

American War Cinema

War in cinema has become a very American and lucrative tradition. Both World War II and Vietnam have garnered a great deal of attention from Hollywood. Being a huge fan of cinema and history, I have watched and purchased as many war movies as I can get my hands on. I don't look to cinema for historical fact, but for entertainment and hopefully a glimpse into the culture surrounding the conflict. Movies are not necessarily made for historical accuracy, but to make and generate revenue. I have watched *Saving Private Ryan* (WWII) and *We Were Soldiers* (Vietnam) multiple times. They both offer good insight when not taken as pure fact, but rather a small glimpse into what war may look like.

When first researching movies, I always reference professional reviews from movie critics and historians. On most sites, *Saving Private Ryan* scores extremely high. The film's opening scene (U.S troops storming the beaches of Normandy) is widely reviewed by critics and veterans as one of the most intense and accurate battle scenes ever depicted on film. Steven Spielberg's WWII film (released in '98), was loaded with a star-studded cast, including Tom Hanks, Edward Burns and Matt Damon. The film went on to win five academy awards, including best director. The film was based on an account written by Steven E. Ambrose, who was also used as a historical consultant.

We Were Soldiers, a film set during the Vietnam War and was released in 2002. The Randall Wallace directed film also had big name actors, including Mel Gibson, Greg Kinnear and Kris Klein. The film was based on one of America's first heated battles in Vietnam in '65, which resulted in producing tales of heroism and tragedy. The movie includes some intense, accurate and very well shot battle scenes and tries to tell the tale of both a soldier and the perspective of the soldier's family. The film was met with mediocre reviews and no Academy Awards.

Obviously both films are biased in the sense that they are American films, made by American's, and covering America's involvement in war. They both offer historical accuracies, but they of course pander to a ticket buying audience. Spielberg's pedigree as a filmmaker certainly helped the popularity of *Saving Private Ryan*, especially post *Schindler's List* success. To his credit, it is a meticulously shot film. Painting the picture of heroes in WWII is much easier to do than painting Vietnam Vet's as heroes.

WWII Vet's are viewed as heroes and referred to as America's greatest generation. The Nazi's provided a universal evil that united the masses in support of war. Vietnam Veterans met a very different world when returning from war. There were no ticker-tape parades, rather anti-war protests on the streets. Many Vietnam War Veterans were treated the opposite of a hero, and even referred to as baby killers. This

public perspective of both wars has been created for decades and further shaped by media.

Although both wars included countless heroic and tragic experiences, it is much easier to pitch a heroic WWII film to the public than it is to pitch a heroic Vietnam film. There are many critically acclaimed and popular Vietnam films, but most of them offer the typical anti-war sentiments that have become so wildly accepted by our culture. Films like *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket* and *Apocalypse Now*, are great examples. I enjoyed the change in perspective regarding the Vietnam War that “*We Were Soldiers*,” provided. Like all wars, the conflict in Vietnam provided stories of both heroism and chaos. A fair balance would offer both extremes.

Without covering all of the perspectives of a conflict, it is impossible to provide a balanced glimpse into war. The nature of war is horrific no matter how you analyze it. I found *Saving Private Ryan* to be a mesmerizing film with great acting, writing and wonderful attention to detail, typical of Spielberg. I found *We Were Soldiers* to be a refreshing glimpse into the Vietnam War that is not typically covered by American media, which also included some very well shot battle scenes. Both movies were overly and understandably patriotic. A certain level of propaganda is to be expected. They capture some of the universal horrors of war via an American lens.

Films like these should not be used as a sole provider of historical knowledge, but rather entertainment, or a new perspective on historical truths you have already researched. With that being said, both films worked hard to provide the sheer terror of war, and the psychic change, which accompanies that experience. Although WWII garners much more positive attention than Vietnam, all wars have their horror stories, scarred vet’s and fierce opposition. Metaphorically speaking, all wars have had their own versions of doves and hawks. I’m not a supporter of war, but I believe that all veterans subjected to the horror of wars should be treated with care and respect. I hope that the international film world continues to explore history, while also attempting to provide historical truths.