

WAR ON FILM—an annotated overview

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Saving Private Ryan (1998) To many military historians, Steven Spielberg's tour-de-force is the best war film ever made. Gritty, realistic—often disturbingly so—and generally accurate, it follows an elite squad of Army Rangers from the D-Day invasion in June 1944 as they attempt to rescue a young paratrooper whose three brothers all have been killed in combat. The film's opening sequence gives an unflinching and brutal portrayal of the Normandy landings, and the film's meditation on soldiers' motivation provides a thought-provoking examination of the way individuals experience combat and war.

Glory (1989) Perhaps the best war film about the American Civil War, *Glory* traces the history of the 54th Massachusetts infantry regiment, one of the first African-American regiments in the Union Army. Beginning with its formation, the film follows African-American soldiers and their white officers from training to the unit's famous assault on Fort Wagner in 1863. Released in 1989, the film remains one of the most careful looks at issues of race in wartime.

Paths of Glory (1957) The first of Stanley Kubrick's three war films, *Paths* tells the story of a World War I officer (Kirk Douglas) who must represent three soldiers chosen at random to represent French mutineers in a court-martial. Dark and powerful, the film hints at themes that Kubrick would revisit in *Dr. Strangelove* and *Full Metal Jacket*.

Dr. Strangelove (1964) Stanley Kubrick's masterpiece discusses the madness of the Cold War and the atomic age with sharp wit and laugh-out-loud humor. Peter Sellers plays three roles, including one as an American president desperate to recall a rogue wave of American bombers bent on launching an unauthorized nuclear strike on the Soviet Union. The plot unfolds against the Pentagon's belated discovery that the Russians have built a secret Doomsday Machine that will destroy all life on the planet if a nuclear war erupts. The film's set of the War Room was so uncannily accurate that Pentagon officials became concerned that someone had leaked its top-secret design to the filmmakers.

Full Metal Jacket (1987) The final film in Kubrick's trio of war films, *Jacket* follows a platoon of recruits from their training on Parris Island to their deployment in Vietnam. Roughly divided into two parts—the soldiers' experience in boot camp and their time fighting in Vietnam—the film is best known for introducing R. Lee Ermey, a former Marine Drill Instructor who, most critics agree, stole the film's first half. Kubrick tackles the way the military socializes soldiers (frequently brutally) before following Private Joker (Matthew Modine) to Vietnam and examining the effects of that brutality on his experience in the war.

Gettysburg (1993) A film adaptation of Michael Shaara's superb novel *The Killer Angels*, *Gettysburg* offers a somewhat sanitized depiction of the three-day battle of Gettysburg in 1863. While not nearly as grisly nor as realistic as *Glory*, *Gettysburg* nonetheless provides plenty of grist for discussions of leadership in war in its portrayals of Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, James Longstreet, and Robert E. Lee.

Platoon (1986) Vietnam veteran Oliver Stone's film offered a vision of that war as a world gone mad. Charlie Sheen stars as a fresh-faced conscript—perhaps a representation of Stone himself—who is gradually corrupted by the war he is forced first to witness and then to participate in. One of the grimmest and most pessimistic portrayals of the war in southeast Asia.

The Patriot (2000) Many historians view this version of the American War for Independence as one of the worst of modern war movies. Unrealistic, overly sentimental, and sometimes just plain wrong, the movie gives a badly distorted view of both British regulars, American patriots, and the nature of the conflict.

Mary Silliman's War (1994) Difficult to find but well worth the effort, this 1994 TV movie depicts the American War for Independence in realistic and sometimes brutal strokes. Based on the diaries of the Revolutionary-era Mary Silliman, the movie traces her attempts to free her patriot husband from British custody and hold together her family as two warring armies crush colonial civilians between them. An honest portrayal of a conflict that was essentially a vicious civil war, and a wonderful classroom source.

Sands of Iwo Jima (1949) One of John Wayne's best-known World War II films, *Sands* is notable less for its depiction of battle than for its insights into the way that post-WWII Americans wanted to envision America's experience in that war. Scores of young Americans who volunteered in the first years of the Vietnam war expressed surprise that that conflict did not meet the expectations they had from watching Wayne on screen.

*M*A*S*H* (1970) Ostensibly a depiction of front-line surgeons during the Korean War, Robert Altman's incisive film was clearly meant as a commentary on the Vietnam War. Altman's disjointed, dark, and ironic vision of war's effects on the medical staff lay much of the foundation for the sensibility that would define Vietnam films in the 1980s and 1990s.

Three Kings (1999) One of the first films to cover the 1991 Gulf War, David O. Russell's film drew criticism for its stark depiction of one facet of combat: the damage a bullet does when it strikes a human body. That scene, filmed in slow motion using an actual cadaver, gave an unflinching look at violence in wartime and—perhaps not surprisingly—created an uproar in some quarters.

Twelve O'clock High (1949) One of the single best films about leadership and the strain it places on men during wartime, *Twelve O'clock High* features Gregory Peck as a USAAF officer brought in to boost morale in an underperforming bomber squadron during the Second World War's Combined Bomber Offensive. Gripping but understated, the film offers a brilliant examination of the way men are motivated to fight and the burdens that war places on the officers who lead them.

Apocalypse Now (1979) Francis Ford Coppola's film overlays Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* on the American experience in Vietnam, and in the process set the tone for later films like *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket*. It also contains some of the most iconic screen images of the conflict: the scenes of helicopters speeding into action as Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" plays and Robert Duvall's surf-obsessed Army officer remain definitive moments in American film.

Gallipoli (1981) A vastly superior film to Mel Gibson's other war movies, *Gallipoli* tells the story of young members of the ANZAC force that assaulted the heights at Gallipoli during the First World War. Raw and unvarnished, the film anticipates the more realistic direction war films would pursue a decade later.

The Longest Day (1962) One of the first attempts at a more realistic depiction of war on film, *The Longest Day* takes Cornelius Ryan's book of the same title as its inspiration and approaches one of the Second World War's pivotal battles from a number of perspectives: the German and Allied high commands, French civilians, and American GIs put ashore in France. While not nearly as realistic as *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Longest Day* was dramatically better than most movie fare in the early 1960s and remains a useful document today.

Black Hawk Down (2002) Director Ridley Scott adapted Mark Bowden's book about US soldiers attempting the rescue of a crew of a downed Black Hawk helicopter in war-torn Mogadishu. Grisly and dark, the film includes several discussions of the factors that impel young soldiers to fight and provides a thoughtful look at the limits of American military power in the post-Cold War era.

Questions? Comments? Suggestions? Please don't hesitate to contact me at chamner@gmu.edu

