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Dylan J. Eldridge
dje1126@uw.edu

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The Evolution of pacific War Cinema

Dylan Eldridge

University of Washington Tacoma

Introduction

On Sunday December 7th 1941, the Empire of Japan launched an all-out surprise assault on the American naval base in Pearl Harbor, sinking or damaging 18 American ships and killing an estimated 2500 Americans. This attack was prompted by the total embargo imposed by U.S. president Franklin D. Roosevelt on Japan that began in July of that year¹. Dec. 8th, President Roosevelt formally declared war on the Empire of Japan, officially marking the entry of the United States into what would be known as the Second World War². For the first six months of the war the Japanese dominated the allied powers, winning military victories in the Philippines, and Malaya, as well as sinking several British battle ships in Singapore. The tides of war however eventually changed with the American victory at the Battle of Midway in July 1942, which forced the Japanese to go on the defensive as the American navy began a bloody campaign aimed at pushing the Japanese back towards their homeland³. On August 6th, and again on August 9th, 1945, the United States dropped two atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, forcing the Japanese to unconditionally surrender on August 14th⁴. For the next seventy years the events of this war would be told time and time again by filmmakers choosing to shape the American perception of the war's history through art.

For as long as there have been collective groups of people on this earth, war and conflict have always been a part of the human experience. Subsequently, every civilization has a tradition of passing down stories and depictions of war. The Greeks have Homer's the *Iliad*, and Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, the Romans the histories of Boudicca, the

¹ Mary L. Hanneman, *Japan Faces the World 1925-1952*. (Harlow, England: Longman 2001)67-70

² World War II:Timeline. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed Jan. 25, 2014
<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007306>

³ Hanneman 75-77

⁴ Timeline

French *Liberty Leading the People*, the Americans *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, and so forth. Accounts of such events and figures can be fictional, but still retain a strong historical background based on fact, such as the aforementioned *Iliad*. Many of the combat films that focus on the Pacific Theater during the Second World War released, both during and after the war, including *Gung Ho!*(1943), *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970), and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006), are such works of fiction.

These cinematic works have a profound effect on the way World War II events and figures are remembered. Such combat films as *The Thin Red Line* (1998) and *Air Force* (1943) are often used in high school and college classrooms as a teaching tool intended to inform students about, as well as shape an emotional response regarding the events of the Second World War.^{5 6} In modern-day American culture, film is by far the most widespread form of media used to depict historical events. Few forms of media shapes the public's understanding of history more than the movies.

Interpretations of these events and figures have changed “over time in response to various cultural and social pressures”.⁷ For example portrayal of the Pacific War in *Air Force* takes a much more positive stance in the war than *The Thin Red Line* which interprets the war as profoundly negative event. According to Jeannie Basinger, in her book, *The World War II Combat Film*, these interpretations changed four times before 1980, generating five different eras or “waves” of combat films.⁸ There are two general problems with Basinger's claim. The first two waves, which Basinger claims occurred between 1943-1944 and 1944-1946, are so similar to

⁵ John Macnamar, Junior Level American History, Antioch High School 2009 Notes in possession of the author

⁶ Debra Lamb and Jodi Delay. History's Interpretation of Film. Olympic College autumn quarter 2010 Notes on possession of the author

⁷ Jeanine Basinger. *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 121

⁸ *Ibid.*

each other in their interpretations of the war that it is more likely they should be categorized within the same era. Similarly, waves three and four, which encompass films released between 1949-1959 and 1960-1970, are also similar to one another. The second problem is that Basinger was never able extended her research to include films made after the 1980's, leaving a large hole in combat film chronology. In order to solve these problems, the first and second, as well as the third and four waves of films must be combined and a new fourth wave focusing on films made during the 1990s and 2000s needs to be added in order to create four concisely distict eras of World War II cinema.

Basinger also falls in her explanations of what makes up each wave and how films that fit within them express specific viewpoints on the war. She says almost nothing about film theory, choosing instead to focus primarily on the films production and the history of the wave without expressing what components of such films allow them to fit within said waves. More analysis needs to be done of the films themselves in order to fully understand what they are trying to say about war.

John Belton in his book, *American Cinema/ American Culture*, divides World War II cinema into three different eras. These three eras consist of films made before the Vietnam War, films made during the Vietnam War and up until the 1990s, and films made after the Gulf War. Belton does a good job of describing how these films preserve war and how the view of war has changed; however he ignored the subtle variations of individual films choosing instead to lump all films made in one given time period together.⁹

⁹ Jogn Belton. *American Cinema/ American Culture*. (Boston, Mcgraw-Hill, 2009)

Although each wave of Pacific War cinema is distinctly different, filmmakers generally have chosen to use the same four aspects of cinema in order to convey a specific theme, or argument, within a particular film. One can tell a great deal about what these films are trying to say about the Pacific War by analyzing these four components of each film individually. The first is *characterization*: how different characters are portrayed on screen. It is important to pay close attention to characterization as characters “normally focus the action and often the theme of the film”.¹⁰ In other words, characters, whether protagonist, antagonist, or merely secondary players, drive a story along and influence the overall message of the film. For example, Sgt. Stryker, the main protagonist in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, is the main force driving the story and, as we shall see, his never-ending quest molds his subordinates into ideal Marines. Later, his drive to keep them alive leads to his own death.

Another component used by filmmakers is *dialogue*. Dialogue is generally the conversation in a play or story, literally the words that characters are saying and how they say them. This component is extremely important in determining how characters feel about the events unfolding around them, and by extension determining the overall tone and message of the film. In another example from a movie discussed below, one can infer that Major Bagley in the film *Air Force* strongly supports the war, and by extension the audience should also. This is apparent in such lines as, “if you see my old boss, General MacArthur, tell him no matter what the news is, we’ll be in there pitchin' till they strike us out”,¹¹ meaning that Bagley and all of his fellow airmen will fight the Japanese until the war is either won or until they die.

¹⁰ Timothy Corrigan. *A Short Guide to Writing about Film*. (New York: Longman, 2010) 47

¹¹ *Air Force*, directed by Howard Hawks (Warner Bros 1943) VHS (1989) 108 min.

Unique to combat films, the third component is that of *battle sequences*. Battle sequences generally comprise a relatively small amount of time on screen as compared to other components. The one battle sequence in the film *Gung Ho!*, for instance, only last for about a half hour of the 110 minute movie. They are often unique to the era of film in which they take place, for instance, the battle sequence in *Sands of Iwo Jima* is much different than that of *WindTalkers* (2002). These battle sequences can greatly influence the overall tone of a film, partially though the use of “outside intensifiers”.

These *outside intensifiers* make up the fourth component film makers use to convey a specific message within a film. The most prominent of these intensifiers is music, which can be used to elicit either a positive or negative response from the audience. Another outside intensifier is special effects, which almost exclusively aid in expressing a negative or neutral theme about war. That is to say, most special effects, directly show the audience the brutality of war. The use of major special effect is especially prominent in films that fall within the fourth era of Pacific Theater films, but not exclusively. Special effects have been used in all four waves.

The different eras of Pacific War cinema can be categorized based in part by release dates, and how such movies chose to depict the war. Films made both during and within the first four years following the war make up the first era, and often take a very positive stance on the war and by extension the American soldier. Major characters are portrayed as infallible men eager to “go above and beyond the line of duty”.¹² In the case of *Gung Ho!*, there is only one large battle sequences taking up a great deal of the final part of the film. Such sequences often

¹² *Gung Ho! : the Story of Carlson's Makin Island Raiders*, directed by Ray Enright (Universal Pictures 1943) accessed Jan. 26, 1014, <http://movies.netflix.com> 2min

show a great many American secondary or primary characters dying heroically while defending a small island or attempting an American retreat.

The second wave of Pacific war cinema is quite similar to the first in that both contain a strong pro-war message, similar battle sequences and outside intensifiers, as well as portrayal of a strong leader willing to fight tooth and nail for victory because that is what is expected of him. One Example is *Operation Pacific* (1951). Often times however, the characters in these second era films show some type of fault, or are depicted as outright cowards, criminals, or, drunks like Sgt. Stryker in *Sands of Iwo Jima*.

By the late 1960s, the general attitude towards war began to change as the conflict in Vietnam began to escalate.¹³ As a result, the way in which the Pacific War was portrayed on film also began to change, as American characters became even more fallible and dialogue began to reflect a type of indifference or frustration to war. For the first time the, Japanese were depicted with human traits and not as alien beings bent only on the death and destruction of the American way of life. Movies such as *Tora! Tora! Tora!* and *Hell in the Pacific* (1968) especially dealt with this new idea by introducing the Japanese as main characters and even making them seem to be equal to Americans. Many of these films featured few or no battle sequences, music, or special effects, choosing instead to rely heavily on the first two aforementioned components of film, characterization and dialogue. When battle sequences and outside intensifiers are necessary in these films, they often take an over the top approach with long battle featuring an extraordinary array of explosions and very dramatic, almost depressing, music. This new third era of Pacific War cinema would come to dominate the market for the better part of the next three decades.

¹³ Harring 205-207

With the victory of the Gulf War in the early 1990s came a new kind of World War II combat film.¹⁴ This new fourth wave of World War II films tended to be hybrids of their predecessors, drawing distinct characteristics from all three earlier waves. More often than not, these films such as *Windtalkers* employ the same types of semi-fallible characters depicted in second wave films, as well as the harsh battle sequences and use of outside intensifiers used in the films of the third era. Yet these fourth-wave films tend to be reminiscent of first and second wave films in that they tend express a positive attitude of the war and a negative representation of the Japanese.

This is not always the case however, as a select few films of this fourth wave choose to employ attributes from previous eras in order to express a slightly different message or employs different themes than audiences are accustomed to seeing in Pacific theater cinema. Some of these films, such as "*The Thin Red Line*", choose to express a profoundly anti-war message that was previously untouched in this genre of war film. Others, such as *Letters from Iwo Jima*", paint the enemy as not only equal to the Americans militaristically (a common theme in third wave films), but also emotionally. This is to say that these films depict Japanese primary and secondary characters that are reminiscent of such second wave heroes as Sargent. Stryker, and PFC. Conway, in that they are inherent flaws and bravery.

¹⁴ John Belton. *American Cinema/ American Culture*. (Boston, McGraw-Hill, 2009) 214

Era One Films 1943-1949: *Gung Ho!* and *Bataan*

Almost immediately after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hollywood sprang into action and began green-lighting dozens of films to chronicle the events of that day, as well as the next few months of the war. Many of these films were also created as propaganda vehicles, aimed at gaining support for the war on the home front. It was now Hollywood's job to create films that were " educational, inspirational, and recreational,"¹⁵ meaning that war films now needed to teach the public about the war, inspire patriotism, as well be entertaining. Two of the first combat films to be released in this time period were *Gung Ho!* and *Bataan*, both produced in 1943.

Gung Ho!, directed by Ray Enright, written by S.W. LeFrancois and Lucien Hubbard, and starring Randolph Scott as Colonel Thorland and Robert Mitchum as "Pigiron" Mathews. It takes its name from the Chinese saying which translates to "work harmoniously," and is the true story of the Marine Corps Second Raider Battalion's monumental attack on Makin Island in an attempt to liberate its population from Japanese control. As the film begins, several young men are volunteering to become members of the Second Raiders. All of these men have different motives for joining; one man because his sister was killed when the Japanese invaded the Philippines and another because, as he put it "I just don't like Japs."¹⁶ However, they are all united in their desire to defeat their enemy and win the war. As the film progresses we see these men put their differences aside as they slowly begin to become a cohesive unit, especially during the last half hour of the film where the battle of Makin Island takes place the raiders win the battle and successfully liberate Makin Island.

¹⁵ Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) 61

¹⁶ *Gung Ho!* 4min

The film *Bataan*, directed by Tay Garnett, written by Robert D. Andrews, and starring Robert Taylor as Sergeant Dane and Desi Arnes as Felix Ramirez, is quite a similar film in that it focuses around an ethnically diverse, “rag-tag” group of Americans on a mission. At the start of *Bataan*, Sgt. Dane is assigned a collective of thirteen men directly after the Japanese invasion of the Philippines, whose sole purpose is to guard a bridge in order to keep the Japanese at bay long enough for General Douglas MacArthur’s men to retreat off of the island. Over a period of five days these men are systematically picked off until finally only four remain culminating in an epic battle with the Japanese in which all four are killed bravely defending their post.¹⁷

Films of the first era or wave of Pacific Theater combat cinema focus on primary characters that embody the ideas of leadership and an unfaltering sense of heroism. These films often center on a moderately high ranking and experienced officer or NCO, such as Col. Thorland or Sargent Dane. Primary characters in first era films are almost super-human not only in their determination to complete a mission no matter what the odds, but also their general infallibility and iron-willed character. Colonel Thorland for example, never falters under pressure or shows any signs of weakness, fatigue, or second thought as to his decision to stay and hold off the Japanese even though he knows it means certain death for him. These traits often do not go unnoticed by the men who serve under them and almost always rub off on at least one subordinate soldier.¹⁸

Secondary characters in these films consist of a diverse bunch of multiracial, multiethnic characters that that make up the stock “elastic” combat company seen in many films that are ultimately an extension of their commanding officer. In *Bataan* this diversity is especially

¹⁷ *Bataan*

¹⁸ *Ibid*

accented, as there are two Filipinos, a Jewish man, and an African-American in Sargent. Dane's command. Most of these men are just as eager to fight as their commander, and often mirror him in some way. "Pigiron" Mathews in *Gung Ho!*, for instance, is almost a younger version of Colonel Thorland in that they both keep a clear head under pressure and have no perceived character faults.

The enemy, on the contrary, seems to possess no redeeming traits. The Japanese in first era films act as one stereotypical character as opposed to unique individuals who make up an enemy fighting force. They are most often portrayed as savage and brutal people who rely on underhanded tactics, such as shooting from trees, pretending to be dead in order to surprise and bayonet Americans in the back, and hang captured American or Filipino soldiers from trees. Much of what the audience learns about the enemy does not come from direct screen time. The audience does not see the enemy very often, but learns about them from the language used by American characters. American soldiers often refer to the Japanese as "nips" or "monkeys",¹⁹ which implies that the war is not being fought against other human beings, but against animals.

Characters rely on dialogue in order to express the overall theme of a particular film. Primary and secondary characters in era one films in particular use lines such as "maybe it doesn't do a lot of good. Good men getting killed in some place you've never heard of [...] but we figure, the men who died here may have done more than we'll ever know to save this whole world",²⁰ and "some of us are going to die for freedom and democracy."²¹ These words are vehicles, to perpetuate the themes of necessary sacrifice, victory at all costs, and an overall pro-war message. Adding to this message is the lack of dialogue from the enemy. Most often the

¹⁹ *Gung Ho!*, 2min

²⁰ *Bataan*, directed by Tay Garnett (MGM 1943) DVD (Turner Entertainment 2006) 100-101min

²¹ *Gung Ho!* 51min

Japanese in era one films do not speak, or speak only a few lines in Japanese without subtitles, which only serves to fuel the audience's hatred for Japanese people.

Most often, Japanese combatants in first wave films are only seen during battle sequences. These battle sequences, whether they be long and grueling, as in the case of *Gung Ho!*, or short and sporadic, as in *Bataan*, contain the same basic patterns. The heroes are always outnumbered, leading to some type of heroic last stand or clever tactic to outsmart the enemy forces. In *Gung Ho!*, that clever tactic comes in the form of Colonel Thorland having his men paint an American flag on a hospital, then tricking Japanese planes into bombing said hospital with enemy soldiers inside of it. Very little blood is shown in battle, but when it is, Americans are always the ones bleeding, and the bleeding Americans almost never die.²²

Another of these basic patterns is casualties. The number of American casualties is always significantly lower than those of the Japanese, due in part to Americans always being outnumbered. That is not to say that Americans do not die. On the contrary, Americans die quite often, especially secondary characters who the audience has already developed an emotional connection with. Within *Bataan* in particular, twelve of the thirteen men in Colonel Thorland's command are killed periodically on screen and the film heavily implies the death of Thorland himself within the ending sequence.²³

Many first wave films rely on outside intensifiers in order to help express the theme of a particular movie. The most common of these special effects are exploding airplane bombs and grenades. These special effects can be used differently, however, to set up various films in different ways. In the opening scene of *Bataan*, explosions from airplane bombs dropped on a

²² *Gung Ho!* and *Bataan*

²³ *Bataan*

Filipino village are aimed at creating dismay and contempt for the enemy, where as in *Gung Ho!*, the same types of explosions show the clever nature of Colonel Thorland as he tricks the enemy into bombing their own men.²⁴

Music is also used extensively in first wave films before, during and following battle. The music in some of these films, including *Gung Ho!*, is characteristically a combination of music that is characteristically upbeat, has a fast tempo, and features an extensive horn section, to express and inspire a positive message about the war . Other films, such as *Bataan*, choose to employ music that is a bit slower, and features less instrumentation. Such music is most often played when a character dies or at the end of the film in order to express sorrow and inspire sympathy for the fallen American soldier.²⁵

²⁴ *Gung Ho!* 70 min

²⁵ *Gung Ho!* 2min

Era Two Films 1949-1965: *Sands of Iwo Jima* and *The Bridge on the River Kwai*

Shortly after the end of the Second World War, movie-goers and Hollywood alike began to lose interest in the combat film. For the next four years very few World War II movies were produced. This lull would prove to be short lived, however, as the 1950s quickly approached and the Korean War began to escalate. Over the next decade and a half, Hollywood would create dozens of films that chronicle the events of the Pacific War.

Although all of these films are different in their own way, they tend to express the belief that the War in the Pacific was a positive experience despite the negative aspects that they also depict. The characterization, dialogue, battle sequences and outside intensifiers are all quite similar in first and second wave films. However, subtle differences in these components, as well as the time in which these films are made, separate the two eras. Two of these second era films, *Sands of Iwo Jima*, and *The Bridge on the River Kwai* highlight these differences.

Sands of Iwo Jima, directed by Allen Dwan, written by Harry Brown and starring John Wayne as Sergeant. John M. Stryker and John Agar as PFC. Peter Conway is the story of the Battle of Iwo Jima. As the film begins, the audience is introduced to Sgt. Stryker as he intensely trains a new battalion of soldiers to survive war. As the film progresses, Stryker's men become more anxious to fight, hoping to win the war quickly. Finally the big day comes and they first are thrust onto the battlefield during the Battle of Saipan which they win in a very short time. Stryker and his men are then hastily thrown back onto the battlefield with the mission of taking the island of Iwo Jima, where several die at the hands of the enemy. In the end the battle is won; however Sgt. Stryker is killed and PFC. Conway takes his place as commander of the outfit.

The Bridge on the River Kwai, directed by David Lean, written for screen by Carl Foreman and Michael Wilson, and starring Alec Guinness as Colonel Nicholson and William Holden as Shears, is the true tale of how British prisoners of war constructed a portion of the Burmese railway that connected Rangoon and Bangkok. These men's work consisted of building a bridge that spanned the length of the Kwai River. In the beginning of the film, Col. Nicholson and his men have been brought to a Japanese POW camp in the middle of the jungle where they are introduced to the fierce Col. Saito, the Japanese officer in charge of the camp. As the film progresses, both colonels are at odds as to whether or not British officers can be forced to work alongside enlisted men. This dispute is eventually put to rest and Col Nicholson takes charge of the project in hopes that it will instill pride in his men and help them retain their identities as soldiers. While all of this is going on, an American by the name of Shears, who had been at the camp when Col. Nicholson arrived, manages to escape but is eventually forced to go back as a member of an elite outfit whose sole mission is to destroy the bridge. At the end of the film prideful Nicholson stops them from blowing up the bridge, but then quickly realizes the error of his ways in helping the Japanese. He dies, while accidentally blowing the bridge by falling onto the detonating device.

The characterization within second wave films is very similar to that of the first wave. Primary characters are almost identical in their unwavering heroics and duty. Col. Nicholson in particular bases almost every decision he makes on this sense of duty, honor, and loyalty both to his men and to his country. There is one striking difference in characterization, however, in that era two films characters express the capacity to be human. That is to say, where as first era films primary characters are presented as perfect soldiers and perfect men, those of the second wave have the capacity to question their actions, make mistakes in command, and even show some

type of character flaw or weakness, such as Sgt. Stryker being portrayed as an alcoholic when not on duty and Col. Nicholson's infatuation with the rules of engagement rather than the well-being of his men, that lead him to make the decision to help the Japanese build the bridge. This ushers in his own down fall.

Secondary characters are also strikingly similar in both eras, in that they can often be categorized as extensions of their commanding officers. In *Sands of Iwo Jima* this can be said about PFC. Conway towards the end of the film when he takes up command of his unit after Sgt. Stryker is killed. What is different about these characters in second era films is that such men often do not begin the film with an inherent trust and devotion to their leader. That is to say, in *Bataan*, as well as other first era films, all thirteen men within Sgt. Dane's command (with one exception) begin the film with a respectful and obedient attitude towards their leader. In *Sands of Iwo Jima*, however none of the men involved initially trust or like their commander, yet by the end of the film all of Sgt. Stryker's men grow to show the same respect and admiration.

The Japanese in these second wave films are portrayed in two ways. First being similar era one films, Japanese are seen as stereotypically homogenous characters and not as individuals. Japanese people rarely speak in these films, and when they do it is only in Japanese. When they are seen on screen it is usually when they are attacking in some brutal and underhanded method. In the case of *Sands of Iwo Jima*, they pop out of hidden tunnels and foxholes to shoot at or bayonet unsuspecting Americans.

Yet some second wave films chose to break this pattern by allowing the Japanese to become their own individual characters. *The Bridge on the River Kwai* is a perfect example of such film, in that it allows for the differentiation of Japanese characters, such as Col. Saito and

Lt. Miura, who speak English. These men, however, are still seen as brutal and barbaric, especially Col. Saito. He refuses to comply with the Geneva Convention's mandate that officers not be forced to do manual labor, and constantly works men to the point they become ill or in extreme cases die.

Dialogue is one of the most profoundly different components of eras one and two films. In first wave cinema, characters almost never criticize the war or why they are directly involved with it. Conversely, characters within second wave movie express negative viewpoints of the war and the death associated with it, like Sgt. Stryker's comment, "That's all we're doing... trading men for real-estate"²⁶ and Shears after burying a fallen British soldier, when he says, "hear lies Private Herbert Thompson [...] who dies for... say what did he die for?"²⁷ These attitudes, however, do subside and become more positive by the end of the films as men begin to realize the importance of the war in preserving freedom around the world.

Battle sequences are very similar components in both eras. Second wave films tend to copy various aspects of battle scenes such as the outnumbering of American or Allied troops, as well as the emotional deaths of secondary characters. This can be seen within the last thirty minutes of *Sand of Iwo Jima*, where PFC.s Regazzi, Bass, Shipley, as well as others all die periodically at the hands of the Japanese.

The only real differences in battle sequences are the display of blood, and the death of primary characters. Within first wave cinema, blood was quite rare and reserved only for wounded or dead Americans. Second era films, however, do not depict any blood at all. Second era pictures also introduced the concept of the primary character dying in battle, sometimes in

²⁶ *Sands of Iwo Jima* 31min

²⁷ *Bridge on the River Kwai* 6min

explosions, as with Col. Nicholson as he is hit by mortar shrapnel and promptly falls over dead. Sometimes this results in the unification of the hero's command and the ascension of one of the secondary characters to the vacated role of commanding officer, as in *Sands of Iwo Jima*.

Outside intensifiers, are by far the most strikingly similar components of both era films. Both employ similar combinations of upbeat, fast moving and downtrodden almost depressing musical styles that features a slow tempo and single instrumentation, such as a piano or trumpet playing in a low octave, in order to illicit a positive or negative emotional response from the audience. The use of special effects is also extremely similar. Both employ the exact same types of over the top and dramatic explosions as their primary special effect focus. The only difference in outside intensifiers is the aforementioned lack of physical blood within second wave films.

Era Three Films 1965-1993: *Empire of the Sun* and *Tora! Tora! Tora!*

Beginning in the 1950s the United States began exercising a campaign to contain the spread of communism in Vietnam. For the most part the American public supported the war as an extension of World War II. In January 1968 the North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong organized a massive attack on U.S forces known as the Tet Offensive. After this event there came a split in the American attitude towards the war. Some people began to question the motives for going to war, as well as grew weary of fighting a seemingly unwinnable war, particularly in the younger generation; the war was now seen as imperialistic and destructive.²⁸

As a result, film makers began to shift the way they portrayed war on film in order to express these new attitudes. Several films began depicting events of the Second World War in a neutral or negative light. Films such as *Tora! Tora! Tora!* even went as far as to present the Japanese in a neutral light, and began showing events from the Pacific War from the Japanese perspective. Many films, including *Empire of the Sun* (1989), paint a profoundly negative view of war by showing the effects that it had on the civilian populations of areas that were ravaged by war. These new neutral and negative attitudes towards war would come to dominate Pacific War cinema for the next three decades to come.

The film *Tora! Tora! Tora!*, directed by Rickard Fleischer and others, written for screen by Larry Forrester and others, and starring Martin Balsam as Adm. Husband E. Kimmel and Sohei Yamamura as Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto, is the story of the events leading up to the attack on Pearl Harbor, as told from both the American and Japanese perspectives. In the opening sequence of the film, Adm. Yamamoto has just been appointed to the role of Commander-in-

²⁸ Herring

Chief of the Royal Japanese navy. He and his men are soon ordered to begin working on plans to destroy the United States Pacific Naval fleet. Meanwhile in Washington D.C. these plans are slowly being intercepted by U.S. military intelligence, which begin attempting to piece together what the Japanese are planning. By the end of the film, however, the Americans are unable to fully predict and stop the attack and it becomes a huge success for the Japanese, sparking the Pacific War.

Empire of the Sun, directed by Steven Spielberg, adapted for screen by Tom Stoppard and Menno Mayjes, and starring Christian Bale as Jamie “Jim” Graham and John Malkovich as Basie, is the story of a young boy whose life of privilege is ripped from him as the Japanese invade Shanghai and he is forced into life in a refugee camp until the end of the war. Early on in the film Jamie and his parents are separated when the Japanese begin to bomb Shanghai. He eventually begins wandering around until he is captured by the Japanese and placed into a prisoner camp where he spends the next four years. As the war draws to a close the Japanese evict the prisoners sending them off by themselves to survive in the harsh Chinese rural environment. Jamie is then picked up by Americans who are in the process of driving the Japanese from China and in the end he is reunited with his family.²⁹

Primary characters in wave three films tend to be different than those of earlier eras. They are often either high ranking officials such as admirals and generals, or people who have very little significance in the war. Officials are portrayed as being men who are incredibly reluctant to fight and in some ways have great respect for their enemies, such as Adm. Yamamoto, while the insignificant spectator is depicted as being an innocent bystander and victim of wartime violence, such as Jamie Graham. These two characters in particular, though their differences in experience

²⁹ Empire of the Sun

and personality, convey much different interpretations of war. Adm. Yamamoto for, instance is, used to show that the Japanese were not the bloodthirsty savages that Americans believed them to be at the time and by extension the complexity of the war. At the same time, Jamie shows the innocence lost to warfare and thus the negativity of war.³⁰

Third era films that take different stances on the war not only feature differences in primary, but also secondary characters as well. Secondary characters in *Tora! Tora! Tora!* and such neutral films often take the role of the reluctant participant, such as Commander Genda, who is hesitant to order the attack on Pearl Harbor. They can also take the role of the comic relief, in this case Capt. Ramsey, who jokingly tells his buddy to get a Japanese pilot's number so they can report him for safety violations. In more negative films, such as *Empire of the Sun*, secondary characters are most often civilians who, like the primary character, struggle to accept the hard realities of war or rebel against the Japanese leadership altogether. Such characters are not always positive ones. For example, Baisie is constantly unleashing underhanded schemes, stealing, lying, and cheating in order to survive and flourish in the prison camp until he escapes toward the end of the film. Men such as Baisie reflect the harshness and deviant nature of warfare both for the military, as well as the civilians it affects.

The enemy in these third wave films is the hardest to decipher, in that the line between hero and enemy is very ambiguous in neutral and negative films. In *Tora! Tora! Tora!* for instance, it is very hard to tell the heroes from the enemy because the story is told from both perspectives. The audience gets to see the good in both parties without much attention paid to the bad, leaving them with one of three conclusions; either the Americans are the enemy, the Japanese are the enemy, or neither is the enemy. On the contrary, negative films tend to mostly

³⁰ Ibid

show the bad in both parties, such as the Japanese mistreating prisoners in their camps, and the Americans bombing and firing into areas that directly border the camp, which could have resulted in the death of innocent civilians.³¹

Often times the dialogue of films that take the more neutral approach to the war conveys the message that no one really wanted to fight but were forced to by their government. For example, Admiral Yamamoto knows the Americans are not as weak as his superiors are telling him and so he is reluctant to fight. He expresses this several times, most notably by saying “If we go to war with America, we won’t be able to stop at Hawaii or San Francisco [...] we will have to negotiate peace in Washington. Those Army hotheads should think about that.”³² What Adm. Yamamoto is saying essentially is that he does not feel that America will be as easy to defeat as his superiors maintain. He expresses this again at the end of the film when he states “I fear all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant and fill him with a terrible resolve,”³³ meaning that the attack on Pearl Harbor has only angered the Americans and in Yamamoto’s eyes, spurred a war that Japan will not easily win.

Films that take a more negative approach to the war however, employ dialogue which simply tugs at the heart strings of the audience in order to elicit an emotional response. For example, when Jamie begins crying and proclaims “I don’t remember what my parents look like anymore,”³⁴ the audience immediately feels sympathy for the young boy’s plight brought about by the war. The audience is also encouraged to feel anger for both the Japanese and at times the Americans through lines such as, “one side feeds you and the other tries to get you killed, then

³¹ *Empire of the Sun* 93min

³² *Tora! Tora! Tora!* 58min

³³ *Ibid* 148min

³⁴ *Empire of the Sun* 121min

it's all turned around; It's all about timing."³⁵ What Basie is saying is that it does not matter what side you support in the war, both sides are going to try to kill the neutral parties at some point.

Battle sequences in era three films also began to lose luster. They were no longer a main component in determining the overall themes of Pacific War movies, giving way to characterization and more importantly dialogue. *Empire of the Sun*, for example features less than ten minutes of overall combat, and *Tora! Tora! Tora!* has one thirty minute sequence at the end of the two and a half hour long film. These sequences none the less do help to drive the tone of the film. For example, the battle scene in *Tora! Tora! Tora!* features a great number of deaths on both sides of the altercation, which maintains the neutrality of the film.³⁶

With the inception of the third era of Pacific War cinema outside intensifiers began to change. Special effects such as explosions became even larger and more dramatic than in previous eras. *Tora! Tora! Tora!* even won an academy award for its spectacular special effects.³⁷ Although neutral era three films still hold on to the first and second era tradition of limited if any depictions of blood on screen, negative films tend to make great use of it as a way of conveying the brutality and violence of war. *Empire of the Sun*, for example, features two distinct scenes which depict gratuitous amounts of bloodshed. The first is the blood trails left from Japanese soldiers dragging dead Chinese soldiers off of rooftops during the invasion of Shanghai,³⁸ and the second is after the young Japanese pilot that Jamie befriends is shot and begins bleeding profusely from his chest and mouth.³⁹

³⁵ Ibid 89 min

³⁶ *Tora! Tora! Tora!* 118min

³⁷ King F.14

³⁸ *Empire of the Sun* 43min

³⁹ Ibid 105min

The use of outside intensifiers, such as music also began to change in the third era. Negative themed films began incorporating more depressing music, which can be described as having an extremely slow tempo, single instrumentation (usually a piano or human voice), and performed in either a moderately high or extremely low octave. *Empire of the Sun*, for instance, uses such music throughout the film, but most notably when the Americans begin bombing the Japanese airfield next to the prison camp, in order to convey the message that this is a somber event. Neutral films on the other hand feature very little music, even in the heat of battle where music was often used in film to help elicit the desired emotional response from the audience. This is because such neutral movies do not wish to direct any emotional response from the audience, but instead simply want to educate and inform without creating an emotional bias for one side of the war or the other.

Era Four Films 1993-2014: Windtalkers and Letters from Iwo Jima

On August 2nd 1990 Iraq invaded its southern neighbor Kuwait. On January 17th 1991 the United States officially begins strategic airstrikes against Iraq sparking what would be known as the Gulf War. By February, Iraq began a full withdrawal from Kuwait.⁴⁰ This victory marked the first major U.S. military victory since the Second World War. As a result, Americans began to regain faith in their military power. Some film Makers began to create films that focus on the Second World War in a new more positive light⁴¹, while others choose to retain a neutral view of the war.

Film makers began drawing heavily from several elements of the previous three eras, creating movies that can be classified as hybridizations of what came before them. Although a majority of films would draw upon the same components, such as era two characterization and dialogue, as well as third wave outside intensifiers, not all of these films chose to convey the same message. For example, *Windtalkers*, used such elements in order to promote a pro-war message by depicting American dominance over the enemy, as well as the brutality of the Japanese.⁴² *Letters from Iwo Jima*, on the other hand, uses these second and third wave components in order to demonstrate a much more neutral, approach to the war by depicting the Japanese as heroes who fought gallantly to protect their homeland from being overrun by foreign invaders without demonizing all Americans.⁴³

The film *Windtalkers*, directed by John Woo, written by John Rice and Joe Batteer, and starring Nicolas Cage as Sgt. Joe Enders and Adam Beach as PFC. Ben Yahzee is the story of the

⁴⁰ *The Gulf War: Chronology*. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/cron/>

⁴¹ Andrew Crampton and Marcus Power. Frames of Reference on the Geopolitical Stage: Saving Private Ryan and the Second World War/ Second Gulf War Interaction. (Geopolitics: 10 2005) 245

⁴² *Windtalkers*

⁴³ *Letters From Iwo Jima*

Navajo Indian Marines who used their native language as an unbreakable code during the Battle of Saipan. The film also focuses on a Marine assigned to protect one of these Navajo, and most of all, the code, at all costs. As the film begins Sgt. Enders has just lost all of his men in a devastating battle with the Japanese where he was injured. He is quickly discharged from a military hospital and assigned to protect a Navajo Marine translator named PFC. Ben Yazhee. As both men are thrown into the Battle of Saipan, their humanity and survival skills are immediately put to the test. Eventually Sgt. Enders has to kill PFC. Yazhee's longtime friend and fellow Navajo translator PFC. Whitehorse in order to keep him from jeopardizing the code by being captured. This leads Yazhee to hate Enders and all of the white men in his company until the very end of the film where Sgt. Enders sacrifices himself in order to save PFC. Yazhee, forcing him to forgive and respect Enders. The film closes with PFC. Yazhee performing a Navajo ritual and telling his son "If you tell stories about him (Enders), say he was my friend."⁴⁴

Letters from Iwo Jima, directed by Clint Eastwood, written by Iris Yamashita and others, and starring Ken Watanabe as Gen. Kuribayashi and Kazunari Ninomiya as PFC. Saigo, is the tale of the Battle of Iwo Jima from the perspective of the Japanese commanders and soldiers. As the film begins General Kuribayashi has just arrived on the island and immediately begins surveying the island's beaches and mountains in order to draw up defensive strategies. Once the Americans land and the battle officially begins, the Japanese immediately find that they are severely outnumbered and outmatched by the Americans. Gen. Kuribayashi then begins giving orders to retreat and regroup, which are ignored by most of his command except PFC. Saigo and several others. Towards the end of the film, Gen. Kuribayashi is severely wounded and asks PFC. Saigo to bury him on the Island so his body will not be found by the enemy. After PFC. Saigo

⁴⁴ *Windwalkers* 132min

complies he is captured by the Americans who show him compassion by treating the injuries to his neck and head he sustained while being captured.⁴⁵

Primary characters in fourth wave films often times mimic those of second era cinema in several ways. First, many primary characters feel the need to go above-and-beyond the call of duty in order to accomplish their mission, even if they know it will cost them their lives. For example Gen. Kuribashi leads a last ditch suicide mission in an attempt to hold off the American advance toward the end of *Letters from Iwo Jima*. And Sgt. Enders takes PFC. Yahzee deep into enemy territory in order to steal a radio and tell their comrades to adjust their mortar fire in order to blow up an enemy stronghold. This second example shows the semi-fallible nature of characters such as Sgt. Ender, who has anger issues and apparent post-traumatic stress from a previous battle in which he was severely wounded.

Secondary characters are also similar to those of the secondary era, mostly in the evolution of the character as the plot develops. Most secondary characters begin their film in one of two ways. The first, like PFC. Yahzee, is as a fresh faced and eager volunteer who realizes too late that he might be too cowardly for battle. The Second characterization is as a reluctant and bitter draftee who does not see the point in war and is resentful of his commanders, such as PFC. Saigo. By the end of the film however, both types of secondary characters go through some type of transformation and begin to prove their bravery and devotion to their commanders. PFC. Yahzee does so by killing several Japanese soldiers as he is being carried by Sgt. Enders following an explosion (as well as holding a Navajo ceremony for Enders after his death). PFC. Saigo transformed, by attempting to kill the American Marine who took Gen. Kuribashi's gun as well as resisting capture by the Americans with a shovel.

⁴⁵ *Letters from Iwo Jima* 137min

The enemy in era four films is represented in two ways, depending on the overall theme of the films. Pro-war film, such as *Windtalkers*, present the enemy as overgeneralized characters who are brutal, bloodthirsty, savage, underhanded in their tactics, and overall inferior to the American heroes of the film. However, films that express a neutral or negative theme choose to depict the enemy in a more indifferent light. *Letters from Iwo Jima* for instance does this by directly showing the positive and negative traits of several enemy (in this rare case American) soldiers. The negative capacity is willingness to shoot surrendering Japanese soldier and the positive, the compassion not to shoot Saigo when he is attempting to attack them with a shovel.

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The dialogue of era four films is reminiscent of second wave dialogue in that characters often express negative viewpoints about the war regardless of the overall theme of the film. Such lines as “now I’m in Saipan with this giant zippo on my back [...] why I volunteered... beyond me,”⁴⁷ and “these are the holes we will fight and die for (referring to the trenches that they are digging)... I am digging my own grave,”⁴⁸ express these negative viewpoints. Dialogue can also be used to reflect the heroism and sacrifice of primary characters, which is once again borrowed from second era cinema. For instance in the opening of *Windtalkers*, Sgt. Enders expresses his bravery by telling his men as they beg for him to call a retreat “we got orders... we need to hold our position, and that’s what we are going to do.”⁴⁹ Gen. Kuribashi also tell his men at one point “If our children can live safely for one more day, it would be worth the one more day we defend this island.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Ibid 138min

⁴⁷ *Windtalkers* 51min

⁴⁸ *Letters from Iwo Jima* 10min

⁴⁹ *Windtalkers* 7min

⁵⁰ *Letters from Iwo Jima* 39min

Battle sequences are the most unique component in fourth wave films. They are often quite long and intense, featuring a great deal of quick cuts from one camera to another in order to simulate the disorientation felt in combat. These battle sequences also feature a great deal of violence, with vast numbers of soldiers dying on both sides, often in gruesome ways. Both *Letters from Iwo Jima* and *Windtalkers* depict Japanese soldiers burning to death very slowly after their bunkers are hit by flame throwers. These battle sequences often feature the greatest amount of outside intensifiers of all four film eras.

Although era four films tend to feature more outside intensifiers than other waves, they are not entirely unique. Special effects in particular are reminiscent of era three films in that they are dramatic and a bit over-the-top at times. Several scenes in *Windtalkers*, even make large explosions the primary focus of the scene. One example of these is the enormous explosions from gun boats firing at an enemy position during the second battle of the film.⁵¹ Some films however do not depict such theatrics but instead choose to focus on smaller and more intimate explosions, such as the explosions from grenades being used by Japanese soldiers to commit ritualistic suicide in *Letters from Iwo Jima*.

The music in era four films also draws heavy influence from previous waves. The majority of this music is reminiscent of era three films in its use of slow tempo, single instrumentation, and moderately high or extremely low octaves to express sorrow and instil it in the audience. Pro-war themed films, such as *Windtalkers*, also employ the same types of fast, upbeat, and orchestrated music featured in era two cinema that is aimed at eliciting from the audience a positive emotional response towards the brave men who fought and dies in the Second World War.

⁵¹ *Windtalker* 45min

Conclusion

Since the American entrance into World War II following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Hollywood has had the tremendous task of helping to shape the general public's memory and viewpoint of the war in the Pacific. The films produced both during and after the war, teach us "why we fight; they stage and restage war's battles; and they attempt to explain why we won or lost."⁵² In other words, it is the job of Hollywood to help the American people understand the events of the Pacific War, as well as never let them forget the brave men who gave their lives in support of a cause they felt was just. Some of these Pacific War films, such as *Air Force* and *The Thin Red Line* are so powerful that they are used as historical text to educate future generations.⁵³⁵⁴

As time passes and American society continuous to change and grow, the way in which Hollywood filmmakers choose to present the war also evolves. Events such as the escalation of the Vietnam War, and the American Gulf War victory, all influenced the way in which filmmakers presented the events of the Pacific War. With the escalation of the Vietnam War, Americans began to question the very nature of warfare and the motives for fighting. As a result, Hollywood began depicting the events of the Pacific War as less positive, and began putting the spotlight less on the soldier and more on the commanders and the everyday people affected by the war itself. The Gulf War then proved that America could still win global conflicts, and helped to renew American patriotism and enthusiasm for our past war victories.

The four distinct eras or waves of Pacific War films all attempt to say something different about one or more aspects of the war. Different eras also tend to take an overall stance, choosing

⁵² Belton 219

⁵³ Macnanar,

⁵⁴ Lamb

to say that the war was either a positive, negative, or neutral event in history. Pacific War films are placed into these eras based of three criteria, release date, content of the film, and the overall message they aim to convey.

Despite these different interpretations of World War II, all of these films employ the same four basic components of film making; characterization, dialogue, battle sequences, and outside intensifiers, in order to express their themes. These components, however, are used very differently in individual eras. Era three characters, for example, are quite different than those of previous waves. Later eras do however draw from their predecessors. For instance, wave four films draw on the outside intensifiers of era three, as well as the characterization of era two.

Although all of these waves of Pacific War cinema are different, they all help shape the American understanding of the events that transpired in the Second World War Pacific Theater. They were all inspired by their time and in turn help to shape and inspire the present. Each era teaches us something different about the war, whether that be the patriotism and bravery of the men who fought, the reluctance of the Japanese to go to war, the hard conditions of battle, or simply the events that led to U.S. involvement in the Pacific. Each individual era contributes a brush stroke to the total portrait of Pacific War Cinema.

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