

LIGHTS CAMERA ACTION AND THE POOR BLOODY INFANTRY

© Tim Cawkwell 2008

War has always been a favourite subject of literature: the story of David in the Book of Kings is made vivid by the recurrent element of armed conflict; the drama of Homer's Iliad takes place in war and its warrior protagonists are defined by their fighting prowess; Thucydides' Histories document war and the causes of war, which he deems inevitable because it is innate in human nature for one state to seek to have power over another [endnote 1]. Books 7 to 12 of the Aeneid of Virgil (the Roman Iliad) deploy Roman rhetorical poetry to describe battle. If Homer and Virgil are two treasures of European civilisation, it is because that civilization has been forged in the geographical crucible of multiple nation states jostling for position and status in a crowded area divided by mountains, rivers, seas: battle came naturally to its occupants, and after battle reflection in literature and art. More recently, war is in the foreground and the background of many of Shakespeare's history plays and tragedies, and the iconic novel of the nineteenth century is 'War and Peace'.

Writing well about falling in love, or family conflicts, may not be easy, but at least these situations are familiar to readers. The subject of battle on the other hand poses a ticklish question: how do you convey the reality of it to the many readers who have never been in one? How do you make readers feel they were there? Shakespeare, with his acute artistic intelligence, used the question to kickstart his drama on King Henry the Fifth with an invitation to the audience to use their imagination. When in starting with the Prologue he seemed to crave apology for the inadequacies of the stage – “a kingdom for a stage”, “Can this cock-pit hold the vasty fields of France?”, “Into a thousand parts divide one man”, “Turning th'accomplishment of many years into an hour-glass” – he was encouraging the imagination the audience would bring: “O for a Muse of Fire, that would ascend the brightest Heaven of Invention,” “Let us. . . on your imaginary forces work,” “Peace out our imperfections with your thoughts”, “Make imaginary puissance”, “For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings.” When the Prologue appears to seek indulgence – “gently to hear, kindly to judge our play” – does he in his heart of hearts boast at the amazement his audience will feel? And when Laurence Olivier films *Henry V*, and the English countryside serves in a passable fashion for the vasty fields of France, and he shows us the wooden O, the theatre in the round, as the field of Agincourt, he gets the best of both worlds, like the man of the theatre and the man of cinema that he was, so that he can both cherish the little stage for these great events, and yet bow to Ben Johnson's jibe about presenting history with the help of “three rusty swords”, transforming the stage into a battlefield with arches and horsemen. We do not have to imagine the horses “printing their proud hooves i' the receiving earth”, for we can see them do so and on the soundtrack hear the overwhelming thunder of the hoof beats.

Would Shakespeare have written for the cinema? Yes, no doubt, for the money, but reluctantly: surely he would have taken the purist line that to use words to underpin images was to dilute their power? Cinema as an artistic expression of battle links its audience in a quite different way from the theatre: it defines battle, in essence does the spectator's imagining.

This essay comments on what success film-makers have had in this subject, for in one particular way literature and painting, in their long history, have failed to do full justice to the reality of battle: they honoured the heroism it brought forth and the pain it caused, but depicting its physical reality has proved beyond it. Film on the other hand, the art of the common man for the century of the common man, can pitch the spectator into the front

line, where battles are won or lost not by the warrior heroes of Homeric warfare but by the "poor bloody infantry". I have focused too on conventional battle on land, not on war at sea or war in the air, which require their own treatment, nor on irregular war, such as guerrilla or partisan war such as the resistance films recalling Occupied Europe [2].

Another theme pursued in this essay is that war films can usually be put into one of two categories. The first group aims to convey the physical reality of battle, the second to explore the mental reality – what effect the sights and sounds of physical action have on soldiers in the thick of it. The two categories do not exclude each other, for a film aiming to get an audience to feel the effects of battle on mental states will want to convey the appearance of battle to the senses, nor can a film engaged in reproducing battle easily avoid showing human reactions to it. This topic is made the more lively because public feelings about war have been hugely influenced by films, so that rightly or wrongly conceptions of what, for example, twentieth-century battle looked like are shaped by such films as *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), *The Sands of Iwo-Jima* (1949), *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and many others. But it is more than the imagination that has been shaped, for public attitudes have been powerfully moulded as well, something both pacifist film-makers and militant governments have firmly grasped in the way they have promoted anti-war and pro-war sentiment through the cinema. Politicians arguing for war have the harder job, for two reasons: narrative focuses on individuals so that we identify with them and when in war they suffer, so we suffer too and conclude that war is a bad thing. Secondly, the cruelties of technological war in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries undermine human heroics, human courage being eclipsed by 'smart' bombs, 'smart' shells and 'smart' bullets.

When the century turned in 1900, the cinema had just been invented. Soon afterwards war erupted on a scale and with an awfulness that was new to mankind. Besides its colossal carnage, the First World War redefined war for Europeans and beyond Europe, as not just the clash of arms in the hands of humans, but the clash of armaments, metallic, impersonal, unthinking, and quite indiscriminate in their effects. When it ended in 1918, the shock of this 'storm of steel' caused public silence, as if the combattants did not dare to recount what had happened, and non-combattants did not dare to enquire. When writers recovered their voice, books began to pour out. In Britain (for example), 'Goodbye to All That' (1928), 'Undertones of War' (1928), 'Death of a Hero' (1929), 'Memoirs of an Infantry Officer' (1930), 'In Parenthesis' (1937), entered the public domain from the late 1920s on, and their effect became cumulative as the century wore on [3]. RC Sheriff's play 'Journey's End', first performed in December 1928, transferred to New York and was filmed in Hollywood around 1930. Hollywood in fact had broached the subject already in *The Big Parade* (1925) and *What Price Glory?* (1926), but in 1930 two notable treatments, one celebrated, the other obscure, were able to make use of the new technology of sound to make a new kind of film about the First World War, and indeed about battle. Erich Maria Remarque's 'Nicht Neues im West' had been published in 1929 and has subsequently sold hundreds of thousands of copies. It was aided in this by its filming in 1930 by Hollywood as *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the reputation of which is not necessarily easy to pin down. It is famous because of its pacifist message, articulating a denunciation of the war as not just terrible to fight, but grossly deceptive in the way soldiers marched off joyfully, and came home either dead or with morale shredded to pieces (and in Germany's case, defeated). This was unlike *The Big Parade* stirring 'whimsy' [4], into its portrayal, or *What Price Glory?* mixing in comedy. Rather it was an assault on militarism: in a scene near the beginning the flower of German youth, at their school desks, is stirred into battle by the oratory of their teacher who

does not shrink from reciting Horace: “Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori” (“it is a sweet thing, and an honourable one, to die for one's country”), the words conveying a special bitterness to an audience whose memories of the war were still fresh. Yet nowadays the tone of its pacifism feels mannered as a result of its hectoring, histrionic tone.

So should it be famous for its realism? In the scenes on the front line, the director Lewis Milestone and his set designers bring to the fore the ruin of war, its squalor, and its mud – which Napoleon called ‘the fifth element’ in battle. What is more, the very recent invention of sound cinema means that the effect is not just visual but acoustic as well, bringing to audiences an idea of the horrific sound world in the trenches. The cinema did not just reveal what the exotic, the unfamiliar and the unknown looked like, but what noises it made as well. *All Quiet* was released in August 1930. Three months earlier, a German film, *Westfront 1918*, had appeared with enough similarity of content to suggest that UFA, the German studio, wanted to make their own version of *All Quiet*, but finding Universal had got to the film rights first, they commissioned Ladislaus Vajda to write a fresh script incorporating a number of elements in Remarque’s book. [5] In the event *Westfront 1918* was eclipsed at the time, and has been ever since, by *All Quiet*: since it is a German not an American film, its promotion and distribution was significantly weaker, and it lacked the underpinning that the title of Remarque’s bestseller gave to the film of *All Quiet*. Yet it ought to be as celebrated, not least because it mirrors the pacifism of *All Quiet* at several points: it centres on a group of German soldiers, narrating their disintegration as a group and how they died; its message is that World War One was an insane waste of human life. At the same time, it achieves a greater realism than *All Quiet*. Its director, G W Pabst paid particular attention to capturing the quality of the landscape of battle by its visual eloquence about the mud, and in making the camera as mobile as the early sound technology permitted. He deliberately eschewed filming from inside a stationary soundproof booth, and instead allowed the camera to move by opting to use a mobile ‘blimp’ (a soundproof casing around the body of the camera). This visual quality was matched by using sound creatively, once again within severe constraints since the technology of mixing sound from different sources did not exist. “Consequently, the sound of artillery bombardment had to be eliminated to insert lines of dialogue. . . . This crude method required numerous painstaking trials and errors before an acceptable synchronization could be achieved.” [6] The result of Pabst’s methods is that *Westfront 1918* feels more realistic, two sequences in particular standing out: the first is of German soldiers going into the trenches at night in silence, which is then broken by a barrage opening up. When two of them are trapped underground in the bombardment, others try to rescue them fruitlessly. This is an eight-minute sequence told solely in image and sound. A second sequence later in the film, some seven minutes long, also wordless, well illustrates the fog of war: a long shot of some two minutes’ duration shows a French attack across the mud and the wire of no man's land, leading to Germans being overwhelmed in the trenches. Then suddenly the French withdraw, leaving their dead. The sequence is made more vivid by the presence of tanks bulldozing their way through until they are immobilized.

All Quiet has its own effective realism too: one ghoulish touch shows the French advancing across no man's land and being machine-gunned; when one soldier is blown to bits we get a glimpse of his severed hands hanging on the wire. But this realism is secondary to its real strength, which is the narrative of the career of Paul as a soldier, from student ardour to mental isolation in the trenches and death – that is to say, an account of the mental journey Paul makes, in which he both grows up and suffers the pain of withdrawing into himself. Paul's relationships change: he responds to his teacher at the beginning but when on home leave he returns to the school,

he tells an unconvinced class that it is "dirty and painful to die for your country". His friends gradually die off until only he and the old soldier Kat are left. When Kat is killed, Paul withdraws completely into himself. The dialogue in the film feels stilted much of the time, expressing convincing inner thoughts in an unconvincing way. For examples, Paul's moralizing speech to the French soldier he has bayoneted and with whom he shares a crater as he dies is delivered theatrically at the corpse, when what is needed is a voiceover of Paul's thoughts while the camera focuses on his impassive face. This is a clumsiness stemming from inexperience of how to use the new sound technology, and in reaching an appreciation of the film the viewer needs to accommodate it as an element of the film's style. As we shall see, Milestone was to learn from this experience in making *A Walk in the Sun*.

The causes of war do not include books, films etc., but the popular view of war can be influenced by them, and it is possible to argue a connection between *All Quiet* and the feeling of 'never again' that prevailed in the 1930s for example in Britain and France [6a]. Ever since, film (and now television) has been at the forefront of the process of connecting the public with the nature of the war that their country has been engaged in. This has been true of all wars fought by the Western powers in the twentieth century in one way or another, the paradigm for which has been the Vietnam War. This process of historical interpretation and understanding takes place at the most substantial level in writing about the war, but this cannot be divorced from the visual imagination which people bring as well. First of all the Vietnam War is famous for the fact that even while it was being waged, news cameramen and still photographers were bringing its horrors into the living room in a newly immediate way, quite eclipsing the one (notorious) pro-war film to have been made during the war, John Wayne's *Green Berets* (1968). When the war ended for the Americans with the fall of Saigon in 1975, within five years both *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) had newly defined the war in hallucinatory terms, as if the "veracity" of news images needed supplementing. The late 1980s then saw a spate of Vietnam battle films, including *Hamburger Hill* (1987), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), *Platoon* (1987) and *84 Charlie Mopic* (1988), seeking to convey the intensity of battle and its brutalizing effect on those fighting it. (Alongside these efforts there has been the complementary group of 'Vietnam veteran' films, which as a subject for the cinema has arguably been more potent as vehicles to explore the mental impact of the war.) Yet it is the documentary method that has produced the two works that move rather than numb, as if the primary relationship between the visual material and the events they portray give them an authenticity which challenges fictional re-creation. These are *Dear America* (1987) and the television documentary *Two Days in October* (US title) / *How Vietnam was Lost* (UK) (2005). Both rely on newsreel and amateur footage as the visual ground over which speech is used as a counterpoint, in *Dear America* as voice-over (the soldiers' letters home) and in *Two Days in October*, the surviving protagonists commenting on the action in which they were involved thirty years later. In both films, the subject is thickened by the mixing of domestic elements. In *Dear America* one layer of the soundtrack is given over to countercultural anthems of popular music, many of them created in reaction to American militarism especially in Indochina. The effect is in the end muddying, as though countercultural expression at home was equivalent to the experiences in the Vietnam jungle, when patently they were of a different order. *Two Days in October* achieves far greater clarity by cross-cutting two simultaneous events from 1967: an incident in Vietnam when American GIs were ambushed and lost 61 of their number, and the student protest at the University of Wisconsin-Madison against the presence on campus of recruiters from Dow Chemicals (who were involved in the manufacture of napalm), a protest that turned violent, so that these two Americas come

face to face in the way the two unfolding events crisscross each other, ratcheting up the pain and emotion they still cause even now [7].

Portrayal of the Vietnam War is significant in the history of the cinema for another reason: the films are made in colour, the particular attraction of which was that it made the appearance of war more vivid: an explosion is much more spectacular in colour than black and white[8]. To appreciate this most fully, we need to go back from the twentieth century to the nineteenth, to the spectacular Soviet version of Tolstoy's 'War and Peace' which was made as an 8-hour film in 1967.

The western front of the First World War, while containing a number of key battles, comes to us as a state of mind and body rather than a sequence of incidents, four years of continuous mud and slaughter, a permanent stalemate. The conventional view of warfare on the other hand is that winning battles is the key to victory – and this is well-suited to the capabilities of the cinema, to show the beginning, middle and end of an encounter, to give an overview of the engagement rather than the eye view of a particular protagonist. When Tolstoy described the Battle of Borodino in 'War and Peace', he portrayed it through the eyes of Bezukhov and Bolkonsky. Because Bezukhov travels over the battlefield as a free agent, present at but not a participant in events, Tolstoy has a means of giving some sense of the whole.

In making the film version, the director Sergei Bondarchuk goes beyond giving merely the fixed viewpoints of Tolstoy's two heroes: Bolkonsky with his regiments behind the lines, waiting to go into battle; and Bezukhov, principally with the battery at the Raevski redoubt. Secondly, Bondarchuk reinterprets Tolstoy's historico-philosophical framework: Tolstoy writes about the opposition between Bezukhov/goodness and Napoleon/badness, and Napoleon's destiny to stumble and fall at the hands of the Russians who embody History. Bondarchuk elevates these ideas further, making of the Russian army an embodiment of moral superiority, of the battle a symphony in praise of war, and of Kutuzov the visionary general who can see beyond the 'defeat' at Borodino to the final ruin of Napoleon and the French army's dreams. As an example of this elevated tone, he also copies faithfully the striking scene in Tolstoy during preparations for the battle when the icon of Our Lady of Smolensk is paraded among the army at work. Everything comes to a halt and common soldiers, officers and the general, all fall to their knees in veneration. The soundtrack on the film allows a dimension denied to Tolstoy: a Russian choir chanting a hymn of prayer to the Virgin for victory and salvation.

The section dealing with the Battle of Borodino lasts some 35 minutes. The first impression is of something enormous, carried out on a huge canvas, 'canvas' being the necessary word in view of the painterly effects the film achieves, nineteenth-century painting that is: infantry and cavalry in movement, battle in the sunlight, the visual poetry of plumes of smoke from artillery and from rifles. Once the battle is fully underway, fire seems to become the predominant element, reflecting the way that the order of battle has become confused and turbulent. It appears that Bondarchuk filmed a huge amount of material, the editing of which then became a crucial stage in completing the film: we see lots of individual actions – soldiers marching and firing, an artillery salvo, a cavalry charge, i.e. men following their particular orders in disregard of the activity going on around them, symbolized most acutely by Bolkonsky's regiment at the rear of battle, unflinching from their positions as their numbers are decimated by French cannon: the soldiers remain heroically obedient to orders. As the battle progresses, this order breaks up, marked vividly by a group of riderless horses passing across the screen. The dead bodies pile up, and the battery of guns on the Raevski redoubt begins to run out of ammunition. At the opening, the

camera is comparatively static as the movement occurs in front of it. As battle progresses, Bondarchuk uses elaborate tracking shots giving it a movement which doubles the movement on screen. At the climax of the sequence, and following the mortal wounding of Bolkonsky and the encounter with his rival for Natasha in the dressing station, the voiceover becomes more lofty yet in tone, and a sequence of freeze frames follows: of the faces of the artillery men at the redoubt, and overhead shots of the battlefield after the battle.

It is fitting that the Soviet cinema, in which the theories of montage had been most assiduously practised, should have produced this essentially visual depiction of battle with a bravura piece of direction, of cinematography and of editing. It aspires in effect to be symphonic, aided in the process by the score of Vyacheslav Ovchinnikov which is used for much of the battle, mingled with the noise of gunfire and explosions, the sound of horses' hooves. The effect is achieved with some discretion: the music is never allowed to overwhelm the image, and the battle sequence eschews the use of a Russian choir (presumably a temptation to its makers which they rightly rejected) to add a sentimental affect to the proceedings.

Two criticisms need to be made: for all the colour, as it vividly recreates a nineteenth-century canvas in which the palette, even while muted, is very colouristic in effect, the film shows no blood, even when soldiers lose their limbs or die. In this respect, the first section of *Saving Private Ryan* (see below) is its antithesis, an antithesis that lends the heroics of that film an 'anti-war' feeling compared with *War and Peace* which glorifies its battle, even though the D-Day landings were as crucial to the defeat of Hitler as Borodino was to the defeat of Napoleon. Secondly, while great symphonic music combines vivid passages of music-making with the creation of a whole structure, so that the listener is drawn through the music in time (exposition of theme, development of musical ideas, the elaboration of suspense as to where the music is going, the resolution of ideas), film could do the same but such a satisfying totality just eludes *War and Peace*. There is some structure, as I have indicated, but there is a certain disjointedness in the editing of the sequences as well: after the battle disintegrates as it were, we are shown an orderly charge, or very arrestingly, aerial shots of the soldiers in the square formation. Are these from an earlier stage in the battle? From another part of the battlefield? Is their insertion justified by the movement from one shot to another? The answers are not immediately obvious.

Taken as a whole, the sequence is coherent enough and when it ends with an aerial shot high in the clouds, with the Russian landscape visible far below, it gives a proper sense of the immensity of the battle which is true to history, to Tolstoy's novel, and to the Soviet military effort in the Second World War. Just as significantly, and in fact much more than any painting could, it enlarges our understanding, our imagination of what a major nineteenth-century battle might look like.

In Tolstoy's novel, the primary purpose of describing the battle is to explain its effect on Bezukhov's personality, his interior space. In the film, Bezukhov's view of battle is of a heroic encounter, not of the pain and waste, and ultimately it locates the interior reaction on the public plane, sacrificing it as it were, in line with Communist ideology that private feelings can only be at the service of the state. It therefore cannot by definition reflect the interior quality that a quite different kind of war book and war film can evoke. Interestingly, a key novel to illustrate this point is Norman Mailer's 'The Naked and the Dead'. While Mailer consciously set about writing a novel displaying Tolstoyan compassion as he understood it, encompassing both the good and the bad in human beings, severe in order to avoid being sentimental, but aiming for the reader to "feel strengthened by those who

endure, and feel awe and pity for those who do not" [9], the book's strength is in the way it portrays the intensity of battle on a Pacific island as something felt privately by the infantryman, beyond the reach of the officers giving the orders.

It is a truism of battle that the big picture is denied to the individual actually fighting it. The point is made by Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*, the promotional tagline for which, 'Every man fights his own war,' could equally well have been used of 'The Naked and the Dead', and is true to the spirit of James Jones' novel on which the film is based. [10] The narrative concerns the actions of C Company in landing on a Pacific island and capturing a ridge held by the Japanese; the company then engages in a gunpoint-to-gunpoint encounter with the Japanese and overruns them; the third encounter with the enemy results in the sacrificial death of Private Witt. Although these actions are set in the larger context of American efforts to capture the island of Guadalcanal from the Japanese, this big picture, which in hindsight we know not just to have been successful but to form a turning-point in the Pacific War, is scarcely referred to. This war is very much an infantryman's war, and focuses on the story of Witt, seen at the opening of the film as AWOL on a South Sea Island, experiencing his own version of paradise. When the US Army finds him again, they put him back in the ranks. Witt's private war is trying to square the physical experience of battle with his own mental confusion about the loss of goodness, where hatred comes from, "this war at the heart of nature". This spiritual dimension in him, an awareness of another world, is in contrast to his alter ego, Sgt Welsh, who insists that this world is the only one that exists -- a dialogue between a theist and an atheist in which the word God is never mentioned. When after Witt's death he is formally buried in the jungle, and the other soldiers drift off, Welsh remains behind to grieve. [11]

"Where does this emotionalism come from?" one might muse in Witt-like manner. There are several answers. Firstly it comes from Malick himself, who does not intend an anti-war film, but aims to get audiences to understand the pressures of battle on individuals, to articulate the tragedy of the common soldier's situation. There is always a public argument about why the infantryman is there in uniform with the task of defeating the enemy in this particular situation, such public argument revolving around defending the homeland, asserting the values of the society in which he exists, emphasizing the community of effort that the war involves. Yet Malick does not engage these questions, but instead focuses on private hopes and fears, as if to assert that the ordinary infantryman cannot know the public reasons why he fights. Secondly, between Guadalcanal and *The Thin Red Line* has come the reverse of American arms in Vietnam, the war that made the American soldiers' private feelings public. Malick imports into the Second World War a post-Vietnam sensibility. Is this a permissible anachronism? It would be too strict a judgement to say no, and in any case, *The Thin Red Line* deliberately adopts a particular stylistic approach, which could be considered 'timeless', namely to put into dialogue and facial expression feelings and thoughts that were surely suppressed at the time. To take a clear cut example, in the first encounter with Japanese bullets, a soldier in C Company dies. In the confusion, someone suggests to another that he is the appropriate person to write to the dead man's wife, a proposition from which the other demurs. This feels untrue to reality: under fire among the still-hot dead and wounded and with an order to execute is no time to be discussing letter-writing, but the incident is still true to an inner realism, that a soldier on seeing for the first time one of his buddies killed in battle could well have flashed through his mind the thought that someone was going to have to write to the widow and it was not going to be him.

The central figure of Witt largely gives his thoughts through voiceovers as well as flashbacks to his paradise in the South Seas. Private Bell is shown with constant visual memories of the wife he has left behind. But apart from these two the other soldiers largely express their feelings through dialogue, delivered in various American accents and mumbles, and accompanied by an array of tics and mannerisms, the most particular of which is turning the head away from the person being spoken to. The film therefore very much belongs to the actors as well as to the director, reflecting the conditions in which it was made. The actors underwent a nine-day boot camp (hosted by two Vietnam veterans) followed by a five-month shooting schedule in which (very unusually for a big commercial film) the film was shot in sequence from beginning to end. The ensemble and the relationships between the characters, and the relationship to the director, became important. This is a powerful ingredient in the film, provided any wish for simple looking and simple speaking, one man to another, as in a previous generation of Hollywood war movies, is put on one side. It feels like the difference between classicism and mannerism, both styles requiring creativity to be successful, but with the inherent risk in the latter of flaccidity of execution. This is certainly the case with the opening set in Witt's paradise, some nine minutes long, when a judicious selection of single images would have cut it by half and yet made the point about Witt's otherworldliness more cogently.

The Thin Red Line came out almost simultaneously with Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, the one about fighting the Japanese on Guadalcanal, the other about the US landings in northern France in 1944 and the subsequent push inland. Both were hard-fought victories, and Spielberg and Malick were of the same frame of mind in the sense of representing the generation born after the war coming to terms with the heroism of the Second World War. They have another social purpose as well, probably quite accidental, to go behind the defeat of the Vietnam war to a war in which American military virtues were triumphant. Their joint appearance makes another unconscious political point about the Second World War, that only the USA managed successfully to achieve victory in two major theatres, the Pacific and the European. In a way, they represent a post-Cold War zenith in conveying American global power.

But as cinematic depictions they make a very important contrast in illustrating the two poles I have explored in this essay: do you focus on the external appearance of battle or on the private experience of it? *Saving Private Ryan* is in three parts, the first of which is a re-creation of the US landings in the Dog Green Sector on Omaha Beach on 6 June 1944. In this section there is very little delineation of character in individual infantryman, but a concentrated attempt to pitch the viewer into battle, to give a direct experience of its extremities. To achieve this, the camera is variously used: it is static, reflecting pauses in the action when a clear view of individuals is possible; it is hand-held, imitating the narrow focus of soldiers running without regard to what is happening around them, and it is 'blurred static', portraying the fractional but doubly arresting glimpses of action [12]. The editing is rapid, so that the sequence comprises short strips of film, exploiting the paradox that the less time you can see them, the more vividly they play in the mind. Just as Bondarchuk's *War and Peace* drew visual inspiration from nineteenth-century painting, so the visual quality of *Saving Private Ryan* draws on war photography to create a convincing visual patina, a point underlined by the way the illusion of seeing is disrupted by sand, water and even drops of blood hitting the camera lens. But the sequence could also be described as 'painterly' in quite a different way from *War and Peace*: the rapid montage creates a visceral effect such as you get in some twentieth-century portraiture, where the paint 'comes onto the senses' in a way that photography is unable to achieve [13]. As already noted, battle is an aural as well as a visual experience: after the period of waiting for battle, when sounds drop

away, the bullets and shells create their own startling aural vocabulary which words such as whizz, zing, boom, crump etc. only inadequately describe. The final point to make concerns the narrative structure, as the first part of the film is exceptional in showing with great clarity the particular military objective, to land on the beach and knock out the German gun emplacements at the head of the cliff, and in illustrating visually how it was achieved.

Unfortunately, the subsequent two parts of *Saving Private Ryan* lapse into more conventional heroics, so that overall *The Thin Red Line* manages to achieve a greater resonance as a depiction of war, in the way it conveys, as does *Saving Private Ryan*, the sheer physicality of coming under fire and of fighting back, but balances that with the portrayal of the states of mind of those involved, their reflections on experience, their anxieties, and in Witt's case his mental detachment coexisting with his physical involvement.

The genre of the battle film in Hollywood, into which *The Thin Red Line* falls, even if it seeks to transcend it by its length and its philosophical content, comes in the aftermath of the Second World War, and is further stimulated both by the Korean and Vietnam Wars. This period is marked too by the impact on the military of the ideas of SLA Marshall, who joined the American Historical Teams in interviewing individuals and groups fresh from combat in the Second World War [14]. These form the basis of the American campaign histories, from which Marshall drew for his first book, 'Men Against Fire', published in 1947. This reached conclusions about how soldiers might deal with their fear on the battlefield, and how it was necessary for the American army to foster a sense of bonding among groups of GIs, with the practical purpose of getting them to support each other physically and emotionally, to help overcome feelings of cowardice. Put crudely, the emphasis is switched from it being noble to die for one's country to honour being found in defending one's friends, which may well involve being a casualty, whether wounded or dead. This 'band of brothers' strain (going back to where we started with Shakespeare's *Henry V*) is common among many of the battle films since the end of the Second World War, indeed to the point where it is almost a defining feature of the genre: even a film focused on the externals of battle should make some attempt to characterize individual soldiers so that we as audience can empathize with what they suffer or appreciate the motivation behind their heroism. One of Marshall's books, 'Pork Chop Hill: the American fighting man in action, Korea, Spring 1953', published in 1956, was made into a solid example of the genre, *Pork Chop Hill* (1959). Its specific focus is on the military action involved in retaking a strategically useless hill and how the officer in charge drives his men to carry out this task. The idea is reprised in *Hamburger Hill* (1987), about the capture of a hill in Vietnam in 1969 in fearsome conditions: the film ends with a shot of surviving combattants sitting desolately on the desolate hilltop. The mood at the end is one of despair. The strategic purpose of capturing the hill is never explained, as if it was irrelevant to the men's motivation; nor does it even resort to the platitudes such as that tacked onto the end of *Pork Chop Hill* – "Millions live in freedom today because of what they did."

Pork Chop Hill was directed by Lewis Milestone, who as we have seen made his name with *All Quiet on the Western Front* (which incidentally brings to the fore the way the German soldiers in the trenches supported each other in the fighting, distant from the high command and even more distant from the misconceptions about trench warfare on the home front), and is an excellent example of Milestone's virtues as a film-maker -- and his vices, principally that of speechifying at the audience to press a message home that battles are for useless ends. Having created two parallel stories, one of the battle to take the hill, the other of the protracted negotiations between the USA and China at Panmanjom, it neglects the latter in favour of the former when there was a striking opportunity to inject suspense into both stories, and to make crystal clear the way the strategically valueless hill became a pawn in

the negotiations to the cost of many lives. This causes the film to lose direction in its last third. However, the middle section, from the start of the attack to the capture of the top of the hill, has an exemplary quality: it is comprehensible tactically in explaining the way the three platoons are deployed, and in using a model of the hill at Battalion HQ to explain what the attack is meant to achieve; it touches at various points on Marshall's preoccupation with how soldiers are motivated to fight, even motivated to use their weapons; it gives a convincing picture of the battle-scarred hill and its trench system (which must have given Milestone a feeling of *déjà vu* in the way it recalls the First World War landscape of *All Quiet*). Because of this clarity, a real suspense is generated as to whether the attack will succeed or fail.

Almost exactly in the middle, between this film and *All Quiet*, Milestone made another battle film, *A Walk in the Sun* (1945), which is his masterpiece. While *All Quiet* was a notable early sound film, *A Walk in the Sun* is vastly more sophisticated in its use of this element of film-making, deploying sound and internalized speaking in a way that conveys the thoughts of the characters in new ways. The story concerns a platoon of common GIs in the Texas Division at Salerno, south of Naples, in September 1943. Given the task of landing at the front on the beach and taking a German-held farmhouse six miles inland, it only achieves its objective at the cost of several lives. At the end, Windy, the introspective GI, composes a letter to his sister: "It was so easy, so terribly easy." It both celebrates the force of American arms, while confronting the casualties of war, the dead, the bleeding and even the mad: Sergeant Porter, pitched into command by the deaths of an unnamed young lieutenant and Sergeant Halverson, breaks down and relinquishes his command to Tyne. The film is at the other extreme to the openly heroic, a dark war film made in the flush of American victory in the Second World War.

This disjunction between the official (heroic) version and the harsh reality of the achievement is achieved by interiorizing the thoughts of the GIs as they move from landing barge to objective, dawn to noon – Windy is the prime example, composing laconic letters to his sister. The film gathered several talents, bringing out the best in each: the story was by Harry Brown, who seems to have specialised in stories about beach-landings, witness *The Sands of Iwo-Jima* (1949) and *D-Day 6 June* (1956), and who had worked on *The True Glory* (1945), a large collaboration on the Allied invasion of Europe; the screenplay was by Robert Rossen, who came from the New York Theatre, and whose best written work, as in this film, understands the need for men to create a hard-boiled carapace which cannot prevent human sentiment showing through; the director, Lewis Milestone, achieved early fame with *All Quiet*, but with this more muted work could be said to have achieved something more lasting, a study of men coping not with the extreme horrors of trench warfare but inner demons in a more conventional military setting. Milestone produced the film as well, which may be an indication of his personal commitment to what he had to say about war. Mention should also be made of the cameraman Russell Harlan who can probably be credited for giving the film some striking visual flourishes, and of the title song, sung by Kenneth Spencer, that helps to fix the film in the memory by echoing the understated nature of the action: a landing, a 6-mile hike, the knocking out of a German foxhole and the blowing of a bridge were just a stroll, terribly easy.

Wars, the film argues, are fought as much in the mind as in open battle. While the assault on the farmhouse at the end lapses into incoherence in terms of the action, the script and Milestone's handling of his actors focuses on the relationships between the GIs, their obduracy and their strength of character. This it does by interiorizing the war. Nothing is witnessed of the landing (apart from a brief long shot of the landing craft coming ashore, possibly newsreel footage) except what is visible to the platoon. Later there is an encounter with an

armoured car, and finally the assault on the farmhouse. If the film is weaker in the action sequences, the film is particularly good at the inaction which comes in between and characterizes so much of war: waiting for the landing barge to hit the beach, waiting behind the beach-head to move on, waiting in a ditch, waiting behind a stone wall to go over the top and storm the farmhouse. The lugubrious song comments on the mood: "It's a long long time a man spends a-waiting, a-waiting around in a war." And in this downtime, the men converse sporadically, wise-cracking, periodically needling each other, thinking of home. And in this fog, they get only a glimpse of the big picture: only the whine and snarl of shells in the darkness indicate to the men in the landing barge that they are nearing the beach; the German planes dropping bombs on supply ships are not seen, only the black plume of smoke going into the sky points to what is happening; a reconnaissance motorcyclist offers to check the road up front and report back, but they never see him again (as Tyne remarks: "It's a funny thing, how many people you meet in an army that cross your path for a few seconds and you never see 'em again"); only the machine-gun rattle coming from the farmhouse reveals that Germans are holed up there. McWilliams, the medical orderly, expresses it well: "That's the whole trouble with war, you never get to see nothing, you fight 'em by ear." Tyne responds, "You gotta guess what's going on." Shells are heard before they are seen to explode; planes are sounds until they suddenly appear on top of you. As spectators, we are afforded no wider view, merely the means to identify with the characters, all well individualized in the script. At the end, in showing Tyne, crawling on his stomach, leading his men against the farmhouse, Milestone uses not a long take, but a montage of shots of his face, subtly blended by the device of a wipe, and voicing his monologue on the soundtrack. At the end, Tyne, fearful to the pit of the stomach, sees the landscape spinning, a wholly interior spell, broken by an explosion and the eruption of action.

As spectators, our involvement is bought by the film rather than presented on a plate. The Salerno landings were heroic, the platoon's capture of the farmhouse is worthy of a Congressional Medal of Honour, but by the end we have been sucked – by Rossen's script, by the quality of the ensemble acting, by Milestone's use of interior voices and sound – into the ambiguity of war: are they murderers? Or "selling democracy to the natives"? "Nobody dies" the GIs tell themselves, yet several are killed; they have been given a clear objective, but waiting in the beach-head, they also feel they've been forgotten; Tyne is thrust into command because Porter cracks, having fought "one battle too many"; if landing in Italy is like this, what will the invasion of Normandy be like? Censorship did not allow Rossen to have the GIs use the f-word on screen, so Rivera keeps saying "loving" instead. We have eyes and ears to see and hear, but we have to use them.

Thucydides wanted his history of the Peloponnesian War to be considered "useful" by those wanting to understand what happened (and, he added, will be repeated in the future) [15]. Even though many film-makers are moved to express the horror and pity of war, passing over into expressing a judgement on those who conduct war, there is a gloomy sense that the most successful films reveal the fact of battle in the front line, rather than the why of it, or how it came about. There is an even more melancholy conclusion that doing this well is commercially speaking a sound proposition: there is a mass audience for battle scenes. Making the situation murkier still is the entertainment value in killing, as portrayed in films like *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-3) and *300* (2006), with the risk that the documentary reality which *Saving Private Ryan* strives for requires the audience to disentangle it from fantasy films, a process that becomes foggier as history moves forward. Portraying D-Day remains vivid history, even to those born just after it. This element of history is still present in the Battle of Borodino in the Soviet *War and*

Peace, but our response includes the feeling that battles are no longer fought in that way and so the events begin to drift away from fact. And when *Gladiator* (2000) opens with battle between the Roman army and German tribes somewhere in a dark Teutonic Forest, about 2000 years ago, the differences between the actual battle portrayed then and the fantasy battles in *The Lord of the Rings* have largely broken down[16].

So, there is a commercial impulse in making war movies. But, as we have seen, there is a clear technological one as well, the challenge of using the resources of the cinema to depict battle: long shots, close-ups, sound (bullets, half-heard shouts, explosions etc), battlescape design, mobile cameras, rapid editing, special effects, digital imaging and so on. The cinemas themselves have changed: when *Saving Private Ryan* is screened to an audience in comfortable armchairs experiencing the images on a very large screen with sound filling all portions of the darkened chamber (eating popcorn all the while), this offers a new experience from watching a routine black-and-white Hollywood war movie in an empty flea-pit or on a second-hand television in a bedsit.

So money and technology have a big part to play, but there is surely a more enduring and more compelling motive in the drive to expression of truth about the human condition. *A Walk in the Sun* has an arresting detachment in being sceptical about heroism and about the larger war being fought, and a close attachment to the humans who have to fight. *All Quiet* is more famous as a film with a pacifist message, but the fifteen years separating the two films mark a maturing of views. *All Quiet*'s messages are unmistakable, whereas *A Walk in the Sun* catches us unexpectedly, so that on subsequent viewings *All Quiet* begins to grate in its obviousness, whereas the subtlety of *A Walk in the Sun* becomes more striking. It has also been more influential because it achieved several 'firsts' for a battle film: the first to show a story about a platoon; the first to start with the infantry in the landing craft before hitting the beach; the first to use a group of young actors fairly early in their careers (e.g. Andrews, Conte, Ireland); not the first to alternate action and stasis, but the first to make convincing the anxiety that waiting can cause, where 'each man fights his own war' – in the mind.

Yet there is surely scope for greater profundity. In this respect, *The Thin Red Line* is more interesting than might first appear. Consider its final section. The transition to it is marked with a prologue, of Sgt Welsh and Private Witt on a verandah talking about "this world and another world", flesh and spirit. Then it is evening, with the men on the ground smoking, wordless except for Witt's inner thoughts on the soundtrack. It is then day and the men are going up a stream to engage the enemy. When two men are chosen to be sent forward to reconnoitre, Witt volunteers to accompany them. Upriver, the three encounter a platoon of Japanese coming down. When one of the three is wounded, Witt volunteers to stay with him and divert the Japanese, while Fife goes back to send word to the others. Witt leaves the wounded private to float himself back downstream, while he draws the Japanese away deeper into the jungle, where he is surrounded and killed. The film then jumps to Witt's burial, done without any liturgy (no sign of an army chaplain) and bare of any ritual except the planting of his rifle in the ground, barrel down, with name-tag and helmet hung on it. His fellow soldiers drift off leaving Welsh squatting by the grave, muttering something inaudible and then being swept by emotion. The next shot jumps to Welsh listening to a newly arrived captain lecturing them on how he's going to run the group: we experience a conflict between Welsh's experience and disenchantment and the captain's voice of authority and commitment. The troops embark on a landing craft and in the evening sun are silent on deck while Witt's voice-over meditates on the nature of his bond with the others, on light and dark being in the same Mind that made the world, shining in the setting sun. A shot of the wake of the boat gives way to natives in canoes in a mangrove swamp, to a ground-level shot of a seedling tree

breaking from the shell of its seed, the roar of the oceans behind it. All through, the adagio music overlays and overplays the emotion.

The trajectory of this last sequence is redemptive, and redemptive in the Christian manner. From the evening sequence with Witt and the others lying smoking in the grass (Last Supper), to daytime and Witt volunteering to go into danger (Calvary), to Witt's sacrifice (Crucifixion) in order to rescue the platoon, to his burial ((Deposition) and Welsh's grief (Pietà). Finally, the voice-over from beyond the grave, reflecting on the central mystery of Creation, simultaneously light and dark, is a Resurrection, made specific in the final image of the seedling on the beach. This narrative is understated while the emotion is carried in the music, and applies, as already stated, the 'trauma', the wounding that the Vietnam War gave to America, to the clearer certainties of the Second World War. The shell is brittle, the toughness is skin deep. Inside each soldier fighting his own war is a huge well of feeling, of belonging, and in Witt's case, of understanding.

The *chef d'oeuvre* of contemporary land battle is yet to be written or filmed. The cinema is certainly poised to do it, offering as it does the resources of words in dialogue and in reflection allied to the extraordinary visual and aural possibilities inherent in making pictures for a large screen, and sophisticated techniques of re-creating battle (although one obstacle to be skirted will be the propaganda element, making the film either denunciatory of war or laudatory of false heroics). If Shakespeare and Tolstoy are to be our guides, then a battle story woven into a much larger narrative would allow an extra dramatic force to be given to scenes of fighting, an extra way into understanding for spectators who have never fired a gun. The subject of Homer's *Iliad*, set in wartime and punctuated by scenes of battle throughout, is not the public fighting but the Wrath of Achilles [17], its cause and its costly assuaging. Our putative masterpiece will certainly need to engage with the mental landscape as well as the physical one, encompassing the heroic and cowardly, tenderness and hatred, suffering and redemption from suffering. Focus on the protagonists on both sides will allow the audience to engage with a general human vulnerability, culpability if you prefer, but also on the value of individual fulfilment and meaning, that soldiering and fighting are a necessary part of an existence out of which expressions of humanness, extreme as they may be, can emerge.

ENDNOTES

1 Thucydides 1.76.2. The quotation is from a speech by the Athenians to the assembly in Sparta, but the sentiment is part of Thucydides' mental outlook.

2 Examples of films not covered include such notable works *Paisà* (1946 especially the last episode), *The Battle of Algiers* (1965), *L'Armée des Ombres* (1969), the flying scenes of *The Battle of Britain* (1969). John Ford is the greatest film poet of battle, witness his cavalry trilogy and the outstanding *They Were Expendable* (1945).

3 Nor is the subject exhausted, judging by among other novels and films the reception for Pat Barker's trilogy published between 1990 and 1995, with *Regeneration* being filmed in 1997, and the making of *La Chambre des officiers/ The Officers' Ward* in 2001.

4 In the 'Time Out Film Guide' (London: Penguin Books, published annually) Tom Milne suggests that *The Big Parade* contains 'snatches of all-American whimsy'.

5 This is only my speculation, but note the following common elements: the camaraderie among soldiers in the trenches, including harmonica music, fraternizing with the French women including sleeping with them, return to their homeland where there is mental dislocation, disembodied hands (on the wire in *All Quiet*, sticking out of the mud in *Westfront*), French attack on a German trench followed by a retreat, Franco-German peace-making (in *All Quiet* Paul in the crater giving drink to the Frenchman he has bayoneted as he dies; in *Westfront*, the French soldier announcing to Karl at the very end he is 'camarade, pas ennemi'), and the hospital in the ruined church.

6 Quoted from Lee Attwell 'GW Pabst' (Boston: Twayne Publishing 1977). See also Michael Geister, 'The Battleground of Modernity: Westfront 1918' in 'The Films of GW Pabst' ed. Eric Rentschler (Rutgers UP, New Brunswick and London 1990).

6a Films do not cause wars, *pace* the Vichy spokesman who said in 1940: "If we have lost the war, it's because of *Quai des brumes*." (Quotation from Sadoul 'Dictionnaire des Films' Editions du Seuil 1965, p.205.) Perhaps the spokesman was thinking that the desperate atmosphere of *Quai des brumes* at the end of the decade was a natural conclusion to the pacifism of 'Nicht neues im West' at the beginning of it. Jean in *Quai des brumes* is as mentally isolated as Paul at the end of *All Quiet*.

7 *Two Days in October* is based on David Marraniss's book 'They Marched into Sunlight' which is currently [2008] being made into a feature film.

8 The Hollywood action films that came out of the Second World War (for example, *Guadalcanal Diary*, *Objective Burma!*, *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, *Battleground*, *The Story of GI Joe*) were made largely in black and white. It is really only in the 1960s, with the advent of the blockbuster war film (such as *The Great Escape* (1962), *Battle of the Bulge* (1966), *L'Armee des Ombres* (1969), *The Battle of Britain* (1969), *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970) and *A Bridge Too Far* (1977)) that colour begins to be used to add a vividness to the story. This is not to deny that the studios were schizophrenic about the merits of colour and black-and-white: the milestone film in this development was *The Longest Day* (1962), which Daryl Zanuck chose to make in black and white, and subsequent blockbusters such as *The Train* (1964) and *Paris brule-t-il?/Is Paris burning?* (1966) were made in black and white.

9 From Mailer's 1998 introduction to 'The Naked and the Dead' (New York: Picador 1998)

10 James Jones, who had participated in the Guadalcanal campaign, published his novel 'The Thin Red Line' in 1962. It was filmed in 1964 as well as by Malick.

11 'Every man fights his own war.' This consideration is not extended to the Japanese, who remain the almost faceless enemy. I have not seen Clint Eastwood's *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) and *Letters from Iwo-Jima* (2006), which by all accounts take steps to address this point.

12 Spielberg drew on Robert Capa's photographs taken at the Omaha Beach landings, which gain urgency from being out of focus.

13 The chief example is Francis Bacon, but one thinks of De Kooning, Auerbach and others.

14 I came across the reference to Marshall's ideas in John Keegan's book, 'The Face of Battle'. He also touches on Marshall's ideas about the 'ratio of fire' and his conclusion that only a minority of soldiers on the battlefield actually fire their weapons at the enemy. These ideas subsequently proved very controversial, but were influential at the time. My point in referring to Marshall's work is that it exerted influence not just in army thinking but in battle films of the era.

15 Thucydides 1.22.4

16 When I saw *Gladiator* I had the initial impression that the slaughter of the German tribesmen by superior technology in the forest battle that opens the film was merely the application of 21st-century American firepower of the 'smart' kind to the ancient world. However a study of the operations of the Roman Army as depicted on Trajan's Column in Rome suggests that this was not inaccurate.

17 As the first line of Homer's epic poem tells us.

© Tim Cawkwell 2008