Melting Down the Armor: The Soldier Portrayed Through Cinematic History

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ABSTRACT
Since the beginning of this century, films have provided a visual account of the chaos and horror, as well as the glory of war. Some of the earliest films depicted the mythological nature of war and tended to sentimentalize the warrior as an invincible being. Over the course of cinematic history, a theme of disillusionment with war began to prevail. This paper seeks to examine how the fantasy of heroism was replaced by the harsh reality of war through the realistic cinematic interpretation of war. The humanist elements of our society had begun to question the madness of the ritual of war. Furthermore, the harsh reality of war has left emotional and physical scars that will last a lifetime for the soldiers who endured the ravages of battle. From the films Birth of a Nation (1915) to Apocalypse Now (1979), history through motion pictures began to chronicle this transition from the glorification of war to the theme of disillusionment.

Since the beginning of this century, films have provided a visual account of the chaos, horror and the glory of war. Many early films depicted the mythology of warfare and tended to sentimentalize the invincible warrior. The glorification of heroism and valor were popular cinematic themes. Over the course of history, a transition began in American film as the theme of disillusionment with war began to prevail. Our culture became a culture of vision with the introduction of cinema, the persuasive power of film began to influence the viewing public. The historian, Steven Mintz explains the impact of film upon the viewing public:

Highbrow critics might dismiss most Hollywood films as schlock-but these films gave audiences more pleasure than any other art form and taught fundamental lessons in intimacy, tenderness, initiation, lust, conflict, guilt and loyalty... Movies have helped form the country's self-image and have provided unifying symbols in a society fragmented along lines of race, class, ethnicity, region, and gender. (Mintz ix-x)

Unified in the film theatre, a diverse film audience viewed young shell-shocked soldiers looking at life through the scope of a rifle. From the films Birth of a Nation to Apocalypse Now, cinematic history began to note this important thematic transition.

D.W. Griffith's Birth of a Nation was released in 1915 and proved to be a propagandistic film with authentically staged battle scenes and a mythic view of the Old South. The film was artistically innovative with an underlying theme of racist glorification and white supremacy. The historian Everett Carter noted that here is where "significant motion picture history begins" (Carter 8). With spectacular battle scenes and glorification of the Confederate cause, this film romanticizes the southern soldier as he sets off on a mission to preserve the feudal agrarianism of the south. The soldier is portrayed as determined to protect and preserve white honor and glory. This "knight in shining armor" image was very much alive during the Civil War. Likewise the poet Edmund Clarence Stedman describes this concept of the soldierly legend of a southern military leader in his poem, Kearny at Seven Pines:

So that soldierly legend is still on its journey—
That story of Kearny who knew not to yield!
"Twas the day when with Jameson, fierce Berry, and Birney,
Against twenty thousand he rallied the field...
When the battle went ill, and bravest were solemn,
Near the dark Seven Pines, where we still held our ground,
He rode down the length of the withering column,
And his heart at our war-cry leapt up with a bound;
His sword waved us on and we answered the sign:
Loud our cheer as we rushed, but his laugh rang the louder,
"There's the devil's own fun, boys, along the whole line!"
O, evil the black shroud of night at Chantilly,
That hid him from sight of his brave men, and tried!
Foul, foul sped the bullet that clipped the white lily,
The flower of our knighthood, the whole army's pride!

This poem illustrates the legendary nature of a military leader who, with heightened enthusiasm and courage, approached war as a zealot, relishing the challenge of a great battle. It was this type of warlike mentality, along with the adoration of the "white lily," that fueled the fire of feudal agrarianism in aristocratic southern society. As southern soldiers depart for the battlefront in Birth of a Nation, the South's flag is blowing in the wind and a banner expresses the southern spirit, "Conquer We Must For Our Cause is Just: Victory or Death." The gallant gentry are carried off to war on flower-decked horses, as cheering crowds wave farewell.
The plot of *Birth of a Nation* centers around the Cameron family. They are the embodiment of southern aristocracy and gentle society, whose lives are depicted in an antebellum plantation ideal that is threatened by the Civil War and the emancipation of slaves. In addition, the Ku Klux Klan seeks to defend the veritable empire of southerners, white supremacy. Their society perceived the emancipation of the Black Man as a major threat to southern aristocracy. As Everett Carter stated, “It [the film] served the ugliest purposes of pseudo-art giving people a reflection of their own prejudices, sentimental at best, vicious at worst, and a restatement of their easy explanations of the terrible complexities of their history, as Americans” (Carter 18). This film shows the dismal story of a lost generation of Aryans, who subscribed to the notion of white supremacy and the destruction of the white race through the integration of Black men into southern society. A curious message was placed on screen before the film, perhaps clarifying the purpose of the film, at least in the eyes of those responsible for the production. It read: “If in this work we have conveyed to the mind the ravages of war, to the end that war may be held in abhorrence, this effort will not be held in vain” (*Birth of a Nation*). The explicit battle scenes in the film heightened the awareness of the viewing public to the brutality and horrors of the Civil War. This film was the first motion picture ever to be shown at the White House. President Woodrow Wilson commented that “it is like writing history with lightning” (Stern 4). The emotional impact of this movie will continue to be felt by future generations.

If war was seen as a most noble and manly pursuit, the meltdown of the armor of the soldier emerged in the film, *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Upon its release in 1930, the film became a powerful piece of cinema that emphatically portrayed the transformation of a young German soldier in World War I. As the historian John Chambers states:

> The film... emphasizes the war’s senseless waste of youth. The camera graphically illustrates the breakdown of romantic ideas of war, heroism, and defense of a nation in the squallor of the trenches and the brutality of combat (Chambers 16).

The audience experiences the transformation of a young soldier from a dynamic, patriotic youth, into a hardened killing machine. The Knights in Shining Armor are reduced to what the main character, Paul Baumer calls “thugs and murderers...” This move toward realism, both in cinematic representation and plot, provided the public with the horrors and reality of trench warfare, as well as the preservation of a way of life as *Birth of a Nation* did so effectively.

The prologue at the beginning of the film was taken almost verbatim from the forward written by the author of the novel, on which the movie was based. The author, Erich Maria Remarque had written:

> This story is neither an accusation nor a confession and least of all an adventure, for death is not an adventure for those who stand face to face with it. It will try simply to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped its shells, were destroyed by the war.

The ending of the film is famous because of its powerful impact. In a moment of childlike wonder, the main character, Paul, reaches out over the bunker and into the air to touch a beautiful butterfly. The lone butterfly lands just out of his reach, near a tin can discarded on the ground. A French soldier eyes Paul through the scope of his rifle and prepares his aim. Paul reaches out, almost touching the butterfly, as the sharp sound of a shot fired rings out. In a haunting image, Paul Baumer dies. The camera had illustrated the brutality of combat. Film was now beginning to portray the harsh reality that after the glory of the battle had worn off the soldiers were left shell-shocked and stunned by the ordeal of war. Films began to reveal the lasting effects of war that would follow many troubled soldiers to their final rest, where all at last is peaceful and quiet.

While the overwhelming majority of war films made in Hollywood portrayed the sacrifices and deaths of American soldiers as necessary and noble, Sam Goldwyn released the path-breaking, *The Best Years of Our Lives* in 1946. The film attempted to tell the discouraging story of three servicemen and their readjustment to society in post-war America. The World War II veterans return from the war, both physically and emotionally fragmented and return to their homes to find that their niche in society had radically changed. The veterans struggle to adjust to the new postwar world. The men spend a good deal of time in the bar as they listen to this song played by the piano player:

> There’s nothing left for me

Of days that used to be

They’re just a memory

Among my souvenirs

The movie examines the lives of the returning servicemen who are plague by nightmares of war. For these returning veterans there are no accolades, no veneration, they are not treated as heroes. They struggled to find jobs to sustain them. They are haunted by the nightmares of war. The men suffer the impending consequences of their war. The film became a powerful piece of cinema that emphatically portrayed the transformation of a young German soldier in World War I. As the historian John Chambers states:

> “The Best Years of Our Lives” remains an important piece of evidence regarding that moment in American life when the past had been irrevocably lost, but the future had not yet taken a clear form” (Jackson 149). In the film, a young sailor, who has lost both his hands to a war injury must decide if he should marry his girlfriend, whose parents are against the marriage because he is now severely disabled. The young man finds the courage to move on with his life and his high school sweetheart accepts his proposal because her love for him is so great. All of these men must find the courage to continue living a meaningful life.

As different as all of these war films are, the nature of war is closely examined. As the armor of the soldier melts away, he is left standing with only his courage. He must find the courage to move through battle when he knows all is lost, or worse yet, there is nothing to be gained. He needs the courage to return to a home and to people who are totally different from those that he had left. He must find the courage to limp through life without a limb or an arm or worse yet, without the will to live. War-shocked, haunting images infiltrate his dreams. Perhaps it is true what Winston Churchill had proclaimed, “Courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities, because... it is the quality that guarantees all other” (Greer 34).

Hollywood has long been fascinated by the lasting effects of
war upon its soldiers. The Manchurian Candidate (1962), explored this phenomenon. The film is a psychological thriller about conspiracy and the powerful effect of brainwashing as a military device. Filled with symbolism and chilling imagery, the film is a surrealistic demonstration of the power of cinema to display the detrimental influence of brainwashing on the soldiers. The plot reveals that the servicemen were ambushed and taken to Manchuria to be brainwashed by communist forces. They have been conditioned and programmed to participate, but to forget, the strangulation murder of another serviceman by a young soldier named Raymond Shaw. Even though they were in the room when the murder occurred, they were instructed to remember only this: That “Raymond Shaw is the kindest, bravest, warmest, most wonderful human being I've ever known in my life” (The Manchurian Candidate 1962). The soldiers involved in the brainwashing sessions struggle to deal with the dreams that continue to plague their sleep.

The film helped the public to become aware of the power of psychological warfare and the lasting adverse effects. The character Yen Lo, who oversees the brainwashing episode, confidently tells his associates:

Do you realize, Comrade, the implications of the weapon that has been placed at your disposal?... a normally-conditioned American, who has been trained to kill and then to have no memory of having killed. Without memory of his deed, he cannot possibly feel guilt. Nobody, of course, has any reason to fear being caught. Having been relieved of those uniquely American symptoms, guilt and fear, he cannot possibly give himself away... His brain has not only been washed, instead, as they say, it’s been dried-cleaned.

The shocking realization that this film delivered was the impact of warfare on the subconscious mind as well as the physical being, and in this respect, Hollywood was playing upon a generalized fear: what happens to our boys when they go abroad to fight. The battle zone had extended into the psyche of the soldier, and this realization was frightening.

Along with the Vietnam War came anti-war sentiment and the pressure for Hollywood writers and directors to reflect some of that sentiment through their films. The viewing audience could see and feel the impact of the war through film. Francis Ford Coppola attempted to capture the feel of the combat in Vietnam, and to convey those images on screen with his intense film, Apocalypse Now (1979), which was loosely based on Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness. The film historian William Hagen notes Coppola stated the dual intention of his film:

The most important thing I wanted to do in the making of Apocalypse Now was to create a film experience that would give its audience a sense of the horror, the madness, the sensuousness, and moral dilemma of the Vietnam War....

In a sense, the film had returned to the sentiments expressed in All Quiet on the Western Front.

This film is poetic in nature and it lends itself to artistic interpretation. Definitely not documentary in its approach to telling the story of the complex web that constituted the war in Vietnam, Hagen reveals in his essay:

The film was focusing more on the psychological-moral effects of the madness. Perceptual disorder increasingly becomes physical and mental disorder, until we reach (the character of) Kurtz, whose apparent order of mind and manner are belied by the actual disorder around him. (Hagen 235)

In the film, Walter E. Kurtz, played by Marlon Brando, is a colonel in the Special Forces who is accused by the military of being an assassin. Captain Willard, played by Martin Sheen, is commissioned to terminate the colonel's command. Since Kurtz is an American, Willard has many reservations about the mission that includes traveling into Cambodia. As he says in the beginning of the film, “I was going to the worst place in the world and I didn’t even know it” (Apocalypse Now 1979). To a large extent, the fact that an American is sent to kill “with extreme prejudice" another American, shows the madness of the war.

When Willard arrives at an outpost close to the Cambodian border a soldier tells him, “You are in the asshole of the world captain.” Upon viewing the film this is a bit of an understatement. Willard is in hell, complete with the gnarling and gnashing of the teeth. He infiltrates the jungle with a troop of boys and realizes that half of the battle will be moving up the river and staying alive with these soldiers on board. Hagan explains the negatives of the troops as perceived by the military leaders in their charge:

The few military men competent to lead find that America had given them rock and rollers with one foot in their graves... technology’s children are depicted as soft, self-indulgent, and unequal to their hidden enemy. (Hagen 238)

This view was radically different from the view of the soldiers on the ground during the Vietnam War. Author and at one time the Army’s youngest colonel, David Hackworth sheds light on the problems with the senior commanders, who spent much of their time in helicopters in the sky. He wrote:

In the spring of 1965, America began to dispatch a great conventional army to Vietnam... The Americans were trained to fight the Soviet Union. Their doctrine, tactics and equipment were designed to engage a Communist enemy on a European battlefield, not an Asian opponent in the jungle. The training and mindset of their generals and admirals were to fight great air, land and sea battles... (Hackworth 1)

These conflicting points of view represent the problems that existed for the military personnel who fought the complex war in Vietnam. In the film Willard continues on his mission to terminate Kurtz, attempting to keep his sanity in the presence of the soldiers and the enemy that surrounds them.

In the minds of many soldiers, Vietnam was more than a jungle. It was the worst place in the world. As Michael Herr, who wrote the narration for the film stated, “Forget the Cong, the trees will kill you, the elephant grass is homicidal, the ground you were walking over possessed malignant intelligence, your whole environment was a bath"
The infantry soldier in the darkness of the jungle was peppered by machine gun fire and learned the true meaning of terror. He was locked in a jungle and surrounded by the enemy who used women and children as instruments of destruction. The movie shows the deconstruction of the soldier's concept of reality as he struggles to survive in a brutal world. There is no escape. How can one judge the morality and battle tactics of the men who fought in the jungles of Vietnam? Willard and his men moved up the river to find Walter Kurtz, and they entered yet another dimension.

Kurtz, the poet warrior, was found living in a tiny universe that was the fusion of two cultures and ideologies. Kurtz was living in a world where he has "Freedom from the opinion of others even the opinion of yourself." He is painfully aware that he is being judged by the military. He is in bad health and he knows of the purpose of Willard's mission. Indirectly, he assists in bringing about his own demise. The military had determined that Kurtz had slipped out of the moral realm. They said:

"Out these with these natives, there must be temptation to be God, because there's a conflict in every human heart between the rational and irrational, between good and evil... sometimes the dark side will overcome the better angles of our nature." (Hagan 240)

Colonel Kurtz later admits to Captain Willard that "you have to have men who are mortal but having primeval instinct to kill without judgement" (Ibid.).

Herein lies the truth that is conveyed through this movie, the truth of what is really required to be a soldier of valor. A soldier must possess the ability to kill without hesitation, to thrust the knife, to fire the weapon, or to strangle the life from his enemy. How does a man do this and still remain sane? He must transcend the realm of moral judgement without hesitation. He darts in, makes them bleed and then retreats. He returns to a world that wants to forget that the war ever existed. In this respect, Apocalypse Now, which is ostensibly an anti-war film, also subscribes to the older pro-war ethos seen in such films as Birth of a Nation.

The mythological image of armed conflict and the men who preside over and reside in these conflicts has transformed the way valor is depicted in film. From Birth of a Nation to Apocalypse Now, American cinematic history has recreated the images of wars that have transcended through time, from the Civil War to the Vietnam War. Over the years, the image of the soldier as the invincible knight with a suit of armor has changed. The transformation has been chronicled in film. The soldiers portrayed in film have, attempted to form an impermeable shield to protect their souls. The viewing public has learned through the film experience that, a soldier must learn to fight an enemy who lives without fear of moral judgement. A disabled veteran must learn to live with war injuries. His courage is his shield that must protect him from judgement served upon him by a society that at times refuses his re-entry into its realm. He must learn to embrace life again. Cinematic history has provided a highly valued view of the complexities of war and the valor of American soldiers.

REFERENCES


Sharon is currently a junior pursuing a General Studies degree with a minor in History. Her paper was written for H218, History of Motion Pictures. "I found that film brings history to life and can become a powerful learning tool. I chose this subject because of my interest and compassion for war veterans. This paper was written in honor of them."