

“Are we shootin’ people or what?”: Critical Reflections of War in Popular Films

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ABSTRACT

One important and influential popular culture product is fiction film. Arguably, even though fiction film is often seen as a mere entertainment outlet, its undeniable status as a socio-cultural commentator allows fiction films to impart values as well as capture popular imagination and consciousness. Fiction films, needless to say, can move or provoke the audience with their depiction of and focus on real-life events such as personal angst, the World Wars, the cold war, political struggles, economic downturns and natural disaster. One prevailing trend with regards to fiction film is that after the event of September 11, 2001, the interest in the war film genre gains its momentum. Speculations about the post-September 11 war that ensued, such as that in Iraq, have allowed variegated representations of war to be made on silver screen, either reaffirming or challenging the audience’s perception of war. Employing close textual analysis, the main aim of this paper is to reveal the prevalent themes of some war films. This is done by focussing on the characters. This approach to film as signifying practices will help illuminate the themes of the films, hence, prompting critical reflections of the film’s commentary of the war that it alludes to.

Keywords: *Characters, Popular Culture, Textual Analysis, Themes, War films*

Introduction

The history of film that starts with “snippets of actions” (Dominick, 2011, 203) is responsible for making direct association between a film and kinaesthetic imagery, evoking the sense of muscularly movement. Films, as moving images, arguably, are able to capture reality via movement. This reality, albeit scripted, edited and constructed, transports the audience’s sense of belief or disbelief into a different realm, inextricably expanding their understanding or misunderstanding of the world. So powerful is the force that fiction films have on human’s sensibility that the blurring of cinematic reality and material reality has been widely documented especially with regards to the audience’s responses to filmic texts. This has been the main adage in Western idea of the aesthetics, which originates from Aristotle’s *Poetics* that underlines the idea that art, does imitate nature (Braudy and Cohen, 2004, 135).

Needless to say, the role of cinema audience has always been very clear as the development of the motion picture, to a great extent, is about them. The nature of film or cinema may have been described in terms of filmic languages such as the aesthetics, structures, and genres; recent development, however, sees efforts to formally place and consequently validate the audience’s position in the equation. As the link between films and the audience is organic, their expanding relationship, on the contrary, is informed by the perpetual building up of “hyper-texts”, an idea put forth by Janet Harbord to evince how this relationship “links to other products and applications” (2002, 3) such as film merchandise, tie-in publications and also the Cineplex itself (which includes parking space and food stores etc.). Within this discourse of Capitalism, film and the audience are further defined by their reciprocating relationship. This relationship not only reaffirms the audience’s status as active (at least not totally passive and gullible), but it also effectively apotheosizes films as one important and influential popular culture product. Arguably, even though fiction film is often seen as a mere entertainment outlet, its undeniable status as a socio-cultural commentator allows fiction film to impart values as well as capture popular imagination and consciousness. To say the least, it is able to make the audience wonder and question their previously held belief about certain issues.

Fiction films, needless to say, can move or provoke the audience with their depiction of and focus on real-life events such as personal angst, the World Wars, the cold war, political struggles, economic downturns and natural disaster. One prevailing trend with regards to fiction film

is that after the event of September 11, 2001, the interest in the war film genre gains its momentum. Speculations about the post-September 11 war that ensued, such as the one in Iraq, have allowed variegated representations of war to be made on silver screen, either reaffirming or challenging the audience’s perception of war. The question that arises from this is whether or not this perception is justifiable since film, as a signifying practice, employs layers of textual webs and state-of-the-art apparatuses to create meaning, mood and attitude. The rapid attraction to the application of psychoanalysis to the study of film since the 1970s, as an illustration, is evidence that a film deserves a closer look beyond the audience’s response as its theoretical employment that relies on cinematic apparatuses to dissect the nature of gaze manages to expose the ideological motif of the film. There is no denying that as films are no longer seen as a singular text, which means, the audience’s choice about a film is not limited to aesthetic evaluations, their decision to choose what to watch and, to a certain extent, like or dislike about a film is also influenced by their reading of criticism and film reviews. What this proves is that textual reading of a text is still very relevant as it provides a certain level of literacy to the understanding of what a filmic text may mean or try to disseminate.

War films or what we would call reconfigured war films have garnered a lot of interest among cultural and film studies experts. Reconfigured war films, for us, are films imbued with alternative expressions of war as they, according to Martin Rubin, are seen as “peacetime transpositions of certain war-film motifs” (1999, 121) with former soldiers acting as spy, detective, or even robbers by employing “textbook military operation” (ibid., 122). Nonetheless, the analysis of these films is often made to excavate gender politics within the texts. Kaja Silverman, for instance, in her study of “‘returning soldier’ ... points out the trauma produced by the war was strong enough to pierce insulating ‘dominant fiction’ of classical film narrative and erupt through a series of films dwelling on, instead of diligently disavowing, men’s own castrated condition” (in Foertsch, 2001, 164). Similarly, in tracing the existential despair of pulp hero in the noir thriller genre, Jamaluddin Aziz also observes that “the male noir protagonists” – who are usually returning war veterans – “are psychologically bruised by economic and social changes” brought about by post-war America’s female independence. This bruise is embodied in the classical *femme fatale* figure: she is deadly as her presence evokes male castration anxiety (2005, 5). This connection between gender and war finds similar expression in Kimberly Hutchings’ analysis of

masculinity and war. She argues that “relational properties of masculinity provide a framework through which war can be rendered both intelligible and acceptable as a social practice and institution” (2008, 389). This concern is continued by Rebecca A. Adelman who studies “the nexus between photography, masculinity and American nationalism” (2009, 259) to evoke a disturbingly intimate relationship between male gender and war within the war narrative. Again, what these studies prove is that war narrative is usually studied in the context of gender analysis.

Eschewing gender analysis as much as we can and employing a close textual analysis, the main aim of this paper is to reveal the prevalent themes of some war films. The films to be closely analysed are David O’ Russel’s *Three Kings* (1999) and Ridley Scott’s *Body of Lies* (2008). The films are selected as they depict different wars and diversified mood and tones, which are important in revealing possible themes that transcend spatial and temporal locations of war. We will analyse these films by focussing on the characters. This approach to filmic text as signifying practices will illuminate the themes of the films, hence, prompting critical reflection of the film’s commentary of the war that it alludes to. We would argue that a close textual analysis will allow a more intimate access to the nuances of the films under scrutiny, and this is of paramount importance in critically reflecting the film’s commentary on war.

War Film, Propaganda and Signifying Practices

If the cinema is, in part, a medium well-suited for the depiction of spectacle, the war film is uniquely capable of maximizing that spectacle, marshalling thousands of troops in battle formation, blowing up bridges, battleships, ammunition dumps, airfields, towns and cities, and laying waste to not only individual armies but entire nations as well (Belton, 1994, 164).

War films are made possible by the magic of cinema. As the quotation above indicates, the magic of cinema creates wonder through spectacle; however, this spectacle arguably can consign war into cultural artifice. Needless to say, war films are often ideologically-driven and they utilise the magic of cinema as a conduit for something else, and that something else is a palimpsest for the films’ points of reference which are often historically-relevant and are reflections of real-life war situations. As a genre, war films are constructed through generic conventions – formulaic; hence easily manipulated as a propaganda machine.

Likewise, the relationship between film and ideology is already well-documented and this is usually discussed in the context of media propaganda. Hitler, for instance, uses the image of rodents in his effort to not only juxtapose it with the Jews, but importantly for him to insidiously propagate the idea that the Jews are pest, deserving mass annihilation and abrogation. Hitler’s ability to sell his idea by creating metonymic images of the Jews foregrounds not only the nature of film as having the potential to tap into the collective unconscious (an idea akin to Carl Jung’s archetypes – hence adumbrates its appeal as potentially useful theory), it also privileges a film’s ability as signifying practices that allow manipulation of all kinds over its other roles. Indeed, in his article entitled “Understanding Propaganda from the Perspectives of General Semantics”, Mohd Rajib Ghani illustrates how films have been used as propaganda machine, aptly calling it “A Mother of All Propaganda” (2010, 3).

It is important to note here that even though early propaganda films exist in the form of documentaries or Public Service Announcement (PSA), this fact harks back to the history of film development: these films contain narratives that fictionalised real life situation to frame the minds of the audience. Besides that, film is great at magnifying certain event and extrapolating the future, which then effectively feeds into the audience’s existing xenophobia. Film works tremendously well as a propaganda vehicle due to its ability to create meaning, mood, tone and attitude. This is to say that the signifying practices of films make this possible such as through its veritable alphabets of filmic apparatuses and arbitrary filmic languages. Conterminous with that idea is that unlike “writing”, as Graeme Turner argues, “no one system operates alone in film” (2006, 72), making it possible for filmmakers to construct meaning by using any or a combination of filmic languages such as camera shot, lighting and sound to signify certain mood, tone and even attitude. The filmmaker, indeed, constructs meanings by creating his or her own film syntax.

Characters and Themes

In treating a film as signifying practices, the idea about a character is a complex one. Simply speaking, characters are the people who inhabit a certain spatial and temporal location in a text, and often function as “a device used to illuminate aspects of the story such as theme and

plot” (Jamaluddin Aziz, 2011). By the same token, “screen heroes and heroines”, Graeme Turner opines, “are widely held to offer some kind of wish fulfilment, and our admiration for one or the other is assumed to be the expression of a wish we might, even unconsciously, want fulfilled” (2006, 151). Turner’s opinion is traditional in audience analysis as it relates directly to the idea that the point-of-view of the film is organised principally around the audience’s identification. Simply put, the camera primarily acts as the audience’s eyes. So crucial is this conceptualisation of audience’s identification to the understanding of film narrative that it is not hard to see how filmic techniques, such as point-of-view shot, close-ups and hand-held camera work provide efficacious access to the nuances of the characters, through which events are unravelled. The problem with this idea, nevertheless, is that it denies dramatic irony, that is, the discrepancy between what is happening and will happen with the limit of what the audience should know, to take place. If the audience is omnipresent and ubiquitous, elements of suspense or even hidden truth will be stultified, making the story a boring one.

The crux of the characters can be understood in two ways, and they are important in raising the themes. One, the characters can be understood in terms of what they say or what is said about them. Two, as suggested by Peck and Coyle, “the characters are part of a broader pattern: they are members of a society, and the author’s distinctive view of how people relate to society will be reflected in the presentation of every character” (2002, 117). Peck and Coyle make a very good observation here as looking at the character within its contextual location, be it spatial or temporal, may automatically humanise him or her. To understand the character, it is crucial to comprehend its action, life motivation, fear and relationship with its surroundings. It is in the details of the personality of the character that the general themes are often embedded.

Another essential point that is made by Peck and Coyle that is germane to this study is that characters are constructed by the producer of the text, and in the context of filmmaking, the director. Needless to say, the characters, especially the protagonists, are the conduit for the director’s ideological or political message, which can be understood by interpreting what editing, shot, and other signifying practices of cinema bring to the screen. Often, it is through the character’s stream of consciousness that is signified by these practices that a message is understood. For that reason, it is fundamental for the protagonist to be a character that the audience can relate to or at least empathize with. A caveat, a character that we can relate to does not have to be the main

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protagonist; the antagonist who presents the conflict to the protagonist may be the site of ideological motif that the director chooses to situate. In a nutshell, the combination of details and broader patterns of the characters helps to illuminate the theme of the story.

So, what is a theme? The theme of a text, be it literary or filmic, relates to the general observation it makes about the portrayal and depiction of life in general. For this paper, we would like to develop the idea of a theme as suggested by Perrine, that is, the theme “should keep us from trying to wring from every story a didactic pronouncement about life” (1984, 92). This essentially means, for the purpose of this analysis, the theme is considered a critical term: we will avoid moralizing the issue brought forth by the film, and instead present what the films communicate to us as an observation.

Analysis

At the outset of David Rossel’s *Three Kings*, two characters throw questions at each other:

Troy Barlow : Are we shooting?
Soldier : What?
Troy Barlow : Are we shootin’ people or what?
Soldier : Are we shooting?
Troy Barlow : That’s what I’m asking you!
Soldier : What’s the answer?
Troy Barlow : I don’t know the answer! That’s what I’m trying to find out!

This exchange, though brief, helps the film to define what it wants to be: a black comedy within the war film genre. Subverting the war film conventions in every possible angle, the film is able to move forward its narrative by using a myriad of characters. For that reason, the characters’ disparate traits and idiosyncrasies are crucial in the colouring of the film’s tone and mood, while simultaneously unravelling the film’s true heart. Indeed, access to the nuances of the characters’ personality is made possible by cinematic means; this is first set by the opening scene in which the alternate use of a long point-of-view shot and steady tracking-shot establish the film’s crucial idea about the war. Using handheld camera, the film becomes inextricably and organically intimate, thus drawing the audience directly into the actions and psychological states of the

characters. The concatenation of the characters' points of view with that of the audience's even from the beginning of the film is effective in allowing the audience (including us) to understand the characters' motivation for certain actions, and subsequently limits our knowledge of what is to come. This latter quality is fundamental in making the audience's feel complicit in the actions; therefore allowing thriller elements to take place. Consequently, the film via its characters gradually becomes edgy, thrilling, comic, visceral and intimate, revealing some dark themes.

As the actions of the film are vastly generated by the character, and not vice versa, the audience is made complicit in the actions. Even though the characters – Archie Gates (George Clooney), Troy Barlow (Mark Wahlberg), Chief Elgin (Ice Cube), Conrad Vig (Spike Jones) and Adriana Cruz (Nora Dunn) – function fundamentally as narrative device, their characterisations illuminate the themes of the film through the agglutination of their enthusiasm and world-weariness. The young soldiers (Barlow, Elgin and Vig) are emblematic of the first, while the older characters (Archie and Adriana) provide the epitome for the latter. Barlow and Elgin joined the army so that they can do something different from their routine work in the office and as an airport baggage handler, respectively. Vig, on the other hand, was jobless before he joined the troop. The change from their daily routine, and in Barlow's case, with the hope of getting extra cash to support his young family, is the drive that pushes the narrative to the hilt. Vig's "trailer life" at home is translated into animatedly goofy character who takes army role a tad too seriously, and deeply personal. Watching him, however, brings to mind the hinterland of American's ignorance of the world. The comic manner in which their lives at home are depicted via the use of flashbacks speaks volume of the film's effort to establish the characters' innocence and ignorance, perhaps to create the idea that they, just like the civilians, are victims of circumstances. Their motivation, then, lacks moral centre that is typical of the Capitalist (American) dreams. Meanwhile, Archie and Adriana represent the characters' sense of disillusionment and world-weariness of their job as a veteran trooper and an award winning war correspondent, respectively. Archie aptly expresses this mood: "I don't know what we did here man", creating an echo that is both cliché and true. Adriana's obsession with her job is a caricature of the Media in the West that hunger, almost pornographically, for war news. All of these characters, nonetheless, provide a critique of American heroism that owes its ontological uncertainties in the Myth of the Founding Father

that incessantly manufactures history (that is always about the victors) and dream (that evokes Disneyland’s sensibilities and imageries).

These ontological uncertainties are mutated into moral ambiguities of the soldiers on the ground. Set right after the Gulf war, after Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, the soldiers are in the mood of celebrating their victory, not knowing in particular what they have done and achieved. The truce is in place, but no one really knows what it entails or what is going on. It is within this miasma of uncertainties that the film tries to reveal its attitude towards war, which at times are judgmental and at others as documentary-style matter-of-factly happenings. Situating the film at the threshold of a truce, the character’s sense of space and time is therefore shared with the audience’s, comparing the soldiers’ disorientation with the threateningly barren locale. After Barlow finally shoots the local guy with a white flag at the beginning of the film, the film consciously juxtaposes Vig’s naively honest remark, “I didn’t think I’d get to see anyone got shot in this war. Take a picture.” with the close up of Barlow’s feeling squeamish of the blood that comes gurgling out of his own victim. By doing this, the film actually articulates the rite-of-passage and the subsequent loss of innocence of these American men. Vig’s observation rings eerily true and thus galvanizing the characters into a comic relief, which, to our mind, is useful in setting the tone and mood of the film as a black comedy. This technique, that involves situating the characters in an environment that they are not familiar with or throwing to them war-related conflicts that they are not familiar with, is effective in bringing to bear the characters’ motivation of being in the war. What the mixture of the bleak environment or surrounding and discombobulated characters does is that it becomes a narrative trajectory that immediately throws the characters spirally into vigilantism, marking the film’s generic mutation into reconfigured war film. The narrative unravels itself as these supposedly American heroes turn vigilante, and the actions that ensue evoke American idealism of wealth fulfilment.

Some prevailing themes, it has to be said, are raised by metallic collisions of fast-paced action and animatedly loaded, to a certain extent, goofy characterizations. There is something profoundly determined and earnest in their motivation that, though it still resounds of genre trapping, it is bleakly honest. Roger Ebert, for instance, opines that the film is “a screw-loose war picture that sends action and humor crashing head-on into each other and spinning off into political anger” (1999). Ebert’s observation resonates well with the general feeling of watching this film as the relentless weaving of trigger-happy combat actions and brittle

characterisation leaves a bitter aftertaste that lingers long after the film ends. This is the result of a perpetual shuttle of emotions exacerbated and intensified by the fluid transference from comic to tragic moments and back again. The comic moments, in effect, are not used to palliate the effect of war, instead they are there to make the feeling of war more tragic. As comedy and tragedy are located at the opposite ends of the same psychological continuum, this film wears its politics in the metaphorical sleeves of the characters; and the characters take this American *devoir* literally and inject it with steroid. Their aggressiveness that ricochets off as personal greed of wanting to steal gold stolen by Saddam Hussein from the Kuwaiti government is the modern reincarnation of the Founding Father's colonial path. However, the end of the film, which sees the men desperately surrendering their gold to allow the war refugees to be taken into safety, evinces the idea that the film, unlike the United States of America, has a redeeming feature that tries to cynically reconcile the sins of the Father with what is left of American humanity. While this cynicism is in itself one of the themes of the film, its elixir, ironically, reveals the theme of Americans' perpetual self-recreation, calling into question the ability of Hollywood film to move beyond its Disneyland.

Meanwhile, the narrative of Ridley Scott's *Body of Lies* unfolds as a political war movie thriller, using a quote from W.H. Auden "[...] Those to whom evil is done Do evil in return" as a crucial point of departure. The film does not pretend to be anything else but a critical/judgmental evaluation of the West (specifically the United States of America) towards the Middle East, as the eloquence of the war locations speaks about the West's internal struggle to understand the Middle East. This struggle is manifested through the two main characters, Roger Ferris (Leonardo DiCaprio) and Ed Hoffman (Russell Crowe). Even though the character pairing is imbued with contrived binary opposition, the immediacy of their relationship accelerates the narrative, which consequently turning them into a plot device. It is through their constant bantering and swearing at each other that their existence and "operational" roles are symbiotically defined. In embryo, we need both of them to understand "both sides of the war stories".

The seemingly deadpan and tough male protagonist in *Body of Lies* can be viewed as a contemporary interpretation of the noir film genre's representation of threatened masculinity. Ferris character inherits a large chunk of Raymond Chandler's and Joseph Conrad's existentially bitter protagonists *raison d'être*; none the less, his vulnerability is exposed by the environment that he is in. By being the "guy on the ground", he sees

and smells his environment; hence, as he usually insists, he needs to “adapt” to the surrounding as a means of temporizing his operation. This angle of his characterization alludes more to Dickensian construction of his protagonist as a victim of circumstances than to Chandler’s capitalist dream gone awry. Therefore, Ferris’ flaw in making judgment is the reflection of the circumstances that he is in, rather than the flaw in his character. He may not be totally innocent, in the most conservative meaning of the word, as there is a sense that at the end of the day, what he eventually does culminates in his own volition. Nonetheless, the effect of this character construction is that of palliation, that is, the moderation of the intensity of blame from him to the environment that he is put into.

The characterization in *Body of Lies* seems to steadfastly support this kind of palliation structure, and this is apparent in the pairing of both characters. It has to be said that character juxtaposition is pre-eminent in this film, both to create and to highlight the moral ambiguity of war. Ferris, being the person with vivid emotional attachment to the people on the ground, is starkly contrasted with the hostile environment that he is usually surrounded by. Despite the dusty road, barren land and “local aliens”, he remains honest and caring, prioritizing his connection with people who work with him (He wants his late assistant’s family, the Bassam, to be helped and he stopped and called for medical help when another aid of his was shot) over his own operations. Ed, on the other hand, is usually placed within domestic settings such as inside his kitchen, in the compound of his house, the children’s school, and family car. The blurring of domestic and public setting is part of the postmodern attitude towards space. The effect of this blurring, to borrow Nicola Evans’ analysis of the events of 9/11 by using Frederick Jameson’s conception of “spatial confusion” (2005, 131), results in the idea that the problem of grasping the spatial and temporal coordinates of the disaster continued, as Americans sought to come to terms with the cartographic rearrangements in which the distant struggles of the Middle East had suddenly and graphically become a local problem, close to home. (2005, 132)

To exacerbate and problematise this notion of domesticity further, Ed usually plots the war strategy and instructs Ferris while he is doing domestic chores, for instance, attending his daughter’s sports event and accompanying his son into the toilet. Reversing the *doppelganger* narrative by placing the evil character, Ed, within domestic space and the angst-ridden Ferris in a hostile environment, the film observes two crucial themes: “evil lurks everywhere” and “what you see may not be what it is”. Ed’s belief that no one is innocent in war belies his

commitment as a husband and father and his collectedness as a character. Considering Ferris's last word to him after the latter's claim that Ferris' refusal to continue working for him equals giving up on America, "Just be careful calling yourself America, huh, Ed", Ridley Scott exposes Ed's character as equally porous and frank, yet pathologically deluded; thus, evoking unmistakably American dreams that have gone awry. Ed, as an emotionally remote character, is a synecdoche for America's own vacuous stand with regards to war.

Even though the schism of Ed and Ferris characters forms the backbone for the narrative trajectory, *mutatis mutandis*, it is the third character in the operation, Hani Salaam (Mark Strong), who is the Jordanian intelligence chief that provides the moral centre of Ed's characterization. With his straight-to-your-face no nonsense operative principle, "Do not lie to me", he becomes the reflection of Ed's increasing frustration of the organization that fails to "listen to operatives of who know and understand the culture they are dealing with" (Clarke, 2008). Ferris' reliance on Hani and Hani's trust in him form an intercultural link that Ed often sneers at. It is the trust between Ferris and Ed that Ridley Scott develops to be the harbinger of the sense of community that Ferris believes in, foregrounding the theme of brotherhood that automatically gives the Middle East a trustable and dignified voice. Within this thematic formation, Scott is successful in creating the mood and attitude towards the war by underlining the very problem in the war conflict, as delicately expressed by Ed and Ferris at the end of the film:

- Ed : Nobody likes the Middle East. There's nothing here like.
Ferris : Well, maybe that's the problem right there, isn't it, Ed?

Conclusion

The two war films analysed in this paper show how the understanding of characters illuminates the themes, which in turn provide a critical reflection of war. In *Three Kings*, the film's concern with the uncertainties of going to war is traceable in America's own ontological uncertainties. The soldiers' confusion reverberates across the narrative and eventually it metamorphosizes into vigilantism. The classic American heroism that it tries to idealise articulates the film's affinity with American Founding Father's colonial past, thus throwing the film back into the generic

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trapping set by the Hollywood studio system. The Disneyfication of America is sealed. In *Body of Lies*, the strategy of palliation allows the shift of blame to take place, outlining the arbitrariness of the main protagonist’s hope and increasing sense of disillusionment. The film’s attitude towards war is conventionally communicated through the schism of two main characters, and in this lies the honesty or commonality of the film’s attitude towards war. Both films, whether sugar-coated with humanity or Kafkaesque-ly–shrouded by Capitalist dreams, bear witness to the older-than–the-mountain’s theme of the absurdity of war.

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