

Richard Mason / Jarosław Suchoples (eds.)

# Representations of War in Films and Novels



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## Introduction

History is replete with wars. War is an organized and often prolonged conflict carried out by states and/or non-state actors. It is characterized by extreme violence, killings and waste, human suffering, social and economic destructions. Wars are intentional political violence and widespread armed conflict between political communities. In a seminal study, *On War* (1832), Carl von Clausewitz, a Prussian military general and theoretician, defines war as “an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will” and as “an extension of policy by other means”. A state thus hope to attain by war what it cannot attain through diplomacy. Techniques used to carry out war are known as “warfare”.

Wars are arguably among the most dramatic of human dramas. While the decision to go to war are limited to top government officials responsible for the conduct of national policies, the ravages and consequences of wars are unmistakable: the destructions and waste; violent deaths and human sufferings; deserted towns and villages; destroyed buildings and structures; starvation and shortages of food, and the look of deprivation and fear on the peoples' face. Despite some romanticists' views, war is certainly no picnic. Indeed, people who have fought in wars or witnessed battles often describe war as “hell”.

Yet at the same time, crises such as wars do bring out other aspects of human nature: the nationalism, patriotism and jingoism; comradeship, bravery and heroism; humanity and personal sacrifices. War-time stories of someone giving their own life to save others are not uncommon. There are also stories of people helping the “enemy”, hiding them from pursuing troops; sharing limited food with starving soldiers. These are often favourite themes among movie-makers and novelists.

The list of war movies and war novels that are now available are endless; and many of these made it to the best seller list. An all-time best-known war novel [anti-war really] is *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928), which was later adapted into multiple versions feature film. War movies that made the box-office, indeed even nomination/voted the best movie for a particular year include *The Deer Hunter* (1978); *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *Schindler's List* (1993); *Life is Beautiful* (1993). On the Pacific theatre, highly acclaimed movies include Stephen Spielberg's *Empire of the Sun* (1987) and Clint Eastwood's *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006), to mention just a few. A very popular espionage feature film, couched in the backdrop of the Cold War and the post-Cold War is

Ian Fleming's 007 *James Bond* movie series. War offers many and varying themes that could be exploited in movies and novels.

This book discourses some of the many aspects of war. Among the objectives of the seminar and also of this book are to understand the roles of films and novels in re-making historical memories; to appreciate the impact and influence of films and novels as social and educational media; and to appreciate the roles of films and novels as instruments of propaganda and mystification. Structurally, the book is organized along chronological and geographical lines, looking first at the First and Second World Wars in Europe; then the Pacific War; and the wars in the Cold War: the Vietnam War and the notoriously popular 007 *James Bond* movies.

In the first essay, Eberhard Demm discusses a novel set in First World War, *Under Fire*, by Henri Barbusse, a French propagandist and veteran of trench warfare 1914–1916. In 1917, the French army suffered a humiliating military route at the hands of the German army. The morale within the French army and populace was very low. Since the traditional French war propaganda of jingoism and national glorification could no longer work with the French masses, Henri Barbusse was identified to write propaganda brochures to uplift the morale of the French. Demm emphatically dismisses Barbusse's *Under Fire* to be a pacifist work but rather an "outright propaganda" that was designed to sustain a crumbling French nation. To illustrate more clearly the specific propagandist character of Barbusse's novel, Demm compares *Under Fire* with the literary works of other French war veterans and writers.

In the second essay, Jarosław Suchoples discusses how the outbreak of World War II in Poland in September 1939 are represented in Polish feature films produced after 1989, that is after the collapse of the Communist regime that had been in power in Poland since 1945. As Suchoples explains it, because of the part played by the Soviet Union in the invasion of Poland in September 1939 and that the Communist regime in power in Poland during 1945–1989 was subservient to Moscow, the subject of the outbreak of WWII was not only a sensitive topic but was even "tabooed." After the fall of the Communist regime, however, Polish film makers were at liberty to make films about the beginning of WWII in Poland that also touch upon these once-tabooed subject. The essay by Suchoples discussed Polish films that were produced post-1989, arguing that these films are closer to the Polish national memory on the outbreak of the Second World War in Poland in September 1939.

Still on Europe, the next two essays discuss European-made films about WWII in Europe. The first of these, by Torsten Schaar and Nicole Ogasa, discuss Holocaust-theme-based movies produced between 2010 through 2013 in various

European countries. The Holocaust, which was the genocidal extermination of the Jews during WWII in Europe, was a sensitive issue and a dark chapter in the national histories of the European countries which perpetrated it; and as such, for that generation, the subject remained an untold national traumata and taboo. The movies produced beginning the 21st century 2010 represents the efforts of the post-WWII generation to deal with these hitherto untold national past.

In the next essay, Torsten Schaar, Bernd Schafer and Raimond Selke discuss selected European films about WWII in Europe, excluding those Holocaust-themed movies. The essay points out the transition from communicative to cultural memory and an ongoing public interest in Nazi Germany and in World War II has resulted in the making of some more than 50 World War II dramas by 15 European countries between 2010 and 2013 and these films are contributing to discourses on memory and national identities, and on history and values. Many of these critically acclaimed films depicts many facets of the bloodiest military conflict in human history set in Norway, Poland, the Soviet Union, Germany, and in the Atlantic Ocean. The narratives tell of the brutal German occupation regimes and tell powerful stories of individual and organized resistance, of civil disobedience, courage and heroism, of tragedy and perseverance but also add uncomfortable truths by showing acts of collaboration, cowardice and betrayal. Movies from Germany, the Czech Republic and Poland depict the final days of World War II, the revenge of the victors and the suffering of German civilians in 1945/46. Told from their unique perspectives several of the European film productions have caused overdue public discussions, soul searching, debate and uproar, and have even led to political controversies between countries.

Moving on from novels and films about the First and Second World War in Europe, the next two essays discuss films and novels about the Pacific War. In their joint essay, Richard Mason and Rashila Ramli discuss the images of the Pacific War in selected war epic films, focusing on the Japanese-American war. The themes of their inquiry include the outbreak of the war; the attendant propaganda and the call to arms; selected battles during the course of the war; Japanese attitudes and treatment of their prisoners of war; and the deployment of the nuclear bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 which brought the Asia-Pacific War to an end. Their essay attempt to answer the question to extent to which these war epic films had been an extension of the Japanese-American war by other means.

The essay by Zawiah Yahya discusses selected writings by British and Malayan/Malaysian writers on the Japanese occupation of British Malaya. The essay is a comparative study of their collective perspectives on the Japanese Occupation. Zawiah argues that Malay fiction on the period was filled with accounts of suffering

and physical tortures borne by the Malays but that at the same time the period triggered a “dramatic burst” of Malay nationalism, “an energy set free by a new awareness of British infallibility.” English-language fiction by non-Malay Malayan writers also records the suffering at the hands of the Japanese but the plots of their novels are moved mainly by “burning desire” for revenge. British writers, on the other hand, basically conceived the war as a military drama unfolding for themselves and seemed oblivious to its political implications for the natives. Some post-war writers did attempt to come to terms with the realities on the ground but these, Zawiah points out, are usually accompanied by feelings of bitterness and betrayal directed at an arrogant metropolis and a weak military leadership that had undermined the best efforts of the colonial-empire builders.

The Second World War gave way to the Cold War. Unable to agree on a number of post-war issues, the Grand Alliance that had defeated Nazi Germany in Europe and Imperial Japan in the Asia-Pacific, broke down irreparably, giving way to what became known as the Cold War between the American-led Western democracies against the Sino-Soviet bloc. The Cold War initially focused on Europe but had promptly spread to encompass the globe. In Asia, the Cold War gave way to ‘hot’ wars, such as the Korean War and the Vietnam War. The essay by Paul Cornelius discusses selected American films which were produced between 1950s and 1990s “as documents of American attitudes that created an atmosphere that helped enable the war in Southeast Asia to take place.”

The essay by Roy Anthony discourses on propaganda on the part of the British during the Cold War and the post-Cold War. Aware of the impact and influence of movies [visual media] on the general public, Britain [and the United States] utilized public cultural diplomacy through the James Bond movie series to promote their ideas and policies while at the same time castigating negative images of the Soviet Union. While the villain during the Cold War had been the Soviet Union, in the post-Cold War James Bond’s mission was to save the world from non-traditional security threats such as energy insecurity, manipulation of information by the mass media and transnational criminal organizations. Anthony’s article is an analysis of the politics of James Bond films and how the films have been part of the public cultural diplomacy of the major powers.

Films and novels are media of historical memories, fantasies, mystification, and propaganda. As such, they are interpretative, coming from a particular perspective. The essays in this book discuss how wars, spanning the period from the First World War through the post-Cold War period, are represented in films and novels and how these wars have been re-interpreted over time.