

Drew Bassett

## Guy Westwell: War Cinema. Hollywood on the Front Line

2007

<https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2007.1.893>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Bassett, Drew: Guy Westwell: War Cinema. Hollywood on the Front Line. In: *MEDIENwissenschaft: Rezensionen | Reviews*, Jg. 24 (2007), Nr. 1, S. 101–103. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17192/ep2007.1.893>.

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### Guy Westwell: War Cinema. Hollywood on the Front Line

London: Wallflower Press 2006 (Reihe Short Cuts), 132 S., ISBN 0-8204-7115-1, £ 12.99

After watching the first few twenty minutes of the Normandy landing sequence in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) I was convinced there was no cause, reason or justification to legitimise such unnecessary loss. If the film had ended there, or at least before the *deux-ex-machina* ending, Spielberg would have created a powerful anti-war statement. Of course, as a Jew, he clearly saw the stand against Nazi Germany to be necessary in order to prevent the Holocaust. World War II was a just war, fought for honourable reasons. What Guy Westwell reminds us in *War Cinema. Hollywood on the Front Line* is that there are vested interests which have an incentive to depict war in a certain way, and that there is a "thoroughly entangled relationship between war, films about war and the cultural imagination about war" (p.2). This cultural imagination of war is shaped by the various depictions of war appearing in many contexts ranging from television news, newspapers, photojournalism, documentaries, film, art exhibitions, war memorials, games and so on. "These representations provide common ground upon which a collective, shared sense of war is worked out, articulated and sometimes contested. With time, this collective sense of war becomes a pattern of thought ... that constrains the very ways we think about war" (p.5).

In Spielberg's case, the motivation is clear. However, one must never forget the symbiotic relationship between the military/political establishment and films. Did the Department of Defense lend equipment for the making of the film and therefore gain leverage over the script? Was the release date influenced by political events? Was the Christian rhetoric of sacrifice deployed to disguise the imperialistic design of war?

Westwell presents a contemporary description of the cultural imagination of war but does so by first looking at the precedents and imaginings of war in earlier cycles of Hollywood war films. He strikes a balance between approaching these films as a distinctive genre but also as "products of cycles responding opportunistically to historical and cultural change in a fast-moving capitalist marketplace" (p.9).

His first chapter "Early War Cinema, 1898-1930" starts with war films from the turn of the century, which mostly reconstructed famous battles. Early examples of shot/reverse-shot and cross-cuts draw the spectator into the dramatic space of war. This immersive sense of combat has remained a feature of war cinema. At the beginning of World War I film producers made films which supported the government's policy of neutrality to the warring European nations. However, as the war progressed the USA became more partisan. In the 1920s, a wave of anti-war sentiment encouraged Hollywood to produce 'anti-war' films such as *The Big*

*Parade* (1925) and *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), although they do conceptualise war as a positive process eroding social demarcation and overcoming class antagonism. Soldiers are shown as victims but there is no discussion of the causes of war.

In the second chapter on the films between 1930-1961, Westwell concentrates on World War II, and in particular on *Bataan* (1943), as he feels films from this period have become central to the cultural imagination of war and a key point of orientation for the wider genre. Cinema of the late 1930s mimicked the government's isolationist stance, and with the exception of Warner Brothers, continued to make non-divisive films distributed into Nazi Germany and its territories. The 'conversion narrative' later became a common theme depicting the main protagonist (and the audience) moving from selfish neutrality to selfless sacrifice. The Production Code Administration (PCA) had overseen Hollywood since 1934, but in addition the newly created Office of War Information (OWI) felt the best way to inject propaganda into the minds of the people was through the medium of entertainment. These agencies ensured that selfless patriotism and moral propriety would be the central themes in this cycle of films.

The way in which *Bataan* "pieces together its patrol stands as a veritable paradigm for the nature and composition (different classes and ethnic backgrounds) of the combat unit in subsequent films, and also for the ways in which the experience of the combat unit becomes a cipher for the experiences of war in general" (p.35). Each burst of intense action prepares the men for further acts of comradeship and bravery whereas the Japanese are simply shown as monstrous. The audience leaves the cinema desiring revenge. Women are relegated to roles supporting men on the home front as nurses or factory workers, seldom on the field of battle.

The template for World War II war film was then applied to the 'police action' in Korea, but two new ideological strains were interwoven: that of cynicism – fighting a bitter small-scale war under the threat of nuclear war, and conformity – as the genre responded to the perceived communist threat of expansion. The next cycle of films in the late 50s and early 60s, such as *The Longest Day* (1962) or *Battle for the Bulge* (1965), articulate a straightforward patriotic version of World War II.

In his penultimate chapter Westwell discusses Vietnam films from 1961-1989. The limited nature of the war, and the lack of a clear strategy to attain victory, resisted Hollywood's ready-made storylines. Hollywood executives didn't see the war as a suitable product for the youth market. The military was also reluctant to lend equipment to productions which might be critical of the war. One notable exception was John Wayne's staunchly patriotic *The Green Berets* (1968) which failed at the box office. Films which addressed the Vietnam war cynically but obliquely like *Soldier Blue* (1970), or not so obliquely such as *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970), were much more successful. Later *Coming Home* (1978), *The Deer Hunter* (1978)

and *Taxi Driver* (1976) dealt with the problems of reabsorbing the returning veterans into American society who were ambivalently located as simultaneously agent and victim of imperialistic politics.

The next cycle of Vietnam War films was started by the introduction of Sylvester Stallone's John Rambo in *First Blood* (1982), followed infamously, by *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (1985). America gets to fight the war again and win.

Then came a cycle of Vietnam War films starting with *Platoon* (1986) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) which resisted the cartoon-like aesthetic of Rambo with their realistic affects, attention to detail and use of the combat soldier to mediate our experiences of combat and our memories of the war. These films imply a personal, ahistorical trauma that can be overcome, diverting our attention from the Vietnamese victims. They allow a successful process of revision.

The final chapter deals with contemporary war films from *Saving Private Ryan* in 1998. This film fosters a sense that World War II was a 'just war' fought by the 'greatest generation'. The brutal violence directed towards the American troops, and their bravery facing such violence, justifies the wider military campaign. Films about actual or contemporary wars, are relatively rare, often one-sided with very little historical or political context. The contemporary period World War II film has replaced the Vietnam War in shaping our contemporary cultural imagination.

*War Cinema* is an excellent book. It is well written, entertaining and concentrates on familiar films. For a relatively short book, it is a first-rate introduction and overview of the genre. The issue of race and what makes a classic anti-war film like *Catch-22* (1970) anti-war could have been analysed in more detail. In any case, this book delivers a timely warning to us to consider the implications when our politicians suggest it is imperative to go to war.

Drew Bassett (Köln)