Film Style and the World War II Combat Genre

Film Style and the World War II Combat Genre

By

Stuart Bender

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS

PUBLISHING

Film Style and the World War II Combat Genre,
by Stuart Bender

This book first published 2013

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-4336-9, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4336-2

CONTENTS

List of Tables vii

Preface and Acknowledgements viii

Part I: Theory, Criticism, and Combat Film Style

Chapter One 2
Introduction

Chapter Two 17
Criticism as a Practice

Chapter Three 49
Alternative Film Studies: A Description of Style and Filmmaking Practice

Chapter Four 56
Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009): "*Stolz der Nation*" and the Problem of a Film-within-the-Film

Part II: Style in the WW2 Combat Films of the 1940s and 2000s

Introduction to Part Two 76

Chapter Five 78
Editing or *mise-en-scene*

Chapter Six 88
Cinematography

Chapter Seven 132
Sound

Chapter Eight 145
The Performance and Representation of Death in Combat

Part III: Realism, Style, and the Imagination

Introduction to Part Three 166

Chapter Nine 167
"Getting the Shot": Rethinking the Handheld Camera of Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*

Chapter Ten 194
"I'll See You On the Beach": The Details of Performance in *Saving Private Ryan*

Chapter Eleven 224
Conclusion: Realism, Increased Detail, and Cognitive Simulation

Notes 245

List of Films and Video Games Cited 303

Bibliography 307

Index 328

LIST OF TABLES

5-1: Average Shot Lengths of selected combat sequences from the films under discussion 79

6-1: Shot scales and camera movement in the films under discussion 94

6-2: Camera movement in the sequences under discussion 95

6-3: Aspect ratios of the films under discussion 100

6-4: Simplified table of camera movements in the films 129

7-1: The use of music during the battle scenes discussed 142

8-1: Types of gunshot deaths in the battle sequences studied 159

9-1: Summary of research data into the camera style of post-*Ryan* WW2 combat sequences 181

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book examines the style of films from the World War 2 combat genre, addressing films made during WW2 and in the following half century and focuses on major Hollywood productions. Using a theoretical framework derived from the work of David Bordwell and Ian Hunter, I show that existing film criticism has concentrated on the narratives of these texts, often using analytic practice as a stimulus for critical self-analysis. For this reason, academic cinema studies has a limited understanding of the stylistic attributes of these films and in some instances the knowledge that has been produced is demonstrably false.

I analyze in detail the style of four films made during the 1942-1945 period, as well as four films produced in the 2000s. These primary texts are supplemented with analysis of a number of other films in order to identify the stylistic norms of cinematography, sound, editing, and performance of death in the WW2 infantry combat film.

The book argues for an understanding of Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) based upon Kristin Thompson's approach of neoformalism. I use this approach to argue that *Ryan*'s hand-held cinematography, staging techniques, and sound design can best be understood as creating the effect of defamiliarization for viewers accustomed to existing cinematic representations of combat. Additionally, I argue that contemporary approaches to performance and *mise-en-scene* suggest that the genre's approach to realism has evolved to favor a significant increase in detail. Using cognitivist research into the imagination and mental simulations, I further argue that the increased audio-visual details enable the viewer's imagination to more vividly render the scenario presented by the fiction. While these particular details may or may not have close(r) correlation to the real world, they produce an effect which I call "reported realism." My conclusion shows that similar developments are apparent in first-person combat shooter video games.

I would like to sincerely thank Mick Broderick, for his continual support and encouragement throughout the preparation and conduct of this research. I also thank my colleagues—including those filmmaking

practitioners and critical theorists—who have provided casual comments regarding films which have stimulated further thinking on my behalf. Thanks also to Brian Moon for initially introducing me to the critical work of Ian Hunter and his continued encouragement as I have developed those ideas through this further research. Noel King offered some interesting starting points and relevant research material during the very early phase of preparing the research, as well as valuable comments on an earlier version of this manuscript. This project has also benefited tremendously from the support of Murdoch University.

Additionally, I greatly appreciate the feedback from Stephen Prince and Leo Berkeley who provided thoughtful comments on an earlier version of this project. Dale Dye very kindly made time to speak with me about his work on *Saving Private Ryan* and this interview has formed the basis of a number of significant analytic points I make later in the book. Thanks also to Pedro Loureiro, Lawrence Suid, Rocky Colavito and Jim and Linda Overman for their encouragement at the midway point of the research, and to the Special Collections staff at the Margaret Herrick Library in California. The staff at Cambridge Scholars Publishing have also been thoroughly helpful in the final stages of preparing this manuscript for printing.

Finally, I thank my family for their support and encouragement during the research and writing of this book, as well as Rachel Winning for her unwavering support during the research and the subsequent preparation of the manuscript.

PART I:

THEORY, CRITICISM, AND COMBAT FILM STYLE

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 General introduction

This research project began as an attempt to analyze two World War II combat films directed by Clint Eastwood: *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) and *Letters From Iwo Jima* (2006). At the beginning of my research, these two films seemed to provide an interesting problem for film analysis in that they represent a single director telling the story of a single battle from the sides of both combatants. *Flags* depicts the perspective of the U.S. Marines attacking Iwo Jima, whereas *Letters* focuses on the Japanese defenders of the island.[1] One of the key attributes of the genre since *Bataan* (Tay Garnett, 1943) is what Jeanine Basinger refers to as the "faceless enemy," which are presented "as an impersonal […] mindless group, as opposed to [the lead characters who are a] collection of strongly delineated individuals."[2] Eastwood's approach is therefore unusual in that *Letters* is a Hollywood film presenting the American soldiers as the faceless enemy. Additionally, there is of course the further problem of *Letters From Iwo Jima* being a Hollywood film about Japanese soldiers, speaking Japanese with English subtitles. As such it seems almost tailor-made for an analysis informed by "the Other" of Edward Said's *Orientalism*.[3] Said's problematization of stereotyped cultural representations of "the inscrutable Oriental" immediately raises the question of how could a film, purportedly about the "sacrifice and survival" of Japanese characters, be valid if it is made by an American director?[4]

Surprisingly, as I began to review the relevant literature on combat films, as well as reviewing a selection of films for study, my interest in this kind of Cultural Studies analysis of representations faded significantly. While an analysis of Eastwood's films from the perspective of a post-colonialist theory would add important contribution to film studies' understanding of combat films, there emerged in the literature an enormous gap in the academic understanding of the *style* of these films as a genre.[5] As I show in Chapter Two, the existing critical works on WW2 combat films attend very specifically to the narratives and ideological

components of these narratives. In doing so, scholars have largely ignored the stylistic properties of these texts: the *specifics* of the films' cinematography, *mise-en-scene*, editing and sound. What follows here then, addresses this lack of academic knowledge of a genre, which has strong significance in the second half of 20th century cinema.

In changing the direction of my original approach, I have widened the analysis to include much more extended discussions of other WW2 films. Eastwood's films no longer hold the same significance to this study. In fact, the focus has shifted significantly towards Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), however I consider films made during the war as well as a selection of mainstream movies made in the post-*Ryan* 2000s.[6] This research has strong precedents in the poetics of David Bordwell, the neoformalist approach advanced by Kristin Thompson, and statistical measurements of film style by Barry Salt.[7] Through an extended encounter with the work of these scholars, my book reframes critical discussions of WW2 combat films onto their stylistic systems.

1.2 The WW2 Combat Film as Genre and Critical Object

While Basinger's pioneering study of the genre undertakes a sustained analysis of the various configurations of films depicting WW2 actions of the Army, Navy, Airforce, and Marines, for my purposes I will define the object of study much more narrowly.[8] In this book I am concerned with films portraying armed *infantry* forces—the Army and/or the Marine Corps—and I concentrate on sequences of combat action. Basinger's approach is extremely useful for the scholarly understanding of combat films; however, it is of course a study of the *genre* conventions, rather than a focused analysis of the stylistic norms associated with these films. My research contributes to the academic understanding of the genre by extending Basinger's study into terrain which is well outside the scope of her study. Regardless, it is useful to take note of her key points in relation to the genre's evolution.

In *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre*, Basinger divides the corpus of texts into five historical categories, or "waves," which comprise successive stages of the genre's evolution. The "First Wave" encompasses films made and released between America's entry into the war until December 1943, in which "the basic definition of the World War II combat film is formed."[9] Here, Basinger is describing films such as *Wake Island* (John Farrow, 1942) and *Bataan*. In this first wave of

combat films, the narratives generally "depict the first disastrous losing battles of America's entry into the war."[10] *Wake Island*, while featuring fictional characters, is based on the real-life Japanese attack on that island which took place on December 8, 1941. This assault on the small atoll, one day after the Pearl Harbor attack, ended in the defeat of the US garrison by December 23.[11] *Bataan* also creates a fictional squad and places them in the narrative context of the combat which took place on that island in the Philippines during the early months of 1942.[12] The film ends with virtually all of the major characters killed by the Japanese attackers, promoting what Basinger regards as a relevant United States' propaganda message of the time by invoking the "anger, determination, and passion for the fight."[13] In these early films, the basic genre elements are established. For instance, "internal conflict on our side," the "last stand" combat sequence which has been borrowed from Westerns, and themes of sacrifice, such as the pilot in *Wake Island* whose wife has been killed at Pearl Harbor, and who "takes his plane up to bomb the Japanese warship successfully."[14]

The "Second Wave" of combat films is the group of films released between the First Wave and immediately after the end of the war itself. In this phase of the genre, Basinger suggests that these films—such as *Objective, Burma!* (Raoul Walsh, 1945)—are "subtly different" to the early films.[15] Her reasoning is that these films "have an *awareness*" of the genre conventions and iconography of the earlier films and newsreels that had been released early in the war.[16] For instance, *Objective, Burma!* seems to assume "the audience already knew and understood such concepts as the group of mixed ethnic types" in a combat film and does not explain these conventions through dialogue.[17] Whereas the down-beat endings of *Bataan* or *Wake Island* may have seethed with an angry propaganda encouraging Americans to support the war, these films often had delicately positive conclusions. While the second wave films acknowledge the hardship of battle, they simultaneously suggest that victory is imminent. For instance, Captain Nelson's unit does survive the combat and marches back to the command post in the conclusion of *Objective, Burma!*, however, he immediately empties a sack of dog-tags into the Colonel's hand and states: "This is what it cost."[18] A key characterizing feature of these second wave films is that they typically—with the exception of *The Story of G.I. Joe* (William A. Wellman, 1945)—tell fictional narratives.[19]

For Basinger, the "Third Wave" of WW2 combat films, which includes films released in the decade between late 1949 and late 1959, is marked by thematic complexity as filmmakers (and presumably, audiences) reconsider and re-understand the Allied victory at the end of the conflict.[20] Through these films, Basinger argues, Hollywood "could *resolve* the war, finish it off once and for all" as well as speak to issues of the post-war society.[21] For instance, *Battleground* (William A. Wellman, 1949) depicts the Battle of the Bulge while simultaneously commenting on tension with Russia during the late 1940s.[22] For Basinger, *Sands of Iwo Jima* (Allan Dwan, 1949) shows a marked difference in what constitutes combat heroics.[23] John Wayne's character of Sergeant Stryker is killed at the end of the film, but the killing is a "random death" and is presented as "accidental […], not one which is heroic and wins battles."[24] While Robert Taylor and Robert Mitchum died at the end of *Bataan* and *The Story of G.I. Joe*, neither of them possessed the same star status at the time as Wayne.[25] Therefore, his death at the end of *Sands of Iwo Jima* can be read as indicative of the newer attitude of the third wave combat films toward the war: "By killing him, we [Americans] rid ourselves of the war and of wartime attitudes […] we can go on, more mature and ready for peacetime."[26] The third wave is also "marked by the interruption of the Korean War."[27] Not only did the era produce Korean War combat films that borrowed and reworked the conventions of the established genre, but the Korean conflict also influenced the thematic material of WW2 films which became more cynical.[28] *Attack!* (Robert Aldrich, 1956) "begins the demolition of the wholesomeness of the tradition" of justified fighting by showing the hero run over by a tank, for instance.[29]

For Basinger, the "Fourth Wave" of films, released in the decade between 1960 and 1970, typically present WW2 in significantly different terms:

> This period of epic re-creation, with its attention to minute detail as to timing and place, may be seen as the final evolutionary stage: the true war has been removed, and in its place is its filmed replica.[30]

By this, Basinger does not mean that Darryl Zanuck's *The Longest Day* (1962) or *Battle of the Bulge* (Ken Annakin, 1965) are necessarily realistic or authentic "replicas" – only that the films attempt to portray a broad overview of the Second World War, rather than the more localized battles which typify the earlier waves of combat films.[31] The author also notes that these fourth wave films include color film-stock as well as wide screen CinemaScope productions. She regards the use of color as creating

a sense of "distance" between the film characters and the audiences, as well as to "add unreality, making a subconscious link to the entertainment films of the same period."[32] Additionally, she argues that CinemaScope was "perfect" for this wave of films in that it "provided […] a larger canvas" for the filmmakers to present these epic films.[33]

The last of Basinger's categories, the "Fifth Wave" films released during the period 1965 – 1975, are characterized by a tendency to use satire to present an "inverted" and "opposite reality" to the films prior to this wave.[34] She links this "subversive" movement to "the counterculture at work against the mainstream during the same time period" and in particular the popular beliefs about the Vietnam conflict.[35] For instance, while *Gung Ho!* (Ray Enright, 1943) is arguably the first "dirty group" movie in the WW2 genre, its group is significantly less corrupted than the men led by Lee Marvin's character in the fifth wave film *The Dirty Dozen* (Robert Aldrich, 1967). *Gung Ho!*'s group includes men who admit (with neither pride nor shame) that they have killed before, two brothers who were born to different fathers, and Robert Mitchum's character who is a boxing champion and "has been in the brig four times."[36] *The Dirty Dozen*, by contrast, features a group assembled by court martialled soldiers about to be executed for crimes such as murder and rape.[37] Although *The Dirty Dozen* follows the generic narrative formula, the group's mission is no longer to attack a "useful military target, but […] a whorehouse, a fancy 'Rest and Recreation' for German officers."[38] Basinger finds a similar generic subversion at work in the narratives of *Play Dirty* (André De Toth, 1969), *The Devil's Brigade* (Andrew V. McLaglen, 1968) and *Kelly's Heroes* (Brian G. Hutton, 1970).[39]

Because *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* was first published in 1986, Basinger's research did not include the new wave of combat films released beginning from the end of the 1990s. The second edition addresses this, including a chapter called "Combat Redux" which focuses on *Ryan* and asserts that the film's narrative "does not really break with the established genre format."[40] Basinger's conclusion is that aspects of the film, such as the gory representations of violence and the soldiers' questioning of their mission, were not innovative simply because of their inclusion in the film.[41] Rather, according to Basinger, the film has "a truly new purpose" by comparison to earlier entries into the genre in that Spielberg "challenged audiences to think about the violence they accept in modern movies (and in daily life), and its utterly gratuitous purpose."[42]

Basinger's work provides an excellent beginning coordinate for my current project. However, since the *genre conventions* are her focus, the discussion in her book centers on narrative aspects and character, leaving no room for analysis of the stylistic conventions. This is evident in her analysis of *Ryan*, which simply indicates that:

> Spielberg's mastery of sound, editing, camera movement, visual storytelling, narrative flow, performance, and color combine to assault the viewer, to place each and every member of the audience directly into the combat experience.[43]

Basinger's quick gesture towards *Ryan*'s style is both reasonable and understandable, but simultaneously it is also unfortunate. It is reasonable and understandable because her analysis is dedicated entirely to defining the genre conventions of narrative, theme, and character in these films. However, it is unfortunate because it is indicative of a wider problem in the dominant critical methodology that has been used to interpret WW2 combat films. Although Basinger's statement is valid, it is also extremely vague. For instance, it leaves undefined what type of editing is used by Spielberg, as well as *how* it "assault[s] the viewer." Even when a critic does get more specific about a film's stylistic aspects, the statements are often presented as assumptions that ignore qualification or detail. For instance, Albert Auster writes of *Ryan*:

> Despite the originality of the ground-level shots, drained colors, camera lenses spotted with water and blood, and the hellish scenes of GIs screaming or searching for severed limbs, the images still rely for their inspiration on those old, grainy combat photos and newsreels that have been the iconic symbol of the D-Day invasion since the end of the war.[44]

Certainly this is more specific than Basinger's commentary, but Auster provides no details as to *how* Spielberg's imagery resembles "old, grainy combat photos and newsreels." Arguably, Robert Capa's photographs of D-Day are the most "iconic" images of the event; however, *Ryan*'s cinematography is much clearer and with a greater range of contrast than Capa's blurred, stark photographs. Additionally, Capa only made it to the waterline and did not take photographs further up on the beach where most of *Ryan*'s opening scene takes place.[45] Auster's claims are further diminished by Toby Haggith's research into D-Day combat footage. According to Haggith, "most of the film shot of the [American troops involved in the Normandy] landings was lost when the ship carrying the footage back to Britain was sunk."[46]

However, there are more significant problems when a critic's focus on the narrative or ideological components of a combat film lead them to make assumptions about the style which are untenable. Later, I show a number of these in relation to *Ryan* and other WW2 combat films, however, it can also be seen in criticism of other combat genres. For instance, consider the following statement about Oliver Stone's Vietnam War film *Platoon* (1986):

> The documentary feel of the combat sequences—marked by shaky, hand-held camerawork—offer audiences a sense of immediacy, claustrophobia, and realism [and] more importantly, the subjective point of view of the grunts. *Platoon* suggests that "the true story of war" can only be told from the perspective of the grunt soldier […] This documentary style of filmmaking modified with character close-ups for emotional impact presented audiences with narrative grounded in fiction, but also presented with an unprecedented degree of realism. The new Hollywood war film [such as *Ryan*] is more than conscious of this tradition.[47]

Certainly these statements sound compelling and provide a useful background for the author's critique of what they see as the "myths of heroism" embedded in contemporary combat films.[48] However, none of that description of *Platoon*'s camerawork is actually true. It is simply erroneous to describe *Platoon*'s combat sequences as "marked by shaky, hand-held camerawork," given that a five-minute viewing of any combat sequence of the film shows that Stone's dominant technique is to mount cameras on tripods or smoothly track them sideways on a dolly platform.

Throughout this book, I argue that academic film studies' preference is to analyze the narratives and ideological position of these films at the expense of the genre's stylistic system. As a result, there is simply no body of knowledge regarding the aesthetic construction of this significant genre. In the following chapter I show why I believe this to be the case, as well as identify how my own research addresses this considerable gap in cinema studies' understanding of the WW2 combat genre.

Additionally, quite a lot of the material under discussion here bears a relationship to the concept of realism, and there are significant difficulties with this topic within the field of film studies. One such complication is that the term is used in so many different ways by critics that it does not seem to have any consistent meaning beyond being "a mode of representation that, at the formal level, aims at verisimilitude (or mimesis)."[49] This is a general definition and gives no indication of what

aspects of cinema might constitute this mimetic style; indeed part of my project is to undertake such a task of identification.[50] In order to do so, I will assume a definition of film realism as a set of conventions which may or may not bear any resemblance to reality but which *are* frequently considered mimetic by filmmakers and viewers. This is, of course, a different approach to the existing literature on film realism, in which theorists usually address the notion of realism in order to understand it as a philosophical concept or phenomenon.[51] Like interpretive positions such as psychoanalysis and post colonialism, I consider these philosophical discussions of film realism to be interesting and important, but I also consider them to be concerned with different issues to those with which I am concerned here. By making the above assumption, I will be able to undertake a clear analysis of film style in Parts II and III of this book. Such an approach also enables me in Chapter 11 to draw concluding remarks on this topic: in that concluding chapter I propose the theoretical concept of "reported realism" to describe the phenomena of film realism with more accuracy than existing models.

1.3 Background to the study

This project, which constitutes a work of film history, has its roots in what is perhaps an unlikely place—my M.Ed thesis written during my prior career as a secondary school English teacher. In that research, I investigated the teaching of viewing practices associated with documentary films in the secondary school English context.[52] Through an analysis of interviews with classroom teachers, state curriculum documents, and the contents of classroom textbooks, I argued that English teachers exhibit a tendency to lead students through a very specific viewing practice which privileges their ethical engagement with the texts. The dominant pedagogy in classrooms typically trains students to use a visual text—whether a documentary film or a fiction feature film—as a stimulus to motivate discussion of their own beliefs and attitudes. This personalist-ethical paradigm treats the narrative elements of the text as a surface on which students' moral selves can be displayed for the corrective gaze of the teacher. While this is certainly a core objective of English curriculum documents (in Western Australia, at least), the evidence shows that students develop their capacities in performing this kind of interpretation at the expense of other textual skills which are equally central to the curriculum.[53] The other two curriculum aims for English can be described as rhetorical training in textual conventions and aesthetic appreciation of texts.[54] Markers for the state examinations (the Tertiary Entrance

Examination) in Western Australia perennially comment on students' inability to demonstrate understandings of rhetorical techniques or aesthetic properties when producing responses to interpretative tasks.[55]

That study was guided strongly by the work of Ian Hunter, whose own research into English teaching had identified the same practice in the teaching of literary texts.[56] Hunter, informed by Michel Foucault's studies of governmentality, shows that this approach to English teaching functions to train students to use literature as a means of continually questioning their own beliefs and behaviors.[57] Hunter describes this process as ethical self-problematization.[58] For instance, students are unlikely to be presented with a range of existing interpretations of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1834) in order to develop an appreciation of the poem's ability to support a range of possible meanings.[59] Rather, teachers are likely to ask students to speculate on how the poem speaks to their concerns about the environment. In this context, *polysemy* seems to describe each student's particular belief to count as a different "interpretation" or meaning. However, each student is of course performing the same interpretative practice.[60] As I show in Chapter Two, Hunter has also shown that very similar pedagogical routines occur in the academic humanities, including film studies.[61] In this current research project, I engage more strongly with Hunter's critique of the humanities, showing how academic cinema criticism has habitually ignored the stylistic attributes of WW2 combat films.

While working with the theoretical material of Hunter and Foucault for the M.Ed study, I eventually turned to the type of film analysis practiced by David Bordwell. Since my argument was that English teachers do not address the stylistic construction of the documentary films they teach, I wanted to offer an alternative pedagogy which would resolve the problem. Bordwell's historical poetics pointed the way towards an alternative pedagogy which would enable students to understand the stylistic features of film texts.[62] Additionally, I found that Bordwell's discussion of film criticism in *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* echoed in many key respects some of the arguments of Hunter that I drew upon throughout my M.Ed research.[63] In large measure, Hunter's argument hinges on a productive model of interpretation.[64] The most straightforward account of such a viewpoint is to say that the *process* of interpretation is one in which a viewer (or reader) *produces* meaning by using particular rules to apply meaning to relevant components of a text.[65] A different interpretation is simply the result of different rules being

applied, rather than a difference of intellect, personality, values, or sensitivity. This should not be regarded as identical to Bordwell's argument in *Making Meanin*g; however, there are clear (and useful) similarities. As Noel King demonstrates, Bordwell's definition of criticism is "an 'occasional' activity in the sense of being a site-specific activation or application of various heuristic devices, schemata and semantic fields."[66] In Chapter Two, I provide greater detail about the overlap between the work of these two theorists.

As a result of this encounter with Hunter and Bordwell, when I began planning for the current research I revised my original consideration of Eastwood's two WW2 combat films about the battle at Iwo Jima. It became obvious that an attempt to examine the apparent subject-positions occupied by Eastwood, the Japanese characters, and the audience would not explore what I now regard to be most significant about these films. Whereas academic film studies has virtually no understanding of the *style* of WW2 combat films—including Eastwood's—there is already a solid body of knowledge of these films' narratives, genre, and ideological components, as well as a significant amount of *interpretation* of these elements. Rather, in this book I have chosen to refocus the discussion of WW2 combat films onto their stylistic attributes.

The importance of my research here is that the existing literature on combat films—whether WW2 or related to other conflicts—generally offers only interpretations on the genre.[67] The dominant critical methodologies used to interpret combat films can be considered iterations of the process which Hunter regards as an act of ethical self-problematization. For instance, when Antony Easthope's analysis of Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978) describes its narrative structure as "legitimating the male [homo-social] bond," this is an instance of the critic using the text as an occasion for critical reflection of their own society.[68] In Easthope's reading, the ethical interrogation is informed by theories of masculinity, but it could just as easily have used Marxism, post-colonialism or any other doctrinal paradigm as a way of identifying formal aspects of the film to stimulate the ethical reflection. While these kinds of interpretations are valid and interesting, they constitute a very particular form of interpretation which does not produce information or knowledge about the text's compositional properties. As Hunter argues:

> This practice requires the initiate to divorce ideas, arguments and desires from their "mundane" spheres of determination and contexts of judgement by attaching them to the formal organisation of the work of art; and,

> conversely, it requires that the formal organisation of the work be subordinated to the ideas, arguments and desires allegedly expressed through it.[69]

I should point out that neither I, nor Hunter, regard the reading/viewing practice of self-problematization in negative terms. There are societal advantages to this educational practice which enables students (whether in high school or at university) to use aesthetic objects, such as films, in order to perform work on their ethical and moral interiority. For Hunter, it is an essential task of government which some educational settings have been called upon to perform.[70] Indeed, Hunter compares this "practical mastery of specific aesthetico-ethical techniques" to another human endeavor which requires practice and training: "Like the athlete's body the aesthete's personality is something that must be worked on."[71] However, he would remind contemporary readers that in the early years of mass education the practice was more honestly regarded as a specific practice of person-forming.[72] For instance, one of the early bureaucrats involved in the assembly of mass education, Matthew Arnold, describes the relevance of Literature to day-to-day life in the following terms:

> More and more he who examines himself will find the difference it makes to him […] whether or not he has pursued his avocations throughout it [the day] without reading at all.[73]

In Hunter's view, this type of education is less concerned with understanding the textual objects apparently under study—for instance, films in a "film" course, or poetry in a "literature" course—than it is with "forming" subjects who are able to use the texts as occasions to turn inward and critically evaluate their own beliefs and conduct.[74] Importantly, Hunter's research shows that this practice is the result of a series of social and historical contingencies and therefore should not be regarded as an essential attribute of human development (in general) or textual study (in particular).[75]

My argument extends Hunter's by examining the critical response to the WW2 combat genre. I show that not only is there virtually no engagement with formal properties of these films in the literature, but that the dominance of the self-problematizing method has led to some serious misunderstandings of the genre's aesthetic construction.[76] In Parts II and III, I attend to these gaps in film studies' understandings of the genre's style by examining in detail the techniques of cinematography, sound, editing and *mise-en-scene* of combat death. This aspect of my research is

strongly modeled on the poetics of Bordwell, the neoformalism of Thompson, and Salt's taxonomic approach to analyzing film style.

In a series of books, Bordwell has shown that an analysis of film from the perspective of poetics is capable of yielding extremely nuanced descriptions of how films create particular artistic effects on their audiences. For instance, *Poetics of Cinema* demonstrates that even such apparently mundane cinema techniques, such as editing out an actor's blinking, has powerful effects on the audience's interpretation of the character.[77] In *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, Bordwell describes in detail the tendency in contemporary Hollywood films—from the 1970s onwards—to predominantly employ a style of editing and cinematography that he calls "intensified continuity."[78] My research adopts this kind of narrow focus on film style, with the intention of defining specific attributes of *how* the techniques used by WW2 combat films constitute particular "norms" in different filmmaking eras.[79]

Thompson's neoformalism is related to Bordwell's poetics, however, its distinct methods of analysis allow my study to account for many aspects of WW2 combat films that have hitherto been inadequately theorized. In *Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible: A Neoformalist Analysis*, Thompson illustrates the usefulness of this approach for identifying how the presence of particular cinematic devices are motivated in very specific ways.[80] In Chapter Nine, I draw upon this mode of analysis to examine what I consider to be one of the most misunderstood aspects of combat films: the use of hand-held cinematography.[81] As neoformalism is derived from the Russian Formalism of the early 1900s, Thompson has updated and adapted many of the concepts to suit cinema studies. A key term in the formalist/neoformalist tradition is *defamiliarization*, which is an effect created by particular texts to challenge the viewer's perception of events, narratives, characters, and ideas that have become routine and habitual.[82] Since WW2 combat films have now been produced for over 50 years, the concept of defamiliarization provides a valuable critical tool through which to analyze some of the stylistic changes present in these films.

Barry Salt's pioneering studies in film style have also provided me with excellent tools for identifying and describing the cinematic devices used by this genre.[83] In Chapter Five I use a number of techniques adopted from Salt's studies, for instance the technique of counting Average Shot Lengths for particular films to measure the norms of editing in particular eras of filmmaking. These methods of analysis also have links to the work

of a number of other scholars, centering on the website www.cinemetrics .lv, where statistical measures of film style have been refined through discussion, critique, and sharing of data.[84]

The combined work of these scholars supplies an excellent approach to examine aspects of style which have hitherto been ignored by film studies. In Chapter Two I discuss the relevant influence of their work in much more detail. Additionally, this book is informed by my own practical experience of filmmaking. The particular set of skills I have developed directing and designing visual effects for short action films enables me to understand some of the practical issues involved in creating scenes of violence on screen. For this reason, I am in a suitable position to analyze the textual content of these films with a highly sophisticated degree of detail.[85] Of course, not only have my practical skills assisted in my scholarly analysis, but the opposite is also true. Through this extended engagement with the minutiae of combat style, I have advanced my own filmmaking praxis immensely.[86]

1.4 Aims and limitations of this project

There are two major contributions of my project to the field of academic film studies. First is my application of Hunter and Bordwell's arguments to the corpus of criticism on the WW2 combat genre.[87] Second, and more importantly, is my very detailed and specific account of the stylistic systems of this genre of filmmaking. In order to perform this task, this book focuses on two sets of mainstream WW2 combat films. As it is my intention to make concrete comparisons between films and eras, I focus exclusively on infantry combat films.[88] Additionally, I narrow the analysis to the combat sequences and unless otherwise indicated, my statements should be regarded as relevant to the major battles in the films.

My focus on mainstream Hollywood productions is at once scholarly, as well as practical. This focus is scholarly in that the dominant academic critique of the genre has also focused on Hollywood productions. It is practical in the sense that all of the films were available in good quality DVD or Blu-Ray formats, which I consider essential for my comments on stylistic attributes to be meaningful. The first five films of the sample were made during the war: *Wake Island* (1942), *Bataan* (1943), *Guadalcanal Diary* (Lewis Seiler, 1943), *Gung Ho!* (1943), and *Objective, Burma!* (1945). The other five are contemporary productions: *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *The Thin Red Line* (Terrence Malick, 1998), *Enemy at the Gates*

(Jean-Jacques Annaud, 2001) and *Windtalkers* (John Woo, 2002), and *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006). With the exception of *Enemy at the Gates* these are Hollywood productions and I have selected them because as two distinct groups they will enable me to identify clear norms of style in wartime productions as well as within the contemporary milieu. At various points in the analysis I do consider other films made in these two eras, as well as films made during what Basinger would describe as the third and fourth waves.

As indicated above, a central theme of this book is that existing film criticism has focused exclusively on the narratives of these texts and for this reason academic cinema studies has a limited understanding of the practical means by which these films have been produced. The two primary research questions which guide this project have been designed to address this problem:

1. What are the specific norms of style (e.g., cinematography, *mise-en-scene*, editing and sound) used by the 1940s, and post-*Ryan* 2000s infantry combat films?
2. Why has existing film criticism ignored the stylistic analysis of these films?

Using the answers to these two questions, I also explore a third question in Chapter 11:

3. How relevant is the notion of realism to an analysis of *style* in the World War II combat film genre?

This final question hovers over many discussions of the genre in both scholarly criticism and popular reviews. For this reason, although I cite examples of critical attitudes towards combat realism throughout the discussion, in general I defer my engagement with the topic until the conclusion. As I show throughout Parts II and III, realism in relation to film style is a particularly complex issue; however, the data and analysis in those chapters enables me to offer a definition in Chapter 11 of what I call "reported realism."

There are some clear limitations on this study and these, in fact, point towards important future research. For instance, my very brief viewing of some recent non-English speaking combat films suggests that there are complex influences of the Hollywood style on those films.[89] Occasionally I make references to non-WW2 combat films, such as films about the

Vietnam War or the Gulf War. However, a full analysis of those films is, of course, beyond the scope of this book. As such, my comments here are intended to illustrate a specific aspect of WW2 films and should be regarded as preliminary statements regarding Vietnam or Gulf War cinema.

CHAPTER TWO

CRITICISM AS A PRACTICE

2.1 Criticism as productive practice

Despite the existence of poststructuralist theories in contemporary critical thought, there persists a predominant view of texts as that which Michel de Certeau has labelled a "strongbox of meaning," at least in the literature on WW2 combat films.[1] For instance, Brian Locke's recent criticism of *Bataan* contains the bald statement that the film "depicts the Japanese 'yellow peril' enemy not only as hostile to both white and black Americans, but as even more racist to blacks than white Americans, *displacing the history of white racism towards blacks onto the Asian enemy*."[2] Although no character in the film explicitly states the opinion that the Japanese possess greater racist attitudes towards the black American characters than the white characters, the author argues that *Bataan* holds this implicit meaning within the presentation of its narrative. The intention of this kind of criticism seems to be to reveal meanings about the text—including its context and its society—which can apparently be uncovered by a suitably sophisticated mind or theoretical position.

In what follows, I will offer a significantly different approach to understanding criticism and interpretation. Unlike the kind of hermeneutics indicated above, my approach will assume that textual criticism, such as the scholarly interpretation of films, is a *productive practice*. This assumption holds that meaning is something that can only be "produced," rather than something to be "recovered" from the text, the author or filmmaker's biography, a set of values or from the viewer themselves.[3] Richard Rorty's pragmatism has a strong influence on this view of interpretation: "We may describe a given set of marks as words of the English language, as very hard to read, as a Joyce manuscript, as worth a million dollars, as an early version of *Ulysses*, and so on."[4] Rorty's argument is that whatever description (that is, the interpretation or meaning) ultimately settled upon is dependent upon what happens to have been said, discursively, about that particular set of marks.[5] Noel King

points out that this position is derived from the works of Michel Foucault and Ludwig Wittgenstein.[6] Taking this approach in line with other research into the productive model of reading, there are three major implications for the criticism of cinema.[7] First, it follows that there is nothing inherent about a film, or its author, that triggers a particular interpretation. For instance, the presence of black American characters in *Bataan* does not, by itself, prompt a reading focused on racist attitudes in American society. Second, when two (or more) critics interpret the same text differently this is a result of their application of different rules for interpretation, rather than them simply having "different points of view."[8] Third, from this position, meaning is not *found* in a text, but is *activated* by following certain historically determined rules which involve the viewing performing very specific routines.[9]

An analogy from a combat film can stand to illustrate this concept of interpretation as a rule-bound practice.[10] Consider the opening scene in the Gulf War film *Three Kings* (David O. Russell, 1999), in which a US soldier spots an Iraqi on a sandy crest and calls out to his unit, "Are we shooting?" Their attempt to read the situation is as follows:

Soldier #1: Are we shooting?
Soldier #2: [Off-screen] What?
Soldier #1: Are we shooting people or what?
Soldier #2: Are we shooting?
Soldier #1: That's what I'm asking you!
Soldier #2: What's the answer?
Soldier #1: I don't know the answer. That's what I'm trying to find out!

[On-screen: The Iraqi has a weapon and is waving a white flag.]

Soldier #1: I think this guy has a weapon! Yeah he does!

[He shoots and kills the Iraqi.]

On a battlefield, the "meaning" of a person standing on a hill could be one of at least three options. They could be interpreted as: i) a hostile enemy soldier, ii) a surrendering enemy soldier, or iii) a civilian. It is not up to the infantry soldier to decide on which meaning to attach to the person. Rather, the meaning is fixed according to the "rules of engagement" issued by the appropriate authority. These may be written on cards carried by soldiers, as well as passed on to individual soldiers by their unit commanders.[11] They are specific, such as this recorded order from a Marine Lieutenant prior to an attack in the Euphrates:

> Change in the ROE [Rules of Engagement]: anyone with a weapon is declared hostile. If it's a woman walking away from you with a weapon on her back, shoot her. If there is an armed Iraqi out there, shoot him. I don't care if you hit him with a forty-millimeter grenade in the chest.[12]

The military rules of engagement are variable (within a certain range of options) depending upon the context of combat; however, once fixed they precisely determine the "meaning" of every human on the battlefield. Although a scholar like Locke producing an interpretation of representations of race is obviously not dealing with the sort of high stakes involved in a soldier's encounter with the Republican Guard, this comparison is a reminder of something easily forgotten in the game of interpretation.[13] Firstly, soldiers are only in a position (geographically as well as ethically) where they are required to "read" people on a battlefield because of a multitude of circumstances that are entirely external to them.[14] Likewise, a scholar is only in the position to interpret a film like *Bataan* because of external contingencies, such as the need to publish as a tenure requirement, or because they are teaching a unit which deals with the WW2 combat genre. Secondly, the satire of the *Three Kings* scene is that the soldier is unable to accurately read the meaning of the Iraqi—in fact, he misreads the situation and kills a surrendering soldier—because nobody seems to know the rules of engagement. His confusion leads him to ignore the Iraqi's white flag and focus on the AK47 assault rifle. The scholar attempting to analyze race representations in *Bataan* is only going to produce a valid reading if they actually know which textual cues "count" in this type of interpretation. For example, if they argue that Sgt. Dane's psychosexual development is echoed in the closing shot of him firing the unit's machine-gun, then they have not performed a "correct" interpretation of representations of race at all.[15]

Thus, the context of viewing is not simply something which influences an interpretation. It, in fact, functions to *produce* the meaning. In order to more fully articulate the problem of interpretation I will draw upon the work of two researchers who offer independent, but complementary, accounts of the interpretive process. David Bordwell's research into film criticism suggests that critics produce their interpretations according to a set of practices of inference and rhetoric.[16] In short, Bordwell's account details the strategies mobilized by critics when they interpret cinematic texts. His key argument is that by examining the "actual procedures of thinking and writing" used by critics, it is possible to understand the "institution" of academic film criticism as "nothing but a body of conventions."[17] Ian Hunter, over a course of publications, has also argued

that the different interpretive positions in the humanities can be read as practices with conventionalized rules and discrete procedures. However, Hunter's work emphasizes the primarily pedagogical purpose served by these practices. From this perspective, the analysis of texts in the humanities is used as a hermeneutic "occasion" in which the student, scholar, or teacher can engage in a process of ethical self-problematization.[18] The intersection of the works by both Bordwell and Hunter enables an examination of the existing research into WW2 combat films, so I will begin here with a review of the relevant literature by these two researchers.

David Bordwell: Interpretation as Rhetoric

In his *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema*, Bordwell suggests that there are four types of meanings which critics can construct for a film. These are a "referential" meaning, an "explicit" meaning, a "symbolic" (or "implicit") meaning, and finally a "symptomatic" meaning.[19] These differing meanings can be regarded as becoming increasingly abstract, as well as comprising two distinct processes. The first two types of meaning—referential and explicit—constitute *comprehension* of the film. A referential meaning is formed when the spectator constructs a "world" from information provided by the text and treats the film as referencing this real or fictitious world. The viewer comprehends the events depicted in the film and mentally assembles (reconstructs) a coherent world—and a coherent *fabula*, or story—from the information presented in the text.[20] In producing an explicit meaning, however, the spectator "assign[s] a conceptual meaning or 'point' to the fabula and diegesis" and identifies "explicit cues" within the text which suggest "the film 'intentionally' indicates how it is to be taken."[21] The hackneyed claim that a given WW2 combat film suggests that "war is hell" is a clear example of such a meaning.

By contrast to the methods of *comprehension* involved in these two meaning making processes, the second two types of meaning—implicit and symptomatic—should be regarded as *interpretation*. Bordwell suggests that when a spectator constructs an implicit meaning, "the film is now assumed to 'speak indirectly'."[22] Roger Ebert attributes such a meaning to *Ryan* when he argues that Spielberg and screenwriter Robert Rodat have "made a philosophical film about war."[23] Ebert regards the actor Jeremy Davies (who plays Cpl. Upham) as "the key performance in