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## Lasting Uncertainty: War And Peace As Portrayed in Film

McKayla Friskney

History seems to fluctuate between periods of war and peace. It is a ruthless storm of conflict only temporarily broken. However, even in these moments, it is a disturbed silence. One wrought with unease and building tension because no matter the situation, history is rarely ever so quiet. Hollywood takes pleasure in exploiting this history. It is no secret that films depicting these wildly intoxicating tales of hardship and determination pay well. These war films evoke emotion from every spectrum that captivates its audience. The subject of war and peace is often one that seizes such devoted interest. From early films such as *The General* of 1926 to later films like *Saving Private Ryan* of 1998, Hollywood has been presenting its audiences the tribulations of war and complications with peace for decades. Hollywood depicts these times from start to finish; from the time a soldier enlists to his arrival back home.

There seems to be a preconceived notion that with war comes prestige. Young men and women can find valor in fighting alongside people of the same likeness. This idea, whether intentional or not, seems to present itself best in the comedic film, *The General* of 1926. This silent film by American actor and director Buster Keaton is largely renowned for its stunts and regarded by some such as Orson Welles, director of *Citizen Kane*, as the greatest film ever made.<sup>1</sup> In it Keaton plays Johnnie Gray, a train engineer of the Western & Atlantic Railroad and longtime admirer of his fiancée, Annabelle Lee. The film is set during the American Civil War and, before Keaton's

<sup>1</sup> "Orson Welles Introduces Buster Keaton's 'The General' \* FilmmakerIQ.com," FilmmakerIQ.com, June 27, 2013, Accessed February 19, 2018, <https://filmmakeriq.com/2013/06/orson-welles-introduces-buster-keatons-the-general/>



character has any inkling of the conflict, he is—by all means—quite ordinary. In his book *A Short History of the Movies*, Gerald Mast writes, “Buster, with his typical deadpan expression, merely tries to go about his business while the world around him goes mad.”<sup>1</sup> Upon the discovery that Fort Sumter has been attacked, Johnnie rushes to the nearest place where he can enlist. Though desperate to become a soldier of the Confederacy, he is rejected because of his importance as a train engineer. The scene that follows depicts others’ disappointment at his failure to enlist. In a discussion with Annabelle Lee, one man remarks, “He’s a disgrace to the South.”<sup>2</sup> Annabelle hurriedly seeks Johnnie to clarify what she has heard and when she, too, discovers his failure to enlist, she states firmly, “I don’t want you to speak to me again until you are in uniform.”<sup>3</sup> Because of Johnnie’s rejection from the army, people regarded him with utmost animosity. To enlist as a young and capable soldier means honor and, because he cannot be accepted, he is denied this respect. Man and woman alike dismiss him. It is not until the end in which he is rewarded the position of lieutenant in the Confederate Army, that Annabelle dares embrace Johnnie, finally seeing him as a true hero of the war.

While *The General* may depict enlistment as the ultimate means of prestige and honor—or as some would say, manhood—the film *All Quiet on the Western Front* seems to wholeheartedly disagree. Set during the First World War and released between the two in 1930, *All Quiet on the Western Front* opens brightly on a parade of German soldiers. Sending them off with a warm cheer, the camera pans the street to show men and women alike waving goodbye while throwing flowers to the wind. The following sequence shows a group of school boys listening intently to the empowered speech of their professor.<sup>3</sup> He speaks of becoming a man through honor, an honor achieved by serving their Fatherland. Encouraging them to

enlist, the boys do so with complete excitement. Inspired, they seek the same prestige Johnnie Gray did in *The General*. Without it, they are regarded in the same like as well, plainly and as boys incapable of the bravery men of uniform display.

However, during the film’s duration, this enthusiasm toward the war soon dissolves. Confronted with bloodshed and utter horror, the lead protagonist, Paul Bäumer, witnesses the deaths of his fellow comrades. Upon a short visit home, he finds his professor delivering the same speech he had also listened to when he first decided to enlist. After being badgered by his professor to validate everything he has been telling the boys, Bäumer offers only his experience, truthful and without caution toward what the others may think of him. To say the least, it is a speech which has the class in complete shock and uproar. In one line Bäumer exclaims, “When it comes to dying for your country, it’s better not to die at all.”<sup>4</sup> Clearly, he does not regard war with the same prestige as the professor or school children. Through his own experience, he has come to learn how cruel and terrifying war truly is. In his book *History by Hollywood*, Robert Brent Toplin writes of this change, “It shows men enthusiastic over the prospect of glorious combat at the beginning of World War 1 and then portrays the ugliness of life in the trenches and senseless human slaughter on the front.”<sup>1</sup> This scene and others as displayed in *The General*, depict the prestige that war may have, but *All Quiet on the Western Front* presents an argument that war is only loss and devastation. It is cold transformation that yields nothing but tragedy.

Regardless of the decade it is set or produced in, similar themes about war and peace are presented with renewed vigor. One such film is *Jarhead* of 2005 which primarily focuses on the events surrounding Operation Desert Storm. However its tone is somewhat different. Instead of focusing on the prestige war may offer, *Jarhead* instead focuses on its obsession. It follows a group of soldiers and their experiences in not only war but in the preparation of it. These men endure terrible hardships during their arduous journey through boot camp. In a review written by Roger Ebert, one of the United States foremost film critics for the Chicago Sun-Times

1 Gerald Mast and Bruce F. Kawin, *A Short History of the Movies* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1986), 127.

2 Clyde Bruckman and Buster Keaton, *The General* (1926; New York City, NY: Kino Video, 1999) DVD.

3 Lewis Milestone, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930; Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 1999), DVD.

1 Robert B. Toplin, *History by Hollywood* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 89.



in 1967, Ebert writes, "It is about men who are exhausted, bored, lonely, trained to the point of obsession and given no opportunity to use their training."<sup>1</sup> Even when they are deployed to the deserts of the Saudi Arabia-Kuwait border, they are only witnesses to the aftermath of an aerial assault. Though they are trained in combat the main character of *Jarhead*, Anthony Swofford, says that he never shot his rifle once. He says, "Four days, four hours, one minute. That was my war."<sup>2</sup> Even though the opportunity presented itself to him, he is denied it by an in present and higher ranking official. It is in this moment that his partner and friend breaks. In response to a sentence demanded by Swofford's friend Alan Troy "Let him take the shot," Ebert writes his interpretation:

Let him, that is, kill one enemy in his payback for the hell of basic training, the limbo of the desert, the sand and heat, the torture of months waiting, the sight of a highway traffic jam made of burned vehicles and crisp charred bodies.

The men of Sam Mendes's film strive for the action they have spent months obsessing over. They long for a release from the pain they have endured, a purpose in the war they have prepared so hard for. When it seems they may finally experience this, it is torn away. In another review this time written for the *New York Times*, A. O. Scott says, "The Film tries to convey not only the terror and thrill of military life, but also the frustration and tedium."<sup>3</sup> Unlike *The General* and *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Jarhead* delves

<sup>1</sup> Roger Ebert, "Jarhead Movie Review & Film Summary (2005) | Roger Ebert," RogerEbert.com, November 03, 2005, Accessed January 26, 2018, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/jarhead-2005>.

<sup>2</sup> Sam Mendes, *Jarhead* (2005; Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, 2006), DVD.

<sup>3</sup> A. O. Scott, "Soldiers in the Desert, Antsy and Apolitical," *The New York Times*, November 04, 2005, Accessed January 26, 2018, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/11/04/movies/soldiers-in-the-desert-antsy-and-apolitical.html>.

into the suspension of war. The boredom that comes from it and a soldier's longing for action.

The reception of certain wars and their purposes—as it is perceived by audiences through film—can often change as well. No two films depict this better than *The Sands of Iwo Jima* of 1949 and *The Green Berets* of 1968. Though both films depict war with the same shared gusto, they are both viewed in drastically different ways. Core to this vast contrast in opinion, is the war itself and how it was perceived by audience members at the time of its release. The first film, *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, was set during the Second World War. It depicts a band of soldiers united through combat. Generally speaking, the film was met with praise and deeply admired by many of its viewers. In a discussion of World War Two films, Steven Mintz, Randy W. Roberts, and David Welky argue the reason why in their book, *Hollywood's America: Understanding History Through Film*. They state, "Many of our deepest images of war's glory and ugliness come from World War II combat films. They helped shape our very conceptions of courage, patriotism, and teamwork."<sup>1</sup> *The Sands of Iwo Jima* is the epitome of this very idea. It depicts bravery and sacrifice at its finest for a war thought good.

*The Green Berets* presents a message that is very similar to that of *The Sands of Iwo Jima*. It promotes sympathy through the tribulations of war and what soldiers endured during its time. However, it was critically received and largely disliked by its audience members. In a review written by Renata Adler for *New York Times* in 1968, "Green Berets' as Viewed by John Wayne," Adler criticizes the story:

The Green Berets is a film so unspeakable, so stupid, so rotten and false in every detail that it passes through being fun, through being funny, through being camp, through everything and becomes an invitation to grieve, not for our soldiers or for Vietnam [. . .], but for

<sup>1</sup> Steven Mintz, et al, *Hollywood's America: Understanding History Through Film*. (Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 137.



what has happened to the fantasy-making apparatus in this country.<sup>1</sup>

Audience members did not have much of the same viewing pleasure seeing this film as they had when seeing *The Sands of Iwo Jima*. Both films were meant to draw sympathy or support from its audiences but only the first film was successful in doing so.

This failure is largely in part for the war it depicted and the manner in which it was done. Set and released during the Vietnam War—a war as deeply controversial, if not more, than the film itself—the problem with *The Green Berets* partially derives from what opinions the audience members had of it. Toplin explains, “Movie audiences of the Vietnam era were not like the audiences that watched *The Sands of Iwo Jima* enthusiastically in 1949 and cheered the memory of “the good war.” In 1970 Americans had a distinctly “bad” war on their minds.”<sup>2</sup> One of the leading differences between the two movies was the war it depicted. Though they both presented its star John Wayne leading young men to war, the United States ideology had changed. Because audience members held differing views on the purpose of each war and of the horrors it held, their overall opinion of the movie reflected this. This is a prime example of how factors and concepts derived from the film and from the society living outside of it held equal effect in the audience’s response.

War is not the only theme depicted through film. Peacetime and a soldier returned to the normality of everyday life has had as much effect in film as combat itself. Directed by William Wyler, *The Best Years of Our Lives* of 1946 depicts just this, peace in a time after war. As written in *Understanding Movies* by Louis Giannetti, “In such movies as *The Little Foxes*, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, and *The Heiress*, Wyler achieved an unparalleled neutrality and

transparency.”<sup>1</sup> Like Gainnetti writes, *The Best Years of Our Lives* is incredibly simple and yet so emotionally complex and nonaligned that it rises a multitude of questions. One incredibly important question brought up by this film is how a soldier hardened by war fits into society, especially those suffering from immense wounds, PTSD, or severe nostalgia. *Best Years* is the story of three veterans of the Second World War returned home to their families. While away, their roles in the household and at work have been changed or replaced. To cope with their deployment, families have endured what they must to continue in their absences. The characters Homer Parrish (Harold Russell) and Fred Derry (Dana Andrews) are two examples of veterans and their transition from soldier to members of their present-day society.

While serving during the war, Parrish lost both his hands to severe burns. As a double amputee, he has been fitted with a pair of metal, mechanical hooks he uses to grasp and move things around. Following his return home, he has had to face the reality of his situation and what that might mean for those relationships he has with his parents and his fiancée, Wilma Cameron. Thus far, his family has not taken the news too lightly and, when presented with the idea that he may be a burden to Wilma, he decides to leave so that she may pursue her own life. He says, “I want you to be free, Wilma, to live your own life. I don’t want you tied down forever just because you’ve got a kind heart.”<sup>2</sup> However, in a later scene, Wilma rekindles their relationship after Parrish’s attempt at pushing her away. After confessing how helpless he feels in a moment of pure weakness, she kneels before him and promises to never leave him. Martin A. Jackson, a professor for the State University of New York and New Jersey Institute of Technology, elaborates on this by discussing certain doubts the producer held in handling the heavy subject of amputees. He writes, “Goldwyn, however, was stricken at the thought of using a real double amputee, it being traditional Hollywood wisdom

1 Renata Adler. “‘Green Berets’ as Viewed by John Wayne,” Review of *The Green Berets*, by Ray Kellogg and John Wayne, *The New York Times*, June 20 1968.

2 Robert B. Toplin, *History by Hollywood* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 163.

1 Louis Giannetti. *Understanding Movies* (Toronto: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2008), 180.

2 William Wyler, *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946; Beverly Hills, CA: MGM Home Entertainment, 2000), DVD.



that audiences wished to be entertained, not depressed."<sup>1</sup> However, despite having lost both his hands, Parrish is able to keep his relationship with Wilma and marry her in the end. During a time so close to the end of the actual world war and in seeing the real depiction of a living amputee, this hopeful ending created a sort of optimism through the devotion of those relationships most treasured.

Fred Derry was another veteran with a conflict both very similar and different to Parrish's in many ways. After Derry's return home, he was faced with a certain nostalgia for lost times. During the war, he had a clear purpose to pursue and he did so without fault. However, his return home has made the fact all too clear that he does not have a new purpose to follow outside of the conflict he faced during the war. In his article, Jackson writes, "In this film about the uncertain peace, former Captain Fred Derry walks among the stripped corpses of wartime aircraft and wonders about his own continued usefulness in a changed world."<sup>2</sup> The scene starts as though Derry is walking through a graveyard. The aircrafts sit in uniform, no longer in use but present nonetheless. They are reduced to museum artifacts in a year that has surpassed them all. Climbing aboard one aircraft, he reminisces about his own time spent in the air before being called back out by another man. It is then that he learns of the aircraft's fate, that they will be reused and repurposed. Seizing the moment, Derry pleads for a job and finds himself one among the aircrafts. Much like the metal in the planes, he has found new purpose in a period after war and in a time of peace.

Not all stories are as optimistic as *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Some stories end in tragedy. The outcome of a film mentioned before, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, concludes with the death of its main protagonist. Faced with those he has left at home during his leave from the front in World War I, Bäumer insists that he does not have a place among them. He declares, "I've got four days more, but I can't

stand it here! I'll go back tomorrow! I'm sorry."<sup>3</sup> Having started the war so enthusiastically, it would be hard to comprehend his change in demeanor if the audience had not witnessed the horrors he had endured. John Chambers explains this in his book *World War II, Film, and History*. He writes, "The camera graphically illustrates the breakdown of romantic ideas of war, heroism, and defense of the nation in the squalor of the trenches and the brutality of combat."<sup>2</sup> In his final moments Bäumer is left a husk of his former self. He has lost all connection to his fallen comrades, his family at home, and any other person he many have even considered a close compatriot. Peace during nor after wartime finds every soldier. Some are left on the field, in the heat of a battle long raging.

As with Bäumer, some soldiers never leave the field. Like the men from *Jarhead*, some become obsessed. In another more recent film set during the war in Iraq, history again shows a sort of consistency. In director Kathryn Bigelow's film *The Hurt Locker* of 2008, some men find passion in war. They become so consumed by it that they forget or no longer want to find solace in their lives at home. This is depicted by *The Hurt Locker*'s main character Sergeant First Class William James, member of a bomb disposal team. James is depicted as a focused individual who often puts the lives of others in jeopardy to fulfill his own missions. He is reckless and beyond stubborn. He is arrogance with purpose because he has proved time and time again his capabilities in disabling bombs. In another review by Roger Ebert, Ebert writes that "when he's at work, an intensity of focus and exhilaration consumes him, and he's in that heedless zone when an artist loses track of self and time."<sup>3</sup> James is brilliant when

1 John O'Conner and Martin A. Jackson, *American History/American Film* (New York: Ungar, 1988), 151.

2 John O'Conner and Martin A. Jackson, *American History/American Film* (New York: Ungar, 1988), 147.

1 Lewis Milestone, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930; Universal City, CA: Universal Pictures, 1999), DVD.

2 John B. Chambers, *World War II, Film, and History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 16.

3 Roger Ebert, "The Hurt Locker Movie Review & Film Summary (2009) | Roger Ebert," RogerEbert.com, July 08, 2009, Accessed January 26, 2018, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-hurt-locker-2009>.



it comes to his work. He becomes a part of it, forgetting all but what lay in front of his hands.

When his rotation ends and he is returned to his family, James finds difficulty readjusting to life at home. In one scene, he is shown gathering groceries with his wife. This is an action so commonplace but, when he is sent alone to find a box of cereal, James is no longer the quick thinking and focused individual he was during his time overseas. He is shown looking up and down the aisle at an assortment of brands. Though Brian Mockenhaupt, a veteran and reviewer for *The Atlantic*, argues that *The Hurt Locker* presents its audience an inaccurate portrayal of war, he remains impressed by this one scene:

One of the movie's best scenes comes near the end as James, back from Iraq, stands alone in the cereal aisle of a grocery store and stares at the choices, not overwhelmed but indifferent. He's traded the adrenaline of combat for the tedium of life at home.<sup>1</sup>

He is no longer consumed by his work and instead wrought with the discomfort of civilian life. It provides variables which no longer excite or drive him to make the decisions he did during war, decisions which were final and made with definite purpose. He is left uncaring and removed from the reality of life at home. In talking to his son, an infant at the time, James enlightens the audience on this perspective of war. He calmly says, "The older you get, the fewer things you really love, and by the time you get to my age, maybe it's only one or two things. With me, I think it's one."<sup>2</sup> James' rotation ends shortly after and he returns to a new team in disabling bombs. Instead of accepting his civilian life, James chooses his work. It is a

1 Brian Mockenhaupt, "What's Wrong With 'The Hurt Locker,'" *The Atlantic*, March 03, 2010, Accessed January 26, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2010/03/whats-wrong-with-the-hurt-locker/36888/>.

2 Kathryn Bigelow, *The Hurt Locker* (2008; Santa Monica, CA: Summit Home Entertainment, 2010), DVD.

voluntary decision which seems to validate the idea that James' one purpose, one real love is war.

War and peace are malleable themes when depicted in film. They can capture with vivid accuracy the terror of combat, the violent ways in which lives are lost each and every day to conflict worldwide. Though some films may view this conflict as honorable causes to which every young soul should participate in, others would strongly disagree. Honor and prestige is subjective when addressed in film and not entirely applicable when audiences disagree with certain controversial subjects. Peace, too, changes in form and perception, in how the audiences see or choose to understand it. As time changes and history moves forward, so does Hollywood. Its depictions of war and peace fit to meet society's standards.

However, there also seems to be a sort of consistency in films regardless of the decade it portrays or is released in. These themes which films attempt an understanding at reoccur throughout time. There is always pressure to enlist whether it be for honor or respect, a passage into manhood, and there is always a sort of disillusionment which becomes undeniably clear as wartime emerges. Hollywood often attempts to elaborate on the details, exaggerating and often romanticizing certain concepts but the fundamentals seem certain. Boredom and obsession, terror and conflict whether during peace or war is ever present. It creates patterns which to some remain unbroken and undying.

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