ryan* is not the typical cigar-chomping, cynical noncommissioned officer of some postwar films; rather, he is a former teacher whose trademark is his uncontrollably shaking hand.²⁴² Danny and Rafe in *Pearl Harbor*, for all their bravado in playing “chicken” while flying their planes, are defined as much by how they are reduced to bumbling bundles of nerves while in the presence of Evelyn. The tone of *Flags of Our Fathers* is set by Ira Hayes, who psychologically relives the horrors of war and is reduced to pathos-filled tears every time he drinks. Traumatized by his combat experience, he becomes an alcoholic and ends up poor and alone, dying young. As in any melodrama, these characters stand not just for themselves, but act as personifications of larger forces. By condensing all of the American military and the experience of war into a handful of characters, these films metamorphose abstract entities associated (now, after Vietnam) with guilt and suspicion into virtuous innocents, victim-heroes worthy of our empathy and respect. Instead of heroic triumphalism, the primary tone of these films is one of loss, as if acknowledging that the adventure stories of war from the past are no longer available to us.

By painting the American soldier as a victim and dwelling on his physical suffering, these films make their moral landscape legible. Even though issues of meaning and virtue are brought up as questions, the films go out of their way to reassure viewers with comforting answers. Highlighting the importance of finding meaning in destruction, Rafe, in *Pearl Harbor*,

²⁴² Films with a cigar-chomping sergeant include *Battleground* (William A. Wellman, 1949) and *The Steel Helmet* (Samuel Fuller, 1951). Interestingly, an early draft of Robert Rodat’s screenplay described Captain Miller in this same fashion: “Relaxed, battle-hardened, powerful, ignoring the hell around them. He smiles, puts a cigar in his mouth, strikes a match on the front of DeLancey’s helmet and lights the cigar.” This version of the screenplay is available online at Drew’s Script-O-Rama, http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/s/saving-private-ryan-script-screenplay.html.

makes clear that he is “not anxious to die, just anxious to matter.” On their way to bomb Tokyo, Danny and Rafe question what their sacrifice would mean if they never made it back. The answer, arriving in a speech by Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle (Alec Baldwin) himself, is belief in America’s might: “Victory belongs to those who believe in it the most and believe in it the longest. We’re gonna believe. We’re gonna make America believe too.”

In *Flags of Our Fathers*, the question of larger purpose is posed most dramatically in the hyperbolic staging of the bond tour, in which the three surviving flag-raisers must play-act their parts. Bud Gerber (John Slattery), their Treasury Department representative, cynically describes one drive event as being “so moving” it will make people “shit money.” Ira, the moral conscience of the film, accuses the tour of being a farce. Yet this prompts the usually contemptuous Gerber to defend the tour as the only way to win the war, since the government has run out of money: “You think this is a farce? You want to go back to your buddies? Well, stuff some rocks in your pockets before you get on the plane, because that’s all we got left to throw at the Japanese.” He finally declares that, despite what the flag-raisers say about the insignificance of their action, their photograph has meaning because it gives America hope: “People on the street corners, they looked at this picture and they took hope... It said, ‘We can win this war, are winning this war. We just need you to dig a little deeper.’” Accordingly, although Ira, “Doc,” and Rene may not be heroes just for raising a flag, the film shows them undoubtedly to be heroes in their concern for their fellow marines, their willingness to sacrifice themselves, and their endurance of suffering. As the closing voice-over intones, “The risks they took, the wounds they suffered, they did that for their buddies. They may have fought for their country, but they died for their friends, for the man in front and the man beside him.”

Saving Private Ryan also has its group of soldiers question whether their mission—and in extension, the war itself—is “worth it.” In the end, this question hinges on the virtue of Private Ryan himself, the human objective of the mission and the embodiment of the heartland of America. At the end of the final combat sequence, Captain Miller’s dying words to Ryan are “Earn this.” The film ends with a digital morph turning the young Ryan’s face into an aged man in the film’s present. The elderly Ryan collapses in front of, and later, stands and salutes, Miller’s grave at the U.S. military cemetery in Normandy. Ryan recognizes Miller’s virtuous sacrifice here, and in doing so, demonstrates his own virtue. This demonstration has a diegetic audience, however—that of his family, his wife, his children, and his grandchildren. In emotional anguish in front of his grave, Ryan recalls Miller’s last words and, doubting himself, asks of his wife, “Tell me I have led a good life. Tell me I’m a good man.” His wife reassures him, but she and the family behind him, witness to his recognition of another man’s virtue, are the proof of Ryan’s virtue. By creating a family—a “good” family that recognizes the virtues of veterans—Ryan has reproduced the symbols of what America is and what soldiers fight for. He has created his own idyllic picture of a traditional American family, who in their recognition of Ryan’s and, vicariously, Miller’s virtue also prove their own virtue.

The framing device of the film explicitly works to recognize virtue by linking self-sacrificial suffering to the redemption of America through the iconography of the family. It is thus on a personalized level that a larger redemption is enacted. *Saving Private Ryan* evokes the Vietnam War in its cynical, mission-questioning soldiers and its extremely graphic depictions of war’s brutality, but it also seeks to redeem American soldiers from their association with Vietnam’s atrocities by showing them suffering and ultimately redeemed. The corporeal realism of the combat sequences works to make this recognition of virtue felt by the spectator. The

sensations experienced by the spectating body are used to orchestrate the moral universe into the recognition of a “felt good.” By suffering (vicariously) ourselves, we recognize the suffering of the victim-heroes emotionally and viscerally.

4.6 MORPHING HISTORY

The prominent use of the digital morphing technology in the last scene—turning the young Ryan into the old man at the cemetery—calls attention to the cinematic material used to create the images of *Saving Private Ryan*. The cemetery scenes that open and close the film are shot in a different way than the rest of the film, using more conventional cinematography and editing. Instead of the anti-Steadicam aesthetic of the combat sequences, the cinematography of these scenes is stable and clear, utilizing smooth panning and tracking shots among the grave markers. Long shots of the cemetery utilize symmetry and balanced visual patterning, and close-ups of the characters’ faces are steady. In a shot of the aged Ryan standing in front of a grave, the camera is low to the ground for dramatic effect rather than to mimic documentary cameramen in the field. The device used to link these two parts of the film—the combat sequences in the past and the cemetery sequences in the present—is the digital morph, reminding us of the changed cinematic technologies of the present day. The conversion of the young Ryan into the old Ryan parallels the outmoding of celluloid, drawing a comparison between the bodies shown on screen and the body of the film itself. Ryan’s face does not appear to age, but rather it morphs into the older face, presenting for a few split seconds a bizarre hybrid of two faces. Just as the young face strangely and artificially moves into the elderly face, the physical body of film is now different, existing as a digital file on a computer rather than a physical set of film reels.

The digital morph is used at the end of *Saving Private Ryan* in order to disclose a crucial piece of information. It reveals that the old man shown at the very beginning of the film wandering through the Normandy cemetery is *not* Captain Miller. The film leads the viewer to believe that the man is Miller because his emotional collapse in front of a grave appears to motivate a flashback to Omaha Beach, which focuses on Miller, using subjective sound and point of view to approximate his first-person experience. It may be a shock then when Miller dies at the end of the film, because the viewer has assumed that he lives and grows old, perhaps collapsing at Ryan's headstone remembering that he failed to save him. Miller, however, following the melodramatic logic and Christian symbolism of the film, sacrifices himself so that Ryan may live. But the digital morph is shocking for more than this plot-based surprise. It is also visually aberrant, standing out from the rest of the film, which uses digital effects in such a way as to render them invisible. Unlike *Flags of Our Fathers*, there are few wide, high-angle shots showing digitized masses of military vehicles, ships, or fighting men. The morph is the one place in the film that digital technology calls attention to itself.

This peculiar use of computer-generated imagery holds in tension competing messages regarding the “end of cinema.” On the one hand, *Saving Private Ryan* venerates the celluloid-based documentary images of combat made during World War II, from Robert Capa’s still photographs to John Huston’s harrowing combat scenes in *San Pietro*. In referencing the latter, Spielberg ignores the history of staging in the creation of many early documentaries, including the ones that had such an impact and influence on his filmmaking. He uses the same “shaky-cam” techniques discussed in Chapter 2 to the same effect—to give the appearance that a camera is recording these events as they occurred. This gives the spectator a visceral jolt, as his body responds to the images almost as if he were experiencing the war first-hand. Although he knows,

of course, that this is a fictional portrayal, the combination of the corporeal realism with the historical content makes a strong impression of reality. This impression is dependent upon an association of celluloid-based film with the creation of an objective record of objects in time. Instead of following this logic exactly, *Saving Private Ryan* instead fetishizes this association, drawing attention to markers of celluloid and the presence of the camera—like blurred focus, lens flare, shaky cinematography, and blood and dirt on the lens. Celluloid film is not thus used in a “classical” way to “invisibly” tell a story. Spielberg paradoxically relies on the notion of celluloid’s transparent recording of history while aestheticizing the images with falsified approximations of celluloid’s flaws.

On the other hand, the morph reveals in a spectacular way that *Saving Private Ryan* does indeed use digital technology, thus implying that celluloid was not sufficient for the telling of this story. Spielberg could have opted to use age make-up or other non-digital cinematic devices to reveal that Ryan survives and ages to become the old man at the cemetery. The morph, though, brings us into the present, both within the story of the film and within the production history. Despite its fascination with and fetishization of celluloid throughout the film, this scene shows that digital technology can tell different stories. Like the morph, digital technologies make everything present, inscribing the image with a different temporality. Existing as ones and zeroes in a computer, digital images have no history; they can be copied and moved without degrading or aging. The digital image is seemingly ageless, existing in the virtual time and space of computer storage, made present and constantly refreshed by the computer screen. As the digitally enhanced combat scenes of the films discussed in this chapter show, digital technology is excellent for spectacular sequences that thrill and jolt the spectator’s body. These scenes are

superior at making history feel present; the spectator is immersed in them, bombarded by images and sounds that feel here and now, unlike the black-and-white fragments of film from the past.

Saving Private Ryan uses digital imaging sparingly, unlike the more extensive uses in *Pearl Harbor* and *Flags of Our Fathers*. The latter films move more and more toward complete digital simulations of battles. These simulations can be found in the World War II video games I examine in the next chapter, where I will explore the consequences of digitizing history in more detail. Contemporary World War II combat films perform a curious balancing act between worshipping the past and its forms of representation and taking pleasure in the alternative spatial and temporal representations of digital technology. In one way, they show World War II to be in the idyllic and quaint past of a “simpler time” that is now lost; we nostalgically wish for its return, while acknowledging this impossibility. In another way, these films use digital technologies of imaging and storing to show that the war is still present to us. Through something like a digital morphing of history, we can access historical material through the click of a mouse. The filmmakers discussed here utilized and digitized historical material in order to recreate it through digital means, making it once again present to spectators. In acting as if watching *Saving Private Ryan*’s Omaha Beach sequence might do that same character-building as experiencing it first-hand, critics confuse and conflate two impulses in cinematic image-making: celluloid’s promise to objectively record a real event as it happens, and digital technology’s ability to reproduce images and other material and convert them to ageless documents, always present. These two competing ideologies of image-making combine in contemporary war films, making them fascinating portraits of both current beliefs about World War II and contemporary beliefs about analog and digital image-making.

5.0 SHOOT TO KILL: WORLD WAR II AND THE FIRST-PERSON SHOOTER VIDEO GAME

Throughout the preceding chapters, I have argued that World War II combat films hold in tension two competing narratives of the war. Thematically and in terms of their explicit narrative, the films conform to the typical American story of the war—a justified military intervention, a necessary sacrifice for which the whole nation united, a morally righteous use of military force. This story is particularized within individual films to domesticate the story and enable its repetition through various iterations. Thus, we see the father-like commanding officers such as Captain Cassidy of *Destination Tokyo* or Captain Miller of *Saving Private Ryan* overseeing the development of a ragtag bunch of inexperienced or cynical servicemen into a dedicated fighting force, unified by a common cause. But, on the other hand, the combat sequences tell a different story of the war. These parts of the films delight in images of destruction and violence on a mass scale. They engage spectators bodily in the thrills and excitements of combat, enacting a roller coaster of sensations and corporeal responses. These sequences come as close as the films come to showing the dark underside of the conventional story of the war: that, while it may have been justified by the need to fight fascism, the war resulted in a fixation on the spectacle of annihilation and the ecstatic pleasures (and pains) of fighting beyond all else. In this alternative story embedded within the combat sequences, what characterized the war is violence and destruction more than honor and sacrifice.

In the late 1990s, alongside the films that nostalgically returned to World War II, another medium simultaneously embraced the war as a setting for its texts: the video game. World War II video games, which are among the most highly acclaimed and frequently played games, participate in the same contemporary cultural investment in the war as the films discussed in the last chapter. However, the fact that in the case of the video game, the “viewer” becomes a “player” means that the relationship between the user and the medium changes. The interactivity of the video game appears to promise a different relation to the narrative and experience of the game, as well as a different relation to the history of the war. Although later in the chapter I will argue against the association of interactivity with either a more liberatory or a more genuine experience of history, the fact that the player simulates the activity of combat is crucial for my analysis. While the films showed a brief glimpse of an alternative narrative of World War II in their combat sequences, World War II shooter video games like *Medal of Honor* (Dreamworks Interactive/Electronic Arts, 1999)²⁴³ and *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward/Activision, 2003) illustrate this other story of the war in their very makeup. They feature nearly nonstop combat, extending the focus on killing—and specifically, shooting—throughout their entire duration.

Therefore, it is here, in this digital media form, that we can most clearly see the full emergence of a previously submerged account of the war. These games celebrate killing, demonstrating both the spectacular thrill of combat as well as the unrelenting violence and cruelty of the war. In this way, they come the closest to exemplifying what veteran-authors like Paul Fussell and Edward W. Wood, Jr. have attested about the combat experience. Yet, as I will show, they also neglect basic aspects of war, such as the finality of death, the sensation of pain,

²⁴³ Parenthetical citations following video game titles list the developer and the publisher of the game, followed by the year of release. In the case that only one company is listed, that organization served as both developer and publisher.

and the ubiquity of great blunders and small mistakes. Rather, they show combat as an exciting adventure of nonstop action, without the danger of physical harm or psychological damage. Furthermore, the video game version of World War II reflects a common fantasy of warfare—that it can be mastered and controlled, that success is determined by skill, and that precision is both possible and desirable.

In the World War II first-person shooter games I examine below, the victory of the Allied powers is literally played over and over again—both in various games, which recycle the same scenarios, as well as within gameplay, in which levels and campaigns are repeated over and over again until they are beaten. In this way, the first-person shooter differs from the strategy game, a specific video game genre which allows players to take the side of either the Axis or the Allies and make broad strategic decisions that could lead to either side winning the war. The repetition inherent in World War II shooter games reflects not only a fetishization of certain aspects of the war (such as the Allied victory), but an emphasis on manual activity—particularly the simulation of shooting. Thus, World War II shooter games combine the moral and narrative associations of the war with the physical activity of aiming and firing, creating a sense of mastery and power. In order to make these arguments, I first turn to the links between war video games and combat films. While the games and the films share many of the same narratological elements—iconography, characters, setting, etc.—they differ in how these components are put into action. By focusing the *Call of Duty* video game series (Infinity Ward and Treyarch/Activision, 2003-), I demonstrate how the gameplay of World War II shooter games, especially their emphasis on precision shooting, shares the nonstop action and combat of other first-person shooter video games, rather than sharing the thematic and temporal concerns of World War II combat films.

This has ramifications for the video games' representation of combat, as well as their representation of history.

5.1 VIDEO GAMES, HISTORY, AND WAR

Video games have been an important part of American popular culture since the 1970s, when the first arcade, home console, and computer games were produced. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, video game software revenue rivaled and finally surpassed movie ticket sales in the U.S.²⁴⁴ Although common misperceptions associate video games with adolescent boys, the average gamer is 35 years old, forty percent of gamers are women, and video or computer games are played in 68 percent of American households. Only 18 percent of gamers are boys aged 17 and under.²⁴⁵ These statistics demonstrate the mass appeal and influence of video games in American popular culture writ broadly.

Because of this widespread popularity, video games can be seen as enacting potent cultural meanings. According to Robert Rosenstone, cinema introduced a “new kind of history” that offers different visions of the world and its past than written and oral history.²⁴⁶ Similarly, video games engage with popular history, telling stories and creating simulations of the past and present (and often future) of American and human society. Generally, however, video games do not represent the past directly. As a brief glance at game titles demonstrates, historical situations

²⁴⁴ According to the Electronic Software Association, sales of video and computer game software in the U.S. totaled \$11.7 billion in 2008 (<http://www.theesa.com/facts/index.asp>). The National Association of Theatre Owners reports \$9.78 billion in box office grosses from the same year (<http://www.natoonline.org/statisticsboxoffice.htm>). The film industry makes additional revenue in home video rentals and sales, licensing and merchandising, and worldwide box office, making a direct comparison between the film and video game industries difficult.

²⁴⁵ Statistics from the Electronic Software Association, <http://www.theesa.com/facts/gameplayer.asp>.

²⁴⁶ Robert Rosenstone, “The Historical Film: Looking for the Past in a Postliterate Age,” in *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, ed. Marcia Landy (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 65.

do not form the bulk of video game content. Rather, video games tend to dramatize scenarios drawn from fantasy or science fiction, or they are set in a version of our present-day world. When video games are set in the past, it tends to be a mythical past (as in *God of War* [SCE/Sony, 2005], based on ancient Greek mythology) or an alternative history (such as *BioShock* [Irrational/2K Games, 2007], set in a dystopian underwater city in an alternative 1960).

The primary exception to this avoidance of traditional history is the series of games set during historical events, principally involving war or historical combat. The History Channel, for instance, has launched a series of video games, including games involving the American Civil War, the battles of ancient Rome, the Alamo, and the Crusades. Additional games take place during World War I, the Vietnam War, and other conflicts. The most visible and popular historical conflict to appear repeatedly in video games, however, is World War II. This chapter will endeavor to understand the cultural and aesthetic reasons World War II has become so popular in video games in the last decade or so. What generic, aesthetic, and narratological relationships exist between World War II combat films and the first-person shooter mode of gaming? What are the moral and cultural associations of the war that are imbued into the medium of video games? What can these video games tell us about contemporary American culture's investment in remembering and reenacting the war?

Video games have been invested in the representation of war from their very beginning. Often considered the first video game, *Spacewar* involved two spaceships in battle with each other, allowing two users to maneuver the ships and fire torpedoes at each other.²⁴⁷ Although the

²⁴⁷ Video games that predate *Spacewar* include a computerized version of Tic-Tac-Toe called *Noughts and Crosses*, created by researchers at the University of Cambridge in 1949, and *Tennis for Two*, created by a Brookhaven National Laboratory employee in 1958. For more on the early history of video games, see Simon Egenfeldt Nielsen, Jonas Heide Smith, and Susana Pajares Tosca, *Understanding Video Games* (New York: Routledge, 2008), esp. 50-2.

graphics and gameplay were rudimentary, *Spacewar*, created in 1962 by three MIT employees, established not only the trend of competition between two players, but also influenced future games to focus on armed combat, whether set in the future, present, or past. Other space-themed shooting games followed in the 1970s and 1980s, including *Space Invaders* (Taito/Midway, 1978), *Asteroids* (Atari, 1979), *Defender* (Williams Electronics, 1980), and *Moon Patrol* (Irem, 1982).

Other genres of video games turned to historical combat, rather than (or in addition to) futuristic space battles. The Atari game *Battlezone* (Atari, 1980) was one of the first vehicle simulation games, utilizing basic two-dimensional graphics to simulate the view from a tank battling other tanks. The strategy game genre—games that provide a god-like perspective and require larger-scale, strategic decision-making—have also embraced historical scenarios, particularly those involving war. In the 1980s, game distributor Strategic Simulations, Inc. (SSI) dominated the strategy game market for home computer, producing games like *Gettysburg: Turning Point* (1986) and *Battles of Napoleon* (1989). A vast number of their games simulated World War II specifically, beginning with *Computer Bismarck* (1980) and *Bomb Alley* (1983), both of which focused on particular missions of the war. The 1989 SSI game *Storm Across Europe* became the first “grand strategy” video game to attempt to encompass almost all of World War II, allowing the player to play as Germany, the Allies, or the Soviet Union in Europe and North Africa from 1939 to 1945. Strategy games have since copied and expanded this scenario, including *Clash of Steel* (SSI, 1993), *Axis & Allies* (MicroProse/Hasbro, 1998), *Hearts of Iron* (Paradox/Strategy First, 2002), and *World War II: Frontline Command* (Bitmap Brothers/Deep Silver, Strategy First, 2003).

The video game genre that has most fully embraced World War II, however, is the first-person shooter.²⁴⁸ This genre of game uses 3D graphics to simulate the point of view of the primary character moving through space, usually with only the character's hand and/or a weapon visible at the bottom center of the screen.²⁴⁹ The first-person shooter thus emulates the individual combat experience, rather than the overarching view of generals simulated in strategy games. Two extremely popular video game series have cemented the association of World War II and the first-person shooter genre: *Medal of Honor* (multiple developers/Electronic Arts, 1999-) and *Call of Duty*. Both of these game series have been released in various formats for different gaming platforms, including Playstation (as well as Playstation 2 and 3), Xbox (and Xbox 360), personal computer, GameCube, Wii, GameBoy Advance, Playstation Portable, and mobile phone.²⁵⁰ The first *Medal of Honor* (*MoH*) game was developed simultaneously with *Saving Private Ryan* by Steven Spielberg and his Dreamworks Entertainment in 1998, and additional games have followed in the franchise every one or two years since then. The influence of *Saving Private Ryan* can be found in the desaturated colors (evoking documentary footage), mournful music, and similar scenarios played out in the *Medal of Honor* games. Some of the games steal scenes directly from the film, such as the Omaha Beach landing sequence in

²⁴⁸ Among those who study and play video games, the term “genre” denotes the mode of gameplay, rather than the explicit content or subject matter of the game. Mark J. P. Wolf, for instance, classifies video games into forty-two genres, based on their form of “interactivity.” These genres range from puzzle, racing, and sports to adventure, strategy, and shooter. See his *The Medium of the Video Game* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), especially Chapter 6.

²⁴⁹ 3D computer graphics are mathematical representations of three-dimensional objects and spaces stored. Although ultimately 3D models are usually displayed in two dimensions on a computer or television screen, they differ from 2D graphics by containing spatial data. In the design process, they can be rotated, animated, and modified within virtual space along three axes, whereas 2D graphics may have the appearance of three dimensions (through shading, for instance) but exist only on a “flat” plane.

²⁵⁰ Playstation (as well as its more advanced versions, Playstation 2 and 3) is a home gaming console produced by Sony. Xbox (and its successor Xbox 360) is a home gaming console produced by Microsoft. The GameCube and the Wii are home gaming consoles created by Nintendo. Playstation Portable (Sony) and GameBoy Advance (Nintendo) are handheld gaming systems. These games are also created for mobile phones or for personal computers run by Windows, Linux, or Mac. Each version of the game is at least slightly different from the others, but in some cases, wholly different games are released for each platform.

MoH: Allied Assault (2015, Inc./Electronic Arts, 2002). Although some of the early games of the *Medal of Honor* franchise revolve around covert, single-player missions involving espionage, sabotage, and infiltration, the later games emphasize frontline action and give the player more choice about which missions to undertake and how to navigate the game. In this way, they conform to the cinematic formula followed by *Saving Private Ryan* of highlighting the mission of a group of soldiers in combat.

The *Call of Duty* video game series began in 2003 with a World War II-set game in which the player alternates among three different characters, one American, one British, and one Soviet. Two follow-up games (*Call of Duty 2* and *3*), as well as additional expansion packs and side-story games, also took World War II as their setting, despite the original plan to shift to a contemporary setting in any sequels or subsequent games. This shift did not take place until 2007, when the fourth installment of the series, *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, was released. But the popularity of World War II was such that the series returned to the war for the fifth release, *Call of Duty: World at War* (2008), the first of the series to include combat missions in the Pacific. The latest addition to the series, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009), is a sequel to *Call of Duty 4* and is set, like the earlier game, in an alternative present in which the player fights terrorists in the Middle East and Russia.

The roots of the World War II video game extend back to *Castle Wolfenstein* (Muse Software, 1981), a 2D²⁵¹ stealth-espionage game in which an individual player must infiltrate a castle full of Nazis in order to confiscate secret war plans and escape alive. The first game's emphasis on stealth and avoiding detection, however, was replaced in its popular sequel, *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software/multiple publishers, 1992), with direct armed conflict. More

²⁵¹ 2D graphics do not use perspective or other visual cues to simulate three-dimensional space. Rather, game elements appear as flat icons, as in *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1980).

specifically, *Wolfenstein 3D* is hailed as the first game to popularize the first-person shooter format.²⁵² In this game, the player takes on the role of an American soldier and spy, William “B.J.” Blazkowicz, who must escape from the eponymous castle, shooting Nazi guards and attack dogs to get out. In following episodes, Blazkowicz fights mad scientists, clones, an army of undead mutants created by the scientists, and Adolf Hitler himself equipped with a robotic suit and four chain guns. The screen displays an approximation of Blazkowicz’s first-person point of view, and the player uses the game controls to aim and fire a gun at enemies, as well as to move through space. In addition to inspiring first-person shooters with sci-fi/horror themes such as *Doom* (id Software, 1993), *Wolfenstein* spawned a number of supernatural Nazi-centered sequels, including *Spear of Destiny* (id Software/FormGen, 1992, a prequel), *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (Gray Matter Interactive/Activision, 2001), and most recently, *Wolfenstein* (multiple developers/Activision, 2009).

Therefore, by the 1990s—a period of intense World War II nostalgia in American culture, as described in the last chapter—the World War II video game had established itself as a resilient formula and an important way that the cultural memory of the war was activated for a growing segment of the population. Although a number of strategy games also take the Second World War as their subject matter, including *Company of Heroes* (Relic/THQ, 2006) and those previously mentioned, the early and persistent confluence of World War II with the first-person shooter suggests that this mode reflects a significant way that American culture reimagines World War II, as well as warfare more generally. This chapter will explore the historical convergence between the first-person shooter and the renewed cultural interest in World War II

²⁵² Earlier video games experimented with first person perspective, such as *Maze War* (1973), *Spasim* (1974), *3D Monster Maze* (1981), and *Hovertank 3D* (1991). The success of *Wolfenstein 3D* led to the development of *Doom* (1993), an even more sophisticated and popular first-person shooter.

in the 1990s. It is my contention that the World War II shooter game provides an alternative story of the war—focusing intensely on combat—that opens up new ways of imagining the war, but forecloses others.

5.2 THE WORLD WAR II SHOOTER GAME AND THE COMBAT GENRE

In previous chapters, I have discussed World War II films as constitutive of—or as challenges to—conventional notions of the World War II combat genre. In this chapter, I am concerned with how World War II video games, and specifically first-person shooters, fit the model of the film genre. In what ways do they conform to generic expectations—due, for instance, to the involvement of personnel from the film industry, like Spielberg? And in what ways do these games, because of a difference in medium, rewrite the genre, as well as the cultural history of World War II? Does it make sense to consider World War II video games to be part of the same combat genre as the films that are set during the war?

Video games have certainly drawn from the cinema in terms of formal and aesthetic qualities, as well as in terms of narrative. Many game developers have sought explicitly to emulate live-action cinema in their pursuit of photorealistic graphics and other cinematic effects (such as slow-motion, mobile cinematography, etc.). The influence of cinema can be seen most directly in “cut-scenes,” scripted and non-interactive portions of the game that introduce characters, fill in storyline, and prepare the player for upcoming missions or events.²⁵³ Cut-

²⁵³ In films, equivalent scenes might include montages of documentary footage to fill in on historical background or establishing shots or scenes that introduce basic expository information. However, in cinema, there is not such a vast difference between these scenes and the rest of the film, whereas in video games, cut-scenes differ from the rest of the game in a fundamental way—they are not interactive.

scenes, because they do not have to render graphics in response to player input, generally have had higher quality visuals, allowing them to mimic the polished look of cinema. Furthermore, cut-scenes are often edited like films, cutting among various angles and camera distances and using such cinematic techniques as close-ups, slow motion, and shot/reverse-shot. In some games, cut-scenes are also marked by the use of letterboxing: black stripes appear at the top and bottom of the screen to give these scenes the widescreen effect of watching a movie on your television set. I will analyze a sample cut-scene later in the chapter.

Beyond cut-scenes, video games share with cinema the use of framing, mise-en-scene, dialogue, and nondiegetic music or scoring, although these aspects may be activated in different ways by cinema and video games. For instance, in a game, a player may be able to pick up and use an object from the mise-en-scene or may be able to choose the nondiegetic music playing in the background. The dialogue in a video game may be repeated several times or may not be heard in the same order each time the game is played, depending on the actions of the player. However, basic aspects of the visual and auditory experience of cinema and video games are the same—the rectangular screen, the illusion of three dimensions, the interaction of sound and image, the modulation of perspective and point of view, the combined effect of diegetic and nondiegetic sounds and music, and so on. With the influx of digital animation and processing into Hollywood filmmaking today, even the difference between live-action (in cinema) and 3D digital animation (in video games) is less pronounced and less definitive of a difference.

Most video games also have predetermined narratives or, at the very least, preset missions, campaigns, or competitive modes that set limits on the player's actions. The extent and type of narrative varies by genre of video game. Abstract or puzzle games, like *Tetris* (Alexey Pajitnov/various publishers, 1984), may involve no narrative whatsoever, while

adventure games like *Zork* (Infocom, 1979) or *Myst* (Cyan Worlds/Brøderbund, 1993) involve the player in a complex narrative that the player must figure out throughout the game. Strategy, sports, and simulation games may not have set storylines with determined endings, but the game sets up certain limitations for the narrative that unfolds through gameplay. Additionally, many games which are based on activity and kinetic stimulation that do not require a narrative, such as a driving or racing game, contain self-contained missions that are optional. In the driving game *Smuggler's Run* (Angel Studios/Rockstar Games, 2000), for example, the player can choose among Joyriding (driving a vehicle in a particular terrain with no narrative), Turf War (games within the game in which the player competes against computer players to complete discrete tasks), and Smuggler's Mission (completing tasks in a particular order to progress through a series of levels).

First-person shooters, which will be the focus of the rest of the chapter, typically involve a predetermined narrative. In the “campaign mode,” the player progresses through a series of levels, each of which is made up of particular missions that must be accomplished to continue in the game. In other words, certain enemies need to be killed and certain goals achieved (such as collecting data or destroying objects) before moving on. Typically, these are marked by checkpoints, at which point the game saves the player’s progress and if the player “dies,” the game will start over from the last checkpoint. Unlike many role-playing video games, in which the player can choose or design a character to play, first-person shooters tend to determine both the main character that the player becomes as well as secondary, non-playable characters that have set trajectories. There are, however, other modes built into contemporary shooters, such as the Deathmatch mode, which allows networked players to play against each other in an all-out firefight. The rise of online gaming has led to more and more action-adventure and shooter

games moving away from set narratives geared toward single players and moving toward open-ended, player-directed combat.

Because the campaign mode recreates particular World War II battles, I will focus on these fixed, single-player levels, as opposed to the networked, multiplayer modes, which take place in World War II-inspired landscapes and employ historical weapons, but otherwise do not attempt to simulate the war. To explore how cinematic genre conventions have influenced video games, my examples will be primarily drawn from the four video games of the *Call of Duty* series that are set during the Second World War. *Call of Duty* is one of the best-selling video games series of all time. In November 2009, global sales for the entire series (four set during World War II and two “Modern Warfare” games) exceeded \$3 billion. Game publisher Activision’s chief executive has claimed, “If you consider the number of hours our audiences are engaged in playing *Call of Duty* games, it is likely to be one of the most viewed of all entertainment experiences in modern history.”²⁵⁴ Furthermore, *Call of Duty* advertises itself as “deliver[ing] the gritty realism and cinematic intensity of World War II’s epic battlefield moments,” linking itself explicitly to combat cinema.²⁵⁵ Considering the wide appeal and great popularity of the series, it is important to include it in an analysis of how contemporary visual culture imagines World War II and combat more generally. Can we say that the *Call of Duty* games share the same genre as the combat films I have analyzed in previous chapters, however?

At first glance, the answer appears to be yes. World War II shooter games utilize the same settings and character types, look similar in terms of stylistic concerns, and share other

²⁵⁴ Gabriel Madway, “Activision Says ‘Call of Duty’ Series Tops \$3 Billion,” *Reuters.com*, Nov. 27, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE5AQ37V20091127> (accessed June 12, 2010).

²⁵⁵ *Call of Duty* PC game (Infinity Ward/Activision, 2003), text on the back of the box.

elements that film genre theorist Rick Altman would label “semantic” elements.²⁵⁶ One of the major semantic elements employed by both games and films is World War II iconography. Along with the basic setting of the war, these video games also emulate with great attention to detail the authentic uniforms, weapons, vehicles, and insignia that also appear in films. Furthermore, they visualize the same iconic spaces and events that appear over and over again in combat films—such as the D-Day landing at Omaha Beach, combat amongst the hedgerows and bombed out villages in France, tank warfare in North Africa, winter combat at the Battle of the Bulge, and so on. As this list demonstrates, video games more than films have tended to favor the European Theater of Operations over the Pacific. Part of this is due to concern over racism—today, Nazis can be demonized as monsters, while the Japanese people cannot. (Obviously, this was not the case in the founding films of the genre from the 1940s.) But another reason is the lack of varied terrain in Pacific warfare beyond ocean, beach landings, and jungle warfare and the relative lack of iconic settings or spaces from the Pacific. D-Day, and Omaha Beach in particular, are simulated in several of the *Medal of Honor* and *Call of Duty* games, referencing not only this event as a turning point in the war, but the cinematic impact of *Saving Private Ryan*'s recreation.

As the graphic capabilities of the games have become more sophisticated, so has the level of detail in the game's visuals. *Call of Duty: World at War*, the most recent World War II-set game, includes such details as the U.S. Marine Corps insignia on a canteen, Japanese letters on a red headband worn by an enemy soldier, and individualized jungle camouflage on Japanese helmets. Because the entire game (with the exception of some documentary footage included in

²⁵⁶ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: BFI, 1999), 219. Altman's essay “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre,” reprinted as an appendix to *Film/Genre*, was originally published in *Cinema Journal* 23, no. 3 (Spring 1984), 6-18.

cut-scenes, discussed below) is computer generated, the look of the game cannot attain the same visual realism as a film. Although *Call of Duty*'s graphic and physics engines (which control the visual appearance, as well as the movement and action of all in-game objects) improved dramatically in just the five years separating the first from the latest World War II title, there are still unrealistic movements, glitches in how objects are rendered, and a “shiny” look to everything that results from digital animation. The game designers aim for “photorealism,” which sometimes has the unsettling effect of seeming less real the more technically accurate it gets, particularly when attempting to render human faces.²⁵⁷ While films can record textures, real movement, and actual locations, video games can more accurately simulate certain things that would be difficult to fabricate on a film set or location. For instance, while the Irish beach that stood in for Omaha Beach in *Saving Private Ryan* looked similar to the Normandy shoreline, it differed in proportion and depth; in a video game, however, these proportions can easily be remedied, allowing for an even more realistic sense of scale. Further, video games allow for realistic manipulation of a vast variety of weapons, which would be difficult to find or to fabricate for a film shoot. Not only do the weapons in the game look exact, down to the last detail, but they also operate in an accurate way, holding a certain number of bullets, reloading in a particular way, making a particular sound, and shooting an appropriate distance. Thus, what video games lose in visual realism, they make up for in the fidelity of their simulations.

In addition to iconography, the *Call of Duty* games also draw from the cinematic genre's set of stock characters. Most importantly, this involves the privileging of the group or squad of soldiers over the individual; although Hollywood cinema has always had its major stars, World War II films have typically differed from other war cinema in enmeshing the main star or hero

²⁵⁷ This effect is a result of what roboticist Masahiro Mori deemed the “uncanny valley,” which describes the revulsion felt by human observers when robots or simulations approach life-likeness.

into a group of soldiers or sailors who must work together to get the job done. Unlike earlier games, such as the first *Medal of Honor* shooter games, which engaged the single player in lone-wolf-type missions (espionage, sabotage, rescue, etc.), *Call of Duty* places the player's character within a group of computer-operated characters who aid the player and must in part be supported by him as well. Through dialogue, these characters tell the player where to go or what to do to advance to the next level. In *Call of Duty 2*, if the player strays too far from the squad, the game ends (and restarts from the last checkpoint). These secondary characters, like a computer-generated supportive cast, also help defend the player from enemies, so it is in the player's best interest to protect them as well. To this end, in most of the *Call of Duty* games, friendly fire is prohibited. When the player aims at a fellow soldier, his name and rank appear on screen, making it possible to tell the difference between friendly and enemy combatants, which can be difficult when firing at someone far away or when distracted by incoming bombs. But firing at one's own side is also impossible—if one aims and shoots at one's computer-operated “buddies,” there is no effect. To remedy this vast hole in the situational realism, *Call of Duty: World at War* allows for friendly fire, but too much of this results in the game ending once again, with the words appearing on the screen, “Friendly fire will not be tolerated.”

Like the combat film genre, this squad of soldiers also often includes a group of representative types from various parts of the United States, demonstrating the “melting pot” ethos that the U.S. government encouraged during the 1940s in order to increase unity and support for the war effort. The types found most often in World War II films include the immigrant representative, typically Polish and often from Pittsburgh; the Italian from New York, usually Brooklyn; and a Southerner, often called “Tex” whether or not he was from Texas.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁸ Basinger, 51.

Call of Duty 2: Big Red One is most pronounced in following these conventions of American combat cinema, since it is the only *Call of Duty* game that uses a single playable protagonist for the entire game and this character is American. Although it does not overtly reference the Samuel Fuller film, *The Big Red One* (1980), in anything but the title, the game also follows a group of diverse soldiers (part of the U.S. Army First Division, whose insignia includes a red number one, hence the name) from North Africa through D-Day to Germany as they mature from rookie recruits to an integrated fighting force. In *Big Red One*, one plays as Pvt. (and later Sgt.) Roland Roger. Roger is relatively indistinct as a character, in order to aid the player's identification with him. He is, quite literally, invisible, since the user sees through his eyes. But his squad includes a modicum of ethnic and geographic diversity. The most obvious reference to the film genre is the inclusion of Pvt. Alvin Bloomfield, who is revealed through the game's dialogue to be the son of a Jewish deli owner from the Bronx. Despite this, he is constantly called "Brooklyn," and the other characters ignore his efforts to make a distinction. Visually, however, the squad is homogenous. Other than in cut-scenes, which might include close-ups, the soldiers do not much vary in skin tone or appearance. Thus, names and voices are the only way to gauge ethnic, class, or racial identity. The accent and dialogue of one character, named Pvt. Denley, identifies him as a Texan former high school football star. Pvt. Castillo's name and voice are vaguely Latino. The game's overwhelmingly white cast of characters reflects the historical situation of segregation in America's military during World War II, but not the cinematic genre, which invented situations in which it could plausibly include African-American characters or sympathetic Filipino or Chinese characters among the group.

Unlike *Call of Duty 2: Big Red One*, however, the rest of the World War II games of the franchise alternate the player among American, British, and Soviet characters. Although this

departs from cinematic conventions of American combat cinema, the games still rely on cultural stereotypes established by World War II films. For instance, a major mentor character in *Call of Duty: World at War* in the Soviet scenes, Sgt. Reznov, is voiced by Hollywood actor Gary Oldman. Speaking in English with a broad Russian accent, Oldman's dialogue adopts a melancholic or poetic tone, explicitly evoking "Mother Russia," referencing traditional objects like balalaikas, and constantly calling the player "comrade." In contrast, Sgt. Roebuck, the players in leader in the U.S. Marine sections of the game, is voiced by Kiefer Sutherland, who uses explicit language and an informal tone. A typical comment for Sgt. Roebuck would be: "Outstanding, Marines! Out-fucking-standing! We kicked ass!" Meanwhile, the German and Japanese enemy characters speak in their native languages, and their dialogue is rarely translated, reflecting, particularly in the case of the Japanese, the cinematic history of treating enemy soldiers as less than human. The British, Russian, and American playable characters may disperse the player's primary identification among two or three different characters, but they all share the same portrayal as Allied soldiers fighting for freedom against tyranny. The promotional material for the first *Call of Duty* game, for example, claims that users play as "citizen soldiers" and "unsung heroes" responsible for nothing less than "shap[ing] the course of modern history."

A third semantic element that is shared between the cinematic and video game versions of World War II is the use of evidence and historical references as strategies of authentication. Like 1940s combat films, these video games include animated maps, epigraphs, inspirational quotations, and other markers, like date, time, and place specifications, to position the narrative in a distinct space and time and with a specific set of meanings and associations. Moreover, like the films, almost all of the World War II shooter games include documentary or newsreel footage

taken during the war. Unlike the films, however, which often integrate documentary footage into the fictional diegesis in order to visualize vehicles or events which would be difficult to recreate on a soundstage or studio backlot, video games isolate the documentary footage in montage sequences that occur in between levels of gameplay, used to introduce the next mission to be undertaken in the game.

In *Call of Duty 2: Big Red One*, these montages emulate World War II-era documentaries in their use solely of black-and-white newsreel footage and the inclusion of a voice-of-God-style narrator with an old-fashioned tone to his voice. These sequences provide a minimal background to the war and its conflicts and introduce each new mission the First Division will encounter. Somewhat strangely, these documentary sequences are first introduced by the logo of the Military Channel, which is a present-day cable television network that airs primarily new documentaries about historical and current military topics. The logo of the Military Channel remains in the corner superimposed over the historical footage throughout the entire sequence. In one way, this mimics the military insignia that would introduce a period documentary, and thus it serves, like the old-fashioned voiceover, to place the player into the historical period. In another way, however, this sequence places the player outside of history, as a contemporary viewer watching cable television and learning about events far in the past. Moreover, it makes the player a consumer, with the Military Channel logo acting as product placement. History then becomes a commodity, something that can be summarized in a few iconic images make the property of a company that stands to gain from the association.

Call of Duty: World at War segregates newsreel footage from computer-generated simulations in an even more pronounced manner. In the sequences that separate the major sections of the game, which switch amongst the American and Russian segments, black-and-

white (or, in a few instances, faded color) sequences of combat footage play on part of the screen, surrounded by computer-generated figures in simplistic colors to suggest a 3D animated map. Text on the screen announces information like September 1944, Operation Stalemate, 0832 hours, 1st Marine Division, Objective: Capture Airfield. The soundtrack plays vaguely Japanese music, while a narrator (Kiefer Sutherland again, who voices the sergeant for the U.S. Marine Corps sections of the game) intones, “Getting this far has been tougher than any of us could ever have imagined.... The enemy will fight to the death for every last inch. ... They’re making their last stand in the jungles and caves. ... We take them and we take Pelelieu.” During this voiceover, the virtual camera scans over a gray sketch of a landscape rising into the peak of the mountain, labeled “The Point,” on the Pacific island of Pelelieu. The camera follows small, blue, roughly animated marines, moving from a landing craft through water onto land, looking like toy soldiers.

As the virtual camera moves into medium close-up on one of the anonymous digital soldiers, the computer simulation switches to a documentary shot of a marine in the exact same position, aiming and firing to the left. Two brief newsreel shots follow, one of a Japanese soldier in a ghillie helmet²⁵⁹ throwing a grenade and another of a marine shooting a mortar. Later, as the virtual camera continues over the simulated landscape of Pelelieu, more film footage can be seen, but it is in the distance and comes closer to the camera as it moves. Part of the whole screen, then, is devoted here to the moving footage of two marines shooting, while it is surrounded by the animated map and moving text. This sequence emphasizes the celluloid origin of this historical footage both by its lack of color and photographic grain *and* by adding blips of black leader and the parts of old-fashioned filmstrips that say Picture and Start. The

²⁵⁹ A ghillie helmut is covered in foliage to provide camouflage.

separation of this footage from the rest of the gameplay reinforces the sense that these black-and-white scenes may be authentic, but they are dated and obsolete, while the full-color, interactive combat missions of the game are immediate and viscerally engaging. Further, the virtual, animated map of Pelelieu, with moving soldiers and text, provides an overview of the situation and the space of battle that the momentary and fragmentary documentary shots lack. The sequence appears to claim that the video game may not be authentic in the same way this combat footage purports to be, but it does give the illusion of presence and interactivity that the older images lack, while also providing an even more all-encompassing simulation of the battle. Moreover, unlike documentary footage, which is necessarily fragmentary, incomplete, and two-dimensional, the three-dimensional animated map presents the space of war as completely ordered, rational, and controllable.

The World War II combat game can therefore be seen as an update to the cinematic genre, but also as part of it, at least in terms of its semantic “building blocks”—the settings, characters, and stylistic elements described above. And on a broad level, the video games also seem to share the same narrative “syntax,” which Rick Altman defined as the constitutive relationships that describe how the semantic elements create meaning. Like the films, these video games engage their group of soldiers in specific missions to achieve particular military objectives, and this always results in combat, the defining feature of the genre. But the broad narrative similarities do not account for all the integral situations and relationships of the combat film that are missing in the video games. The World War II combat films to which the video games refer often revolve around an internal conflict among the soldiers, whether between rivals or between the enlisted men and the officers; they feature narratives of conversion in which selfish individualists are persuaded to sacrifice their own desires to join the group effort; much of

the duration of the film is devoted to discussion of home and what they are fighting for; the temporality of the film plays out along a dialectic between the frustrations of waiting and training and the exhilaration and terror of fighting.

All of these crucial, meaning-making structures are absent from the World War II video game. Instead, there is a relentless focus on action and combat. Unlike a film, which might work its way up to a big combat climax, every battle in a video game is a combat climax. Every scene is a “last stand.” In the *Call of Duty* games, basic contextual and character information is dispatched with quickly through the documentary montages and through brief cut-scenes. The overwhelming bulk of the games is devoted to combat—combat in different situations, over different terrain, and using different weapons. This compulsive action differs from the narrative movement of the film genre. While meaning is arguably created in a film in the relationship between action sequences and dialogue or other sequences, the meaning in a video game is created in the action itself. To take it one step further, the meaning *is* the action. These games exist to create various scenarios that require a certain kind of activity from the player. This insistence on activity marks a major way in which video games and films differ.

5.3 A LUDOLOGY OF FIRST-PERSON SHOOTERS

Instead of focusing on narratology—that is, analyzing the basic elements shared by almost all narratives, such as character, setting, and thematic meaning—what is needed to get to the heart of video games is ludology. One of the pioneers of video game studies, Gonzalo Frasca, has defined ludology as the study of a game’s “structure and elements—particularly its rules—as

well as [a way of] creating typologies and models for explaining the mechanics of games.”²⁶⁰

Ludology has shifted the focus away from the common narratives among “old” and “new” media texts, a methodology familiar from the first attempts to include video games and hypertext in humanistic study, particularly Janet Murray’s influential 1997 work, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*.²⁶¹

For Frasca, an important distinction between video games and narrative media like novels and cinema is the reliance within games on simulation: “Simulation does not simply retain the—generally audiovisual—characteristics of the object but it also includes a model of its behaviors.

This model reacts to certain stimuli (input data, pushing buttons, joystick movements), according to a set of conditions.”²⁶² Thus, while the D-Day Normandy invasion in *Saving Private Ryan* may look and sound, according to audiovisual parameters, very similar to the invasion reenacted in any number of video games, only the games add the element of simulation. This difference not only describes the interactivity inherent in the game, but also the embedded information within the setting that reacts in different ways to different inputs.

Certainly, the World War II shooter games I have discussed here engage in narrative—the broad story of World War II, the more specific narratives of individual battles (usually based on historical combat), the scripted storylines involving characters in the game, and the narratives crafted by the player in response to the limitations set up by the game. However, a more fruitful perspective in analyzing the particular contributions these games make to contemporary representation of the war in American culture must focus on its ludic possibilities: rules that the players must follow, game conventions, objectives, missions, obstacles, and most importantly, gameplay. Gameplay describes the kinds of actions that a player must take in order to progress

²⁶⁰ Gonzalo Frasca, “Simulation versus Narrative: Introduction to Ludology,” in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2003), 222.

²⁶¹ Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

²⁶² Frasca, 223.

through the game. It is here, in the minutiae of thumb movements and split-second decisions, that the specific meanings of particular video games can be found.

This emphasis on activity also contributes to how video game genres are defined. Semantic elements only play a role in the definition of a select few genres—the subgenre of “survival horror,” for example. First used to describe *Resident Evil* (CapCom, 1996), survival horror refers to games that pit players against supernatural enemies such as zombies, mutants, monsters, and the like and employ elements of visual design and tone to provoke a dark and frightening experience, much like horror fiction or films. Much of the definition of the subgenre thus revolves around iconography, mise-en-scene, visual style, music, and character types—all semantic elements. However, survival horror also specifies a particular type of gameplay that emphasizes puzzle-solving, evading monsters (rather than just killing them), and managing scarce resources, such as guns and ammunition. Other genres may on the surface seem to be defined by their semantic elements, such as cars or motorcycles in racing games, but are more fundamentally distinguished by the activity that the player must perform to play the game, such as the simulation of driving.

On the most basic level, all video games involve the same activity from the player—pressing buttons or pointing and clicking a mouse.²⁶³ What these patterns of button-pressing allow the player to do within a game is what defines the genre. This definitive emphasis on activity is why the term “interactivity” has been used so often to describe the difference between video games (along with other new media) and “old” media, like cinema and literature. Over the

²⁶³ Alternative game controllers have expanded the range of inputs beyond just “button-mashing.” The dance mat for *Dance Dance Revolution* allows you to “press buttons” with your feet. Music games like *Guitar Hero* or *Rock Band* allow players to “press buttons” by strumming a guitar or hitting electronic drums. The Nintendo Wii has been perhaps the most innovative to date in designing a controller with a different input system. The Wii tracks the movement of the controller in space, allowing bodily movements beyond just that of the fingers and thumbs to control the game.

course of the development of the digital arts, interactivity has been discussed as an essential feature of new media that distinguishes it from earlier forms. Interactivity has been thought to have a liberatory quality, freeing the user from being the passive viewer of supposedly non-interactive forms like cinema and television. However, theories of spectatorship and reception studies have denounced such clear divisions between active and passive. As I have argued in previous chapters, films and other “old” media activate viewers’ minds and engage their senses, provoking visceral, emotional, and physical responses from spectators’ bodies. Yet video games in particular rely upon specific bodily actions (namely, the pressing of buttons with one’s fingers) in order to operate. Unlike a movie, which could play in its entirety with no one there to watch it, video games require particular inputs from players in order to proceed.²⁶⁴ Further, the very make-up of the text changes each time it is played. Thus, while the term “interactive” may be misleading in its alleged uniqueness for new media, activity—and more specifically, particular actions done in a particular order—is necessary for the medium of video games in a way that it is not for other media. To find meaning in a video game—to interpret it—one must look beyond the narrative of the game, despite the temptation to focus on such elements as cut-scenes which appeal more directly to interpretive strategies gleaned from narratology or film studies. Rather, meaning must be found in the actions of the game, the activities that the game asks the player to perform.

To that end, I will turn now to a description of one episode of playing *Call of Duty: World at War* in order to analyze the particular actions that players perform within gameplay. I

²⁶⁴ Alexander Galloway discusses four types of video game action, one of which is the activity of the computer without any input from the player. In general, however, the computer actions—the rendering of graphics, the simulation of physics, etc.—cannot be completely divorced from player actions; they work together to create the game. See Galloway, “Gamic Action, Four Moments,” in his *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 1-38.

have chosen to describe *World at War*, the most recent *Call of Duty* game set during World War II, because it is the most violent and graphic of the games—the only one of the games set during the war to be rated M for mature (and thus restricted to players 17 or older). As such, the dialogue of the game contains profanity and bodily injury is presented in explicitly gruesome ways (but only for other characters—one’s own wounding is presented abstractly as a glowing red light around the screen). *World at War* allows for the possibility of decapitations and amputations (most commonly from the impact of a high-caliber bullet), blood spurts and pools of blood, as well as what gamers describe as “gibbing.” When one “gibs” an enemy (intentionally or unintentionally), his body explodes with such force that it is reduced to “gIBLETS,” or chunks of digitally rendered flesh and blood.²⁶⁵ As these examples demonstrate, I thought it best exemplified how first-person shooters tell a violent counter-narrative of World War II, portraying it as an exercise in killing and cruelty.

Simple on-screen text identifies the level I will be playing, titled, appropriately enough, “Relentless.” It also states the date, place, and character I will play: September 16, 1944; The Point, Pelelieu; Pvt. Miller, USMC. The level, like all others, opens with a cut-scene—although I can look around, I cannot yet interact with the environment, move, or shoot my weapon. I am riding on a tank moving through a jungle, listening to Sgt. Roebuck tell us what to expect of the coming battle. Another character, in a louder voice that stands out to me, comments that it’s going to be a “fucking bloodbath.” After a few moments, the sergeant yells, “Incoming!” At this point, the cut-scene ends and I hop off the tank and run for cover into the jungle, trying to avoid mortar fire. Since I am playing the Playstation 3 version of the game (different consoles

²⁶⁵ Previous games in the *Call of Duty* series had only allowed “gibbing” in the multiplayer, networked modes like Deathmatch, in which two teams go head-to-head, trying to kill more players than the other team. *Call of Duty: World at War* was innovative in allowing “gibbing” in the campaign (or narrative) mode, much to the delight of some gamers.

and formats involve different inputs), I do so by moving two miniature joysticks, one which controls the movement of my character through space and the other which controls where I am looking (and, therefore, aiming, as there is always a small crosshair at the center of the screen). These joysticks must be moved in tandem with my thumbs in order to keep movement and aiming smooth and continuous. Other buttons control firing (my right trigger finger), crouching and standing, throwing grenades, and other activities. I hide behind a log and shoot at Japanese soldiers in the middle distance. Most of the enemy soldiers appear to be about 100 yards away, but as I continue playing, some charge, yelling “Banzai!” and getting close enough to allow me to use my bayonet. As I kill enemies, I see blood spurting from their wounds as they fall down. Unlike in previous games, dead bodies no longer disappear after a few moments, but stay there and have to be maneuvered around.²⁶⁶

I move through high grass, around rocks, and through trees—all presented in the first-person perspective. The only part of “my” body that is visible is my hand on my weapon. I am currently using an M1919 deployable Browning assault rifle, a heavy machine gun that shoots .30 caliber bullets. Highly controllable with less need to reload often, this weapon inflicts heavy damage, making it a good choice for the beginning of this level, when you are attacked by unyielding waves of enemy soldiers. I reach a landscape of trenches dug into the ground and text at the upper left of the screen alerts me to a new task: Clear out anti-aircraft positions. I move to use a large anti-aircraft gun when I am killed for the first time, by an off-screen assailant. Shortly after “respawning,” or coming back to life, I die again, this time from accidentally killing

²⁶⁶ I played the game on the “Regular” difficulty setting, which is harder than the “Recruit” level, but easier than the “Hardened” or “Veteran” levels. The difficulty setting affects such elements as the number of enemies, the amount and accuracy of their fire, and the weapons available.

too many fellow American soldiers whom I mistake for enemy soldiers. (Text on screen lets me know that “Friendly fire will not be tolerated.”)

After respawning and successfully moving through the Japanese underground bunkers, killing enemies as I do so, I find a Springfield bolt-action sniper rifle. (New weapons often appear at the beginning of a new task, suggesting to the player the best way to get through the next part of the level.) When I press the left trigger button, the screen displays my view through the sniper scope, magnifying enemies to medium close-up within the crosshairs. While this kind of shooting involves concentration and precision, slowing the gameplay to a less rapid pace, I still have to be careful to keep on the move to avoid grenades. (The game engine is designed to punish staying still by increasing the number of grenades that fall, even when the enemy is not in sight.) This part of the level is difficult and I die several times, usually by grenades. I look around the area, find and try other possible weapons, such as an M1987 Trenchgun, a grenade launcher, and the standard M1 Garand rifle. Finally, I have success using a combination of the grenade launcher, the sniper rifle, and then the heavy machine gun. As in the other *Call of Duty* titles, I can only carry two weapons at a time, plus grenades, so I have to keep maneuvering around to pick up new weapons, as well as ammunition. Later in the level, I use a flamethrower, a couple of different Japanese light machine guns, a Thompson submachine gun, and a bayonet. I fight through a jungle gully, through underground bunkers, and through a series of trenches, finding cover behind logs, fortifications, sand bags, walls, and, at one point, an American flamethrower tank. I kill dozens, if not hundreds, of enemy combatants, who keep moving toward me, often yelling “Banzai!” Finally, I reach the end of the level, having fought my way through the final trenches. Triumphant music starts and dialogue returns to the soundtrack:

“How many marines have we lost already trying to take this rock?” “Too many.” Then the screen goes black and a new level begins.

5.4 SIMULATING VIOLENCE

As should be clear by this description of my experience playing *Call of Duty: World at War*, World War II shooters are fundamentally about combat—with an intensity and singular focus that war films could never sustain, nor do they have any interest in doing so. Producing a sixteen-hour film of pure combat would be a piece of avant-garde cinema, not a popular narrative film—but this is exactly what a combat video game aims to do. But even more than combat per se, these video games are about shooting, as the name first-person shooter makes clear. Regardless of how they are packaged as history and as a justified fight against fascism and imperialism, these games are, at their essence, simulations of aiming and firing weapons at digital reconstructions of people. These games exist to recreate the activity of shooting weapons.

The first-person shooter is itself part of the umbrella genre of the action game. Action games involve rapid-fire tests of physical skill requiring quick reaction times and hand-eye coordination. Shooter games, which can take the first- or the third-person perspective²⁶⁷, focus on the activities of aiming and firing in situations involving multiple enemies or targets. The first-person shooter allows the player to take the point of view of the main character. This aids in the creation of identification with the avatar, making the player’s perceptual apparatus

²⁶⁷ In the third-person perspective, the player sees his avatar (the character that he or she is controlling) from the back and can observe the full bodily movement the avatar makes in response to the player’s input.

basically the same as that of the character he or she is playing. This perceptual identification heightens the sense of immersion into the game world.

In World War II shooters, the player gets the chance to use a wide range of historically accurate weapons. In playing the level I described above, I used five or six different weapons. Across the whole game, I had the opportunity to use dozens of weapons. The *Call of Duty* Wiki lists thirty-eight weapons that appear in *World at War*, ranging from pistols and rifles to shotguns, machine guns, explosives, and grenades.²⁶⁸ Although for a modicum of situational realism, the player can only carry two weapons at a time, the vast availability of weapons differs from that of actual World War II infantrymen, or even their cinematic counterparts, who were assigned either a rifle or another weapon, such as a Browning automatic rifle (BAR). However, the main advantage of the first-person perspective is accuracy in aiming and, in particular, the ability to seamlessly integrate scoped weapons (e.g., sniper rifles with telescopic sights that allow a highly magnified view for even more precise aiming) into the gameplay. Most first-person shooters include crosshairs (or some other graphic, such as a circle or a dot) over the center of the screen to aid in precise aiming. Since most of the game involves shooting, this graphic is usually visible in all parts of the game other than cut-scenes. If the character wants to do something else with his hands, such as pick up an object or open a door, the aiming graphic usually changes to another symbol, such as a hand, along with a written instruction (such as “Press ‘O’ to open door”). Furthermore, as in *Call of Duty: World at War*, most first-person shooters provide a range of scoped weapons and a button that switches the visual perspective of the game to a magnified view as if seen through the telescopic sight. This perceptual experience, allowing for precise aiming and the picking off of targets, is an integral part of first-person

²⁶⁸ http://callofduty.wikia.com/wiki/List_of_weapons_in_Call_of_Duty:_World_at_War

shooters. Although this activity of sniping slows down the gameplay, it is a very popular and gratifying part of most first-person shooters. Scoped weapons appear in various challenges amidst multiple levels of the game, meaning that the games switch back and forth between precision aiming and firing rapidly, and less discriminately, at multiple enemies.

On a base level, World War II shooters share the same fundamental gameplay as every other first-person shooter. Instead of shooting monsters, the player shoots Nazis. Instead of clearing an abandoned medical facility filled with zombies (as in *Resident Evil*), the player clears an abandoned aircraft hangar filled with enemy soldiers. In this sense, all of the World War II iconography, settings, and characters discussed earlier are merely window dressing. The primary activity of these games is not taken from the genre of the World War II combat film, but is rather shared with all video game first-person shooters. This similarity among all first-person shooters is in fact inscribed within their software. Current video games tend to share the same game engines, which are software that determine the rendering of graphics, the simulation of physics, and the artificial intelligence, among other things, used to create a game. For instance, the first *Call of Duty* used the Quake III game engine—*Quake III* being a sort of sci-fi gladiatorial hybrid game. This engine was also used for a *Medal of Honor* game, as well as for a *Star Trek* and a *Star Wars* game. Thus, at a base, technological level, excepting the express content of particular games, two first-person shooters can be exactly the same. And, in fact, all first-person shooters share the same basic form, meaning that World War II shooters have more in common with fantastical shooters, like *Doom* or *Halo* (Bungie Studios/Microsoft, 2001), than they do with games of different genres that take World War II as their setting, such as a strategy game.

However, the fact that first-person shooters share so much in terms of their basic set-up means that the small differences among games carry even more meaning. Therefore, the rest of

this chapter will be devoted to exploring the significance of the historical and cultural overlap between the contemporary renewed interest in World War II and the first-person shooter genre. This concurrent cultural investment demonstrates how American culture conceives of the “good war” today and of combat and war more generally. Moreover, analyzing the first-person shooter format can tell us something about video games more broadly because it is medium-specific in ways that other genres are not. The strategy game, for instance, is in some respects an automated version of certain board games like *Axis & Allies*. Trying to imagine a first-person-shooter board game causes cognitive dissonance, and while there have been some experiments with the subjective camera in film and television—most notably in the 1947 film noir *Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery)—the first-person point of view has never been seen as a truly viable aesthetic in cinema, at least in anything more than brief, formally daring sequences.

Alexander Galloway has traced the origins of the first-person subjective perspective, as well as the “first-person shooter” perspective (including a gun within the shot), through the history of cinema.²⁶⁹ Such cinematography—which takes not only the approximate view of a character, but attempts to render visually his or her actual visual perception, which is sometimes blurred by tears, blood, dizziness, or the like—has been exceedingly rare in film. Along with *Lady in the Lake*, Galloway discusses the first hour of *Dark Passage* (Delmer Daves, 1947) in which the subjective point of view acts as a conceit to hide the bandaged face of the main character from view until he emerges as Humphrey Bogart. These experiments with extended subjective vision are uncommon. But brief use of the subjective can be found in other films, especially, as Galloway argues, to represent deviant vision belonging to a damaged, monstrous, detached, or cyborg personality. For example, *The Naked Kiss* (Samuel Fuller, 1964) contains

²⁶⁹ See Galloway, “Origins of the First-Person Shooter,” in *Gaming*, 39-69.

the optical perspective of a drunk, and *Vertigo*'s (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958) famous “trombone shot” (tracking out while zooming in) represents the fearful and disorienting experience of vertigo. In slasher films like *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978) or *Friday the 13th* (Sean S. Cunningham, 1980), the film often adopts the subjective perspective of the killer stalking a victim. Carol Clover has labeled this kind of sadistic vision “predatory” or “assaultive.”²⁷⁰ The use of first-person camera to mimic the point of view of cyborgs, in films such as *The Terminator* (James Cameron, 1984), *Robocop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987), and *Predator* (John McTiernan, 1987), only reinforces the sense of detachment and monstrousness attached to this camera perspective. Thus, Galloway argues, instead of connecting the audience more organically and fully with the character whose perspective it takes, the subjective camera ironically distances the audience and “effect[s] a sense of alienated, disoriented, or predatory vision.”²⁷¹

However, in his assessment of subjective vision in video games and specifically first-person shooters, Galloway argues that unlike in cinema, “in games the subjective perspective is quite common and used to achieve an intuitive sense of motion and action in gameplay.”²⁷² He claims that the first-person perspective—even when attached to the “shooter” point of view that includes the weapon at the bottom of the screen— aids identification but is not necessarily associated with violence. As he points out, video games that adopt a different perspective on the action (such as third person or the god-like overview) are just as likely to contain violence. But can we say with such assuredness that the alienation and aberration associated with the first-person perspective in cinema does not bleed into the World War II shooter game, particularly

²⁷⁰ Carol Clover, “The Eye of Horror,” in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 193.

²⁷¹ Galloway, 68.

²⁷² Ibid., 40.

since these games draw so much of their visual style from World War II combat films? More broadly, what is the impact of the first-person shooter perspective on these games' representation of World War II? And why are the designers of first-person shooters drawn to the war as a setting for their games?

Galloway argues that first-person shooters differ in their use of perspective and representation of space from films because the video games involve action and require "fully rendered, actionable space."²⁷³ In other words, unlike a film, which only shows portions of a three-dimensional space artificially constructed via montage, a video game provides access to a virtual three-dimensional space that can be explored and is always available to be acted upon by the player. This is indeed an important variation in the representation of space between the two media. However, despite Galloway's dismissals of the first-person shooter's link with violence, the way the video game space is "actionable" is through shooting. The player visually experiences the game setting as a scrolling landscape atop a weapon, or quite often, through the scope of a gun. The visual and spatial experience of the game is intrinsically linked to the violence perpetrated through the weapons that are (usually) a permanent fixture at the bottom of the screen. At the very least, if we dissociate the simulation of violence from violence itself, the game experience—its construction of time, space, narrative, and objective—revolves around the aiming and firing of weapons.

Therefore, certain measures have to be taken to soften this association with killing—which runs the risk of alienating a key demographic for these games, preteens and teens, or at least their parents who would purchase the games for them. All of the *Medal of Honor* games have been rated T (for teen) by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB), as were the

²⁷³ Ibid., 63.

first three *Call of Duty* games. (Beginning with *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, all recent *COD* titles have been rated M for mature, or 17 or older.) The setting of World War II facilitates this softening, as the game designers are able to couch their violent gameplay scenarios in “real” history. This is one of many examples in which historical realism is used to justify excessive violence or other potentially offensive material. Furthermore, World War II’s moral authority—the cultural mythology that paints the war as a vast defense of freedom against tyranny—also works to justify the violence that, as we have seen, is at the very heart of the genre of the first-person shooter. The war’s associations with patriotism, Allied triumph, justified military intervention, heroism, and freedom all serve to justify the genre’s obsession with shooting and killing. The World War II semantics are not only merely the outer wrappings of a classic shooter game; they are also a mask that puts an unquestionably honorable face on what many would consider to be inherently dishonorable—the simulation of killing.

Yet the irony of this historical realism couched in moral clarity is that World War II games allow the player to shoot and kill humans, rather than monsters or other fictional creatures, and to still feel good about it. The stakes may be higher for historical reasons—the fight against fascism—but they are also higher for cultural and moral ones—the ability to aim and fire at (simulations of) real people. World War II provides game designers with clear and defined enemies, however, who have been demonized to the point that they may not seem human.²⁷⁴ Video games can rely on the cultural stereotype of Nazis in particular, who have been portrayed in countless films as ruthless and bloodthirsty killing machines who lack sympathy for their victims. In video games, German soldiers are generally not distinguished from Nazis, and

²⁷⁴ Indeed, the conclusion to this dissertation addresses the extent to which video games and films have combined World War II enemies, especially Nazis, with the occult, creating literal monsters out of the figurative monsters of historical record.

the enemy armies players fight in the European theater or in North Africa are generally represented as homogenous Germans, and thus Nazis. Since Nazis are a historical group no longer in existence, there is more leeway in how they are represented.

Representation of the Japanese soldiers proves to be a trickier case, since they are less likely to be associated with a historical group or period. Rather, the video games (and films) cannot help but evoke the racially motivated violence that affected how the war itself was fought and how the Japanese were represented at the time. Films were far more likely to ascribe racial stereotypes—portraying them as animalistic, devious, fanatical, and cruel—to all Japanese people, not just a subset of them that were in power. As the Japanese are now allies of the United States, as well as the major producer of video game hardware (Nintendo, Sony, etc.), the representation of the Japanese as less than human becomes more problematic. Games have generally dealt with this problem by setting the action of the games in Europe rather than the Pacific. Furthermore, there is not much close-contact fighting. The enemy soldiers are often just tiny figures in the distance or encased in machinery (such as a Zero fighter plane) that further reduces the sense of humanity of the enemy.

As I have shown with the description of gameplay above, *Call of Duty: World at War* breaks with some of these conventions in setting more than half of the game in the Pacific and in intensifying the violence. One way that the game justifies this violence, which tends in this game to be more up-close and personal than in other games, is by returning to the standard tactic of World War II films—demonizing the enemy. This is particularly apparent in the first scenario that the player faces in the game, a Japanese prison camp on Makin Island. In the opening cut-scene, a low-angle subjective point of view shows a Japanese guard standing over an American prisoner. The guard, yelling in subtitled Japanese, puts out a burning cigarette on the prisoner's

face and then executes him by decapitating him with a samurai sword. As the guard then moves past the lifeless and bleeding body of the American lying on the ground towards the screen (and thus, the player), he is attacked from behind by an American soldier who kills the Japanese guard by stabbing him through his neck. This soldier addresses the player, allowing the player to escape the prison camp. Then the cut-scene seamlessly transitions into the gameplay, as the player then controls the character's exit from the camp into a battle.

This grisly scene in the prison camp relies upon cultural stereotypes of the Japanese from the 1940s and later, particularly in the form of the cruel prison camp guard and the barbarity of samurai sword beheadings, which were publicized in the press and much feared by American servicemen, while also being objects of fascination. The first-person perspective of the scene heightens the scene of identification with the scenario and the danger it poses to the player's character. It also makes the interactive violence in the continuing scene seemingly justified because of the egregious actions of the Japanese guard, whose murder of the prisoner is given no backstory or motivation. As in most video games, the player is thrown into the midst of the action without elaborate instructions or background plot. The cut-scene models the appropriate and expected behavior for the player—the also gruesome murder of the prison guard by the fellow American, who instructs the player in the rest of the scene. This mixture of nonplaying and interactive parts of the scene sets the stage both morally and physically for the rest of the mission. The player is motivated to revenge this killing he has witnessed, via the use of first-person perspective, and expected to act out that revenge through the gameplay of aiming and firing. Stereotypes allow for an easier entrance into the game and the game world, since nuance of character does not need to be demonstrated. Rather, the reliance on demonized enemies and stereotyped allies works with the first-person point of view to allow a seamless and immersive

experience of the game's action, with little delay for explanation. Furthermore, because of the use of cultural and historical stereotypes, players can feel justified in killing human characters, perhaps even morally superior.

This heightened violence and reinforced negativity toward the enemy may serve to explain and justify other innovations of *World at War*, particularly the introduction of two new weapons—the bayonet and the flamethrower. On the one hand, these weapons are historically accurate and were particularly associated with the close-quarters combat on the islands of the Pacific. But they also add a level of personal interaction between the player and the enemy, along with enhanced visual gore. Both weapons must be used at extremely close range and the effect on the body is more pronounced than just a bullet wound. In closer ranges or with the used of the magnified sight of the sniper rifle, often elaborate and graphic streams and splatters of blood can be plainly seen. Without even meaning to, when playing the game, I blew off the heads of enemy soldiers, amputated limbs, caused sprays and clouds of blood, and even “gibbed” two or three combatants.

This gore is not just a consequence of gameplay, but an integral part of it; in fact, graphic violence is often a motivating factor in the choice to play the game in the first place. It has been reported that gamer fans of *Call of Duty* requested the ability to dismember the bodies of their victims—a request that was denied.²⁷⁵ While this kind of violence can be found in third-person games, or games with other points of view, the first-person effect enhances the sensation that violence is being done to the player herself and that she is personally inflicting violence of the simulated characters. It creates a very particular sense of corporeal immersion. This sensation is enhanced by the design decision in *World at War* to visually indicate being wounded by a

²⁷⁵ David Kushner, “Lord of the Fans: How to Keep Trigger-Happy Gamers in Line,” *Wired* 17, no. 11 (Nov. 2009), http://www.wired.com/magazine/2009/10/pg_games_modernwarfare2/.

subjective visual experience, rather than by a head-up display²⁷⁶, which usually uses symbolic graphics to display how much “health” remains before the character will die. The subjective experience takes the form of the color red blurring and clouding the image, along with representations of blood dripping, as if on a camera’s lens. The player must find cover in order to not be hit again, and then in a brief time the character will recover, the visual marker will disappear, and the character can return to the action. This decision reduces the distraction of the head-up display, which exists outside of the diegesis of the game and thus contradicts the immediacy promised by the first-person subjective point of view.

First-person shooters thus revolve around violence, both that which the player inflicts on characters within the game and that which his character receives. While it may be true that the first-person subjective visual point of view that Galloway locates first in cinema may not necessarily be attached to “predatory” vision in video games, the first-person shooter perspective, including the weapon on the screen, cannot be disconnected from violence. The player experiences the game world primarily through the actions of shooting and killing. Unlike the spectator of a film, the player’s view of the screen is directly connected to movement and action controlled by the player himself. The first-person perspective in a video game allows the player to look around and explore a virtual space. But in the shooter game, this visual experience cannot be removed from the action of shooting and killing, especially with the emphasis on scoped weapons which provide a magnified view. Thus the violence that Galloway linked to the first-person subjective view in cinema can also be found in video games. The

²⁷⁶ A head-up display, or HUD, consists of the graphics overlaid on top of the visuals, giving graphical and numerical information about health, direction, position, ammunition count, or any other data that the player needs to know and cannot sense intuitively.

difference is that this violence, not just this point of view, is normalized and standardized. It is no longer detached or alienated, as it was in film. Rather, it becomes the norm.

World War II provides a way to both soften and enhance this association with violence. The war allows for moral justification of the violence, along with an appeal to historical realism to excuse what many would consider to be excessive. The virtual act of killing human beings may not seem so reprehensible when stationed in the historical setting of the fight against the fascism of the Nazis and the Imperial Japanese. Yet this justification allows these games ever more realistic and extreme representations of violence, particularly against human characters. The represented violence on screen, becoming more and more graphic and extreme with each additional game in the franchise, enhances the sense of immersion, as the first-person point of view implicates the player and her body and perceptual apparatus.

5.5 IMMERSIVE HISTORY AND THE SOLDIER AS MACHINE

The first-person perspective works with other video game conventions and technologies to amplify the sense of immersion in the video game world. For instance, many video game controllers, or gamepads, contain force-feedback capability. In other words, they vibrate in response to the game world, simulating, for instance, the impact of being wounded or shot or the vibrations of moving on a truck or helicopter. The Playstation 3 controller, named the DualShock 3, contains both “rumble” (aka vibration-feedback) and wireless capability.²⁷⁷ The wireless controller allows for freer movement of the body and hands. Not having to be tethered

²⁷⁷ This is the controller I used to play *Call of Duty: World at War*, as well as other Playstation 3 games, such as *Wolfenstein* (2009). For *Call of Duty: The Big Red One*, I used the DualShock 2 controller for the Playstation 2, which also uses rumble, but is not wireless.

to the machine increases the sensation of direct control over the game world. The vibration of the controller creates a sense of bodily immersion, even though it is on a limited scale (the hands only, rather than the whole body). Corporeal sensation and movement (even if it is merely the movement of hands and fingers) joins with the first-person perspective on screen to create the sense of not only being transported to a different world, but being able to control and interact with that world.

In the World War II shooter, this imaginary world to which the player is perceptually immersed is also supposed to be the historical world of the war. History then becomes something that can be interacted with in real time, something that can be perceptually experienced and “lived through” after the fact. This is the promise of all the advertising that highlights the realism of the games, their recreation of historical battles and equipment, and the accuracy of their simulations. This begins to explain the focus on setting gameplay within particular historical battles, rather than just using villains or iconography from the war within the game, as the *Wolfenstein* games have. While retaining a sense of fidelity to the time period and the historical record, these games alter the way history is written by using the game form in which to tell it. How does the first-person shooter perspective in particular impact how World War II history is narrated and experienced by the player?

To begin with, World War II shooter games reflect a contemporary celebration of victory culture and the triumph of the Allies—especially the U.S.—in an era in which American military intervention has been viewed with skepticism. These games offer a chance to return to the “good war” and to win it all over again, this time with the input of the individual player. This version of history may follow the same basic trajectory of conventional history, but the emphasis is on action, specifically the action of the player. Rather than an act of cognitive reconstruction—

imagining the world as it once was—history as told by the video game attempts to be a visceral immersion in the activity of history. History becomes action, and action only. Broader historical connections, larger causes and consequences, considerations of strategy and supply—these are neglected in favor of the immediate gratification of activity. Cause and effect still apply, but are reduced to a micro scale—the pressing of buttons as cause; the virtual destruction of a target as effect. This sequence is played over and over again, and indeed this repetition of activity, this honing of skills, is part of the pleasure of the game.

Furthermore, the focus of the first-person shooter is on the individual player who usually controls a single common soldier. Even in games when the main character changes (as in most of the *Call of Duty* games in which the player controls two or three different characters from different nations), the emphasis is on the action taken by the single player. The fact that the main character changes only highlights how much that character, in all situations, is just an ordinary grunt. Although multiplayer options are available with the increasing integration of online gameplay, the games are still designed for the single player who must progress through a series of missions in a particular order. Unlike a strategy game, which emulates the perspective of a commanding general making broad strategic decisions, the first-person shooter focuses on the nitty-gritty experience of the individual on the ground. In this way, the World War II shooter falls into the same tradition as *San Pietro* and *Saving Private Ryan*. It neglects the broader stakes and consequences of the war, replacing them with nonstop action and stimulation.

However, the emphasis on the infantryman, the lowest of the low, the everyday soldier, is in tension with the heroic action that the character takes (controlled by the player) and the impact that character/the player has on the game environment. With the first-person perspective, the game is literally shaped around the player's experience, both visually and in terms of narrative.

Unlike a real infantryman, who likely has a minimal influence on the outcome of a particular mission and who must work together with others in a team, the main character of a World War II shooter makes vital decisions and takes crucial actions that affect the unfolding of the game. Furthermore, the character is virtually invincible. Death of course is possible in video games, but it is never irrevocable. When a character dies, the game automatically restarts at the latest checkpoint, forcing the player to replay part of a certain level in order to learn how to avoid her earlier fate. This repetition both avoids the consequences of death and results in learning and improvement in ability for the player. The player (and thus his character) becomes even more skilled and therefore able to tackle harder obstacles as the game unfolds.

Not only does the emphasis on the individual perspective reduce the massive scale of the war to that of the individual grunt (something that has long been celebrated in World War II representation, from Ernie Pyle's dispatches to *Saving Private Ryan*), but the video game also reduces the war to the activity of killing. The World War II shooters discussed above treat the war as if all servicemen did was constantly fight—and not only fight, but aim and fire with precision at the enemy. This kind of repetitive activity, with the gameplay and setting variations introduced by the individual games, is what makes the games exciting and fun to play. The player must constantly be on the alert to enemies surrounding him. He must find the targets, aim, and fire, all very quickly and often on the move, in order to avoid mortal wounding himself. His actions have immediate consequences not only for his own virtual health, but for the survival of other members of his unit.

Therefore, instead of making the American soldier out to be a victim, as in the contemporary World War II films discussed in the last chapter, the structure of the first-person shooter makes the player's soldier character nearly invincible. According to Bernd Hüppauf, the

industrialization of warfare in the twentieth century led to “reconstitution of the soldiers’ identity,” turning him into a “fighting machine”: the “hardened man with his steel helmet, emotionless, experienced, with no morality apart from the value of comradeship and no obligation or attachment other than to his immediate group of warriors.”²⁷⁸ This description of the modern soldier also applies to the character one plays in World War II shooter games. These characters are literally fighting machines, impervious to the mortality that afflicts real-world combatants. In one way, this makes them the ultimate heroes, capable of death-defying feats. But their machinic basis also evacuates the larger cultural associations and deeper meanings of their actions, despite the constant reminders of the historical and moral context of World War II via the iconography, cut-scenes, and montages of documentary footage. These soldiers may exist in what Galloway called a fully “actionable” space, seemingly open to unlimited possibilities, but it is also akin to the “geometrical and abstract,” “non-emotional and basically empty space” that Hüppauf finds in the aerial photography of the First World War.²⁷⁹ Instead of fighting through a landscape filled with moral and emotional associations like a cinematic character, the video game player fights through an abstract, virtual landscape in order to rack up points and kill counts, to progress through space in the most precise, skilled, and swiftest way.

This representation of soldier as machine also reflects the transition that Lynda Boose has identified in war cinema between Vietnam War films like *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978) or *Born on the Fourth of July* (Oliver Stone, 1989) and later films like *Top Gun* (Tony Scott, 1986). While the former films—and I would add contemporary World War II films like *Flags of Our Fathers*—represent the soldier as victim, the latter film contains “a radically

²⁷⁸ Bernd Hüppauf, “Experiences of Modern Warfare and the Crisis of Representation,” in *Hollywood and War: The Film Reader*, ed. J. David Slocum (New York: Routledge, 2006), 61, 63.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 64.

different ethos, that of the elite technicians of war, the studied *sprezzatura* and gamesmanship of the high-flying macho men of the air who ... experience war from the detachment of button-pushing technology.”²⁸⁰ For these machine-soldiers of the digital age, war is made computable and thus knowable, predictable, quantifiable, controllable, and rational. In video games, visibility is at the crux of the action. The act of aiming and firing, essential to the first-person shooter, involves the player in a process of mentally computing visual information, making quick decisions, and acting upon the information to achieve determinable, quantifiable results. The player herself thus becomes part of the machine. Video games “represent the most complete symbiosis generally available between human and computer—a fusion of spaces, goals, options and perspectives.”²⁸¹

To represent combat in such a way vastly misconstrues the actual experience of World War II, in which servicemen spent most of their time waiting and in transport and many never fired their weapons.²⁸² Moreover, these soldiers were often relatively untrained and their aim was hardly as precise as a computer program. Such a representation neglects the concept of total war, in which the side with the most war materiel produced and transported won the war. It ignores the great blunders made and wasted effort. It disregards the psychology of the war—what Paul Fussell described as “chickenshit,” the hierarchical system of the military and the useless display of rank²⁸³—as well as the physicality of combat: the physical aches, pains, and

²⁸⁰ Lynda Boose, “Techno-Muscularity and the ‘Boy-Eternal’: From the Quagmire to the Gulf” in *Hollywood and War*, 282.

²⁸¹ Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Post-Modern Science Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 196-7.

²⁸² According to Adams, only 27 percent of the military saw combat during World War II (11). An immediate postwar study conducted by Brig. Gen. S. L. A. Marshall concluded that 75 to 85 percent of U.S. soldiers most likely did not ever fire their weapons while at the front lines in both the European and Pacific theaters. See Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (Toronto: George J. McLeod, 1947), 56-7.

²⁸³ Fussell, especially 79-95.

wounds; the reality of death; the rancid smells; the dirt and rot. The World War II video game may be very effective at recreating the mise-en-scène of the war, the weapons and the uniforms and the landscapes. But the gameplay reflects something other than World War II itself. It is self-reflexive, reflecting back on the construction of a first-person shooter. One shoots because that is what the game is designed to do—to simulate shooting. Thus, World War II becomes all about shooting, reflecting a contemporary fantasy about what World War II was and what warfare is today.

This fantasy involves the impression that military combat is a game of precision and skill—the lining up of aim, the dexterity of trigger fingers, the clean and confirmed kills. Many games even provide statistics at the end of every level, showing what percentage of the player's shots hit a target, what kinds of wounds they inflicted (torso, head, limb, etc.), and data about damage to the player's character. The most fetishized of these shots is the head shot, a direct and fatal bullet to the head of one of the enemy. The player is rewarded for this kind of shot. First, the head shot is instantly fatal, so it takes fewer bullets and less time to kill more enemies. Secondly, gory effects are reserved for headshots, like the spurting of arterial blood or a gruesome explosion of the organ. Third, certain parts of the video game literally reward head shots with more points. While it could be argued that this aspect of the game merely celebrates graphic violence for its own sake, I think the more important implication is the emphasis on precision in aiming that this set-up encourages. This fetishized, but rather sterilized, version of violence neglects the element of randomness, chance, and serious gaffes that are part of any war. The emphasis on aiming reintroduces an illusion of control and mastery that the player can enact over her virtual environment.

Instead of historical war, the World War II shooter reflects a contemporary fantasy of what modern warfare is, particularly as it is increasingly waged with weapons designed to work like video games. The digital interface of a video game mirrors the interface on dozens of computerized instruments and weapons currently being used by the American military, such as the pilotless drones flown in the Middle East but controlled remotely from Nevada. Moreover, if the World War II setting is set aside as a part of the game's visual exterior, the basic gameplay of the game—aiming and firing—is nearly identical to the digital simulations that the military uses to train soldiers. Neither World War II, nor the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, fit the model that is propounded by these games—a war of precision aiming and firing in which enemies are clearly located and there is no collateral damage—yet these games still reflect the fantasy of what twentieth and twenty-first century war is: clean, precise, fast-paced, with quantifiable success. Video games present war as something computable, controllable, and orderly, fought without posttraumatic stress disorder or real death by machine-like soldiers. In this, they reflect how Baudrillard described the first Gulf War, “an asexual surgical war, a matter of war-processing in which the enemy only appears as a computerised target.”²⁸⁴ The fact that this description presents a fantasy of war and neglects the massive destruction on the ground contributes to his judgment that that war “did not take place.”

In an essay on the World War II shooter, James Campbell suggests that these games return us to a premodern age of warfare in which combat was construed as “a contest between equals—a skill-based *agon*.²⁸⁵ Campbell follows theorist of play Johan Huizinga in arguing that warfare, before the instantiation of “total war” in World War I, with its blurring the lines

²⁸⁴ Jean Baudrillard, “The Gulf War Did Not Take Place,” in *Hollywood and War*, 303.

²⁸⁵ James Campbell, “Just Less than Total War: Simulating World War II as Ludic Nostalgia,” in *Playing the Past: History and Nostalgia in Video Games*, ed. Zach Whalen and Laurie N. Taylor (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008), 195.

between civilians and soldiers, had been seen as a kind of game, played as a game by equal contestants following rules. Campbell argues that by constructing World War II “as an exercise in marksmanship, efficiency, and heroics,” it participates in a “revisionism that symbolically relocates World War II in the premodern.”²⁸⁶ While I agree that these games revise history by emphasizing individual skill over chance or logistics, I believe this reflects a fantasy of warfare that can describe combat-made-ludic in any age, not just the premodern. That is, by making war into a game—whether that be chess or a video game—the messy chaos that is combat is simplified and reduced into something controlled and controllable, something that can be mastered by skill.

Call of Duty and similar games take fantasies of “clean” combat and add to them the cultural associations of World War II. This gives them the credibility of established history, while propounding the ideology of American superiority in technologized warfare. It fuses the emphasis on skill-based shooting and killing with the moral rectitude of World War II. On the other hand, however, it immerses the player in an experience that goes beyond the surface narrative of World War II. As Martti Lahti describes the gaming experience, “This delirium of virtual mobility, sensory feedback, and the incorporation of the player into a larger system thus tie the body into a cybernetic loop with the computer, where its affective thrills can spill over into the player’s space.”²⁸⁷ The corporeal realism and visceral pleasures of shooter games extend past the moral or thematic meanings integrated into the games’ narratives. Instead, like combat sequences in Hollywood films, these World War II video games illustrate a competing narrative of war, one based more on the visceral excitements and activity of combat than on the virtuous

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 197, 196.

²⁸⁷ Martti Lahti, “As We Become Machines: Corporealized Pleasures in Video Games,” in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, 163.

and nostalgic association of the war. Even as the stakes of the games' violence is not apparent on the level of the individual player with his multiple lives, the intense aggression, frenzied brutality, and simulated cruelty of the games also contribute to an even more pronounced representation of the war as a vast enterprise of killing and mass death. In this way, World War II shooter games contain within themselves conflicting representations of the war—a narrative of heroic duty and honorable actions with the ludics of gruesome killing and nonstop firing of virtual weapons. The tensions produced between these two aspects of the games contribute to the thrills and pleasures of playing them.

6.0 CONCLUSION: ALTERNATIVE HISTORIES OF WORLD WAR II

The exhilarating action of World War II combat media has most often been linked to an explicit context that can be called the “good war” narrative of World War II. The thrills of combat are linked to a sense of inevitable victory, the necessity of sacrifice, and the righteousness of the Allies. In this mythology, America is reluctant to fight, but once she does engage, her might wins the day. Accordingly, American soldiers are not bloodthirsty, but rather, the victims of circumstance. While they are competent—or superior—warriors, they are shown to suffer, and thus, in the melodramatic logic of the films, they prove their worth. The goal of this dissertation has been to reveal the holes in this nationalistic narrative within the texts that espouse it on a manifest level, even those made by Hollywood filmmakers or within the mainstream American entertainment industry. The films and video games discussed in this dissertation demonstrate that the popular narratives of World War II in America are not monolithic. Scenes of combat in particular work against this assured narrative with its set ending and righteous moral associations. Although World War II combat films have been reified through genre studies that focus primarily on certain narrative characteristics, a focus on the action and sensation of these texts reveals a different side.

The World War II combat genre invests, literally and figuratively, in the destructive sublime—audiovisual representations that delight in obliteration and violence, not just the reassuring narrative of triumphant military success. This investment disputes familiar

characterizations of the genre: that it is comprised merely of simplistic propaganda or triumphalist fantasies, that it reflects a culture of consensus, and that it is both formally and politically conservative. The previous chapters uncovered the ideological contradictions, narrative ruptures, and fractured visual styles that undercut these characterizations. Furthermore, the fascination with destruction in evidence in these texts works against any one-dimensional reading of narrative. Rather, attention to visual style and kinetic action reveals counter-narratives of World War II at the heart of combat sequences. These viscerally thrilling scenes immerse the spectator in another kind of history written on the body and felt within the jolts and shocks felt by the viewer. These histories tell stories of force and power, action and movement, cruelty and killing, destruction and violence.

These sensational scenes link spectacle and realism in the body of the spectator, who is immersed in combat scenes through a corporeal identification, particularly in those works that use the first-person subjective point of view. In Chapter 2, I located the origins of one of these kinds of perspectives—the first-person camera view that shakes violently in response to the concussive effects of battle—in the U.S. military documentaries made during the war. The unique historical confluence of Hollywood filmmakers with the wartime aims of the military led to exciting and moving depictions of the fighting forces. But it also underscores the strange amalgam of contingent, historical material and of staged, artificial material in both documentary and fictional films. This juxtaposition of disparate materials shows how, in a film like *San Pietro*, cinematic combat is made to feel “real” by assaulting the sensory and perceptual apparatus of the spectator.

Chapter 3 investigated the ramifications of inserting documentary footage into the fictional war films of the 1940s alongside historical reenactments and special effects with

miniature models. The phantasmatic constructions of space and time resulting from such juxtapositions undercut the straightforward assuredness in the manifest narratives of inevitable victory and moral righteousness. They also challenge the conventions associated with classical Hollywood cinema, particularly in their visual inconsistency and narrative fragmentation. These ruptures show that 1940s Hollywood films—particularly those dealing with the war—are polysemic texts torn between multiple goals: to educate, to propagate American values, to honor those fighting, to analyze the war, to reassure the home front, to entertain the masses with thrills and emotions. While on the surface, these films appear to conform to what Dana Polan calls “war-affirmative discourse,” their combat scenes still indulge in the destructive sublime, reveling in the explosions of miniature models alongside documentary images of real explosions on the battlefield.

Whereas 1940s combat films are much more likely to include combat scenes in which Japanese or German cities or military vehicles are destroyed, contemporary combat films have shifted the locus of violence to American soldiers. As I argued in Chapter 4, the American forces are represented as victims of an unexplained (and often unseen) enemy. While this would appear to be a shift from sadism (the spectacular destruction of the enemy) to masochism (the no-less spectacular obliteration of ourselves), there is an often unacknowledged power in victimhood. As victim-heroes, American soldiers attempt to redeem America from the debacle of Vietnam, while also participating in a melodramatic process of virtue lost and gained. This nostalgic melodrama does not tell the whole story, though, as the films also rely upon the new conventions of graphic violence that emerged during the Vietnam War and have continually transgressed fresh boundaries of acceptability. These films, like their 1940s counterparts, also

contain various types of footage, demonstrating nostalgia for celluloid representation while also employing state-of-the-art digital special effects.

Chapter 5 continued the examination into digital simulations of World War II combat, turning to the extremely popular first-person shooter games that return to the war as a setting. These games come the closest to using a doubly immersive (because of their subjective point of view and their interactivity) corporeal realism to tell a different story of the war, emphasizing death and killing. However, despite being structured around the aiming and firing of weapons, they misrepresent combat as a low-risk (because the player's character cannot really die) activity that can be easily controlled, mastered, and completed. They foreground the violence of World War II, but neglect its disorder. Although the structure of the World War II first-person shooter reflects the shooting genre to which it belongs, the game also engages the player in the construction of new narratives of the war.

In the last few years, there have been more and more instances of films and video games which explicitly reject the “good war” narrative of World War II in favor of other narratives. One text in transition is *Call of Duty: World at War*, a text I discuss in Chapter 5. The game includes a series of “Easter eggs,” or hidden special features that can be found and activated via certain codes or procedures. Easter eggs are, for the most part, intended additions to the game (they rarely result just from mistaken coding, for instance), but the player must seek out the information online, in gaming magazines, or in other fan discourse. One result of the inclusion of these special features is genre pastiche. For instance, in one part of the game, moving one’s characters into a series of craters in the sand in the correct order gives the player a sci-fi ray gun with which to kill Japanese soldiers. Neglecting historical accuracy, this new weapon combines the setting of World War II with an interactive object from science fiction. In addition to

referencing other science-fictional texts, the inclusion of this object also references the gameplay of other first-person shooters that contain fantastical weapons. One of the appeals of a historical shooter like *Call of Duty: World at War* is the historically faithful rendering of weapons. But the limitations of those weapons also stand as a drawback of these games. The ray-gun Easter egg allows for the best of both worlds, temporarily suspending the statutes that rule the game world, such as the constraints on historical simulations of weaponry. The ray gun, a short-lived exception to these rules, reveals those rules to be arbitrary. It reminds the player of the almost boundless possibilities of video games to simulate any kind of space, time, or behavior. By merging sci-fi imagery with the diegetic landscape of the historical war, the game briefly allows for a whole new set of connotations to emerge resulting from the collision of genres.²⁸⁸ These connotations might include futuristic warfare, advanced alien technology, or the human race as a whole pitted against an unknown species. In this one instant, various temporalities emerge—the past of World War II, the present of playing the game, and the future of warfare, whether it is engaged with digital simulations like video games themselves or with the ray guns of a past idea of the future.

Call of Duty: World at War also contains a hidden level that becomes available once the player has fully completed the single-player campaign—in other words, when she has “won” the game. This new level is in fact a game in itself called “Nacht der Untoten,” or Night of the

²⁸⁸ Other contemporary video games also combine science fiction iconography with elements taken from World War II. The latest *Wolfenstein* (multiple developers/Activision, 2009) features an American spy taking on the Nazis in Germany, but because of Nazi experiments with the occult, the player is able to use special, futuristic weaponry, such as the Particle Cannon, which fires a blue energy stream, instantly vaporizing opponents. A magical medallion also gives the player additional powers, like the ability to see through walls, slow down time, and create an invisible shield from bullets. The game *Resistance: Fall of Man* (Insomniac Games/SCE, 2006) also unites World War II iconography with science fiction. The game is set in an alternative 1951 in which a race of hostile aliens has invaded Britain. Many of the uniforms, weapons, vehicles, and settings thus resemble World War II, but there are also advanced weapons (based on alien technology) that allow a wide array of shooting experiences, such as the ability to shoot through or around walls.

Undead. The English title as it appears once you click on this level is even more explicit: “Nazi Zombies.” In this game, you use World War II-era weaponry to hold off an ever-greater horde of zombies wearing Nazi uniforms. This game-within-a-game distills the first-person shooter experience down to its essence. The player’s character is trapped in an abandoned and boarded-up warehouse with limited space and resources. As zombies approach the windows, tear off the boards, and enter the warehouse, it is the player’s job to kill the zombies one by one and, if he has time, repair the boards on the windows. With every zombie killed and every board replaced, the player receives points, which can be used to buy new weapons or ammunition or to unlock other parts of the warehouse (to open a door or to move the debris off the stairs).

Unlike the campaign mode analyzed in Chapter 5, the goal of “Nazi Zombies” is quick and efficient killing without the distractions of narrative motivation, new challenges and campaign levels, or any kind of storyline. But, like the larger game, “Nazi Zombies” is nonstop shooting, and for this reason, it is incredibly addictive. There is no backstory for why Nazis have become zombies, why your character is here at this warehouse fighting them off, who your character is, or when or how this is happening. The threat of the zombies needs no explanation. The point of the game is just aiming and firing, as with the rest of *World at War*, but the results here are explicitly quantified. The player receives a certain amount of points for killing each zombie and extra points for a headshot or for killing multiple zombies at once. The game’s addictive qualities stem from the constant action and the repetition of the same event (a zombie entering the building) with slight differences each time (through a different window, with a different speed, etc.). The game is extremely difficult, getting faster and more challenging with each level. The player “dies” quickly and often. But with the repetition of the game (starting over at the beginning every time) comes improved skill and strategic planning.

Another interesting aspect of the “Nazi Zombies” game is that there appears to be no way to win it. There is no final challenge, no big monster that must be defeated before the game is complete. It just keeps getting harder and faster indefinitely. Unlike the narrative of World War II that says that inevitably, there will be an Allied victory, this game always ends in defeat. But this does not ruin its appeal; in fact, I believe that it enhances it. It is the ultimate challenge—to beat something that cannot be beaten. Furthermore, in utilizing World War II and Nazi imagery in a fantastical, zombie-ridden world without any defined space or time orientations, “Nazi Zombies” abstracts from the historical context of the war. Instead of a definitive timeline of events with set endings (certain battles won or lost), this game pulls out strands from the World War II combat genre and weaves them together with other generic codes to create something new.

With its intense focus on killing, lack of closure, and addition of elements of fantasy, this mini-game illustrates a narrative of World War II that both extends and competes with the more conventional narratives told by the explicit content of games and films like *Call of Duty* and *Flags of Our Fathers*. “Nazi Zombies” extends the portrayal of the war that is apparent in the action of the *Call of Duty* games—the emphasis on killing, the graphic violence, the need to develop precision and speed in firing. However, the campaign mode of the *Call of Duty* games still links this version of skill-based, computerized warfare to the moral associations and historical situations of World War II in rendering particular battles and specific cultural qualities (if stereotyped, such as the exaggerated Russian accents and manner of speaking in the Soviet parts of the games). The zombie game, on the other hand, presents a much bleaker portrait of the war—one of constant death and violence that will not end, as the undead hordes never cease.

The appeal of the Nazi zombie figure deserves more research in its own right. The undead Nazi has also appeared recently in the Norwegian film *Dead Snow* (*Død Snø*, Tommy Wirkola, 2009), which was a cult hit in the U.S. and which makes reference to a long line of American Nazi zombie films ranging from *King of the Zombies* (Jean Yarbrough, 1941) to *Shock Waves* (Ken Wiederhorn, 1977). The zombie figure literalizes how the films and games investigated here bring “dead” history “to life” by recycling combat footage and narrative tropes from earlier visual representations of the war. World War II is now more than sixty-five years in the past, but it continues to haunt us, reemerging from where we had safely laid it to rest. As it returns to cultural consciousness, it does so not only through the original societal associations that have been attached to it—the moral conviction, the sense of consensus and unity, the righteousness of the innocent victim—but also through other associations that refuse to die: the atrocities, the industrialized mass killing, the exhilaration and terror of the front lines, the trauma of witnessing death.

The flexibility of genre pastiche allows for some of these “undead” associations to emerge more explicitly, particularly the conventions of horror films, monster movies, and the supernatural subgenre. The association of Nazis with the occult—found in various films from *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1981) to *Hellboy* (Guillermo del Toro, 2004) and in video games like the *Wolfenstein* series—evokes the pure evil, greed, and fanaticism associated with the Third Reich. But it also demonstrates the magical fascination held by those who had such power—seemingly supernatural—over life and death. Thus, the violence of World War II that is foregrounded in combat sequences in films and video games may disgust and disquiet us, but it also holds out an appeal. Part of the fantasy involves power and force, particularly as it takes the form of technologies of mass destruction, such as the atomic bomb. While appalling,

such technologies also mesmerize exactly because of the unimaginable scope of their annihilation. Susan Sontag has also located an erotic allure linked with domination in fascist memorabilia, such as the cheap paperback of *SS Regalia* that she analyzes in her essay “Fascinating Fascism.” The SS is made erotic because it was “the ideal incarnation of fascism’s overt assertion of the righteousness of violence, the right to have total power over others and to treat them as absolutely inferior. ...The SS was designed as an elite military community that would be not only supremely violent but also supremely beautiful.”²⁸⁹ As Sontag points out, at stake in contemporary representations of Nazism is the sadomasochistic play of victimhood and domination that is both frightening and captivating.

The contemporary World War II films discussed in Chapter 4—especially *Saving Private Ryan* and *Flags of Our Fathers*—presented the intense suffering of American soldiers, engaging in a masochistic representation of American self-flagellation. In their emphasis on the wounded bodies of American soldiers, the spectacular scenes of combat in these films differ from wartime films, whose spatiotemporal incoherence served to glorify the destruction of the enemy. As I argued in Chapter 4, these images of violence done to American soldiers both punishes them for the perceived sins of past wars, especially Vietnam, and purges them, turning them into victims made innocent once again. While the wartime films discussed in Chapter 3, such as *Destination Tokyo*, offered scenes of almost gleeful destruction of the enemy—particularly the landscape of Japan—mainstream American cinema had turned by the 1990s to images of American suffering, paradoxically giving power to the sufferers by making them into victims. This strategy was also in evidence in Spike Lee’s 2008 World War II film, *Miracle at St. Anna*, which empowers

²⁸⁹ Susan Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism,” in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 99, originally printed in *The New York Review of Books*, Feb. 6, 1975.

African Americans soldiers in part by showing their endurance of both white American racism and the violence unleashed by the German army.

However, another kind of narrative of American involvement in the war emerges in Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), moving once again from masochism back to sadism. As in some of Tarantino's other films, such as *Kill Bill* (2003, 2004), *Inglourious Basterds* revolves around revenge, drawing on the centrality of that theme in genres like the Western (particularly the Italian, or "spaghetti," Western), film noir, and horror. The revenge theme in *Inglourious Basterds* is marked explicitly as Jewish vengeance against the Nazis. The Basterds themselves are Jewish American soldiers selected to infiltrate German-occupied land ahead of the U.S. armed forces, terrorize the Nazis by killing as many as possible with brutal means, and collect one-hundred Nazi scalps each. The film also tells the concurrent story of Shoshanna (Mélanie Laurent), whose family is killed in the first scene by Col. Landa (Christoph Waltz), the "Jew-Hunter." She escapes, moves to Paris, and takes over the management of a movie theater, where she hatches a plan to kill the Nazi high command—including Hitler himself—when they gather there for a film premiere. Shoshanna makes a short film that plays while she sets the theater on fire; in it, she intones, "This is the face of Jewish vengeance," and laughs menacingly.

Revenge has always been a part of the American cultural imaginary of World War II, particularly in the hateful vehemence in which the Japanese war was conducted after Pearl Harbor. European immigrants to America also had reason to seek revenge on the Nazis for what they had done in their home countries. In *Destination Tokyo*, "Tin Can" (Dane Cook) whose real Greek name is unpronounceable to his shipmates, feels hatred toward the Nazis for killing his uncle in Greece. However, the film sees this as a problem that must be remedied, for it distracts

him from his work on the submarine and keeps him from uniting as a team with the other sailors. Capt. Cassidy (Cary Grant) makes a speech about the far more noble goals informing their mission, comparing what they are doing to removing daggers from the hands of Japanese schoolchildren and replacing them with roller skates. By making reference to other genres—and, significantly, foreign genre films—Tarantino is able to foreground and reinvigorate the theme of revenge, highlighting a crucial but underrepresented American cultural understanding of World War II.

Tarantino also marks his inspiration by Italian and Asian film genres with his extreme use of graphic violence. Two scenes in particular stand out in this respect. In the first, Lt. Aldo Raine (Brad Pitt), the (non-Jewish) leader of the Basterds, threatens to kill a Nazi officer if he does not give them information about a possible ambush. More specifically, he says that Sgt. Donny Donowitz (played by horror film director Eli Roth), also known as the “Bear Jew,” will beat him to death with a baseball bat. When the officer refuses, Raine laughs and replies with awful glee, “Watching Donny beat Nazis to death is the closest we get to going to the movies.” After Donny emerges wearing a dirty tank top and carrying a baseball bat, the film shows him bash the skull of the Nazi officer in medium shot and then shows a high-angle long shot of Donny swinging the bat again and again at the Nazi’s head. In a second scene, at the end of the film, Donny and another Basterd infiltrate the Nazi film premiere with weapons and explosives. As the theater catches fire, they break into Hitler’s box seats, firing incessantly with machine guns. Hitler is shown in medium close-up lying on the ground as the bullets destroy his face into an unrecognizable lump of flesh. A slow-motion close-up of Donny shows the hatred, but also illicit pleasure, he experiences killing Hitler, knowing that he himself will soon blow up as well.

The sadistic violence of these two scenes, inflicted by Americans on the enemy, seeks justification in the “Jewish vengeance” of which Shoshanna speaks, yet it also exceeds the bounds of conventional taste by being so up-close and personal. While the violence of a film like *Saving Private Ryan* was also extremely graphic—showing amputations, guts spilling out, pools of blood, and so on—it was also fairly impersonal; violence was shown to be the inevitable outcome of the machinery of war put into motion. But in *Inglourious Basterds*, the violence is inflicted against individual persons intentionally and with malice. Although violence is not new to the World War II combat genre, this kind of personalized, sadistic violence is usually not part of the American story of the war. If that kind of thing exists in the popular rendition of the war, it is on the part of the pathologized enemy soldiers (especially the Nazis, often depicted as vicious, ruthless, and sometimes mentally unhinged in their excessive loyalty to Hitler and the Third Reich). A wartime film like *Destination Tokyo* shows massive destruction caused by torpedoes shot by the American submarine, causing far more deaths. But this violence is shown from an extreme long shot, and it is depicted with the explosion of a miniature model of a Japanese ship. Contemporary World War II films show most of the more gruesome violence being inflicted on American soldiers.

These two scenes also imply the complicity of the institution of cinema in the violence being enacted. In the first scene, the on-looking Basterds form an audience for the murder of the Nazi officer, hooting and laughing in anticipation of a spectacle that is explicitly compared to “going to the movies.” The actual audience watching *Inglourious Basterds* adds to this diegetic viewership, invited to take perverse pleasure in this audacious act of brutality. While in this scene, Tarantino appears to be celebrating the visualization of a destructive fantasy of murderous revenge, the other scene in the diegetic movie theater is somewhat more ambiguous about the

functions of cinema. The fictional Nazi propaganda film being premiered, *Nation's Pride*, tells the story of a German sniper who manages to kill almost three-hundred Allied soldiers over three days. The part of the film that we see is only rapid-fire shooting and killing, edited together in a disjunctive way, more akin to avant-garde filmmaking than to classical Hollywood or Nazi propaganda. The style it emulates is more Sergei Eisenstein than Leni Riefenstahl; it even copies a shot from *Battleship Potemkin's* (Eisenstein, 1925) famed Odessa Steps sequence, a close-up of a figure being shot in the eye. Instead of being critical of the Nazi film, therefore, Tarantino uses the film sequence as an opportunity for additional stylistic experimentation and further intertextual references. He celebrates the diverse history of film style, rather than being critical of propaganda.²⁹⁰ Tarantino clearly finds violence, whether it is perpetrated by the Nazis or by those fighting the Nazis, to be "fascinating," demonstrating the dangerous power of fascistic imagery that Sontag described. Tarantino's film has thus been criticized by some critics for turning Jews into Nazis, that is, for showing Jewish characters engaged in the same kind of psychopathic and yet systematic violence that motivated the Holocaust.

For Tarantino, cinema is complicit in violence, but it also holds out the possibility of resistance to power. Shoshanna's movie theater offers the one magical opportunity to kill Hitler and end the war. The short film she plays during the massacre identifies who did this and why, giving her vengeance a voice. But only in cinema is such a plan possible—blowing up a movie theater (with highly flammable nitrate film stock, no less) and thus winning the war. Only in the movies could such a colorful set of characters converge and change the course of history, murdering Adolf Hitler and a theater full of Nazis. Tarantino's film thus re-imagines the history

²⁹⁰ Although uncredited, Eli Roth, the horror film director and actor playing Donny, directed *Nation's Pride*. A more extended version than what appears in *Inglourious Basterds* is available in the Special Features of the DVD release.

of World War II—the Allies still win, but in a very different way, enacting a fantasy of Jewish revenge. In its constant intertextual references to other films, *Inglourious Basterds* venerates cinema’s ability to re-envision entrenched historical narratives, such as the conventional story of World War II. But the critical potential is lost when it appears that *only* in the movies is such a narrative possible.

Tarantino’s film is constructed out of bits and pieces of other movie universes. Although he may not do so in a critical way, he shows us how national narratives of history are constructed and conveyed by cinema in a powerful way. Like some other recent texts, he endeavors to alter the narrative of World War II that has been most commonly received in American cinema. Tarantino visualizes an alternative ending to the war, as well as imagining the power of a handful of Jewish individuals (the Basterds and Shoshanna) to strike fear in the heart of the Nazi leadership and, ultimately, to eradicate them. The violence of his film reminds us of the brutality and cruelty of the war. Although it presents an almost cartoonish fantasy of power for those who were powerless to stop something as vast as the Holocaust, it also reiterates the horror of the war’s violence and makes that horror felt in the body of the spectator.

Inglourious Basterds departs from the other texts I have discussed in this dissertation because it does not feature any scenes of combat that fit the model of the World War II combat genre. However, it performs, in its own way, what I have argued that the other texts do in their combat sequences. In their use of both spectacle and corporeal realism, these sequences give expression to an alternative narrative of World War II, one emphasizing the annihilation caused by the war on a massive scale. In individual texts, this brutality has different effects—from callously rejoicing in the destruction of the enemy to melodramatically valuing the suffering of Americans. But in all of the examples I have examined here, the “good war” narrative of

American triumph is only part of the story. Combat sequences, for all their carnage and aggression, offer multiple pleasures of their own, often working against the explicit narrative of the film offered by dialogue and plot. They open up an array of meanings, some of which may contradict each other. As we have seen time and again, however, some of these meanings finally give voice to what many experienced in the war, showing it to be a merciless exercise in cruelty, bloodshed, and slaughter. These connotations show that there was more to the American World War II experience than the heroism, triumph, honorable sacrifice, and camaraderie usually celebrated and acknowledged in the combat genre.

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