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Virgin Film: War Films

James Clarke

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About the Book

‘The soldier is abosorbing because all the circumstances surrounding him have a kind of charged hysteria . . .’ – Stanley Kubrick

Taking readers into the heart of on-screen battle, *War Films* explores the heart-wrenching storylines, pure spectacle and the dramatisation of history in one of the movie world’s most enduring genres. Films about war have been a part of cinema history since the beginning of the moving picture, and in the post-World War Two era have gone on to assume a prominent place in our collective imagination.

Featuring classics such as All Quiet on the Western Front, The Dam Busters, The Great Escape, Platoon and Born on the Fourth of July, as well as films such as the Japanese semurai epic Ran, the Polish classic Kanal and Spielberg’s interpretation of War of the Worlds, *War Films* is a global through conflict, horror and heroism. With an in-depth exploration of each film’s production and creative history, analysis of theme, style and character and historical background, *War Films* is a comprehensive tour of duty of the genre.

About the Author

James Clarke is the author of Virgin Film books on Ridley Scott, Francis Ford Coppola and Animated Films. As well as producing films and videos, he has written many books about cinema, and has been published in the *Pocket Essentials* series and *Wallflower Press*'s guide to notable film directors.

Virgin Film: War Films

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For David Bayly, who always believed in my writing and who was a great family friend.

Introduction

IN HIS STUNNING novel *Three Soldiers*, about three disparate American troops fighting in the First World War, John Dos Passos writes, ‘Men were more humane when they were killing each other than when they were talking about it . . . So was civilisation nothing but a vast edifice of sham, and the war . . . was its fullest and most ultimate expression.’ War stories have always had to deal with a conflict of morality, and with an increasingly complicated sense of what war means. Finally, the war film must visualise and dramatise some sense of a world twisting out of recognition when war strikes. Men find it hard to emote and express frailty, so perhaps the war film creates opportunities for them to acknowledge their insecurities in a world apparently without reason. This way of presenting the distorting effect of combat and violence is never far from the minds of the filmmakers featured in this book.

We tell stories to one another, and always have done, as a means of confronting the frayed ends of life; with its painful and traumatic untidiness. This is magnified, intensified and most concentrated in the war story.

Many of the war films that have made their mark on the imaginations of the viewer have been stories of characters moving from innocence to experience in a way that corresponds with the strongest of myths and ancient stories. It seems fair to say that it is rare for a war film to engage only with the particular details and issues surrounding a specific conflict. Instead, war is frequently used in cinema as a means by which to dramatise the enduring issues that all

of us face – mortality, frailty (physical and emotional), community and courage.

Since the early years of the twentieth century, war films have captivated audience interest with incredible force and consistency, many of the films becoming iconic frames of reference for a large number of us. In certain instances these films have made great efforts to express some of the trauma of war. Other films have gone all out to counter any imagined sense of excitement around combat. Tellingly, as David Lean entered preproduction on his action-drama ***The Bridge on the River Kwai*** in 1956, he observed that war was anything but the adventure that stories might often portray it as. Lean commented that 'War is not fun except in bad films and bad books . . . These ideas are false . . . War is the greatest plague on earth. I don't think this is a time to minimise its horror and film it in false colours.'

Undoubtedly, the war film is often a variation on the action movie in part or whole. The war film has provided many of cinema's most popular and accomplished directors with the opportunity to tell their stories using the arena of combat to open audiences' eyes, hearts and minds to the toll war takes and sometimes to those conflicts that have been forgotten.

For the majority of viewers it is the Hollywood-made, popular American cinema version of warfare that is most widely known. In an incisive article written in 2003 Guy Westwell commented, 'In the last few years, Hollywood has produced a distinct and commercially successful cycle of war movies . . . These films work hard to renew America's self-belief, to reclaim faith in war as a valid mechanism of change and to reassert American moral rectitude.'

War stories have existed for as long as people have thrilled to storytelling and the idea of 'courage under fire' and for as long as people have mourned the wastefulness of combat. In other words, war stories have existed for as long as people have fought one another. Homer's epic *The Iliad* is

a war story, as is the Babylonian epic poem *Gilgamesh*. Shakespeare set many of his most celebrated plays against the canvas of war, such as *Henry V*. The critical, and perhaps unsettling, issue to consider is how war can rightly be used as a subject for an art form geared around the concept of 'entertainment'. This might seem an uneasy alliance. Erich Maria Remarque's landmark novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* includes the following assessment of war, and surely most war films with any kind of guiding moral impulse serve in some way to do the same thing: '. . . war is a cause of death like cancer and tuberculosis and dysentery. The deaths are merely more frequent, more varied and terrible.' Stories about war reshape history and can newly shape our imaginative sense of what combat is about.

The war film has been a part of popular cinema since its earliest days and in the post-World War Two era has arguably assumed an even more prominent place in our collective movie memory. Cinema is both narcissistic and voyeuristic. The war film, then, is yet one more way of telling stories about the tragic and seemingly inevitable violence that humans continue to commit against one another and the world.

Some war stories serve a propaganda purpose, while others seek to suggest that there are no good wars, and never will be. Some seek to visualise the horror, both emotional and visceral, especially in more recent years, whilst others seek to acknowledge the heroism and twisted social and political backdrops.

History and cinema have not always made a comfortable fit. Dramatic impulse will often override fidelity to history; though history itself is a vast sea of stories that has never been, and never will be, objective. History is as dramatic as any 'fiction' and both are always offering us versions of reality; of what actually happened.

The war story can contain a variety of forms, styles and tones. From the intense realism of ***All Quiet on the Western Front*** (Lewis Milestone, 1930) and ***Saving Private Ryan*** (Steven Spielberg, 1998) to the comedy of *Dr Strangelove* (Stanley Kubrick, 1962) and *Three Kings* (David O Russell, 1999). It's obvious to note that there are more war films to watch than this book can hope to acknowledge.

It's obvious to say that there are so many more war films than this book can hope to acknowledge. British war films alone number in the hundreds and from this output we can namecheck a small handful such as ***The Dam Busters*** (Michael Anderson, 1954), *The Cruel Sea* (Charles Frend, 1953) and *Battle of Britain* (Guy Hamilton, 1969) all of which fused a sense of documentary and drama in their portrayals of British military effort and the bravery of its recruits.

Then, too, there is the war film as action-adventure spectacle. In many ways, maybe this is its most enduring incarnation. To some eyes, as early an effort as the ethically committed ***All Quiet on the Western Front*** is punctuated by moments of kinetic energy and jeopardy. Is it smarter, though, to look to those films made at a safe enough distance from the Great War and World War Two to begin understanding how they attached macho heroics to the context of international combat? The films of the 1940s and 1950s, still so close to both world wars and also the Korean War stepped with understandable reverence through the battlefields.

By the 1960s the genre had seen a shift towards a more straightforward action-film approach, typified by the hugely popular ***The Great Escape*** (John Sturges, 1963) and films such as *Where Eagles Dare* (Brian Hutton, 1968) in which Allied commandos set out to rescue an American general being held in a Nazi castle. *The Guns of Navarone* (J Lee Thompson, 1961) has also endured as a much-loved action story and is surely responsible for ushering in the undiluted

action-adventure war film that characterised many of the 1960s films set during war.

In the two decades or so since the late 1960s the war film was particularly marked by depictions of the Vietnam War, and then starting in the late 1990s we have seen the ‘resurrection’ of the World War Two combat film. This very recent wave of stories rolled in with ***Saving Private Ryan*** and was soon followed by *When We were Soldiers* (Randall Wallace, 2002) and *Windtalkers* (John Woo, 2002). Alongside these titles, television featured the miniseries *Band of Brothers,* which was received with real enthusiasm for its accuracy and seriousness of purpose.

As I sat about to watch ***War of the Worlds*** (Steven Spielberg, 2005) a conversation started between the man sitting next to me and his wife. He had fought in the Korean War and he said something that continues to stick with me. He started talking about the fact that in combat ordinary people do ‘the weirdest things’. Just that morning I had been writing of how war films show the sense of the ordinary slipping away during war. Watching a number of war films in close succession had expressed that fact with real clarity. Those films were made all the more real and acute by the real-life memory from the quiet man alongside me.

War films, like all films, show us worlds. If the job has been done effectively films immerse us in their realities and, as such, they have an immediacy that the written word can perhaps never possess. A war film can powerfully indicate the physical cost of war and its grimy, desperate scramble for survival with a vivid closeness that tends to supercede the written word. Where literature has the advantage is in charting the internal feeling and response to combat.

Russian filmmaker and writer Sergei Eisenstein, who was critical to the development of both film theory and film practice in cinema’s early years, proved that literature and film are mutually enriching endeavours. Eisenstein had begun his lifelong work with drama and storytelling with the

Proletkult Theatre which, rather than focus on an individual hero in its stage plays, would instead make the mass of people the hero. Dialogue was not considered the centre of dramatic meaning, but instead ideas and values were communicated through a montage of effects: and in film this included lighting, camera position, editing patterns, sound, music and acting. This concept of montage found rich expression in his expansive and critical war film *Battleship Potemkin*. In keeping with Eisenstein's socially inclined and politicised filmmaking, we can look to more recent efforts such as *The Battle of Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1965), which was a highly inflammatory film that sided with the Marxist revolutionary opinion in its depiction of Algeria's fight for independence from France. In keeping with the work of the Italian director Roberto Rossellini in the 1940s, Pontecorvo's film made a rigorous attempt at realism. The film features only one professional actor and uses actual people and locations from the events it depicts. The film has been praised for being unflinching in confronting the harder, more complex aspects of that particular battle for freedom.

The twenty-first-century experience of the world is becoming ever more mediated through moving pictures, but it is perhaps images of World War Two that continue to endure in our imagination. As Jeanine Basinger discusses in her stunningly thorough book *The World War Two Combat Film,* 'the World War Two combat film . . . has almost magically regained its audience appeal . . . For Hollywood, the combat film is perfect. It provided ready-made conflicts . . . easily simplified and clarified – and reversed.'

The birth of film coincided with the end of the nineteenth century, a time when battles seemed very distant geographically to most audiences. Cinema brought images of the world to people's local neighbourhoods. The Boxer Rebellion of 1900 and the Boer War (1898–1902) both received their share of cinematic coverage. In his writing about the beginnings of depictions of war in cinema Robert

Murphy writes, ‘The high casualty rates among those who fought in the First World War made it difficult to either celebrate or condemn the war.’ Murphy notes that the earliest motion-picture images of war showed soldiers disembarking and doing drill exercises, and so more ‘exciting’ versions of reality were produced such as *Attack on a China Mission* (James Williamson, 1900) or *Peace with Honour* (Cecil Hepworth, 1902).

With their focus on combat, war films have very much become ever more allied with the aesthetic of the action film, so that a war film of the early twenty-first century could have as much in common with the kinetic patterns of a film like *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988) as with a film such as *A Walk in the Sun* (Lewis Milestone, 1945).

For more than half a century now the war film has developed a range of story elements that audiences expect to see regardless of the combat scenario. When we watch a war film of the most accepted and ‘conventional’ kind we will expect (or at least unconsciously anticipate) seeing a story that centres on one heroic soldier in relation to the unit of soldiers he is a part of (professional or otherwise). We might expect to see a range of ethnic backgrounds represented. We would also expect a scene in which the soldier receives mail from home, and another based around the men using their weapons. Maybe too we expect to see the soldiers quietly and anxiously anticipating the fury of the battle ahead. And we expect to see acts of bravery amidst terror. War films aim to satisfy audience expectations as much as any other film. Across a wide and varied span we see images repeat, character formations echo and the heart and soul of these stories reverberate in similar ways, even though on the surface they may appear very different in their historical reference points. Looking at things this way ***Paths of Glory*** (Stanley Kubrick, 1957) isn’t so far removed from the drama of ***Casualties of War*** (Brian De

Palma, 1989), even though the former film is set in First World War France and the latter in the jungles of Vietnam.

War has always involved the exercise of technology. Cinema is also about displaying, in part, the technological tools at the disposal of the filmmaker. In the modern age, war has often been dominated by images of machinery clashing with humans, and our sense of war and military campaigns has almost assumed the quality of a film itself, with images endlessly streamed to us via television and the Internet. Computer games that pitch the player in the firing line suggest war is a game. Yet films are equally able to portray war as hell, and war as the way to a nobler self. War as a potential character-building experience is the idea that shoots through the chaos.

Obviously certain films reach for a more mature and grounded sense of communicating what battle zones and wartime are about than others. To go from *Rambo: First Blood Part Two* (George Pan Cosmatos, 1985) or ***The Great Escape*** to the cinema of Italian feature film *Rome, Open City* (Roberto Rossellini, 1945) or the generous and gentle anti-war film ***La Grande Illusion*** (Jean Renoir, 1937) is a long journey, striking in its contrast. *Rome, Open City* marks the beginning of Italian Neo-Realism, that is to say an approach to cinema that strips away, by choice or circumstance, the established artifice of the medium. Location filming was critical to this stylistic development, and Rossellini's film was shot on the streets of Rome during the final days of its Nazi occupation, when the city was anything but open. The city was in a state of destruction and Italy was on the verge of economic and social collapse. Rossellini found himself battling for resources and would buy raw film stock to shoot on from street photographers. This situation in turn created a particular and startling aesthetic that was seen to be 'real' and without gloss, as none of the film stock was of consistent quality. The voices of actors and ambient sound were added after filming, but Rossellini was

keen to stress that his presentation of war-torn Rome was not a series of invented episodes spontaneously conjured ‘on the spot’. Yes, the project was impacted by the situation, but all along there was a clear commitment to telling a particular story.

Italy was not the only country to continue producing films during Nazi occupation. France, too, was occupied by the German Army and, intriguingly, during their period of invasion and occupation over 350 films were produced. The invading force saw value in making films in the French language in order to underline the efforts of the occupation. One such film to be produced under these conditions, and thus have its production affected directly by the occupation, was the classic feature *Les Enfants du Paradis* (Marcel Carné, 1945).

What is it, then, that the most affecting war films achieve? Is it to amaze us with how cinema is able to recreate gruesome reality? Is it to remind us of moments of human compassion amidst the fury and desperation of the world, or to remind us that war is wasteful? Is it to compel audiences to wish they had been war heroes, to encourage viewers to sign up, literally or ideologically? We can only hope that war films individually, and in sum, serve to compel viewers to acknowledge the waste of war in a tangible and an emotional sense. For writer Louis Menand, ‘I have always thought that what makes war appalling isn’t the possibility that someone will maim or kill you; it is that possibility that you will maim or kill someone else.’

It seems fair to say that our prevailing sense of what a war film is for, and how it functions, stems from the vast number of American and British films about combat in the First and Second World Wars, and more recently the Vietnam War. Inevitably, perhaps, these dramatic takes on combat have been more powerful in shaping a public sense of war than more journalistic documents and dispatches. But there’s a pretty fine line between fact and fiction when you

look more closely. Certainly for younger audiences, films articulating the American experience in Vietnam and World War Two have a particular clarity and familiarity. In the American context, 'Warfare . . . offers another opportunity for a return to versions of the American "frontier" experience.' For sure, British war films have been produced over recent years, such as *Memphis Belle* (Michael Caton-Jones, 1990), *Regeneration* (Gillies MacKinnon, 1997) and *The Trench* (William Boyd, 1999), but none of them have had the marketing backup and distribution to get them far and wide to audiences.

For early Hollywood, busily building its reputation and galvanising the way in which it viewed the world and reflected it back to audiences, there was not only the horror of the First World War battlefield but also the chance to use big conflicts as a backdrop for big stories of love, romance and heroism. Hence the Oscar-winning film *Wings* (William Wellman, 1927) and later the more downbeat World War One flying movie *The Dawn Patrol* (Howard Hawks, 1930). An interesting, and somewhat bizare, detail of Hollywood's relationship with the First World War was demonstrated when film director DW Griffith (who had begun filming his inflammatory and ethically stunted American Civil War drama *Birth of a Nation* in 1914) was the only director authorised to go to the battlefields of that conflict, whereupon he voiced disappointment at what he saw. There wasn't enough spectacle and action for him. Movie reality and 'real' reality are two very different things. You might think that a big-shot film director would be the first to understand that, but then again, perhaps not.

For American cinema the war that proved especially prescient was the country's own Civil War (1861–65). Whilst Griffith's film stands as the most memorable (we cannot ignore his contributions to developing cinematic language) several hundred silent films were produced. Towards the middle of the twentieth century America had other, more

recent wars to look to, though it continued to occasionally produce Civil War pieces, notably *The Red Badge of Courage* (John Huston, 1951), *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939) and *Major Dundee* (Sam Peckinpah, 1965). More recent notable American Civil War titles have been ***Glory*** (Ed Zwick, 1989), *Gettysburg* (Ronald Maxwell, 1993) and *Cold Mountain* (Anthony Minghella, 2003). Steven Spielberg has recently begun work on a film about the last five years of Abraham Lincoln's life as the Civil War raged, based on the recently published book by Doris Kearns Goodwin entitled *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*.

America was not the only territory, though, in which war was conceived on a large movie canvas. France in the 1920s displayed a real enthusiasm for historical epics and none was more distinctive than Abel Gance's film *Napoleon* (1927). The epic tradition and the war story have always fitted well together in cinema, and the film is a stunning testament to this compelling relationship between history and artistry. Gance's film took three years to make and was initially to have told the story of all of Napoleon's life. Gance was a sort of 'Epics R Us' of the time and French cinema in the 1920s was notable for its big film output. The great British film historian Kevin Brownlow spent twenty years compiling the most comprehensive version of the film yet shown, running to five hours. Francis Coppola presented the film in America as a three-hour version. As a young filmmaker in the early 1960s, Kevin Brownlow had made *It Happened Here* (1966) on location in Radnorshire in the UK. Brownlow's film imagined a Great Britain that the Nazi forces had successfully invaded. One of its leading actors was Sebastian Shaw, who many years later would portray ageing Anakin Skywalker in the intergalactic war film *Star Wars Episode 6: Return of the Jedi* (Richard Marquand, 1983).

Whilst alluding particularly to the Vietnam War, in a comment at the start of an all-encompassing collection of film essays entitled *From Hanoi to Hollywood* the editors observe that war films have a 'power to make war and to destroy lives. Explicitly, it is about the power to make images that may displace, distort and destroy knowledge of the history in which those lives . . . participated.' This acknowledgement readily carries over to so many other wars that cinema has chosen to interpret, dramatise and reimagine.

World War One, World War Two and the Vietnam War are the combat subjects that have most evidently shaped the public imagination of what war might look and sound like. Of course, playing its part in this aesthetic is also the relationship between literature and movies, with many novels and journalistic pieces serving as starting points for feature films about war. In turn, one generation of stories will reinvent and redefine the generations that came before.

Even now, sixty years after the end of World War Two, many films are made set during that period, almost as though its images, motifs and reference points have become a shorthand for our understanding of combat. The Second World War resulted in films being produced during the conflict that served as propaganda much of the time, in pieces such as *Objective Burma* (Raoul Walsh, 1945), *They Were Expendable* (John Ford, 1945), *The Story of GI Joe* (William Wellman, 1945) and *A Walk in the Sun*. These films simplified issues of 'good' and 'evil', with the enemy presented as barbaric and the US intervention in war as totally justified. For Jeanine Basinger, Ford's film is particularly worthy of our interest because '(the) visual power of *They Were Expendable* extends the genre and proves it through its eloquent comment on established patterns. With its sense of dignity and truth and its rejection of false battle heroics, *They Were Expendable* is almost an anti-genre film.'

Then there are the World War Two movies made after the end of war when the outcomes were known, and finally in the 1960s there were the large-scale epic films that purported towards being some kind of docu-drama projects, and films like *The Longest Day* (Ken Annakin, Bernard Wicki and Andrew Marton, 1962) and *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (Richard Fleischer, 1970) come immediately to mind. Also from the 1960s movies such as ***The Great Escape,*** *The Dirty Dozen* (Robert Aldrich, 1967), *Play Dirty* (Andre de Toth, 1968), *Kelly's Heroes* (Brian G Hutton, 1970) and *Devil's Brigade* (Andrew V McLaglen, 1970) were made, wherein the heroes were a little less upstanding and more prone to cynical behaviour. *Devil's Brigade* featured a gold heist behind enemy lines and anticipates the plot of *Three Kings* (*1999*). Even the western *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah, 1967) had much in common with these war-movie escapades. At the time of writing, Quentin Tarantino is developing his long-talked-about potentially two-part movie *Inglourious Basterds*, which he has described as his 'World War Two men on a mission' film in the spirit of films such as *The Dirty Dozen* and *Where Eagles Dare*. The proposed cast for Tarantino's film may well prove the film's most interesting aspect, with the following names being raised as possibilities: Eddie Murphy, Adam Sandler, Michael Madsen, Tim Roth, Bruce Willis and Sylvester Stallone.

Fantasy and the war movie also exist readily together, perhaps never more so than in one of the great British movies, *A Matter of Life and Death* (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1943) in which a British fighter pilot apparently dies in his flaming fighter plane over World War Two England. The film was produced, in part, as a propaganda piece, but with Powell and Pressburger at the helm the film becomes a dazzling fantasy and dramatisation of metaphysical issues that to some degree sit well alongside *A Guy Named Joe* (Victor Fleming, 1943) and the much more recent film ***The Thin Red Line*** (Terrence

Malick, 1998). With *A Matter of Life and Death*, the directors used fantasy to suggest the dynamics of a post-war world. Other films of the period also took the cinematic road less travelled in dealing with war. *Went the Day Well* (Alberto Cavalcanti, 1942) dramatised the possibility of an English village invaded 'quietly' by German soldiers, and was based on a Graham Greene short story *The Lieutenant Died Last* that had been published in June 1940 in America. There is an intensity to the Cavalcanti film and the action includes a suitably chilling moment in which the postmistress kills one of her German soldier lodgers with an axe. Powell and Pressburger also made *A Canterbury Tale* (1944), which is, despite its surface appearance as a slightly eccentric real-world fantasy, a propaganda film with a spiritual edge. The film is set during the war but the concept of the film is to celebrate a spiritual Englishness that, at the time at least, was intended to articulate the contrast with the awful materialism of fascism.

With its great liberty to refract the present through imagined futures or alternative presents, science fiction has memorably collided with the subject of war over the years. Consider the longevity of HG Wells's novel *War of the Worlds* and its cinematic iterations, or the film project *Things to Come* (William Cameron Menzies, 1953), based on the same author's work. Look also at *The Postman* (Kevin Costner, 1998) which is both western and war film. Major Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky made *The Sacrifice* (1986), in which the prospect of nuclear war propels the action in a world without a strong spiritual sense.

The war film can assume many kinds of combat scenario, from the most expected re-creations of the two world wars through to an epic samurai feud, to the outer-space 'grunts' going one on one with bio-mechanoid aliens. Some films favour the simple, straight-ahead approach, whilst others go for a more confidently expressed sense of moral complexity.

As the decades have passed, the combat war film has morphed from telling strongly fictional accounts of combat, to other films more committed to finding ways to document an actual event through the use of drama, and then to films that have found ways to reimagine battle and launch a critique of history from a 'safe distance'.

In many instances the war film is a subset of the action genre, but the war film has also been able to graft onto it a range of other generic devices so that it can be an action-adventure such as *The Guns of Navarone* or *Rambo: First Blood Part Two*, a philosophical soul piece such as ***The Thin Red Line*** or even a fantasy such as *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* (Peter Jackson, 2002) and ***Aliens*** (James Cameron, 1986).

By the 1960s the function of the war film was, in part at least, to dramatise the valour of the soldier. Some films began to tell war stories that presented soldiers whose values and intentions were not as clean-cut and heroic as they had been, for instance *Kelly's Heroes* and *The Dirty Dozen.* Then there was the film *M*A*S*H* (Robert Altman, 1970), set during the Korean War, which was notable for its subversion of the war film idiom, though depicting combat was not its central narrative line. The reverential approach to the war story was replaced by something rather more sceptical. Perhaps one exception to this was the film *Patton* (Franklin J Schaffner, 1970). By the late 1970s, though, the most prominent war-themed films had reverted to a super-seriousness of purpose, as shown by ***The Deer Hunter*** (Michael Cimino, 1978), *Coming Home* (Hal Ashby, 1978) and **Apocalypse Now** (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979) most notably. *A Bridge Too Far* (Richard Attenborough, 1977) was far more in the spirit of the 1960s docu-drama mode.

In an age when audiences are more prepared to question those 'in power', cinema has found pockets of opportunity to question the established order and consider the cost of wars fought and possible wars to come. British television

offered up *Threads* in its consideration of what would come of a nuclear war when that threat seemed to hang in the air throughout the 1980s. In the early 1990s British television produced an affecting drama about the Falklands War, but still there has been no major British cinema release to explore this conflict.

In very recent years, perhaps the most high-profile mainstream films set within very recent war zones have been ***Welcome to Sarajevo*** (Michael Winterbottom, 1996) and *Three Kings* (David O'Russell, 1999), an action film based in the period immediately after the end of the Gulf War in the early 1990s.

Certainly, audiences expect a certain kind of tone in a war film and when honour and dignity are subverted by satire and dissent this often does not rhyme with the popular feeling. There are, of course, exceptions, as borne out in a film such as *Dr Strangelove*, produced at the height of the Cold War. Consider also the hyperkinetic comedy of *1941* (Steven Spielberg, 1979) and the small-scale satire of the more recent *Wag the Dog* (Barry Levinson, 1997) in which the American administration hire a Hollywood producer to stage a fictional war in a generic eastern European state using the latest filmmaking technology in order to boost ratings for the administration. Certainly one can object to the decision of going to war when diplomacy appears not enough to resolve a conflict, but one can only offer support and empathy to those who have gone to the battlefield.

It would be inaccurate and ignorant to think that the only wars that get screened, recorded and reimagined are the two world wars and Vietnam. Undoubtedly these films constitute a significant portion of the body of work we label as war films, and as such our general expectation is tied to our familiarity with these films. Other terrains, other conflicts and other ways of *looking* at conflict have been taken up by the cinema. For Australia, the war film has offered several key opportunities to express reservations

about Australia's ties to Britain, notably in ***Gallipoli*** (Peter Weir, 1981) and also the film *Breaker Morant* (Bruce Beresford, 1979), which centres on a court martial during the Boer War.

We are familiar with Afghanistan as a backdrop for hyped-up Hollywood heroics in *Rambo III* (Peter McDonald, 1988) but what of films produced in that war-torn, beleaguered country that seek to explore the cost of war? Consider films such as *Baran* (Majid Majidi, 2001) and *Delbaran* (Abolfazl Jalili, 2001) both of which are set on the Iran–Afghanistan border. Perhaps the most well-known film to come out of Afghanistan recently has been *Kandahar* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 2001). Another film is *Jung* (Rama Rao Tatineni, 1996) that, like *Kandahar*, explores life lived under the rule of the Taliban. *Jung* is notable for its images of land-mine victims in this film about two Western doctors' efforts to create an effective medical response to the casualties.

Whilst this book considers 'fiction' films, it is worth noting that alongside these creative efforts is a vast world of documentary film about war, such as Ken Burns's vast documentary about the American Civil War. The Vietnam War was dissected in documentaries such as *In the Year of the Pig* (Emile de Antonio, 1968) and *Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam* (Bill Couturié, 1988), and not to be overlooked is Claude Lanzmann's nine-hour documentary *Shoah* (1985) about the Holocaust. All of these films offer perspectives on the cost of conflict. These films all testify to the tensions and tragedies, cultural confusions, hatreds, mistrust and murder that have always formed part of human experience, and which show no sign of abating.

More recently, conflicts in Europe of the early 1990s have been taken on by filmmakers, for instance in ***Welcome to Sarajevo*** and the Oliver Stone produced *The Saviour* (Peter Antonijevic,1998). Less widely known by a fairly long way is the stunning and artful *Ulysses Gaze* (Theo Angelopoulos, 1995), one of the greatest films of the last twenty years, in

which a filmmaker (portrayed by Harvey Keitel) returns to his home country and takes a road trip through the war-torn Balkans. The film exists somewhere between war film and road movie and explores the pains and costs of conflict in a way very different from most films that take war as their setting and subject. *Ulysses Gaze* lacks the hysteria that marks many war films and instead favours a thoughtful stillness, yet never avoids contemplating the violence and destruction that war creates.

Peace is the proclamation of so many war stories. Not every war film has to take place on the battlefield though. For some real homefront drama and exploration of post traumatic stress, watch *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler, 1946), *Coming Home* (Hal Ashbury, 1978), *Birdy* (Alan Parker, 1985), *Gardens of Stone* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1987), *Hope and Glory* (John Boorman, 1987) and *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994).

Sometimes the less combat we see the more room there is to measure the cost of that combat on those separated from their loved ones. Other settings have been used to make memorable comments on the futility of war but also on the bravery of those who fight. Thankfully not every war film has to be some kind of gung-ho exercise in jingoistic flag waving and macho derring-do. Even films that are ostensibly far removed from Vietnam engage with it. Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976) is a threatening ex-combat soldier at war with himself and New York city, and Scorsese has often claimed that this is his Vietnam film, commenting, ‘Travis Bickle was affected by Vietnam; it’s held in him and then it explodes . . . any second the time bomb might go off again.’

War films suggest a loss of faith in paternal authority, social institutions and commonly held beliefs around what constitutes ‘decent’ human behaviour. They are about unity, terror, romance, perhaps even love lost and found.

Men and war films seem synonymous, but what of war stories with women at their heart? We can look to *So Proudly We Hail* (Mark Sandrich, 1943), *Cry Havoc* (Richard Thorpe, 1943), *This Happy Breed* (David Lean, 1943) and *Flight Nurse* (Allan Dwan, 1954) as especially memorable examples of this narrow division of the war movie during and just after World War Two. More recently Britain produced *The Land Girls* (David Leland, 1998), and *Hope and Glory* (John Boorman, 1987) and *Gardens of Stone* (Francis Coppola, 1987) all feature women as focal characters. The science-fiction combat of ***Aliens*** focuses on a woman at war and the Polish film ***Kanal*** (Andrzej Wajda, 1957) features a young woman who does all she can to pursue her freedom as Warsaw is purged by the Nazis.

For better or worse, modern war has been inextricably linked to the development of cinema and visual, dramatic storytelling. Is it not a touch unsettling to hear war zones described as theatres of war? In his book *War and Cinema*, French academic Paul Virilio writes, 'War can never break free from the magical spectacle because its very purpose is to produce that spectacle: to fell the enemy is not so much to capture as to "captivate" him, to instil the fear of death before he actually dies.'

Is it more likely that older battles will be resuscitated in the name of 'entertainment'? Historian JM Roberts talks about how mass emotion is very easily roused by mass media in the forms of the cinema, television and the press.

Whilst films set in combat zones form the focus of this book, it is worth recalling how effective films set far from the battlefield can be in defining the impact and cost of war, and the emotional wars that are waged for survival on the 'battleground of the soul', to quote Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis. Films in this category include *Gardens of Stone* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1987), the last third of ***The Deer Hunter*** (Michael Cimino, 1978), *Coming Home* (Hal Ashbury, 1978), *Hope and Glory* (John Boorman, 1987), *This*

Happy Breed (David Lean, 1944) and the second half of ***Born on the Fourth of July*** (Oliver Stone, 1989).

The use of the 'home front' or just the home as a means of projecting the horror of combat is a powerful storytelling device, because the terrible impact of the combat zone is brought right into the location that we are most familiar with. The sense of loss and permanent damage is powerfully, unequivocally clear. How can we forget the storyline of Steven in ***The Deer Hunter***? For all of the intensity and pain such narratives can bring, these acts of cinematic remembrance and witnessing are ultimately to be thanked, for it is in these quieter stories that the rage of war perhaps makes the most sense to the audience. Oliver Stone, one of the most accomplished movie chroniclers of the Vietnam War spoke on behalf of many, if not all of the filmmakers whose work is explored in this book when he made the comment some years ago that, 'You have to make films as an idealist. You've got to make them to the greater glory of mankind.'

In this book many of the titles one might expect to see included are present front and centre, but there has also been a conscious decision to explore films a little less expected or known. There is not the space to deal with every major war film, so the task has been to indicate assured examples of the form and to suggest other film titles worth viewing. For example, in picking only one film to dramatise the American Civil War, one is immediately inclined to investigate other films about the internal American conflicts as dramatised in *The Last of the Mohicans* (Michael Mann, 1992), *The Patriot* (Roland Emmerich, 2001), *Drums Along the Mohawk* (John Ford, 1939), *Revolution* (Hugh Hudson, 1985) and *Gettysburg* (Ronald F Maxwell, 1995) to name just several key films.

At a time where film plays such a part in shaping and defining public imagination and understanding of the world, the war film has been significant in exploring the trauma,

complexities and heroism that find their place in every conflict.

The war film, consciously or not, carries a significant responsibility in reimagining conflict. In his book on John Ford, Scott Eyman writes: ‘For many Hollywood filmmakers, the war was a thorny psychological problem . . . For a man like John Huston, the problem was more intellectual than psychological – to hate it and glory in it simultaneously.’ This is the tension that surely underscores war films even today.

Evidently, war films have long been a cornerstone of popular cinema and continue to be so with films such as *Black Hawk Down* (Ridley Scott, 2001), **Saving Private Ryan** and the recently released *Jarhead* (Sam Mendes, 2005) all pulling in the multiplex crowds. With his *Star Wars* (itself a war story) series now over, George Lucas plans his follow-up to be a war movie called *Redtails,* set in World War Two and charting the airborne endeavours of the African-American Tuskegee airmen. Clint Eastwood is currently adapting the book *Flags of Our Fathers* for the movies, telling once more of the American World War Two soldiers at Iwo Jima.

At its best the war film has been a crucible in which to pour a range of wider social issues and concerns about what it is to be human and humane. Certain films have endured with their anti-war messages, such as Abel Gance’s 1938 film *J’Accuse,* one of the earliest pieces of cinema to function in this way. Gance paved the way for countless other efforts, including *The Cranes Are Flying* (Mikheil Kalatozishvili, 1957).

From the thunderous jungle adventure of ***Apocalypse Now*** to the cocky, juvenile bravado of ***The Great Escape;*** from the mournful ***Kanal*** to the patriotic fervour of ***In Which We Serve*** (Noel Coward and David Lean, 1942) the war film is global. As we know, with regret sometimes, history is typically written by the victors, and this situation never seems to go out of fashion.

For all its claims of fidelity to historical truth and detail the war film is ultimately one more way to deal with stories about human experience in which the drama plays out the possibilities and limitations of human action. Whatever the tone, style, genre or subject, films remain obsessed with one key issue – human behaviour.

With the recent popular success of several war films the genre continues to hold its place in the popular imagination. Spielberg, Malick, Coppola, Lean, Stone, Scott, Kurosawa, Weir, Wajda, Renoir, Ford. All these filmmakers and more have made war films, frequently bringing a range of other generic qualities to stories of the battlefield. Do women ever feel inclined to use film to dramatise war?

As cinema audiences look into the projector of the future, what stories of war seem to stand most strikingly on our fractured horizon? In a world where terrorism and covert combat is perhaps becoming ever more the norm, the lines between good and evil become more indistinct and we realise that the word evil is an immature and inappropriate term that denies the historical and cultural complexities that source so much conflict.

What will the American campaign in Iraq of 2003 yield cinematically over the next ten years, and will we ever see a movie scaled like ***Apocalypse Now*** on such a subject?

The most recent war to find a dynamic and compelling movie rendition was depicted in *Black Hawk Down*, directed by Ridley Scott from Mark Bowden's account of the combat in Mogadishu to depose the local warlord. The film, produced by Jerry Bruckheimer (an aesthetic influence not to be underestimated), is kinetic in a way that says much for the influence of ***Saving Private Ryan*** and, by extension, of audience familiarity with news footage from combat zones over the last thirty years. *Black Hawk Down* can be praised for its suggestion of moment-to-moment life at combat level, but perhaps fails to explore enough the political context. This is the tightrope that the war film walks, as it

attempts to offer a range of expected thrills and visuals with some sense of cultural subtlety.

This book makes an attempt to consider some of the most engaging and available war films, taking into account their strength as works of cinematic expression but also their fidelity or otherwise to a specific historical moment. It charts the missions to make these notable films, considering their development, their production histories and their reception by critics and the public. It puts a number of classic war movies in the spotlight whilst also recalling less-celebrated films well worth revisiting or discovering. From Weir's ***Gallipoli*** to Malick's ***The Thin Red Line*** to the Polish classic ***Kanal*** and the epic pacifist drama of ***All Quiet on the Western Front,*** the reader will embark on a global journey through visions of conflict and images of heroism; of dangerous worlds and moments of hope, promise and understanding.

At best the war film can remind us of the trauma and warped reality that combat creates. In an age that is ever more visually orientated, where we live in a global culture where images can transcend barriers of spoken and written language, there is an opportunity to be seized for us to understand one another better. There is, of course, the human tendency to transmit images that play to our fascination with flashes of anger and violence. Surely, to borrow a phrase from American President Abraham Lincoln, the angels of our better nature can prevail. We know that our animal instinct leads to war. Our instinct also leads to re-experiencing and trying to understand the trauma of conflict. People need stories because stories help all of us carry the burden of life's pains and sorrows. The role of stories, of art, is to find ways to suggest better ways of living, or at least of ways of coping with those unavoidable conflicts.

Our job as an audience, bringing meaning to every film we watch, is to invest the imaginary worlds on our screens with