

## The Not-Too-Subtle Psy-War in War Films

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Whether film as art provides or not learning experiences or a psychologically reinforcing outlet is less a matter of fact than an attitude, or an expression of personal predisposition. Anyway, movie watchers have the final choice out of a dozen or more films showing simultaneously in the malls, and from hundreds of VHS tapes stacked in rent-a-movie shops.

Some film-lovers would go for a fantasy trip or titillation from X-rated flicks; others may wish to escape the humdrum through cliff-hanging adventure and horror films; the rest may desire a virtual date with their movie idols through romance. While the choice is as varied as the moviemakers' intentions, nonetheless there are films that try to entertain as much as they inform the viewers on specific socio-political issues.

*Insider*, which casts Russell Crowe in the title role as the chemist employed by a big cigarette manufacturer, is very informative with regard to the manipulations of cigarette makers in ensuring and heightening nicotine addiction among smokers – as well as how they flex their corporate muscles on mass media's dependence on advertising revenue.

Through semi-documentary lens, *Traffic* depicts the dangerous labyrinth of the illicit drug trade between Mexico and the US that entraps both drug-users and law enforcers, even as it shows the irony of the US drug czar played by Michael Douglas finally coming to the bitter realization that his own daughter has become a low-life junkie bedding with drug pushers just to have her high. Also unforgettable in *Traffic* is its portrayal of how juvenile boredom, peer pressure and absentee parenting impel kids of the high-and-mighty clans to plunge into the gutter.

If ever such movies have really been produced to transcend the usual enchantments of film art and seek detours in consciousness-raising such as *de rigueur* in documentary films (and in video essays shown on Discovery Channel), I have little doubt that the genre of war films made

in Hollywood, including espionage/sabotage thrillers, is a reflection more often than not of a socio-political mindset, either emergent or well-established.

Even before Samuel Huntington's book, *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996) became a favorite bone of contention in world conferences, there had been numerous Hollywood-made films dramatizing how the US soldiers or their mutants and robotic proxies would secure global peace and world civilization by eradicating evil-doers who usually look like grizzled Arabs, eccentrically violent East Europeans, stealthy Asiatics (especially chinky-eyed), including extra-terrestrial interlopers. Arnold Schwarzenegger looms large in such slam-bang suspense scenario, while *Universal Soldier* may be representative of this uni-dimensional film supersaga featuring the state of the art armory from the US arms factories and spouting the current American slang.

Was *Universal Soldier* consciously or subliminally produced as an iconographic metaphor for the US superpower status and armory? This intriguing question remains anybody's guess, although it did appear to underscore that fact that there is only one superpower today taking charge of the global police work. Apropos of such movie trivia, Neal Gabler's analysis on US war films can give us an insight into the leitmotif, if not the psychological dimensions of this particular filmography. In his essay in the *New York Times* (January 27, 2002) entitled "Seeking Perspective on the Movie Front Lines," Gabler provides this bird's eye view of this film genre:

War movies trace the arc of America's changing attitudes toward combat – from the movie effusions of sentimentality in World War II to the bitter cynicism in Vietnam to a renewal of patriotic fervor tinged with nostalgia in recent pictures like *Saving Private Ryan*. But war movies have always done something else; albeit more subtly. They have served as metaphors for America's attitude toward authority, both personal and moral, that the armed forces as institutions symbolize.

Gabler elaborates on his America-centric overview: "Thus the respect for authority during World War II, when Americans were confident in their purpose and their leaders, translated into respect for commanders in war movies. Disenchantment with leaders during the late 1960s translated into disenchantment with authority in Vietnam movies..." The significance

of this assertion, however, may be appreciated only piecemeal because it is too neatly encapsulated or too simplistic that it could amount to a mere hyperbole.

His presumption of "respect for authority" in that period "when Americans were confident in their purpose and their leaders" requires historical and sociological evidence which a careful reading of events and sentiments in the US at the time may not warrant at all. There was a surge across the American landscape of disputations and conflicting campaigns: the "Bring Home the Boys" lobby was met head-on by the program of forced conscription into military service, signified by the then ubiquitous poster of Uncle Sam's scowling face and stern pointing finger underscored by the grim slogan "America Needs You."

Why this threatening stance of Uncle Sam if indeed there was respect and confidence in the government leaders at that period? The fact is, after herding the Japanese-American communities into concentration camps, even unwilling Filipino migrant laborers were pulled out of the farms and marched off to the war fronts — behind the confused Afro-Americans. My own uncle, Alejandro Azurin, recounted being yanked off his menial job and thrown into the Carolines naval battles, in the Pacific, doing menial tasks on the ship.

Another fact is even a highly prominent American like Charles Lindbergh (famous for his solo flight across the Atlantic) was under surveillance because of his sympathies for the Nazis, according to Lindbergh's files with the Secret Service. And even the celebrated actor Errol Flynn, according to his biographer, was being harnessed by German spies. And the American farm sector was yet staggering from the devastating effect of the Great Depression. It is highly probable that Gabler's picture-pretty sense of social reality in war time is the impression he got from watching those war films of World War II, for indeed top commanders like General Patton, as portrayed by George C. Scott in the movie *Patton*, could push his soldiers to plod through knee-deep mud and snow with diminishing rations, and nary a whisper would ensue from their ranks, that is, as depicted in the movie.

In *The Guns of Navarone* (that I admit has also enlivened my imagination of self-sacrifice and gallantry among soldiers and partisans) the commandos sent to sabotage the heavily fortified gun emplacement



hidden on the side of a high cliff were in high spirits while using only a frail fishing boat to sneak into enemy territory. In the stormy night, the waves tossed the frail vessel, but it was this storm and the dark that could be their perfect cover for the sneak assault. If they bungled their sabotage mission, the approaching American fleet would be reduced into sitting ducks for the powerful cannons in Navarone. The tense build-up to the climax nearly made me piss in my pants but the Bang-Boom came soon enough to let me relieve my bladder in the suddenly crowded comfort room.

This same high-tension teamwork and precision in sabotage was also the high point of *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, where I came out of the movie house whistling fervently the musical theme as it was whistled by the British prisoners of war in Burma. The point of recollecting a couple of WW II movies is that I was also a sucker for the sense of reality conjured by my favorite actors and film directors from Hollywood. My imagination was impregnated with cinema imagery.

It was only when I was past my teens, after watching *The Battle of Neretva*, a strategic river in the defense of Yugoslavia by the Allied Forces, that I began to suspect that more Europeans fought or died defending their homelands and human dignity against Hitler's occupation army than the heroic Americans during that global conflagration. Several books and movies made by Europeans would later confirm my belated suspicions. As to the heroism or patriotism of the brave and the free under the star-spangled Banner, well, George C. Scott in *Patton* probably proclaimed it more accurately: "It is not to die for one's country but to let the enemy die for his."

It is a clearer perspective for soldiery bereft of sentimentality; and war may be better reckoned for what it usually is — a bloody opportunity to grab territories, resources, power and profit. Significantly, war films on World War II have never shown that the biggest buyers of the war bonds sold by Hitler's government to support the Nazi advance across Europe and Africa were British and American bankers. But the film *Catch-22* satirizes the war-profiteers among the top military echelon during the Korean War, if memory serves me right. And if my leapfrogging flashback serves my attempt at hindsight, war films made in Hollywood in the 1950s and early 1960s were mostly replications of Cowboy-versus-Indian series with the US cavalry climactically galloping to the rescue. This

regimented worldview of the good guys crushing the evil gooks was neither incidental nor unintentional. The war films I saw with misty eyes as a youngster were a psychological armory deployed through the enchanting artistry of the cinema to buttress the Cold War strategy of the US military establishment and right-wing business wizards. Hence, more than just serving as Gabler's "metaphors for America's attitude toward authority," they comprise a very potent channel of psy-war that perfectly inculcated within the imaginations and emotions of my generation the all-time benevolence and reliability of the American war machine.

Is this another conspiracy fantasy?

Certainly not, if one reckoned with historical facts and context. Soon after World War II, as the Soviet army intensified its stranglehold in East Europe, Mao Tse Tung's army crushed the Kuomintang forces. In 1949, it took over the reins of government in China while threatening to spread its influence to Indochina and Indonesia. This was followed by the Korean War a few years later and the US incursion into Vietnam and the American CIA operations in Indonesia in pursuit of the Domino strategy of the state department in Washington, D.C.

Within the US itself the immediate effect of these US interventionist wars was the resurgence of right-wing demagoguery as expressed through the McCarthyite witch hunt. Hollywood was among the prime targets of this socio-political purge probably because of its influence on public consciousness. Most of the left-leaning and humanist writers and artists, including journalists and screen playwrights, were hounded by the inquisition and false accusations of the House Un-American Activities Committee of the US Congress.

The predatory travesty against human rights in America is reconstructed by the Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes in his documentary novel *The Years with Laura Diaz*, to wit:

Immediately, all ultra-reactionaries in Hollywood — Ronald Reagan, Adolphe Menjou, Ginger Roger's mother — corroborated their suspicion (against target personalities), and then the congressmen would pass on the information to Hollywood gossip columnists, Hedda Hopper, Walter Winchell, George Sokolsky all lived on the blood of the sacrificed stars, like ink-and-paper Draculas. Then the American Legion would mobilize

its forces to picket the movies in which the suspects appeared — John Garfield, for example — not allowing people in. Then the studio could say what was said to Garfield: You're a risk. You put the security of the studio at risk. And fire him.

That's the real conspiracy that virulently swept artistic integrity and idealism out of Hollywood which imprinted in my generation's imagination the Good Guys versus Evil Gooks cardboard characterization and stereotyped story lines, such as in those movies on World War II, among others, which were the by-product of McCarthy's psy-war witch hunt. Indeed there was a time I even asked my mother to buy me a jacket similar to that worn by John Wayne in his role as a commander of a marine air contingent in *Flying Leathernecks*.

It would take the next decade to show such movies as *Is Paris Burning?* dramatizing the deep-set human values of Hitler's generals in Paris who refused to carry out his order to raze the cosmopolitan capital. By then, Hollywood, like much of American society, was buffeted by the widespread clamor for social change among the anti-racist civil rights movement, the anti-establishment Hippies and the radicalized Black Power agitation, the assassinations of prominent political figures, but mainly by the anti-war protesters.

Hollywood star Jane Fonda went on a round-the-world road show denouncing the immorality and futility of the Vietnam War. And yet US intervention in Vietnam was spilling over to neighboring countries with war personnel reaching half a million. The modus operandi of such massive intervention required the policy of universal conscription of American youth to replace the increasing number of body bags returning home, along with the war veterans disabled for life, who found their own families and neighborhoods strained by the anti-war sentiments and the dispute over the draft-dodgers. The government caused the stripping of the heavyweight title from boxing champ Muhammad Ali for his refusal to accept the draft, while reasoning out he could not "shoot at complete strangers who have done me no harm."

The anti-war groundswell shook Hollywood well enough to churn out numerous movies depicting the moral and psychological quagmire of shell-shocked veterans and their loved ones: *Apocalypse Now*, *Homecoming*, *The Deerhunter*, *Birdy*, *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*,



*Casualties of War*, and so on. Some of these movies were shot on location in the Philippines.

But as movies must come to The End so did that season of Vietnam era reflective and remorseful films. Now we are back to the nostalgia and heroics of World War II: *Schindler's List*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Snow Falling on Cedars*, *Pearl Harbor*, etc. Back to the old reliable Romance, Adventure, Catastrophe plus the newfangled compugraphic toon characters like *The Lion King*, *Shrek* and so forth. Hollywood has expanded the market choices and global sales strategies. McDonald's and Coca-Cola have acculturated in the erstwhile communist bloc. Hollywood movies will follow suit.

Not really, since they will have their reserved command post. After all, as most film buffs know, today there is only one capital for the entire movie-world, as there is only one Oscar Awards televised worldwide with a vast audience certified by pollsters. Actors, scriptwriters, directors the world over will have to catch the eye of the major American producers to make it to International Release. The independent filmmakers, according to a Hollywood insider, are doing their best to excite the movie moguls into bankrolling their cherished projects dealing with personal relationships with gender sensitivity, family and neighborhood reciprocity, ethnic and ecological values. It's a long line and the wait is taking too long for this breed of conscientious filmmakers.

The bandwagon today mostly blares out the musical scores of *Spy Game*, *Behind Enemy Lines*, and *Black Hawk Down*. Five elements bind these crowd-drawers together. First, they are well crafted and project the sophisticated capability of US armory. Second, a palpable sense of history and contemporary issues. Third, deliberate incursions into hostile territories. Fourth, the tactical role of the satellite-linked computer circuitry to monitor or help carry out the military operations. Fifth, despite the grime and bloodshed endured in the encounters, the American interventionists and their war technology emerge on top of the situation, with limited sacrifice of lives as compared to their enemy's losses. Hence taken together they hew very close to the headlines, images, and editorial slant projected consistently by CNN. When, for instance, CNN repeatedly broadcast on the types of US jetfighters that bombed Iraq in early 2001, "The F15, F16 and Tornado attack jets were used in the raid," it sounded much like an advertising spiel for such military hardware, and that the

bombings were simple exercises to demonstrate the superb capabilities of these killing machines.

### Reel and Real Blend

There is as little subtlety in the dramatic display of high-powered weaponry and assault tactics in the recent movies released as in a serial after the relentless attacks on the Taliban lairs in Afghanistan. It may just be sheer coincidence or simply a studio scheme to cash in on today's sensational headlines, but the war technology and the assault strategy plus the elite breed of warriors deployed by US President George Bush against the extremist dissidents — with Afghanistan serving as the initial demonstration site — seem to be replayed graphically in these war films. One cannot help perceiving the mutual reinforcement of the battle scenes and explosions in broadcast media and in these movies.

What is in the celluloid reel is what is in the real war zone, this appears to be director Ridley Scott's viewpoint in *Black Hawk Down*. Feel the nerve-racking reports of guns. Experience the painful spasms of flesh and blood oozing from torn-off body parts. But don't forget to witness the grit of soldiers giving and taking the deadly spray of bullets, burst of grenades, and then risking all just to retrieve a comrade's corpse.

Thence in the end, as the last squad flees the battle zone, these survivors see many civilians at the roadside dancing and cheering for their American heroes. I can't tell whether the events in the movie really reflected a true-to-life situation in Somalia back in the early 1990s but I'm afraid many watchers of this movie will find no need to distinguish between the reel and the real, specially when *Black Hawk Down's* epilogue stresses the factuality of the film narrative.

In *Behind Enemy Lines*, the movie watcher is also given this equation or apparent correspondence between the filmic situation and the factual. This trick of blurring the distinction between cinema scenario and a real situation, or between the actor's characterization and true-life characters is the primal subliminal process behind advertising and mass promotions — or mass propaganda in general — designed to alter individual tastes or product preference, as well as the social psychology of a community. In short, it is meant to make the people's consciousness "suggestible,"



to use the term of Harold Brown who has presented a comprehensive study of this manipulative process in his book *Techniques of Persuasion*.

To illustrate this mind-changing scheme down to the behavioral level: in a moviehouse in Gaisano Mall in Davao City showing *Behind Enemy Lines*, the audience suddenly burst in applause and collective sigh when the airborne rescue party swooped down at long last to lift the American straggler pilot out of his desperate attempt to elude his blood-thirsty Bosnian pursuers. This scene that has incited the mind and emotion of the film watchers in Davao deep enough to make them react in wild applause followed the tense, long sequence showing the pilot's miserable plight and imminent capture. The pilot's agony has obviously touched the movie watchers' sense of the pathos thus impelling them to react by clapping and cheering for him and the rescuers.

This collective feeling of relief and joy in the audience was punctuated by the film epilogue asserting that the Bosnian top military officer so-and-so was eventually charged with genocide in the War Crimes Commission; what nailed down the Bosnian commander was the spy pilot's photographic evidence. To be sure, the pilot-actor has won the hearts and minds of the movie-watchers in a Davao mall in Mindanao, a troubled land festering with dissidents and kidnap-for-ransom bands, and which has now welcomed an American military contingent to rescue an American couple from the Abu Sayyaf kidnapppers, and train as well the Filipino soldiers and officers to do a better job in eradicating these lawless elements.

So, was the Davao moviegoers' spontaneous applause incited by the tense film sequence in *Behind Enemy Lines*? Or was it also expressive of the existential tensions in their own lives and landscape?

This review of war films does not pretend to have the answer to the twin riddles. Perhaps a socio-psychological research may better enlighten us concerning the motive power of filmmakers and cinema and their potency to influence consciousness and behavior. One point needs to be amplified by way of concluding this overview: *Spy Game*, *Behind Enemy Lines*, and *Black Hawk Down* all try to enmesh or inter-link cinematic scenery with actual geopolitical conflicts, past and present. The last two films achieve this newsy immediacy via the documentary-style epilogue.

It should not come as a surprise (like some Jack-in-the-box) for a war film to indulge in the simulation of headline-hogging events so as to have a built-in marketing strategy by harnessing the volatile issues that excite public attention and emotion. Nor should it shock anyone not born after September 11, 2001 when a war movie made in Hollywood utilizes a subliminal scheme in psychological stimulation, thereby inciting the audience to respond or express their feelings and viewpoints regarding the celluloid actors as well as the major actors and stakeholders in today's headline-hogging geopolitical conflicts.

Whichever way the movie moguls and directors handle their equipment, talent and motive, the technique of blending simulation and stimulation is a time-tested trick of the trade among psy-war operatives. Like it or not, cinema and the whole mass media have always been harnessed for corporate and product persuasion as well as socio-political propaganda — and not to exclude, of course, such personal indulgences as virtual sexuality, artistry, extraterrestriality, spirituality and the low-cost pursuit of happiness in a dark moviehouse.

### Epilogue

There is a particular film I have been itching to watch again since the September suicide jet plane crashes on the megalithic centers of US big business, New York's World Trade Center, and American military power, the Pentagon. Starring Annette Bening as an operative of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), this movie foreshadowed by several months the September 11 sabotage conducted by Arab pilots mostly trained by American and West European aeronautic schools.

In the film, however, the Arab suicide bombers were trained by the CIA to do their dirty work in Arab countries. As their CIA handler, Bening tries every which way to neutralize their suicide bombing spree in US cities (while agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) closes in on the terrorist cells), even going to the extent of copulating with their leader, as revealed by an FBI night-vision camera.

But Bening fails to thwart any of the jihadist cell members who spitefully tell her of their distrust and rage. And that they are now wreaking vengeance on the US which has used them in assassination jobs in Arabia, and yet achieving nothing positive in their homelands but causing

a spiral of violence and hopelessness. Worse, they can't even return home, so they are made to feel that they are virtual detainees in the US or highly dispensable pawns in this bloody power play. But what's intriguing in the filmic narrative is that they are autonomous in their deadly sorties, not linked to a vast secret network. Just one individual can constitute a terrorist cell, unlike in their former role as CIA killers when they had to take orders from a distant boss.

Sadly, the three movie-for-rent shops I visited told me this film *The Siege* was no longer available. Not surprising, considering that the movie plot reflects the well-cited notion that Osama Bin Laden, the prime suspect of US President George Bush to have plotted the September 11 carnage, used to cooperate with the CIA in pushing out the USSR's occupation army from Afghanistan. So I'll bet two cases of beer that Hollywood won't make any movie with a story line and character similar to *The Siege* (or, to Osama Bin Laden's) for as long as President Bush is rabidly waging a terrorist-hunt throughout the planet highly reminiscent of how the discredited McCarthy hounded Hollywood through his red-baiting witch hunt.

To be fair, here's a caveat to anybody wishing to take me on my bet: just weeks after the September 11 carnage, movie reporters in Hollywood bared that President Bush had met with film directors to appeal for restraint in releasing films that may depict the US soldiers as confused or demoralized while they are waging a globalized crusade against terrorist cells and governments suspected of harboring them.

So expect more war films which mainly demonstrate the stupendous capabilities of killing machines and war-linked satellite monitors but have very little to say about society, inequity, much less about human values transcending the ties of comrades-in-arms or the esprit de corps of rescuers, casualties and corpses. This myopic motivation in making war, insofar as *Black Hawk Down* dramatizes it, is best expressed by one survivor who defines the entire kill-or-be-killed endeavor in laconic sentences: ' t's about the man next to you. That's it.'

Is that it?

Great guts! Dubious glory! That's the sort of war films drawing big crowds this season even as CNN shows on the screen President Bush spouting fire and brimstone: "We will prevail in this war, and we will defeat this recession."



Now, you see the official connection between war-mongering and fighting recession, as you may have noted the usual parallelism between the slant of CNN headlines and recent war film storylines. ●