British Journal for Military History

Volume 10, Issue 3, November 2024

Cover picture: Michael Caine and Stanley Baker on the location set of the film *Zulu* (1964), dir. Cy Endfield, Diamond Films / Paramount Pictures. Public Domain

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Volume 10, Issue 3 November 2024

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British Journal for Military History – ISSN: 2057-0422
DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i3
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CONTENTS

EDITORIAL 1

Articles

INTRODUCTION: SCREEN SHOTS – REPRESENTING WAR AND CONFLICT ON SCREEN
By Laura Aguiar & Emma Hanna 2

BY THE SWORD DIVIDED: THE ENGLISH CIVIL WAR AS SUNDAY-NIGHT TELEVISION DRAMA
By Sarah Betts 6

'I CAME UP HERE TO BUILD A BRIDGE': CAPITALISM AND THE REPRESENTATION OF MILITARY LEADERSHIP IN *ZULU* (1964)
By Will Kitchen 31

LANDSCAPE AND EMOTION IN MODERN FIRST WORLD WAR CINEMA: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE BRITISH SOLDIER IN NATURE
By Bethany Wyatt 50

KILLING TO COMMEMORATE, DYING TO REMEMBER? AUTHENTICITY AND THE PRACTICE OF MEMORY IN *ISONZO*
By Chris Kempshall & Vanda Wilcox 69

'NOT A HERO STORY': CHALLENGING CONCEPTS OF 'HEROES' AND 'VILLAINS' IN HISTORICAL CONFLICTS THROUGH VIDEO GAMES
By Alastair Binns 91

CAMERA TECHNOLOGY, ITS LIMITATIONS AND ITS IMPACT ON THE WORK OF THE ARMY FILM AND PHOTOGRAPHIC UNIT, 1941-1945
By Oliver Carter-Wakefield 112

WHAT THE SEA REMEMBERS; WHAT THE FILMS OF MIDWAY FORGET
By Debra Ramsay 134

'STOP AND SEARCH': HOW THE MILITARISED SPACE OF BELFAST'S PAST IS NAVIGATED BY FEMINIST FILM-MAKERS
By Elspeth Vischer 154

‘DO YOU FEEL LIKE A HERO YET?’: *SPEC OPS*, *CALL OF DUTY* AND THE PROBLEMS OF PLAYING SOLDIER
By Ben Hammond 170

THE VIRTUAL AND THE REAL; WAR FILMS, VIDEO GAMES AND THE IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM
By Ian Kikuchi 191

Submission Guidelines

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES 213
BJMH STYLE GUIDE 217

EDITORIAL*

Given the media buzz surrounding the release of the new Steve McQueen production *Blitz,* this special issue could not be more timely. In 'Screen Shots', guest editors Laura Aguiar and Emma Hanna have brought together an outstanding collection of articles illuminating the complicated relationship between war and art. The interdisciplinary contributions herein explore the many ways in which war and the military are represented on screen, from film and television to computer games and museum displays. In doing so, this special issue shows how, in the words of the editors, 'different screen formats have become crucial in shaping public discourse around the representation and memorialisation of war'. We are most grateful to all the contributors and particularly to our guest editors, and we very much hope you enjoy 'Screen Shots'.

As this is our last issue of 2024 this is also a good opportunity for us to say many thanks to all our readers, contributors, reviewers, and guest editors. Since taking the helm in the spring we have been impressed by the quality of the submissions and immensely grateful for the work of all the reviewers and managing editors. Our next edition, which will once again include articles and research notes from an array of scholars, will follow in early 2025.

In the meantime, we are always grateful for any new submissions relevant to the broad field of military history, whether they be full length articles or research notes about new collections of sources or work in progress. For anyone considering a submission, please consult our guidelines at
https://journals.gold.ac.uk/index.php/bjmh/about/submissions#authorGuidelines .

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* DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i3.1825

British Journal for Military History, Volume 10, Issue 3, November 2024

Introduction: Screen Shots – Representing War and Conflict on Screen

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Over the last thirty years there has been a growing interest in the ways in which war and conflict has been represented on screen. Cinematic and televisual representations of military action have formed an increasingly significant part of the discourses surrounding the history, memory, and memorialisation of war, particularly around the times of significant anniversary commemorations.

To reflect the wide variety of formats and contexts in which screen representations can be used and experienced today, the authors have brought together this special issue of the BJMH on representations of war and conflict on screen. This issue showcases current research which reflects the breadth and depth of work being done into this subject across a diverse range of disciplines. There are contributions from researchers who consider how screen representations of military activities are used in the wider contexts of film and television, but also in museums, galleries, computer games, and other public spaces, both real and virtual. This highlights that work on screen representations of military action are being approached in a broad chronological and geographical scope.

In Britain, certain periods such as the Tudors and the two World Wars have dominated popular primetime television schedules. Sarah Betts' article on the series *By The Sword Divided* (BBC, 1983-1985) seeks to rectify the absence of the English Civil War from the history of television screen-drama. Betts considers its representation of warfare and use of historical research by contextualizing it against popular understandings of civil war history, specifically and perceptions of warfare more generally, as well as formats of 1980s popular television drama.

Cinematic representations of war can accrue mythic status in modern cultural history, with some films becoming accepted as synonyms of British heroism and pluck. Will

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DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i3.1826

Kitchen's article analyses military authority and capitalist ideology through a textual analysis of the film *Zulu* (1964) and its narrative depiction of leadership during the Battle of Rorke's Drift – the most prominent action of the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. Kitchen interprets how this heroism is explained to the film audience and the political implications of film's ability to communicate the ideology of leadership in reference to frameworks shared between military and corporate social systems, considering how this relationship is illuminated by the text's wider historical construction and reception.

Landscapes also play a key role in the representation of war on screen and their purpose go beyond merely creating realistic settings to add authenticity to the story. Landscapes can shape the tone, narrative, and emotional impact of the film's story and act as silent witnesses to the human violence and the epic scale of wars. The interaction of characters with their environment also carries a lot of meaning and can reflect inner conflicts and represent stages of their physical and emotional journey. Bethany Wyatt's article looks at British and Hollywood representations of First World War since 2011 and explores how the Western Front landscape has been dramatized in varied ways as a coping mechanism for soldiers.

The First World War is also explored by Chris Kempshall and Vanda Wilcox who examine the growth of popularity of videogames focusing on the period since the centenary of 2014-18. Through interviews with players and developers of the game *Isonzo* (2022), the authors take us to a lesser-known setting in the anglosphere – the Italian Front – and demonstrate how players can gain insights into the constructions of memory, the complexities of warfare, and the socio-political contexts that shaped these events.

Isonzo is one of the many historical games using the power of visual and narrative techniques to immerse audiences in complex (war) worlds, allowing players to shape their own experiences and outcomes within these narratives. *Battlefield V* (2018) and *The Great War: Western Front* (2023) are analysed here by Alastair Binns who focuses on the under-representation of 'villains' of the two World Wars and the challenges faced by video games engaging with history outside of traditional 'heroic' narratives. Kempshall and Wilcox's and Binn's articles demonstrate how video games have become as important as cinema and television within Screen Studies scholarship, offering unique forms of storytelling, visual artistry, and audience engagement that challenge traditional media boundaries.

The Second World War is the focus of Oliver Carter-Wakefield's article on Britain's Army Film and Photographic Unit and the limitations and impact of the camera technology used between 1941-1945. Formed as part of a strategy to address the 'morale crisis' the Army believed it was facing, the Unit aimed to counter German

propaganda by producing images of battle and military victories. Carter-Wakefield's detailed analysis highlights the technological limitations the Unit encountered, and the innovative solutions found by the cameramen to overcome these.

The environmental impact of warfare is a rarely discussed topic in the history and memory of conflict. Debra Ramsay's article investigates how three films about the Battle of Midway (1942) have represented the environmental impact of industrial warfare, exposing a long history in the American war film of practices that obscure the relationship between warfare and the environments in which it is waged. Ramsay argues that the films themselves enact a form of structural violence upon these spaces and their non-human inhabitants. As conflict and climate change converge, Ramsay calls for a more critical interrogation of the representational strategies of past conflicts, so that we might recognise and challenge those of current and future wars.

Elspeth Vischer's article takes us to the conflict in Northern Ireland (1969-1998), often known euphemistically as *The Troubles*, to remind us that wars are not a quintessentially masculine realm. Vischer offers a comparative study of feminist filmmaking strategies deployed to address issues around the militarised space of Belfast during the conflict and examines two films: Pat Murphy's *Maeve* (1981) and the author's own film *New Threads (*2022). Vischer demonstrates the experimental techniques that can be used to challenge hegemonic narratives of the Northern Irish conflict and to capture how queer bodies *(New Threads*) and women's bodies (*Maeve*) navigated it. The article also reminds us how important it is to not only write women and queer bodies into the history of the conflict, but also to query why they were omitted in the first place.

This special issue demonstrates that historians and screen scholars can no longer neglect the significant impact that video games have on the representation of war and conflict. Ben Hammond's article underlines that during the Global War on Terror the modern military shooter became one of the most popular genres of video games. He examines the way modern combat was portrayed in *Spec Ops: The Line* in contrast to its genre contemporaries, particularly the *Call of Duty* franchise. Hammond shows that despite the game's commercial failure it asserted itself as an important historical document for analysing media portrayals of modern warfare by questioning the ethics of military video games, and the role of the players themselves.

Where television programmes were broadcast to mark significant wartime anniversaries, the video games market has responded by releasing certain games in periods of remembrance. Ian Kikuchi's article demonstrates how the Imperial War Museum, founded in 1917 to record the war effort and sacrifice of Britain and its empire in the Great War, created an exhibition in 2022 to reflect its long association

with the history and memory of 1914-1918, and its contemporary engagement with video games as a creative medium and an artefact of war in popular culture.

In conclusion, this special issue highlights current multidisciplinary research that demonstrates the breadth and depth of work conducted by scholars and practitioners across diverse chronological and geographical contexts. This body of work illustrates the dynamic and multifaceted ways in which military history is represented across various screen mediums, from traditional film and television to video games and museum exhibitions. The contributions highlight the evolution of this field of study, emphasising how different screen formats have become crucial in shaping public discourse around the representation and memorialisation of war. From the exploration of underrepresented conflicts and analysis of landscapes and technologies to the inclusion of diverse narratives, this special issue highlights the importance of a broad and inclusive approach to studying military history. By engaging with these diverse formats and perspectives, both screen and history scholars can continue to challenge traditional perspectives, foster critical dialogues, and illuminate the varied experiences of conflict, ultimately enriching our understanding of the past and its ongoing implications.

British Journal for Military History, Volume 10, Issue 3, November 2024

By The Sword Divided: The English Civil War as Sunday-Night Television Drama

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ABSTRACT
The English Civil War's absence from screen-drama has been long bemoaned. Although scholars have started interrogating the topic, particularly with reference to cinematic depictions, thus far there has been total critical neglect of a unique attempt to bring the wars onto the small screen, as popular primetime 'Sunday-night' period drama. This article examines this attempt, the BBC1 show, By The Sword Divided (1983-1985), considering its representation of warfare and use of historical research and contextualizing it against popular understandings of civil war history specifically and perceptions of warfare more generally, as well as formats of 1980s popular television drama.

Introduction

The seventeenth century being so little 'manifest[ed] in contemporary culture, particularly visual culture or in popular media', despite its significance in national political history, academic culture, and 'intellectual life after the advent of television and film', Jerome de Groot described as a 'peculiarity'.[1] This dramatically turbulent and significant period's absence from screen drama, particularly that of the Civil Wars (1642-1660), has bewildered and frustrated enthusiasts and scholars. Several scholars have considered the topic, some, attempting to explain its absence, but most analysing those depictions that do exist through the lens of particular figures and/or cultural products. Mostly focused on film rather than television, scholarship has virtually

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DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i3.1827
[1]Jerome de Groot, '"Welcome to Babylon": Performing and Screening the English Revolution' in Mark Thornton Burnett and Adrian Streete (eds), *Filming and Performing Renaissance History*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 70.

ignored a significant exception to this absence of the wars from mainstream popular culture, the BBC's Sunday-night serial drama, *By The Sword Divided* (1983-1985).[2]

This article places *By The Sword*, into the contexts of depictions of history on screen, specifically period drama television serials, and contemporary formulae of primetime television in 1980s Britain. It will then analyse its coverage of key events, before examining its portrayal of technical aspects of historical warfare and weaponry, and the depiction of civilians at war. The influence of cultural understandings of the nature of war, utilisation of historical research and popular tropes, and aesthetic and logistic production choices will be considered. Analysing the (re)construction of the conflict within this single but long-term production against these contexts will help uncover how the series reflected public understandings of the civil war, and elucidate the place of warfare within contemporary public historical cultures which increasingly embraced social history approaches.

John Hawkesworth & 'Golden Age' Sunday-Night Period Drama.

Since the BBC's famously successful 1967 *Forsyte Saga* adaptation, British television developed what Claire Monk has described as 'a template' for 'period "event television" dramas on a vast multi-episodic scale' that created certain expectations for producers and audiences.[3] Sunday evenings became an expected, prestigious slot for such offerings, associated in long-term cultural mindsets with 'quality drama' which combined 'period nostalgia' and the 'cultural prestige' of conveying a sense of a 'national' past. British Television drama experienced a 'golden age' of funding and creative freedom and throughout the 1970s both channels screened numerous successful 'historical' dramas, several very popular and commercially.[4] By the early-1980s, British 'heritage' productions for both big and small screen had a strong market

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[2]Ronald Hutton, 'Why Don't the Stuarts Get Filmed?' in Susan Doran and Thomas S. Freeman (eds), *Tudors and Stuarts on Film: Historical Perspectives*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 246-258. David Rowlinson, 'What's the Future for the 17th century on screen?' https://earlofmanchesters.co.uk/whats-the-future-for-the-17th-century-on-screen/. Accessed 5 January 2024, Sarah Betts, 'Roundhead Reputations Twenty Years On: Cultural Memory Studies and the English Civil War', *English Historical Review*, Vol.138, No.593, (August, 2023), pp. 985-986.

[3]Claire Monk, 'Pageantry and Populism, Democratization and Dissent: The Forgotten 1970s' in James Leggott and Julie Anne Taddeo (eds), *Upstairs and Downstairs: British Costume Drama Television from The Forsyte Sage to Downton Abbey*, (Lanham; London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), pp. 10, 17-18,

[4]Estella Tincknell, 'Dowagers, Debs, Nuns and Babies: The Politics of Nostalgia and the Older Woman in the British Sunday Night Television Serial', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, Vol. 10, No. 4, (2013), pp. 769-784 (p.773), Lez Cooke, *British Television Drama: A History*, (London: BFI Publishing, 2003), p. 4.

and reputation, domestically and internationally. Investment in such projects increased, bigger budgets were spent on both production quality and marketing, and, in the television industry, aspirations/assumptions set from inception about 'potential as "heritage export"'.[5] Many 1970s hits were exported to America via PBS's *Masterpiece Theatre*, creating a brand identity culturally 'synonymous' with 'Anglophiliac', nostalgic 'heritage shorthand', that, despite difficulties in definitively generically categorising diverse offerings of broadly 'historical' drama, nonetheless highlighted a 'very particular type' of British 'heritage quality' cultural product, recognisable via 'attenti[on] to detail', and acting, 'aesthetic', and 'pacing' styles.[6]

Perhaps the 1970s most successful and enduringly famous of this 'type' was ITV's original, multi-series *Upstairs, Downstairs* (LWT 1971-1975), following an Edwardian to late-1920s Belgravian household, a big hit in both the UK and America. It spawned tie-in publications including novelisations from authors who worked in dramatic broadcasting, the first two by the show's producer, John Hawkesworth. Hawkesworth was seen as instrumental in the show's success and, clearly hopeful of capturing some of *Upstairs, Downstairs*'s audience, the BBC broadcast two series of his own creation, *The Duchess of Duke Street* (1976-1977). Following a woman from domestic servant, to high-end hotel proprietress, this series employed a similar setting, and many of the same creative team, as *Upstairs, Downstairs*. It was popular, award-winning, broadcast in America, and novelised. Academics have traditionally considered period drama culturally 'conservative', socially snobbish, and unnuanced in approaching history, focussed on 'superficial costume and the artifices of class…[and] enshrine[ing] particular erroneous myths about historical identity' and events, and historical dramas have always faced criticism for sacrificing accuracy for dramatic sensationalism.[7] Original scripts, lacking direct historic source-text, fictional protagonists, and focus on mundane period ephemera, left shows like *Upstairs, Downstairs* particularly vulnerable to classification as superficial commercial products rather than historically educational texts.[8] But, as Gary Edgerton has argued, television is a significant, even 'principal',

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[5]Andrew Higson, *English Heritage, English Cinema: Costume Drama Since 1980*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 15-16; Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*, Second Edition, (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 225.

[6]Simone Knox, '*Masterpiece Theatre* and British Drama Imports on US Television: Discourses of Tension', *Cultural Studies in Television*, Vol.7, No.1, (Spring, 2012), pp. 30-31; Elke Weissmann; *Transnational Television Drama: Special Relations and Mutual Influence Between the US and the UK*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 74-75; Monk, 'Pageantry and Populism', pp. 4, 6-7, 11-12.

[7]De Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 223-224.

[8]Helen Wheatley, 'Rooms Within Rooms: *Upstairs, Downstairs* and the Studio Costume Drama of the 1970s' in Catherine Johnson and Rob Turnock (eds), *ITV Cultures:*

source of 'history' for 'most people', and thus has been increasingly examined as a resource for teaching, and for studying popular history.[9] Furthermore, as Emma Hanna notes, *Upstairs, Downstairs*'s creators took the series' historical element seriously, particularly the depiction of the 1914-18 war, 'feel[ing] themselves to be deeply involved in the history of the First World War', researching and building-upon personal connections amongst cast and crew, and seemingly alert to a sense of responsibility, towards the audience and the national past, to be both accurate and 'identifiable'.[10] That one of those family connections was Hawkesworth's is noteworthy because personal ancestral links to both sides of the English Civil Wars apparently inspired him to create *By The Sword Divided*.[11]

By The Sword Divided

With its cover-headline, 'For King or Parliament? One family takes two sides', and follow-up feature inside on 're-creating the seventeenth century', *Radio Times* introduced BBC1's 1983 autumn-season centre-piece costume drama.[12] Allocating an early prime-time Sunday evening slot, and heavily promoting *By The Sword*'s debut, the BBC, press-critics concluded, was 'obviously expect[ing]…a major hit'.[13] Hawkesworth's reputation was crucial to the marketing, with listings and features name-checking him as creator and citing his previous hits to build anticipation, consolidating such a strong impression that more than one critic concluded that essentially 'The Beeb's new Sunday biggie…[wa]s a sort of Upstairs, Downstairs in [the] ringlets and pantomime boots' of a different period dress.[14] Certainly the period was somewhat novel. Hawkesworth's '70s hits, like many other contemporary popular

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Independent Television Over Fifty Years, (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2005), pp. 145-149, 156.

[9]Gary R. Egerton, 'Introduction: Television as Historian: A Different Kind of History Altogether' in Gary R. Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins (eds), *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), pp. 1-16; Nicola Bishop, 'Presenting the Past: New Directions in Television History' in Sam Edwards, Michael Dolski and Faye Sayer (eds), *Histories On Screen: The Past and Present in Anglo-American Cinema and Television*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 277-289.

[10]Emma Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen: Representing the First World War in Contemporary Britain*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp. 126-129.

[11]Peter Oliver, 'The War That Split a Family', *Western Daily Press*, 15 October 1983, p. 16.

[12]Jim Crace, 'Cavalier Attitudes', *Radio Times*, 15-21 October1983, pp. 84-91.

[13]Albert Watson, 'Sharon's Bid For Fame', *Evening Chronicle*, 15 October 1983, p. 13.

[14]Hilary Kingsley, 'In My View: Sword That Is Blunt', *Daily Mirror*, 17 October 1983, p. 17. Michael Poole, 'Revolutionary Saga', *The Listener*, No. 2830, 13 October 1983, p. 38.

historical serials, were both Edwardian-set. Regency/Victorian literary adaptations were consistently popular, and the BBC experienced significant success with Tudor historicals. But the Seventeenth Century's complex internecine political and military conflicts had a less well-tested appeal. Hawkesworth himself found it inexplicable that 'nobody' had 'fully' dramatised 'one of the most important periods in our history', which shaped national society and 'government' into the present. Having long-considered it 'extraordinarily neglected' considering its historical importance, he had waited '14 years' for time for period research to flesh-out his concept, and the 'Midas touch'-record to secure BBC-backing.[15]

The chronologically remoter period, more alien to historical culture, struck a more awkward artificial, 'Shakespeare-ese' tone for some compared to the Edwardian dramas, but modern production technologies and cultures rendered the series an improvement on its predecessors in terms of visual spectacle.[16] New capabilities and vogue for location filming were transforming the 1980s into an era of country-house aesthetic 'heritage' dramas, making 'extensive' use of outdoor, picturesque heritage sites and rural landscapes. Following this model, epitomised by Granada's recent spectacular success, *Brideshead Revisited* (1981), but also adopted by lower-key productions like BBC2's *Mansfield Park* (1983), significant portions of *By The Sword* were shot outside, its chief location, Rockingham Castle, Northamptonshire, was a focal point of action, practically an extra protagonist in the drama, in a very different manner from the 'set-bound' studio aesthetic of *Upstairs, Downstairs*.[17] A key selling-point of *By The Sword* as an historical piece then, was indulgence in the combination of the exoticism of the relatively distant past, combined with a comfortable sense of continuity with an old England, a perfect 'excuse', a tv-listing reminded, for 'lavish costumes and showing off our architectural heritage'.[18]

Dramatically Hawkesworth built on previous success, and, one journalist opined, *By The Sword* had 'all the Hawkesworthian traits of a successful serial'.[19] Many interiors were shot in-studio adding to familiar impressions of 'quality' and 'heritage' drama which Elke Weissmann argues were culturally implied, even inherent, in the 'deliberate

[15]Ian Lyness, 'John's Golden Touch Turns to Epic', *Bristol Evening Post*, 8 September 1983, p. 13; 'Nothing Like a History Lesson', *Nottingham Evening Post Supplement*, 22 October 1983, p. 10.
[16]Kingsley, 'Sword That Is Blunt'.
[17]Tom Bragg, 'History's Drama: Narrative Space in "Golden Age" British Television Drama' in Leggott and Taddeo, *Upstairs and Downstairs*, p. 23.
[18]*Cambridge Evening News*, 15 October 1983, p. 3.
[19]Alec Lom, 'Shooting a War the Civil Way', *Leicester Daily Mercury*, 11 August 1983, p. 20.

aesthetic choice of theatricality' consolidated by the '70s dramas as 'generic markers'.[20] Michael Poole also observed a particular 'mythology' conveyed, 'that of television family saga' in the tradition, he specified, of *Forsyte Saga* and *Upstairs, Downstairs*, with 'sense of period' and national historic moments 'emerg[ing] through the dynastic and domestic small-change of life in an upper-class household', and clearly-purposed rooms, for cooking, dining, and sleeping, aesthetically reminding of that domesticity, both specifically in *By The Sword*, and generically in reference to the well-known *mise-en-scène* of the previous decades' hits. Particular to Hawkesworth's own reputation, rooms were also demarcated by rank, and the kitchen was once again a key location, emblematic also of his re-use of the 'landmark' and popular inclusion of servants in the narrative, which had itself been a 'deliberate' choice by the creators of *Upstairs, Downstairs* to 'redress' the upper-class focus of the influential *Forsyte Saga*, and use the freedom of original narrative and long-running format to explore aspects of social history and 'everyday' heritage which were becoming an increasing feature of contemporary historical cultures.[21] Heightening his new drama's association with his famous back-catalogue, Hawkesworth also brought across old colleagues like producer, Brian Spiby, and writers, Jeremy Paul and Alfred Shaughnessy (See Figure 1).

[20]Weissmann, *Transnational Television*, pp. 71-72.

[21]James Leggott and Julie Anne Taddeo, 'Introduction' in Leggott and Taddeo, *Upstairs and Downstairs*, p. xvi Katherine Byrne, *Edwardians on Screen: From Downton Abbey to Parade's End*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) pp. 9, 24-25; Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*: *Past and Present in Contemporary Culture,* (London: Verso, 1994), pp. 210-212, 260, 263.

Episode Number	Series 1 (1983)	Date Given in Opening Titles	Writer
1	Gather Ye Rosebuds	May 1640	Jermey Paul
2	The War Without an Enemy	Summer 1641	John Hawkesworth
3	The Sound of Drums	September 1642	Alfred Shaughnessy
4	A Silver Moon	July 1643	Jeremy Paul
5	The Edge of the Sword	June 1644	Alexander Baron
6	Outrageous Fortune	Summer 1645	Alfred Shaughnessy
7	A Sea of Dangers	September 1645	John Hawkesworth
8	Ring of Fire	September 1645	John Hawkesworth
9	Ashes to Ashes	September 1645	Jeremy Paul
10	Not Peace, But a Sword	June 1647	Alexander Baron

Episode Number	Series 2 (1985)	Date Given in Opening Titles	Writer
1	Conflicts	1648	Jermey Paul
2	Cruel Necessity	1649	John Hawkesworth
3	Cromwell at Arnescote	1649	Carey Harrison
4	Witch Hunt	1650	Alexander Baron
5	Escape	1651	Jeremy Paul
6	Fateful Days	1653	Alexander Baron
7	Forlorn Hope	1655	Alexander Baron
8	The Mailed Fist	1657	Alexander Baron
9	Retribution	1658	Jeremy Paul
10	Restoration	1660	John Hawkesworth

Figure 1: Episodes of By The Sword Divided (BBC 1983-1985)

The protagonists were fictional Arnescote Castle's Laceys, an ancient aristocratic family who, dialogue informs, have served monarchs, and fought in famous battles of English history, for generations. Patriarch, Sir Martin, is the widowed father of twins, Tom and Anne, and younger daughter, Lucinda. Other regular cast are servants, led by Cropper (Steward), and Goodwife Margaret (Housekeeper), poor relation, Susan Protheroe, and wealthy merchant, Sir Austin Fletcher and his son John, friends who become family when Anne and John marry, pre-war, in Episode 1:1. The titular division comes with war in 1642 when the Fletchers, including Anne, side with Parliament, in which John sits as MP for the fictional local town of Swinford, while the Laceys (and their household) remain staunchly loyal to the king. Series One covered the period from 1640, through the 'First Civil War' (1642-1646), to its immediate aftermath. In early-1985, a second series aired, covering the 'Second Civil War' (1648), Charles I's imprisonment and execution in 1649, and the 1651 Battle of Worcester, the Interregnum period, Oliver Cromwell's government and eventual death, and finally Charles II's Restoration in 1660. All twenty episodes were dated by on-screen text at the end of the opening titles alerting viewers to the passage of time.

Hawkesworth's team again took the historical element very seriously. He reported to the writing team in August 1982 that he and Paul had already done 'much reading and

research', as well as 'collect[ing] vocabulary and quotations' for better creation of period 'flavour'. He also provided a bibliography of key works, contemporary and historiographic, and established a team reference 'library' to be managed by 'Brian Spiby's secretary'.[22] Much use was made of this reading to directly lift accounts, dialogue, and specific phrases from period documents and traditional historiography. This was very much in keeping with notions of 'authenticity', and responsible and educational value which became associated with, particularly BBC, historical drama of this period, later favourably compared with genre's more recently criticised 'dumbing down' with writers and broadcasters perceived as rejecting a beloved style of quality cultural production in favour of commercial sensationalism.[23] Once again, connections were publicly drawn between the production and actual historical events, with not only Hawkesworth's familial connections publicised, but also aristocratic director, Henry Herbert's, whose ancestor had 'switched sides' to 'preserve' his ancestral home.[24] Hawkesworth included copies of Rockingham's guidebook in his writers' reference-pack, and even its Civil War story was shared to embellish its starring role as Arnescote with authentic colour.[25]

Headlining a busy autumn schedule including a much-commented-on deluge of British-made programming, *By The Sword* seems generally well-received. 'Historical accuracy' and 'authenticity' was praised, but the popular drama element was appreciated too, one commentator describing it as 'a sort of mediaeval Dallas' thanks to 'lots of nookie and intrigue'.[26] Bought by PBS for *Masterpiece*, marketing again specifically highlighted Hawkesworth's reputation, and although the less familiar setting 'failed to cut it' with American audiences in the same way as those previous hits, they still aired both series,

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[22]Museum of English Rural Life (hereinafter MERL) MS 5126/346, John Hawkesworth, 'By The Sword Divided: Notes and Outlines for a Television Series, 31 August 1982', pp. 1, 3, 9-11.

[23]Sarah Betts, 'Power and Passion: Seventeenth-Century Masculinities Dramatised on the BBC in the Twenty-First Century' in Katherine Byrne, James Leggott and Julie Anne Taddeo (eds), *Conflicting Masculinities: Men in Television Period Drama*, (London: IB Tauris, 2018), pp. 72, 86.

[24]Olinda Adeane, 'Peer Through The Lens', *Harpers & Queen*, January 1984, p. 54.

[25]MERL MS 5126/346. 'TV War Divides Fortress Again', *Liverpool Daily Post*, 8 August 1983, p. 9. Watson, 'Sharon's Bid for Fame'. Crace, 'Cavalier Attitudes', pp. 89-90.

[26]Neil Clements, 'Did You Watch..?', *Nottingham Evening Post*, 19 October 1983, p. 2. Ann Pacey, 'A Look-In', *Sunday People*, 23 October 1983, p. 25; Iain Pryde Campbell, 'Review', *Press and Journal*, 29 October 1983, p. 9; John Williams, 'Golly, Gosh, Gush – You're the Grate-est', *Liverpool Daily Post*, 29 October 1983, p. 3; Nina Myskow, 'Watch It!', *Sunday People,* 23 October 1983, p. 24.

and it slotted easily into the 'popular imagination' of *Masterpiece*'s standard fare.[27] In the UK, it was one of an increasing number of 'home-grown' productions with subtitle-availability from initiation, widening accessibility, and an 'increased' general 'interest' in the period was attributed to the show, and capitalised on in publishing and tourism industries, and by re-enactment groups.[28] Mollie Hardwick, noveliser of Hawkesworth's previous hits, brought out a novel in association with the series, with cast-photograph on the cover which also adorned a release of the series music, and thirty-six *By The Sword* costumes were on public exhibition at Longleat House for several months in 1983/4.[29] Rockingham Castle advertised themselves as 'Arnescote' for years to come, and invited the series-star, Timothy Bentinck (Tom Lacey) to open an event there in May 1984.[30]

In a new era of country house screen-tourism, and cooperation between independent historic houses and 'heritage' production, highly recommended by Rockingham's owners, Hawkesworth's own ancestor's civil wartime destruction of its Castle, was noted, as having 'denied' Kenilworth the benefits of 'a nice touch of TV fame'.[31] In the longer-term, although the series never achieved the popularity of Hawkesworth's Edwardian works, it was fondly remembered as something of a cult classic, its eventual DVD-release delighting long-term fans many of whom attributed lifelong interest in the period, and/or joining re-enactment societies, to watching the original broadcast.[32] Anecdotally, lack of alternative material, the carefully-dated and detailed account of the period, and extensive use of seventeenth-century sources, rendered the series a popular teaching-aid for some years, even at university level.

[27]'A Family Torn By Strife', *New York Times*, 20 March 1986, p. A2; 'Public TV', *Variety*, 23 November 1988, p. 90. John O'Connor, "'By the Sword Divided," on "Masterpiece Theater"', *New York Times*, 21 March 1986, p. C34; Rebecca Eaton, *Making Masterpiece: 25 Years Behind the Scenes at Masterpiece Theatre and Mystery! On PBS*, (New York: Viking Penguin, 2013), p. 136; Knox, '*Masterpiece Theatre* and British Drama Imports', pp. 29-32.
[28]'TV Extra…' *Lincolnshire Echo*, 5 December 1983, p. 6. 'Calling All Budding Roundheads and Cavaliers', *Herts and Essex Observer*, 8 December 1983, p. 8.
[29]Mollie Hardwick, *By The Sword Divided*, (London: Century Publishing, 1983). Stuart Russell, 'Mail TV', *Daily Mail*, 8 November 1983, p. 3.
[30]'Rockingham: A Grand Family Day', *Lincoln, Rutland & Stamford Mercury*, 25 May 1984, p. 9.
[31]Hugh Montgomery-Massingberd, 'Arnescote And All That', *The Field*, Vol. 263, Iss.6830, (December, 1983), p. 1321; 'Castle Ruins Its Chances', *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 15 October 1983 p. 9.
[32]Amazon.com Reviews, https://www.amazon.co.uk/product-reviews/B0002MGZ1O/ref=cm_cr_othr_d_show_all_btm?ie=UTF8&reviewerType=all_reviews. Accessed 31 July 2024.

Coverage of Civil War Events

Discussing the Civil War's absence from contemporary popular culture, Hawkesworth mentioned a sole example of 'a film about Cromwell' (presumably *Cromwell* (1970)), but claimed 'no-one' had previously 'done it' for television.[33] The BBC *had* actually, adapted nineteenth-century historical novels, *Woodstock* and *Children of the New Forest*, and screened some one-off TV-plays, but these generally focused on particular moments, events, and/or historical figures rather than the entire period's ideological, military, and political conflict. Both de Groot and Ronald Hutton posit the era's controversies and complexities accounting for lack of enthusiasm for adapting it for screen.[34] How then did Hawkesworth approach narrating this complex twenty-year story via twenty, one-hour, episodes? Partly, on-screen, through re-creation of historical and cultural hooks that both created 'authentic' sense of period, and situated the Laceys' drama within an identifiable national-historical chronology. Opening credits dating helped do this, as did borrowing phrasing from contemporary and popular-historiographical documents and literature (including fiction). So too did using period music and hymns, costumes recreated from portraiture and 'tailor's bill[s] and descriptions', and visual allusions to well-known artworks depicting scenes like the pre-war court, Cromwell viewing Charles I's body, or Charles II's disguise after the Battle of Worcester (1651), all actively researched by the production team.[35] Most comprehensively, Episode 2:2, depicts Charles I's well-documented and nationally-mythologised trial and execution.

The Fletchers are inserted into the historical action and dialogue, John even signing the death warrant, while Edward Ferrar, a royalist viscount Lucinda marries in Episode 1:7, and Arnescote servant, Dick Skinner, wait on Charles, but the characters are seen in London, attending an historical event portrayed as accurately as possible. Extensive on-screen removal of the fictional protagonists to historic scenes is rare. Although characters visit London, and a few other historic locations such as Charles I's wartime-court at Oxford, or the Royalist court-in-exile in France, most of *By The Sword*'s narrative takes place around Arnescote Castle, or the Fletchers' fictional homes nearby. Encounters with genuine historical figures reinforced periodisation, and placement of Arnescote and the Laceys/Fletchers at the heart of the national story. Sometimes these occur on visits to the aforementioned historical locations, but

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[33]Lom, 'Shooting a War the Civil Way'.

[34]De Groot, '"Welcome to Babylon"', p.80; Hutton, 'Why Don't the Stuarts Get Filmed?', pp. 249, 257-258.

[35]MERL MS 5126/346. Russell, 'Mail TV'. Sarah Betts, 'Henrietta Maria, "Queen of Tears"?: Picturing and Performing the Cavalier Queen' in Estelle Paranque (ed), *Remembering Queens and Kings of Early Modern England and France: Reputation, Reinterpretation, and Reincarnation*, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p. 160.)

Arnescote also hosts Charles I, his nephew, Rupert, several Royalist commanders, Cromwell and his son-in-law, and Charles II, as a fugitive from Worcester, and, later, restored king. However, Charles II's first visit, transposing well-known incidents from his famous escape into the fictional family's locality and narrative, marks the only occasion where an historical visitor brought an historical event actually into Arnescote itself.

Apart from the dramatic necessity of keeping the Lacey/Fletcher/Arnescote original narrative central, and desire to take full advantage of location filming at Rockingham, budgetary and other logistic constraints made recreating largescale events in other sets and locations impossible, and desire to preserve authenticity made bringing well-recorded but smaller-scale events to them implausible. But these key national-scale events, and particularly the warfare itself are integral to understanding the war's motivations and outcomes, as well as the progress of historical time. Thus, rather than being directly shot, most happens off-screen but is then recounted, sometimes in great detail, on-screen. As an MP, John is well-connected to receive news, while Tom is a prominent Royalist officer, and close friend and confidante of Prince Rupert. Other comers and goers at Arnescote also bring particulars of wider events, giving the audience a mix of directly reported news interspersed with its discussion amongst family or servants.

Surveying historical novels about the Civil Wars, Farah Mendlesohn observes that popular cultural memory of them almost unfailingly references a handful of major battles recognised as having national significance.[36] Unsurprisingly, *By The Sword* features them prominently. Arnescote was very carefully 'imagined', though never explicitly declared, to be located in Warwickshire, a central location, close to Oxford but not impractically far from London, within easy reach of the Midland-locations of three of those key battles, Edgehill (1642), Naseby (1645), and Worcester (1651), and near enough for plausible familiarity with Roundway Down (1643) and Cropredy Bridge (1644). Mindful of this, and his own familial history, Hawkesworth initially sought a location there, but was frustrated by destruction levels. He found Rockingham the 'perfect' solution, having actually 'been besieged in the Civil War but [not] completely blown up'.[37] Of the four best-known battles, Tom misses only Marston Moor (1644). Rupert *was* at this battle, losing, Tom later references, his beloved dog, but its timing for the series narrative-arc, and its relatively distant Yorkshire location, rendered it dramatically inconvenient for Tom to be there. Still

[36]Farah Mendlesohn, *Creating Memory: Historical Fiction and the English Civil Wars*, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 99-103.

[37]MERL MS 5126/346, Hawkesworth, 'Notes and Outlines', p. 2. 'Nothing Like a History Lesson'. *Nottingham Evening Post*.

the battle and its significance are meticulously included when Tom, arriving to rescue Arnescote from temporary roundhead occupation, recounts,

> learn[ing] of a great battle in the North …. place called Marston Moor. We were whipped. Cut to pieces …. we've been badly hurt …. the King is forced back to Oxford. And [Arnescote] is named as one of the outer garrisons that must be manned to protect it.[38]

More immediate news of Edgehill and Naseby comes directly from the battlefields. Edgehill, the war's first large-scale battle, is important narratively as the household-at-large's first experience of battle, 'the Lacey Troop' fighting, and so nearby that battle-sounds can be heard from Arnescote. Significantly, it is Sir Martin's first *and* last battle-proper as he seriously wounded, and, the audience is repeatedly informed, would have died there if Arnescote's proximity and the King's interest hadn't facilitated his being stretchered home for nursing, providing Tom with an excuse to visit post-battle and impart details and informed assessment of consequences. Naseby is farther, but still near enough that the King requests shelter in its aftermath. Although the battle itself is neither shown, nor featured as prominently as Edgehill, Ferrar details its course, and their defeat's significance is highlighted via the Royalist generals' conference once at Arnescote. Audiences were also prepared for this significance through TV-listings promising 'the war['s] …. dramatic turn with the Battle of Naseby'.[39]

Set mostly during the Interregnum, with Sir Martin now killed-off, Series Two featured less historical *military* action, focusing rather on political events, and socio-cultural experience, of the period. Episodes themed around well-known moments and stereotyped iconography: Charles I's trial, Charles II escape and later restoration, and the coming of a witchfinder (a concept familiar and associated with the civil war period in popular culture from 1968 film *Witchfinder General*).[40] Royalist defeat at Worcester is key to Episode 2:5's plot, and overall series narrative, but again the battle is off-screen, Susan's husband relaying salient details after capture there. Mention is made of the Royalist uprisings of 1655, a local arm of which is written-in to be the chief storyline of Episode 2:7, bringing about the deaths of Ferrar and long-time Lacey servant (and trooper), Walter Jackman. These uprisings instigate the implementation of military rule under district Major-Generals which viewers see Cromwell enact, before Arnescote is made fictional General Horton's regional headquarters.

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[38]Alexander Baron, 'The Edge of the Sword', *By The Sword Divided*, 1:5.
[39]'Weekend TV', *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, 19 November 1983.
[40]De Groot, "'Welcome to Babylon'", p. 74. James Sharpe 'The Cinematic Treatment of Early Modern Witch Trials' in Burnett and Streete, *Filming and Performing Renaissance History*, pp. 89-94.

Second Civil War action had been reported in Episode 2:1, and Tom's participation confirmed when he secretly seeks help at Arnescote following wounding escaping the infamous Siege of Colchester. Mendlesohn has noted that although a significant proportion of civil war action involved sieges, urban and manorial, including large-scale and significant ones, they haven't garnered the same long-term notoriety in national historical narratives as the famous battles.[41] Beyond Colchester, *By the Sword* referenced several significant First Civil War sieges during Series One (at Leicester, Bristol, Oxford, and Basing House), before fictional royalist agent, Frances Neville is introduced in Series Two as having been widowed during the Sieges of Newark (1643-1646). With royalist fortunes declining, Tom also mentions the significance of siege warfare for the conflict's outcome, assuring his father their king 'is not beat yet' while 'hold[ing] many great cities' and 'many great houses, like Arnescote'.[42] Hawkesworth had been eager to shoot at a genuine siege-location, and studied several books on sieges, so, inevitably, Arnescote was besieged, providing not only drama, but the perfect opportunity to bring direct experience of warfare on-screen.[43]

Military Action & Engagement on Screen

Cast as Tom after Hawkesworth and Herbert saw him playing a swashbuckling pirate, Bentinck describes his delight at continuing 'earning [his] living with a sword around [his] waist', becoming 'obsessed with the period', reading around and discussing the wars with an *Archers*-colleague living close to Edgehill, and relishing 'doing major sword fights'. This last being risky, multiple minor injuries occurred during the process despite his 'stage fighting [from] drama school' and pirate-experience, the sword-work being professionally choreographed, and his 'train[ing] for days', to hone skills.[44] But despite their titular relevance, and the media's impression the show was essentially '*Upstairs, Downstairs* with swords', there was far more to its portrayal of weapons and warfare than swagger and hand-to-hand combat with swords.[45] The writing team read leading popular and specialist military historians of the period like Maurice Ashley, John Adair, and Peter Young, and recognising weaponry and warfare as 'such a huge subject and so important to us', Hawkesworth recruited Young as historical consultant.[46] A distinguished veteran soldier and military historian at Sandhurst, Young had previously consulted on BBC drama *Churchill and the Generals* (1979).[47] But his great passion was

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[41]Mendlesohn, *Creating Memory*, pp. 104-105.
[42]John Hawkesworth, 'A Sea of Dangers', *By The Sword Divided*, 1:7.
[43]MERL MS 5126/346, Hawkesworth, 'Notes and Outlines', pp. 9-10.
[44]Timothy Bentinck, *Being David Archer And Other Unusual Ways of Earning a Living*, (London, Constable, 2017), pp. 77-78, 86-87, 90-91, 130.
[45]Robert Barr, '"Sword" Swashbuckling Saga of Civil War', *News-Press*, 30 March 1986, p. 122.
[46]MERL MS 5126/346 (quote from Hawkesworth, 'Notes and Outlines', p. 8).
[47]Crace, 'Cavalier Attitudes', p. 86.

the Civil War, on which he was considered the 'unrivalled' military expert having advanced knowledge of the warfare considerably by combining his practical knowledge and field-experience with battlefield archaeology. Amongst his many books, he had written the foremost study of Edgehill, and was writing one on Naseby.[48] In 1968 he had founded the Sealed Knot reenactment society, creating a popular and 'accessible' living history organisation, passionate about 'authenticity' but also about education, and talks and demonstrations for audiences as well as the re-enactment itself became a key part of the organisation's events.[49] Preproduction, Young wrote notes on structuring and equipping the armies, and was later on-set to choreograph and 'monitor the authenticity' of the military action shot.[50]

The Sealed Knot themselves were brought in to populate and lend further authenticity to the siege, but throughout the first series much attention was given to description and demonstration of weaponry. The plausibly authentic experience of Tom and his servant, Will Saltmarsh, as veterans of 'the foreign wars' where they acquired significant expertise, is referenced, and one of Will's principal roles is essentially military-interpreter for the audience via explanations to Arnescote's inhabitants. Leading household preparations for anticipated war in Episode 2:1, Will formally demonstrates loading and firing a wheel-lock pistol, talking through the process as he performs it, the camera focused upon the weapon (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Screengrabs from Will Saltmarsh's (Simon Dutton) demonstration of loading and firing a wheel-lock pistol. Episode 1:2. (BBC, 1983).

[48]Alison Michelli, *Commando to Captain-Generall: The Life of Brigadier Peter Young*, (Barnsley, Pen & Sword, 2007), pp. 222-224, 240-241, 247

[49]*Ibid*. pp. 226-235, 247-248. Allan Boughey, 'Look', *Lichfield Mercury*, 23 September 1983, p. 28.

[50]Crace, 'Cavalier Attitudes', p. 84.

When Tom departs alongside Rupert, Cropper, Sir Martin, and his neighbour-turned-officer, Charles Pike, discuss equipping the Troop Sir Martin's is raising – according to Young's directions for the writers.[51] Inventorying existing arms, Pike worries about the shortage of swords for the (majority) non-gentry troopers, and having only 'a few', 'ancient' pistols, 'and fowling pieces – not of great use', but Sir Martin, conscious of his men's inexperience, assures, 'a well-aimed fowling piece is better than a mis-aimed musket', and mentions hopes for supplies from royalist headquarters. For protective-wear however, Sir Martin is well-satisfied with 'the burgonets lately found in our armoury', retorting to Cropper's assumption the antique helmets will no longer be fit-for-purpose that 'our forbears'' arms will actually make them more easily 'recognisable'. They later indeed prove both 'distinctive' and effective (Figure 3).[52]

Figure 3: English-made 'Burgonet' (c.1575). Likely of a similar period to those antique ones issued to Lacey's Troop in 1642. [53]

[51]MERL MS 5126/346, Peter Young, 'Notes on Sir Martin Lacey's Troop of Horse, 7 December 1982', pp. 1-4.

[52]Alfred Shaughnessy, 'The Sound of Drums', *By The Sword Divided*, 1:3.

[53]Royal Armouries, UK. 'Popular across sixteenth-century Europe, the style had a distinctive comb running front to back across the top, fixed peak above the face, and hinged cheek-plates.' ©Royal Armouries.

Preparing for siege at Arnescote, Skinner, previously 'reported slain at Cropredy Bridge', is recognised as a friend approaching via 'one of our old burgonets on his head'. Once inside, Skinner remarks how lucky it was 'our troop wore burgonet[s]…sav[ing his] life' when he was hit over the head after being 'unhorsed' at Cropredy.[54]

Troop structure is also conveyed during the preparations, in Jackman's roll-call, and when Lucinda excitedly relays details to Anne. Showing off the Troop's flag, Lucinda explains, both it and its bearer, Peter Crane, are called 'a cornet'. In training, Pike draws the Troop's attention to their 'colour', 'carried at all times on parade and into battle by Cornet Crane' as a distinctive unit rallying-point.[55] Later, Crane *is* repeatedly seen fighting in the background still carrying it. The flag (specially designed by Young) is also flown at the castle while held by the Laceys.[56] When the returned-Troop ensconces as Arnescote's garrison, the gates firmly shut 'to all but friends', they begin flying beneath their colour, a *Bloody Flag* 'of defiance' to emphasise firm resolve of cause and 'readiness' for siege (See Figure 4).[57]

Figure 4: Screengrab of the Lacey Flag designed by Peter Young. Shown flying above the so-called 'Bloody' red flag of defiance at Arnescote Castle. (*By The Sword Divided*, BBC, 1983).

[54]Alfred Shaughnessy, 'Outrageous Fortune', *By The Sword Divided*, 1:6.
[55]Shaughnessy, 'Sound of Drums'.
[56]Crace, 'Cavalier Attitudes', p. 89.
[57]Baron, 'Edge of the Sword'.

This combination of Young's Lacey flag with red flag below was also used in publicity shots next to Julian Glover dressed as Sir Martin.[58] The writers, having read about them in Lewis Winstock's *Songs and Marches of the Roundheads and Cavaliers*, consolidated characterisations of Tom and Will's expertise as Siege of Breda (1637) veterans through their use and explanation of '*Swedish Feathers*', spiked stakes angled to impale oncoming cavalry. Will prepares these while awaiting reinforcements at Arnescote, and later joins the Troop in installing them in the defensive trenches dug around the castle, as Tom explains to his father that the renowned warrior king, 'Old Gustavus Adolphus first used them in the Low Countries' (See Figures 5 & 6).[59]

Figure 5: Will Saltmarsh prepares and explains 'Swedish Feathers'.[60]

[58]Crace, 'Cavalier Attitudes', p. 85.
[59]MERL MS 5126/346. Lewis Winstock, *Songs and Marches of the Roundheads and Cavaliers*, (London: Leo Cooper, 1971), p. 15. Baron, 'Edge of the Sword'. Shaughnessy, 'Outrageous Fortune'.
[60]Screengrab from Episode 1:5. (BBC, 1983).

Figure 6: Walter Jackman (Edward Peel) supervises installing 'Swedish Feathers' in the defensive trench dug around Arnescote's walls.[61]

The besieging Roundheads' preparations were also covered, their leaders shown studying castle plans, seeking intelligence on supply and storage inside, and ultimately successfully targeting the grain and powder store. Assessing the castle wall before initiating bombardment, they conclude they need the 'big guns', 'demi-cannon or culverin at least!', and lament both Cromwell being 'greedy with his guns', and the national multitude of places 'to reduce' diverting the required artillery.[62] As well as many detailed shots of the discharge of weapons during the siege action itself, a demonstration of the mounting, firing, and discharge of a petard on the castle's main gates represents the breakthrough moment for the Roundheads, allowing them finally to breach the walls which the outnumbered garrison had hitherto managed to keep at bay. Once fallen, Arnescote is sequestrated and centrally-ordered slighted, in keeping with Hawkesworth's personally-informed, well-advertised embrace of Cromwell's folkloric destructive reputation. However, to preserve the location, and the Arnescote household narrative, into the second series, it is rescued when John purchases the castle and the Fletchers inhabit it, retaining surviving servants, until it is returned to Tom in 'Restoration'.

[61]Screengrab from Episode 1:6. (BBC, 1983).

[62]Hawkesworth, 'Sea of Dangers'.

Bentinck recalled the set's authentic atmosphere and 'smell' created by the re-enactors, who also volunteered experienced riders for cavalry action beyond the average capabilities of the regular cast. The reenactors', and particularly Young's, involvement was well-publicised to promote the show's authentic credentials, while another military historian-cum-reenactor, John Adair, launched a new book of 'eye-witness' accounts of the wars (also called 'By the Sword Divided'), to coincide with the series.[63] Also much-mentioned in the press, was the vast number of arms collected, and shots fired on set, in the spirit of conveying the brutality of war, and there were even complaints about the level of violence shown.[64] Competency in warfare was enhanced by other expert teachers and choreographers, for swords, and for horseback manoeuvres. While absolute realism was impossible to achieve, some of the action's amateurism Young judged 'authentic' in portraying what he described as the 'most disorderly of wars', and visually, though 'fibreglass' armour pieces were used, the general lack of armour was in-keeping with the narrative's running-theme of supply issues, themselves reflective of the wartime situation.[65] Partly these were also aesthetic choices however, for the purposes of design, recognition, characterisation, and practical mobility. Young's advice that 'Sir Martin might have a full cuirassier armour in 1642' was clearly decided against in favour of displaying him in plumed hat and fine fabrics of more stereotypical cavalier dress.[66]

Civilians at War

Hawkesworth 'hoped' to depict 'different attitudes on both sides …. as fairly as possible', and there was a strong sense of the general tragedy of (and distaste for) Englishmen at war with each other, but there also runs throughout a sense of the inherent division of men by type into natural 'soldiers', and those ill-suited to military life and/or command.[67] Though clearly epitomised by frequently-highlighted differences between brothers-in-law Tom and John, neither character-type is wholly plauded or vilified, and both can be found across both cavalier/roundhead and class divides. This is essential to the drama's overall narrative drive, that the war impinges on everyday life for everyone, and also tapped into the popular social history previously so successful in *Upstairs, Downstairs*. Mendlesohn notes that two world wars 'accelerated' interest towards 'history from below', the day-to-day life of soldiers, and everyday

[63]Bentinck, *Being David Archer*, p. 89. *Harborough Mail*, 27 October 1983, p. 21.
[64]Ron Knox, 'TV Talk', *Press and Journal*, 22 October 1983, p. 9; *Hull Daily Mail*, 15 October 1983, p. 3; 'Point of View', *Sandwell Evening Mail*, 10 December 1983, p. 15.
[65]Bentinck, *Being David Archer*, p. 89-90. Peter McGarry, 'Teleview', *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 7 December 1983, p.8. Crace, 'Cavalier Attitudes', p. 84. Phil Riley, 'TV Topics', *Herald Express*, 15 October 1983, p. 16.
[66]MERL MS 5126/346, Young, 'Notes' p. 3.
[67]MERL MS 5126/346, Hawkesworth, 'Notes and Outlines', p. 9.

'Home Front' experience of war, including women's, interest that increasingly dominated post-war historical fictions such as Daphne Du Maurier's *The King's General* (1946), which made a strong impression on Hawkesworth who recommended it on the writers' bibliography.[68]

Although 'Upstairs' characters dominate the series, several of the servants are given significant screentime, and there is a 'Downstairs' element to the family-divided motif for Will whose brother Sam fights (and storms Arnescote) for Parliament. Castle kitchen-talk is often used to simplify and explain the series' complex events and politics, although, in keeping with contemporary debates about the political nature of the recent Falklands War, it is periodically suggested that the lower classes have little understanding of the conflict's ideologies but are merely followers, conscripts, and/or victims of the elite classes on both sides. Life at Arnescote revolves around strong feudal feeling, with Cropper, Skinner, and also blacksmith, Matthew Saltmarsh, the latest generation in their families to serve the Laceys, and an overwhelming impression that Sir Martin's servants and tenants should unquestioningly commit to Royalism out of personal fealty. This is writ-large in Sir Martin's own sense of obligation to serve the king. Much of the drama of the series is found in the disruption of this feudal hierarchy.

More politically and socially radical voices on *Upstairs, Downstairs*, had been moderated by dominant editorial vision, notably Hawkesworth's and Shaughnessy's, and, interestingly, although Hawkesworth's previous series had both employed female writers, none were brought over to *By The Sword*.[69] That said, and despite traditional military history being seen as a very masculine domain, several reviews of the series felt that Hawkesworth was well-attuned and responsive to the 'changing attitudes' of the time, 'display[ing] a concern about the status accorded women that would have been inconceivable in the earlier series' and allowing 'strong' leading female characters, their actions, and the dynamics of their '*relationships*', 'equal' 'prominence' to the 'men and their disputes and actions'.[70] The 'division' between the sisters, Anne and Lucinda is one of the most consistently central to the drama because it is domestic, simultaneously both a more pronounced, and less stringently enforced, one for Anne than that with her twin-brother, located *at* Arnescote as the narrative epicentre because of their more stable residence there.

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[68]Mendlesohn, Creating Memory, pp. 34-42; MERL MS 5126/346, Hawkesworth, 'Notes and Outlines', pp. 3, 11.

[69]Wheatley, 'Rooms Within Rooms', p. 151.

[70]Poole, 'Revolutionary Saga'. Margaret Kitchen, 'A History Lesson', *Liverpool Daily Post*, 6 March 1985, p. 6

The home environment becoming very much a female one, with the men away at the wars was of course by the 1980s a common trope of war-fiction, and the sense of their lives veering between the uncertainty of being removed from the action (Lucinda in particular spends a lot of hours waiting for news of battles), being beset by the hardships of a society and economy at war, and direct exposure to personal danger, provides a key atmospheric aesthetic in keeping with the increasingly dominant 'Home Front' interpretations of wartime. Significantly, though it never becomes quite the makeshift military 'hospital' Hawkesworth earlier imagined, and which many aristocratic homes became during twentieth-century conflict, there are references to early modern medical practices, and the expectation that women will need to learn wound-care, and when Sir Martin returns from Edgehill, he is treated by his household women rather than the local doctor.[71]

Hand-in-hand with this interpretation of war's cultural totality come impressions of it as democratic universal experience, heightened by the setting-specificity of having the battlefields actually on English soil, domesticity even further emphasised when Arnescote is besieged. Wartime camaraderie has been seen as culturally diminishing class barriers in twentieth-century Britain.[72] This is reflected in the series, but although demarcation of feudal status is clearly preserved, the household dynamic also reflects Hawkesworth's impression of the period more generally, that class relations predated Victorian/Edwardian Britain's 'fixed formalities' and interrelationships 'were much more direct and free and easy in Charles I's day'.[73] Cropper and Margaret move freely between family and servants, and Susan, though technically family, is generally placed under their authority and deployed to laundry-work with the lowest-ranking servants as punishment for disloyalty. When hardship comes to the house, family and servants (all ranks) are seen suffering or facing them together. This is clearest during the siege, in preparation for which 'all the outlying people', Arnescote's estate workers and tenants, complete with any food/livestock resources they might have, are brought 'in behind the [Castle] walls' to join the main household and garrison to resist siege as one unit.[74]

Siege-time depicts all working alongside each other, social barriers abandoned as home becomes battlefield. Lucinda's role as a gentlewoman is contradicted by her dirtied, dishevelled appearance, she loads muskets for the defenders, and works with the maids to carry boiling water and bricks to the battlements before throwing them onto Roundheads below. The kitchen, symbol of domesticity so closely associated with

[71]MERL MS 5126/346, Hawkesworth, 'Notes and Outlines', Appendix of preliminary episode-outlines, p. 6

[72]Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*, pp. 396-397.

[73]MERL MS 5126/346, Hawkesworth, 'Notes and Outlines', p. 4.

[74]Hawkesworth, 'Sea of Dangers'.

Hawkesworth's period drama is transformed into a workshop, as cook, Mrs Dumfry, and old retainer/'wise-woman', 'Minty', meltdown roofing-lead for Matthew Saltmarsh to turn into ammunition (see Figure 7). The awful absurdity of this repurposing of the homely Kitchen is underlined when, to Margaret's chevying for 'more shot', Mrs Dumfry retorts the process is 'dangerous work', 'not like making partridge pie'. Minty reminds that product as well as process differs from pie, being capable of inflicting 'gross wound[s]'. Meanwhile, demonstrating the manufacturing process, 'Living History'-style, Matthew underlines the skill-level required, remarking that they 'must be perfect spheres[…]to fit the barrels' (See Figure 8).[75]

Figure 7: Making bullets in the Arnescote kitchen.[76] Mrs Dumfry (Claire Davenport), Minty (Eileen Way), and the blacksmith, Matthew Saltmarsh (Frank Mills) making bullets in the familiar set of the Arnescote Castle kitchen, a visual reminder of the war's incursion on everyday domestic life.

[75]John Hawkesworth, 'Ring of Fire', *By The Sword Divided* (BBC, 1983), 1:8.
[76]Screengrab from Episode 1:8. (BBC, 1983).

Figure 8: Minty reflects on the effectiveness of bullets while Matthew Saltmarsh demonstrates the technicalities of making them.[77]

Beyond Arnescote, the series also demonstrates the war's impact on the civilians, mostly women, of Swinford, vulnerable in their own homes to passing soldiers' raping, pillaging and looting, and that this mix of civilian with military life applies also to the traditional battlefield as well as the besieged homestead is demonstrated by reference to adaptation of civilian skills and experience to the Troop's structure. Sam Saltmarsh, blacksmith's son and apprentice is drafted as Troop-farrier to in 1642, and Moresby the huntsman becomes Trumpeter. Skinner's pre-war gamekeeping experience manifested in skilled wartime marksmanship. Charles I's grand courtiers are mostly depicted ill-suited for forced-transposition to military-commanders, reluctant to yield authority to the more-experienced Rupert to pragmatically serve the war effort. Contrastingly, on the other side, although the viewers do not meet Cromwell until Series Two, his name increasingly crops up as Series One progresses, and Roundhead momentum gathers thanks to the (much reported) professionalised discipline of the New Model Army. This reflects not only the inflation of Cromwell's role in cultural memory of the civil war, but also a modern sense of meritocratic advancement over

[77]Screengrab from Episode 1:8. (BBC, 1983).

hereditary privilege, while coming divisions between Parliament and Army, and the military and ordinary people in the 1650s are foreshadowed.

Though small details in depicting brutalities and politics of warfare were obviously influenced by contemporary situations in the Falklands and Northern Ireland, Hawkesworth's long-nursed ambitions for the project, his assessment of the period's importance and the nature of his research into it suggest he saw *By The Sword* as a vehicle for conveying history rather than contemporary politics. His approach to the drama, and the background and resources he drew on to bring the project to screen also suggest that the primary creative aim was to recreate the Civil War via a tried-and-tested formula Sunday-night period television. Scholars have defined such drama as 'visually captivating' but 'ultimately conservative', a 'cosy', 'sanitised', 'mono-cultural' vision of history preoccupied with ideas about 'Englishness and nationhood' ever-intertwined with the aristocracy, and essentially 'escapist, feel good television'.[78] Certainly, encouraged by new opportunities for location filming, this was true of expectations for it in the 1980s, despite acknowledgement, even hope, that socially-broader histories might be introduced.

The seventeenth century did have some 'escapist' form in twentieth-century screen culture as 'swashbuckling', adventure-romance, however, preferencing 'stylization rather than realism, fictional adventure and not historical fact', such an approach was not wholly compatible with Hawkesworth's commitment to historical research and period immersion.[79] While Hawkesworth's Edwardian dramas had been great successes, applying his formula to a more chronologically-remote, and less culturally-familiar period was clearly less generically effective, and while the format of *Upstairs, Downstairs* has been revisited in more recent times, *By The Sword* remains a unique exploration of the English Civil War in Sunday-night television. Socio-political divisiveness and physical brutality of civil war, cultural expectations regarding the nature and commemoration of war, and commitment to laboured historical detail (enhanced, practically and impressionistically, by the involvement of the re-enactors, known for their educational and commemorative ethos) rendered the drama 'worthy' and prestigious, but lacked the traditional coziness and escapism of the genre.[80]

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[78]Byrne, *Edwardians on Screen*, pp. 8-13, 37, 64, 117, 149.

[79]Jeffrey Richards, *Swordsmen of the Screen: From Douglas Fairbanks to Michael York*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 1-4.

[80]Sarah Betts, '"…Where Liberty Was Fought For": Civil War Memorials in England' in Frank Jacob and Kenneth Pearl (ed), *War and Memorials: The Age of Nationalism and the Great War*, (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2019), pp. 67-92; McGarry, 'Teleview'.

Attempting to cover fully the eventful two decades of conflict, capitalise on familiar iconography yet also educate the public about a neglected but significant era in history, create drama and narrative momentum whilst attempting to be even-handed, and explain complex, controversial political ideologies, was inevitably ambitious within a popular and accessible format laden with such strong associations and expectations. When, almost thirty years later, the wars were again transformed into multi-series primetime drama, the offering was deemed 'revisionist', made for edgier Channel 4, and broadcast in a midweek post-watershed slot, but publicity once more cited neglect of the Civil Wars in popular culture.[81] But the wars' depiction, particularly in television drama, is itself neglected, and *By The Sword Divided*, an extended exploration created during a golden age of period drama by the man with the apparent golden touch for the genre, is long-overdue scholarly examination.

[81]De Groot, '"Welcome to Babylon"' pp. 75-76.

'I Came Up Here to Build a Bridge': Capitalism and the Representation of Military Leadership in *Zulu* (1964)

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ABSTRACT
This article will offer an examination of the link between cultural representations of military authority and capitalist ideology through a textual analysis of the British film Zulu (1964) and its narrative depiction of leadership during the Battle of Rorke's Drift – the most prominent action of the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, and one which has accrued a certain mythic status in modern cultural history, becoming, for many, a 'synonym of British heroism.[1] The central aim will be to interpret how this heroism is explained to the film audience and the political implications of the text's ability to communicate 'the ideology of leadership'.[2]

Introduction

One of the most characteristic features shared by cultural representations of miliary conflict, and more explicitly economic activity, is a hierarchical conception of social organisation. Like the older feudal systems from which such values developed, abstract qualities of personal ability and charisma in modern cultural productions can often be read to mythologise a dynamic and distinct 'professional' class. *Zulu* provides a revealing case study to explore this issue, particularly since 'inspiration and dashing leadership' counted among the highest virtues of effective military organisation during

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DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i3.1828

[1]See Jan Morris, *Heaven's Command: An Imperial Progress*, 1973, (London: The Folio Society, 1992), p. 364.

[2]For more on the methodology of 'audio-visual explanation' see Will Kitchen, *Romanticism and Film: Franz Liszt and Audio-Visual Explanation,* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020).

the nineteenth century, when a mythic class system was seen to provide a necessary and vital structure in social life.[3] In addition, qualities of military leadership often overlap with a civilian paradigm of entrepreneurial practice, as described by various economic sociologists.[4] Cultural texts will often present audiences with military figures, therefore, whose personal qualities of individual authority – proven, more often than not, in the heat of battle – are shown to be capable of integrating unproblematically into the capitalist economy and its supporting metaphysics of value. It is important, therefore, to look at cultural representations which contextualise leadership in reference to frameworks shared between military and corporate social systems and consider how this relationship is illuminated by the text's wider historical construction and reception.

Figure 1: Lieutenants Bromhead (Michael Caine) and Chard (Stanley Baker) and the defenders of Rorke's Drift. *Zulu* (1964) dir. Cy Endfield, Diamond Films / Paramount Pictures.

The Ideology of Leadership

In the following analysis, the 'ideology of leadership' will refer to the effect created by meaningful textual elements which encourage a judgement that personal qualities of hierarchical social responsibility, authority and distinction are necessary features of human social life – that institutions need particular individuals to lead, organise, and direct their members' behaviour, and that some people are 'naturally' better suited to certain roles and functions. The ideology is most clearly understood as an instance of

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[3]Edward. M. Spiers, *The Late Victorian Army: 1868-1902,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 317 & p. 300.

[4]See Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, 1999, (London and New York: Verso, 2018), pp. 16-19; Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism,* (New Haven and New York: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 15-38.

myth, as described by Roland Barthes; certain ideas, concepts, attitudes, and representational schemas are judged to be mythologised (rendered falsely 'natural' or 'good') by certain representations.[5] The ideology of leadership will be treated as a schematic construct – a certain idea or group of ideas which display recurrent themes and values, and which find multiple points of interpretation in texts and films such as *Zulu*. The ideology of leadership commonly operates in association with the 'hero type' – those unique individuals, or Romantic 'geniuses', who stand apart from society so as to shape it and orchestrate a better future. This sense of differentiation from the social totality – whether it frames the world as essentially 'wrong' or only in need of piecemeal readjustment, depending upon the perceived valuation of elements the society is shown to contain – functions as proof of the individual's 'superiority', or a need to positively distinguish them from the majority.

Due to its association with dynamic individualism, the ideology of leadership is extremely prevalent in modern capitalist society and has a tremendous impact upon the political significance of cultural products. Modern sociologists have reported that at least 70% of young Americans in high school, for example, believe that they have 'above-average' leadership skills – such statistics are hardly surprising in a global society which saturates its cultures with proactive and masterful character types, ranging from military heroes to civilian community leaders, superheroes to business entrepreneurs.[6] The mythologised idea of leadership is a highly malleable feature of modern cultural representation and has been one of narrative cinema's most resilient structuring tropes. Sometimes, as in *Zulu*, the political issues associated with such representations emerge most clearly in an explicitly military context, when characters facing death and destruction in violent and chaotic situations – and which, by extension, threaten the strength and coherence of the social fabric itself – expose and negotiate the need for order and authority. The significance of military representations is also demonstrated by noting the substantial influence that such texts can have on real world principles of leadership. A White House screening of *Patton* (1970), the Academy Award winning biopic of the famed Second World War US Army General George S. Patton (George C. Scott), has apocryphally been linked to US President Richard Nixon's decision to continue military intervention in South East Asia during the Vietnam War.[7] *Twelve O'clock High* (1949), the story of US Army Air Force General Savage (Gregory Peck)

[5]See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies,* 1957, (London: Vintage, 2009), pp. 131-187.
[6]See Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character*: *The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism,* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), p. 90.
[7]Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film,* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 197.

and his efforts to raise the morale of an underperforming bomber squadron, was screened during officer training programs by the US Air Force.[8]

Due to the highly formalised systems of military social organisation, the ideology of leadership is a widespread convention throughout the catalogue of war themed media. The remarkable individual soldier who displays exceptional bravery, skill, charisma, tactical ability, or simple common-sense, is a stalwart of the combat genre in general. Many cultural products, ranging from TV shows to video games, will, despite any ideological nuance or complexity they may also contain, broadly celebrate feats of heroic leadership and impart the message: 'We couldn't win wars without men like this'. Examples of this type of mythologised individual leadership include Sgt Steiner (James Coburn) in *Cross of Iron* (1977), the Sergeant (Lee Marvin) in *The Big Red One* (1980), Captain Miller (Tom Hanks) in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), and Captain Price (Billy Murray/Barry Sloane) in the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series of video games (2007-). In each case, the mythologising of combat experience – which is sometimes in direct conflict with a meta-narrational critique regarding violence and arbitrary social power which organises the events in the narrative – is focused around the heroism of a particular individual who is humane, stoic and hardy. The films' rhetoric often situates them as a 'born', if sometimes reluctant, leader and an inspiration to those under their command. Yet this sense of value is often displaced throughout the social diegesis to emphasise a mythic validation of hierarchical structures. As the Old Man (Jürgen Prochnow) states in *Das Boot* (1982), in order to be a good leader 'you've got to have good men'.

Such representational tropes are, of course, typical of a significant proportion of cultural productions both ancient and modern, but they do demonstrate the prevalence of the ideology of leadership, as well as its potential to overstep critical perspectives on military activity and create positive valuations in favour of leadership in general – leadership with the potential to translate into the civilian world of capitalist economic activity, in the form of the business manager or entrepreneur. It was no coincidence that John Ruskin modelled his conception of political economy on the structures of military organisation.[9] Social relationships which extend beyond the bounds of economic rationality (a conception of objective standards interpreted according to self-interest) play a hugely important role in the organisation of modern capitalism as a system of cultural metaphysics, as Ruskin was among the first of his generation to realise. Duty, trust, charisma, and other forms of 'affection', comprise the roots of modern commerce and economic activity in addition to the structures

[8]John T. Correll, 'The Real Twelve O'Clock High', *Air Force Magazine*, 94, 1, (2011), https://www.airforcemag.com/article/0111high/. Accessed 30 July 2024.
[9]See John Ruskin, 'Unto This Last', 1862, in *Unto This Last and Other Writings*, Clive Wilmer (ed.), (London: Penguin Books, 1997), p. 172.

and behaviours characteristic of military institutions. If the labour practices of modern capitalism modelled themselves upon quasi-military schemas, therefore, it was not only in order to raise levels of production and logistical efficiency, but also the social status of commerce itself.[10]

The prevalence of the leader-hero type in politics, history and fiction demonstrates the significance of the concept of leadership and its malleable relationship with cultural production. Texts in which the ideology of leadership plays a critical role often display an intricate political negotiation between not only military and economic domains but also authoritarian and egalitarian perspectives in general. It is necessary to explore some of the ways in which this ideology of leadership mythologises social hierarchies, advocating the idea that certain people are better suited to lead than others, and, by implication, denigrates the notion of equality. Such a critique may help to remind us (as scholars such as Jo Littler, Michael J. Sandel and Adrian Wooldridge have done recently) that a meritocracy is not a democracy, no matter how compatible the ideas are suggested to be by cultural products which do not refute the power structures of the dominant social system.[11] In the following analysis of *Zulu*, I will examine this cultural transition between the military and the corporate mythologising of leadership in a specific historical context and illustrate how ideas of courage, authority, and ability 'under fire', can become a celebration of the spirit of capitalism, even in some of the most unlikely cultural products.[12]

Approaching *Zulu*

The Battle of Rorke's Drift on 22 January 1879 forms the dramatic central episode of a three-part campaign during the Anglo-Zulu War, between the crushing defeat of British forces at Isandhlwana and their decisive retaliation at Ulundi.[13] From a purely

[10]In 1862, Ruskin writes of the inferior status of commercial activity as compared to military vocations; Ruskin, 'Unto This Last', p. 175. In the next twenty years, theorists and labour entrepreneurs such as Taylor, Ford and Escoffier would introduce quasi-military levels of organisation into the workplace, both at the level of primary and secondary sector factory production and the artisanal crafts.

[11]See Jo Littler, *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power and Myths of Mobility,* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017); Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?,* (London: Penguin Books, 2020); Adrian Wooldridge, *The Aristocracy of Talent: How Meritocracy Made the Modern World,* (London: Penguin Books, 2021).

[12]For more on film and its relationship with the spirit of capitalism see Will Kitchen, *Film, Negation and Freedom: Capitalism and Romantic Critique,* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023).

[13]For historical accounts of the battle itself, see Saul David, *Zulu: The Heroism and Tragedy of the Zulu War of 1879*, (London: Penguin Books, 2005), pp. 159-187; and Clammer, *The Zulu War*, pp. 90-108.

military perspective, the battle was rather insignificant, but in cultural terms it stands as one of the most enduring events in the global mythology of British imperialism, alongside General Charles Gordon's experiences in Khartoum. On the journey from England to assume command in Natal, Gordon's contemporary, then Lieutenant-General Garnet Wolseley, carried eleven Victoria Crosses for the soldiers who defended Rorke's Drift, the highest number awarded for any single action in British military history.[14] The successful defence of Rorke's Drift against several thousand Zulu warriors by a small group of British soldiers has not only become a grandiose symbol of national 'heroism', but also a staging ground for the complexification of British imperialism and its economic, colonial and political legacy. The famous 1964 film dramatisation directed by Cy Endfield and co-written by Endfield and John Prebble, although probably best remembered for containing the breakthrough performance of actor Michael Caine, offers a compelling representation of this contested fragment of the British imperial past (Figure 2). It maintains a complex representational field addressing issues of class, nationalism, race, masculinity and religion in reference to a deeply engaging and emotionally affective narrative structure.

Figure 2: Zulu warriors prior to the battle. *Zulu* (1964) dir. Cy Endfield, Diamond Films / Paramount Pictures.

Political readings of *Zulu* can easily adopt broadly post-colonialist methods and critique the film's representation of African characters – addressing, for example, the ambiguous depiction of the Zulu warriors as a formidable antagonistic force who display a profound respect for their weakened British enemies, and simultaneously lowering that same imposing force to the status of an unholy and 'inhuman' aberration.[15] The constructed opposition between the plucky British force and the

[14]Clammer, *The Zulu War*, p. 108.

[15]During the opening scene, images of a Zulu wedding ceremony are intercut with the disturbed and offended look of a young European woman (Ulla Jacobsson) who

overwhelming and Othered African warriors employs the structuralised encounter between nature and civilisation typical of the Hollywood western genre.[16] This combined empowerment and dehumanisation of the Zulus serves the film's overall mythologisation of British imperialism and military practice, as well as the broader glorification of the British national 'spirit' displayed by the film's central characters. In the twenty-first century, *Zulu* continues to be a controversial film due to interpretations which foreground the film's 'racist overtones', its tendency to fetishise violence, and its simplification of historical discourse.[17]

All forms of representation reduce the complexity of their subject to some degree or other, but the drastic simplification of history is commonly identified as one of the primary features of audio-visual media.[18] Such representations regularly demand that known historical facts be subsumed by a narrational focus on a small group of primary diegetic elements, constructing sympathetic or empathetic protagonists, if not always a clear-cut distinction between 'heroes' and 'villains', and framing the represented events as an engaging 'David and Goliath' story of courage and commitment against the odds.[19] For example, the film dispenses with contextualising the war in reference

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complains to her father about the barbarity of the native customs. Throughout the film she is shown to be a kind-hearted and tolerant Christian, worthy of audience sympathies. Her father (Jack Hawkins) shows more respect for the native customs and culture, and is shown to be, later in the film, drunken, unstable, and a negative influence on the morale of the British soldiers. One sympathetic Welsh character, Neil McCarthy, a farmer shown to care about animals, also notes how the soil in Africa is unsuitable for life, too dry, and unable to sustain anything 'green' or healthy – a judgement with the potential to reflect negatively upon the Zulus themselves.

[16]See Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 74. James Chapman suggests that this inheritance is characteristic of the British Imperial adventure film in general; see James Chapman, 'Action, Spectacle, and the *Boys' Own* Tradition in British Cinema', in *The British Cinema Book*, Robert Murphy (ed.), pp. 85-95. 3rd edition, (London: BFI, 2009), p. 86.

[17]A 2018 charity screening of *Zulu* in Folkestone was protested for these reasons; see Sean Axtell, 'Calls to axe "racist" Zulu film from Folkestone's Silver Screen Cinema listings', *Kent Online*, 26th June 2018, https://www.kentonline.co.uk/folkestone/news/calls-to-axe-racist-zulu-film-from-cinema-185221/, Accessed 30 July 2024.

[18]Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defence of Hollywood,* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), p. 17. For additional theoretical context on historical representation on film see also Robert A. Rosenstone, 'History in Images/History in Words', in *The History on Film Reader*, Marnie Hughes-Warrington (ed.), (London & New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 30-41,

[19]See Toplin, *Reel History*, pp. 17-57.

to the political and industrial developments which lay behind the invasion of Zulu territory, nor does it address the fact that the British were an invading force. It also omits the unknown injured Zulu who, at the time of the narrative commencement, was recovering in the hospital under the care of the British, and is reported to have been discovered and killed by his fellow warriors during the battle.[20] The deserting Natal sergeant who was shot in the back by a British soldier also didn't make it into the film.[21] Perhaps most significantly, historical sources also report that the majority of Zulus were killed by the British 'in cold blood': 'in the hours after the battle, hundreds of wounded Zulus left on the field of battle were bayonetted, hanged and buried alive in mass graves. More Zulus are estimated to have died in this way than in the battle itself, but the executions were covered up'.[22]

Although valuable, such historically inflected critical readings can neglect other significant political approaches.[23] It is important to remember that postcolonial interpretations which focus on racial topics must be conducted alongside methodologies which address the wider concept of capitalism and elements of its cultural ethos rooted in the individual and their relation to society. Indeed, it is the representation of those central 'heroic' characters – and their contribution to the overall narrative and diegetic representation of the social structure – which display elements equally significant for an understanding of the film as a political text. One of the most significant of such elements is, as suggested, the ideology of leadership.

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[20]Clammer, *The Zulu War*, p. 90.

[21]Ibid., p. 95, 102; David, *Zulu*, p. 169. Neither did the encouraging support and actions of chaplain George Smith; Clammer, *The Zulu War*, p. 99. As Saul David points out, as far as historical accuracy is concerned, the film also gives an inaccurate impression of the predominance of Welsh soldiers; only about 25% of those present at Rorke's Drift were born in Wales; David, *Zulu*, p. 162. In reality, Colour-Sgt Bourne was 5 foot 5 and a half inches tall and 'painfully thin'; Ibid. And the script also frames Private Hook as a more insolent and insubordinate character than he was in reality, in order to increase the drama and mythic appeal of his subsequent heroism; Ibid., p. 163. For further discussion of other historical inaccuracies, including the misrepresentation of the missionary Otto Witt, see Frederick Hale, 'The Defeat of History in the Film *Zulu*', in *Military History Journal*, 10, 4, (1996), http://samilitaryhistory.org/vol104fh.html. Accessed 30 July 2024.

[22]See David, *Zulu*, p. 184. The quotation is from Philip Dwyer and Amanda Nettelbeck, 'Savage Wars of Peace': Violence, Colonialism and Empire in the Modern World', in *Violence, Colonialism and Empire in the Modern World*, Philip Dwyer and Amanda Nettelbeck (eds.), (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 6, pp. 1-23,

[23]For example, similar critical tendencies have influenced the reception of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*; see Verlyn Klinkenborg, 'Introduction' in Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), pp. ix-xxi.

The Narrative Dynamics

The film's main characters are two British officers, Lieutenant Chard (Stanley Baker) and Lieutenant Bromhead (Michael Caine) (Figure 3). They are responsible for organising the defensive action which occupies the bulk of the narrative. Throughout the film we are shown how the officers take control of a dangerous and rapidly developing situation through ingenuity, tactical proficiency, and the ability to remain calm and display decisive and pragmatic behaviour under highly stressful conditions. Eventually, after surviving waves of attacks by Zulu warriors through the virtues of individual bravery, comradeship, and a firm commitment to a malleable yet distinctly hierarchical command structure, the British forces at Rorke's Drift win the day. In the final scene, the remaining African warriors depart the field with a gesture of respect for their adversaries.

Figure 3: Lieutenants Chard (Stanley Baker) and Bromhead (Michael Caine). *Zulu* (1964) dir. Cy Endfield, Diamond Films / Paramount Pictures.

Much of the film's content adheres to a 'problem and solution' system of narrative hermeneutics. A diegetic problem will often arise and present itself as an issue to be solved by the central characters. The Zulus mount a surprise attack against an underdefended part of the garrison, so an officer will order the redeployment of troops from a different section. One character's pacifism threatens to weaken the morale of the soldiers, so an officer has him isolated. The enemy breaks through the barricades, so an officer organises an attacking formation to secure the vulnerable section. Each 'problem' is represented as a significant diegetic element with the potential to impact negatively upon the fictional situation of the positively valued characters. The film audience are then shown how these problems are solved by efficient leadership and well-executed military tactics. For the viewing audience, there is a kind of aesthetic pleasure to be derived from this spectacle of characters efficiently

solving serious problems. The result of this narrative procedure is a positive valuation of the elements shown to be primarily responsible for these pleasurable solutions.

Fuelled by the motivational logic of self-preservation, every level of the represented social hierarchy takes part in this process. For example, the doctor Surgeon-Major Reynolds (Patrick Magee) will recognise a threat, such as a Zulu climbing through a nearby window, and take action to solve the problem in a way which is both favourable to his own situation and demonstrating a degree of organisational finesse (ordering a nearby solider to repel the attacker while continuing to operate on a patient). Throughout the battle, men fight whilst hobbling on crutches or dragging their injured bodies across the floor to feed ammunition to those still standing. At a later stage, even the malingering and insubordinate Private Hook (James Booth) is swept-up by the situation, displaying valour and bravery by returning through a burning building to save an injured man against whom he held previously held a grudge. After the battle is won, the film's voiceover narrator (Richard Burton) reverently lists the names of those represented soldiers who won the Victoria Cross, but the general effect is to endow every character with a share of the film's generalised atmosphere of purposeful and commonsensical activity. It spreads its glory to all, without prejudice. But the sense of equality thus created has a secondary political function which upholds the ideology of leadership.

The diegesis has presented a certain social order as a necessary condition of physical survival, and we are invited to conjecture that without a strong yet flexible hierarchical structure of military authority, the battle would have been lost and the sympathetic characters would have been killed. The officers stand at the apex of a necessary and 'good' system of social power. The film manages to fortify the value of this system by offering a particular combination of class mobility and class hypostatisation, since *Zulu* offers us the spectacle of some characters remoulding their social situation whilst others are held firmly in place. This is most clearly demonstrated in the contrast between the two officers placed at the centre of the narrative, Chard and Bromhead. The kind of purposeful activity and organisation displayed and valorised by the film situates the former as the representative of an emerging professional class which is ready and able to assume the responsibilities of social leadership from an anachronistic aristocracy.

Chard and the Professional Class

At the start of the film, the haughty Bromhead is in command of the outpost. He is introduced as an aristocratic officer who takes pride in his family's military history, despite the fact that he is personally inexperienced and seems more interested in hunting on the African veldt than demonstrating any outstanding aptitude for military command. As an officer of the Royal Engineers, Chard was initially sent to Rorke's Drift to build a bridge across a nearby river. During a construction accident, he is

shown to leap into the water himself to contain and rectify the situation – undaunted at the prospect of doing for himself what he asks of his subordinates. Chard's professionalism is reiterated throughout the film by repeated references to his commission as an officer in the Royal Engineers, in contrast to Bromhead's regular army heritage. Their first encounter frames Bromhead sitting high on a horse in immaculate dress whilst Chard is stripped to his shirt, getting his hands dirty during bridge construction. Chard's 'hands-on' professionalism is directly contrasted with Bromhead's anachronistic qualities – his emphasis on honorific military formality and leisure activities – hunting. Bromhead's aristocratic family background is not shown to render him any particular psychological or social advantage when commanding his men during the battle; and he at first grudgingly, later willingly, concedes ultimate responsibility to his fellow Lieutenant.

During the opening act of the film, Bromhead considers himself to be more of a 'real' soldier than Chard due to his family tradition in military service. But when the Royal Engineers officer voices this unspoken criticism – 'You're telling me that you're the professional and I am the amateur' – the narrative of the film will actually prove Bromhead mistaken in more ways than one. Not only is Chard given opportunity to reveal superior leadership skills in the heat of battle, demonstrating how the middle-class Chard has more professional 'ability' as a solider than the aristocratic Bromhead, but the film is also able to reframe and rehabilitate this professionalism by transcending its relationship with the sphere of military activity altogether. Chard's 'civilian' qualities, or those not directly associated with traditional military combat experience and ability, are shown to be partly responsible for his essential superiority as a military leader. The film explicitly displaces his military prowess into a more neutral context, open to interpretation as belonging to the economic rather than overtly military sphere. During his first scene, Chard laments that men are 'sitting around on their backsides, doing nothing' and imparts the universalising capitalistic ethic of labour: 'I can find work for baritones as well as tenors'. As Chard himself states, after the successful defence of the outpost: 'I came up here to build a bridge'. The disavowal of personal qualities of leadership serves to mythologise those very qualities themselves, as well as de-militarise their essential value into a civilian domain closer to the world of vocational capitalism. Yes, Chard is the real 'professional', but for precisely the reason that he is *not* initially contextualised by the film as a regular combatant. His professionalism finds its supporting value in the narrative's ability to reconfigure his status as 'just an engineer' – the idea that he might have come here 'to build a bridge', but fate led him to encounter another and momentarily more pressing use for his talents. In this way his value transcends military organisation and leadership and evokes the world of economic capitalism.

The kind of civil engineering which forms a key part of Chard's character also has its own ambiguous relationship with the colonial legacy. Despite their positive effects,

throughout the nineteenth century infrastructure and communication development strengthened social and racial divisions in and around the colonies. As C. A. Bayly notes: 'The steamship, telegraph, and leaps forward in medicine and techniques of war […] opened up an even wider gap in power and resources between European and African'.[24] The invasion of Zulu territories was orchestrated by British officials Henry Bartle Frere and Theophilus Shepstone, who exaggerated the military threat posed by the Zulus and interpreted the war as a means of securing sources of cheap labour for farms and mining companies in Natal, as well as consolidating British power around the Cape of Good Hope, and fortifying the southern passage to India.[25] Against this political and economic background, it was precisely the kind of engineering professionalism embodied by the figure of Chard which was responsible, in part, for the systematic exploitation of the African population. Laying railway tracks and building bridges generally were labour-intensive colonial projects which required 'a vast, unskilled workforce, which could only be found among the black population. If industrialisation was to proceed, the blacks of southern Africa had to be completely pacified and brought under white control'.[26]

The intimate connection between economic power and colonial exploitation was strengthened by the military, political and civil developments which followed the Zulu conflict, through the First Boer War and beyond. It was the urgent need for infrastructure and engineering works in the southern African colonies – 'no civil hospital, no bridges, no metalled roads' – which fed grievances against Britain during the 'scramble for Africa', and by 1914 'hundreds of thousands of southern Africans had become labourers in mines or on the estates of white owned-farms. Far from initiating a period of land reform, as some Africans had hoped, the war for control between the British and the descendants of Dutch settlers from 1899 to 1902 simply confirmed the racial division of labour'.[27] Needless to say, the film gives little opportunity to explore or negotiate the intimate connection between imperial exploitation and the kind of purposive leadership and organisational activity associated with its central characters. In the construction of an engaging narrative, the various forms of imperial exploitation are 'forgotten', and the remaining content performs a more decontextualised, but no less political, valuation of purposive activity and hierarchical organisation.

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[24]C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World: 1780-1914,* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 442.

[25] Lawrence James, *The Rise and Fall of The British Empire*, 1994, (London: Abacus, 2000), pp. 256-257.

[26] Ibid., p. 256.

[27] See Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa: White Man's Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876 to 1912,* (New York: Perennial/Harper Collins, 1992), p. 90. The quotation is from Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World*, pp. 442-443.

Bromhead's concession to Chard becomes a moment of 'passing the torch' from a problematic aristocratic past to a more pragmatic capitalist modernity. Although it was Michael Caine who would emerge as the rising star and eventually an icon of the 1960s, it is Stanley Baker's Chard who is more emblematic of contemporary Britain – a society striving to reimagine its imperial past after a painful yet glorious victory over the Third Reich, at a time of heightened social mobility, in the growing shadow of American cultural and economic dominance, and with a nostalgic desire for a liberal, respectable brand of economic professionalism. With the UK still reeling from the blow to national status dealt by the Suez crisis, the early 1960's witnessed a widespread desire for modernisation and economic growth. In a 1963 edition of *Encounter*, Arthur Koestler accused Britain of being 'backward': 'the cult of amateurishness, […] and the contempt in which proficiency and expertise are held, breed mediocrats by natural selection'.[28] As Dominic Sandbrook notes, 'there was a strong and justified sense that Britain was falling behind her competitors', illustrated by a decline in real national income between 1951 and 1964 compared to Germany, France and the Netherlands.[29] Britain was confused about its place on the world stage, and modernisation was seen to be the way forward – modernisation of its economic policy, labour relations and management practices. The redistribution of class relations in *Zulu* is symptomatic of a modern Britain which was being, in the words of Sandbrook, 'dragged kicking and screaming into the modern, scientific, classless world of the 1960s'.[30] Where cultural icons such as James Bond provided a fantastically reassuring and aspirational image of professionalism, mobile consumerism, and international significance, the heroism of the Rorke's Drift defenders is no less revealing for British culture in the post-Suez era. Indeed, it would be Michael Caine who would soon go on to solidify his stardom as an even more culturally potent example of the mannered professionalism which distinguishes Chard as the herald of a new era when he played Harry Palmer in *The Ipcress File* (1965).

[28]Cited in Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles*, 2005, (London: Abacus, 2006), p. 542.
[29]Ibid., p. 521.
[30]Ibid., p. 541.

Figure 4: The 'professional' Chard leading Bromhead following the battle. *Zulu* (1964) dir. Cy Endfield, Diamond Films / Paramount Pictures.

According to this interpretation, Chard's ability to take command and successfully lead his men in the defence of Rorke's Drift (Figure 4) exemplifies the capacity of a new professional class to take the reins of leadership in a modern microcosm of British society. Throughout the film, the officers call on their sergeants to carry out orders. Audiences are encouraged to understand the need for an efficient and unimpeded chain-of-command by witnessing the successful execution of military strategy by the NCOs. Corporal Allen (Glynn Edwards) and Colour-Sergeant Bourne (Nigel Green) are emblematic figures of British working-class heroism. Their stalwart, straight-backed hardiness, emphasised through physical stature and air of paternal authority, are role models for the ordinary privates. Chard and Bromhead know they can rely on their NCOs to maintain morale and an effective chain-of-command. The image of traditional hierarchical class placement becomes a form of comfort which is intimately connected to the audiences' empathic desire to see the sympathetic British characters survive the battle. Again, the ideology of leadership ascribes ultimate value to those who stand at the top of the hierarchy, but also credits those leaders with the ability to magnanimously project that value downward to their subordinates – 'You've got to have good men'.

With a body of able soldiers under his command, Chard organises some impressive feats, and the affective power of *Zulu* is perhaps strongest at its most problematic political moments. Scenes in which disciplined ranks of riflemen fire bullets into scores of half-naked Africans return frequently at desperate moments of the narrative when the battle seems to be tipping in favour of a Zulu victory. When the Zulus breach the outer walls, Chard organises a last-minute counterattack by deploying a group of riflemen in a classical volley fire military formation (Figure 5). This moment is narratively constructed so as to be experienced by audiences as a pleasurable relief –

the affective 'solution' to a dangerous 'problem'. At such moments, the film seems to fetishise military action as the creation of a semi-human killing machine which symbolises more than British imperial power, but also an abstract conception of effective organised performance. It is also possible to critique such spectacles of violence in terms of capitalist metaphysics itself, or through the sublime merging of quantity and quality. What comes to the foreground in this moment is the underlying idea that the success or failure of the battle – the triumph of the positively valued diegetic elements – depends upon the immediate and formalised process of killing as many enemies as possible. If the audience experiences 'goosebumps' during this scene, as many viewers seem to, then it is a curious moment of conflation between the embodied pleasures of audio-visual spectatorship and the mythologisation of the doctrine of purposeful activity – an audio-visual paean to human agency, impactful cause and effect, which has, as its disavowed 'explanan', a naturalised and commonsensical conception of leadership and social organisation.[31]

Figure 5: Riflemen in a classical volley fire military formation repelling the Zulu breach of the outer walls. ***Zulu*** **(1964) dir. Cy Endfield, Diamond Films / Paramount Pictures.**

Having ventured such an interpretation, however, the interesting thing is that the film both allows the audience an opportunity for such pleasures and simultaneously denounces its own effect through the main characters' emotional and moral response to the battle. At the end of the film, Chard and Bromhead share a wounded confession. Despite the British victory, they abhor the violence which circumstances have forced

[31]In this context, 'explanans' are the various conjectured ideas, values judgments or other explanatory structures which it is necessary to take for granted in order to render any textual representation intelligible and relevant to a given interpretive situation; see Kitchen, *Romanticism and Film*, p. 9.

upon them. Delivered in an uncomfortable tone evocative of a sexual confession, Bromhead says,

> Does everyone feel like this afterwards? … Sick … I feel ashamed.
>
> Was that how it was for you, the first time?

Mixing shame with a vague sense of resentment, Chard's answer invites the audience to assume that both men are combat 'virgins':

> Do you think I could stand this butcher's yard more than once?

This reply distances the heightened value of Chard as a proactive and dynamic character from the audience's potential to condemn the represented killings, and also provides an opportunity for them to increase their respect for his abilities as a leader. His demonstrated professional capabilities – which have been put to the most severe test throughout the battle – are now worthy of redoubled respect now that we are led to understand that he lacked prior combat experience. The audience are also primed to applaud Chard for the hypothetical assumption that he will turn his talents back to 'building bridges', and other such ends, which are perhaps less 'military' in character and will take him into the vocational world of the civilian economy.

Conclusion

As a piece of narrative storytelling, *Zulu* constructs a coherent and polished diegetic world in which the need for clear, structured and effective leadership is indispensable. By offering a compelling and simplified dramatisation of the battle of Rorke's Drift, which makes use of a dynamic 'problem and solution' narrative structure, the film is able to articulate an ideology of leadership which finds heroes forged on the battlefield ready and willing to inspire the economic values of the contemporary British economy.

In order to understand the content of any text, it is often just as useful to consider those things that are excluded. The film's interpreted message about leadership might be very different, for example, if it did not cautiously dispense with all historical material which might be utilised to complicate this affirmative picture of social organisation. One individual who is conspicuously absent from the film's adaptation of historical events is the original commanding officer at Rorke's Drift, Major Henry Spalding of the 104th Regiment of Foot.[32] Historical scholarship has not looked kindly upon Spalding, who was absent at the time of the battle attempting to secure assistance from a British infantry company reported to be in nearby Helpmakaar. As Saul David writes: 'Why he chose to go himself, and not send a galloper, has never been

[32] David, *Zulu*, p. 160.

satisfactorily explained; nor has his failure to return with reinforcements. There is, in any case, no excuse for an officer abandoning his post when an attack is imminent'.[33] The shocking defeat of British forces at Isandhlwana – the event which sets the stakes for the drama at Rorke's Drift during the opening scene of *Zulu* (Figure 6) – was attributed, in part, to poor organisation of defences by the commanding officers, through a general 'failure to take precautionary measures at the camp […] No lookout was established on the top of Isandhlwana itself, and no pickets were posted to the west of the hill. In other words, the rear of the camp was quite unprovided for'.[34]

Figure 6: The aftermath of the British defeat at Isandhlwana. *Zulu* (1964) dir. Cy Endfield, Diamond Films / Paramount Pictures.

Lieutenant-General Garnet Wolseley and other British official were critical of Lord Chelmsford's conduct as commander of the expeditionary force into Zulu territory and blamed the disaster at Isandhlwana on a gross underestimation of the enemy's military strength.[35] Wolseley's subsequent appointment as High Commissioner and Commander in Chief of British forces in Natal was taken as an insult by Chelmsford and led indirectly to his later attack on the Zulu capital Ulundi.[36] The British deployed their formidable moving fortress, 'the British square', complete with Gatling guns capable of cutting through scores of charging African warriors and the square then parting to release mounted divisions to perform the *coup de grâce*.[37] It was a nearly

[33]Ibid., p. 164.
[34]Clammer, *The Zulu War*, pp. 47-48.
[35]Halik Kochanski, *Sir Garnet Wolseley: Victorian Hero,* (London and Rio Grande: The Hambledon Press, 1999), p. 98.
[36]Clammer, *The Zulu War*, p. 205.
[37]Ibid., pp. 210-213. At Ulundi, this function was famously performed by the Duke of Cambridge's own 17th Lancers.

anachronistic military formation which was only viable for the British when used against comparatively underdeveloped native forces such as the Zulus. It recalled a style of fighting which the British had retained since the Napoleonic wars. In all, the casualties suffered at King Cetshwayo's stronghold numbered twelve killed and eighty eight wounded on the British side and an estimated Zulu loss of between 1,000 and 1,500 men.[38] Chelmsford's final assault on Ulundi was in direct contravention of Wolseley's orders, although the British reception of the action – which resulted in a resounding victory – was ultimately positive.[39] Seen in such terms, values associated with the ideology of leadership also led to a precipitous military action countenanced in terms which would allow an officer to 're-establish his military reputation'.[40] Leadership was also less than ideal on the Zulu side. Cetshwayo had forbidden any advance into Natal territory, so the attack on Rorke's Drift was an independent action on the part of his regiments – and Prince Dabulamanzi, Cetshwayo's brother, in particular – anxious to follow-up upon the advantage won at Isandhlwana and give their warriors another chance for winning valour in battle, regardless of the strategic irrelevance of Rorke's Drift itself.[41]

Ignoring the perhaps negative roles played by figures such as Spalding, Chelmsford and Dabulamanzi, therefore, and focusing instead on Chard and Bromhead, *Zulu* was able to maintain a more coherent interpretation of leadership as a positively valued concept. Moreover, in order to purify the film of its association with imperial exploitation and the affective spectacle of bloody violence, the narrative foregrounds the supposedly 'innocent' aspects of individual leadership and its role in the consolidation of a dynamic and effective social group consisting of sympathetic members. In pursuing its dramatic objectives, the film does not require any degree of historical fidelity which might find room for executions or mass graves. The audience are invited to take pleasure in seeing the plucky band of British soldiers stand their ground against an overwhelming horde of vaguely 'othered' antagonists, and recognise that their survival and ultimate triumph – on moral grounds, when Chard provides the necessary disavowal by comparing the battlefield to a butcher's yard – is dependent upon the mythologisation of a hierarchical system of social organisation and the pragmatic location of individuals at certain positions of authority and responsibility within that system.

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[38]Ibid., p. 214.
[39]Kochanski, *Sir Garnet Wolseley*, pp. 99-100.
[40]Clammer, *The Zulu War*, p. 205; Chelmsford gave Cetshwayo reasonable time to surrender by meeting negotiated terms, although his troops continued to advance through the province until a confrontation became inevitable.
[41]Ibid., p. 97; David, *Zulu*, p. 167.

Chard, the fictional Chard created by the film, 'came up here to build a bridge'. Soldiering, he makes clear to us, is not in his blood. Yet coursing through his veins are the qualities of intuitive organisation and natural leadership which are prized by both military institutions of colonial governance and civilian capitalism alike. If he declares himself ready and willing to transcend the 'butcher's yard' of African soil and, by implication, leave the army for some other vocation or calling, then this movement between spaces is one which is also shared by the film audience when *Zulu* itself ends and cinema stalls or living room sofas are vacated. During the South African campaigns, Royal Engineers such as Chard undertook a variety of civil works involving railway repairs, water supplies, road construction, telecommunications, dynamos, traction engines, and pontoon bridges.[42] And although the expertise derived from such activities was typically directed inward, *Zulu* offers a representation which allows a British society, perhaps nostalgic for their recent past, the opportunity to rediscover the qualities of professional zeal which once laid the foundations of an empire. Whatever Chard's imagined career choice after Rorke's Drift, and whatever work audience members may return to when they find themselves back in reality – a post-imperial world which no longer shares much of the economic advantages provided by the colonial legacy – the lesson of the film remains. We will surely 'do well' with men like this around.

[42]Lieutenant-Colonel C. K. Wood, 'The Work of the Royal Engineers in Natal', in *Professional Papers of the Corps of Royal Engineers*, *Royal Engineers Institute Occasional Papers*, XXVII, Captain R. F. Edwards (ed.), pp. 49-70, (Chatham: W. & J. Mackay & Co. Ltd, 1901), passim.

British Journal for Military History, Volume 10, Issue 3, November 2024

Landscape and emotion in modern First World War cinema: Representations of the British soldier in nature

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ABSTRACT
This article examines landscape representations in twenty first century First World War cinema. Spanning 2011's War Horse and ten subsequent British and American productions, it demonstrates the appeal to filmmakers of not only dramatizing the First World War generally, but dramatizing the Western Front landscape in varied ways. While intentions no doubt vary, these choices reflect discussions in British soldiers' written accounts of the emotional connections these men felt with particular spaces. The article is structured under three themes, 'Nostalgia', 'Endurance', and 'Memory', and concludes that such cinematic scenes powerfully visualise the role war landscapes played as a coping mechanism for soldiers.

Introduction

> 'Surely it is One of the Compensations of this War to be Able to Recall Beautiful, Inspiring Things.'[1]

First World War cinema in Britain has a history stretching back to the very events themselves, with newsreels, and films such as *The Battle of the Somme* (1916) reaching a wide public audience.[2] The twenty first-century has seen the war continue to hold a place in popular memory, with several British and Hollywood-made films depicting British experiences released since 2011, the debut year of the film *War Horse*. While

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DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i3.1829
[1]Imperial War Museum (hereinafter IWM), private papers, Documents 11906, Captain A. McCormick Memoir, p. 46.
[2]Michael Paris, 'Film/Cinema (Great Britain)', https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/filmcinema_great_britain. Accessed 19 January 2024.

these productions vary in their particular construction – whether a 'traditional' take following a group of soldiers; a wartime or inter-war biopic; or other – the majority of them employ the visual language of the Western Front trenches and no man's land which has become so embedded in popular memory. However, filmmakers' immersion of their characters into war landscapes – echoing the sensory experience of combatants – goes beyond scenes of devastation. The films examined in this article provide, to differing extents, nuances in imaginings of the Western Front, from vistas of 'unspoilt' countryside, to the transmission of memory via flora taken from the landscape. These scenes resonate with experiences of British servicemen, who described their surroundings in diaries and memoirs, and engaged in activities such as bird-watching, gardening, collecting flowers, and painting.

The question of whether nature at the front provided emotional support to soldiers during the First World War has been underexplored, in contrast to the impact on morale of letters from home, food, and the support of comrades, which have all been closely studied.[3] While important environmental studies of the British and global war experience have been published in recent years, they predominantly interrogate aspects such as the operational difficulties posed by particular terrain, and the mining of home landscapes for natural resources.[4] Exceptions which have examined the connections between emotion and war landscapes include Natasha Silk's book chapter on the relationship between soldiers and their 'sacred' spaces of the Western Front; Alex Mayhew's article on the allotment culture and vegetable shows of Le Havre; and John Lewis-Stempel's trade history book on nature and the British First World War serviceman.[5] Cultural histories which explore war cinema and period drama have also examined important facets including popular memory, masculinity, and medicine.[6]

[3]Jessica Meyer, *Men of War: Masculinity and the First World War in Britain*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional Survival in the Great War*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).

[4]Selena Daly, Martina Salvante, Vanda Wilcox (eds), *Landscapes of the First World War*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Tait Keller, J. R. McNeill, Martin Schmid, Richard P. Tucker (eds), *Environmental Histories of the First World War*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[5]Natasha Silk, 'Some Corner of a Field That is Forever England: The Western Front as the British Soldiers' Sacred Land' in Alan Beyerchen, Emre Sencer (eds) *Expeditionary Forces in the First World War*, (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2019); Alex Mayhew, 'British Expeditionary Force Vegetable Shows, Allotment Culture, and Life Behind the Lines During the Great War', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 64, Iss. 5, (December, 2021), pp. 1355-1378; John Lewis-Stempel, *Where Poppies Blow: The British Soldier, Nature, The Great War*, (London: W&N, 2017).

[6]Emma Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen: Representing the First World War in Contemporary Britain*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); Jessica Meyer,

However, there is arguably room for discussion on war landscapes as (re)imagined by filmmakers.

This article centres on two interlinking arguments. Firstly, that more attention should be paid to the nuanced ways in which modern First World War cinema employs war environments, offering interpretations on landscape, emotion, and memory while still dramatising the familiar concepts of the trenches and no man's land. Secondly, that British soldiers used war landscapes and the recreational activities they undertook within them as a coping mechanism during their service, thus broadening Michael Roper's concept of men's 'emotional survival'.[7] Soldiers' diaries and memoirs are cited to demonstrate the resonances between their writings and war cinema. The parameters of the article are as follows. Eleven British and Hollywood First World War films have been examined, both studio and independent – all focused on British characters – which fall under the category of war film or biopic respectively:[8]

- *War Horse* (2011)
- *Private Peaceful* (2012)
- *Testament of Youth* (2014)
- *Goodbye Christopher Robin* (2017)
- *Journey's End* (2017)
- *The Burying Party* (2018)
- *1917* (2019)
- *Tolkien* (2019)
- *Benediction* (2021)

'Matthew's Legs and Thomas's Hand: Watching Downton Abbey as a First World War Historian', *Journal of British Cinema and Television,* Vol. 16, Iss. 1, (January, 2019); Julie Anne Taddeo, 'The War is Done. Shut the Door on it!: The Great War, Masculinity and Trauma in British Period Television' in Katherine Byrne, James Leggott, Julie Anne Taddeo (eds) *Conflicting Masculinities: Men in Television Period Drama*, (Bloomsbury: London, p.b. edition 2020), pp. 165-186; Claire O'Callaghan, 'Pride Versus Prejudice: Wounded Men, Masculinity and Disability in Downton Abbey' in Katherine Byrne, James Leggott, Julie Anne Taddeo (eds) *Conflicting Masculinities: Men in Television Period Drama*, (Bloomsbury: London, p.b. edn 2020), pp. 187-205.

[7]Roper, *The Secret Battle*.

[8]For the purposes of this article, the author has taken the succinct definition of war film by the Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies:

'An enduring, varied, international genre showing scenes of war. Home-front dramas, veteran films, service comedies, basic training films, documentaries, prisoner-of-war movies, and partisan films may all be regarded as war films.' Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell, *Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies,* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2020 2nd edn.), n.p. Oxford Reference online version.

- *The Laureate* (2021)
- *The War Below* (2021)

Television war dramas and films in alternative genres, such as DC's *Wonder Woman* (2017), and *The King's Man* (2021), a prequel to the spy-comedy *Kingsman* films, are not included in this particular study. This is due in part to the volume of televisual productions, and to the article's intention to draw connections between war film depictions and the experiences of real-life soldiers, as documented or recalled in their personal writings.[9] The latter two examples also differ in intention. Rather than seeking to present a 'realistic' portrayal, their primary objective is entertainment, with *Wonder Woman*'s superhero action, and *The King's Man*'s narrative of a mysterious organisation engineering the 'War to End All Wars'. While there are many examples of international First World War films, these also do not feature – with the exception of the German-made *All Quiet on the Western Front* (2022) – given the article's focus on British soldiers' connections with war landscapes. With the Western Front setting of these films, the majority of the archival material discussed pertains to experiences in Belgium and France.

The article begins with a discussion of nostalgia and the war landscape, examining servicemen's compulsion to compare spaces at the front with those of home, and to 're-enact' activities such as collecting and displaying flowers. This is followed by a section on endurance, particularly the ideas of finding beauty in unlikely places, and feeling inspired by flora and fauna witnessed at the front. The final section explores cinematic depictions of landscape as memory, including soldiers' concerns that the 'renewal' of nature would result in an erasure of their experiences; the idea of the countryside as a refuge following the war; and the meaning imbued in objects such as the violets Roland Leighton collected at the front for his fiancée Vera Brittain.

Nostalgia

1917 (2019) is a film which attracted considerable media and awards attention for the intensity and immediacy of its cinematographic style.[10] One of its standout scenes sees

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[9]The many examples of twenty first century First World War television period dramas include 'prestige' dramas such as *Birdsong* (2012), and *Parade's End* (2012); productions centred on alternative voices to soldiers including women, and men who were unable or unwilling to serve – *The Crimson Field* (2014), *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (2015 and 2022), *Chickens* (2013); and series encompassing a longer period of twentieth century history which dedicated most or all of a season to depicting the impact of the war – *Downton Abbey* (2011), *Mr Selfridge* (2014).

[10]Mark Kermode, '1917 Review – Sam Mendes's Unblinking Vision of the Hell of War', https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/jan/12/1917-review-sam-mendes-first-world-war-ww1-unblinking-vision-one-shot. Accessed 19 January 2024; BBC News,

protagonist Will Schofield sprinting, and stumbling, across French countryside as a company of the Devons launch an attack, and explosions rock the landscape. However, despite the film's focus on the frenzy and exhaustion of close combat and navigating the Western Front, there are quieter moments which too have resonances with the experiences of British First World War soldiers. A poignant scene sees Schofield and Tom Blake – who are tasked with journeying to the 2 Devons' position to urge them to halt their planned attack – enter the remnants of a garden or orchard. Imaginably once a tranquil space for a French family, it is now a pitiable sight of broken stone walls and damaged cherry blossom trees. The purpose of this scene is revealed in its opening dialogue, as Schofield exclaims 'Jesus. They chopped them all down.' His immediate reaction to the cherry trees is a metaphor for the soldiers slain during the First World War, but Blake's response is arguably more interesting. After remarking 'Cherries,' Blake moves closer to the trees and touches some of their buds, pondering the species out loud. Here, Blake demonstrates a horticultural knowledge built during his civilian life in Britain. As the conversation continues, the viewer is provided with the context: 'Why on earth would you know this?' 'Mum's got an orchard back home. Only a few trees. This time of year, it looks like it's been snowing. Blossom everywhere. And then in May, we have to pick them. Me and Joe [his brother]. Takes the whole day.'

This scene provides Blake with an opportunity to discuss his pre-war life, but its most meaningful resonance is the nostalgia garnered for a domestic landscape dear to him. First World War servicemen's diaries and memoirs include descriptions of encountering particular war landscapes and comparing and contrasting them with British environments. As with Tom Blake in *1917*, Denis Alfred Jex Buxton encountered a space which reminded him of his garden back home. Buxton, a private in the 88 Field Ambulance serving in Gallipoli, recorded his thoughts of a visit to a Regimental Aid Post in tranquil surroundings on Wednesday, 5 May 1915: 'It is a lovely spot, the mound dotted with almonds, figs and olives, and covered with purple vetch, poppies, grass, etc, and great big white leaved thistles, like those we had in the garden at Chigwell.'[11] For Private Jack A. Gunn, of 1/8 Battalion Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, the Somme of summer 1915 represented both the unknown and the familiar. He recorded that its valley bore 'a striking resemblance to the chalk Downs of Kent,' with its white roads 'winding over undulating country, woods and cornfields, farmhouses and orchards.' Yet Gunn observed that the setting was subtly different to English soil, with its sun-soaked fig trees and numerous walnut trees lining the country

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'Baftas 2020: Sam Mendes Film 1917 Dominates Awards', https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-51324805. Accessed 19 January 2024.

[11]IWM, private papers, Documents 797, 2nd Lieutenant D. A. J. Buxton RAF Diary (1915), pp. 41–42.

roads.[12] Private T. S. Williams also commented on the Somme landscape in 1915 (November), specifically Buigny l'Abbé. He recalled 'It is hard to believe that after months of hard training we are at last in France. The surrounding countryside might well be taken for a typical English scene. It is a rather flat, undulating landscape covered with a patch-work pattern of fields.'[13] Yet not unlike Gunn, Williams – who served in 19 Battalion of the King's (Liverpool Regiment), a 'Pals' battalion' – observed landscape features which stood out as marks of difference; he wrote that sights including elongated avenues of trees and 'sunken grass-grown lanes' reminded him he was far from the 'open chalkland country of Salisbury Plain' where he had undertaken his training.[14] In 2019, it was the actors and crew members of *1917* who converged on the Plain to film key sequences, including the opening scenes featuring treescapes and chalk trenches.[15]

In contrast to Buxton, Gunn, and Williams's nostalgia being prompted by tranquil landscapes, it is no man's land which sparks a particular memory for the protagonist of *War Horse* (2011). During this scene, Albert 'Albie' Narracott – whose connection with his horse Joey is the thread of the film – is in conversation with his friend Andrew Easton, from back home in Devon, while preparing to go 'over the top'. He remarks 'You know what it reminds me of out there? That bloody impossible lower field the day me and Joey ploughed it. Best day of my life, that was, and you were there. And this here is the worst day of my life about to begin and you're here cheering me on.' Pre-attack anxiety led Albie to recall a time when he faced what appeared to be an impossible challenge, and succeeded, with his reminiscence of choice perhaps also an attempt to lessen the terror of the battlefield by comparing it to familiar ground.

Beyond war environments specifically inspiring recollections of British landscapes, First World War cinema also generally portrays characters reminiscing about their pre-war lives. In *Journey's End* (2017), the 'uncle' of the film's central group of soldiers, Lieutenant Osborne, is tasked with leading a raid with Second Lieutenant Raleigh, a young officer newly arrived on the Western Front. Osborne's attempts to distract Raleigh, and presumably himself, from the impending raid led to a discussion on a setting they both have ties to, the New Forest,

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[12]IWM private papers, Documents 15990, J. A. Gunn Pamphlet 'The Bivouac Botanist' (1915), p. 1.
[13]IWM private papers, Documents 5033, Essays on Nature Between the Battle Zones During World War One 'Bird Life in a French Orchard Behind the Lines' (1929), p. 1.
[14]IWM, private papers, Documents 5033, Essays on Nature Between the Battle Zones During World War One 'Bird Life in a French Orchard Behind the Lines' (1929), p. 1.
[15]James Medd, 'Where was '1917' filmed?' https://www.cntraveller.com/gallery/where-was-1917-filmed. Accessed 29 February 2024.

> Osborne: You know the New Forest?
> Raleigh: My home's there. Allum Green. It's just outside Lyndhurst.
> Osborne: I know Lyndhurst. I used to walk through the forest with my rucksack and sandwiches. I like it better than any place I know.
> Raleigh: Stanhope and my sister and I would spend days and days walking the forest. You should come stay with us sometime.
> Osborne: Yes, I should like that very much.[16]

Osborne also talks about his home in Sussex, with these conversations on the beauty of British landscapes reminiscent of propaganda which called on men to fight for 'their' countryside.[17] The depth of Osborne and Raleigh's conversation is arguably a testament to the continuing importance of their domestic masculine identities. It also has a further emotional pull given Osborne's death during the raid. In the Wilfred Owen biopic *The Burying Party* (2018), Owen and Siegfried Sassoon – while at Craiglockhart War Hospital – discuss a nostalgic poem Owen has written, which includes the lines: 'What gentle light emerges 'cross the down above Broxton's pale and pretty spires […]'. According to Guy Cuthbertson, the Cheshire village of Broxton inspired Owen's vocation as a poet when he holidayed there with his mother in the early 1900s.[18] In the same scene in *The Burying Party*, Sassoon – who had enjoyed a privileged upbringing in rural Kent and was a patient at Craiglockhart following his 'Declaration' against the war – critiques Owen's poem, with the dialogue containing prejudicial class-based sentiments:

> These hostile climbs bid me now remember the simple hues of homely English spring. It's just a bit… I mean is that actually how you felt over there? Face down in French mud alongside the mental defectives of the Manchester Regiment? You were thinking, golly gosh, can't wait to get back to the simple hues and pretty spires of good old Blighty?

The conversation continues

> Owen: Well I'll confess to missing a solid pint of pale ale. [laughs] But the rest, I see your point.

[16]*Journey's End*, directed by Saul Dibb (2017, Lionsgate).
[17]Keith Grieves and Jenifer White, 'Useful War Memorials, Landscape Preservation and Public Access to the English Countryside: Fitting Tributes to the Fallen of the Great War', *Garden History*, Vol. 42, Supplement 1, (autumn 2014), p. 19.
[18]Guy Cuthbertson, *Wilfred Owen*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 20.

> Sassoon: There's no need to rewrite Keats. It isn't bad. It just needs a bit of steel. And a bit more goddamned outrage. And a bit less of the old pro patria mori.[19]

This scene is the film's take on a central part of the story of Sassoon and Owen's friendship – Sassoon's influence on Owen's anti-war poetry, or as Owen himself termed it, poetry on the 'pity of war.'[20] While literary analyses are beyond the scope of this article, there are of course important connections between soldier-poets' experiences of war landscapes and the resulting creative expression.

The films *1917*, *Journey's End*, and *Birdsong* (2012) all feature officer characters who attempt to mask their emotions.[21] Captain Stanhope is horrified when Raleigh, a friend from home, shows up at his dugout because he fears Raleigh's sister Margaret – Stanhope's sweetheart – will find out how 'shot' he is. Stanhope uses alcohol as an emotional crutch, and the only person he finds himself able to open up to is Osborne. Another theme linked to pre-war domesticity which is again evident in First World War cinema and wartime diaries and memoirs are soldiers 're-enacting' familiar activities. In *The War Below* (2021), a dramatisation of the Messines tunnelling operation, Colonel 'Hellfire Jack' Northon-Griffiths initiates a cricket match to boost his men's morale prior to the final stages of their mission. He gathers them all in a countryside setting and remarks 'All right chaps. Bit of R and R before the final push. Haven't got the time for a week in Bognor, so, um… this'll have to suffice.' William Hawkin, one of the working-class miners, responds 'Think we're more the football type, sir.' The cricket match is short-lived, with one of the men, Charlie, distressed by a letter from home he receives during the scene. Sports were only one variety of recreation that servicemen enjoyed in war landscapes. Others included bird-watching, gardening, and collecting flowers to display or send home. Denis Buxton sent a piece of 'real Greek thyme' to his mother from Gallipoli.[22] While Corporal Reginald H. Bryan collected flowers from a wood near the French villages of Belloy en-Santerre and Barleux',

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[19]*The Burying Party*, directed by Richard Weston (2018, Sine Wave Media).

[20]Pat Barker's novel *Regeneration* (1991) and the 1997 film adaptation also explore Owen and Sassoon's time at Craiglockhart.

[21]Sebastian Faulks's novel *Birdsong* (1993) was adapted into a two-part BBC series.

[22]IWM private papers, Documents 797, 2nd Lieutenant D. A. J. Buxton RAF Letter to Mother (2 August 1915), p. 95. As Nigel Steel noted, the diary the serviceman's father sent to him to document his war experiences echoed a family tradition of maintaining naturalist journals; IWM private papers, Documents 797, 2nd Lieutenant D. A. J. Buxton RAF 'The Gallipoli Diary and 1914-15 Letters of Denis Alfred Jex Buxton (1895-1965)', np.

> One afternoon at the end of April 1917 I went to a wood which had been destroyed by guns and had the surprise of my life. The trees had without exception been splintered to smithereens and the ground was strewed with wreckage and broken branches, but I also found that the wood was covered with a mass of yellow wild-flowers, oxslips and cowslips. Elsewhere there was not a sign of a flower but here they were growing in thousands. I was delighted with my find and gathered some and sent a box of them home to Mother.[23]

These instances demonstrate not only the importance of the maternal relationship to British soldiers, as Michael Roper has argued, but also the emotional comfort which could be derived from war landscapes.[24] In her memoir *Testament of Youth* (1933), Vera Brittain describes receiving violets her fiancée Roland had picked in France. In a creative interpretation in the film (2014), Brittain discovers the violets, and Leighton's poem about them, after his death, in his kit, which has been sent to his family. At the moment of Brittain's discovery, the viewer sees Leighton walking through a wood and picking the flowers, his face expressive as he contemplates the violets and then looks up to the sky before walking away. But there is also an edge to the scene, with Leighton having picked the violets from around a dead body. During the scene, Leighton is heard reading his poem *Villanelle*, also known as *Violets*,

> Violets from Plug Street Wood---
> Sweet, I send you oversea.
> (It is strange they should be blue,
> Blue when his soaked blood was red;
> For they grew around his head.
> It is strange they should be blue.)
> Violets from Plug Street Wood---
> Think what they have meant to me!
> Life and Hope and Love and You.
> (And you did not see them grow
> Where his mangled body lay,
> Hiding horror from the day.
> Sweetest, it was better so.)
> Violets from oversea,
> To your dear, far, forgetting land:
> These I send in memory,
> Knowing You will understand.[25]

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[23]IWM private papers, Documents 13953, R. H. Bryan Memoir (c. 1920s-1930s), p. 46.
[24]Roper, *The Secret Battle*.
[25]The First World War Poetry Digital Archive, 'Vilanelle' [sic], http://ww1lit.nsms.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/4071. Accessed 19 January 2024.

'Plug Street Wood' was a nickname of British soldiers for Ploegsteert Wood in Wallonia, Belgium, where Leighton picked his violets. *Villanelle* encapsulates several themes including death, memory, and nostalgia for a loved one (who inspires their creativity). The poem also resonates with a topic which will be discussed later in this article, the idea of soldiers finding beauty among horror.

Captain A. McCormick embarked on a daily ritual of collecting and displaying flowers to brighten his surroundings. He wrote 'Most folks who served in France learned to have a great appreciation of the wild flowers which did so much to brighten the arid wastes left in the trail of war. Each evening I used to bring in a different kind of wild flower – dandelions, cornflowers, poppies – to grace our evening meal.'[26] The attention McCormick gave to this practice is evident in his complaints about a perceived lack of appreciation by his fellow officers, and the army cooks' arrangements of his flowers.[27] In another anecdote, the serviceman's civilian and martial masculine identities are visually interlinked as he arranges a 'bowl of emblematic Scottish flowers'; a display of French thistles wrapped in the tartan paper from a box of shortbread he had received from Scotland.[28]

Other soldiers created, and tended to, their own gardens despite the fact these could only ever be temporary endeavours. When Lieutenant A. Ashurst Morris was due to move between sectors in Flanders, his thoughts turned to the garden he had worked on: 'I had finished our garden. Just as the seeds are starting, and the nasturtiums are really going fine. Anyway, the fortune of war.'[29] This sense of resignation suggests Morris was emotionally invested in the activity. While not a dramatisation of gardening at the front, *Journey's End* includes a scene where Osborne speaks of working on his garden while home on leave. Following a question from Stanhope about whether he went to see any shows, Osborne responds 'Uh, well, wish I had now. Spent all of my time in the garden working on the rockery [laughs].' After Stanhope comments 'Your wife must have been thrilled,' Osborne remarks 'Well, Joan and I and the boys pretended there wasn't a war on. It was great.'

Endurance

Beyond a sense of nostalgia, war landscapes could also elicit feelings of inspiration, and the desire to endure. *Testament of Youth* (2014) encapsulates these emotions through the figure of Geoffrey Thurlow, one of the four loved ones of Vera Brittain killed

[26]IWM private papers, Documents 11906, Captain A. McCormick Memoir, p. 216.
[27]Ibid., p. 216.
[28]Ibid., pp. 217–218.
[29] IWM private papers, Documents 14134, Lieutenant A. A. Morris Diary (1915-1917), p. 47.

during the First World War. The scene is framed around Vera and her brother Edward, who is being treated in hospital. Edward reads a letter from Geoffrey which Vera found in his pocket, with Geoffrey's voice taking over from Edward's:

> We walked back to the barracks last night, all of us thoroughly exhausted. It was a scene of devastation, and yet, as I looked at it, a strange feeling came over me. The setting sun had lit up the water in the shell holes, so they looked like pools of gold. And I felt a presence there, greater than all this. Such… peace, Edward. And I thought of you, dear friend. And I knew I'd see you again, either in this world or the hereafter.

During the reading, the viewer sees Geoffrey marching in a line of soldiers. He takes off his helmet, stops, and stares at this scene of beauty witnessed in a devastated landscape of shell holes and damaged trees. In Geoffrey's words, this moment is not just a comfort at a time of physical and perhaps emotional exhaustion, but a religious experience, a sensing of the numinous in the landscape. T. S. Williams' interwar writings display a similar ability to find beauty in unlikely places. He wrote

> Looking back on the varied experiences of trench life on the western front it may seem strange to think that some of us still treasure one or two really pleasant associations with no man's land. Who, for, instance, can forget the red glow of early dawn over the enemy's lines and the larks singing in the morning sunlight? Men in mud-stained uniforms of Kahaki [sic], field-grey and horizon-blue listened with never-failing wonder to those sweet notes.[30]

While Captain A. McCormick recalled, 'surely it is one of the compensations of this war to be able to recall beautiful, inspiring things, and even the recalling of pathetic and tragic things has a great value if the setting down of such can in any degree help to prevent a recurrence of the harrowing things described.'[31] L. Williams's description of a contrasting landscape has a darker edge to it: 'Gorgeous were the poppies that decked the untilled fields of Picardy, torn up by giant shells, stained with poison gas and reeking with the smell of the putrefying flesh of unburied horses, mules and men.'[32] Williams's juxtaposition of the poppies with the scent of death indicates that he felt their beauty was tainted.

The idea of animals inspiring endurance in First World War soldiers is nodded at in *The Laureate* (2021) and is explored in detail in *War Horse*. *The Laureate*, a Robert

[30]IWM, private papers, Documents 5033, Essays on Nature Between the Battle Zones During World War One 'Nature Notes from No Man's Land' (1929), p. 1.
[31]IWM, private papers, Documents 11906, Captain A. McCormick Memoir, p. 46.
[32]IWM, private papers, Documents 24249, L. Williams Memoir (1915-1918), p. 16.

Graves biopic, includes an early scene of Graves pruning in his garden when he hears the song of a nightingale. Calling over his daughter Catherine and conversing with her about the bird, Graves – who has been struggling with his poetry – remarks 'You know, if a nightingale can sing on a chilly autumn morning as passionately and as sweetly as it does on a night in May …. then there is hope for me yet.' While it is not nature which ultimately inspires Graves's creativity but the arrival in his life of Laura Riding, in *War Horse* Albie's horse Joey becomes a symbol of endurance for several soldiers. When Joey is ensnared in wire in no man's land, both a British soldier, Colin, and a German soldier, Peter, attempt to free him, and are successful. Peter gifts Colin a pair of wire cutters, with the British soldier replying 'Thanks. I'll use them back in the garden in South Shields.' This nonchalant mention of South Shields reminds the viewer that Colin, who they have only seen as a soldier, had a civilian life before the war, and serves as a contrast to Albie's Devon, highlighting the service of men across Britain and perhaps attempting to draw a universality in their war experiences. As Colin leads Joey away, Peter says 'Remarkable. A remarkable horse!' Colin is also inspired by Joey. After returning to the British lines, he pleads with a doctor to treat the horse, saying 'Please, sir, this horse can pull through anything!' Continuing his efforts despite the doctor's refusal, Colin says later in the scene 'He was alive, you see, sir, where nothing survives. So to me and my mates, to the men, sir, he's… well, we have high hopes for him.' Following the reunion of Albie and Joey – Albie was being treated for gas injuries nearby and heard talk of a 'miracle' horse – the doctor changes his mind and assures Albie that Joey will be treated like the soldier he is.

British servicemen's writings also discuss the impact on their emotions of inhabiting tranquil green spaces directly after serving in less appealing environments. Ornithologist Captain Collingwood Ingram's diary includes this entry for Wednesday, 18 September 1918, from St-André,

> The last two days I have spent in the war-stricken area, which now stretches in an ever widening belt of desolation, a broadening scar across the fair face of France. This is a country of weeds and graves, of shell-splintered trees, littered everywhere with the ugly debris of battle. Returning to the pleasant valleys and the peaceful cultivated fields was like waking from a horrible nightmare – or the satiating of an aesthetic thirst that had become well-nigh intolerable.[33]

This sense of relief is also evident in a passage by L. Williams,

> On the opposite side of the river the aspect of the country changed because so far it had been little damaged by war and only here and there one saw a freshly

[33]Ernest Pollard and Hazel Strouts (eds), *Wings Over the Western Front*, (Charlbury: Day Books,2014), pp. 224–225.

> made shell hole. It was good to look on the green fields and woods for they made a pleasant change to the devastated country in which we had for so long been fighting.'[34]

Contrasts in war landscape aesthetics have been employed by the makers of First World War films. In an interview with the author, Edward Berger – director of the German adaptation of *All Quiet on the Western Front* – described using idyllic landscape scenes to provide the viewer with relief from the intense battle depictions, as well as to portray a sense of 'the beauty of what we are destroying'.[35] *1917* also uses this technique in striking ways. The film begins and ends with scenes of tranquil countryside, both featuring Will Schofield sitting upright against a tree. In the first, Schofield is at rest with his eyes closed, in the second an exhausted Schofield has completed his mission, and informed Tom Blake's brother of his death. Having walked to a tree, Schofield places one hand on it before sitting and resting his head against the trunk. In a moment of vulnerability for the guarded officer, he opens a box containing photographs of, presumably, his wife and two daughters. While the film ends without a clear resolution for Schofield, shortly after he examines the photographs, the dialogue from the earlier cherry blossom scene suggests a renewal of nature and, if we continue the metaphor of the trees being the soldiers killed, better times to come for humanity. Schofield asks Blake 'So, these ones all goners?' With Blake replying 'Oh no. They'll grow again when the stones rot. You'll end up with more trees than before.' The idea of the renewal of nature at the front was discussed by British servicemen in their diaries and memoirs. In October 1918, Ingram described visiting Bourlon Wood and Hill 80 with comrades,

> The former has been a very hotly contested spot and has been won and lost on many occasions, but finally fell into our hands a week or so ago. The fresh splintered gashes in the trees, the crumbling brown earth of the shell craters and finally a row of khaki-clad corpses awaiting internment, all bore evidence of very recent strife. And yet this wood was still alive and sufficiently leafy to harbour a jay, and it certainly did not present that gaunt, blighted aspect of the woods of last year's battlefields.[36]

Bryan voiced similar sentiments in a passage describing a warm June day: 'Nature too was trying to cover up the effects of war – the damaged trees were all trying to cover

[34]IWM private papers, Documents 24249, L. Williams Memoir (1915-1918), p. 60.
[35]Bethany Wyatt, 'All Quiet on the Western Front Inspiration: As Remarque Said, War is Not an Adventure. There's Nothing Glorious About it', https://www.historyextra.com/membership/all-quiet-western-front-adaptation-inspiration-creation/. Accessed 19 January 2024.
[36]Pollard and Strouts (eds), *Wings Over the Western Front*, p. 227.

up their wounds by sprouting green leaves.'[37] Here Bryan uses the military language of 'wounding' to describe nature as suffering at the hands of the war, and his phrase 'Nature too' suggests he was perhaps also thinking of his and his comrades' efforts to endure. However, as discussed in the next section, not all servicemen were heartened by the prospect of a transformation of the war's landscapes.

Memory

The final section of this article examines more closely the connections between memory and war landscapes as represented in First World War cinema. *Goodbye Christopher Robin* (2017) – the biopic of Winnie-the-Pooh author A. A. Milne, and his son, Christopher Robin – contains a moment which evokes the anxiety that some soldiers felt about the future of Western Front landscapes. In a scene with Milne and Christopher Robin, E. H. Shepard – Milne's collaborator and illustrator on Winnie-the-Pooh – gazes at the idyllic countryside of the Ashdown Forest, East Sussex, and appears shaken. Milne asks his fellow ex-serviceman 'You all right, old man?' Shepard replies 'Those fields in France… they'll look like this now, won't they? As though it never happened.' Shephard's response is resonant of the soldiers who were concerned about the loss of specific martial landmarks, and the possibility these spaces and the actions undertaken within them would be forgotten. The serviceman and poet John Masefield once wrote,

> When the trenches are filled in, and the plough has gone over them, the ground will not long keep the look of war. One summer, with its flowers will cover most of the ruin that man can make, and then these places, from which the driving back of the enemy began, will be hard indeed to race, even with maps. […] In a few years' time, when this war is a romance in memory, the soldier looking for his battlefield will find his marks gone. Centre Way, Peel Trench, Munster Alley, and these other paths to glory will be deep under the corn, and gleaners will sing at Dead Mule Corner.[38]

An alternative view is voiced in soldier H. Harris's account of a pilgrimage he took to Gallipoli. The account includes a description of an area that retained military materiel such as rifles, bayonets, and water bottles, but was otherwise transformed,

> We alighted from the car about 400 yards from Krithia and explored the front line trenches and communications. They appeared to be untouched since they

[37] IWM private papers, Documents 13953, R. H. Bryan Memoir (c. 1920s-1930s), p. 51.

[38] John Masefield, *The Old Front Line,* (London: William Heinemann, 1917), p. 75, cited in Tim Godden, 'Memory, Landscape and the Architecture of the Imperial War Graves Commission', in Daly, Salvante, Wilcox (eds) *Landscapes of the First World War*, ed. by Daly and others, p. 195.

> were occupied in 1915, except that nature has endeavoured to obliterate the signs of war by a generous gift of lovely flowers and plants which grow both outside and inside the trenches.[39]

First World War films have also portrayed the memory transmitted between a person and an object. Of many examples, these have included a watch in *Private Peaceful* (2012), the military pennant of Albie's father in *War Horse*, and a woman's scarf which passes as a token from soldier to soldier in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, with each new wearer taking the scarf from the body of a fallen comrade. These objects have also included those taken from war landscapes. As previously discussed, Roland Leighton sent violets from the Western Front to Vera Brittain. In her memoir *Testament of Youth*, Brittain writes of having kept the crinkled and brown flowers.[40] A scene in the film adaptation conveys the powerful memories Brittain associated with these violets. The scene shows her (after the end of the war) in her room at Oxford University, taking a violet out of a tin and moving it between her fingers. Another violet can be seen outside of the tin. After a few moments, Brittain replaces the violet and pushes the tin away after shutting the lid. The viewer is then flooded with various sights including letters on the bed; Brittain experiencing nightmares; Brittain at the sea in the outfit she wore on what should have been her wedding day; Leighton at the front. Brittain's memoir includes another example of memory transmitted via a Western Front landscape. She describes the mud on her fiancé's kit, which was sent to his family following his death. In the film adaptation, Leighton's father buries the kit in the garden, in a ceremony speaking to the fact of Britain's policy of non-repatriation. The film also features a scene of Brittain, upon discovering the news of her brother Edward's death, running outdoors and sinking her feet, then her knees, and then her hands into the mud, pushing it between her palms before rubbing one hand along her face.

The cherry blossom symbolism of *1917* returns in a scene sometime after Tom Blake's death, with Will Schofield still attempting to reach the Devons' position and fulfil the pair's mission. After jumping into a river to escape an enemy soldier and having been informed by a French woman he met that he would reach his destination if he followed the river, Schofield is swept along, clinging on to a broken piece of a tree for support. The mood of the scene shifts from the frenzy of the current to a calmer progress, but with a sombre tone. Petals fall onto the water around Schofield, and as he becomes aware, he moves one hand through them, gasping, no doubt reminded of Blake and the cherry blossom trees they had walked among. Schofield quickly submerges his head and begins swimming, with cherry blossom trees coming into view on the banks.

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[39]IWM private papers, Documents 9355, H. Harris Memoir (1936), p. 11.

[40]Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth*, 2009, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2009 edn), n.p. Amazon Kindle ebook.

The theme of nature and death entwined reaches an apex when Schofield's way is blocked by fallen trees, and numerous bodies which he has to climb over to reach the left bank. Stricken, Schofield falls on his knees and sobs, with his hands pressed in the earth, before continuing on his mission. The symbolism of cherry blossoms as representing the fleeting nature of life, but also renewal, has seen them appear in other First World War films. In *Testament of Youth*, Brittain's fellow student Winifred Holtby – who would become an important figure in her life – reminds her that they are all surrounded by ghosts and must learn to live with them. Holtby adds that spring is outside, waiting for her friend. Brittain looks out of the window, birds can be heard singing, and then the scene shifts outdoors, to a lawn and a cherry blossom tree. Brittain contemplates the tree and holds some of the blossoms in her hand, with the scene ending with her smiling. Cherry blossom also features in the Siegfried Sassoon biopic *Benediction* (2021). A conversation between Sassoon, and psychiatrist W. H. R. Rivers, at Craiglockhart, concludes with the following dialogue,

> Rivers: Are you searching for truth?
> Sassoon: Isn't everyone?
> Rivers: And if you find it, what then?
> Sassoon: [Inhales sharply] Peace of mind, contentment. No longer yearning for what's been lost.

His face working with emotion, the camera then moves from Sassoon to a window, then to a view of a cherry blossom tree. A song, *A Shropshire Lad: Loveliest of Trees*, accompanies further lingering shots of this cherry tree, and others.[41] The music continues as the viewer sees Sassoon sitting at a window, then hears a knock at his door and his answer, with the music only stopping as Wilfred Owen enters and asks 'Lieutenant Sassoon?'

A further theme of memory and landscape presented in cinema, and soldiers' writings is the idea of the countryside as a refuge following the upheaval of the First World War. From the beginning of *Goodbye Christopher Robin*, the impact of the war on Milne is evident, with him experiencing flashbacks at noises such as theatre lights being turned on, and a champagne cork popping. Milne confides in Shepard that he had 'been thinking of moving down to the countryside where it's peaceful and quiet.' In a later conversation with Shepard, and Milne's wife Daphne, the matter comes to a head. Milne voices his disquiet about the purpose of the war, and his perception that others are pretending nothing happened, as well as a feeling of inadequacy that he is doing nothing about it. He adds 'Nothing has changed. Don't you see? If nothing changes, then the same thing will happen all over again. I need to get out of London.' Daphne mistakenly believes her husband is referring to a day out, but he states he wants to

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[41] Composed by George Butterworth, words from a poem by A. E. Housman.

leave 'for good. I'm talking about going somewhere quiet and decent and trying to think for once. Do something worthwhile.' Milne and his family do make the move to Ashdown Forest, where the writer initially works on a pacifist tome, but through time spent with his son, and Shepard, in the outdoors, the Hundred Acre Wood is born. Reflecting on those days with Christopher some years later – following Christopher's return from the Second World War, when he was missing presumed dead – Milne says 'Those days, just the two of us… they were the happiest I've ever known. After the worst I've ever known.' For Milne, their life in the countryside, however fraught with the impact of Winnie-the-Pooh's success on Christopher's childhood, gave him a renewed happiness following the ordeals of his war experiences.

The Laureate presents Robert Graves as another writer who sought to build a new life in the countryside. Following the title card, the film shifts to a green field, and the words 'Islip, Oxfordshire 1928' appear. A narration by Graves goes: 'I'd thought of a cottage in the hills …. a cottage full of books, pictures and brass and …. cosy nooks. Flowers in the garden …. walls all white. I'd live there peacefully and dream …. and write.'[42]

The dramatizations of Robert Graves in *The Laureate* and *The Burying Party* both include flashbacks to the First World War, with the former focused on the fact that the poet was so severely wounded during the Battle of the Somme that his family were told he had died. During a scene in *The Burying Party* of Graves, Owen, and Sassoon walking around Edinburgh after leaving a pub, Graves falls to the ground and experiences a hallucination. When Sassoon becomes aware, and struggles to calm Graves,

> Graves shouts 'You listen to me, you little tart! I procured you your your [sic] shell shock alibi, but this? This is what it's like!
>
> [….]
>
> Even the smell of these f*****g poppies makes me shake.'
>
> Sassoon says 'We're on Calton Hill, Graves. Not in the trenches.
>
> How would you know? How would you know?
>
> There isn't any gas. There isn't any gas.'[43]

[42]*The Laureate*, directed by William Nunez (2021, Creative Artists Agency).
[43]Ibid.

While posited differently to Milne in *Goodbye Christopher Robin* and Graves in *The Laureate* – with a direct comparison to war-devastated landscapes – British serviceman A. McCormick voiced an appreciation of life in the countryside following the war. He wrote ,

> Had I not been encamped for eighteen months on the battlefield of Arras, and contemplated the arid waste of chalk thrown up from trenches and shell holes could I as keenly enjoyed the beauty of this autumn day and all the radiant glory of woodlands and moorlands intensified and enriched by the first day of rain which has fallen for many months.[44]

McCormick was far from the only ex-serviceman to seek out a rural idyll after the First World War.[45] This desire to take refuge in the countryside was not an entirely new phenomenon – John Tosh has discussed the Victorian middle classes' nostalgic 'idealization of the countryside' – but nevertheless it is clear that for some soldiers, their experiences of industrialised warfare resulted in a longing to escape into nature.[46] For Vera Brittain, the return to the provincial settings of her pre-war life following the loss of four loved ones, and her service as a nurse, was less a refuge than a blaze of memories. One of the earliest scenes in the film adaptation sees Brittain, her brother Edward, and Victor Richardson, swimming in a lake in the Derbyshire countryside. It is to this lake that the film returns in its final scenes, visualising the continuing trauma of Brittain's war experiences. While a poem of Roland Leighton's is read – *Hédauville* – the viewer watches Brittain make her way to the lake and prepare to go in. As she wades and then swims, the film moves between the scenery of the lake setting and flashbacks of Edward, Leighton, and Richardson, with Brittain's narration stating 'They'll want to forget you. They'll want me to forget. But I can't. I won't. This is my promise to you now. All of you.'

Conclusion

This article has argued for the benefits of studying cinematic First World War landscapes in all their nuances. For all the scenes of soldiers navigating, and fighting in, environments of devastated countryside – which loom large as a visual in popular memory – there are others which resonate with the wider experiences of British soldiers. While comparing the narratives and cinematography of motion pictures with written accounts by soldiers, the article has also argued that servicemen's physical and emotional engagement with war landscapes operated as a form of coping mechanism, a theme which has been underexplored in the historiography of the First World War.

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[44]IWM private papers, Documents 11906, Captain A. McCormick Memoir, p. 13.
[45]Roper, *The Secret Battle*, p. 293.
[46]John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 32. Jstor ebook.

The eleven selected films differ in narrative, structure, and intent, but all feature landscape contrasts, whether that is simply the juxtaposition of domestic (British) spaces with harrowing war scenes, such as in *The Burying Party* (2018) or the more sustained focus of *1917* on presenting 'unspoilt' countryside. A theme of nostalgia for home landscapes provides poignant scenes in *1917*, *War Horse*, and *Journey's End*, which resonate with the writings of British soldiers who compared and contrasted significant places to them with the war landscapes they encountered. Whether they were observing similarities, naming sectors after landmarks, or engaging in activities such as bird-watching, gardening, or flower collecting, servicemen were demonstrating the continuation of their domestic masculine identities, which supports Jessica Meyer's research on masculinity and British soldiers.[47] *Testament of Youth* provides a particularly striking example of finding beauty in unlikely settings, through the visualisation of Geoffrey Thurlow's letter, which describes the rays of the setting sun shining on a waterlogged shell hole.

While devastated landscapes could elicit unsettling emotional responses in soldiers, there are also occasions in their diaries and memoirs which describe the pleasure of witnessing birdlife, or flowers, in such places where it is expected there will be no signs of life. Cinematic depictions of the impact of war memories on protagonists have not only provided powerful scenes for the viewer, but have also spoken to the emotional ties between servicemen and the landscapes they served in, as Natasha Silk argues in relation to the 'sacred' Western Front.[48] *Goodbye Christopher Robin* presents Shepard's fear that the footprints of the First World War, the physical evidence of the soldiers' experiences, will have vanished from the Western Front given the passage of time. *Testament of Youth* includes several scenes presenting landscapes as arbiters of memory, from the final lake scene, and Roland Leighton's violets, to the cherry blossom which also features in *1917* and *Benediction* as motifs of fleeting life and renewal. The ideal of the countryside as a refuge from memories of industrialised warfare – which some British soldiers attempted to make reality – is explored in *Goodbye Christopher Robin* and *The Laureate*, but is met with more success for its protagonist in the former. With the enduring popularity of First World War cinema, and with recent British, and international examples including *1917*, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and *Tirailleurs* (2022), it is possible that filmmakers will continue to explore the narrative opportunities provided by (re)imaginings of First World War landscapes in the 21st century.

[47]Jessica Meyer, *Men of War*.

[48]Natasha Silk, 'Some Corner of a Field That is Forever England'.

Killing to commemorate, dying to remember? Authenticity and the practice of memory in *Isonzo*

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ABSTRACT
First World War video-games have grown in importance and popularity since the centenary of 2014-18. But what does it mean to both develop and play these games? What vision of history is being constructed or transmitted between developers and players? Drawing on interviews with both these groups, this article examines the game Isonzo *set on the Italian Front – an unfamiliar setting to most in the anglosphere – to explore the constructions of memory and historical meaning which the game produces.*

Introduction

Historical computer games lie at an important and perhaps unique intersection between historical knowledge and popular understandings of the past. Games with historical settings often rely on player's existing understandings of events. At the same time, developers frequently seek to introduce audiences to substantial new information or concepts through their work. Whilst there are similarities between the mediums of film and games, the latter – especially historical combat games – require a different form and level of active engagement and participation from their audiences than is traditionally involved with watching films.[1] To play a game is not a passive

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DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i3.1830

[1]Jo Bryce and Jason Rutter, 'Spectacle of the Deathmatch: Character and Narrative in the First-Person Shooters', in *ScreenPlay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces*, ed. Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, (London & New York: Wallflower press, 2002), pp. 66–80;

undertaking, and developers and gamers both expect the experience to be proactive. What can we learn, therefore, from the intentions of developers and from the understandings of their audience through games that focus on the 'lesser known' or under acknowledged aspects of the past?

Using the game *Isonzo* (Blackmill Games, 2022) – which is set on the Italian front of the First World War – as a case study, this article explores the ways that historical videogames can create a space through which players interact with the history and memory of war. Through undertaking interviews with the game's primary developer and survey questionnaires with volunteers from the player base, we explore the extent to which the game allows for a form of memory work rooted in players' perceptions of historical accuracy. We argue that both the developer's intentions and players' reactions show that a commemorative, even reverent, function is not incompatible with the performative 'killing' enacted within the game itself. Although players are 'participating' in the imagined violence of war, they may still also believe that they are undertaking some form of commemorative or solemn activity. Furthermore, notions regarding the game's 'accuracy' or authenticity become essential components of the more emotional commemorative functions.

Given the limited place of the First World War's Italian Front within anglosphere understandings of the conflict, the preconceptions and 'memories' that players bring to the game are likely to be built upon other spaces and aspects of the war.[2] As a result, the developers of the game – as our interviews make clear – believe that they are undertaking an important educational task by showcasing the war in new ways to diverse audiences. As such, *Isonzo* provides an important opportunity for historians to explore the relationship between developer intentions and player expectations within historical games.

The Italian Front in Popular Culture & Memory

Until quite recently the Italo-Austrian theatre of the First World War has been widely downplayed as a side-show in the English-speaking world, as it has in France and

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Chris Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games,* (Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p.13.

[2]See Vanda Wilcox, 'Introduction', in *Italy in the Era of the Great War,* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), pp. 1-13. Popular histories of the war have neglected Italy – even the eminent John Keegan, in *The First World War,* (London: Hutchinson, 1998), dedicates it very few pages, which are filled with stereotypes and errors. The incredibly influential A.J.P Taylor's *The First World War: An Illustrated History,* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963) has only 3 pages on Italy out of 296 (pp. 89-90, p. 196). Today, a search on Amazon.co.uk finds over 50,000 books on the First World War but only 188 results for a search on "First World War" and "Italy".

Germany. Only within the former combatant nations has it been taken seriously either by scholars or the public. Italian memory of the war was hijacked during the fascist dictatorship for political ends; though afterwards many people turned against this simplistic patriotic narrative, it still took time for alternative memories to emerge. Since 1968, a major strand of Italian academic and popular memory has focused on repression – the brutality which army and state exercised towards their own people, who were less than enthusiastic about the war.[3] As a result, the First World War is less prominent in popular memory in Italy than in some other former combatant nations.[4] The dissolution of Austria-Hungary in 1918 has meant that on the Habsburg side there could be no unifying national memory of the Italo-Austrian theatre. The successor states of the Habsburg Empire, while celebrating the war's contribution to their national independence, have often been reluctant to commemorate the military service of their peoples within the multinational Austro-Hungarian armies.[5]

Although there was one early and globally celebrated depiction of the Italian front in Ernest Hemingway's 1929 novel *A Farewell to Arms*, successfully filmed in both 1932 and 1957, there were relatively few other international cultural representations in the twentieth century.[6] Few of the great classics of Italian war literature from the 1920s and 1930s – poetry, novels or memoirs – were translated into other languages; the triumphalist films of the fascist era were not popular outside Italy. From the 1950s,

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[3]Nicola Labanca, 'Historiography 1918-Today (Italy)', in: *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopaedia of the First World War*, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2019-10-10. DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.11416. Translated by: Thom, Martin.

[4]On the historiography underpinning these cycles of memory, see Marco Mondini, 'L'historiographie italienne face à la Grande Guerre : saisons et ruptures', *HISTOIRE@POLITIQUE* 22, no. jan-avr (2014), https://www.academia.edu/6428800/Lhistoriographie_italienne_face_à_la_Grande_Guerre_saisons_et_ruptures Accessed 2 August 2024.

[5]See, for instance, James Krapfl, 'Sites of memory, sites of rejoicing. The Great War in Czech and Slovak cultural history', *Remembrance and Solidarity* 2 (2014), pp. 109-146: https://enrs.eu/article/sites-of-memory-sites-of-rejoicing-the-great-war-in-czech-and-slovak-cultural-history; Gregor Joseph Kranjc, 'The Neglected War: The Memory of World War I in Slovenia', *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, 22:2 (2009), 208-235, DOI: 10.1080/13518040902918105.

[6]Others include the Helen Hayes and Clark Gable movie *The White Sister* (1933, Victor Fleming); *The Doomed Battalion*, and parallel German version *Berge in Flammen* (Luis Trenker, 1932); Mark Helprin's novel *A Soldier of the Great War* (1991); and more recently, Andrea Molesini's prize-winning *Non tutti i bastardi sono di Vienna*, (2010) (English ed. 2016)..

Italian popular culture depictions of the war have frequently been satirical and either ambiguous or openly anti-war. Some important Italian First World War films like Mario Monicellis's Oscar-nominated tragicomedy *La Grande Guerra* (1959) or *Uomini contro* (Franceso Rosi, 1971) did meet with international success, especially in France. Overall, Italy continued to be one of the war's so-called 'forgotten' fronts, particularly in the British and American public imagination. Perhaps this is unsurprising considering that the first dedicated single-volume history of the Italian war in English was not published until 2008.[7]

Curiously, the first mass-circulation cultural product to bring the Italian front to a global audience since Hemingway's novel and its film adaptations, was a 2016 videogame: *Battlefield 1*. This First Person Shooter (FPS) game brought an unprecedented global vision of the war to the videogaming public, with sections of the game set in northern France, the UK, Gallipoli, the Hejaz and on the Italo-Austrian front. International audiences responded favourably and were often enthusiastic about 'discovering' this front.[8] Within Italy, reaction was mixed: while gamers were often excited to find their country's history represented within a major international franchise, many First World War hobbyists were scandalised, as were local political figures within the former front-line areas.[9] The focus of complaints varied. Some argued that it was wholly inappropriate to ever convert the traumatic experience of the First World War into a game, and that an event involving mass death should not be played at. Never before had the Italian public seen their own historical sites turned into a space for imagined play, as had for years been done elsewhere. Complainants found the very notion disrespectful.[10] The president of the National Alpini Association, a veterans' group for the elite mountain Alpini soldiers, issued a formal condemnation of the game, which he and others saw as 'dishonouring the sacred soil' of the

[7]Mark Thompson, *The White War: Life and Death on the Italian Front, 1915 - 1919,* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008).

[8]See, e.g., The Daily Dot Review, https://www.dailydot.com/debug/battlefield-1-review/. Accessed 17 February 2024.

[9]For gamers' reactions, see reviews from specialist websites such as https://multiplayer.it/recensioni/175225-battlefield-1-il-bollettino-della-vittoria.html. Accessed 17 February 2024. Politician Sergio Berlato of the far-right Brothers of Italy party, by contrast, demanded that the game 'be stopped': see 'Videogame di guerra sul Grappa. Esplode la polemica degli Alpini', *Corriere del Veneto*, 21 October 2016. Debates in Great War enthusiast communities such as the Grande Guerra 1915-1918 group on Facebook were revealing.

[10]For the debate within the National Alpini Association see https://www.ana.it/lalpino/le-opportunit-di-un-videogioco/, Accessed 17 February 2024.

battlefields and as an 'insult to those many lives sacrificed for the fatherland'.[11] He was particularly concerned by the game's focus on killing and on 'blood everywhere'. Other critics were more concerned about its many historical inaccuracies and 'arcade-like' style, which they considered inherently misleading.[12] By the time *Isonzo* was announced in March 2021, many aspects of this rather sterile and alarmist debate had faded from view, and the majority reaction within Italy was cautiously positive. Even Great War enthusiasts who were themselves uninterested in videogames tended to see it as a way to interest younger people in the history of the war. [13] In fact, in 2023 the National Alpini Association, so hostile to *Battlefield 1* in 2016, enthusiastically collaborated in the production of a new locally-made First World War videogame.[14] In Italy as elsewhere, war-based videogames are now a mature genre.

The Emerging Nature of First World War Computer Games

The current popularity of First World War computer games can largely be traced to the emergence of new titles around the war's centenary. The most notable examples are *Verdun 1914-1918* (2013), *Valiant Hearts: The Great War*, (2014), and *Battlefield 1* (2016).[15] These works have already received considerable academic attention in the centenary period.[16] However, the conflict did not cease to serve as a source of

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[11]'Videogame di guerra sul Grappa'; see also *La Stampa,* 25 October 2016.

[12]'Abbiamo provato la missione Avanti Savoia di Battlefield 1: è imprecisa, ma non oltraggiosa', *Wired,* 28 October 2016, https://www.wired.it/gadget/videogiochi/2016/10/28/battlefield-1-missione-avanti-savoia-imprecisa-non-oltraggiosa/

[13]See reactions in the 'Grande Guerra 1915-1918' Facebook group, https://www.facebook.com/groups/60371965880/posts/10158356873980881. Accessed 17 February 2024. Accessed 3 August 2024.

[14]'La Grande Guerra in 3D, un videogioco ricostruisce il Fronte verticale del Lagazuoi', *Corriere del Veneto*, 27 December 2023.

[15]'Verdun 1914-1918', Steam (Apple OS X, Linux, Windows), PlayStation 4 (2016) and Xbox One (2017 (M2H & Blackmill Games, September 2013); 'Valiant Hearts: The Great War', Microsoft Windows, MS Windows, PlayStation 3, PlayStation 4, Xbox 360, Xbox One (Ubisoft Montpellier, 25 June 2014); 'Battlefield 1', Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Battlefield (EA DICE, 21 October 2016).

[16]For wider context, see: Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*; Chris Kempshall, 'Pixel Lions – the Image of the Soldier in First World War Computer Games', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 35, no. 4: The Great War and the Moving Image (19 October 2015): pp. 656–72, https://doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2015.1096665; Jakub Šindelář, 'Playing through to Europe? Depiction and Reception of the First World War in the Videogame Valiant Hearts', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, August 2022, 1–14,

inspiration in 2018 and both developers and players appear to have found something compelling within the war that continually draws them back. Many games developers have revealed the extent to which they were already invested and immersed in histories relating to the War, which they then attempted to introduce to their games.[17] The popularity of some of these games, particularly *Battlefield 1*, means they now act as a point of entry into the war for many players who might previously have first encountered it only at school. The visions of the war that players either bring to, or take away from, these games often reflect existing dominant ideas or, in some cases, wider culture wars on the internet.[18] This is particularly noticeable when it comes to concepts of race and the notion of the First World War as, in the words of Stefan Quiroga, a 'white mythic space' where any non-white characters and races are perceived to be encroaching.[19]

Rather than fading away following the conclusion of the centenary in 2018, First World War games have begun to spread their focus onto different aspects of the conflict. As games enter previously unfamiliar areas, we can begin examining what both developers

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https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2022.2097206; Debra Ramsay, 'Liminality and the Smearing of War and Play in Battlefield 1', *Game Studies* 20, no. 1 (February 2020); Iro Filippaki, 'Great War Games: Notes on Collective Memory, the Adynaton, and Posthumanism', *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, no. 31 (2018), https://doi.org/10.14198/raei.2018.31.11; Adam Chapman, 'It's Hard to Play in the Trenches: World War I, Collective Memory and Videogames', *Game Studies* 16, no. 2 (December 2016); Chris Kempshall, 'The Evolution of First World War Computer Games', in *The Edinburgh Companion to the First World War and the Arts*, ed. Ann-Marie Einhaus and Katherine Isobel Baxter (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2017).

[17]Chris Kempshall, 'War Collaborators: Documentary and Historical Sources in First World War Computer Games', *First World War Studies* 10, no. 2–3 (2019): 225–45, https://doi.org/10.1080/19475020.2020.1774914.

[18]Sarah A. Aghazadeh et al., 'GamerGate: A Case Study in Online Harassment', in *Online Harassment*, ed. Jennifer Golbeck (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), pp. 179–207, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78583-7_8; Bridget M. Blodgett, 'Media in the Post #GamerGate Era: Coverage of Reactionary Fan Anger and the Terrorism of the Privileged', *Television & New Media* 21, no. 2 (February 2020): 184–200, https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419879918; Jennifer Golbeck, *Online Harassment* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-78583-7_8.

[19]Stefan Aguirre Quiroga, 'Race, Battlefield 1 and the White Mythic Space of the First World War', *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, no. 31 (2018), https://doi.org/10.14198/raei.2018.31.12; Stefan Aguirre Quiroga, *White Mythic Space: Racism, the First World War, and Battlefield 1* (Location: De Gruyter, 2022).

and players believe they are creating or participating in through them. Blackmill Games, the developers of *Verdun 1914-1918,* an online first-person shooter, in which the player joins others online as a platoon to collectively fight against a similar group playing as their enemies, did not stop after portraying the war's most famous Western Front. New iterations took the war firstly to the east, in 2017's *Tannenberg,* and then south to the Italian Front in *Isonzo* (2022).[20] Neither front is well-represented in British, American, or French understandings of the First World War and the experiences of the Russians, Germans, Italians and Austro-Hungarians who fought there are rarely reproduced in mainstream media designed for those audiences.[21]

An attractive aspect of the First World War for computer games developers was the fact that the war existed in a relatively fixed form within the minds of their target players, but that large parts of the conflict were obscured by dominant narratives. These knowledge gaps created significant opportunities for these developers to explore new content that could educate, move, or shock their players.[22] If this was true for games like *Valiant Hearts*, then it is even more so for titles like *Isonzo* which are set in a theatre about which many players know nothing. In these circumstances, what are developers trying to show their audience? How do they introduce them to a new area of the war and what knowledge do they attempt to instil in their game? Similarly, what existing understandings do the players bring to a game like *Isonzo*? Do the games strengthen or challenge their perspectives and, if these games do indeed act as a gateway for exploring historical memory, then how do the players approach this and what 'memories' are they bringing with them? It is these questions that this article primarily explores.

***Isonzo*: Intentions of Developers**

The intentions, ideas, and interests of developers are often key in understanding historical computer games. Jos Hoebe – the CEO of BlackMill Games and the primary creative force behind the games *Verdun 1914-1918*, *Tannenberg*, and latterly *Isonzo* – has a long-standing existing interest in the First World War. Importantly, he wishes to use his games as a vessel for both *remembrance,* as a form of almost reverent

[20]'Tannenberg', Microsoft Windows, OS X, & Linux (M2H & Blackmill Games, November 2017); 'Isonzo', Microsoft Windows, OS X, & Linux (M2H & Blackmill Games, September 2022).

[21]Popular media on Italy often uses the language of 'the forgotten front', see e.g. Cassar, George H. *The Forgotten Front: The British Campaign in Italy 1917-18*, (London: A&C Black, 1998); Morris, Jane. 'The Forgotten Front'. *The Economist*, 19 January 2017. https://www.economist.com/1843/2017/01/19/the-forgotten-front. Accessed 3 August 2024.

[22]Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, p.35.

reproduction, and something more akin to constructed *re-enactment*, which spreads awareness.[23]

Figure 1: Autumn foliage in the landscape in *Isonzo*.[24]

To understand Hoebe's design choices in *Isonzo* and his other games, we must first explore how concepts of history are presented in-game. It is immediately clear that both the research behind the game, and the depiction of history within it, are highly visual processes for Hoebe and his team. Given the medium of computer games this should not be too surprising, but the lengths to which the developers went to try and create a visual fidelity is as interesting as it is impressive. Hoebe and his team would 'scrape the internet for historical material and books, if available,' with a focus on 'as much visual material as possible'.[25] The process could be highly inventive. To accurately depict weather and scenery for the Caporetto maps, the team calibrated the amount and colours of the tree foliage by cross-referencing Erwin Rommel's personal account of the battle with drone footage found on YouTube of a similar area at the right time of year (Figure 1).[26]

[23]Jos Hoebe, Questions regarding Isonzo – Blackmill Games & M2H, interview by Chris Kempshall and Vanda Wilcox, Interview, 14 December 2022.
[24]All screenshots reproduced with permission of BlackMill Games.
[25]Ibid.,
[26]Ibid., See Erwin Rommel, *Infantry Attacks,* (London: Greenhill Books, 1990).

Hoebe sought to create a visual environment through which understandings of the past can be transmitted. He described placing as many 'faction-specific' objects or elements within the game as possible, from propaganda or recruitment posters from the featured combatant nations, the inclusion of different types of national music on the game's soundtrack, right down to the in-game bandages having the correct 'faction' [i.e. national] label upon them.[27]

Figure 2: Detail on uniforms designed to give authenticity.

Hoebe and his team undertook this work even though they believed 'people don't notice it'.[28] He considers the individual objects themselves to be not hugely important, but together 'everything combines and then it will make the whole picture'.[29] He explained that it would have been both easier, and potentially more recognisable, to re-use objects from the British army – which they likely already had versions of from *Verdun* – to populate the game but 'then all of those things combined …. they will make a difference and leave an impression. I also think it does better justification to the front if you see the faction-specific stuff'.[30] This suggests that Hoebe believes the feeling or impression of accuracy and authenticity are transmitted through the collected environment, rather than located within individual objects or uniforms (Figure 2). By themselves they are just small, often overlooked, curiosities – but

[27]Ibid.,
[28]Ibid.,
[29]Ibid.,
[30]Ibid.,

together they create a cumulative and immersive whole within which players operate. This supports the concept of 'authenticity lite' which dictates that computer games aim to construct a view of the *spirit* of how players *believe* the past existed.[31]

This was not the only way that *Isonzo* aimed to deliver historical meaning and information to the player base. Hoebe believes various groups within his audience want different levels of historical education from the game. The visual aspects are generally important across the whole audience, but also of particular relevance to 'the slice of people who we want to educate indirectly' by 'creating a picture without being overtly educated on it'.[32] Alongside this group, who are almost learning by osmosis, is another who are very interested either in history generally or this setting more specifically, who 'just reads up on it and wants to be educated'. Hoebe notes that the information about different battles and locations provided on the loading screens is intended for this information-hungry audience, along with the accurate depictions of the various weapons.[33]

While acknowledging this audience and the need to provide them with information directly, Hoebe offers a nuanced view on how far he is prepared to service them. He notes that there are, within the fanbase of this game and others like it, groups of 'reenactors who know every belt buckle'. He says of these groups and their interests,

> These are such detailed very niche specific, …. I wouldn't say it's history …. I mean you can know everything about the working of weapons and what type etc but that's not – that's a bit different from understanding and deducing the context of history, those are two separate things, it's almost like being a doctor versus being someone who does medical research or something – they're different things altogether.[34]

Hoebe's understanding of 'doing history' – or of being a historian – leads him to declare that the form of detail-heavy, slavish re-enactment embraced by some of the audience is *not* 'history'. He distinguishes between real historical understanding and a more superficial awareness of the past. He added that while

> I don't think people expect you to know everything about the different types of Enfield rifles and what was deployed where and what time'

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[31]Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, p.8.
[32]Hoebe. This was achieved through ensuring that the dimensions of towns were right, correct uniforms were depicted, and there were different maps available to play on.
[33]Ibid.,
[34]Ibid.,

he believed such details to be

> in the bigger context …. irrelevant, but here where it's in your face and has to be put in and linked with game mechanics as well it has to be accurate.[35]

Hoebe is not suggesting that different weaponry is irrelevant to the way the war is waged, but rather that it is marginal to his communication of the central ideas and historical lessons that he finds important. Since in FPS games like *Isonzo* the player spends a great deal of time looking at their own weapon, these must be accurately depicted – but they are not transmitters of any key historical knowledge.

Instead of relying on objects to do more than create a general historical setting for the game, Hoebe creates a sense of historical time and place by using 'unique' in-game events. In *Tannenberg* attacks by wolves occur randomly on different maps and places of opposing factions would have to form temporary truces to fight them. This idea was based on some probably apocryphal stories from the Eastern Front.[36] In *Verdun,* for many years, each 11 November the game has instituted a two minute silence as 'a reminder of the gravity of the subject and [to] pay your respects to the past', while also including a 'Christmas Truce' mode each December where players throw snowballs at each other and play football in No Man's Land.[37] These events propose that the game's subject matter is important and weighty enough to require a form of reverence; at the same time the game allows players to act out combat – often graphically – creating a contradiction common to this type of game. The desire to provide the 'right' kind of remembrance is in creative tension with the requirements of mock killing.

Hoebe believes his games serve a wider purpose than mere entertainment, saying that 'we/I have a unique opportunity to shape how people see the Italian Front – that's also

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[35]Ibid.,

[36]Ibid.,The 'Wolf Truce' event draws upon stories published in the New York Times in 1917 and is designed to create a horror film-esque atmosphere: *Tannenberg: Wolf Truce Event Trailer!*, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dwDXkextcWg. Accessed 3 August 2024; 'Tannenberg – The Wolf Truce Returns! – Steam News', 26 November 019, https://store.steampowered.com/news/app/633460/view/1629669614123129707. Accessed 3 August 2024.

[37]Hoebe; 'Verdun 1914-1918'; 'Christmas Truce Event :: Verdun General Discussions', http://steamcommunity.com/app/242860/discussions/0/619574421263154332/. Accessed 3 August 2024.

a big responsibility'. Exploring his motivations, Hoebe reveals a distinct vision not just of the war in general but of his own role in spreading information about it, that effectively places him as an auteur figure,

> So far there hasn't been a *Saving Private Ryan* on the Italian Front, so people don't have a big perception of it other than *Battlefield 1* who dipped their toes in it. I get to shape how people see it and in that way you have to do justice by the material and then try to be as accurate as possible and cherry pick – or especially not cherry pick – the correct things to highlight. So that people have a correct image of it. I think that's where the value is of what we're doing.[38]

Because of the nature of the audience and the appeal of games like *Isonzo*, Hoebe has a greater platform for the dissemination of his ideas about the war than do most academic historians. His sense of 'responsibility' implies both a respect for the realities of the historical record and a concern for people's perceptions of the past – in other words, popular memory of the war; perhaps it also incorporates a responsibility to the war dead, or to their living descendants. Given Hoebe's earlier remarks that a laser-focused interest in military materiel is not really 'history', we might ask what he does actually consider 'history' to be, and how he is undertaking it through the game. Hoebe believes he has a responsibility to the memory of the war to tell the truth, or a truth, about it. But concepts of 'truth' relating to any historical event are, as First World War academic historians know, highly complicated and protean.[39] What is the 'truth' that *Isonzo* is transmitting to its players?

Certainly, there can be no major accusations levelled at the game for the way it approaches the landscapes and visual fidelity of its setting. The work that has gone into reproducing the various battlefields and villages is extraordinary; Hoebe reports some Italian players contacting the team to say, 'my town is in there and it looks exactly like how it looks in real life' (Figure 3).[40] Despite this, how much real knowledge does the game provide about the nature of the Italian Front? Loading screens offer important and useful contextual information about specific moments but can disappear much quicker than it takes to read them. The combat depicted is often violent and gruellingly attritional, played out in harsh conditions, but it is not necessarily that different from the experiences of playing *Tannenberg* or *Verdun*. However, simply by placing the

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[38]Ibid.,; *Saving Private Ryan* (DreamWorks Pictures & Paramount Pictures, 1998); 'Battlefield 1', 1.
[39]On how memory of the war has changed over time to become an evolving 'truth', see: J. M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning : The Great War in European Cultural History,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Daniel Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory,* (London: Hambledon and London, 2005).
[40]Hoebe

spotlight on an aspect of the war, which is little understood in the anglophone world, Hoebe is already disseminating a vision that combines awareness, knowledge and understanding of this theatre. He speaks repeatedly about the importance of bringing attention to something that has been so heavily overlooked.[41]

Figure 3: Townscapes recognisable to Italian players of Isonzo.

Hoebe describes *Isonzo* as being 'a very history-minded game' and this is perhaps a helpful way to acknowledge the tensions between authenticity and enjoyment which any game must navigate. There can be absolutely no doubt of the craftsmanship that has gone into constructing the game. The focus on visual sources as basis for research may seem like anathema to some academic historians, who often privilege the written word over the static (or moving) image, but it has allowed the team to undertake a staggering reconstruction operation. The range of objects, posters, and ephemera with which they have populated their game means they have effectively curated a truly transnational digital gallery. Arguably, therefore, the game should be understood as an example of memory work rather than history, since it is primarily focused on bringing attention to past events rather than overtly analysing them for historical 'truth'. It is the outcome of a creative attempt to draw out understandings and visions of the Italian Front based on the recollections and material available, to then create something that looks and feels how *we think* the war in this place should. But the intentions of the developers are only one aspect of this process; to assess how successfully the game

[41] Ibid.,

achieves its aims, we must also examine what the players take away from their experiences.

***Isonzo*: Responses from Players**

A global release for a game can ensure global reactions and responses. Examining online reviews and commentaries allows us to consider perspectives from players across different societies, who inevitably will have different responses to historical topics. Online spaces also make it possible for encounters between, for instance, Italian and Austrian commentators, thus allowing both for the diffusion of national cultural responses to the game and, paradoxically, contributing towards the emergence of transnational or international memory cultures around the First World War.[42]

In researching this article, we used a variety of methods to gauge player response. We conducted an anonymous online survey of players, recruited from dedicated communities on Reddit and Twitter, which garnered 149 separate responses – Survey A – while in-depth follow-up questions – Survey B – were sent to selected respondents, of whom 26 replied.[43] Respondents came from the UK, USA, Canada, Italy, Slovenia, Ireland and more. We also gathered spontaneous reactions from communities of players and reviewers on Twitter, Facebook, Reddit and YouTube. The sheer number of discussions online make a systematic analysis impossible; only a small selection is considered here. YouTube reviews and reaction videos, together with their public comment sections, offer a particularly rich source for community responses since they are so open, unlike closed Facebook groups, for instance, and attract such large numbers of participants.[44] These sources suggest that Italian gamers generally responded to *Isonzo* within an explicitly national framework, as a reflection on Italy's national history; the post-war dissolution of Austria-Hungary makes such a reaction impossible from the other side of the conflict. Italian responses were more likely than others to display reverence and to invoke explicit memorial functions;

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[42]Eugen Pfister, 'Why History in Digital Games Matters. Historical Authenticity as a Language for Ideological Myths', in *History in Games: Contingencies of an Authentic Past*, ed. Martin Lorber and Felix Zimmermann, volume 12 ,(Bielefeld: Transcript, 2020), pp. 47–72, p. 60

[43]Google Forms:
Survey A carried out May 2023, https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1WmmE-x2RWQ7elOE4dgcRSurFAtXZVttOx_S6vkenQM0/edit?ts=647f47c0&pli=1,
Survey B carried out October 2023,
https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdRJgwBxtRdzm85x0vAYn_Oy2xOLS9C9vJWyhyF-VKFBQhj_w/viewform .
Respondents to Survey A were 96% male, and to Survey B 100% male. More than 80% were aged 18-35. Full data available on request to authors.

[44]Quiroga uses a similar methodology in *White Mythic Space*.

however, they were also most likely to make historically-informed jokes and irreverent remarks about specific individuals, such as chief of general staff Luigi Cadorna, renowned for his embrace of attrition and his brutal disciplinary policies. English-language channels and communities were generally more focused on the mechanics of the game itself, rather than its national-historical significance, perhaps unsurprisingly. However, many international reviewers and commentators also explicitly seek to link *Isonzo* to their wider frame of reference about the First World War.

Accuracy & Realism

Historical accuracy featured highly in commenters' and reviewers' responses and survey respondents followed suit. Survey A collected 149 responses:

- 99 reported that historical accuracy was extremely (5/5) or very (4/5) important to them when choosing to play a videogame with a historical setting.
- 96 reported that it was extremely or very important to them in choosing to play *Isonzo* specifically.

Respondents repeatedly suggested that accuracy was an essential underpinning for the game's immersive function. Though highly invested in perceived accuracy, players were not necessarily equipped with much prior knowledge of the game's material. Over 60% claimed to have had either no knowledge at all or very minimal knowledge of this theatre of war before the release of *Isonzo*. Despite this, when asked to assess the game on a 1-5 scale where 5 represents 'extremely accurate' and 1 represents 'not at all accurate':

- 61% selected level 4 (very accurate)
- 14% selected level 5 (extremely accurate).

Given how poor many respondents' self-reported level of historical knowledge of the front was, it is worth asking on what basis players believed they were actually capable of assessing the accuracy of the game. In essence, a game makes certain truth-claims or presents certain forms of evidence to persuade players that it is accurate, which players then accept or reject. However, this judgement is based less on real historical knowledge than on a set of prior assumptions, formed by familiar cultural points of comparison – in other words, historical memory.

Asked to select all the aspects they looked for in assessing accuracy, players' most common response was 'weapons and equipment' (95%) followed by 'uniforms and clothing' and 'maps and landscape', each selected by 84% of respondents. Physical environments in the game such as buildings (churches, stations) and dug-outs were

also perceived as essential for creating a credible, accurate representation for 75% of respondents. These clearly contribute to what Eugen Pfister has termed 'a feeling of pastness' within the game, that is to say a sense of authenticity rather than necessarily of accuracy, rooted not in knowledge but 'primarily by comparing the representation with other popular culture representations'.[45] These findings appear to fully vindicate Hoebe's focus on the visual as a key mechanism for creating an environment of authenticity, as well has his argument for the accumulated effect of multiple, carefully researched small elements in building historical context. In the absence of real prior historical knowledge, it appears to be the careful curation of visual detail which convinces players of authenticity. At the same time, the responses of more informed local players show that Hoebe's team has gone above and beyond the 'standard' iconography. In-game information, such as narrative or descriptive text panels, original film footage or historical photographs, was important to 49% of respondents as a means of assessing accuracy. These information-hungry players, discussed by Hoebe, in fact often complained that the text panels in the loading screens were available too briefly for their liking. For 45%, the dynamics of gameplay were seen as a measure of accuracy while only 30% saw storyline as an important criterion in this respect. By contrast information about historical or military advisors, or discussion about the research process, was of much less interest to players.

Social media responses reinforce these findings. One of the largest Italian YouTube gaming channels, "Parliamo di Videogiochi" or PdV [Let's talk about Videogames], which has over 488,000 subscribers and a significant presence across social media, focused on accuracy in its review of the game.[46] Reviewer Francesco Miceli praises the 'almost maniacal historical care with respect to uniforms, weapons and accessories' and above all maps. He describes the visual representation of the front-line as almost uncannily accurate,

> what springs to the eye to anyone who has visited those places – and I recommend you should do so at least once in your life – is the precision with which the settings for the fighting have been reconstructed, starting with the real locations of the conflict.[47]

Reflecting Hoebe's own experience, numerous responses come from Italians who state they are resident in the former battlefield regions and who highly praise the

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[45]Pfister, pp. 63-5

[46]Parliamo di Videogiochi, *ISONZO un tragico segmento di storia italiana*, 28 Sept. 2022, Video, YouTube. 11:47. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GH6BhbDEn2k. Accessed 3 August 2024 – all translations from Italian by V. Wilcox.

[47]*ISONZO un tragico segmento di storia italiana*.

accuracy of the game's depiction of landscapes. Another player explained why this accuracy was so important to him,

> As a history buff from a military family …., it was a treat for the eyes to see the accurate history of the uniforms, the weapons, …. even the secondary equipment such as the bombs, the knives, the mace. […] It is a pleasure for the eyes and the mind. …. It really reflects one of the most brutal wars in history, in all its horror. I play it a lot with a friend and we often find ourselves saying phrases like: 'Poor guys for going through all this'. To think about the sheer horror of the gassings, the deafening noise of the bombing, the blind luck of not being among those men to be hit. When, bitterly unfortunately, it all really happened. And who knows how many of our (and not only!) poor soldiers still lie in the damp earth, carrying with them all the suffering of a terrifying war.[48]

In-game 'realism' and the sense of the historical and emotional weight of events are thus intimately intertwined; however, the 'horror' of thinking about the real events and engaging in an act of nationally-framed memory ('our … poor soldiers') does not diminish the 'pleasure' which the player takes in the game (Figure 4).

Figure 4: The 'horror' of fighting and dying on the Italian Front.

[48]User @roschach3617, comment on *ISONZO un tragico segmento di storia italiana*, 2022.

Like film, games offer both visual and aural experiences. Where international responses focused mainly on visuals like uniforms and weapons, many Italian reactions mentioned the soundtrack. The voice acting was praised as bringing additional authenticity, in contrast to the poor-quality dubbing experienced in many other internationally-produced games. However, a surprising number of Italian commenters noted the 'unrealistic' usage of correct standard Italian: *real* Italian soldiers of the day spoke in a huge range of dialects, often mutually incomprehensible. There was also the complete absence of swearing and – many noted with disappointment – blasphemy. An authentically Italian soldier, these commenters propose, was foul-mouthed and spoke in slang and dialect! This suggests that realism and authenticity are to a considerable degree in the eye (or ear) of the beholder.

Survey responses confirm the importance of 'perceived accuracy' or authenticity-lite, rather than genuine historical knowledge. When asked what they had taken away from the game, respondents suggested feelings were important – but they had to be rooted in this perceived accuracy: 'it felt [like] immersion of history of a time what felt long past'. The game worked by 'bringing the experiences to life in a way that books/pictures could not', wrote another. If seeing is believing, playing is even more so: 'Visuals have added a better idea of scale to the Italian front. Pictures are one thing, "video" another'.[49]

The First World War in public memory: Narratives & Tropes

Several well-worn narrative tropes, long established in collective memory of the First World War, are attached to *Isonzo* by players. PdV revealingly entitled its review of the game *Isonzo: a tragic segment of Italian history*. Arguably the fighting on this front was much more tragic for the defeated peoples of the Austro-Hungarian, or indeed the local Slovene civilian population, but the review is framed in national terms. The idea of the war as tragic is common internationally, as reflected in survey data: 85% chose to associate the term 'deadly' with the Italian front and 69% selected 'futile'.

As well as fixating on tragedy, personal and familial connections are important in Italian responses and often are rooted in patriotic language. PdV host Francesco Miceli commented in his review that in over 30 hours of gameplay, he had not once played as the Austro-Hungarians, showing a level of personal identification with his in-game character rooted in nationality. He notes that,

> as an ex-soldier it was quite moving to play *Isonzo*… not only because it's the Italian army and you can see regimental cap badges and symbols which still exist today, but also because each [playable] class [of soldier] is specific to our army.[50]

[49]Survey A, May 2023, three anonymized respondents (70,21,5).

[50]*ISONZO un tragico segmento di storia italiana.*

The use of 'our' is telling here; equally, it is realistic details in the game which create the emotional connection for the player. Numerous commenters also invoked their own military service, this is of course unverifiable but not implausible in a country where conscription was only abolished in 2004, so most able-bodied men over the age of 40 have served at least briefly in the armed forces. 'I'm an Alpino, and to see my unit in such an amazing and accurate shooting game is an immense joy, considering that my regiment played a leading role in lots of operations like the capture of Monte Nero,' wrote one.[51] Personal experiences, historical memory and ludic enjoyment are thus united.

Narrative assumptions about the nature of combat in the First World War determine players' assessments of accuracy: the very difficulty of the game, and the high chance of one's avatar being killed at any time, led one survey respondent to call this 'the most realistic iteration of a World War I front' – noting 'Most other FPS titles allow you to act as a super soldier, but in Isonzo, no matter how much skill or game knowledge you have, a stray bullet can always stop you.'[52] On PdV, Miceli says admiringly that 'the most dramatically realistic element is the cruelty of the fighting and the very few chances to advance and survive for more than a few moments.' The implication is that the most universal experience of the war is of death rather than survival, and that a game which is likely to cause the player to 'die' many times is inherently more accurate than one where they easily survive. In reality, around 10-15% of mobilised men died in most First World War armies.[53] The player will be 'immersed in a reality where dying like flies was unfortunately the sad destiny of many young and very young men from all over the world, including 650,000 Italians', Miceli concludes, invoking a reverential memorialising note.[54] The game's memory work is powerfully linked to its perceived accuracy and precision – even though in fact this is not actually rooted in historical reality. This assumption allows 'dying' in-game to become a form of memorialisation of those who died in reality.

From gaming as memory to traditional memorial forms

For many players the game was a prompt to engage more deeply with the First World War, both on the Italian front and more generally. Survey A found that 96% of all

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[51]User @cortyy4470, comment on *ISONZO un tragico segmento di storia italiana*, 2022.

[52]Survey B anonymised respondent 17.

[53]Pierluigi Scolè, 'War Losses (Italy)', *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2015-03-16. DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.10571. Translated by: Mazhar, Noor Giovanni

[54]*ISONZO un tragico segmento di storia italiana*.

respondents sought out further information about the Italian front thanks to playing the game. Most Survey B respondents agreed that *Isonzo* and other games in the series had increased their overall interest in the First World War. Some carried out online research and reading while others were moved to more memorial or commemorative responses and of course, the two categories also overlap. Real-world interactions were not uncommon, with several respondents visiting Italian and Slovenian battlefield locations in person or planning to do so. Others began collecting First World War militaria after playing the game, a commemorative activity reflecting some players' great interest in the minutiae of physical equipment, as identified by Hoebe.

If for international players, *Isonzo* represents a major learning opportunity, for Italians and others from the former battlefield region the decision to invest in the game was motivated by a commemorative impulse. Italian and Slovene survey respondents were clear that it serves a memorial function,

> Most Italian families had a family member that served. The war in the Dolomites is actually a point of obsession for me.'[55]

Similarly,

> The history of the Italian Front is very important to me since I am Slovenian and …. [it is] a vital part of our national identity which is why I am pleased that it is finally getting some spotlight.[56].

The game operates within the context of these players' existing deep connection to their own national history. Social media commenters explicitly connected the game to the real First World War service of their ancestors,

> I'm definitely going to buy this, to be able to explore for myself what my grandfather lived through in 1917, because he was born in 1899 and he was among those 18-year-olds called up to the front. He fought in both world wars but unfortunately I never got to meet him because he died in the late 70s before I was born. Of those experiences all that remains to me is the diary grandad wrote at the front, during the First World War.[57]

The writer connects a real-life memory object, his grandfather's diary, to the memorial space of the game. *Isonzo* offers him an opportunity to imaginatively 'explore' his grandfather's experience. Such personal connections perhaps underpin Hoebe's

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[55]Survey A, May 2023, anonymous respondent 124.
[56]Survey B, October 2023, anonymous respondent 6.
[57]User @zodiark93, comment on *ISONZO un tragico segmento di storia italiana*, 2022.

remarks on the 'responsibility' of making this type of game: his care and attention to creating an 'authentic' experience seem to resonate with his audience in that they feel able to project such intimate emotional bonds onto the game.

Players from further afield found that *Isonzo* played an important role in amplifying their overall historical memory of the war, just as Hoebe intended. British and Irish survey respondents considered it a useful corrective to the 'Fritz and Tommies' myth and to an exclusive focus on the 1916 Easter Rising respectively.[58] American and Canadian respondents valued the increased awareness and understanding they believed the game could bring about; some explicitly embraced *Isonzo* as a form of memory work, which would 'ensure that WW1 isn't completely forgotten about'. Although the game is focused on the act of killing, and gameplay can be gory,

> Playing the game reminds me why it is important to respect human life and always respect the fallen no matter what nation they fought for. [A] hero's sacrifice knows no color or bounds.[59]

YouTube commenters also invoked high diction commemorative tones, and even strongly emotional reactions such as tears: 'The memory of our grandfathers who died in battle in that war will always remain in our hearts,' wrote one.[60] In an interesting link between different memorial media and tones, another simply posted the very famous and evocative First World War poem by Giuseppe Ungaretti, 'Soldati'.

Conclusion

There has been a tendency, particularly among non-gamers, to assume that 'violent' first-person shooter games appeal to audiences and developers primarily because of the opportunity to inflict death upon others.[61] In reality, however, both developers and players recognise that games can exist as spaces for the construction, experience, and dissemination of historical knowledge. Such games allow players to undertake what they believe to be real and meaningful thinking about the past. Historical understanding is transmitted through an idea of 'historical accuracy' which is not

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[58]The Fritz and Tommies narrative places the common experiences and paradoxical transnational solidarity between ordinary British and German soldiers at the heart of the First World War; see Peter Doyle and Robin Schäfer, *Fritz and Tommy: Across the Barbed Wire,* (Stroud: The History Press, 2015).

[59]Survey B anonymised respondents 24 and 22.

[60]User @elle64streaming56, comment on *ISONZO un tragico segmento di storia italiana*, 2022.

[61]Patrick M. Markey and Christopher J. Ferguson, 'Teaching Us to Fear: The Violent Video Game Moral Panic and The Politics of Game Research', *American Journal of Play* 10, no. 1 (2017): 99–115.

located simply in individual objects. Instead, it is disseminated through the cumulative positioning of many details that collectively provide a more tangible version of 'authenticity lite' that is based upon a *feeling* of historical reality. The result is a noticeable difference between the constructed memory of the past and actual historical knowledge.

The 'responsibility' to 'get it right' when it comes to the game's historical content has motivated the *Isonzo* developers to focus on visual fidelity to the battles of the Italian front, while also providing a sense of what Hoebe deems most important about the era portrayed and the place it ought to have within wider collective memory. This commitment is recognised and appreciated by the audience: the more they perceive the game as accurate, the more they find it offers them an immersive memory space with scope for real personal emotional connections to the past. For many players, the violent nature of the game's content – where they regularly kill each other – is not incompatible with more respectful and even reverential attitudes to a historical war.

Indeed, for those players from Italy, the game can take on pilgrimage-like aspect, where participating in the combat is just another aspect of 'visiting' the battlefields and paying homage to those who died there. In this sense play and ludic enjoyment can exist alongside historical reflection and commemoration, potentially creating a mutually reinforcing cycle of memory.

'Not a Hero Story': Challenging Concepts of 'Heroes' and 'Villains' in Historical Conflicts through Video Games

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ABSTRACT
History has been a popular subject for video games for many years, however engagement has largely overlooked the perspectives of groups characterised as 'villains' in the historical narrative. This article explores significant factors for this under-representation in historical games and examines the interactions of two games – Battlefield V (2018) and The Great War: Western Front (2023) – with historical groups characterised by popular history as 'villains'. By contextualising each game within the respective media historiographies of the two World Wars, this article illustrates the challenges faced by video games attempting to engage with history outside of traditional 'heroic' narratives.

Introduction

Modern entertainment media platforms, such as cinema, television streaming services, and, in more recent decades, video games, have popularised and promoted a simplified perspective of history, with clear 'heroes' and 'villains' to facilitate the presentation of their narratives for their audiences and the interpretation of particular historical periods. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in entertainment media's treatment of the Germans in the Second World War, whose devolution into a homogenised villainous archetype has been represented by countless generic, one-dimensional Nazi/German characters in depictions as diverse as situation-comedies like *'Allo 'Allo* (1982-1992), action-adventure films like *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), and video games such as the *Wolfenstein* (1981-2019) and *Sniper Elite* series (2005-2022).[1]

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DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i3.1831
[1]Eva Kingsepp, 'Experiencing and Performing Memory: Second World War videogames as a practice of remembrance', in Patrick Finney (ed.), *Remembering the Second World War,* (New York: Routledge, 2018), p. 219; *'Allo 'Allo*, created by Jeremy Lloyd and

The generals of the First World War have experienced similar 'villainous' devolution in the popular historical narrative, reduced to caricatures of their historical counterparts through depictions in entertainment media, notably by comedies like *Blackadder Goes Forth* (1989).[2] However, particularly in recent years, we have also seen films, television programmes and video games engaging with historical narratives and characters in more nuanced manners – such as the recent film *The Zone Of Interest* (2023), which depicts the caring family life of the commandant of the Auschwitz concentration camp – which have sometimes challenged the inherently 'villainous' characterisation of figures or groups in the historical record.[3]

Video games have contributed significantly to the presentation of historical conflicts in entertainment media. Warfare provides many elements fundamental to gaming as a medium: competition between opposing sides, providing challenging scenarios in an accessible context; clear protagonists and antagonists; simple and nuanced narratives, and so on. Unfortunately, it is easy to dismiss the contribution of video games to contemporary understandings of warfare or of history. Many allegedly historical games feature multitudes of inaccuracies and anachronisms in spite of fervent claims to intensive research and 'historical authenticity', while others twist historical settings into fictional worlds more influenced by popular culture than by real events.[4] Furthermore, formal discussion of video games frequently demands information only accessible from informal sources, primarily journalistic articles – whose lack of scholarly rigour can greatly limit the reliability or detail of their information – and gaming para-texts, such as promotional media – which require additional interpretation to extract useful commentary.[5]

David Croft, broadcast 30 December 1982 – 14 December 1992 on BBC1, DVD; *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, directed by Stephen Spielberg (1989, Paramount Pictures; DVD); *Wolfenstein* (Muse Software *et al*., 1981 – 2019). Published by Bethesda Softworks *et al*., PC, Xbox, and PlayStation; *Sniper Elite* (Rebellion Developments, 2005 - 2022). PC, Xbox, and PlayStation.

[2]*Blackadder Goes Forth*, written by Richard Curtis and Ben Elton, broadcast 28 September 1989 - 2 November 1989 on BBC1, DVD; Emma Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen: Representing the First World War in Contemporary Britain,* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2013), pp. 89-94.

[3]*The Zone Of Interest*, directed by Jonathan Glazer (2023, A24 and Gutek Film; theatres).

[4]Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Popular Culture* (Second edition), (London: Routledge, 2016), pp.153-154; Esther Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History: Promotional Materials and the Construction of Authenticity,* (Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenburg, 2022), pp. 18-22.

[5]Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, pp. 7-10.

However, dismissing video games as a historical medium ignores the many successes of games in enabling their players to experience history first-hand and connect emotively with historical subject material through a readily accessible format.[6] By forcing their participants to personally engage and empathise with events on screen, video games have been at the forefront of recent historiographical trends, evoking discussion and controversy in equal measure.[7] Moreover, as the likes of *Dad's Army* (1968-1977) has shown, depictions of history in entertainment media, especially those that seamlessly inter-weave reality and fictional interpretations of events, can have a powerful influence over the popular memory of their historical subjects.[8] Likewise, the variety of historical games should be examined to understand how history is understood and employed in the popular zeitgeist, thereby allowing us to gauge the value of cultural currency attributed to concepts such as 'historical accuracy', and linguistic iterations thereof, in both academic and popular discourse, and to identify alternative avenues for historical games in academic discussion.[9] In the last decade, historical game studies has grown exponentially as an academic discipline, led by authors such as Adam Chapman, Robert Houghton and Esther Wright, and now stands on the threshold of a promising future as video games continue to gain acceptance within academic study of representations of the past.[10]

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[6]de Groot, *Consuming History,* pp.152-159; Chris Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games,* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Pivot, 2015), pp. 7-8; Connie Veugen, "Using Games to Mediate History", in Linde Egberts and Koos Bosma (eds.), *Companion to European Heritage Revivals,* (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2014), pp. 95-99.

[7]de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp.152-159; Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderoth, "Exploring the Limits of Play: A Case Study of Representations of Nazism in Games" in Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderorth, and Ashley ML Brown (eds.), *The Dark Side of Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments,* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 137-140.

[8]Mark Connelly, *We Can Take It!: Britain and the Memory of the Second World War,* (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd., 2004), pp. 76-84; Corinna Peniston-Bird, '"I wondered who'd be the first to spot that": Dad's Army at war, in the media and in memory', *Media History*, vol. 13: 2-3 (2007), pp. 183-202; Penny Summerfield & Corinna Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence: Men, Women & The Home Guard in the Second World War,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 170-197.

[9]Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, pp. 18-26.

[10]For examples, see Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice,* (New York: Routledge Press, 2016); Robert Houghton (ed.), *Playing the Middle Ages: Pitfalls and Potential in Modern Games,* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023); John Wills & Esther Wright (eds.), *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth and Violence in the Video Game West,* (Norman, Ok.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2023).

This article examines the capacity of video games to challenge popular ideas of history by exploring two instances of the presentation of 'villains' in historical war-set games and the manner of the interactions of these games with their respective 'historical villains'. This, in turn, shall enable the identification of challenges in analysing video games as a historical medium. In the first instance, this article examines an obvious characterisation of a 'historical villain' in the depiction of Nazi Germany in the First World War, and how *Battlefield V* (2018) makes a bold attempt to diversify the narrative presentation of the Germans in Second World War-set media. In the second example of 'historical villains' within games, we shall assess *The Great War: The Western Front* (2023) to examine how the game interacts with the 'lions led by donkeys' myth that continues to colour popular understandings of the First World War.[11] In order to highlight the impact of these chosen games on the depiction of their respective 'historical villains', each selected game shall be contextualised within their respective media historiographies, thereby providing illustrative examples from film and television against which to compare these games and assess how they differ or conform to the popular narrative of their particular historical conflict. This analysis will ultimately highlight the creative desire to portray history faithfully within the gaming medium, but that popular understandings of historical events can constrict the gaming medium's ability to directly confront and redefine controversial perspectives of history as a result of interactions between games and politicised memories of the past.

Constructing 'Villainy' in Historical Games

Before examining specific instances of 'historical villains' in video games, it is important to begin by exploring what a 'villain' is in a gaming context. In their most common form, the video game 'villain' is the narrative antagonist whom the player must overcome in order to complete the game. However, there are also a multitude of games with more ambiguous 'villains', with nuanced or even sympathetic motivations, or even instances whereby the player character themselves can become, or be interpreted as, the true 'villain' either due to the writing of the in-game narrative or 'morality mechanics', such as the 'Honor system' in *Red Dead Redemption 2* (2018); these mechanics attribute numerical values to certain in-game actions, and the accumulation of these values raises or lowers the player's position on a graphical scale whose extremes represent 'good' and 'bad', and can be tied to mechanical modifiers which alter the game experience depending on the player's position on the 'moral' scale.[12]

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[11]'Lions led by donkeys' is the colloquial name of a cultural narrative of the First World War which maintains that the soldiers in the trenches suffered horrendous casualties due to the mistakes and/or incompetence of their commanding officers.

[12]*Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games, 2018). Xbox, PlayStation, PC; Wills & Wright (eds.), *Red Dead Redemption: History, Myth and Violence*, p. 3; Hilary Jane Locke, "You Are A True Progressive: *Red Dead Redemption 2* and the Depiction and

Many video games follow the pattern of established historical narratives and existing media, presenting the player protagonist as the 'hero' within the given historical narrative, in direct structural conflict with a 'villain' who they must ultimately defeat. This may be viewed as a symptom of gaming's approach to historical research, which often presents a direct, simplistic interpretation of the narrative from contemporary sources.[13] The clearest example of historical games following an established 'heroic' perspective is in the case of games with a Second World War setting. As in other entertainment media like films, this war has frequently been represented in video games; in a quantitative survey of historical games, Yannick Rochat revealed that more than 515 games with this setting were released between 1981 and 2015.[14] In a significant proportion of these games – including the *Medal of Honor* (1999 - 2020), *Call of Duty* (2003 - 2023), and *Sniper Elite* (2005 - 2022) franchises – the player is cast as an Allied (usually American) soldier, thereby perpetuating an image of the Second World War as 'a "mythical 'just war'"' against the villainous Nazis 'in which good and evil are easily distinguishable, and the latter can be destroyed without guilt'.[15] The Western-centric narrative in gaming's depiction of the war also builds on media precedent, whereby games overtly attempt to recreate sequences from famous films like *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), or *Enemy at the Gates* (2001) in the case of games presenting a rarer Soviet perspective.[16] Another factor, of equal significance with regards to video game historiography yet often dismissed as a crude indicator of gaming's overall significance, is the commercial value of the gaming medium and, consequently, the influence of commercial imperatives upon game design.[17] America is the highest valued gaming market in the world, and the home to almost half of all professional game developers globally; accordingly, the American gaming industry exerts a powerful influence over the genres and settings of many video games as a consequence of the need to appeal to this valuable market.[18]

Reception of Progressive Era Politics", *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, vol. 20:1 (2021), pp. 79-83.

[13]Jeremiah McCall, "The Historical Problem Space: Games as a Historical Medium", *The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, vol. 20: 3 (2020). Consulted online: https://gamestudies.org/2003/articles/mccall. Accessed 14 December 2023.

[14]Yannick Rochat, "A Quantitative Study of Historical Video Games (1981-2015)", in Alexander von Lünen, Katherine J. Lewis, Benjamin Litherland and Pat Cullum (eds.), *Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian,* (New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 12.

[15]Debra Ramsey, "Brutal Games: "Call of Duty" and the Cultural Narrative of World War II", *Cinema Journal*, vol. 54: 2 (2015), pp. 95-98.

[16]de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp.153-154; Ramsey, "Brutal Games", p. 99.

[17]Ester Wright, *Rockstar Games and American History*, p.1.

[18]"Top countries and markets by video game revenues", *Newzoo*, https://newzoo.com/resources/rankings/top-10-countries-by-game-revenues.

Ludo-Narrative Dissonance

The simplified presentation of history in games is also a consequence of the *ludo-narrative dissonance* which can arise from presenting historical 'villains' in 'heroic' contexts; ludo-narrative dissonance, a term coined by video game writer and director Clint Hocking, refers to a disjunction between the written narrative of a game and the 'player-generated' experience created through gameplay interactions with a game's world, and can have significant consequences for the immersion and emotive impact of a video game.[19] Since the majority of narrative-focused games position the player as the story's protagonist, players are preconditioned to expect that the protagonist, and by inference the player themselves, is the 'hero' of the narrative; this has contributed to many well-written and well-executed 'player as the villain' revelations becoming noteworthy moments within the gaming medium.[20] In a historical context, this narrative preconditioning can conflict with gameplay if a game's narrative is set from the perspective of a historical figure or group popularly categorised as a 'villain', especially given the assumptions of 'historical accuracy' in popular discourse surrounding historical games. Ludo-narrative dissonance often proves a significant challenge for developers, as it places unspoken restrictions on which historical perspectives are considered acceptable by the public for depiction as playable scenarios within a game. Many portrayals of contentious historical events in games, such as the depiction of 2004's controversial Second Battle of Fallujah in the game *Six Days in Fallujah* (2021), receive vocal public protests which often negatively impact the affected game's sales or development; in the case of *Six Days in Fallujah*, the negative public reaction to the game's development prompted the game's original publisher, Konami, to withdraw their support for the title, ultimately resulting in the bankruptcy

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Accessed 20 November 2023; J Clement, "Distribution of game developers worldwide as of April 2021, by region", *Statista*, 19 August 2021, https://www.statista.com/statistics/453785/game-developer-region-distribution-worldwide/. Accessed 20 November 2023.

[19]Chapman, *Digital Games as History*, pp. 161; Frédéric Seraphine, "Ludonarrative Dissonance: Is Storytelling About Reaching Harmony?", *Researchgate.net* (2016), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/307569310_Ludonarrative_Dissonance_Is_Storytelling_About_Reaching_Harmony. Accessed 11 December 2023.

[20]For examples, see WhatCulture Gaming, "10 Video Games That Trick You Into Playing The Villain", *YouTube*, 2 June 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KMUR1X-ohpA. Accessed 11 December 2023; WhatCulture Gaming, "9 Times Video Games Tricked You Into Becoming The Villain", *YouTube*, 15 October 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aXAJBrk_yLU. Accessed 11 December 2023.

and closure of the original development studio, Atomic Games.[21] Situations like this create a clear, if understandable, reluctance on behalf of game developers to permit an association between players and historical atrocities within their games.[22] While certain fictional gaming protagonists, such as Arthur Morgan from *Red Dead Redemption 2*, may be played in a morally 'villainous' manner thanks to the significant degree of player agency facilitated in many modern game genres, such a portrayal frequently runs counter to the game's intended narrative, and so is either restricted to specific gameplay segments, punished by in-built morality mechanics and narrative choices, or prompts real-world responses from the developers to distance themselves from controversial actions by players.[23]

Playing as the villain is also complicated by the aim of video games to be 'good fun'. Video games are, fundamentally, a form of entertainment as well as an artistic medium, offering escapist experiences and power fantasies for player enjoyment; therefore, issues of real-world political controversy act as an uncomfortable distraction from these experiences.[24] Consequently, many games which actively facilitate the player's actions as a 'villain' are conducted in a setting or gameplay format which is demonstrably separated from reality, often occurring within fictional scenarios such as science-fiction or fantasy, or appear as features of gameplay genres, such as Grand Strategy or Role-Playing games, where player choice forms such a critical element of gameplay that player actions automatically separate in-game events from reality. As the public backlash to *Six Days in Fallujah*'s development demonstrates, the consequences of alienating modern audiences by depicting history deemed unacceptably controversial can be severe, which encourages developers to portray historical narratives and player perspectives which conform to the expectations of their audience.[25] History may be bloody, but players want developers of historical games to ensure that their hands remain untarnished by any historical atrocities.

[21]Wesley Yin-Poole, "Six Days in Fallujah re-emerges 11 years after Konami ditched it", *Eurogamer*, 12 February 2021, https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2021-02-11-six-days-in-fallujah-remerges-11-years-after-konami-ditched-it. Accessed 8 December 2023.
[22]Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, pp. 4-6.
[23]Locke, "You Are A True Progressive", pp. 174-188; Michael James Heron & Pauline Helen Belford, "Do you Feel Like a Hero Yet?: Externalized Morality in Video Games", *Journal of Games Criticism*, vol. 1:2 (2014). Consulted online: https://gamescriticism.org/2023/07/24/do-you-feel-like-a-hero-yet-externalised-morality-in-video-games/. Accessed 14 December 2023.
[24]Chapman and Linderoth, "Exploring the Limits of Play", pp. 137-140.
[25]Yin-Poole, "Six Days in Fallujah re-emerges 11 years after Konami ditched it".

Naturally, there are exceptions, and some games have successfully presented revisionist narratives in their depictions of history and challenged ideas of 'heroes' and 'villains'; for example, *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* (2020), whose original announcement trailer expressly highlighted its contrast to the traditional, popular characterisation of the Vikings by depicting the game's protagonist, Eivor, acting in direct opposition to a narrator, ultimately revealed as King Alfred 'the Great', who describes the Vikings in terms symbolic of their traditionally villainous media image.[26] Yet such revisionist attitudes also come with caveats and flaws as consequences of the gaming medium. Games, as Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderoth note, have a 'moral obligation' to avoid causing offence to the survivors of historical atrocities or 'those whose identities are deeply linked with the victims of such experiences'.[27] As such, games experience greater difficulty in presenting more nuanced depictions of historical 'villains' whose actions are within, or strongly linked to, living memory.[28] In Chris Kempshall's words, 'time has removed the shock value from such ancient conflicts', enabling older historical periods to be safely explored in the gaming medium despite the consequent loss of source material, whereas 'a form of self-censorship is required' to off-set the controversy of more recent, better documented history with its presentation in video games.[29] Therefore, games are only permitted to present 'villainous' historical figures as playable perspectives in ancient conflicts which players may struggle to emotionally identify with, or after imposing omissions, anachronisms or other problematic historiographical phenomena to enable these groups to become acceptable within a gameplay context.[30]

The combination of these factors – established history, media tradition, business influences, ludo-narrative dissonance, and norms of playing as heroes – makes playing with conventional ideas of a historical 'villain' challenging within video games. Yet only by challenging popular understandings of historical conflicts through more nuanced and empathetic depictions in the media can we attempt to understand the decisions and experiences of their participants. Engaging with historical conflicts from the perspective of their narrative 'villains' is a key element of this process.

Battlefield V & the German Problem of Second World War Games

[26]Assassin's Creed UK, "Assassin's Creed Valhalla: Cinematic World Premier Trailer", *YouTube*, 30 April 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KjsxI01XWsA. Accessed 8 December 2023.
[27]Chapman and Linderoth, "Exploring the Limits of Play", p. 140.
[28]Ibid.
[29]Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, pp. 4-6.
[30]Margaret MacMillan, *War: How Conflict Shaped Us,* (London: Profile Books, 2020), pp. 2-3; Chapman and Jonas Linderoth, "Exploring the Limits of Play", pp. 147-149; Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, pp. 4-6 & pp. 60-70.

The reluctance of video game developers to directly associate players with controversial history makes DICE and Electronic Arts' First-Person Shooter game, *Battlefield V* (2018), all the more remarkable for the simple fact of its inclusion of a narrative-focused campaign, entitled *The Last Tiger*, set from the German perspective in WWII, a historical context synonymous with villainy.

Figure 1: Promotional artwork for Battlefield V – The Last Tiger.[31]

The player is shown as the commander of a German Tiger tank in the final months of the war, defending an unnamed city against the advancing Americans and in the story's opening cinematic, the central characters of *The Last Tiger* pass a line of German prisoners, who are identified as deserters; meanwhile, the German officer guarding these prisoners salutes the player character as they pass.[32] Later, at the end of the first act, the Tiger crew are forced to conceal themselves from Allied aircraft and one crewmember is required to leave the safety of the tank in order to scout ahead on foot. After a short dialogue, in which one of the crew – the fanatical youth, Schröder, who acts as the spokesperson of Nazi ideology throughout the story – advocates the selection of a young conscript, Hartmann; according to Schröder, all the other members of the crew are too valuable to risk, whereas the frightened Hartmann is 'damaged' and 'expendable'. With great reluctance, Hartmann obeys his orders and leaves the tank, but is quickly lost from view; while the rest of the crew express

[31] *Battlefield V – The Last Tiger* (EA DICE, 2018). Xbox, PlayStation, and PC.

[32] Video game cinematics are non-interactive film-like sequences created within a game. They are commonly used to depict complex action or narrative sequences without requiring player in-put.

concern for their comrade, Schröder immediately brands him a deserter. These separate narrative strands converge at the end of the second act when, in another cinematic, the eponymous tank passes the prisoners seen in the introduction being hanged from lampposts by the same officer, who again proudly salutes the player character. The tank then stops to illuminate the missing crewman, Hartmann, who has also been hanged as a deserter. This incident expressly confronts the tank crew, and by consequence the player, with the role they have played in supporting the actions of the Nazi regime, which ultimately causes the surviving crewmen, with the exception of the fanatical Schröder, to abandon the Nazi cause in the story's climax; after a final cinematic in which Schröder shoots his fellow crewmembers, including the player protagonist, for their refusal to fight to the death on the Nazis' behalf, the game highlights the predicament of the German military by describing the oath of loyalty under which its members were obliged to fight for Hitler's regime.[33]

The Last Tiger, and its intentions to portray a German narrative which does not attempt to isolate the protagonist from the actions of the Nazi regime, stand in direct contrast to various previous depictions of the German experience in the Second World War. In several German-perspective narratives seen in previous Second World War films, the German protagonist is explicitly positioned in opposition to the actions and views of the Nazi regime, thus enabling the audience to empathise with them without supporting Hitler and his followers. In the fictional *The Eagle Has Landed* (1976), the German protagonist Colonel Steiner, played by Michael Caine, is punished for attempting to aid the escape of a young Jewish girl from SS captivity, while his superior Colonel Radl, played by Robert Duvall, is deceived by Heinrich Himmler, played by Donald Pleasance, into believing that the operation which forms the film's central plot was officially authorised.[34] Meanwhile, the biographical film *Valkyrie* (2008) depicts the attempts of the German military resistance led by Colonel Von Stauffenburg, played by Tom Cruise, to assassinate Hitler and overthrow the Nazi regime, thereby expressly pitting the central cast against Hitler and his supporters.[35] In each of these instances, the principle German characters are shown in overt contrast to the agents of the Nazi Party, acting either as their unwilling or misled pawns or in deliberate opposition to Hitler's government, thus enabling the writers of these narratives to create sympathetic characters while keeping the Nazis in the overall 'villain' role. While the writers of *The Last Tiger* stressed that their German player character was not a Nazi, the central premises of complicity and disillusionment precluded the employment of similar narrative devices to those featured in the likes of *The Eagle Has Landed* or *Valkyrie*, as *The Last Tiger*'s narrative deliberately intends to associate the player with the actions of the Nazi regime and thereby actively confront players'

[33]*Battlefield V – The Last Tiger*.
[34]*The Eagle Has Landed*, directed by John Sturges (1976, ITC Entertainment; DVD).
[35]*Valkyrie*, directed by Bryan Singer (2008, United Artists; DVD).

understanding of the German experience in the Second World War.[36] Instead, *The Last Tiger* may be viewed as a gaming representation of the revisionist narrative in which the Germans in the Second World War are framed as victims of their own government, actively highlighting a relationship with the Nazi regime which illustrates the exploitation experienced by ordinary Germans during the war.[37] This interpretation highlights the significance of the reference to the German military's oath of loyalty at the conclusion of *The Last Tiger*, the influence of which otherwise goes unacknowledged within the game.

The Last Tiger is not without faults, some of which greatly restrict the game's ability to achieve its narrative objectives. The game incorporates some prominent anachronisms – the game features no expressly Nazi symbols, such as swastikas, for instance – although many of these are common occurrences in Second World War-set games or are readily attributable to modern political sensitivities which might impact upon game sales.[38] Other flaws can similarly be ascribed as symptoms of cultural influence within game development: *The Last Tiger* shares prominent parallels with the German TV mini-series *Generation War* (2013), which depicts the experiences of a group of German youths drawn into various roles on the Eastern Front, and with David Ayer's *Fury* (2014), the war film, starring Brad Pitt, about the eponymous American tank and its crew, while *The Last Tiger*'s development was directly inspired by the popularity of a similar tank-focused story in *Battlefield I* (2016).[39]

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[36]Andy Chalk, "Battlefield 5's German campaign mission is 'not a hero story'", *PC Gamer*, 18 October 2018, https://www.pcgamer.com/battlefield-5s-german-campaign-mission-is-not-a-hero-story/. Accessed 8 December 2023; Wesley Yin-Poole, "The Battlefield 5 campaign lets you play the German perspective but 'it's not a hero story', insists DICE", *Eurogamer*, 18 October 2018, https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-10-18-the-battlefield-5-campaign-lets-you-play-as-the-nazis-but-its-not-a-hero-story-insists-dice. Accessed 8 December 2023.

[37]Robert G. Moeller, "Germans as Victims?: Thoughts on a Post-Cold War History of World War II's Legacies", *History and Memory*, vol. 17:1-2 (2005), pp. 145-195; Bill Niven, '*Generation War* and Post-Didactic Memory: the Nazi past in contemporary Germany', in Finney, *Remembering the Second World War*, pp. 30-42.

[38]Chapman and Linderoth, "Exploring the Limits of Play", pp. 147-149; "Germany lifts total ban on Nazi symbols in video games", *BBC News*, 10 August 2018, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-45142651. Accessed 8 December 2023.

[39]*Generation War*, directed by Philipp Kadelbach, broadcast 17 - 20 March 2013 on ZDF, DVD; *Fury*, directed by David Ayer (2014, Columbia Pictures; DVD); Yin-Poole, "The Battlefield 5 campaign lets you play the German perspective but 'it's not a hero story'".

Significantly, *The Last Tiger* is severely undermined as a narrative experience by the very game to which it belongs. *Battlefield V* is primarily a multiplayer game, released across multiple gaming platforms within a triple-A 'blockbuster' franchise, with an intended emphasis on those features which facilitate multiplayer gameplay, attract mass audiences and, crucially, generate profit; *Battlefield V*'s publisher, Electronic Arts, alleged that the redistribution of resources for the development of the game's single-player content, which includes *The Last Tiger*, instead of planned multiplayer modes was a reason for *Battlefield V*'s failure to meet initial sales targets upon release.[40] Consequently, the single-player, narrative-driven aspects of *Battlefield V* comprise only a small portion of the game's overall content, forcing the game to convey the salient moments of each individual narrative through short cinematic sequences which bookend the three gameplay sections within each story. These cinematics collectively total barely twenty minutes of content for each story, which stands in stark contrast to other narrative-driven gaming experiences; narrative-driven Role-Playing games, for instance, can require ten to twenty *hours*, and sometimes longer, to complete.[41] This short duration severely restricts the depth and complexity with which *The Last Tiger* can explore its chosen themes. Moreover, the conveyance of the narrative through passive cinematic sequences removes any capacity for player agency which could actively affect the story. In the case of *The Last Tiger*, where the story intentionally carries undertones of complicity between the player and the Nazi cause, this constitutes a significant weakness in the game's attempts to elicit an emotional response from the player audience, thereby limiting the efficacy of its intended narrative.

However, the greatest hurdle which *The Last Tiger* faces is its subject matter. The complex identity of the Germans in the Second World War makes any playable portrayal of them in a game context inherently controversial, regardless of censorship of Nazi symbols, thereby restricting the potential form and scope of such representation to minimise its possible negative impact.[42] The mere fact that the developers of *The Last Tiger* felt the need to clarify that the story's German protagonist

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[40]Stephany Nunneley, "Battlefield V sales didn't meet expectations during Q3, says EA", *VG24/7*, 5 February 2019, https://www.vg247.com/2019/02/05/battlefield-5-sales-didnt-meet-expectations/. Accessed 8 December 2023.

[41]Brad R. Edwards, "Are Video Games Getting Shorter?", *Make Use Of*, 7 June 2023, https://www.makeuseof.com/are-video-games-getting-shorter/. Accessed 11 December 2023; "What is the ideal length of a video game single-player campaign?", *Netivist*, https://netivist.org/debate/video-game-length-single-player-campaign. Accessed 11 December 2023.

[42]Chapman and Linderoth, "Exploring the Limits of Play", pp. 147-149; Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, pp. 4-6.

was not a Nazi underlines this problematic historiographical identity.[43] As long as 'Germans' are historically equated with 'Nazis' and vice versa, any examination of the German experiences in the context of a Second World War game will be fundamentally compromised.

Commanding the Narrative of the First World War

As in the case of the German experience of the Second World War, Britain's cultural narrative of the First World War has struggled for years to escape from the shadow of its mythologised commemorative and popular cultural history, despite repeated reassessment by the academic community.[44] In 2014, the UK's Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, controversially criticised the manner in which the First World War was being taught, which the tabloid newspaper *The Daily Mail* supported by reporting that 'teachers should stop showing *Blackadder* to children learning about the First World War'.[45] Although numerous teachers attempted to respond, their comments were largely sidelined by the mainstream news media.[46] The popular narrative of the First World War, like that of the Second World War, is inherently politicised, and control over its interpretation is a sensitive issue when perceived to be disrespectful to the sacrifices seen in that conflict.[47]

This popular narrative is, in some respects, a product of hindsight. In the aftermath of the Second World War, whose narrative is dominated by mobile warfare and a clear antagonist in the form of Nazi Germany, the bloody struggle to break the stalemate of the First World War's trenches has been highlighted in severe contrast or framed as a warning or prologue for the later conflict. Moreover, thanks to the historical foreknowledge provided by the outbreak of the Second World War, the extraordinary casualties seen in the earlier conflict are perceived as all the more tragic and futile to modern audiences; according to Catriona Pennel, the words most

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[43]Yin-Poole, "The Battlefield 5 campaign lets you play the German perspective but 'it's not a hero story'".

[44]For examples, see Ian Beckett, Timothy Bowman & Mark Connelly, *The British Army & the First World War,* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2017); Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen*.

[45]Jason Groves, "History dons back Gove over ban Blackadder: Great War comedy is not documentary for schools, they argue", *The Daily Mail*, 4 January 2014, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2533619/History-dons-Gove-ban-Blackadder-Great-War-comedy-not-documentary-schools-argue.html. Accessed 28 February 2024.

[46]Catriona Pennel, "On the frontlines of teaching the history of the First World War", *Teaching History*, vol. 155 (2014), p. 34.

[47]Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen*, pp. 7-29; Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, pp. 4-6.

associated with the First World War by the British public in 2014 were "'trenches", "death" and "loss of life"'.[48] One crystallisation of this popular conceptualisation of the First World War is the 'lions led by donkeys' myth, which has exerted a powerful influence over British remembrance culture, following the efforts of veterans to rationalise the war's unprecedented carnage in its aftermath by identifying someone to blame, ultimately manifesting in demands to hold the commanding generals that were criticised in the memoirs of participants accountable for the death-toll of the conflict.[49]

Film and television have played a critical role in promoting this understanding of the First World War, emphasising the extraordinary casualties of its battles and the role of the commanding officers in causing them. Among the most famous, and therein most enduring, depictions of this interpretation of history comes from the British situation-comedy *Blackadder Goes Forth* (BBC, 1989), which, as previously mentioned, became a focal point of controversy regarding how that war is perceived in the modern day.[50] Across the series' six-episode run, the dynamic between the eponymous Captain Blackadder, played by Rowan Atkinson, and his commanding officer, General Melchett, played by Stephen Fry, routinely forms the focal point of each episode as Blackadder's comically desperate efforts to escape the trenches come into conflict with Melchett's delusional strategies, which frequently threaten to send Blackadder and his subordinates to their certain deaths. In the series' final episode, this dynamic is additionally manifested through the inclusion of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, played by Geoffrey Palmer, a principal figurehead of the 'lions led by donkeys' myth.[51] In the episode, Blackadder calls Haig in a final attempt to escape the trenches before 'going over the top'; Haig answers while surveying a scale model covered with miniature figures and, as they talk, casually knocks over these figures using a dustpan and brush to clear them away, directly symbolising his causal disinterest in the hundreds of soldiers about to advance to their deaths at his command.[52] This symbolism is further signalled when Haig picks up and contemplates one of these discarded figures as he consents to Blackadder's request, thereby inferring the title

[48]Belinda Davis, "Experience, Identity, and Memory: The Legacy of World War I", *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 75:1 (2003), p. 111; Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, pp. 18-21; Pennel, "On the frontlines", p. 34.
[49]Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen*, pp. 89-94.
[50]*Blackadder Goes Forth*; Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen*, pp. 22-24; Pennel, "On the frontlines", p. 34.
[51]*Blackadder Goes Forth*, "Goodbyeee", written by Richard Curtis and Ben Elton, broadcast 2 November 1989 on BBC1, DVD; Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen*, pp. 89-100.
[52]*Blackadder Goes Forth*, "Goodbyeee"; Hanna, *The Great War on the Small Screen*, p. 90.

character's supposed salvation and emphasising the subsequent tragedy when Haig's plan proves useless.[53]

Even British science-fiction has contributed to the presentation of the First World War's commanders as villains. In the 1969 ten-part *Doctor Who* serial, *The War Games*, the Doctor, played by Patrick Troughton, arrives with his companions at what they believe is the Western Front and are summarily tried as spies by the callous British commander, General Smythe, played by Noel Coleman.[54] However, they soon discover that Smythe and his German counterpart are members of an alien race using brainwashed soldiers from conflicts throughout human history – including the First World War and the American Civil War – to conduct the eponymous war games in simulations of these same conflicts, and therein test Humanity's suitability as a tool of galactic conquest.[55] Although the historical setting is soon subsumed by the broader science-fiction plot, the initial episodes of the serial attempt to rationalise the experience of the First World War by presenting it in the context of a military hierarchy subservient to the machinations of a (literally) inhuman commander, who views their subordinates only as disposable pieces in a violent contest played directly against their opposite number. [56]

A more recent and nuanced depiction of the struggle faced by these commanding officers, battling the imperative of winning the war against the desire to preserve the lives of their soldiers, is presented by Colonel Mackenzie, played by Benedict Cumberbatch, in Sam Mendez' Oscar-winning film, *1917* (2020).[57] The film's plot revolves around two corporals, Blake, played by Dean-Charles Chapman, and Schofield, played by George Mackay, who are dispatched with a message for Colonel Mackenzie, who has advanced his battalion into No Man's Land unaware that the

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[53]*Blackadder Goes Forth*, "Goodbyeee".

[54]*Doctor Who*, "The War Games – Episode One", written by Terrance Dicks and Malcom Hulke, broadcast 19 April 1969 on BBC1. Consulted online: https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p00v54p8/doctor-who-19631996-season-6-the-war-games-episode-1?seriesId=p00krpg4. Accessed 10 November 2023.

[55] *Doctor Who*, "The War Games – Episode Three", written by Terrance Dicks and Malcom Hulke, broadcast 3 May 1969 on BBC1. Consulted online: https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p00v54rs/doctor-who-19631996-season-6-the-war-games-episode-3. Accessed 10 November 2023; *Doctor Who*, "The War Games – Episode Eight", written by Terrance Dicks and Malcolm Hulke, broadcast 7 June 1969 on BBC1. Consulted online: https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p00v550n/doctor-who-19631996-season-6-the-war-games-episode-8?seriesId=p00krpg4&page=2. Accessed 10 November 2023.

[56]*Doctor Who*, "The War Games – Episode Three".

[57]*1917*, directed by Sam Mendez (2020, Universal Pictures; DVD).

Germans have withdrawn to new, heavily fortified defences; if Blake and Schofield fail to warn him, Mackenzie's men – including Blake's brother – will be massacred as they attack the Germans' new positions. After many tribulations, Schofield finally reaches Mackenzie just as his troops begin their assault; after belligerently dismissing Schofield's message, believing that his commanders are hesitating on the cusp of victory, Mackenzie grudgingly reads the message and, with visible reluctance, calls off his attack. While the order is disseminated, Mackenzie indicates the reason for his bullish aggression: the hope that *this time* the enemy would be defeated. As he tells Schofield, 'hope is a dangerous thing', for he understands that the respite Schofield's message has brought is fleeting, and he will inevitably be given new orders to attack in the coming days. In his eyes, 'there is only one way this war ends: last man standing'.[58] Significantly, however, Mackenzie is shown in marked contrast to, for instance, General Melchett, as he visibly recognises the cost of his decisions and, although believing himself justified, cancels his attack before casualties rise.

History versus Memory in The Great War

In each of these examples, the role of the commanding officer is emphasised in dictating the casualties of the First World War's battles, framing them in the cultural context of the 'villain' created by the mythologised narrative of the conflict. Alongside these continuations of the cultural interpretation of the war, video games have developed their own depictions of the conflict, explored in detail by Kempshall, which have served to both challenge and support the perspectives offered by other media.[59] Among the most recent contributions by the gaming medium is *The Great War: Western Front* (2023), a PC strategy game developed by Petroglyph Games in collaboration with the UK's Imperial War Museums.[60] Combining turn-based strategic gameplay on a wider 'theatre' view of the Western Front with focused, 'real-time' tactical battles, *The Great War* challenges players to choose whether to direct the war as the Allied Nations of France, the British Empire and Commonwealth countries, and the United States, or as the Central Powers – which, given the focus on the Western Front, means Germany alone – and guide their chosen faction to victory.[61]

Thanks to Petroglyph's collaboration with the Imperial War Museums, *The Great War* reflects its history in every facet of its design, including its gameplay. Unlike other

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[58]Ibid.

[59]Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*.

[60]*The Great War: Western Front,* (Petroglyph Games, 2023). Published by Frontier Foundry, PC; Petroglyph Games, *The Great War: Western Front – Digital Field Guide* (2023), p. 1.

[61]*The Great War: Western Front*; *Digital Field Guide*, pp. 2-4 & p. 9; *The Great War: Western Front*, "Relive Or Redefine History in The Great War: Western Front – Available Now", *Steam*, developer update, 30 March 2023.

strategy games, players of *The Great War* cannot conquer entire continents in a matter of in-game months, painting the map in the colour of their faction; instead, players must painstakingly fight for every inch of ground, launching multiple successful attacks in order to secure a single region on the game's strategic 'theatre' map, on which units are displayed like tokens on a general's map table.[62]

Figure 2: Strategic 'theatre' gameplay view in *The Great War: Western Front*.[63]

The player may assume direct control over battles in *The Great War*, conducting them in two stages: a pre-battle stage, in which the player may position as many trenches, troops and other military assets – such as barbed wire, weapon emplacements and artillery batteries – as they have the resources to support; and a 'real-time' battle phase, in which the player directs their forces to either attack or defend key objectives on the map, possession of which will swing the outcome of the battle in favour of the side which controls them.[64] Both phases are conducted from a high, overlooking viewpoint – as though watching the battle unfold from an aircraft overhead – and the

[62] *The Great War: Western Front*; *The Great War: Western Front*, "Gameplay Guide: Strategy & Tactics", *Steam*, developer update, 11 April 2023; Phil Savage, "The Great War: Western Front is an RTS you'll win by inches, not miles", *PC Gamer*, 21 September 2022, https://www.pcgamer.com/the-great-war-western-front-is-an-rts-youll-win-by-inches-not-miles/. Accessed 14 November 2023.

[63] *The Great War: Western Front*.

[64] *The Great War: Western Front*; *Digital Field Guide*, p. 2.

player's control over their units is restricted to simple instructions such as point-to-point movement and generic attack orders, mimicking the limited tactical control generals have over units in the heat of battle.

As with their historical counterparts, battles in *The Great War* are bloody affairs. Upon receiving attack orders, soldiers will emerge from their trenches and advance across No Man's Land. As players quickly discover, many of their units will be destroyed by enemy fire long before they reach the enemy's trenches, and those that do will usually be too depleted to fight effectively against the undamaged units awaiting them. Therefore, players will research and employ tactical assets such as artillery barrages, tanks and undermining to attempt to 'soften up' the enemy ahead of or alongside an infantry assault, and the game's tutorial teaches players to utilise these assets. Even with this support, losses will continue to mount with remorseless inevitability, forcing players to decide whether to continue sending troops across No Man's Land in the hope of achieving their objectives, or to spare their forces needless casualties and concede the battle.[65] In the heat of the moment, many players may find themselves deciding that the perceived tactical gain will be worth the losses and continue fighting, often resulting in only minor gains – if any – and leaving the battlefield littered with the bodies of fallen soldiers.

This is the mentality which the cultural legacy of the war frames as the 'villainous' trait of the conflict's generals. With the benefit of hindsight provided by more than a century's separation from events, the assumption that the generals were blind to the human cost of their decisions appears convincing to modern eyes coloured by culturally conditioned beliefs about the First World War's conduct. Yet it is a scenario that has been replicated within the digital confines of *The Great War* for at least one player, who – crucially – was shocked to realise that they had unwittingly assumed the role which the popular narrative of the First World War has condemned.[66] Moreover, the game's developers have not expressed an intention to create a scenario in which players would find themselves acting out the 'lions led by donkeys' myth; simply by collaborating with the Imperial War Museums to ensure that every possible element of gameplay was authentic to the history of the war, Petroglyph created the conditions within *The Great War* for players to become the 'villain' of the popular historical narrative.[67]

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[65]Ibid.

[66]Alice Newcombe-Beill, "A WWI strategy game turned me into Benedict Cumberbatch", *Polygon*, 10 April 2023, https://www.polygon.com/platform/amp/23670056/the-great-war-western-front-ww1-rts-benedict-cumberbatch. Accessed 14 November 2023.

[67]*Digital Field Guide*, p. 1.

Rather than contributing to the inherent condemnation of this strategy, *The Great War* instead incorporates it into its presentation of the First World War.[68] While players may successfully conclude campaigns and win the war by capturing the enemy faction's headquarters region – for instance, Paris as the Allies' HQ – this strategy is extraordinarily difficult to achieve within the parameters of the game: achievement data from the game platform, Steam, indicates that (at time of writing) only 1.7 per cent of players had achieved victory in a campaign by successfully capturing the enemy HQ.[69] Instead, *The Great War*'s campaigns feature a unique secondary mechanic: 'National Will', a numerical system effected by battles and other in-game events, which reflects the two opposing factions' overall desire to prosecute the war. Within the game, victories will raise 'National Will', while defeats or sustained heavy casualties will lower it, and if a faction's 'National Will' falls to zero that side will concede the war.[70] When one compares the percentage of players who have successfully captured an enemy HQ region to the total percentage of players who have successfully completed a campaign – 17.2 per cent as the Allies and 18.3 per cent as the Central Powers, at the time of writing – it is clear that the majority of players achieve victory in *The Great War*'s campaign mode by exhausting their opponent's 'National Will'.[71] This more closely reflects the history of the war as a battle of attrition between the opposing sides, and as such creates a more representative experience and more nuanced insight into the challenges presented to the First World War's commanding officers.

However, because the game does not explicitly connect the player's actions to the 'lions led by donkeys' myth, *The Great War* relies on players identifying this connection for themselves, limiting the game's overall exploration of this narrative but strengthening its emotional impact once an individual recognises the implications of their actions within the game.[72] This, in turn, encourages players to think critically about the historical narrative of the First World War, highlighting the value of directly participating in history through video games to gain a more resonant understanding of historical events.

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[68]Kempshall, *The First World War in Computer Games*, pp. 60-70.

[69]*Digital Field Guide*, p. 4; *The Great War: Western Front*, "Global Achievements", *Steam*, https://steamcommunity.com/stats/2109370/achievements. Accessed 8 December 2023.

[70]*The Great War: Western Front*; *Digital Field Guide*, p. 4; "Gameplay Guide: Strategy & Tactics".

[71]*The Great War: Western Front*, "Global Achievements".

[72]Newcombe-Beill, "A WWI strategy game turned me into Benedict Cumberbatch".

Conclusion

Between these two examples – depictions of the Germans in the Second World War and the generals in the First – we can identify some crucial factors in the presentation of historical 'villains' within games and identify important considerations for assessing the interaction of video games with history in more general terms. Firstly, modern influences play significant roles in shaping the presentation of history in video games. Historical games do not exist in isolation, either within popular culture or within society as a whole; games serve as representations of contemporary attitudes as well as interpretations of historical sources. Consequently, the effect of these wider influences must be assessed as part of a game's interpretation of history to identify and, if necessary, separate the modern viewpoints and manipulations of the historical subject matter.

Secondly, the 'villainous' identities of historical figures or groups are frequently constructed or reinforced in hindsight, leading to politicised memories of events which can make nuanced engagement with the associated history a significant, sometimes insurmountable, challenge within the medium of video games. In particular, the issue of participant association within gaming forces developers to isolate players from the worst historical controversies, thereby constraining a game's ability to engage with associated historical subjects to avoid causing offense to affected communities.

Finally, the manner of interaction with history in the context of a video game, particularly with regards to constructs of historical villains', is crucial. Engagement with history in the gaming medium relies on the player developing an emotional connection with the subject matter, and where this engagement is restricted by gameplay considerations or censorship, the emotional impact of the game is diluted. Therefore, each historical game should be examined on an individual basis to assess its unique characteristics as a means of presenting its particular historical subject(s), which will subsequently enable a broader identification of those games or genres least suited to engaging with history, or of those historical subjects better suited to exploration by media like film and television.

The inherent fascination with conflict in video games is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, although societal attitudes to engagement with historical conflicts can and have changed over time. Therefore, the depiction in video games of those figures framed as 'villains' in the popular narrative of historical conflicts can serve as a useful indicator of changing modern attitudes to history. As such, historians have an obligation to engage with and examine the presentation of historical 'villains' in video games, despite their often-imperfect presentation of history, to explore the concept of history in modern society and the willingness of the gaming industry to depict – on

occasion – historical subjects which are, in the words of a *Battlefield V* developer, 'not a hero story'.[73]

[73]Yin-Poole, "The Battlefield 5 campaign lets you play the German perspective but 'it's not a hero story'".

British Journal for Military History, Volume 10, Issue 3, November 2024

Camera technology, its limitations and its impact on the work of the Army Film and Photographic Unit, 1941-1945

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ABSTRACT
Created as part of a wider strategy to tackle the 'morale crisis' that the British Army believed itself to be experiencing between 1940-1942, the Army Film and Photographic Unit was intended to counter German propaganda by producing images of battle, and it was hoped, British military success. Doing so however, proved easier said than done. Using the testimony of the men behind the camera, this article examines the limitations that technology imposed on the unit's work. It concludes by exploring the solutions the cameramen employed including shooting images of prisoners and of the dead and the production of staged material.

Introduction

'…[a] terrible old thing really, but it seemed to work'[1]

Thus did Army Film and Photographic Unit (AFPU) cameraman John Cotter describe the device with which he and his comrades were expected to bring images of battle to British cinema screens. Formed in October 1941 and disbanded in June 1946, the AFPU was a product of expediency created as Ronald Tritton, the head of PR2 – the sub-department within the War Office's Directorate of Public Relations responsible for handling the unit's output explained, with the aim of getting 'as much Army material onto the screen as possible'.[2]

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DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i3.1832
[1]Imperial War *Museum (hereinafter IWM) Sound.3953: John Cotter.*
[2]Fred McGlade, (ed.), *The Diaries of Ronnie Tritton: War Office Publicity Officer 1940-45*, (Solihull: Helion, 2012), p. 212.

The need for a positive portrayal of Britain's land forces was, by the Autumn of 1941, immense with the evacuation of Greece, the fall of Crete and the reversal of previous gains made in Libya contributing to a general feeling that something was seriously wrong with either the Army's command or its fighting ability. As the Permanent Under-Secretary for the War Office, P.J. Grigg observed in a paper presented to the Executive Committee of the Army Council in late October, 'for some time past the popularity of the Army with the public has been declining.'[3] Although the work of the AFPU would come to serve many purposes from documenting the testing of new weapons to recording evidence of war crimes, the unit's primary goal was to reverse this trend by projecting an image of the British Army as a tough, aggressively-minded, institution modern in both its attitudes and its approach to war. While informing the public about the progressive reforms to welfare, education and personnel selection that transformed the post-Dunkirk Army into something very different from its predecessor had a place within this strategy, its cornerstone was images of combat. This was made clear by Middle East General Order, No.122 which explained:

> The primary object of this Unit is to obtain records of the battle; material thus produced will be used both for publicity purposes and for War Office use. It is hoped by this means to obtain valuable publicity for the work and daily life of the Army, and to counteract the propaganda of the enemy.[4]

This article examines how the camera technology that was available to the AFPU impacted upon the unit's ability to fulfil this remit. In doing so, it builds on a corpus of work produced by Kay Gladstone, Tobby Haggith, Fred McGlade, Annette Kuhn, Ian Jarvie, James Chapman and others.[5] While much of this scholarship focuses on the

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[3]The UK National Archives (hereinafter TNA) WO 163/86, Papers and Proceedings of the Executive Committee of the Army Council, Oct-Dec. 1941, 'The Army and the Public', 31 October 1941.

[4]IWM Notes and Correspondence of Kay Gladstone: Box 1; Pass Issued to Sgt. R.P. Lambert, 2 October 1942.

[5]See: Annette Kuhn, 'Desert Victory and the People's War', Screen, 22,2 (July 1981), pp. 45-68; Ian Charles Jarvie, 'The Burma Campaign on Film: Objective Burma (1945), The Stilwell Road (1945) and Burma Victory' *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television,* 8,1 (1988), pp. 55-73; James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda 1939-1945*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), pp. 138-161; Kay Gladstone, 'The Origins of British Army combat filming during the Second World War.' Film History, 14, 3 & 4 (2002), pp. 316-331; Toby Haggith, 'D-Day Filming- For Real: A Comparison of "Truth' and 'Reality' in Saving Private Ryan and Combat Film by the British Army's Film and Photographic Unit' Ibid., pp. 332-353; Ibid., 'Filming the Liberation of Bergen-Belsen' in Toby Haggith and Joanna Newman (eds.), *Holocaust and the Moving Image:*

finished product into which the work of AFPU cameramen was incorporated, particularly the feature length 'Victory' films produced between 1942 and 1945, this article adopts a different approach and utilises a combination of oral history interviews and the so-called 'dope sheets' housed in the archives of the Imperial War Museum to provide a personal insight into the difficulty of combat cinematography during the Second World War.[6] Part One explores the technical and practical limitations imposed on the cameramen of the AFPU by their equipment and the environments in which they operated. Part Two examines a variety of solutions that individual cameramen employed to overcome these difficulties.

Part One: Technical Limitations

As the introduction has suggested, the AFPU was a product of wartime expediency rather than any carefully devised strategy. In this respect the unit offered a marked contrast to the *Propaganda Kompanien* (PK) of the German *Wehrmacht*. In Germany, discussions regarding the possibility of cameramen operating as part of the armed forces had begun as early as 1935 with units of specially equipped *Kriegsberichter,* war reporters, trailed as part of army manoeuvres in 1936.[7] By August 1938, the PK system which comprised units of between 150 to 200 men including cine cameramen, photographers, war artists and journalists as well as technicians and support personal had been formerly adopted.[8] When tanks began to rumble across the Polish frontier in September 1939, 11 such units stood ready to spread the news of German military triumphs.[9]

In Britain, the first War Office Official Cinematographer was not appointed until 9 September and while former member of the General Post Office Film Unit, Derrick Knight, would later claim that he and the man selected to perform this role, 25-year old documentary cameraman Harry Rignold, had been earmarked by the Army at the

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Representations in film and television since 1933, (London: Wallflower, 2005), pp. 33-50; Fred McGlade, *The History of the British Army Film & Photographic Unit in the Second World War*, (Solihull: Helion 2010).

[6]Officially referred to as 'Secret Caption Sheets', 'dope sheets' were contextual documents compiled by cameramen after the fact. Their purpose was to tell editors often separated by vast distances from the events they were witnessing what was occurring on screen. For more see: Oliver Carter-Wakefield, 'The Cameraman's Experience of the Second World War: A Study of the Army Film and Photographic Unit's 'Dope Sheets', 1939-1943' Unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 2023.

[7]Daniel Uziel, *The Propaganda Warriors: The Wehrmacht and the Consolidation of the German Home Front,* (Oxford and Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2008), pp. 70-71.

[8]Nicholas Férard, *Propaganda Kompanien: PK War Reporters of the Third Reich* (Paris: *Historie & Collections,* 2014), p. 8.

[9]Daniel Uziel, *The Propaganda Warriors*, p. 111.

time of the Munich Crisis, there is no evidence in the surviving records to support his claim.[10] Having been well documented by Gladstone, the factors that influenced the evolution of the tiny War Office Film Unit, comprising three men and one camera in May 1940, into the Army Film Unit in December 1940 and later, into the AFPU, do not need to be reiterated here.[11] What is significant is the fragmentary nature of this evolution which was mirrored in the formation of AFPU 'Sections' as the war progressed.

The creation of these units within a unit was not a linear process of expansion. Rather, it was dictated by the needs of the moment with personnel and resources transferred between Sections as campaigns wound down and new fronts opened-up. That the AFPU was forced to operate as part of an ad-hoc and at times parsimonious system highlights a sharp delineation between the British and German pre-war planning. As we shall see, this, combined with a failure to adequately husband resources once the conflict was underway, had serious implications for the cameramen in the field.

Taken prisoner during the battle for France, ambulance driver Bessy Myers, described how soldiers 'in relays of about twenty' would 'come to the road and snap us with their cameras' remarking, 'Apparently every German soldier carries a camera on him as part of his equipment.'[12] Possessed of major industrial concerns such as Zeiss which Adam Tooze describes as, 'one of the Wehrmacht's most indispensable suppliers', Germany led the world in production of 35mm cameras during the interwar period. Subsequently, it was able to provide PK cameramen with a lavish array of equipment including the state-of-the-art Arriflex cine camera.[13]

Designed by the Munich based firm of Arnold & Ritcher, and debuted in prototype form in 1936, the Arriflex was compact, easy to handle and featured a revolutionary design that allowed its user to see images through the taking lens without the problem of parallax. Such was its reputation within the industry, that several British cameramen recalled a sense of awe upon seeing one when they, like Myers, found themselves on the other side of the camera as prisoners of war.[14]

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[10]IWM Sound.10113: Derek Knight.

[11]See: Kay Gladstone, 'The Origins of British Army combat filming during the Second World War.', pp. 316-325.

[12]Bessy Myers, *Captured: My Experience as an Ambulance Driver and as a Prisoner of the Nazis,* (London: G. Harrap & Co., 1942), p. 33.

[13]Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 516.

[14]IWM Sound.4578: E.A. Graham.

A handbook written in 1944 with the aim of improving 'the standard of battle photography' and issued to students at the AFPU's training school at Pinewood Studios listed nine cameras with which they were expected to be familiar. [15] Five of these were cine: the DeVry Types A and B; the Bell & Howell Eyemo; the Newman Sinclair Autokine – generally referred to simply as a 'Newman Sinclair'; and the Vinten Model K. And four still cameras: the Zeiss Super Ikonta; the Bessa Voigtlander; the Rolleiflex; and the Kodak Medalist.[16] Few cameramen in the field however, would have recognised this vision of optical abundance. A month before the handbook's publication, a report from No.2 Section in Italy, stated that the unit's lone Rolleiflex was broken and that there was a desperate need for both an Eyemo and a Newman Sinclair.[17]

This was not a new problem. Alan Lawson, whose duties within the AFPU including liaising with British camera manufacturers, recalled, 'This business of having masses of cameramen with masses of equipment is easily thought of but very difficult to achieve'.[18] Evidence of this difficulty is provided by the fact that from its inception, the AFPU was forced to appeal for donations from civilian camera owners. In December 1941 a notice appeared in *Miniature Camera World* stating that the publication had 'been instructed to collect immediately for use by the Army all available Super Ikontas'.[19] Similarly, from mid-1944 until the war's end, an advert appeared in national and regional newspapers offering camera owners a chance to send their devices 'into battle' by responding to the 'urgent' need of the AFPU.[20]

Exactly how many cameras the unit was able to obtain through these channels is unknown. Such appeals however, combined with the confiscation of German cameras intended for the American market from shipping impounded in Gibraltar, meant that the unit eventually possessed enough stills equipment to ensure that every cine cameraman also carried a stills camera.[21]

Cine cameras, of which there were fewer in private ownership, presented an altogether different problem. Eight months after the AFPU had been formed, the majority of its cine cameramen had yet to receive equipment. Those operating in the

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[15]Ibid., K.47079, *A.F.P.U.*, April 1944.
[16]Ibid.
[17]TNA WO 170/3953, War Diary, 2. Army Film Unit: 'Report on Cine Equipment as used by Cameramen', 14 March 1944.
[18]IWM, Sound.3901: Alan Lawson.
[19]Anon., "Wanted for the British Army", *Miniature Camera World*, Dec., 1941, p. 1.
[20]For examples see: *Kent Messenger*, 16., Jun., 1944, pp. 1; *The Times*, 12 June 1944, p. 4.
[21]IWM Sound.4292: Charles Leonard Edwin Sutton.

field were doing what they could with four cameras, two of which were shared between four cameramen.[22] One of these machines was barley useable while another had been assembled from spare parts.[23] Venting his frustration, the unit's commander Major David Macdonald complained, 'Cine cameras are constantly in the hands of the mechanic, Sgt. Garnham, who is working night and day to keep the equipment running' adding, 'the spirit is there, but the equipment is weak'.[24]

For the men operating these cameras, the knowledge that they were using substandard equipment could be dispiriting. Ten days before he was killed by a landmine, Lieutenant John Murray, formerly an assistant director at Ealing Studios, wrote, 'It is indeed most depressing to make every effort to take good filmic photographs, and go into places where it is by no means healthy, and know that with a 'dud' camera the efforts may well be worthless.'[25]

For his part, Macdonald was clear in attributing blame claiming that the dearth of equipment was due to the 'shortsighted [sic] policy of the War Office'.[26] Certainly bureaucratic penny-pinching did not help. Gerald Massy Collier, who served as No. 1 Section's equipment officer, recalled how acquiring a new pair of cotton gloves for the unit's editing room resulted in a file of correspondence 'about an inch thick' while Peter Hopkinson, who was despatched, without a camera, to film the transit of Russian supplies through Iran, found his enthusiastic offer to buy a device out of his meagre Sergeant's pay for eventual reimbursement firmly rejected.[27]

While Macdonald's accusation is supported by the Army's failure to consider the question of official cinematography until the war was underway, the AFPU also suffered from the underdeveloped state of the British optics industry which in terms of camera technology was dwarfed by its competitors in both Germany and America.

Although Britain produced at least one camera with an internationally renowned reputation, the Newman Sinclair Autokine, it was, in the opinion of AFPU cameraman Arthur Graham, 'not really suitable for pictures in action'.[28] While the Autokine's duralumin body made it nearly impervious to damp and tough enough to survive being

[22]TNA WO 32/10152, War Diary of the Army Film and Photograph Unit in the Third Libyan Campaign, 3 July 1942.
[23]Ibid., 4 July 1942.
[24]Ibid., 31 May 1942.
[25]Ibid., 30 May 1942.
[26]Ibid., 31 May 1942.
[27]IWM, Sound.3897: Gerald Langlois Massy Collier; Peter Hopkinson, *Split Focus: An Involvement in Two Decades* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1969), p. 25.
[28]Ibid., Sound.4578: Edward Arthur Graham.

dropped from a roof six times by director Stanley Kubrick during the filming of the infamous attempted suicide scene in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) it was difficult to operate handheld, being better suited for use with a tripod.[29] As Graham remarked, this was 'a little bit difficult in a battle', yet despite this obvious limitation, the Ministry of Supply did investigate the possibility of manufacturing the Autokine *en masse* unfortunately discovering that the camera's handmade internal mechanism was too intricate to meet the requirements of mass production.[30]

Many members of the AFPU had formerly worked in the film industry and in its dealings with British camera firms this was both a blessing and a curse. On one hand, the network of pre-war contacts with which the AFPU was interlaced meant that the unit could easily call on, as Alan Lawson put it, 'the good will of the industry' and at times used both the facilities and technicians of private companies to repair its equipment.[31] On the other, the fact that they were dealing with 'old friends' necessitated a delicate negotiation between the needs of the unit and what those 'friends' were willing to supply. As Lawson explained, this made the AFPU reluctant to resort to requisitioning.[32] Much of what was produced was, in his opinion, 'quite frightful' resulting in a feeling of 'divided loyalties' which left him 'very glad' to be sent to Burma in 1944.[33]

Lawson's opinion of the industry's attempt to create a British battle camera was not favourable. Debuted in 1944 in time for the Normandy landings, the Vinten Model K was designed to be used handheld, took 200 foot long spools of film and featured a rotating turret that allowed users to switch between lenses without having to physically replace them. Although its makers were keen to publicise its use by the AFPU, so much so that they christened a later model the 'Normandy', Lawson saw it as offering 'enormous problems' owing to the poor quality alloy used in its construction.[34] Jefferey Krish who as an editor at Pinewood viewed a significant amount of footage shot on Vinten's agreed, recalling that the camera's tendency to let in light meant that a significant amount of footage was marred by flare.[35]

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[29]Philip Strick and Penelope Houston, 'Interviewing Stanley Kubrick regarding *A Clockwork Orange*', *Sight and Sound*, 41.2, (Spring, 1972), pp. 62-66.
[30]TNA AVIA 15/3078, Newman Sinclair 35mm Cine Cameras: Nye to Perring, 17 May 1944.
[31]IWM Sound.3901: Alan Lawson.
[32]Ibid.
[33]Ibid.
[34]Ibid.
[35]Ibid., Sound.26599: John Jeffrey Krish.

Prior to the introduction of the Model K, the absence of suitable British cameras meant that the majority of the AFPU's cine equipment had to come from America. In this respect, however, the unit suffered from unfortunate timing. The California based company Bell & Howell's Eyemo, was light, compact and – featuring a pistol grip – easy to use handheld, being, in the opinion of Arthur Graham, 'a very good camera for the type of work we were doing'.[36] However, no sooner had British procurement agents placed their orders, than America's entry into the war saw the output of high-end firms such as Bell & Howell and Mitchel transferred to meet the needs of the U.S. military.[37] As a result, they were forced to turn to the Chicago based DeVry company whose cameras, first debuted in the mid-1920s, would come to define the AFPU's experience of filming war.

Having risen from penny arcade to boardroom, German-born Herman DeVry epitomised the immigrant success story of early twentieth century America. Sometimes referred to as 'the father of visual education' one of this inventor-cum-businessman's most famous achievements was the creation, in 1912, of a suitcase-size projector widely adopted by educationalists, businesses and U.S. government departments.[38]

First produced in 1925, his Type A cine camera reflected the didactic ethos of its creator, being primarily intended for use by schools and religious organisations.[39] Despite being built for use by unskilled hands, the Type A and its sister the Type B quickly established a reputation as a valuable back-up amongst professionals. A DeVry was amongst several cameras used by Joseph T. Rucker and Willard Van der Veer to shoot footage of Admiral Richard Byrd's 1928 South Pole expedition which earned them the 1931 Academy Award for best cinematography.[40] Similarly, a DeVry was used by newsreel cameramen Eric Mayel and Norman Alley to film dramatic footage of the Japanese attack on the USS Panay in 1937.[41]

Described by former AFPU cameramen variously as a 'a square box with a lens' and a 'tin shoe box' the DeVry was simple to operate and, weighing roughly 9lbs, relatively

[36]Ibid., Sound.4578: Edward Arthur Graham.

[37]TNA AVIA 38/269, Film and Camera Requirements: 'Photographic Equipment', 30 December 1942

[38]Anon., 'Get Facts About Home Radio Kits and Home Movies', *Popular Science*, Nov., 1943, p. 33; H. Mario Raimondo-Souto, *Motion Picture Photography: A History 1891-1960,* (Jefferson, N.C. and London: McFarland & Co., 2007), p. 58.

[39]Anon., *New Facts on Amateur Motion Picture Photography* (Chicago: DeVry, 1927), pp. 20-21.

[40]H. Mario Raimondo-Souto, *Motion Picture Photography*, p. 184.

[41]Ibid.

portable although several members of the unit recalled it as being difficult to hold for long periods of time owing to the absence of a grip.[42] Similarly to the Newman Sinclair it was, as Kenneth Rodwell recalled, 'alright if you could use a tripod'.[43]

What had been the camera's most remarkable feature in 1925, its clockwork motor, was by 1942, rather passé and required the operator to rewind for every 30 feet of film shot.[44] Built to run at sixteen frames a second this was incompatible with the twenty-four frames a second format which had become standard in the years following the introduction of sound. Subsequently, cameraman Leonard Harris found himself working alongside George Hill, Gainsborough Pictures' chief camera mechanic, to devise a new spring for the camera which was later fabricated by AFPU men Harold Payne and Douglas Hill in the workshops of Gaumont British's Shepherd's Bush Studios.[45]

To prevent the motor running down, cameramen were taught to rewind after every shot. As Ian Grant recalled, this 'meant that the spring was always in tension and could – and of course did – snap.'[46] The clockwork mechanism also meant that the camera was loud. John Wernham described it as emitting a 'fearful din' akin to 'a Singer sewing machine'.[47] While at times, this might be beneficial, such as when, according to Kenneth Rodwell, the publicity-conscious Montgomery waited until he could hear the whir of the camera's mechanism before handing out cigarettes to the troops he was visiting, more often than not, it was a nuisance.[48] Writing in June 1945, John Connolly reported that he had been ordered to stop filming a speech given by the Field-Marshal, because 'my Devry [sic] camera made a rather distracting noise while 'Monty' was talking.'[49]

The DeVry's 100 foot long spools of film gave its operator roughly a minute's filming time. For men who had been trained to be on the lookout for 'the extraordinary' and reminded that 'the cameraman is sometimes the only witness to events of national importance' while simultaneously being advised to 'never let film use become a mania', this had serious practical implications.[50] As Richard Meyer described, 'whilst you were

[42]IWM Sound.3953: John Cotter; Ibid., Sound.4929: Charles Sutton.
[43]Ibid., Sound.3867: Kenneth Mathew Rodwell.
[44]Ibid., Sound.7324: Reginald Ernest Day.
[45]Ibid., Sound.3969: Leonard William John Harris.
[46]Ian Grant, *Cameramen at War* (Cambridge: Stephens, 1980), p. 66.
[47]IWM Sound.14030: John Wernham.
[48]Ibid: Sound.3867: Kenneth Rodwell.
[49]Ibid: Dope Sheet, A700/353/3: Sgt. Connolly, 04/06/1945.
[50]Ibid., Notes and Correspondence of Kay Gladstone: Box 3; Notes taken by H.W. Govan, Course No.5 Army Film Unit, 1943.

loading it up …. something exciting or interesting may have been happening and you'd miss it'.[51]

Figure 1: AFPU Sergeants with tripod mounted DeVry cameras.[52]

Unlike the Arriflex, the DeVry did not use magazines meaning that every time it was reloaded the camera's inner workings were exposed to the elements. Despite being advertised as a daylight loading camera, it was common for up to 2ft of every reel to have to be deliberately exposed while loading. Sand, water, dust, and mud could all cause serious problems with one grain of dirt in the camera's gate capable of scratching an entire length of film. When the first footage of the May 1942 Axis offensive against the Gazala line in North Africa arrived in London, Ronald Tritton, complained that, 'The film material was badly scratched, a lot of it was out of focus and the dust made the picture almost invisible.'[53] In an attempt to minimise the risk of scratching, cameramen were instructed to 'take the camera to a shady place' and lay it on a flat surface while they cleaned it, or, in extremis, just the gate every time they reloaded.[54]

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[51]Ibid., Sound.3861: Richard Philips Grimstone Meyer.

[52]IWM HU 109825 Posed photograph of AFPU Sergeants Douglas Wolfe & Edgar Smales operating tripod mounted DeVry's shortly before the Second Battle of El Alamein in October 1942.

[53]Fred McGlade (ed.)., *The Diaries of Ronnie Tritton*, p. 268.

[54]Ibid., Fred McGlade, *The History of the British Army Film and Photographic Unit*, p. 48.

Billy Jordan, who described going down on his hands and knees and covering his camera bodily in an effort to keep out the sun, an effort which unfortunately also brought it closer to the sand, estimated that between '30 to 40%' of material shot in the desert 'was either scratched, fogged or [had] something wrong'.[55]

Figure 2: Sgt. William Lawrie photographed using a DeVry in 1945.[56]

Although a minority of cameramen praised the DeVry, claiming that its simplicity meant that it was better able to survive being 'bashed about', it was still being used in conditions for which it had never been intended and technical problems were common.[57] In April 1944 a report on the quality of footage shot in Italy resulted in three cameras being taken out of service while the AFPU handbook listed ten separate problems that users of a DeVry might encounter.[58] These included jamming, torn film, and the camera's motor failing to stop.[59] The cameramen's dope sheets reflect this, offering a litany of complaints regarding the impact that the DeVry's unreliability was having on their work.

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[55]IWM Sound.4832: William 'Billy' Jordan.
[56]IWM BU 8359.
[57]Ibid., Sound.14839: George Laws.
[58]Ibid., K.47079, *A.F.P.U.*, Apr. 1944.
[59]Ibid.

Writing in June 1942 Reginald Morris, described how his camera's motor had 'a habit of jumping suddenly .... causing the camera to jar badly.'[60] Five months later, Joe West reported, 'The splicer breaks often and every time this happens the beginning of the actual film stock is cemented to the face of the lower film.'[61] 'Unfortunately', wrote fellow No.2 Section cameraman Richard Meyer a few weeks later, 'I could not stop my camera running so that at the end of each shot there is a nasty jolt where someone has to hold the handle for me.'[62]

To offset the danger of footage being lost to malfunctions, cameramen were issued with what one trainee at Pinewood described as 'a lifejacket' in the form of changing bag made of blackout material which allowed them to perform basic maintenance mid-reel without exposing their film.[63] Indeed, such was the importance accorded to cameramen being able to undertake ad-hoc adjustments and repairs in the field that they were taught to perform certain tasks such as loading and unloading blindfolded.[64]

Aside from its tendency to malfunction, the DeVry's biggest drawback was undoubtedly its short focal range. Although the AFPU suffered from an endemic shortage of telephoto lenses, in the case of the DeVry their absence was largely academic as the largest lens its mounting could accommodate was six inches.[65] While this was capable at producing impressive results up-close, events taking place at a distance, such as the clash of British and German armoured formations 'almost in parade formation' seen from atop a ridge by Derek Mayne during the battle of Alam el Halfa in September 1942 were impossible to record.[66] 'If you saw a tank', recalled Richard Meyer, 'you could see this thing rumbling about in the distance, but it wasn't very dramatic.'[67]

Antiquated in design and at risk of a myriad variety of mechanical failings, the DeVry, although not without its enthusiasts, was generally viewed negatively. Little wonder therefore that, despite the collegiate and friendly atmosphere that many AFPU veterans recalling as characterising the unit, as cameraman Henry Thompson recalled, 'If there was an officer present, he had the Eyemo.'[68]

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[60]Ibid., Dope Sheet, A234/7: Sgt. Morris, 30/06/1942.
[61]Ibid., A134/60: Sgt. West, 14/11/1942.
[62]Ibid., A299/5: Sgt. Meyer, 23/12/1942.
[63]Ibid., Notes taken by H.W. Govan.
[64]Ibid.
[65]Ibid.
[66]Ibid., Sound.11380: Derek Mayne.
[67]Ibid., Sound.3861: Richard Meyer.
[68]Ibid., Sound.3952: Henry Thompson.

Figure 3: Sergeant R.V. Stewart poses with a Vinten Model K.[69]

Part One: Practical Limitations

Although early advocates of photography, such as the French chemist Joseph Louis Gay-Lussac, had postulated extensively regarding the potential of the camera to capture images of battle 'with a completeness that is quite unattainable by other means', the results had been disappointing.[70] While cinematography appeared to offer a solution to the problem of recording movement on the battlefield, technological advances – specifically the invention of the Gatling gun in 1861 and smokeless powder in 1884 – meant that the medium's coming of age coincided with radical changes in the nature of land warfare. 'Modern battles are at a long distance', observed film producer Charles Urban in 1904, 'the bullets go "zip, zip" but you can't see the men who fired them'.[71] By the time the AFPU was formed, the domination of the battlefield by machine guns, high explosives and air power was complete, making concealment synonymous with survival. For men who were expected not only to film combat but

[69]IWM H 4129.

[70]Quoted in: Janina Struk, *Private Pictures: Soldiers' Inside View of War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), p. 22.

[71]Quoted in: Colin Harding, and Simon Popple, *In the Kingdom of Shadows: A Companion to Early Cinema,* (London: Cygnus Arts, 1996), p. 120.

to do so in a way that made narrative sense, this environment presented considerable challenges. As cameraman John Wernham asked philosophically, 'what's the use of photographing a rifle poking out from behind a tree?'[72]

While they would attempt to film genuine combat, if possible, most cameramen appear to have agreed that their remit was extremely difficult to fulfil. As Reginald Day explained, the practical necessities of military operations rarely made for compelling footage. 'At night-time' he recalled, 'the conditions don't prevail whereby you can get photographs except perhaps at sunset and sunrise and even then, you're limited. During the daytime movement is down to a minimum […] you get action photographs out of that, you're a miracle worker.'[73] Yet even filming the rare instances of fighting above ground in broad daylight presented challenges. Leonard Harris, a member of No.5 Section, described how 'suddenly perhaps when you're pointing this way, an explosion goes off over there, you might whip round and get a bit of the smoke or something, but it's all spread out and it doesn't look that exciting'.[74] Harris's statement is born out by an entry from No.2 Section's War in which its commanding officer, Hugh Stewart noted that in Tunisa, 'Except for abnormally close-range stuff' he and his men had 'been unable to photograph any shells bursting […] even with 6 inch lens.'[75]

Frequently the volume of 'close range stuff' was such that it prevented the cameramen from filming at all. 'Difficult to get action pictures owing to intense artillery and small arm-fire', reported Arthur Graham as he attempted to record the fighting near Tobruk in November 1941.[76] Covering a counterattack by the Durham Light Infantry in February 1943, Richard Meyer explained, 'It was impossible to get any shots […] as we were obliged to lay absolutely flat and still. The slightest movement brought the usual reply.'[77]

Although as members of the AFPU were expected to face, what Hugh Stewart described as, 'the danger that's inherent in any occupation of the soldier' both they and their commanding officers appear to have subscribed to the view that needless risk taking was counterproductive.[78] Stewart expressed this bluntly, stating 'a shot's only valuable if it can be put on the screen.'[79] Similarly, John Wernham recalled being

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[72]IWM Sound.14030: John Wernham.
[73]Ibid., Sound.7324: Reginald Day.
[74]Ibid., Sound.3969: Leonard Harris.
[75]Ibid., Dope Sheet, A300/1: Sgt. Wilson, 1 January 1943.
[76]Ibid., A169/2: Lt. Graham, 20 November 1941.
[77]Ibid., A356/1: Sgt. Meyer, 28 February 1943.
[78]Ibid., Sound.4579: Hugh St. Clair Stewart.
[79]Ibid.

told by David MacDonald, shortly after arriving in Egypt, 'don't get killed, there's no point, you can't be replaced'.[80]

Clearly however, some cameramen chose to deliberately take risks. Billy Jordan who was wounded by a grenade while traveling on top of an armoured car during the advance in to Tunis in May 1943 recalled how he and stills photographer Geoffrey Keating used to 'get a kick' from attempting to outdo the other's bravado.[81] The propensity of one of Jordan's colleagues, Martin Wilson who was celebrated in a 1943 newspaper article for 'strumming merrily' on an abandoned piano in the newly liberated city of Bizerta while a tank battle occurred nearby, was such that he was described as 'a madman'.[82]

Yet regardless of personal attitudes towards their own safety, it is evident that many cameramen felt a moral obligation not to endanger others through their actions. George Laws, a cameraman with No. 5 Section, described how, 'If they [the soldiers] was [sic] right forward and under observation, they was [sic] very wary of us.'[83] The practical implications of this were starkly summed by Kenneth Rodwell who remarked, 'if there's a lot of muck flying around and you're standing up with a camera, you're a damn fool and someone will shoot you very quickly because you're a danger to other people'.[84]

Part Two: Solutions

At Pinewood, trainee cameramen were given examples of the type of 'stories' they should attempt to cover. Amongst the examples of 'first class' material cited in the notes made by Harold Govan in 1943 were, 'the fall of cities, the capture of high-ranking enemy officers' and 'the wreckage of an important battle'.[85] Significantly, other than rather general aphorisms such as, 'don't rely on having time to think', and the perhaps not overly helpful recommendation, 'Gain ground vantage points where you can see clearly what is going on', cameramen were given little practical advice about how to film combat.[86] Although not mentioned directly in Govan's notes, the emphasis placed by his instructors on the aftermath of battle can be interpreted as a tacit acknowledgement of the difficulties their pupils would encounter in the field.

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[80]Ibid., Sound.14030: John Wernham.
[81]Ibid., Sound.3867: Kenneth Rodwell.
[82]Ronald Legge, "Briton Played Piano as Tank Fought Nazis", *Daily Telegraph*, 10 May 1943, p. 4; IWM, Sound.3861: Richard Meyer.
[83]IWM Sound.14839: George Laws.
[84]Ibid., Sound.3867: Kenneth Rodwell.
[85]Ibid., Notes taken by H.W. Govan.
[86]Ibid.

The profusion of burnt-out trucks, mangled tanks and crashed aeroplanes evident in the work of the AFPU would certainly seem to suggest that many cameramen took this advice to heart. In landscapes otherwise devoid of features wherein, as David Macdonald remarked, 'you never see the enemy unless he comes at you with a bayonet, or with his hands up', material of this kind provided both a useful focal point and an effective bookend for the kind of narrative the cameramen were expected to produce.[87] Evidently it was also seen as excellent propaganda. Indeed, while cameramen were taught to emphasise the power and strength of British armour by filming it, where possible, 'from a low angle', in the case of Axis detritus they were advised, 'always get your pictures from a high point', in order to amplify the scale of defeat.[88]

While footage showing the material destruction wrought upon enemy forces was considered good propaganda, opinions regarding the physical cost of war differed. Confronted in June 1942 with 'a long sequence of the most disgusting close-ups of rotting dead Italians' Ronald Tritton noted disgustedly, 'They are too horrible for any newsreel company to use'.[89] Not everyone within the AFPU shared Tritton's squeamishness, however. While British and Allied dead are conspicuous by their absence in much of the unit's work Axis dead appear frequently. Filming in November 1942 as the fighting at El Alamein reached its climax, Douglas Wolfe recorded that he had shot:

> C.U. showing mangled remains of German gunner. .... Med. & C.U. showing charred remains of scout car driver (enemy) still seated at steering wheel. The car received a direct hit and caught fire. Little remains of the driver except the skeleton. Med and Close up of German infantryman killed by shrapnel. A pool of blood appears in the foreground of M.S. In close up [sic] it will be seen that his spectacles are still in position, one lens being smashed.[90]

Although John Wernham recalled being advised by one colleague that he should try and film, 'dripping fat .... German soldiers oozing, nasty stuff' the majority of cameramen appear to have been aware that particularly gruesome scenes were unlikely to be shown publicly.[91] George Laws justified the shooting of macabre imagery of the kind that he knew would not be used – such as the crew of a German halftrack whose faces and hands had been burnt down to the bone – on the basis that he 'didn't think that it would hurt people sitting in a comfortable chair at Pinewood to see what

[87]Anon. "Film Guide", *The Listener*, 11. Mar., 1943, p. 7.
[88]IWM Notes taken by H.W. Govan.
[89]Fred McGlade, (ed). *The Diaries of Ronnie Tritton*, p. 281.
[90]IWM Dope Sheet, A275/2: Sgt. Wolfe, 2 November1942.
[91]Ibid., Sound.14030: John Wernham.

some of the horrors were.'[92] Fellow No.5 Section cameraman Ernest Walter described how his initial revulsion at the sight of enemy corpses on the battlefield soon changed to fascination, leading him to 'get close with my lens and photograph every little detail.'[93] Like Laws, Walter claimed that he wanted officials in Britain 'to see what we are [sic] seeing' adding, 'I wanted someone to share that with me'.[94]

Figure 4: Sergeant Adrian Acland using a Bell & Howell Eyemo to film Italian dead in July 1942.[95]

Despite dubious legality under Article II of the Third Geneva Convention of 1929 which stipulated that prisoners of war should be protected from 'public curiosity', the filming of captured enemy soldiers was freely indulged in by both sides during the

[92]Ibid., Sound.14839: George Laws.
[93]Ibid., Sound.8299: Ernest Walter.
[94]Ibid.
[95]IWM E 14632 Sgt. Adrian Acland using Bell & Howell Eyemo to film Italian dead July 1942

war.[96] Within the AFPU the subject appears to have raised few qualms with prisoners being seen as an ideal source of 'saleable' material. Peter Hopkinson remarked, 'they could not object if you thrust a camera right into their faces', although the cameramen's dope sheets reveal that some in fact did just that.[97]

The spectacle of weary and bedraggled men trudging into captivity (often under minimal guard) offered an evocative testament to British victory while individual close-ups could be used to elicit feelings of hatred or pity or, as in the case of the advice given to trainees cameramen to focus on, 'outstandingly young, badly clothed prisoners', to signify that the enemy's manpower reserves were running dry.[98] George Laws described how he and his colleagues made a point of following this advice searching first for 'very young prisoners' before focusing on 'the hard characters' particularly the SS.[99]

For Peter Hopkinson who had joined the AFPU 'determined to be a film-maker' the process of 'cranking up my De Vry [sic]' and aiming it at 'distant bangs and crashes' was 'in no sense a capturing of the image of the war.'[100] Far better in his opinion was filming wherein the cameraman had an element of control over what was happening. This allowed for the incorporation of cinematic technique which in turn made the audience feel 'participatory in the action'.[101] Although Hopkinson's dope sheets do contain instances of genuine combat such as his November 1942 footage of 'Grant tanks firing into enemy strong points', they also offer a testament to his creative skill as a filmmaker.[102] Edited mentally and in camera, his sequences, such as the one he shot over three days in September 1942 based on the premise that 'as so often happens an armoured formation has run up against an enemy anti-tank screen, which is hindering its advance', often amounted to short films in their own right.[103]

In arguing for an approach similar to that of the documentary film theorist John Grierson who espoused 'the creative treatment of actuality', Hopkinson was far from

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[96]International Humanitarian Law Databases, 'Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War, Geneva, 27 July 1929.', https://ihl-databases.icrc.org/en/ihl-treaties/gc-pow-1929. Accessed 29 September 2023.
[97]Peter Hopkinson, *The Screen of Change: Lives made over by the moving image,* (London: UKA Press, 2008), p. 194; see for example: IWM Dope Sheet, A449/2: Sgt. Day, 13 May 1943.
[98]Ibid., Notes taken by H.W. Govan.
[99]Ibid., Sound.14839: George Laws.
[100]Peter Hopkinson, *The Screen of Change*, p. 195.
[101]Ibid.
[102]IWM Dope Sheet,
[103]Ibid., A257/6: Sgt. Hopkinson, 07/09/1942.

alone.[104] Hugh Stewart, a peacetime film editor recalled isolated segments such as, 'a shot of tank going along followed by some soldiers going through a group of palm trees in a different kind of place without any relation with one another' as being 'incredibly difficult to use'.[105] In order to guard against the production of this kind of material trainees at Pinewood were told, in a lecture entitled '*The Editor and the Cameramen',* that the cameraman 'must work out his shots beforehand' mentally 'scripting' his work to make it as "artistically dramatic as possible'.[106] While this might be easily achieved on the parade ground, it was impossible amid battle. 'You're very lucky if you get a picture, first time round' stated Derrick Knight, 'there has to be a certain amount of staging.'[107]

Bearing out cultural theorist John Hartley's observation that the 'ideology of eyewitness authenticity is much stronger than the actuality of newsgathering practices', the subject of staging both was and *is* controversial, particularly in regard to images of war, wherein it becomes intertwined with notions of decency, honour and the righteousness of one's cause.[108] McGlade, for instance, demonstrates a marked reluctance to engage with the topic of staging in the work of the AFPU claiming that cameramen were instructed to mark all staged material as such on their dope sheets.[109] While there certainly is evidence that some cameramen marked material as 'reconstructed' this practice was by no means universal.[110]

The cameramen's oral testimony reveals attitudes towards staged material were considerably more nuanced that McGlade suggests. Kenneth Rodwell for example, when describing his own involvement in producing staging material, offered the empathic conclusion, 'The filming of a war, for an exciting picture should all be re-enacted, actual war cannot be filmed'.[111]

No.1 Section's War Diary demonstrates that the subject of staging was discussed as early as January 1942 although there is no record of the conclusion reached.[112] Monty Berman could not remember being given any specific instructions but claimed that

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[104]Quoted in Forsyth Hardy (ed.), *Grierson on Documentary* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966), p. 14.
[105]IWM, Sound.4579: Hugh Stewart.
[106]Ibid., Notes taken by H.W. Govan.
[107]Ibid., Sound.10113: Derrick Knight.
[108] John Hartley, *The Politics of the Pictures: The Creation of the Public in the Age of Popular Media,* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 144.
[109]Fred McGlade, *The History of the British Army Film & Photographic Unit*, p. 97.
[110]For an example see: IWM Dope Sheet, A255/8: Sgt. Flack, 23 August 1942.
[111]Ibid., Sound.3867: Kenneth Rodwell.
[112]TNA WO 169/6825, War Diary, Army Film and Photograph Unit, 12 January 1942.

even if he had, it would have made little difference as, 'we just did our own thing'.[113] Rodwell, on the other hand, claimed that the matter was discussed but left to individual discretion.[114]

A degree of official clarification was offered in 1944 when the Viscount Stopford, recently appointed commander of No.2 Section, sought to address the criticism levelled at his unit by the War Office that, 'when there have been reports in the papers of fierce fighting 2 A.F.P.S has nothing to show for it'.[115] Arguing that 'battle sequences would be rarely more than a fleeting scene over a short period', Stopford, an infantryman with no previous experience of film or photography, stated that 'intelligent reconstruction of historical incidents, well photographed' were 'an essential addition to actual battle photography.'[116] The policy eventually agreed on was that staging would be 'restricted to static periods when useful battle pictures were to all intents and purposes unobtainable'.[117] No.2 Section's dope sheets however, indicate that this was a case of codification after the fact. In March of the previous year, cameraman Dennis Lupson noted that he had filmed a sequence showing members of the Inniskilling Fusiliers attacking an imaginary objective with fixed bayonets. These dramatic images, he explained 'do not form a story themselves but are to be used for cutting into any Tunisian battle film' adding, 'It has proved almost impossible to get this type of shot during actual fighting.'[118]

Hopkinson's use of the phrase 'as so often happens' and Stopford's reference to 'intelligent reconstruction' echo the justification that many cameramen would later offer for shooting staged scenes. Many sought to establish a distinction between staged material and 'reconstruction'. Reginald Day phrased the question rhetorically asking whether getting, 'people to repeat their actions of a few moments earlier can that be classified as reconstruction?'[119] Concluding 'I think not, I think that can be regarded as genuine material.'[120] Even Hugh Stewart, who McGlade claims held an 'unambiguous' view on staging acknowledged that, 'most self-respecting battles were basically un-photographical.'[121] Far from being unambiguous, his view was shaped by his experience

[113]IWM Sound.11382: Monty Berman.
[114]Ibid., Sound.3867: Kenneth Rodwell.
[115]TNA, WO 170/3953, War Diary, 2. Army Film and Photo Section, 'Notes on the organisation of No.2. A.F.P.S.', 19 April 1944.
[116]Ibid., 'Notes on conversation with D.P.R.', 25 April 1944.
[117]Ibid.
[118]IWM Dope Sheet, A372/2: Sgt. Lupson, 22 March 1943.
[119]Ibid., Sound.7324: Reginald Day.
[120]Ibid.
[121]Ibid., Sound.4579: Hugh Stewart.

as an editor. 'What I don't like', he claimed, 'is the idea of shooting entire battles nowhere near the situation at all'.[122] However:

> …if you're shooting a battle and you get some real shots of the battle, and you get some long shots of it, I don't think it is immoral to go back and shoot close-ups to put in to create a correct editorial effect .… one has to be logical and sensible about this. You can't shoot at night. And so, if you want to get a close-up of somebody at night, a man .… handling his rifle, once you got the real battle I don't think it is unreasonable to shoot stuff like that to cut in to give extra cinematic life to the sequence.[123]

Conclusion

'It was a miracle we got any pictures at all', remarked stills cameraman Bill McConville whose 1944 photograph, taken shorty before he lost a leg, of British soldiers preparing to storm a house at Monte Casino garnered the medal for 'Best War Picture' at the International Salon of Press Photographers in 1945.[124] This opinion was echoed by many his comrades and not restricted to stills equipment.

As this paper has demonstrated, the underdeveloped state of the British optics industry combined with a failure on the part of pre-war planners to properly consider the question of combat cinematography put the cameramen of the AFPU at considerable disadvantage. Coming, in comparison to their German counterparts, relatively late to the game, they were forced to rely on equipment acquired through necessity rather than through choice. Sourced through a variety of channels, much of what they received was either antiquated or fell below the standard of acceptability expected by former professionals like Alan Lawson.

The much-maligned DeVry cine camera epitomises this. Had the AFPU been formed earlier in the war, it is possible that suitable numbers of high-grade newsreel cameras could have been acquired. As it was, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour resulted in British procurement agents being largely frozen out of the American market as the resources of its film and photographic industries were transferred to meet its own war needs. In the absence of suitable alternatives, officials were forced to turn to DeVry whose cameras, while possessing many merits when first debuted nearly eighteen years before, were by 1942 beginning to look considerably dated.

[122]Ibid.
[123]Ibid.
[124]Ibid., Notes and Correspondence of Kay Gladstone: Box 3; Bill McConville transcript.

Forced to work in a dangerous environment with unreliable cameras and without the telephoto lenses that might have allowed them to capture combat at a distance, members of the AFPU adopted a variety of solutions in order to produce the type of material expected from them. Largely precluded both technically and practically from filming combat as it happened, they instead focused on its aftermath, using images of wrecked machinery, enemy dead, and prisoners of war to convey to audiences the sense that the British Army had turned a corner from the defeats and setbacks of 1940-42 and was now capable of achieving victory over its enemies.

Many cameramen also employed an element of artifice and staged scenes to make their work more cinematically effective because such material would have been otherwise impossible to obtain. Often this practice was justified on the basis that it was a 'reconstruction' of events that had recently occurred or, as in the case of Hopkinson, 'often' happen. In bringing this to wider attention, this article does not seek to denigrate the AFPU or cast aspersions upon the reputations of those who severed within its ranks. Instead, it argues that equation of 'authenticity' with 'integrity' made by McGlade is reductive and fails to consider the limitations imposed on the unit's cameramen by both the equipment available to them and the environments in which they operated.

British Journal for Military History, Volume 10, Issue 3, November 2024

What the Sea Remembers; What the Films of Midway Forget

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ABSTRACT
This article investigates how three films about the 1942 Battle of Midway (mis)represent the environmental impact of industrial warfare. It exposes a long history in the American war film genre of practices that obscure the relationship between warfare and the environments in which it is waged and argues that by doing so, the films themselves enact a form of structural violence upon these spaces and their inhabitants, other-than-huma). As conflict and climate change converge, it calls for a more critical interrogation of the representational strategies of past conflicts, so that we might recognise and challenge those of current and future wars.

Introduction

Roland Emmerich's 2019 film, *Midway*, ends with a dedication to both the Japanese and American soldiers who fought at Midway and the line: 'The sea remembers its own.' The dedication provoked controversy, with some objecting to the inclusion of the Japanese.[1] There is, however, another issue at stake here. The dedication is no doubt intended as a poignant evocation of a perceived special relationship between the sea and those who fight and die in this environment, but it is an anthropomorphism that obscures the reality of the relationship between humans and the spaces in which they wage war. For the Pacific Ocean and the species, of any kind other than human, who inhabit it and the islands scattered across it, the war is not a matter of memory, but an aggregation of responses and reactions to the impacts of human violence that continues to this day. The environmental impact and consequences of industrial warfare have only recently become a topic of focussed interest in disciplines from

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DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i3.1833

[1]See, for example, Jon Simkins, 'Blockbuster "Midway" Sinks Faster than Japanese Carriers at ... Midway.' *Military Times*, 9 November 2019, https://www.militarytimes.com/off-duty/military-culture/2019/11/09/everything-about-blockbuster-midway-sinks-faster-than-japanese-carriers-at-midway/. Accessed 5 August 2024.

ecology through to economics, law and history, but there is an even greater dearth of investigations into how films and other forms of media have (mis)represented the complex and sometimes unpredictable impact of industrial warfare on the world.[2] Thus, while the Second World War in American cinema has received a great deal of academic attention as genre, history and memory, there are few, if any, investigations into how, or even if, warmaking as environmental disaster has been communicated through the American war film.[3] This is a critical lacuna, because as Jason Moore points out, 'how we tell stories of our past, and how we respond to the challenges of the present, are intimately connected.'[4] While care should be taken about invoking a universal 'we' when it comes to narratives of war, American films are of particular importance because of their disproportionate global reach, and their concomitant potential to inflect the memory and the understanding of conflict.

This article tracks the representation of the Battle of Midway (June 1942) through three American films – John Ford's 1942 *The Battle of Midway*, Jack Smight's 1976 *Midway,* and Roland Emmerich's 2019 *Midway*. According to Christopher Tilley and Kate Cameron-Daum, representations of landscapes from maps to textual descriptions have come to stand in for these spaces themselves, to the extent that they have 'stripped [landscape] of its materiality.'[5] Such representations are 'selective

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[2]See Arther H. Westing, *Arthur H. Westing: Pioneer on the Environmental Impact of War,* SpringerBriefs on Pioneers in Science and Practice, (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2013). Historians considering the impact of the two World Wars include Richard P. Tucker, Tait Keller, J. R. McNeill, and Martin Schmid, eds., *Environmental Histories of the First World War,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2018) and Simo Laakkonen, Richard Tucker, and Timo Vuorisalo, eds., *The Long Shadows: A Global Environmental History of the Second World War,* (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 2017). For perspectives on more recent conflicts, see Jay E. Austin, and Carl E. Bruch, eds., *The Environmental Consequences of War: Legal, Economic, and Scientific Perspectives,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[3]See, for example, Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1986); John Whiteclay Chambers and David Culbert, eds., *World War II, Film and History,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); and the author's own work, Debra Ramsay, *American Media and the Memory of World War II,* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

[4]Jason Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital,* (London: Verso, 2015), p. 11.

[5]Christopher Tilley and Kate Cameron-Daum, 'The Anthropology of Landscape: Materiality, Embodiment, Contestation and Emotion,' in *Anthropology of Landscape: The Extraordinary in the Ordinary*, eds. Christopher Tilley and Kate Cameron-Daum, (London: UCL Press, 2017), p. 4.

and partial, and often highly ideological, ways of seeing and knowing.'[6] This article extends Tilley and Cameron-Daum's argument to the representation of landscapes in conflict in film, and investigates how the spaces of the Pacific, both land and sea, are configured in all three films. By analysing strategies of representation, including the use of maps, this article will reveal how the films delineate the nature and extent of the impact of war, and define who its casualties are. But it also argues for an understanding of these films that moves beyond the ideological to a recognition that they inflict another form of violence, over and above the events of the war, on these spaces and the life that inhabits them. It argues that by stripping Midway and its living beings of materiality and identity, both past and present, the films enact what Johan Galtung calls 'structural violence' – a form of violence generated via unequal structures of power that results in 'unequal life chances' for its subjects. [7]

The battle of Midway, 4-7 June 1942, is widely acknowledged as a pivotal moment in the Second World War in the Pacific in which the Japanese lost their naval superiority, and the Americans gained their first real victory in that arena.[8] Midway is one of the largest and oldest coral atolls in the world. Consisting of an emergent and a submerged reef, as well as three islands, Sand, Eastern and Spit, Midway is home to abundant aquatic and avian life, particularly species of albatross. If any creature other than aquatic can be considered as the sea's 'own', it is the albatross, which spends most of its life on the ocean, and only returns to land to breed. In fact, birdlife was so abundant on the atoll that the Hawai'ians call Midway 'Pihemanu', meaning the loud din of birds.[9] After Pearl Harbour, Japanese strategy included a plan to occupy Midway and use it as an air base for an invasion of Hawai'i.[10] For the U.S., Midway had been identified as early as 1938 as 'second only to Pearl Harbor' in strategic importance, and work on an air base started in 1940.[11] For both the Japanese and the Allies, the damage to the inhabitants, human and otherwise. and to the ecosystems of the Pacific was regarded

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[6]Tilley and Cameron-Daum, 'Anthropology', p. 4.

[7]Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,' *Journal of Peace Research,* Vol. 6, no.3 (September, 1969), p. 171. https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336900600301.

[8] Jonathan Parshall, Anthony Tully and John B. Lundstrom, *Shattered Sword: The Untold Story of the Battle of Midway,* (Lincoln: Potomac Books, Inc. 2005), p. xx.

[9]Department of the Interior Office of Environmental Policy and Compliance, 'Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge (NWR),' ArcGIS StoryMaps, 19 October 2022, https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/2ed172eda34f4feb87fa9d1f99c53f43. Accessed 25 April 2023.

[10]Gordon W. Prange, *Miracle at Midway*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), p. 16.

[11]Joshua Fogle, 'Advanced Base Defense Doctrine, War Plan Orange, and Preparation at Midway: Were the Marines Ready?' *Open Military Studies,* Vol.2, no.1 (January 2022): pp. 66–83. https://doi.org/10.1515/openms-2022-0128.

as unfortunate but unavoidable, if it was considered at all.[12] Since the conflict, Midway has featured prominently in histories of naval battles of the Second World War.[13] But like other forms of history, military history frequently 'formulates experience outside of nature and tends to reduce place to only a stage upon which the human drama is enacted.'[14] The scale of the impact of war on the Pacific and its environs has consequently taken time to register, and in many instances is only recently coming to light.[15]

With its sparse history of human settlement, Midway was considered an 'empty' space of no real cultural or historical significance, which could be occupied and used with impunity. Midway, as both geographic location and battle, thus offers insight into how spaces like these might be reconstructed through practices of recording and representation as utilitarian arenas significant only because of human presence and activities. What happened and is still happening to Midway is a synecdoche of a much larger issue in modern warfare. Jason Moore points out that 'everything humans do, in our everyday lives, and in the major political, economic, and cultural events of our times, is bound up with the earth.'[16] What humans 'do' during conflict is bound up with the environmental ecologies in which war is waged. These environments are never simply backgrounds to events in war but are always critical actors in how combat unfolds. Conflict in turn impacts environments in complex ways, ranging from the 'direct and indirect, immediate and long term, enduring and ephemeral, harmful and beneficial, and local and regional.'[17] While it might be understandable that the focus of most representations of warfare falls on human experiences and suffering, in the process, the effects of conflict on the 'natural world', which is often conceptualised as separate from, and less important than human society, has been obscured, or completely erased.[18] The result is part of what Fritjof Capra identified as a 'crisis of

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[12]Judith Bennett, *Natives and Exotics: World War II and Environment in the Southern Pacific*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), p. 198.

[13]According to Parshall et al, 'more books have been written about Midway than any other single naval battle of the Second World War.' Parshall, Tully and Lundstrom, *Shattered Sword*, p. xviii.

[14]Paul Shepard, *Nature and Madness,* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982), p. 47

[15]While this is true of much of the environmental damage of the Second World War in general, for a specific account of its impact on the Pacific, see Bennett, *Natives and Exotics.*

[16]Moore, *Capitalism,* p. 19.

[17]Richard P. Tucker and Edmund Russell, eds., *Natural Enemy, Natural Ally: Toward an Environmental History of War,* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2004), p. 4.

[18]For examples of interrogations of, and challenges to, the Society/Nature binary, see João Aldeia and Fátima Alves, 'Against the Environment. Problems in Society/Nature Relations,' *Frontiers in Sociology,* Vol.4 (2019).

perception', in which societies and institutions 'subscribe to the concepts of an outdated worldview' that disregards the fundamentally interconnected realities of life on earth.[19]

This article tackles that 'crisis of perception' in the American war film and reveals a long history of fostering an outmoded and flawed perceptual binary between human activity in war, and the natural environment.[20] This article argues that both the immediate and long-term effects of the war on Midway and the Pacific are erased as the same story is told and retold in these films across almost 80 years, in a process that begins with the transformation of Midway to nationalised, domestic territory in Ford's film, and in the increasing emphasis on spectacle and the experience of the soldier across all three. Finally, by placing this story in contrast with the real-world consequences for the islands and the non-human life of Midway, this article promotes a new perspective on war films, highlighting not what they ask us to remember, but what they have caused us to forget – that industrial warfare is never waged without profound consequences for the natural, non-human world, which is itself a casualty of war.

Midway as America's Front Yard

When the U.S. joined the Second World War in December 1941, Hollywood director John Ford was already a Navy Reservist, and he began active duty by heading up a special Naval photographic unit.[21] Ford was sent to Midway at the request of Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet.[22] When the battle broke out, Ford was in position on a power station, and together with cameraman Jack Mackenzie Jr., filmed the attack on the island on 16mm cameras. Both were injured by shrapnel but continued filming. The resulting film, which Ford took pains to ensure did not fall into the hands of Navy censors, was widely circulated in American cinemas. It is, as the author has noted elsewhere, a film that domesticates the chaos and brutality of a war that Americans were still attempting to assimilate, by

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https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fsoc.2019.00029. Accessed 5 August 2024; and Moore, *Capitalism,* pp. 10-12.

[19]Fritjof Capra, *The Web of Life : A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems* (New York : Anchor Books, 1996) http://archive.org/details/weboflifenewscie00capr, Accessed 5 August 2024, p. 4.

[20]Capra, *The Web of Life*, p. 4.

[21]Joseph McBride, *Searching for John Ford,* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), pp. 336-337.

[22]Naval History and Heritage Command, 'John Ford Remembers Filming Battle of Midway,' 9 February 2001 https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/oral-histories/wwii/battle-of-midway/john-ford-remembers-filming-battle-of-midway.html. Accessed 9 May 2023.

transforming it into narrative and aesthetic forms familiar from Ford's oeuvre and from Hollywood film in general.[23] It constructs a reassuring narrative of the battle, the first real victory for the American forces in the Pacific, with familiar voiceovers from well-known actors such as Henry Fonda and Jane Darwell, overlaid by a score featuring popular hymns and patriotic American anthems. *The Battle of Midway* was a success, winning Best Documentary at the 1943 Academy Awards. Joseph McBride, one of Ford's biographers, describes the film as 'an extraordinarily vivid and eloquent meditation on war, one of the rare pieces of propaganda that is also a timeless work of art.'[24] It is thus considered an important film in Ford's career, and a significant example of poetic war documentary.

The film focuses on those dimensions of the experience of warfare that seemed most important to Ford – the actions and responses of the men on the island with him. It has been described as 'quintessentially Fordian', and it simultaneously identifies and circumscribes aspects of American (specifically masculine) identity in its representation of the tanned, resolute young men holding their ground against the Japanese.[25] But what is generally overlooked in the discussions of Ford's talent for illuminating the everyday 'Americanness' of the soldiers, is that *The Battle of Midway* also appropriates and circumscribes the spaces in which they fight. After an intertitle informing the audience that the film is an 'actual photographic record' of the 'greatest naval victory of the world to date', the documentary opens with a map showing Midway's location. Maps feature significantly in all three films. As explained in the introduction, maps, like other representations of landscape, involve a reduction of space that serves ideological purposes. The map that opens Ford's documentary reconstructs the Pacific arena for its American audience in the simplest detail, see Figure 1. Midway is positioned in the centre, next to the American flag, emphasising its status as American territory and as a stepping-stone on the route to Tokyo, which is also on the map. The only other named places are Pearl Harbour, Hawai'i, San Francisco, Seattle, Dutch Harbor, Alaska and Wake Island, a location which, along with Pearl Harbour, would have been familiar to most of the audience because of the defeat of American forces there on the 23 December 1941.

[23]Ramsay, *American Media*, p. 69.
[24]McBride, *Searching for John Ford*, p. 364.
[25]Richard Franklin, 'John Ford,' *Senses of Cinema*, Great Directors, 4 April 2010. https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2002/great-directors/ford/. Accessed 4 July 2023.

Figure 1: *Battle of Midway*, 1942, screenshot.

'A map,' Alfred Korzybski famously noted, '*is not* the territory.'[26] While Korzybski's statement is useful in identifying mapping as a cultural practice of mediated representation, it implies that 'territory' has a stable existence independent of the map. Gearóid Tuathail, however, argues that territory 'should never be conceptualised in isolation for it is part of a complex of state power, geography and identity. Put somewhat differently, territory is a regime of practices triangulated between institutionalisations of power, materialisations of place and idealisations of 'the people'.[27] The map in this film reconstructs Midway and the Pacific as a territory defined by dynamics of power, notions of place and of idealised national identity. Most Americans would not have heard of Midway, so the map is the first step the film takes

[26]Alfred Korzybski, 'A Non-Aristotelian System and Its Necessity for Rigour in Mathematics and Physics,' in *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics,* Alfred Korzybski, 5th ed., (Lakeville, CT: International Non-Aristotelian Library Publishing Company, 1994), p. 750.
[27]Gearóid Ó Tuathail, 'Borderless Worlds? Problematising Discourses of Deterritorialisation,' *Geopolitics,* Vol. 4, no. 2 (September 1999), p.140. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650049908407644.

to identify the atoll as American territory. The map downplays the strategic difficulties of reaching the Japanese mainland by reducing the scale of the Pacific Ocean and eliminating other islands and territories from the space. The ocean itself is a dead and empty space between territories, devoid of meaning except as a distance to be traversed, and even that has been considerably reduced. The ocean is thus relegated to the background, and Midway is an in-between territory, significant not for *what* it is, but for *where* it is. The reduction of spaces in official maps is a process described by Rob Nixon as 'pitilessly instrumental' in its utilitarianism, and the film adopts a similarly functional process of repurposing and reconfiguring Midway and the Pacific.[28]

The opening sequences of the film, which introduce Midway first by air and then by sea, followed by scenes of men unloading aircraft and Marines marching, are accompanied by a mix of three songs: *Anchors Aweigh,* the unofficial anthem of the U.S. Navy; *Yankee Doodle Dandy*; and *From the Halls of Montezuma,* the anthem of the U.S. Marine Corps. The identity of the atoll as American territory, initially established visually through the map, is now sonically reinforced through these rousing patriotic anthems. According to Tuathail, the concept of territory is also defined by idealised representations of its people.[29] In this case, the only people on Midway are the fit and often smiling American 'boys', as the voiceover refers to them, connecting American national identity to a version of masculinity that emphasises youth, individuality, and positivity through both the visuals and the anthems. These young soldiers are at work in what the voice-over describes as 'our outpost, your front yard.' The front yard is a distinctly American concept – a feature of 'domestic landscape design that makes a place recognizably 'American'.'[30] Generally an unfenced lawn, the front yard, is a domestic territory in which nature is controlled and managed, mostly, as Virginia Jenkins notes, by men, because it was men who more usually mowed the lawn.[31] The flora and fauna of Midway, like that of other Pacific atolls, evolved in sometimes unique ways to survive climates particular to the islands. The Pacific and its environs were deeply unfamiliar and unsettling spaces for both the Americans and the Japanese, as Judith Bennett points out.[32] By identifying Midway not just as an outpost, but as America's 'front yard', the film transforms the atoll into a knowable, controllable and masculine domestic arena, inhabited by the same boys who would often mow the

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[28]Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (New York: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 11.
[29]Tuathail, 'Borderless Worlds?', p. 140.
[30]Fred E. H. Schroeder, *Front Yard America : The Evolution and Meanings of a Vernacular Domestic Landscape* (Bowling Green, OH : Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993), p. 2.
[31]Virginia S. Jenkins, 'A Green Velvety Carpet: The Front Lawn in America,' *Journal of American Culture*, Vol.17, no. 3 (1994), p. 43.
[32]Bennett, *Natives and Exotics,* pp. 11-14.

lawns of their homes in the U.S. Midway's wild and complex ecosystem is thus overwritten by the cultural practices deployed by the film to identify and demarcate American territory. The erasure of Midway's wild identity involves a violence that is simultaneously impersonal and instrumental, in that it demarcates the space as significant only because it 'belongs' to human beings in general, and to Americans in particular.

Freedom for the Birds

Almost nothing is seen of the Pacific's wild inhabitants, either in the ocean or on land, with the notable exception of birds on the atoll. The images of the flags and marching Marines in the introductory sequence dissolve into close-ups of 'gooney birds', the Laysan albatrosses for which Midway is an important breeding site, waddling on the beaches, with the accompaniment of an instrumental track reminiscent of music usually heard in cartoons. The birds are identified in Donald Crisp's voiceover as 'the natives of Midway.' Crisp goes on to claim wryly that 'Tojo has sworn to liberate them.' The albatross serves as a kind of comic counterpoint for the more serious scenes of battle that follow, but the birds are also used to make a subtle ideological point that further delineates the space. Following the dramatic scenes of battle, the film returns to close-ups of the birds. Some are still on the beaches but now appear against a background of billowing black smoke, others are on or near the wreckage of buildings and aircraft. These birds seem, the voiceover muses 'just free as they ever were', despite 'Tojo's' attempts to 'liberate' them.

Freedom, as Eric Foner points out, was the 'rallying cry' for American involvement in the Second World War.[33] Foner describes how the concept of freedom 'permeated wartime America', from Roosevelt's 'four freedoms' to posters, adverts, and Norman Rockwell's famous artwork.[34] According to the film, the birds are kept 'free' by American actions, protected by them, and left unscathed by the conflict. Ford uses the birds as a subtle reminder of what the U.S. was fighting for, but in doing so, exploits them by reducing them to symbols that only have meaning in relation to human concerns.[35] Violence in its most basic form involves the denial of needs, which include the need to survive, the need for wellness, freedom and the need for identity.[36] By denying the birdlife on Midway their identity and autonomy as wild creatures, and erasing evidence of the impact of war on their survival and ongoing wellbeing, the film

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[33]Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom,* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980), p. 221.
[34]Foner, *The Story of American Freedom,* p. 225.
[35]The author is indebted to Dr Benedict Morrison for this insight.
[36]Johan Galtung and Dietrich Fischer, 'Violence: Direct, Structural and Cultural,' in *Johan Galtung: Pioneer of Peace Research*, edited by Johan Galtung and Dietrich Fischer, SpringerBriefs on Pioneers in Science and Practice, (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2013), p. 35.

subjects them to the indirect effects of structural violence, over and above the direct impacts of conflict.

Besides the two sequences of close-ups mentioned above, birds feature in the background of many of the shots in *The Battle of Midway*. However, they were not in the background in the day-to-day life on the atoll but were subject to routine, direct acts of violence. Even before the battle, birdlife was under extreme pressure from the sudden massive influx of American military personnel onto the small bands of land on Eastern and Sand islands. Judith Bennett describes how the construction of air strips, roads and buildings flattened much of Sand Island's surface, destroyed nests and eggs, and disturbed birdlife both day and night.[37] Birdstrikes presented a danger to planes, and so birds were killed by ground crew and bored Marines, who would club them out of the air, kill them with flamethrowers, trample and raid nests or drive jeeps over them.[38] The birds that survived remained under pressure from 'the fifteen thousand humans crowded on an atoll of two square miles.'[39] The notion of the sea 'owning' anything is anthropomorphic, but the albatrosses and much of the other wildlife of Midway were part of the atoll's ecosystem. The Marines, however, can be considered an invasive species that entered into an ongoing, combative relationship with the birds and other life on and around the atoll long before the first Japanese bomb dropped.

Just as the birds, a significant part of daily life on Midway, are relegated to the background, the fundamental integration of conflict and environment is only hinted at in this film. Clouds hide the enemy, the birds 'seem nervous', and there is 'something in the air, something behind that sunset', according to the voiceover of a short sequence of soldiers in silhouette against the background of a Pacific sunset in the prelude to the battle. The environments in which war is waged are never background to events but are always intrinsically part of conflict. The significance of knowing and understanding the nature of the terrain, its inhabitants (both human and otherwise) and its weather patterns are all fundamental to waging war, yet the representational practices deployed throughout the film situate the ecological environment primarily as a stage for human presence and activity. Of course, Ford is not the only filmmaker to take this kind of approach, and as noted in the introduction, considering the ecological environment as nothing more than a set for the action is frequently a feature of written histories too. Such representational practices reflect and reinforce the long history of perceptual boundaries in Western thinking and epistemology between man-as-subject/nature-as-object, and conceptual boundaries between Society/Nature. Yet in

[37]Bennett, *Natives and Exotics*, p. 199.

[38]Roy MacLeod, '"Strictly for the Birds": Science, the Military and the Smithsonian's Pacific Ocean Biological Survey Program, 1963-1970,' *Journal of the History of Biology*, Vol.34, no. 2 (2001), p. 324.

[39]Bennett, *Natives and Exotics*, p. 199.

war films, particularly in a documentary that claims to be an 'actual photographic report' of the battle, the perpetuation of the idea that the actions of 'Society' are independent from 'Nature' is particularly egregious because it minimises or erases the complexity of the ecosystems in which war is waged, and consequently undermines even the possibility of acknowledging the effect of armed conflict on anything other than human.

The Battle of Midway includes some of the most dramatic, and unusual, footage of actual combat involving U.S. forces to be shown in American theatres up until that point. Filmed in colour, which at the time was associated primarily with fiction rather than documentary or news footage, the scenes of combat are a mix of footage shot on Midway by Ford and Mckenzie and that of U.S. Navy cameramen on the American fleet. The central battle sequence on Midway has no musical accompaniment, distinguishing it from combat sequences in Hollywood war films and even in newsreels, but is overlaid by a carefully crafted post-dubbed soundscape consisting of the sounds of airplane engines, artillery fire and explosions. Most dramatically, Ford includes the moment when a bomb exploded near him, with flying shrapnel captured by a wildly destabilised camera. There are also times when the film comes loose from its sprockets or appears damaged by heat. The inclusion of this material was a sharp stylistic contrast to that of most Hollywood films of the time, which minimised the techniques involved in their production. The result is a chaotic and impressionistic few minutes of guns firing, airplanes swooping across the sky, men's faces, explosions, fire and smoke, all generating a sense of urgency and immediacy. The voiceover to a scene in which the American flag is lifted against a backdrop of black smoke billowing into blue Pacific skies confirms the film's claims to authenticity. 'Yes,' intones Irving Pichel, 'this really happened.'

Most critiques of the film's version of what 'really happened' focus on the sentimentality of its voice-over or on its ideological overtones as propaganda.[40] In the process, the way the film constructs a particular perspective of what really happened, and what is still happening, to Midway and the Pacific because of the war, is overlooked. Having established the space as domestic American territory, and as a backdrop rather than a vital component of warfare, the film depicts combat as something that impacts only men, machines, and human-built structures. Even the violence done to the camera and the film reinforces the notion that the primary actors and victims of war are men

[40]For a good overview of some of the objections to the film's narrative structure see Lea Jacobs, 'December 7th, The Battle of Midway, and John Ford's Career in the OSS,' *Film History,* Vol.32, no. 1 (2020), p. 1. https://doi.org/10.2979/filmhistory.32.1.01. For an example of a critique of the film as propaganda, see William T. Murphy, 'John Ford and the Wartime Documentary,' *Film and History*, Vol.6, no. 1 (February 1 1976), pp. 3-4.

and machines. The film ends with a triumphant tally of the 32 Japanese vessels and 300 aircraft destroyed in the battle, most of which ended up in the Pacific Ocean but it registers no damage done to the Pacific, the atoll and to oceanic wildlife in the process of that destruction.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to gauge the immediate impact of the battle on Midway and on the Pacific because none of this kind of damage registered in any real way in the records or representations of the conflict, including in this film. Certainly, vegetation, avian and aquatic life would have been injured or destroyed by the direct violence of explosions, artillery fire, downed aircraft and sinking ships. But all forms of violence on anything other than human on Midway and the Pacific, whether direct or through the indirect impact of human habitation, are erased in *The Battle of Midway*. Perhaps even more crucially, the film goes so far as to suggest that American actions are in fact *preserving* wildlife on the atoll. Made in the heat of combat itself, and by a director whose work explored American values, ideas of service, sacrifice and male comradeship, and who had great respect for the military, it is unsurprising that *The Battle of Midway* focuses on the Marines, sailors, and airmen on Midway and the American Pacific fleet.[41] But the film's representation of Midway and the Pacific as utilitarian spaces, its separation of human from environment, and the immediacy of its battle sequences combine to create the impression that it is possible to wage industrial warfare with little to no consequence for the natural world.

According to Johan Galtung and Dietrich Fisher, 'cultural violence' involves those aspects of culture, which would include filmmaking, 'that can be used to justify, legitimize direct or structural violence.'[42] But this film goes beyond the justification or legitimisation of the violence of warfare. Instead, *The Battle of Midway* completely erases any trace of violence on the spaces and life of Midway and the Pacific. By removing the possibility of even acknowledging the difference between 'the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is' for Midway and the Pacific during and after the war, Ford's film enacts a form of structural violence on these spaces and the lives they support.[43] The effects of war are rendered invisible, and therefore any need to respond to such effects, either in the present or the future, becomes unnecessary. By overwriting Midway's identity and transforming it into an American territory, significant only as the location of a battle, Ford's film begins a process that situates Midway into a moment in the past, a process that is perpetuated and intensified in the two Midway blockbusters.

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[41]Jeffrey Richards, *The Lost Worlds of John Ford Beyond the Western* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), p. 321.

[42]Galtung and Fischer, 'Violence', p. 38

[43]Galtung, 'Violence, Peace,' p. 170.

Midway as Blockbuster

Released over forty years apart, both Jack Smight's and Roland Emmerich's *Midway* films claim in their opening intertitles to tell the story 'the way it was', but neither are documentaries. Smight's *Midway* is one of a spate of blockbusters based on events in the Second World War produced in Hollywood during the 1960s and 70s, including *The Longest Day* (Ken Annakin, Andrew Marton, and Bernhard Wicki, 1960), *The Battle of the Bulge* (Ken Annakin, 1965), and *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (Richard Fleischer, 1970). While all these films made claims to standards of authenticity, including incorporating actual combat footage, they also capitalised on the capacities of widescreen technologies such as CinemaScope and Panavision, and in *Midway's* case, a new sound technology called Sensurround that emphasised rumbling base notes perfect for disaster films, in showcasing the spectacle of industrialised warfare. By the time Roland Emmerich's version of Midway was released in 2019, digital technologies were facilitating different ways of representing war, allowing for improbable sequences shot from the cockpits of fighter planes, and computer-generated images of vast fleets and spectacular battles. Both films received mixed reviews in the popular press. Well-known critic Roger Ebert wrote that Smight's film 'could be experienced as pure spectacle .... Bombs explode and planes crash and the theatre shakes with the magic of Sensurround.'[44] Emmerich's *Midway* was described in turn in one review as 'a frustratingly empty spectacle'.[45] As popular blockbusters relying on thrilling audio-visual effects in their representation of war, both films can be considered the products of what Rob Nixon refers to as 'spectacle-driven corporate media'.[46] Such representations, according to Nixon, are responsible for generating the impression that violence is immediate and instantaneous. The emphasis on violence as a phenomenon of 'spectacular time' masks what Nixon calls 'slow violence' – 'the long dyings – the staggered and staggeringly discounted casualties, both human and ecological that result from war's toxic aftermaths'.[47] This section examines how the long legacies of industrial conflict are erased in the two *Midway* blockbusters, but it additionally reveals something that Nixon's concept of spectacular time does not include – how the emphasis on spectacular time also erases the immediate impact of war on anything other-than-human.

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[44]Roger Ebert, '*Midway* Movie Review & Film Summary,' rogerebert.com. 22 June, 1976. https://web.archive.org/web/20190522112029/https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/midway-1976. Accessed 17 August 2023.

[45]Bibbiani, William. "'Midway" Film Review: Impressive Visuals Go to War With Spotty Writing,' *The Wrap,* 6 November, 2019. https://www.thewrap.com/midway-film-review-2019-roland-emmerich/. Accessed 5 August 2024.

[46]Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence*, p. 6.

[47]Nixon, *Slow Violence*, p.6; p. 3.

Ford shot in the moment and on location, but both *Midway* films must recreate the times and spaces of the war, despite the use of actual footage in Emmerich's film. In the process, Midway and the Pacific are stripped of spatial and temporal identity and locked into a spectacular moment in the past. From the outset, both films signal a sense of nostalgia for the spaces and times they recreate by using sepia tones. In Smight's *Midway*, opening footage of the bombing of Japanese cities is sepia-toned, and in Emmerich's film sepia colours most of the opening company idents. According to Paul Grainge, tones like sepia constitute a 'style code' that conveys a 'general, geographically indeterminate sense of temporality.'[48] What follows in both films is thus coded as belonging to a general 'pastness' more closely associated with conventions of photography and film than it is with any actual historical temporality or geographic location. The Pacific and its environs are thus removed from the present and reconstructed in a mediated past, where they can be fragmented, rearranged and repurposed for anthropocentric purposes. As in Ford's film, this process is most obvious in maps.

Figure 2: *Midway*,1976, screenshot.

[48]Paul Grainge, *Monochrome Memories : Nostalgia and Style in Retro America,* (Westport, Conn. : Praeger, 2002), p. 71.

Maps in both blockbusters reconfigure the spaces of the Pacific and of Midway according to the utilitarian logics of conflict as spaces to be traversed, conquered and utilised. In their analysis of the maps in Smight's *Midway*, Paul Ryder and Daniel Binns point out that the battle map involves a reduction of space according to the 'perception of logistics'.[49] In the offices and war-rooms of Smight's film, Japanese and American commanders gather around situation maps of the Pacific laid out on tables with models of ships to indicate the distribution of the fleets, while charts and maps often cover the walls (see Figure 2).

In all table maps, the plotting tools, lines and markers demarcate zones of strategic importance. There is more of a sense of the scale of the Pacific arena in the maps in Smight's *Midway* than in Ford's film, but the ocean and its islands are stripped of life and complexity through the urgent requirements of the logistics of warfare, and also (following Ryder and Binns' argument) through the film's need to communicate the complex strategic planning that led up to the battle. While Emmerich's *Midway* does not engage so deeply with the complexities of strategizing, the profusion of gridlines, markers, counters, notes and vectors covering the table maps used by both Japanese and American commanders in this film render the spaces of the Pacific and Midway almost invisible (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: *Midway,* 2019, screenshot.

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[49]Ryder, Paul, and Daniel Binns, 'The Semiotics of Strategy: A Preliminary Structuralist Assessment of the Battle-Map in *Patton* (1970) and *Midway* (1976),' *M/C Journal*, Vol.20, no. 4 (16 August 2017), para 2, https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.1256.

In Ford's film, the purpose of the map is to render unfamiliar space into recognisable territory for an American audience. In these two films, the maps overwrite the Pacific Ocean and its islands with the symbolic markers of machines and military objectives. In a similar way, the films themselves overwrite space and relegate it to the background of all human activities, including warfighting.

Spaces and Erasures

In contrast to Ford's film, which features only the Pacific Ocean and Midway, the two blockbusters introduce spaces other than those in which war is fought. In both the 1976 and the 2019 films, all exterior sequences set outside of combat zones occur in manicured, organised, landscaped spaces. In Smight's *Midway*, these include the lush gardens of the residence of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto in Hiroshima, and the Pacific Fleet Headquarters in Hawai'i, which forms backgrounds of neat lawns along with the palm trees and blue skies so often present in Hollywood representations of Pacific islands.[50] Emmerich's *Midway* opens with a scene of a Japanese duck hunt set in the Kiyosumi Garden in Tokyo before the outbreak of war. A British officer, accompanied by an American, is struggling with the traditional net, while the Japanese officers catch their duck with ease. On the surface the scene is about cultural differences – the slow, careful approach of the Japanese contrasted with the aggression of the British officer, who complains that the technique is 'bloody ridiculous' and looks forward to seeing the Japanese through the sights of his gun, while the American remains carefully neutral – but it also reveals that these spaces and the lives they contain are conceived as nothing more than arenas for the expression of culturally-specific masculine identities. Like the front yard, these are all spaces shaped by and subject to human, particularly male, principles and needs, and in which – bar a few exceptions – male characters interact.

In contrast to these organised, controlled spaces, which are nevertheless filled with life, the spaces in which combat occurs in both films are largely devoid of anything except men and machines. Scenes shot on the atoll in Ford's film are at the very least filled with birds, but the Midway of the two blockbusters is scrubbed of any life other than human. Point Mugu, a naval station on the coast of California, was the location used for Midway in Smight's film. Point Mugu is an important area for birdlife, but there is no life at all to be seen in this representation of the atoll, apart from a few scrappy plants on the dunes. The 2019 *Midway* features Ford as a character. As he arrives on the atoll, a soldier asks him, 'what kind of film are you planning to make in a God-forsaken place like this?'. Ford's film erased the impact of violence on Midway's wild

[50]These kinds of Hollywood aesthetics for the Pacific were so pervasive that during the war, American soldiers sent to the islands were disconcerted by the extreme diversity of the environments they encountered. Bennett, *Natives and Exotics,* p. 11.

inhabitants, but these two films go a step further to erase the inhabitants themselves, reconstructing Midway as an empty space that not even God cares about. A violent structure, according to Galtung and Fischer, involves a form of 'unequal exchange', in which those who dominate the structure exploit everything else within it.[51] Ford's film provides an example of such an 'unequal exchange' in its exploitation of the birds for ideological purposes. The two *Midway*s, however, take structural violence one step further by not simply exploiting the non-human life on Midway, but by utterly eliminating it.

Midway in both films is reduced to one small location in the larger battle. But all other spaces of combat are similarly devoid of anything except men and machines. In Smight's film, battle sequences incorporate actual footage from the Pacific war, alongside those shot in studio and on location. The result is an odd melange that fragments the Pacific Ocean into aesthetically distinct and disjointed pieces that resist temporal and spatial coherence. By 2019, these spaces could be digitally recreated, allowing for an expanded scope and scale. An impressive plethora of aircraft and ships dominate the sky and the sea in Emmerich's film, obscuring the spaces of Pacific as effectively as the symbolic markers on the maps. The awkward juxtaposition of actual combat footage and studio footage in Smight's *Midway*, and the digital reconstructions in Emmerich's, render the Pacific Ocean as an artificial and oddly immaterial setting for the spectacular destruction of machines and men. Aircraft crash into the sea, plumes of black smoke rise from sinking ships, but the sea absorbs it all, and there is little to no evidence in either film of debris or contaminants left behind on the surface of the ocean, or of marine life that might have been destroyed in the process. As in Ford's film, men and machines bear the brunt of industrial warfare. The spaces of the Pacific Ocean in both films are artificial and sterile sets in which men engage in war, and warfighting leaves that setting relatively undamaged.

Emmerich's film ends by detailing the futures of some of the men involved in the battle, dissolving from images of the actors to photographs of the actual men they play. These soldiers go on from the battle, but the spaces of Midway and the Pacific remain locked in a spectacular moment in the past in both Midway blockbusters. Ford's film erased the impact of war from the life on Midway, but these two films erase any life other than human from the spaces of war and in the process, reduce Midway from place to battle. There is a political dimension to acts of erasure that, according to Arthur Bradly, goes beyond the power over life and death to 'the more originary and fundamental power to decide upon the living and the non-living, upon what *counts* as being alive and what does not, upon which lives are 'bearable, in every sense of that word, from the metaphysical through the juridico-political to the biological, and which

[51]Galtung and Fischer, 'Violence', p. 37.

are 'unbearable.'[52] While the politics of erasure are generally applied to erasures of humankind from aspects of socio-political life, they are just as relevant to the erasure of all other forms of life. In the case of these two films, the erasure of all life other than that of men on Midway and the Pacific determines what might be considered alive in the spaces of war, and therefore which lives are impacted, either directly or indirectly, by warfare.

Conclusion: What the Sea Remembers

Midway remained under U.S. military control until 1996. In 1973, it was identified by the Pacific Ocean Biological Survey Program (POBSP) as 'the most altered' of all the atolls and islands in the Northwestern Hawai'ian Chain.[53] Sand Island was made an official bird sanctuary, and the 'gooneys' were now supposedly a protected species, but in an example of the complex relationship between the military and natural environments, the paving over of three runways on Sand involved the 'destruction by asphyxiation of 18,000 incubating albatrosses, 13 percent of Midway's and about 5 percent of the world's population', and all active nests on Sand Island's golf course were destroyed to preserve this recreational space.[54] Meanwhile on Eastern Island, the Sooty Tern, which had been deliberately driven off Sand, was subject to extreme harassment by Naval personnel, including so-called 'chick-stamps,' being clubbed from the air, and hunted by dogs brought to the island for specifically that purpose.[55] Far from being freed by American actions, the birds of Midway continued to be under extreme duress for decades after the battle, the victims of what Rob Nixon terms 'slow violence'.

Today, Midway is part of the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument (PMNM), protected and managed as both a National Wildlife Refuge and a war memorial. But even after the U.S. Navy had withdrawn, birdlife remained under stress because of the lead-based paint used on most of the structures built on the islands. Lead leached into the soil, and chips of paint were picked up by albatrosses for their nests, resulting in the deaths of approximately 130,000 chicks.[56] From 2010-2017, however, measures were taken to clean up the site, and deaths from lead poisoning have ended. According to the Papahānaumokuākea Marine Monument website, nearly

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[52]Arthur Bradley, *Unbearable Life: A Genealogy of Political Erasure,* (Columbia University Press, 2019), p. 4

[53]Warren, B King, 'Conservation Status of the Birds of Central Pacific Islands,' *The Wilson Bulletin* 85, no.1 (1973), p. 93.

[54]King, 'Conservation Status', p. 93.

[55]King, 'Conservation Status', p. 93.

[56]American Bird Conservancy, 'Lead Paint Kills Thousands of Rare Seabirds on Midway,' 17 June 2010. https://abcbirds.org/article/lead-paint-kills-thousands-of-rare-seabirds-on-midway/. Accessed 17 August 2023.

two million birds of 19 species can be found today on Midway. They are more recently facing a new threat in the form of mice, an invasive species which, for unknown reasons, started attacking birds in 2015.[57] The mice are not the only invasive species on the atoll. Not all invasive species are due to the military occupation, but around 90 percent of Midway's flora are considered non-native, and extensive efforts have been made to remove the more damaging of these species.[58]

The reefs around Midway are rich with life, but as a recent expedition conducted by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) noted, 'paradoxically, while a cultural and military invasion was successfully fended off by U.S. forces in 1942, the same military infrastructure that made that possible may have also fostered a moderately successful biological invasion' of alien marine invertebrate life in and around the atoll.[59] As NOAA's study demonstrates, aircraft and ships do not simply vanish between the waves, but linger under the ocean, sometimes leaching contaminants, biological and otherwise, into the Pacific. The Pacific Ocean and Midway thus do not 'remember' the war. They continue to struggle with the ongoing slow violence of the impact of war and human habitation on those species that, unlike humans, might really be considered the sea's 'own'.

On one level, an argument can be made that the atoll is recovering, and that what happened, and continues to happen on Midway, is part of the inevitable and acceptable 'collateral' damage of war. However, that argument encourages us to forget, or overlook, not only the immediate impact of the conflict on Midway and in the Pacific, but also the long, slow violence of the impact of invasive species on land and sea, and the terrible careless cruelty that characterised the use of Midway as a military base. The three films of Midway in this article actively foster the erasure and forgetting of both the immediate and long-term impact of industrial warfare on the spaces of the Pacific and reinforce this perspective through their repeated claims that the story that focusses only on men and machines is the one that is authentic, and the one that

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[57]Hob Osterlund, 'Of Mice and Mōlī: Protecting Seabirds on Midway Atoll,' The Safina Center, 1 November, 2021. https://www.safinacenter.org/blog/of-mice-and-ml-protecting-seabirds-on-midway-atoll. Accessed 17 August 2023.
[58]Friends of Midway Atoll, 'Plants,' 14 September 2015. https://friendsofmidway.org/explore/wildlife-plants/plants/. Accessed 17 August 2023.
[59]Kelly Keogh, 'Exploring the Sunken Heritage of Midway Atoll: Honoring the Legacy of the 75th Anniversary of the Battle of Midway: Background: Non-Native Creatures: NOAA Office of Ocean Exploration and Research,' US Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 16 May 2017. https://oceanexplorer.noaa.gov/explorations/17midway/background/invasive-species/invasive-species.html. Accessed 25 April 2023.

matters. This article is not suggesting that human casualties should not be remembered, but it is arguing that it is vital that we recognise that warfare is not an activity that takes place only between soldiers, and that it is not only soldiers and machines that are damaged by conflict. The American war film has evolved to focus on the intensity and extremities of combat, but at best, these films relegate the natural world to the background; at worst, they erase the complexities of the impact of war on the ecologies in which it is waged and eliminate any evidence of any form of life other than human in the spaces of war.

It has never been more vital, as conflict and climate change converge, that we recognise and challenge representational practices such as these, in order to acknowledge that war, like all human activities, is inextricably connected to the environmental ecologies in which it occurs, the ecologies, which climate change is making clear, upon which humans depend as much as all other forms of life.

British Journal for Military History, Volume 10, Issue 3, November 2024

'Stop and Search': How the Militarised Space of Belfast's Past is Navigated by Feminist Film-makers

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ABSTRACT
This article provides a comparative case study of feminist filmmaking strategies deployed to address issues around the militarised space of Belfast during the conflict, often known as The Troubles. This article makes specific reference to scenes from Pat Murphy's formally experimental film Maeve from 1981, which contains key moments of gender-based harassment and violence between two sisters and British military personnel in Belfast. Analysis is also provided of the author's own short film New Threads, which uses elements of BBC archival video of Belfast in 1976 and extracts from a book of first-person accounts of lesbian lives in the 1970s and 1980s to depict LGBT+ lives in a subversive manner.

Embodied Filmmaking: Feminist Strategies

An anti-colonial analogy is offered in a debate by the eponymous character in Pat Murphy's experimental film *Maeve*. Maeve (Mary Jackson) declares: 'Men's relationship to women is just like England's relationship to Ireland. You are in possession of us. You occupy us like an army.'[1] Bound in ideas of feminism and colonialism, Maeve speaks to wider fears of the historical moment. As a filmmaker, Murphy incorporates strategies that disrupt standard narrative to present a different view of Northern Ireland during the conflict. As feminist film scholars have posited: 'any alternative must be distinct from the mainstream, in order to free the image from its enslavement to

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DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i3.1834
[1]Maeve Sweeney *Maeve* directed by Pat Murphy (1981 Double Band Pictures, Channel 4, 2010: BFI) https://player.bfi.org.uk/rentals/film/watch-maeve-1982-online. Accessed 6 August 2024.

patriarchy.'[2] By exploring more experimental formal strategies in an episodic structure, Murphy's work draws into focus the casual sexualised harassment, violence and constant surveillance women in Belfast faced through a series of pivotal encounters between Maeve and her sister Roisin (Brid Brennan) and the British Army.

New Threads was made using BBC archive from 1976 of two women on a shopping trip in Belfast and first-person written accounts of lesbians' experiences in Belfast in the 1970s and 1980s.[3] The amalgam of these two elements came together through an examination of the physical process of being stopped and searched at barriers in Belfast's city centre. Whilst the male British military personnel posed a threat to women on screen in *Maeve*, for young lesbians in Belfast, there was a thrill, a danger and a flirtation in the act of being searched by female British military personnel, according to these written accounts.

Investigating feminist strategies on screen is important in considering counter-hegemonic perspectives of the heavily militarised zone of Belfast in the context of the 30-year conflict, often referred to as 'The Troubles.'[4] Feminist modes of filmmaking will be investigated and the article will analyse the techniques used to explore gender and sexuality on screen. Murphy's work, though much renowned in Irish Film Studies, is still considered marginal and works in opposition to a wider canon of films made about Belfast during this period. Much of this hegemonic canon forefronts masculinised military or paramilitary violence and ignores the violation of bodily autonomy and patriarchal structures that this violence upholds. As Scarlata writes of *Maeve*, 'the film offers a subjective and intimate history that contrasts with the official history of the state as well as the heroic histories of Irish nationalism.'[5] There was a sustained British military presence in Northern Ireland that is portrayed in both *Maeve* and the archival

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[2]Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.' Screen 16, 3 (Autumn, 1975), pp. 6-18; Claire Johnston, 'Women's Cinema as Counter- Cinema,' in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 31-40, p. 22.

[3]Elspeth Vischer, *New Threads* (2022: Vish Films), use password Threads2022 to view. https://vimeo.com/759846997. Accessed 25 August 2024.

[4]'The Troubles' refers to the period of civil conflict in Northern Ireland after Civil Rights protests in the late 1960s up until the 1998 Good Friday Agreement peace deal. This war was between 'Loyalists' or 'Unionists' who were predominantly Protestant and loyal to Britain and the United Kingdom and 'Nationalists' or 'Republicans' who were largely Catholic and loyal to Ireland and a United 32 county Ireland. See: David McKittrick and David McVea, *Making Sense of the Troubles: The Story of the Conflict in Northern Ireland,* (Chicago: New Amsterdam Books, 2002).

[5]Jessica Scarlata . *Rethinking Occupied Ireland: Gender and Incarceration in Contemporary Irish Film.* (Syracuse University Press, 2014), p. 75.

footage used in *New Threads*. Codenamed Operation Banner, this was 'the single longest continuous deployment of the British Army and from 1969-2007 British security forces remained in Northern Ireland.'[6]

Maeve's words paralleling the military 'possession' and 'occupation' of both women and Ireland speak to the political situation in Belfast and Northern Ireland when the film was made. 'The Wilson Government in Britain in 1969 after the Civil Rights movement gained traction meant that British troops were mobilised en masse to Northern Ireland to help the police supposedly control the spread of violence.'[7] With the deployment of over 20,000 British army troops from the mid-1970s to contain the conflict, people were under occupation. Having such a 'Massive military effort, however, begged the more basic questions of what its political aim was and whether or not the British army would be deployed on a permanent basis.'[8] Legacy Investigations are underway In Northern Ireland in relation to civilian deaths caused due to this sustained militarisation. 'Between August 1969 and July 2007 1,441 military personnel died in Northern Ireland. 722 of those personnel were killed in paramilitary attacks. During the same period, the British military were responsible for the deaths of 301 individuals, over half of whom were civilians.'[9]

The presence of army personnel, metal barricades, vehicle checkpoints, and 'stop and searches' became integral elements of Belfast's architecture, shaping the city's landscape. This militarised environment is critically examined in films that delve into the oppression symbolised by this military presence. 'Within a year of the deployment, the conflict had radically changed from one of ethnic conflict policed by the British troops to one of confrontation between the nationalist community and the British army.'[10] In the process, 'the troops became the symbol of British oppression.'[11]

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[6]Andrew Sanders, 'Aid to the Civil Power? The Politics of the British Army's Operation Banner in Northern Ireland'. *APSA 2012 Annual Meeting Paper University College Dublin* (2012), p. 2. https://ssrn.com/abstract=2106722. Accessed 13 August 2024.

[7]Colin McInnes and Caroline Kennedy-Pipe. "The Dog That Did Not Bark': The British Army in Northern Ireland, 1990-94.' *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 8 (1997): pp. 137–53, p. 137 http://www.jstor.org/stable/30002048.

[8]Ibid., p. 138.

[9]Claire Mills and David Torrance, 'Investigation of Former Armed Forces Personnel Who Served in Northern Ireland' Parliamentary Report, *House of Commons Library* 18 May 2022.

[10]'Nationalist community' here refers to oppositional 'republicans' who hold allegiances to Ireland and an Irish state as opposed to the British state, see Fn 3.

[11]McInnes, Colin, and Caroline Kennedy-Pipe. "The Dog That Did Not Bark' *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 8 (1997): pp. 137–53, p.137.

Films have the power to challenge systems of oppression and explore ideas in complex ways that allow audiences to experience challenging content as an embodied presence in the room. Both *Maeve* and *New Threads* resist representing hegemonic national narratives of the Northern Irish conflict and instead represent both how queer bodies *(New Threads*) and women's bodies (*Maeve*) navigated a particular space and time, through experimental techniques. A consideration of the body is central to much feminist and queer scholarship in discussing how a physical presence of certain sections of society poses a threat to the status quo. In times of conflict, there is bodily risk and bodily harm on a mass scale. As Christina Lamb reports: 'Around the world a woman's body is still very much a battlefield, and hundreds of thousands of women bear the invisible wounds of war.'[12] This concept of 'invisible wounds' is pertinent to an analysis of the invisible nature of invasions of bodily autonomy, harassment and sexualised violence that Murphy addresses through the characters of Maeve and her sister Roisin. Running parallel to this, the lives of lesbians at this time in Belfast were almost entirely 'invisible', yet accounts describe how people were out visiting the first gay bars in Belfast, at a time when military intervention and raids posed a serious threat.

What is key to both *Maeve* and *New Threads* is a feminist exploration of bodies moving around forbidden spaces and experiencing life as it was for them in the 1970s and 1980s in Belfast. This analysis considers film a 'multisensorial' experience. [13] As Michelle Royer posits: 'While in cinema, information is transmitted through an audio-visual medium, spectators perceive the film with all their senses.'[14] This multisensoriality is bound in an embodied viewing that acknowledges how the audio-visual can enable us to physically respond to the lives of those on screen. It is through the subversive and experimental strategies deployed by feminist filmmakers that a different narrative of the militarised space of Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s can be told, seen, heard and experienced. What these films reveal about counter-hegemonic perspectives of the time has hitherto not been given enough scholarly attention. Exploring how marginalised bodies move through the site of Belfast, both *Maeve* and *New Threads* centre female and queer experience and allow actions on screen to portray perspectives that can resonate with audiences. What follows is a case study of key moments from Murphy's *Maeve* that aims to discuss these concepts of embodiment, bodily autonomy and the experiential reality of women in militarised Belfast, as told through the female characters on screen.

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[12]Christina Lamb. *Our Bodies, Their Battlefield: What War Does to Women*, (London: William Collins, 2020), p. 11.

[13]Michelle, Royer, 'Film Theory, Multisensoriality and the Feminine.' In *The Cinema of Marguerite Duras: Multisensoriality and Female Subjectivity*, (Edinburgh University Press: 2019), pp. 8-17, p. 11. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvx5w8jh.6.

[14]Ibid., p. 11.

Barriers and Blockades, Bodies in Belfast

A group of 'radical feminists', as envisioned by Anna Burns in the novel *Milkman*, form an International Women's Group in war-torn Belfast that is considered 'beyond the pale' by the majority at the time.[15] As Burns' narrator observes, these women meeting in a 'private' venue was an inherent threat to puritanical patriarchal values. 'They could be plotting subversive acts in it. They could be having homosexual intercourse in it. They could be performing and undergoing abortions in it.'[16] What is interesting about the collective and projected fears of what these women *could* be up to are the connected ideas of queerness and threats to bodily autonomy. *Milkman's* protagonist is an outlier in Belfast during The Troubles in how she physically moves through the city. Reading whilst walking is what draws attention to 'Middle Sister', as something that is not done and is not safe.[17]

Walking unencumbered was not a possibility for most threatened bodies in Belfast during the 1970s and 1980s. As with Burns' Middle Sister, Maeve and her sister Roisin convey the impossibility of living freely in your own body as young women, navigating Belfast in Murphy's film. As Scarlata writes, there is a need for 'self-generated images of Northern Ireland' through feminist film work that reveals the 'gendered politics of occupation and the ways that space is claimed, guarded, and placed under surveillance by a range of competing forces that often converge on the bodies of women.'[18]

Just as the 'radical feminists' are set apart in *Milkman*, for their perceived acts of bodily defiance, Murphy's character Maeve does not fit in, in her Belfast milieu and self-exiles to London to pursue an openly feminist and artistic life. Maeve's return enables a critique of Belfast under military occupation by someone with a renewed sense of distance. 'In Northern Ireland, the severity of censorship facilitated an amnesiac history of colonialism that immediately rewrote the present event as it unfolded. Access to power requires access not only to historical memory but also to its circulation.'[19] Maeve as a character, operates in important contrast to her younger

[15]'Beyond the pale' comes from thirteenth century Ireland. 'The Pale' refers to a geographical area in the east of Ireland beyond the arc of counties Meath, Louth, Kildare and Dublin that was under English control. Within 'The Pale' speaking Irish was forbidden and it was seen by English occupiers as representing order and civility. Beyond it, represented being 'disorderly' in terms of gendered, ethnic and social class expectations of the English occupiers.

[16]Anna Burns, *Milkman,* (London: Faber and Faber, 2018), p. 156.

[17]Ian David Clark, 'Reading-While-Walking Histories of the Troubles: Anna Burns's *Milkman*.' *New Hibernia Review* 26, no. 2 (2022): pp. 92-111. https://doi.org/10.1353/nhr.2022.0015.

[18]Jessica Scarlata, *Rethinking Occupied Ireland*, p. 62.

[19]Ibid., 67.

sister, Roisin, who still lives at home with their parents in the Republican area of West Belfast. Both sisters are positioned differently in relation to an awareness of historical memory and trying to reclaim power.[20] Part of Murphy's feminist filmmaking is to embed these societal problems within the structure of the film itself not just at the level of 'content' as Gibbons describes, but formally as well, 'the structure of the film itself constituting a commentary on the events it portrays.'[21]

An example of formal strategy provoking commentary on the occupied state of Belfast comes in the opening scene. Maeve's father, Martin Sweeney (Mark Mulholland), watches a war film in the family home. We hear sounds of battle scenes on the television, before seeing soldiers silhouetted outside the window. Martin Sweeney answers a knock at the door and a British soldier orders him to evacuate due to a bomb scare. We do not see the soldiers, they are only heard barking orders, an *acousmêtre* of state-sanctioned control. In film, the *acousmêtre* can be defined as an unseen voice who represents that of authority and challenge in the background and can bring 'disequilibrium and tension. He invites the spectator to *go see*, and he can be an *invitation to the loss of the self*.'[22] Martin Sweeney acquiesces to the disembodied command to either evacuate or 'stay in the back' as he retreats to the back kitchen, 'entering what is conventionally designated as female space'.[23]

Though it is Martin Sweeney who narrates this opening sequence, it is the unseen voice of authority of the British soldiers outside who control Martin's set of circumstances. He remains 'freezing in the scullery' as the soldiers never come back to give the all-clear after the bomb scare. State control as omnipotent power is evident through this auditory displacement. Murphy deftly deploys an experimental use of

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[20]'Republican'/'Republicanism' refers to a largely Catholic population in Northern Ireland with ethno-national allegiances to Ireland and a constitutional aim of uniting the 32 counties. Republicanism is seen as in opposition to the British State, and Unionists or Loyalists who were loyal to it. Throughout 'The Troubles' there were oppositional clashes between Republicans and the British Army. See: Garvin, Tom. 'Republicanism and Democracy in Ireland.' *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 102, no. 406 (2013): pp. 181–89. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23631163

[21]Luke Gibbons, 'Lies That Tell the Truth: Maeve, History and Irish Cinema.' *The Crane Bag* 7, no. 2 (1983): pp. 148–55, p. 151. http://www.jstor.org/stable/30060610

[22]Michel Chion defines the *acousmêtre* as an auditory effect to create tension through the unseen presence of someone, that which is heard but not seen by the audience. Michel Chion 'The Acousmêtre.' *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, edited by Timothy Corrigan et al., (Bedford: St. Martin's, 2011), pp. 156–165, p. 162.

[23]Luke Gibbons, 'Lies That Tell the Truth' *The Crane Bag* 7, no. 2 (1983): pp. 148–55, pp. 150 - 151.

Chion's *acousmêtre* to explore British militarisation and its 'ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence,' for citizens of Belfast during the conflict.[24]

Bodily Autonomy Under Threat: Key Moments in *Maeve*

For Darren Anderson, growing up in the northwest city of Derry in the 1980s and 1990s was one of poverty in a material sense and anxiety in a psychological sense, 'We had nothing in those years, but we owned every one of those sunsets and the stars that followed.'[25] Anderson describes escaping up to the skies to claim sunsets and stars as: 'searching for a space in which to be left alone.'[26] An acknowledgement of the world beyond your immediate reality is a philosophical concept that denies the harsh moment-to-moment existence of most in Northern Ireland at this time. Repression was part of the national formula, bound up in archaic religious protocol and an unwillingness to admit to ideas beyond the literal, for many.

Burns encapsulates this, through an acknowledgement of sunsets too, paradoxically one bound up in collective denial. In *Milkman*, the protagonist's French teacher encourages them to describe the sky after reading a literary description of a sunset in French. This causes ruptures in the class with everyone demanding the sky is blue. Despite this outward projection, the narrator inwardly confesses: 'Of course we knew really that the sky could be more than blue, ... but why should any of us admit to that? I myself have never admitted it. Not even the week before when I experienced my first sunset with maybe-boyfriend did I admit it.'[27] This is a conscious denial of escapism. Middle Sister provides an acknowledgement of the impossibility of dreaming, thinking or behaving outside the narrow confines of the metaphorical box that was life in Northern Ireland at this time.

In Murphy's *Maeve,* two sisters come to represent transgressive modalities, with their views and actions falling outside of this narrow box of acceptability. Maeve is the exiled older sister transgressive in her feminist ideas while the younger sister Roisin is physically defiant in her behaviour. David O'Grady writes of Maeve as a character trying to find the words for an 'indecipherable' chapter in history, where 'Blindness is the great problem; to think in political, religious or historical terms is the greatest

[24] Michel Chion, 'The Acousmêtre,'p. 162.

[25] Darren Anderson, 'Sanctuary: I have Grown Up During The Troubles and have Been Seeking a Place of Peace Ever Since,' *The Guardian,* (21 December, 2023) https://www.theguardian.com/news/2023/dec/21/sanctuary-i-grew-up-in-the-troubles-and-have-been-seeking-a-place-of-peace-ever-since. Accessed 6 August 2024.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Anna Burns, *Milkman*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2018), p. 70.

oppression.'[28] Blindness beyond oppression as encapsulated in the denial of a sunset, in the unwillingness to see things beyond certain binaries. In dealing with these systems of oppression 'women negotiate the gendered violence of the British Army and the Northern Irish or British state.'[29] Maeve and Roisin face three key moments of on-screen confrontation with the British military forces. Pat Murphy writes of the film's structure as reflecting the time in which it was made (1980-81) saying, 'With *Maeve* I was dealing with politics now, and it was necessary to work the way I did, with the episodic structures.'[30] Politics 'now' incapsulates the immediacy of an all-prevailing threat felt by the women in the film and presented through feminist formal experimentation as well as content.

The first of these moments of on-screen confrontation involves Roisin Sweeney making her way home from a shift in the local pub, on the night of Maeve's arrival for a week-long visit from London. Roisin walks the final part of the journey, her pace quickens, and we hear footsteps turning to a run before a voice calls out of the darkness: 'Stop!' Another example of the invisible yet ever present surveillance of the British military in Belfast's streets. Three male soldiers' approach and ask: 'right, what's your name?' Out of breath she replies: 'Roisin Sweeney.' The soldiers demand to know an address and proceed to voice the incorrect street name into a radio, before accusing Roisin of lying about where she lives. One accusation is met with another about why she is out so late. Her response: 'I was working', prompts a smirk from one soldier, who projects a sexual inference into the kind of work Roisin has undertaken. As Scarlata observes, 'As a woman, Roisin is vulnerable to sexual harassment or assault by armed agents of the state against whom she'll have no legal recourse, but as a republican woman, she is also at risk for being treated as a terror suspect.'[31] Roisin's behaviour is, therefore, doubly transgressive.

Roisin responds to a soldier's question of whether she has an ID, saying: 'I don't need it, I know who I am.' In other circumstances, this perceived act of insurrection could have gotten her arrested. As Scarlata notes, 'Emergency legislation granted the state the right to detain suspects for seven days without charge without notifying family of their whereabouts and without allowing them access to a lawyer.'[32] *Maeve* could have easily been a film containing sequences depicting one sister in prison for the seven

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[28]David O'Grady, 'Stage and Screen.' *The Furrow* 33, no. 1 (1982): pp. 61–64, p. 63 http://www.jstor.org/stable/27661285.

[29]Jessica Scarlata, *Rethinking Occupied Ireland*, p. 89.

[30]Will David, and Pat Murphy. 'An Interview with Pat Murphy' *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 26/27 (1985): pp. 132–37, p. 133. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44111061.

[31]Jessica Scarlata, *Rethinking Occupied Ireland*, p. 92.

[32]Ibid., p. 62.

days that the other came back to visit. Roisin is the more physically transgressive sister, reacting in the face of adversity, even if these reactions are futile.

Halfway through *Maeve,* children swing around a lamp post on a bombed-out street in West Belfast, close to where the Sweeney family live. Maeve and Roisin walk across the road and a wide-angle shot shows them from a distance as they are stopped by British soldiers. Unlike in the previous encounter with Roisin, the viewer does not know what is said. Instead, the audience's gaze can drift across the entire frame, with young girls playing in the most inhospitable of environs. After a moment, Roisin and Maeve are jumping up and down. There is a close-up of the resigned expression on their faces. Soldiers laugh and ogle Roisin and Maeve's breasts, their guns held firmly in the women's eyeline. This is a power game, soldiers playing with women's autonomy, as children play in the background. Under emergency legislation, put in place by state security at this time in Northern Ireland, 'Women who were detained reported invasive gynaecological exams, humiliating strip searches, and verbal threats of rape during interrogation.'[33] It was of the utmost importance to avoid behaving in a way that would be punishable by detention. Such a scene of public humiliation makes explicit the fact that 'women's bodies are subjected to a constant threat of invasion.'[34] Sexual violence is another tool used as leverage and to further divide the 'us and them' in the Belfast of *Milkman*. Burns' narrator describes how the 'renouncers' (or republicans) divide up the crime of rape to allow for more nuance: 'full rape, three-quarter rape, half rape or one-quarter rape'. This is considered better than 'rape divided in two,' as in 'rape' or 'not rape', which were 'the acceptable categories in most fiefdoms as well as in the burlesque courts of the occupiers.[35] These 'categories' acknowledge a sense of sexual violence not being along binary lines, whilst reinforcing this as a co-opted issue, to serve as another marker of difference between the 'renouncers' and 'the occupiers.' The overuse of the word itself implies the commonality of the crime of 'rape'. Lamb writes of the ubiquity of sexual violence in wars throughout history: 'Rape and pillage were a way of rewarding unpaid recruits and for a conqueror to emphasise victory by punishing and subjugating opponents, what the Romans termed *vae victis* (Woe to the conquered).'[36] Therefore, the panopticism of the British Army in Belfast as a conflict zone becomes analogous to the term itself. As Lamb continues: 'indeed rape is so common in war that we speak of the rape of a city to describe its wanton destruction.'[37]

[33]Ibid., p. 92.
[34]Luke Gibbons, 'Lies That Tell the Truth: Maeve, History and Irish Cinema,' p.152.
[35]Anna Burns, *Milkman*, p. 311.
[36]Christina Lamb, *Our Bodies, Their Battlefield: What War Does to Women*, (London: William Collins, 2020), p. 6.
[37]Ibid., p. 4.

In *Maeve*, 'Violence against women is enacted by the state, not the men of their community, who are at worst sexist and oblivious to women's subjectivity.' In this way the film, as with this idea from Burns' writing addresses 'degrees of oppression rather than construct a blanket patriarchy.'[38] Violence against women is a fulcrum within Murphy's feminist filmmaking and the final scene under discussion demonstrates a denouement on this theme, befitting of the subversive formalism of *Maeve* overall.

Two-thirds of the way into *Maeve*, a soldier walks past a van full of used TVs. Cut to Roisin and Maeve passing through the revolving doors of a security barricade. The two women are en route to meet friends in a pub. We see soldiers and hear helicopters overhead. The barricade wardens, often military personnel, pat down the women as they pass through. The moment is nonchalant, yet oddly intimate as people are frisked and intense eye contact made. It is moments such as these that queer women describe in *Threads*.[39] Maeve and Roisin turn a corner and the sound is sucked out of the scene. A woman is seen being raped up against a derelict shop front by a soldier. This moment is shocking in its silent prosaicness. The sisters hurriedly glance at the woman, whose eyes appear glazed over. After a brief pause, Maeve and Roisin have no choice but to move on as if they have not seen anything.

Despite the public setting, it is implicit that this crime will never be reported. As Lamb reports, 'The intimate nature of rape means it is under-reported generally and even more so in conflict zones where reprisals are likely, stigmatisation common, and evidence hard to gather.'[40] What remains formally subversive is Murphy's choice to present the starkest example of sexual violence in the film as quotidian: 'When the film does visualize violent and/or sexual encounters between the British Army and women in Belfast, it does so in specifically anti-spectacular ways.'[41] In depicting sexual violence as 'anti-spectacular,' *Maeve* reinforces the problematic nature of the omnipotent power of the military. As Lamb reports: 'the first prosecution of rape as a war crime was only in 1998.'[42] 17 years after the release of *Maeve* came the first legal acknowledgement of sexual violence as part of the fallout of war.

In their encounters with the British military, Maeve and Roisin represent different embodied experiences of women. Maeve is exiled both physically and politically for her feminist beliefs, which alienate her from threatening British military presence as

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[38]Jessica Scarlata, *Rethinking Occupied Ireland*, p. 73.
[39]Moya Morris, *Threads: Stories of Lesbian Life in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s,* (Belfast: Nova, 2013).
[40]Christina Lamb, *Our Bodies, Their Battlefield: What War Does to Women*, p. 7.
[41]Jessica Scarlata, *Rethinking Occupied Ireland*, p. 89.
[42]Christina Lamb, *Our Bodies, Their Battlefield: What War Does to Women*, p. 8.

well as the male-dominated republicanism of home.[43] Roisin maintains closer ties to Belfast's domestic political environ and laughs in the face of hostile soldiers in a way that suggests she is confident of her security, despite being acutely vulnerable at every step. Maeve's didacticism upon her return complements Roisin's physicality and strength of character to subvert expectations of how The Troubles are shown on screen. *Maeve* overall highlights the counter-hegemonic perspectives of young, disempowered women, navigating this conflict zone. Subverting depictions of this conflict is part of the central concern of both *Maeve* and *New Threads*. Combining BBC archive of a Belfast shopping trip, with first person testimonies of lesbians going out in Belfast in the 1970s and 1980s, *New Threads* amalgamates different audio-visual elements to create something new and unexpected, exploring the otherwise invisible queer lives of Belfast's past.

Queer Bodies: Deploying Archive and Source Text in *New Threads*

> 'My scene was one of city centre barricades which brazen queens flaunted through.'[44]

Belfast's gay 'scene' is described by 'Marion' in a poem contained within *Threads: Stories of Lesbian Life in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s.*[45] Marion's words encapsulate the juxtaposition of Belfast's inhospitable militarised barriers and how queer people permeated these, defying the law and social order of the day. This source text gives voice to the hidden queer scene in Belfast's enclaves through vivid first-person narratives.

New Threads is a short experimental film, imagining a visual scenario of what was invisible – namely, queer women's lives during the conflict in Belfast. Queerness in Northern Ireland is something intrinsically bound in the limitations of living in a militarised warzone, and what this does to freedom of expression. War tactics and violent games apply in different ways to marginalised sexualities which were, until 1982, illegal in the case of men and contested and ignored in the case of women.[46] Thinking of 'parallel' identities, people want to belong to a group and may have a 'closeted' persona, or different performances of sexuality to suit their settings. It is clear sexuality was situated within a specific socio-historical reality during The Troubles. Through film there is the potential to present 'an alternative, transformative realm, in which it

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[43]Luke Gibbons, 'Lies That Tell the Truth: Maeve, History and Irish Cinema,' p. 148.
[44]Moya Morris, *Threads: Stories of Lesbian Life in Northern Ireland in the 1970s and 1980s*, p. 48.
[45]Ibid., p.48.
[46]European Court of Human Rights, 'Dudgeon v. The United Kingdom', *EHRC Online* (22 October 1981) https://hudoc.echr.coe.int. Accessed 6 August 2024.

is possible to rethink the conditions of the present through uncovering silenced and neglected voices and experiences of the past.'[47]

New Threads operates to initiate 'parallel games' via its reimagination of the past. 'The past is dis/uncovered not just in terms of regionality, sectarianism, and violence, but also in its containment of alternative forms of communality and togetherness.'[48] *Threads*, offers a narrative perspective of the alternative communities and togetherness experienced by women in the queer scene of Belfast in the 1970s and 1980s. Structurally, the film utilises extracts of three accounts: Jayne's '*Time of Our Lives'*, Arlene's '*I Phoned the Line'* and Marion's '*1983?*'[49]

Jayne's words open the film and connect with the 'multisensorial' reading of cinema through an invocation of the sensory memory.[50] As Jayne writes: 'These memories are deep in my mind. To me it is like looking through a camera's lens, so far away, yet being able to zoom close to get a clear picture whenever I choose.'[51] Her prose contains a coy humour that subverts the sentimentality of memory. 'For example, perfumes popular with women in the 70's were Patchouli oil, Geminesse, and Youth Dew and usually at the end of an evening I had a mixture of all three. You can take out of that what you like!'[52] Within *New Threads*, this is edited with archive to match the narration of the three fragrances - 'Patchouli oil,' 'Geminesse' and 'Youth Dew' - with shots of three British soldiers popping up in turn. As if donning the soldiers with perfume titles, implicit in this combination of narrative and archive video is a camp aesthetic that subverts the heightened masculinity of the armed forces on patrol in Belfast to fit a queer reading.

Arlene's story, *'I Phoned the Line'* details a teenager using the Lesbian Line charity to meet befrienders, in Belfast's first gay club, The Chariot Rooms.[53] Pivotal within this

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[47]Stefanie Lehner, '"Parallel Games" and Queer Memories: Performing LGBT Testimonies in Northern Ireland.' *Irish University Review* 47, no. 1 (2017): pp. 103–18, p. 105 http://www.jstor.org/stable/45129204.

[48]Ibid., p.107.

[49]Authors are identified by first name only within *Threads* by Moya Morris, (Belfast: Nova, 2013), and some names may have been changed to protect individual's identities.

[50]Michelle Royer, 'Film Theory, Multisensoriality and the Feminine.' In *The Cinema of Marguerite Duras: Multisensoriality and Female Subjectivity*, (Edinburgh: University Press, 2019), pp. 8-17, p. 11.

[51]Moya Morris, *Threads*, p. 15.

[52]Ibid., p. 15.

[53]Lesbian Line was a distinct NGO from 1989 offering help and support to women who identified as Lesbian or Bisexual in Northern Ireland. See:

sequence was a consideration of the moment that a 'stop and search' changed from something to be feared to being the site of excitement and sexual tension. Arlene's writing builds up to this moment in a way that relays the topographical obstacles in vivid detail and depicts life under military occupation in diaristic terms: 'The British Army had steel security barriers built around the inner-city centre of town. A security ring to ward off sectarian attacks, everyone going into town had to be searched.'[54] In war-torn Belfast, Arlene's account reinforces the literal as well as ideological barriers in place making it harder to move freely through the city to express her identity.,

> Most of the barriers had exits, but only a few had entrance points. I was now heading towards one myself because the Chariot Rooms lay within the security ring.[55]

Jeff Dudgeon writes of the Chariot Rooms: 'it was well frequented and much loved even by soldiers who duck patrolled through the dance floor, lingering in the warmth and safety.'[56] British military personnel frequenting Belfast's first gay night club disrupts the idea of destructive security raids, as described by Marion in '*1983?*' Dudgeon implies that many soldiers stayed in The Chariot Rooms by choice and put on a performance of patrolling the area. Coded performances are sewn up in parallel identities, one of military authority and another of hidden queer desire.

Arlene details these two conflicting ideas when she describes: 'At the security barrier I was searched by a female soldier, not always an unpleasant thing to have done I have to say. In a rarely heard broad English accent she said: "Pass on through". "Nice eyes", I thought.'[57] This account evokes the tension of the physicality of the 'stop and search.' Arlene's narrative formed part of a catalysing scene in the central section of *New Threads* where her experience, and the visual of the two women passing through the barrier in the BBC Archive clip '*Belfast Shopping Trip, 1976'* combine to create a level of new meaning.[58]

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https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/ngos/LesbianLineUK41.pdf. Accessed 6 August 2024.

[54]Moya Morris, *Threads*, p. 5.

[55]Ibid., p. 5.

[56]Dudgeon, Jeff, 'A Century And More of Belfast Gay Life', *AcomsDave,* (23 October, 2021) https://acomsdave.com/a-century-and-more-of-belfast-gay-life/. Accessed 6 August 2024.

[57]Moya Morris, *Threads*, p. 6.

[58]*Nationwide*, BBC1 'Belfast Shopping Trip, 1976', (28 January,1976) Online https://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/belfast_city_centre_shopping/z43h6v4. Accessed 6 August 2024.

First broadcast on 28 January 1976, this BBC footage is a clip from current affairs programme *Nationwide* and features Northern Irish journalist Diane Harron taking English television and radio presenter Valerie Singleton on a shopping trip in Belfast's bombed-out city centre.[59] The image of the two women moving around the militarised site of Belfast has parallels to that of Maeve and Roisin in Murphy's film. However, there are different class and national connotations of the two women on the BBC, chaperoned by a camera crew. Unlike in Murphy's film, Valerie Singleton is guided as a visitor from England, with no apparent connection to Belfast or its political situation. The women in this clip stay in the 'safe' and 'feminine' zone of shopping. Singleton's outsider status is a way of showing the situation in Belfast for a broader BBC audience, without having to delve deeply into issues of militarisation and its inherent colonial framework.

Just as sexual violence is spectacularly unspectacular in *Maeve*, so too is the ubiquity of city centre destruction evoked through the casual attitudes of shop workers in this BBC footage. Despite Belfast being 'a tangle of hatreds, antagonisms, blindness and ill-defined myths,' those working in the city centre go about their lives.[60] Valerie Singleton admits to feeling frightened during a bomb scare. One shop worker interviewed casually says that this has happened 'dozens of times,' her tone seems neutral, in stark contrast to Singleton. The shop worker's succinct comments serve as a reminder of the cavalier attitude of Belfastians during the conflict: 'We're out quite often.' Singleton asks: 'Do you get fed up of it?' and the shop worker responds: 'No. It's just a way of life.'

Visual archival moments are combined with testimony from *Threads* to forge a further feminist commentary on the gendered dynamics of conflict. As the BBC camera rotates around Valerie Singleton and the British soldier in the bomb scare, Moya Morris narrates Marion's words: 'My scene was one of segregation – not between Prods and Catholics but between men and women.'[61] The literal image of two women shopping is superseded within *New Threads*, to comment on gender and sexuality within conflict. This is done through positing an imagined visual scenario where two queer women are out and about in this prohibited conflict zone as a couple, placing the debate around queer lives and their existence directly on screen. As Murphy does with women in *Maeve,* it is crucial to put these disenfranchised queer lives at 'the center of the debate' to depict specific ways they may 'suffer and resist the brutality of the army'.[62] Being visible on screen enables queer women to be represented 'not as

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[59]*Nationwide*, BBC1 (1969-1983) Online. https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00b4z6x. Accessed 6 August 2024.

[60]David O'Grady, 'Stage and Screen.' *The Furrow* 33, no. 1 (1982): pp. 61–64, p. 63.

[61]Moya Morris, *Threads*, p. 48.

[62]Jessica Scarlata, *Rethinking Occupied Ireland*, p. 95.

an appendage to the nation […] but as integral and vital members of a nation who share a stake in its future.[63]

Taking up space on screen, the multisensoriality of *New Threads* aims to invoke a queer embodiment through combinations of formal elements. A 'Bomb Damage Sale' sign, women's perfumes in the 1970s, a 'rarely heard, broad English accent' at a security barrier.[64] All are sights, smells and sounds that recall a particular time and place. Combining archive testimony and video with contemporary footage of locations in Belfast aims to pose new questions about ways in which counter-hegemonic experiences of Belfast's conflict can be navigated on screen. 'Desire and sexuality, in other words, both having their focal point in the women's movement, become key elements in the struggle to release history from the cycle of myth and violence in which it has been traditionally encased.'[65] This release applies to formal strategies in *Maeve* around women's bodies and in a consideration of a queer ownership of militarisation as conveyed in *New Threads*.

Conclusion

It has been discussed through a textual comparison of the experimental films *Maeve* and New *Threads* how different strategies adopted by feminist filmmakers can interrogate and analyse counter-hegemonic aspects of the British Army's militarisation of Belfast during Operation Banner in Northern Ireland. Both films unpack concepts of embodiment and the audio-visual potential to exemplify threatened bodily autonomy.

Made in 1981, Pat Murphy's *Maeve* deploys an episodic non-linear narrative to depict two sisters Maeve and Roisin and key instances of gender-based harassment and violence in a working-class Republican environment. Both sisters navigate the militarised space of Belfast as threatened female bodies who face ritual humiliation and who witness routine sexual violence happening in the streets. Using auditory techniques such as *acousmêtre*, the omnipotent power of the British military is challenged through Maeve's feminist ideas and Roisin's transgressive actions.

Similarly, the lesbian lives as imagined in *New Threads* work in opposition to the societal convention of female queerness being invisible. Made by the author in 2022 using archive video from 1976 and text source material published in 2013, but written about experiences of the 1970s and 1980s, *New Threads* presents a queer reimagining of Belfast's past. Contrasting the visible destruction of Belfast's city centre with the

[63]Ibid., p. 95.
[64]Moya Morris, *Threads*, p. 15
[65]Gibbons, Luke. 'Lies That Tell the Truth: Maeve, History and Irish Cinema,' p. 152.

underground queer scene of the time, commentary is made on how LGBT+ lives could subvert the fear of authority, that militarised barriers imposed upon them.

An analysis of key elements of these films demonstrates how innovative strategies depict feminist critiques of dominant narratives of violence and control in Northern Ireland's history. Much analysis of films set in Belfast at this time focuses on the masculinised agendas of paramilitaries, British military personnel and state forces. *Maeve* and *New Threads* instead investigate taboo subject matter such as sexual violence in times of war, and queer desire between the occupier and the occupied. Presenting ideas of a surveillance state through the objectified bodies of women, both films challenge our understanding of different experiences of military occupation through a gender and sexuality lens. Reinforcing the validity of intimate history as opposed to relying on 'official' history, both *Maeve* and *New Threads* problematise the gratuitous nature of The Troubles on screen. A further investigation of queer and feminist histories of the conflict via other filmmaker's work would be pertinent for future research in this area to expand on the findings made here.

British Journal for Military History, Volume 10, Issue 3, November 2024

'Do you feel like a hero yet?': *Spec Ops*, *Call of Duty* and the Problems of Playing Soldier

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ABSTRACT
During the Global War on Terror the modern military shooter became one of the most popular genres of video games. This article examines the way modern combat was portrayed in Spec Ops: The Line in contrast to its genre contemporaries, particularly the Call of Duty franchise. It articulates that despite the game's commercial failure it asserted itself as an important historical document for analysing media portrayals of modern warfare. By questioning the ethics of military video games, and the role of the player themselves, Spec Ops functions as a locus for new perspectives on the video game industry.

Introduction

During the early years of the Global War on Terror (GWOT) the most financially successful genre of video game was the modern military shooter. The reason for this genre's dominance is attributed to the *Call of Duty* (COD) franchise, and specifically the release of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (COD4) in 2007.[1] The significant commercial and critical success of the COD franchise's shift in settings from the Second World War to modern combat led to a sea change within the video game industry. In the wake of its release many developers made their own attempts to garner the same success, leading to the release of a range of competing modern military shooters such as entries in the *Battlefield* and *Medal of Honor* franchises. None of these attempts ever reached the financial heights of COD. However, within this sea of competitors, one release emerged as an anomaly. Yager Development's *Spec Ops: The Line* (*Spec Ops*) was released in 2012 to muted commercial acclaim but offered a unique perspective on games and modern combat.[2] What appeared to be another

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DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i3.1835

[1]Infinity Ward. *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare.* Activision. Windows/PlayStation 3/Xbox 360/Mac OS X/Wii. 2007.

[2]Yager Development. *Spec Ops: The Line*. 2K. Windows/PlayStation 3/Xbox 360/OS X/Linux. 2012.

attempt to profit from the success of COD instead offered a very different approach to virtual warfare. *Spec Ops* directed its player to partake in the same kind of violence as COD but focussed on the aftermath of that violence in a way other military shooters had not. Many of the most memorable sequences in the game revolved around portrayals of the human cost of military violence and the protagonist's spiral into madness, instead of the exciting action set pieces for which the genre is well known. By forcing the player to reckon with the consequences of their violent actions within the digital medium, *Spec Ops* functioned as criticism of how the realities of modern warfare were increasingly being gamified into entertainment by franchises like COD.

This article will illustrate how *Spec Ops; The Line* exists as an important historical document by contrasting its release, reception, and content in relation to *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*. There is significant work on the military shooter as a genre during the GWOT, and these two games have been analysed in detail separately by various scholars.[3] Matthew Thomas Payne's book *Playing War: Military Video Games After 9/11* (2016) for example has a chapter which examines *Spec Ops* portrayal of drone warfare in contrast to one of the sequels to COD4 through the lens of game studies.[4] Furthermore, there is a significant body of work which considers the wider role of video games as an art form as an avenue for historical consumption, both for historians and the public.[5] However, it is their relationship to each other in the historiographic context of the GWOT and what this means for the two games as historical documents where this article finds it focus.

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[3]Marc A. Ouellette and Jason C. Thompson, *The Post-9/11 Video Game: A Critical Examination* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2017); John Wills, *Gamer Nation: Video Games and American Culture,* (Baltimore; Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), pp. 110-160; Manuel R. Torres Soriano, 'Between the Pen and the Sword: The Global Islamic Media Front in the West,' *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 24:5, (2012), pp. 769-786.; Kristine Jørgensen, 'The Positive Discomfort of *Spec Ops: The Line,*' *Game Studies* vol. 16, Issue 2 (December 2016).; Matthew Thomas Payne. 'War Bytes: The Critique of Militainment in *Spec Ops: The Line'*, *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 31:4, (2014), pp. 265-282.

[4]Matthew Thomas Payne, *Playing War: Military Video Games After 9/1*, (New York: New York University Press, 2016), pp. 116-145.

[5]Adam Chapman, *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice,* (New York: Routledge, 2018): Robert Houghton, 'World, Structure and Play: A Framework for Games as Historical Research Outputs, Tools, and Processes,' *Práticas Da História. Journal on Theory, Historiography and Uses of the Past,* 7, (2021), pp. 11-43.

COD4's release represented a monumental shift in the video game industry and the impact of this will be illustrated via analysis of impressions from both professional reviewers and the scale of its financial success. The content of the game itself will then be analysed in greater detail, both to illustrate the thematic dynamics of the period's modern military shooters, but also as specific sequences are later referenced and criticised within *Spec Ops* itself. In contrast to the success of COD4, *Spec Ops* proved a commercial failure, due in part to the fatigue that had begun to settle after years of modern military shooters. Upon release some critics argued that the way in which *Spec Ops* presented its violent and emotional sequences hampered their overall impact as the player was forced to partake in such acts to proceed.[6] However, as will be illustrated in the following section covering the content of *Spec Ops*, this line of argument misunderstood the wider point of the game. *Spec Ops* is not simply an anti-war or anti-violence game, it is specifically a criticism of the way in which the violence of modern conflict had been filtered through modern military shooter video games.

Through this analysis it will be illustrated that *Spec Ops: The Line* functions as a unique piece of metatextual criticism of the depiction of war present within the *Call of Duty* franchise. Though common in other forms of entertainment media this sort of critical art rarely emerges within video games outside of direct parody.[7] This makes *Spec Ops* a uniquely important historical document to consider when analysing how the violence of the GWOT was portrayed within what was and remains to be an extremely popular medium of entertainment. By forcing the player to consider the moral and societal implications of 'playing soldier' within COD and its contemporaries, *Spec Ops* asserted itself as a new lens with which to study the culture and consumption of the military video games of the period.

The Impact of Call of Duty 4's Release

Before the release of COD4, the first three entries in the COD franchise focused on depictions of the Second World War. Though the franchise found significant critical and commercial success with this formula, the shift to the aesthetics of the GWOT in the fourth instalment pushed the franchise into the status of industry-leading blockbuster. In the month of its release 1.57 million copies were distributed in the United States alone, and despite releasing in November, it became the highest grossing

[6]David Wildgoose, 'Spec Ops: The Line Remains The Best Exploration Of Bloodlust In Games,' *Gamespot*, 26 June 2022, https://www.gamespot.com/articles/spec-ops-the-line-remains-the-best-exploration-of-bloodlust-in-games/1100-6504888/. Accessed 5 August 2024.

[7]Examples include Rare, *Conker's Bad Fur Day*, Rare, Nintendo 64, 2001; And, People Can Fly, Epic Games, *Bulletstorm*, Electronic Arts, Windows/PlayStation 3/Xbox 360/PlayStation 4/Xbox One/Nintendo Switch, 2011.

game of 2007.[8] Reviews from industry professionals of the time illuminate why the game itself became so popular. For example, Jeff Gerstmann writing for the popular video game news website *Gamespot* commented, 'Infinity Ward [COD4's developer] finally got the message that World War II is played out,' and that 'The quality of the content in the campaign is totally top-shelf, and the multiplayer is some of the best around, making [it] a truly superb package.'[9]

The popularity of the game attracted the attention of the United States military. Through a series of freedom of information requests made by Tom Secker, the United States Marine Corps has been shown to have assisted with the development of sequels to COD4.[10] This relationship emerged as early as the next entry in the franchise, *Call of Duty: World at War*, and extended to at least the release of *Call of Duty Modern Warfare 3* in 2011.[11] Though little is known about the exact nature of the connection between the American military industrial complex and video gaming, there has been a significant body of work regarding how the military has been involved in prior media industries, most notably Hollywood films. As is argued by Alford and Secker in their book *National Security Cinema (2017)* state involvement with entertainment production is not a new phenomenon.[12] Emerging during the Second World War, this relationship has included embedded 'advisors' directly from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Department of Defence (DoD), and the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), helping to blacklist actors and directors, and embed pro-state ideological messaging within film

[8]Tor Thorsen, 'NPD: November cooks up $2.63 billion in game sales,' *Gamespot,* 14 December 2007, https://www.gamespot.com/articles/npd-november-cooks-up-263-billion-in-game-sales/1100-6184008/. Accessed 5 August 2024; 'Call of Duty(R) 4: Modern Warfare Ranks #1 Title in Units Worldwide for Calendar 2007,' *Activision*, 25 January 2008, https://investor.activision.com/news-releases/news-release-details/call-dutyr-4-modern-warfaretm-ranks-1-title-units-worldwide? ReleaseID=289631 Accessed 5 August 2024,

[9]Jeff Gerstmann, 'Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare Review,' *Gamespot*, 12 May 2015, https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/call-of-duty-4-modern-warfare-review/1900-6182425/. Accessed 5 August 2024.

[10]Alan McLeod, 'Call of Duty Is a Government Psyop: These Documents Prove It,' *Mint Press News*, 18 November 2022, https://www.mintpressnews.com/call-of-duty-is-a-government-psyop-these-documents-prove-it/282781/. Accessed 5 August 2024.

[11]Treyarch, *Call of Duty: World at War*, Activision, Windows/PlayStation 3/Wii/Xbox 360, 2008; Infinity Ward and Sledgehammer Games, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3,* Activision, Windows/PlayStation 3/Xbox 360/Wii, 2011; Mcleod, '*Call of Duty Psyop'.*

[12]Mathew Alford and Tom Secker, *National Security Cinema: The Shocking New Evidence of Government Control in Hollywood*, (Scotts Valley; CreateSpace, 2017), 'The CIA: In From the Cold, Sheltered in the Cinema'.

in return for funding and military hardware for use on screen.[13] Though the military has not given an explicit reason for the establishment of a relationship with the COD franchise, it is logical to assume that it is for a similar purpose to their work within film and television. Secker himself articulated the following on this phenomenon:

> For certain demographics of gamers, it's a recruitment portal, some first-person shooters have embedded adverts within the games themselves…Even without this sort of explicit recruitment effort, games like *Call of Duty* make warfare seem fun, exciting, an escape from the drudgery of their normal lives.[14]

Though the military has developed its own in-house video games as recruitment tools, such as *America's Army*, none of these attempts have ever had the same demographic reach as the COD franchise.[15] In truth, few franchises within modern video gaming have ever reached the financial heights of COD. Therefore, it should be understood in contrast to its contemporaries as one of the most important and influential intellectual properties in the industry, built primarily upon the vast financial and critical success of COD4.

Playing the Modern Soldier in Call of Duty 4.

On a mechanical level COD4 is a first-person shooter and does not represent any major departure from earlier games in the same genre, popularised by blockbuster PC game hits such as DOOM.[16] Within the first-person shooter genre, the camera is situated at the player character's eye level, providing a 'first-person' perspective with only their hands holding a weapon visible. The game features a single player 'campaign' mode and an online multiplayer component. The former finds focus on an interconnected series of fictional conflicts across the Middle East and former Soviet Union. In some levels the player takes control of a member of the British Special Air Service (SAS) fighting against Russian 'ultra-nationalists', and in the remainder an American Marine in a fictional Middle Eastern country beset by civil war. Though both strands are fictional, the latter certainly attempts to portray something closer to the realities of the concurrent GWOT. The setting and antagonists specifically resemble the invasion of Iraq, which at the time of release was marked by the Iraqi civil war and insurgency era which emerged after the fall of the Ba'ath party in 2003. For instance, the combat sequences in these sections take place in a Baghdad-inspired cityscape

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[13]Alford and Secker, *National Security Cinema,* 'How Bad Could It Get?'.

[14]Mcleod, '*Call of Duty Psyop'.*

[15]United States Army, *America's Army*, United States Army, Windows/Xbox/Xbox 360/Linux/Mac OS X/PlayStation 4, 2002.

[16]Id Software, *DOOM*, Id Software, MS-DOS, 1993.

against a guerilla force led by a Saddam-esque figure named Al-Assad, as opposed to the more rural combat which characterised the war in Afghanistan.[17]

An odd dichotomy emerges between the gamic chapters in COD4 in their portrayals of the enemy fighters that the player aims to kill. The Russian ultra-nationalist fighters attack the player in small, calculated, and challenging assaults, equipped with advanced weaponry and tactical gear. In contrast, the enemies the Marine character faces are irregular guerrilla fighters, made literally faceless by balaclavas and bandanas, who attack the player in large, disorganised waves. These 'terrorist' style enemies are significantly easier to dispatch than their Russian counterparts and are killed in far greater numbers. In one sequence a box truck full of around 20 of them crashes into frame, and the player can simply hold down the fire button as they emerge from the back door, collapsing dead into a great pile of nigh identical faceless enemies. The function of this is to indicate to the player that the ostensibly 'whiter' enemies are a more serious threat than their Middle Eastern counterparts. This is further enforced by the revelation towards the end of the game that the civil war in the Middle East is being orchestrated by the Russian ultra-nationalists for their own gain. While the player may have to make tactical decisions when facing the completely fictionalised Russian forces, when facing the more realistic 'terrorist' characters, the player is invited to indulge in a revenge-fantasy against enemies stylised to resemble those considered to be the perpetrators of the 9/11 terror attacks and America's real-life enemies in the GWOT. These two strands in unison contribute to the dehumanisation and alienation of America's non-white enemies abroad, turning them into facile and faceless cannon fodder for the player to destroy.

Military Hardware & False Reality in *Death From Above* and *Shock and Awe*

Two specific sequences from COD4 are worth particular scrutiny: The seventh level '*Death From Above*', and the ninth Level *'Shock and Awe'*.[18] *'Death From Above'* is focussed on the player utilising an AC-130 military gunship's suite of weapons to kill a significant number of Russian ultra-nationalist soldiers. This sequence is presented primarily as a power fantasy, wherein the player is invited to 'play' with a virtual simulacrum of a very real military technology. The aesthetic framing of this sequence is the most salient and troubling aspect of the level, as it appears to be designed to resemble footage of similar weapon platforms utilised by the real life American armed forces. The grainy black and white visual effect coupled with distorted audio strongly resembles footage of real killings by the US military in the Middle East, the most famous example being

[17]Though the name certainly resembles the name of Syrian Al-Assad family, the character looks physically far more like Saddam Hussein.

[18]Infinity Ward, *Call of Duty 4, Death from Above.;* Infinity Ward, *Call of Duty 4, Shock and Awe.*

the '*Collateral Murder*' video obtained and distributed by WikiLeaks in 2010.[19] The AC-130 also makes an appearance in the multiplayer suite for the game as a 'Killstreak' in the sequel *Call of Duty Modern Warfare 2*.[20] These 'Killstreaks' are a series of rewards for killing a number of enemy players without dying, and take the form of drones, attack helicopters and various other power-ups including one mechanically identical to the gameplay of '*Death From Above*'. This is an important facet of COD4 to consider regarding *Spec Ops*. This gamification of overwhelming technological force in the level and in subsequent entries represents a normalisation of the sort of asymmetric and autonomous warfare which emerged through the expanded utilisation of technologies such as the AC-130 and predator drones during the GWOT. What emerges from this is a glorification of military technology still currently used for depersonalised mass killing, embedding it within the public consciousness as an acceptable tactic through play.

Figure 1: The player aims through the AC130's camera system.[21]

[19]Kari Andén-Papadopoulos, 'Body horror on the internet: US soldiers recording the war in Iraq and Afghanistan,' *Media Culture & Society*, Vol. 31, Issue 6 (2009), pp. 921-938.; Reuters Staff, 'Leaked U.S. video shows deaths of Reuters' Iraqi staffers,' *Reuters*, 6 April 2010, https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE6344FW20100406.
[20]Infinity Ward, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*, Activision, PlayStation 3/Windows/Xbox 360, 2009.
[21]Infinity Ward, *Call of Duty 4*, Death from Above.

Figure 2: The player sees the ruined city seen after nuclear strike.[22]

The ninth Level *'Shock and Awe'* concerns a final assault on a presidential palace to capture or kill Al-Assad stylised to resemble Saddam Hussein's own residence in Baghdad. This utilisation of Al-Assad as allegory for the Iraqi dictator continues as the player can topple a statue in a manner clearly referential to the downing of the statue of Saddam in Baghdad in 2003. Towards the end of the level, it is revealed that Al-Assad has escaped and has activated a nuclear warhead in the city in which you are fighting. As a result, the Marine that the player has taken control of, and presumably thousands of other American servicemen and civilians, are killed. The explosion itself rocks the player while they attempt to escape in a helicopter, and the character then dies from radiation sickness while later attempting to escape the helicopter wreckage. Though it is later revealed that this attack was organised by Russian ultra-nationalists as part of a wider plot to attack the USA, what the nuclear attack represents is a false reality and a political statement. In the real world, despite it being used as the primary *casus belli* for the invasion of Iraq, Saddam Hussein did not have access to any Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), nuclear or otherwise. By the time of COD 4's release this was largely accepted by the public, and the absence of any real WMD in Iraq had been metabolised either as a major intelligence failure or as an outright lie. However, in the virtual world this sequence allows the player to imagine a world wherein the falsehood had been proven true. As is argued by Cayatte (2017), this imparts a feeling of how bad it hypothetically *could* have been had the information the US government

[22] Infinity Ward, *Call of Duty 4*, Shock and Awe.

had given them been true, a worst-case scenario for both soldiers and civilians.[23] This is a thematic device that appears across the *Modern Warfare* games and entertainment media focused on the Iraq War as a method of resolving how different the protraction of the conflict was to images presented in the lead up to the invasion. For example, the game *Fugitive Hunter: War on Terror* (2003) features a combat encounter which sets the player against the 'real' Saddam Hussein, assuring the player that the man captured easily in December of 2003 was a body double.[24] COD4 further partakes in this fantastical reconstruction of history in an after credits bonus level wherein the player thwarts a terrorist attack on a commercial airliner reminiscent of the 11th of September 2001 hijackings.

This presentation of a false reality to the player finds similarity to the practice of counterfactual history. This practice is primarily utilised within film and literature, though there are sparse examples within video games, such as *JFK Reloaded* which invites a player to simulate the assassination of John F. Kennedy to attempt replicate the exact conditions of the official narrative of his killing.[25] However, counterfactual history is usually deployed as an intellectual exercise to allow the participants and audience to consider how the events of the past or present 'true' reality came to be. This is often to allow some conclusion on or criticism of a contemporary issue. For example, James Blight, Janet Lang and David Welch's book *Virtual JFK: Vietnam If Kennedy Had Lived* (2009) sought to consciously map the failures of the American invasion of Vietnam with the invasion of Iraq.[26] They argued that; 'as the disaster in Iraq continues to unfold, and as the analogy with Vietnam becomes more arresting and multidimensional, we inevitably begin to ask, with renewed urgency, how the war in Vietnam, that disastrous "war of choice" might have been avoided.'[27] However, where the presentation of a counterfactual history in that exercise lead to a wider criticism of state policy, the fictionalised narrative of COD presented the inverse conclusion. Instead of a criticism, this process invited the player to conceptualise a simpler, fantastical reality, ignoring the complexities of the conflict for the sake of entertainment. By this process, the realities of the war become muddied in the cultural memory, and the risk of this idealised false reality melding indistinguishably with the truth of the events of the GWOT heightens. This resultant construction of an idealised

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[23]Rémi Cayatte, 'Framing and ideological discourse in the Call of duty: Modern Warfare series' in Nate Garrelts (ed.), *Responding to Call of Duty Critical Essays on the Game Franchise,* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2017).
[24]Black Ops Entertainment, *Fugitive Hunter: War on Terror,* Encore Software, PlayStation 2, 2003.
[25]Traffic Games, *JFK Reloaded*, Traffic Games, Windows, 2004.
[26]James G. Blight, Janet M. Lang and David Welch, *Virtual JFK: Vietnam If Kennedy Had Lived*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009).
[27]Ibid., p. 5.

GWOT resembles Jean Baudrillard's conception of *hyperreality,* wherein the conception of the conflict becomes 'the generation by models of a real without origin or reality', divorced from all real-life context.[28] The function of this is that it allows the player to partake in an imagined reality wherein the 9/11 attacks could have been stopped, or that the accusations of WMD in Iraq were in fact true. This emerges as both a power fantasy for the individual player, and as a way of processing the wider complexities of the United States' involvement in Iraq, by allowing the player to experience an idealised version of events which did not emerge in reality.

Though heavily fictionalised, the content of COD4 held entertainment value by allowing players to experience a hyperreal version of the GWOT wherein they could function as an avenging and heroic destroyer of America's enemies. It did this through the merging of the realities of modern military technology gifted to the player to engage with in simulacrum, and a fictitious version of their own reality in which they could utilise said equipment in a safe and controlled environment. The intended effect of this is entertainment, yet it also provided some attempted catharsis in the face of the complex and morally ambiguous conflict playing out in reality. Criticism of this dissonance is where *Spec Ops: The Line* finds its perspective and emerges as an important document.

The Growth of the Military Shooter & Release of *Spec Ops: the Line*.

In the aftermath of the success of the COD franchise's switch to a modern setting several of its genre contemporaries also made the switch to a similar formula. Electronic Arts' two Second World War themed franchises, *Battlefield* and *Medal of Honor*, both changed their approach after the success of COD4.[29] *Battlefield* implemented this change with the *Bad Company (2008)* series, whilst *Medal of Honor* pivoted with the reboot simply named *Medal of Honor (2010),* and its generically named sequel *Medal of Honor: Warfighter (2012).*[30] This trend went beyond direct competitors to COD, as many games of varying genre and scope shifted to modern combat in the Middle East, including the bizarre celebrity endorsed *50 Cent: Blood on the Sand.*[31] This

[28]Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, (Ann Arbour: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 1.

[29]Battlefield had attempted 'modern combat' earlier than *Call of Duty* with *Battlefield 2*, though it focussed on a fictional conflict between the US and China, whereas the *bad company* games released after COD4 feature a conflict with Russia in Central Asia much more akin to the plot of COD4.

[30]DICE, *Battlefield: Bad Company*, Electronic Arts, PlayStation 3/Xbox 360, 2008.; Danger Close & DICE, *Medal of Honor*, Electronic Arts, Windows/PlayStation 3/Xbox 360, 2010.; Danger Close Games, *Medal of Honor: Warfighter*, Electronic Arts, Windows/PlayStation 3/Xbox 360, 2012.

[31]Swordfish Studios, *50 Cent: Blood on the Sand,* THQ, PlayStation 3/Xbox 360, 2009.

oversaturation led to fatigue within the gaming community, enough to become a common complaint levied by journalists when new entries in the genre were announced.[32] The *Spec Ops* franchise had not released a game since 2002, with *Spec Ops: The Line* emerging just as this player fatigue had begun to set in.[33] The result of this was that *Spec Ops: The Line* initially appeared to be just another modern military shooter released at a time where such games were flooding the market, and may account for the relatively poor sales *Spec Ops* received on launch.[34] Though a cult following developed around the game, its financial failure is largely credited as being the death knell for the *Spec Ops* franchise, and there have been no further instalments since its release.[35] Therefore, in stark contrast to COD4 which revitalised its place within the industry with a perspective shift, *Spec Ops'* own attempt essentially killed its franchise.

Players of *Spec Ops: The Line* were treated to a vastly different gaming experience than that offered by its contemporaries. Reviews were mixed regarding *Spec Ops's* gameplay, seen as a serviceable action shooter by some, and an actively frustrating experience by others.[36] The primary point of praise for reviewers however was the game's unique approach to storytelling. Mitch Dyer reviewing the game for *IGN* stated that, 'The sum of Spec Ops' unexpected story is an army shooter that makes killing people mean something. This, along with its thoughtful aesthetic and intelligent enemy

[32]Mitch Dyer, 'E3 2013: DICE, Battlefield, and the Military Shooter Stigma', *IGN*, 13 June 2013, https://www.ign.com/articles/2013/06/13/e3-2013-dice-battlefield-and-the-military-shooter-stigma. Accessed 5 August 2024.
[33]Big Grub, *Spec Ops: Airborne Commando*, Gotham Games, PlayStation, 2002.
[34] David Scammell, 'Max Payne 3 and Spec Ops: The Line sales 'lower-than-anticipated' - Take-Two,' *Video Gamer*, 1 August 2012, https://web.archive.org/web/20150907195712/http://www.videogamer.com/xbox360/max_payne_3/news/max_payne_3_and_spec_ops_the_line_sales_lower-than-anticipated_take-two.html. Accessed 5 August 2024.
[35]Andy Chalk, 'Spec Ops: The Line sequel has 'no chance' of happening and Yager is okay with that,' *PC Gamer,* 21 July 2014, https://www.pcgamer.com/spec-ops-the-line-sequel-has-no-chance-of-happening-yager-is-okay-with-that/. Accessed 5 August 2024.
[36]Andrew Laughlin, Spec Ops: The Line review (Xbox 360) A story with a heart of darkness,' *Digital Spy*, 26 June 2012, https://www.digitalspy.com/videogames/a389659/spec-ops-the-line-review-xbox-360-a-story-with-a-heart-of-darkness/. Accessed 5 August 2024 - Nick Cowen, 'Spec Ops: The Line – review,' *The Guardian*, 26 June 2012, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2012/jun/26/spec-ops-the-line-game-review. Accessed 5 August 2024.

encounters, defies the standard established by low-aiming action games.'[37] This is indicative of most of the reviews of *Spec Ops* from the time of its release. There were however some who argued that the method by which *Spec Ops* delivered its messaging damaged its overall effectiveness. Some gamers argued that by 'forcing' the player to commit acts of violence to progress, some of the emotional and narrative weight of said sequences fell flat. Brad Gallaway writing for *Game Critics* argued 'How can I possibly take the ramifications of death and killing seriously when the developers want me to gun down wave after wave after wave of generic grunts in contrived shooting galleries?'.[38]

This attitude persists to this day as a common criticism of the game. For example, a post on X from @HMBohemond in October of 2023 stated the following in response to a meme image lampooning this method of storytelling in games: 'Spec Ops the Line does this and it's why I hate it. The fact the creators coped about it by saying "You could have turned the game off but you didn't" makes it worse. Absolute hacks.', the post garnered over 4,600 likes and 241,000 views according to the website's metrics, illustrating that this criticism has persisted.[39] However, what this line of criticism misses, as will be illustrated in the next section, is that *Spec Ops* was not simply an 'anti-war' or an 'anti-violence' game. *Spec Ops* instead asserted itself much more specifically as a commentary on the way in which modern military violence was being portrayed and gamified in video games like the COD franchise. The game did not 'force' the player to partake in violence, instead, it utilised the tropes and mechanics of its contemporaries to make a wider comment about how extreme violence is required to progress storylines in such games. Through this the game invited the player to consider the wider ramifications of such a practice within wider video gaming culture.

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[37]Mitch Dyer, 'Spec Ops: The Line Review,' *IGN,* 26 June 2012, https://www.ign.com/articles/2012/06/26/spec-ops-the-line-review. Accessed 5 August 2024.

[38]Brad Gallaway, 'Spec Ops: The Line Review,' *Game Critics*, 1 August 2012, https://gamecritics.com/brad-gallaway/spec-ops-the-line-review/. Accessed 5 August 2024.

[39]Marshall Bohemond @HMBohemond 'Spec Ops the Line does this and it's why I hate it. The fact the creators coped about it by saying 'You could have turned the game off but you didn't' makes it worse. Absolute hacks.' Twitter/X. 23 October 2023, 9:00pm, https://twitter.com/HMBohemond/status/1716545270681358837. Accessed 5 August 2024.

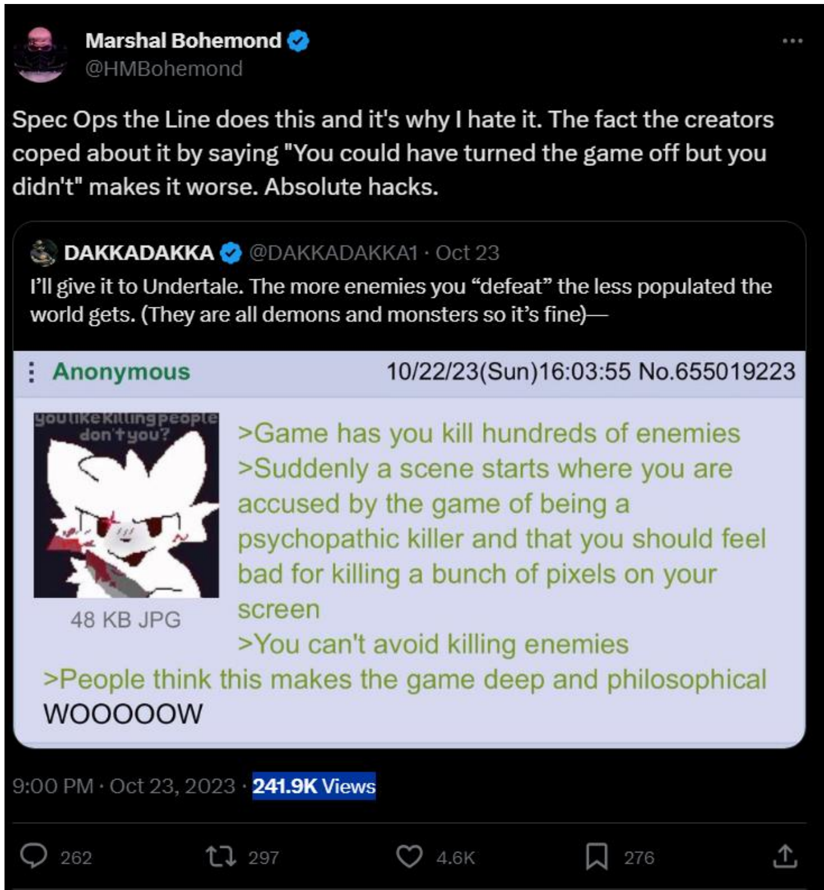

Figure 3: Critical post on Twitter/X from @HMBohemond.[40]

Death, Destruction, and Deconstruction in Spec Ops: The Line.

Spec Ops: The Line sought to portray the after-effects of the kind of simulated violence COD and its contemporaries typically glossed over. This was not only in a literal sense with depictions of grisly violence inflicted on enemy combatants, civilians, and the environment, but also in a more metatextual sense, focussing on the effect on the player character, and the live player themselves. This was the direct intention for the game from the start, as was re-iterated by the game's creative director, Cory Davis in a 2022 ten-year retrospective interview,

[40] @HMBohemond, Twitter/X. 23 October 2023

> I've always wanted to delve into that in games, and this was just the perfect opportunity to do that.… And even when we had our first reveals in the press they were going, "What is this Call of Duty clone?" …. We would discuss these things, but they really couldn't have imagined how invested we were until they got, you know, an hour or two, or sometimes even a little further into the experience, when they realise, "Oh my god, I've got all this blood on my hands."[41]

Despite its framing coming as a surprise to some, the game did not hide its intentions, with the title screen featuring both Jimmy Hendrix's protest cover of the star-spangled banner from the 1966 Woodstock music festival, and an upside down and tattered American flag flying over a ruined Dubai. The latter piece of imagery was commonplace in American media critical of the GWOT, such as in Paul Haggis' *In the Valley of Elah,* denoted as a sign of acute national distress.[42] The game itself played functionally as a 'Third-Person' shooter, placing the camera over the player character's shoulder. Set in Dubai, the game explored the aftermath of a fictional ecological disaster wherein dust storms have engulfed the city and caused a major humanitarian crisis. Colonel John Konrad the commander of the 'Damned 33rd' Infantry Battalion of the United Staes Army, volunteers his forces to provide aid on their way back from a tour of Afghanistan, defying government orders to abandon the city. Konrad and the 33rd go radio silent and are declared to have gone AWOL, and as a result the government sends a 3-man black ops team of former 33rd members into Dubai to find out the truth of what happened, including the player/protagonist Captain Martin Walker. Whereas the player in COD4 is invited to immerse themselves through a silent first-person protagonist, in contrast the over the shoulder perspective combined with Walker being a fully realised and voice acted character creates a disconnect between his character and the player, existing as two distinct entities within the game.

As Walker the player fights off balaclava'd Middle Eastern insurgents typical of the genre, however the player can see them react with fear when one of their comrades is shot and that they attempt to tend to their wounded in contrast to the mindless militants of the COD franchise. Furthermore, it emerges that these fighters are refugees of the environmental crisis in the city, armed and influenced by the CIA to fight against the 33rd. They are then replaced as primary antagonist with members of the 33rd themselves, stylised to look like GWOT era American Marines, who attack

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[41]James Daly, 'Spec Ops: The Line' Creative Director Interview: Why It Needs A Remaster,' *Gaming Bible*, 1 April 2022, https://www.gamingbible.com/features/spec-ops-the-line-dev-interview-why-it-needs-a-remaster-20220401. Accessed 5 August 2024.

[42]*In The Valley Of Elah,* directed by Paul Haggis, (NALA Films, Samuels Media, Blackfriars Bridge, 2007), Blu-Ray Disc.

the player's squad after assuming them to be affiliated with the CIA. This inversion of the established trope of faceless 'terrorist' enemies in favour of American soldiers with individual faces and voices forces the (primarily western) player to reckon with the ethical ramifications of the significant digital body count a player accumulates in the genre. A further inversion occurs in overt reference to the previously covered '*Death From Above*' level from COD4. In Chapter 5, Walker and his team discover a large, heavily armed contingent of the 33rd. Initially unsure how to proceed, the team locate a cache of white phosphorous mortars and after some debate Walker decides to use the weaponry to clear a path. Like in COD4 the player utilises the weapon to destroy dozens of human enemies and several vehicles, climaxing in the bombing of a large concentration of soldiers. The sequence is visually and intentionally resonant with the AC130 sequence in COD4, complete with the grainy black and white visuals indicative of real military systems. However, several aesthetic differences turn it from COD's military power fantasy into one which evokes a feeling of guilt and discomfort in the player. As is argued by Stemmler, in COD4 *'Death From Above'* depersonalises the violence as the player effectively becomes the machine itself, seeing through its mechanical camera 'eyes' rather than those of a fictional soldier.[43] In stark contrast Walker's reflection can be seen in the laptop he uses to control the white phosphorous, his verbal commands to 'burn 'em' visible to the player.[44] This removes a layer of distance that the player has in COD4 and makes it clear that this is their individual choice rather than it being filtered through a depersonalised weapons system. Furthermore, the audio design is far different, as enemy soldiers of the 33rd can be heard screaming and crying as the white phosphorous burns them alive.

The specific use of white phosphorous enforces the game's thesis that the way in which real military violence has been gamified has sinister implications for players. Some consider the use of white phosphorous as a real war crime due to its propensity to stick to the skin, how it can burn underwater, and because it can leave survivors with debilitating respiratory conditions. Despite this it has been recently utilised by both the American military in Iraq in the battle of Fallujah and by the Israeli government in Palestine.[45] By utilising white phosphorus specifically, the game attempted to make

[43]Claudius Stemmler, 'New Media, same stale ideology: Recurring themes and Global Representations in the Modern Warfare trilogy' in Nate Garrelts (ed.), *Responding to Call of Duty Critical Essays on the Game Franchise,* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2017), p. 55.

[44]Yager development, *Spec Ops.*

[45]'US forces used 'chemical weapon' in Iraq,' *The Independent*, 16 November 2005, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-forces-used-chemical-weapon-in-iraq-515551.html. Accessed 5 August 2024; 'Israel admits white phosphorus use,' *Al Jazeera*, 20 July 2009,

the player consider the slow escalation of real-world weaponry implanted into their entertainment, and how this weaponry can become normalised through play as a fun power-up, rather than exposed as a devastating real-world weapon. Creative director Cory Davis indicates that sequences such as this were directly attempting to invert the propagandistic tropes found in COD:

Figure 4: Walker's is reflection visible during the attack.[46]

> The way that propaganda portrays war. It typically looks like something that is not only justified but could be very enjoyable. The way I see it pitched all the time is that this is more exciting than the thing you're probably doing right now…The glorification, and adding fun to a wartime experience, just wasn't the goal of anybody on the team.[47]

Instead of the mission ending when the enemies are defeated, Walker and his team must progress through the wreckage they have caused, coming across several suffering, still burning soldiers. One of the few survivors manages to stammer out 'Why? We were helping?' before succumbing to his injuries, leading Walker to discover that the large group of what he thought were soldiers was in fact a civilian refugee camp.[48] The team then discovers the result of the attack, a great pile of burned

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https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2009/7/30/israel-admits-white-phosphorus-use. Accessed 5 August 2024.

[46]Yager development, *Spec Ops.*

[47]Daly, *Spec Ops Remaster*.

[48]Ibid.

and mangled bodies, fused together by heat. This includes one of the most shocking and striking images in the game, a mother cradling her child, both dead and burned almost beyond recognition. This feeling of 'inversion' is seen in both the primary enemies of the game being American soldiers, and the negative feeling elicited from using military hardware in contrast to COD. Despite this effort, white phosphorous was introduced as a 'killstreak' in the 2019 reboot of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, illustrating that the power of such a sequence is to a degree limited by the significant difference in sizes of COD and *Spec Ops*'s player base.[49] Nevertheless, this inversion is *Spec Ops'* primary tool for coaching the player through a new and more nuanced understanding of how the perspective of the COD franchise had been normalised in the years since its release, offering an alternative way of consuming modern military combat through play.

Figure 5: The player discovers a mother and child burned to death.[50]

The role of the Player in *Spec Ops: The Line*.

As Walker and his team continue to fight through the ruins of Dubai, they slowly become more and more unhinged. In a manner unique within its genre, this is reflected textually in the gameplay. For example, there is a gameplay mechanic wherein Walker can order his allies to attack positions or lay covering fire, and in the first hours of the game he does this by spouting accepted military commands. However, as the team

[49]Infinity Ward, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, Activision, PlayStation 4/Windows/Xbox One, 2019.

[50]Yager development, *Spec Ops.*

partakes in more violence this is replaced with Walker bellowing at his compatriots to kill their enemies in more basic and violent terms.

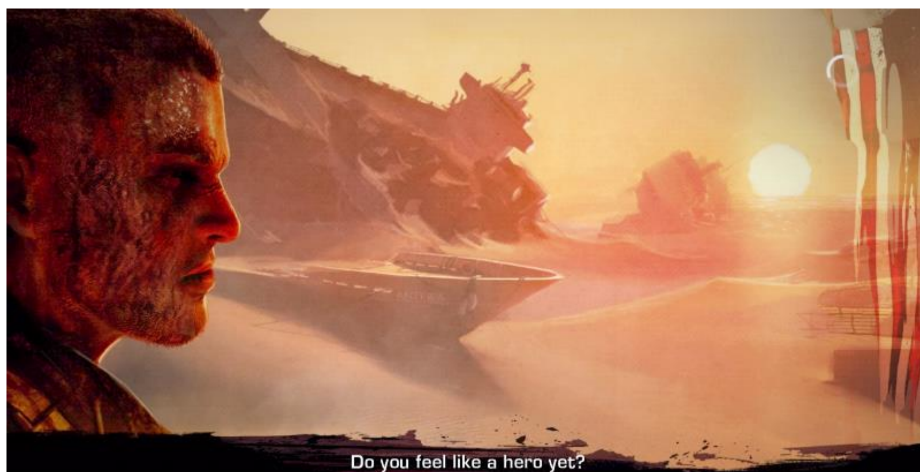

Figure 6: A loading screen from the climax of *Spec Ops: The Line.*[51]

This change in the characters psyche is reflected in the loading screens, where basic gameplay tips such as how to throw a grenade or take cover are replaced with direct addresses to the player such as 'None of this would've happened if you'd just stopped.' and 'Do you feel like a hero yet?'.[52] Walker also begins to have delusions and hallucinatory episodes, eventually breaking down when a member of his team is lynched by a group of refugees as revenge for the violence the player has committed against them to that point. In response Walker and his surviving companion are given the option to fire into a crowd of civilian refugees, signifying Walker's full descent into bloodthirsty mania. This descent is an intentional reference to the 1899 novella *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, with the creators openly admitting this influence, and implying that the plot itself is somewhat of a modernised adaptation of the novel.[53] Walker eventually fights his way to Colonel Konrad after killing most of the surviving 33rd, only to find he has been dead for months, potentially longer than Walker has been in Dubai, and all the atrocities committed in the name of finding and capturing him have been for nothing. The player can then choose their own ending, to have Walker kill himself in despair, leave Dubai in disgrace, or remain there, killing any American troops who enter the city.

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[51]Yager development, *Spec Ops.*

[52]Ibid.

[53]The aforementioned antagonist, Colonel Konrad is named in reference to the author.; Daly, *Spec Ops Remaster.*

As was previously detailed, a significant number of players and critics argued that the way in which *Spec Ops* delivered its content damaged its anti-war messaging. *Spec Ops* however does not function simply as a commentary on warfare, it is instead a hyper-specific criticism of its genre contemporaries. The function of the sequences and details outlined above provided a challenge to the player to consider the way in which modern military shooters portrayed a gamified version of the real-life violence of modern warfare. It did this in two major ways; direct reference to sequences within *Call of Duty*, and by presenting more thematic critique of gamified violence through its wider story presentation. The contrast between the mission *Death From Above* from COD4 with the white phosphorous sequence in *Spec Ops* seeks to make the player consider the normalisation of lethal modern military hardware within video gaming and make a player returning to those other games re-consider those gameplay sequences with this in mind.

The wider story and presentation of Walker's mental decline serves less as a cautionary message about violence or warfare, and more as an invitation for the player to consider their own role within the modern military shooter. Instead of acting as a disconnected third-party *Spec Ops* presented the player's actions to them as an active participant in the violence. This invited a player who also partakes in games like *COD* to re-consider their own role within the wider context of the game, and the ways in which warfare has been gamified for the purpose of entertainment. In a 13 person focus group study performed by Kristine Jørgensen, it was found that this direct addressing of the role of the player led to a feeling of 'positive discomfort', which forced them to consider their own role as players. She stated that 'This means that the game oversteps the sense of safety created by detachment, but by positioning the player as somehow responsible, the sense of safety connected to the fact that this is "play" also threatens to break.'[54] This *overstepping* of the boundary between art and consumer is a significant component of what makes the experience of *Spec Ops* particularly affecting, and an important historical document for GWOT-era gaming. Whilst *Spec Ops* does not present a more *realistic* view of modern combat than its contemporaries (its scenario is of course completely fictitious), it does present a more *empathetic* view of warfare. Through this it attempted to elicit in the player some connection with the protagonist avatar and the digital enemies they face together, and the player's problematic role in their consumption of a digitised portrayal of modern military combat.

Conclusion

The release of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* represented a monumental shift in the video game industry and how people interact with warfare through entertainment.

[54]Jørgensen, *Positive Discomfort.*

Though fringe examples of simulated modern warfare existed previously, the game's shift from the Second World War setting and intermingling of real-life military technology with power fantasy made it one of the most financially successful franchises in gaming. Sequences like '*Death from Above*' allowed a player to utilise cutting edge American military hardware without the inherent risk of real combat, inviting the player to use this technology as a tool for entertainment removed from its real-life context. The simulated warfare allowed the player to imagine a version of history wherein the American and coalition forces were unambiguous forces for good, fighting an unambiguously evil terroristic enemy. The game stripped any ambiguity or question of morality from modern warfare, and even sought to present a reality wherein the proven falsehoods that led America to Iraq were true with the level '*Shock and Awe*'. This ability to connect with the overbearing reality of the GWOT in a safe environment, devoid of difficult moral questions around war and its portrayal in media is responsible for the significant popularity and success of the franchise going forward. Its enormous success attracted the attention of both the United States military as a recruitment tool, and of the rest of the wider gaming industry who shifted their own settings to modern combat evoking the GWOT.

In this oversaturated environment, *Spec Ops: The Line* emerged as a unique historical document. *Spec Ops* sought consciously to act as commentary on the increasingly common way in which modern warfare was portrayed in video gaming after the success of COD4. Some players and critics derided its method of delivering this message as overbearing or heavy handed. These interpretations often misunderstood that the games intent was not to make the player 'feel bad' or believe a particular narrative about the GWOT. Instead, *Spec Ops* served more specifically as a metatextual criticism of the way modern military violence was being gamified in games such as COD4, and what this meant for the player. It did this through direct reference to infamous sequences from COD, most famously in the white phosphorous sequence, and in the inversion present in the player character battling the American soldiers who make up the team of heroes in COD. Furthermore, the games narrative and presentation of the slow descent into mania of Captain Walker due to the actions of the player re-enforced the player's agency in the death and destruction that occurred across the game's plot. *Spec Ops* therefore functioned as both criticism of its genre contemporaries, a rarity for video gaming as a young art from, and as a call to action for the player to re-consider their consumption of military action as entertainment. This made *Spec Ops: The Line* a useful document for historians going forward, not just of military video games and their relation to real life warfare, but also in a methodological sense for considering how to perceive the actions of the player within the context of video games.

Unfortunately, during the writing of this article, it was announced without warning on 30 January 2024, that *Spec Ops* would be immediately removed from sale on all digital

storefronts.[55] This is due to the expiration of several licences rather than any political or ideological agenda by the developers or parent company. This however belies a worrying trend for video games as historiographical sources as *Spec Ops* is far from the first or only game in recent memory to be 'delisted' without fanfare.[56] Though physical copies and digital piracy still present the ability to play the game, it certainly makes this important document less accessible for future historians focussed on digital media culture. The games director Cory Davis posted on Twitter/X that the news was 'devastating' but assured fans that 'This is not the end for Spec Ops: The Line.' Though how this return will be accomplished is unclear.[57]

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[55]Ash Parrish, 'Spec Ops: The Line permanently removed from Steam and other digital stores' *The Verge*, 30 January 2024, https://www.theverge.com/2024/1/30/24055807/spec-ops-the-line-delisting-licensing-2k. Accessed 5 August 2024.

[56]*Delisted Games* has recorded over 1,900 games made unplayable in the same way. ShawnS, 'Spec Ops: The Line, already delisted on Steam, will be leaving all digital storefronts soon [UPDATE: It's gone]', *DeListed Games*, 1 February 2024, https://delistedgames.com/spec-ops-the-line-already-delisted-on-steam-will-be-leaving-all-digital-storefronts-soon/. Accessed 5 August 2024.

[57]Cory Davis @Snak3Fist 'Devastating personally, but also for those who poured their souls into its creation alongside me as developers, and for the gaming community at large. This is not the end for Spec Ops: The Line.' Twitter/X. 30 Jan 2024, 11:37pm, https://twitter.com/Snak3Fist/status/1752476246326587520. Accessed 5 August 2024.

The virtual and the real; war films, video games and the Imperial War Museum

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ABSTRACT
In 2022, the Imperial War Museum (IWM) in London opened War Games, an exhibition that explored the stories of war and conflict told in a diverse selection of video games from the 1980s to the present. This paper expands upon some of the exhibition's themes; video games' shared history with war, and with other screen-based media, and the tensions that exist in any attempt to render the experience of war on screen. In discussing the games featured in IWM's exhibition, this paper seeks to reflect the diversity of games' approaches to war, and to advocate scholars' continuing engagement with a medium capable of shaping and reflecting our feelings about conflict and its aftermath.

Introduction

A man crouches in a crowded trench. With artillery fire screaming overhead, a whistle pierces the din. As his comrades leap over the parapet into no man's land, he feels compelled to join the forward rush. Picking his way through a tangled thicket of barbed wire, he plunges into a flooded shell hole as enemy machine gun fire scythes across the battlefield. Flares dance overhead, the ground erupts with shell bursts, and all around the man's comrades fall, falter, and stagger on.

This vision of the First World War's Western Front would be so familiar to generations of audiences – of films, books, poems, journalism, photography, novels, television programmes, and graphic novels – as to be clichéd. But the scene above comes not from any of these media, but from a video game; *11-11: Memories Retold,* developed by Aardman Animations and DigixArt. The game put players in the shoes of two soldier characters – one a Canadian photographer, the other a German engineer – whose fates entwine in the course of the Great War.

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DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i3.1836

Released precisely one hundred years after the 11 November armistice which ended the fighting in France and Belgium in 1918, the 2018 launch of *11-11: Memories Retold* was marked with a press event in London at the Imperial War Museum (IWM), Britain's national museum of war and conflict. Founded in 1917 with a mission to record the war effort and sacrifice of Britain and its empire in the First World War, the museum's remit would later expand to include all of Britain's wars from 1914 to the present day.[1]

For the Imperial War Museum, hosting this game launch reflected its long association with the history and memory of the First World War, and its interest in the history of war on screen. In 1922, the recently founded museum accepted into its archive the documentary film *The Battle of the Somme*. The film was a record of the 1916 battle, as fought by the British Army in France, and captured on film by two War Office cameramen in late June and early July of that year. Released the following month as the battle continued in France, the film attracted enthusiastic audiences of unprecedented size, keen to witness for themselves the film's spectacular scenes of combat and carnage. In accepting the film into its care, and resolving to preserve, catalogue and make available not only *The Battle of the Somme* but also numerous other films of the First World War, the Imperial War Museum established itself as one of the world's first organised film archives.[2]

The Battle of the Somme was not the first war film, but its success offers a landmark moment in the popular consumption of war on screen. In 2005, in advance of the film's ninetieth anniversary, *The Battle of the Somme* was inscribed on UNESCO's Memory of the World Register for global documentary heritage, and the following year IWM completed a painstaking digital restoration of the title's surviving film elements.[3]

A century after the release of *The Battle of the Somme*, in 2016, the Imperial War Museum mounted a special exhibition on war films. Featuring original script notes, concept art, costumes, filming models and other memorabilia, from films ranging from Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* to Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, and from David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* to Paul Katis' *Kajaki*, the exhibition looked at how war

[1]On the early history of IWM see, for instance Gaynor Kavanagh, 'Museum as Memorial: The Origins of the Imperial War Museum', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 23, no. 1 (January 1988), pp. 77-97. https://www.jstor.org/stable/260869 Accessed 25 March 2024

[2]Roger Smither and David Walsh, 'Unknown Pioneer: Edward Foxen Cooper and the Imperial War Museum Film Archive, 1919-1934', *Film History*, vol. 12 no. 2 (2000), pp. 187-203 https://www.jstor.org/stable/3815371 Accessed 25 March 2024

[3]*The Battle of the Somme* would also be a vital source of footage for *They Shall Not Grow Old* (2018), directed by Peter Jackson and commissioned by IWM.

films had represented a hundred years of conflict from the battle of the Somme to the present.[4]

War Games: Real conflicts, Virtual Worlds

As an exhibition about war in popular culture, IWM's war films exhibition also prompted, in this author, an idea for a future exhibition. Having grown up playing video games, and knowing how frequently they took wars, both historical and imagined, as their subject matter, it seemed clear that an exploration of video games' relationship with war and conflict might make for a stimulating exhibition. In 2022, a century after accepting *The Battle of the Somme* into its film archive, the Imperial War Museum opened *War Games*, its first exhibition about war in video games.

Figure 1: The Imperial War Museum London.[5]

Opening in September 2022, *War Games* sought to look at the stories that video games tell about war and conflict, and how those stories are told. In its final form, the exhibition featured twelve titles ranging in time from 1980 to 2022, in genres including

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[4]Mark Brown, 'The movies go to war: museum explores real to reel conflict', *The Guardian*, 29 June 2016 https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/jun/29/the-movies-go-to-war-museum-explores-real-to-reel-conflict. Accessed 29 January 2024

[5]Photograph © author.

first-person shooter, strategy, text adventure, interactive narrative and military simulator. With the help of a panel of academic and practitioner experts, the exhibition also addressed broad questions, including the roots of our urge to play video games, and the ability – or otherwise – of video games to express truths about war.

It should be noted that exhibitions are a highly contingent form of scholarship. They are shaped by all manner of choices, made by their curators and all who contribute to an exhibition's development. Some of these choices are made freely, for instance when choosing among equally suitable exhibits. Others are forced by factors beyond their authors' control, such as the time available for development, the budget allocated to a show, or the physical dimensions and architectural character of an exhibition space. In its final form, *War Games* comprised nine contiguous rooms, styled as 'Levels' forming the exhibition proper, and a further tenth room referred to internally as the retro games zone. The first three levels formed an introductory chapter, introducing some of the exhibition's themes, and encouraging the visitor to think about what they would go on to see.

In Level 1, the exhibition introduced its themes and displayed a large audiovisual projection containing footage from the video games featured in the exhibition, intercut with archival film and video images from various historical conflicts. In Level 2, visitors encountered a number of board games from the museum's collection. One, a chess set made by a British officer who died in Japanese captivity during the Second World War, spoke to our urge to play games even in extreme circumstances, and the psychological and social benefits expressed in the making of game pieces, and in play. Elsewhere, a pair of snakes-and-ladders games – one themed around a British army officer's career advancement in the First World War, and the other about night bombing raids against Nazi Germany during the Second – showed how games can share their mechanics, even while applying them to different subject matter, and encouraged visitors to think about the choices designers make in creating their games, and the ways games leverage contemporary events. In Level 3, the visitor met a range of academic and practitioner expert 'talking heads', discussing broad questions, including our motivation to play, the unique characteristics of video games over other forms of cultural representation, and why war has proved an enduringly popular subject for video games.

From Levels 4 to 8, the exhibition discussed a number of video games as case studies of particular themes. Video games build virtual worlds in which their stories play out, and Level 4 examined the 2019 first-person shooter game *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, as a case study in art, sound and level design, and the military simulator game *Arma 3*

as a study in player agency and multiplayer design.[6] These case studies, and those that followed in later levels, presented game footage alongside footage of interviews with each game's developers.

In developing the exhibition, colleagues and I were frequently struck by the tension that exists in video games – but arguably in all cultural representations of war on screen – between the virtual and the real. Filmmakers, photographers and video game developers who take war as their subject matter strive for their work to capture something true about the subject, even while the tools of their respective craft transform reality into some facsimile of it.

Figure 2: View of Level 5 of IWM's War Games exhibition.[7]

This idea was explored in part in Level 5, in which the exhibition turned to examine the shooter genre. In the third-person shooter *Sniper Elite 5,* the player takes the role of a secret agent and marksman working for the British Special Operations Executive

[6]In 'first-person shooter' games, the player views the game world as if through the eyes of their player character, and gameplay revolves around combat with firearms and other ranged weapons. First-person shooters typically challenge a player's reflexes and hand-eye co-ordination, and emphasise fast-paced action.

[7]Photograph © Imperial War Museums.

in the Second World War.[8] In a game built around long-range shooting, *Sniper Elite* prizes detailed and realistic models of the rifles and other weapons used by its protagonist. In the exhibition, with a British sniper rifle of the Second World War on display in a showcase, the developers of the game discuss how they go about turning the real object – made of wood and steel – into a virtual object, made of pixels and polygons, their creative process encompassing 3D modelling, texturing, animation, sound recording and game design. On a monitor nearby, celebrated game designer John Romero discussed his 1991 first-person shooter *Wolfenstein 3D*. The game, which casts players as an American secret agent captured by the Nazis, popularised the first-person shooter genre and set a pattern – fast and smooth three-dimensional graphics, powerful sound effects, and violent action – that the genre continues to manifest to the present.

As the visitor exited Level 5, they passed into a hall containing, at its centre, a second appearance of the 'talking heads' seen earlier, now discussing games' representation of war, and discussing such questions as games' ability – or otherwise – to tell true stories, or to allow players to empathise with people's lived experiences of conflict.

Arrayed around this audiovisual piece, stood three levels. Each level contained a themed pair of case study games. In Level 6, the strategy game *Through the Darkest of Times,* in which players run a cell of anti-Nazi dissidents, and the Iraq War first-person shooter *Six Days in Fallujah*, were presented to discuss the ability of games to depict historical realities. In Level 7, civilian survival game *This War of Mine* and refugee text adventure *Bury Me, My Love* offer examples of games building empathy with the plight of civilians affected by conflict. In Level 8 we find the *11-11: Memories Retold*, previously described, and the artillery tactics game *Worms WMD*, exploring how video games express wider cultural trends in our memory of war and conflict.

By Level 9, visitors had become immersed in the fictional worlds of video games. Preparing them to return to the realities of war and conflict documented in IWM's permanent historical exhibitions, the final room of the exhibition proper looked at the increasing use of video games and simulation in military training and recruitment. Contrasting Atari's 1980 arcade game *Battlezone*, in which players drive a tank locked in battle with enemy vehicles, and Bohemia Interactive Simulations' *Virtual Battlespace 4*, a powerful military simulator currently widely used by western militaries, the level explores the use of gaming and simulation, and the increasing crossover between military and entertainment technology. In a telling example, exhibits in this level

[8]In 'third-person' games the player views the game world from a perspective external to their player character, and typically lay more emphasis on exploring and traversing the game environment than first-person games.

included a Microsoft Xbox game pad, previously used to operate a Desert Hawk drone over the British Army's Camp Bastion base in Afghanistan.

Figure 3: An Xbox 360 game controller used at Camp Bastion, Afghanistan.[9]

War & Video Games: A Shared History

IWM's War Games exhibition explored how war manifests itself on screen through video games. Games about war and conflict express some of the dynamics inherent in the depiction of war on screen, and perhaps more than other media, war and video games share a history. As a medium which has evolved with, and been dependent upon, the power of computers to process ever more complex programmes, the earliest video game precursors appear in the years following the development of the first digital computers during the Second World War. In Britain, a pioneering digital electronic computer named 'Colossus' is remembered for its work in cryptanalysis, helping to break Nazi Germany's Lorenz cipher. In the United States, the US Army's Ordnance Corps funded the development of ENIAC, a computer whose tasks included artillery trajectory calculations and work on the first US thermonuclear bomb. Almost immediately, computer scientists saw the potential for computers' processing power to be put to use playing games. Among them was Alan Turing, a mathematician hailed

[9]An Xbox 360 game controller, previously used to operate a British Army drone at Camp Bastion in Afghanistan, on display in IWM's exhibition War Games. Photo © Ian Kikuchi

for his wartime cryptanalysis and widely regarded as the father of computer science. In 1948, with mathematician David Champernowne, Turing wrote a chess-playing algorithm named Turochamp. Though never run as a computer programme before Turing's death in 1954, when implemented by hand Turochamp proved capable of executing an entire game of chess.[10][11]

A few years after Turing's death, another former wartime scientist created an apparatus that would later see him dubbed the grandfather of video games. In 1958 Professor William Higinbotham was a scientist on the staff of the US Department of Energy's Brookhaven National Laboratory in upstate New York. Born in 1910, Higinbotham worked on wartime radar systems before joining the Manhattan Project, designing the electronics for the first atomic bomb. In July 1945, Higinbotham witnessed the first nuclear explosion at Trinity, New Mexico, and became a founder member of the Federation of Atomic Scientists, which opposed nuclear proliferation. For his laboratory's 1958 public open day, Higinbotham designed a simple game that would demonstrate the power of his section's new electronic computers. The result was *Tennis For Two*, a simple tennis game in which a 'ball' – a point of light – bounced back and forth on a cathode ray tube screen, while players controlled the ball's speed and angle with a handheld control box. The game was enormously popular with visitors to Higinbotham's lab.

Over the following decades, sustained investment in electronics and computer sciences, much of it funded by national defence budgets, returned progressive leaps in processing power and the sophistication of computer programmes. In the early 1960s, a group of students at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology created *Space War!* a space combat game that quickly spread through US academia. In 1965, the British Radar Research Establishment – responding to the need for military air traffic controllers, directing ever faster jet aircraft, to be able to interact more quickly with their computers – created the first finger-operated electronic touchscreen.[12] Contemporary smartphone games like *Angry Birds*, *Candy Crush* or *Pokémon Go,* which all depend on a touchscreen interface, have therefore a surprising trace of the Cold War in their DNA. In the twenty years that followed, video games would start to appear first in arcade machines, and then in home consoles and microcomputers.

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[10]Jack Copeland, 'Chess' in Jack Copeland ed. *The Essential Turing: Seminal Writings in Computing, Logic, Philosophy, Artificial Intelligence, and Artificial Life: Plus The Secrets of Enigma,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) pp. 562-575

[11]The author contacted the families of both Turing and Champernowne in the hope of borrowing some chess-related artefacts for IWM's exhibition, but sadly no relevant material survives.

[12]Malvern Radar and Technology History Society '1965 – The Touchscreen' https://mraths.org.uk/?page_id=531 Accessed 18 January 2024

An intersection of war and video games' shared history lies in their use of screens. While the First World War had appeared on cinema screens, the Second World War had itself been fought on screens, as radar operators on the ground, in the air, and at sea peered into the phosphorescent glow of cathode ray tubes. The development of radar, a technology that would shape the conduct of the war by air and sea, would also give rise to a generation of engineers and scientists alive to the possibilities presented by electronics. In 1947, two physicists at DuMont Laboratories in New Jersey, USA patented the 'Cathode ray tube amusement device', a simple electronic game in which players imagined a focused point of light arcing across an oscilloscope to be an anti-aircraft artillery shell in flight. Directing this point of light, the player would aim to have the beam defocus, as if exploding, within the bounds of an outline of an aeroplane drawn on a transparent sheet overlaying the screen. Though not really reckonable as a video game – the game did not use a digital computer or output video graphics – the device pointed both to the possibility of screen-based electronic entertainment, and the enduring, perhaps even instinctive, appeal of games based around target shooting.

The Pleasure of Shooting

As a screen-based entertainment, target shooting – a sport and skill with obvious military application – has a surprisingly long history. As Michael Cowan has noted, in European cities in the years before the First World War, so-called 'cinematic shooting galleries' were a popular entertainment.[13] These shooting galleries combined the existing popularity of small-bore rifle ranges as found at funfairs or amusement parks – manufacturing advances having cut the cost of rifles and ammunition to the point that they became viable playthings – with the emergent popularity of cinema. Various systems existed, but some allowed participants to fire live ammunition at a paper screen, onto which were projected moving target images, such as hostile troops on manoeuvres, or wildlife on African safaris. A mechanical relay activated by the sound of a player's gunshot would freeze the film projector. This freeze-frame would allow another light source, mounted behind the screen, to shine through the bullet hole of the player's last shot, allowing them to judge whether they'd hit their target. Cowan notes that in offering the interactivity of this freeze-frame, these cinematic shooting galleries can be considered as embryonic precursors to today's interactive shooter video games.

Besides their entertainment value, these interactive cinematic shooting galleries were

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[13]Michael Cowan, 'Interactive media and imperial subjects: Excavating the cinematic shooting gallery', *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies*. Vol. 7 No. 1, (2018) pp. 17-44 https://necsus-ejms.org/interactive-media-and-imperial-subjects-excavating-the-cinematic-shooting-gallery/. Accessed 25 March 2024

also seen as having a potentially useful training purpose. In confronting the player with hostile targets whether human or animal, these galleries were said to offer useful training, both in the physical skills of shooting a moving target, and in the mental and emotional self-control essential to accurate shooting under pressure.

The notion of the training value of shooting entertainments translates directly to the video game era. In 1980, Atari released *Battlezone*, an arcade game in which the player drives a tank in a barren landscape, engaging and destroying other tanks with cannon fire. With remarkable 3D vector graphics, the game was the first 3D first-person shooter. It also attracted the attention of the US Army, who saw potential in the system for training gunners serving in their new Bradley armoured vehicles. While only ever developed as a prototype known as *The Bradley Trainer*, the prototype's existence pointed to the future application of simulator-based or game-based military training.[14]

Figure 4: View of Level 9 of IWM's War Games exhibition.[15]

In Level 9 of IWM's *War Games* exhibition, Atari's *Battlezone* was juxtaposed with the current state of the art in virtual military training. *Virtual Battlespace 4* is a military

[14]Tony Temple, 'Bradley Trainer: Atari's Top Secret Military Project' *The Arcade Blogger*, 28 October 2016 https://arcadeblogger.com/2016/10/28/bradley-trainer-ataris-top-secret-military-project/. Accessed 29 January 2024

[15]Footage from *Virtual Battlespace 4* is projected on the screen. Photo © Imperial War Museums

simulation developed by Bohemia Interactive Simulations (BI Sim). The software is capable of generating a virtual environment from any point on Earth, with accurate topography, vegetation and weather, and is able to populate that environment with simulated military forces of all kinds, under the control either of human participants or the computer. While such 'synthetic environment' training cannot replace realistic physical training, simulator-based training offers some significant advantages. Virtual ammunition and expensive high-tech ordnance can be freely expended. Heavy equipment can be exercised without incurring wear and tear, and a virtual environment allows detailed 'after action' analysis. With some irony, it can even be argued that virtual training – in which participants can dispense with the safety margins necessary for the use of live ammunition – may offer more realism than 'safe' physical training.

The Sharp End: The Search For Realism

While a realistic virtual environment feels like a contradiction, realism has proved to be a shared goal of depictions of war on screen. Whether in the virtual worlds built by video games, or in the construction of filmic or cinematic worlds in film and television, audiences and creators have demonstrated a compulsive desire for these media to take them to war's 'sharp end'. We can clearly see this impulse at work in the 1916 film *The Battle of the Somme*. In some of the film's most memorable sequences, filmed by cameraman Geoffrey Malins, troops of the British Army's 1 Lancashire Fusiliers are seen sheltering in a sunken lane (Figure 5 Left). Within minutes of being filmed, these men advanced into no man's land and were cut to pieces by machine gun fire. Also shown is the spectacular explosion of the Hawthorn Ridge mine, and footage of troops advancing under fire across open ground to capture the crater.

Yet even these actuality shots, showing real events and real troops in deadly peril, seem not to have satisfied the filmmakers' desire to show their audience the moment British troops went 'over the top'. Accordingly, they staged a sequence in which British soldiers leap from their trench and step through barbed wire before disappearing into a bank of smoke (Figure 5 Right). In the century since they were taken, at a mortar training school in northern France, these shots have been used innumerable times in film and television productions, often representing the Western Front as a whole, and frequently being loaded with connotations about the futility of the fighting.[16] Ironically, in creating an image which powerfully satisfied his audience's desire to witness a crucial

[16]Alastair Fraser, Andrew Robertshaw and Steve Roberts, *Ghosts on the Somme: Filming the Battle, June-July 1916,* (Barnsley, Pen and Sword: 2009), 'Chapter Ten: The Fake Footage' pp. 163-171.

moment, the filmmakers inadvertently overshadowed more significant shots showing real troops engaged in life-and-death combat.[17]

Figure 5: Lancashire Fusiliers from *The Battle of the Somme* (1916).[18]

This section of *The Battle of the Somme* demonstrates a number of preoccupations shared by both video games and film in depicting war on screen. Firstly, an overwhelming urge to 'go forward'; that is, to take viewers and players to wherever the action is most visceral, wherever the combat is most intense. In the case of a First World War game like *11-11: Memories Retold*, it is difficult to imagine a game resisting the urge to send their player 'over the top'. In the making of *The Battle of the* Somme, to capture his shots of the Lancashire Fusiliers, Malins carried his bulky wooden camera and tripod along a low, narrow, and crowded underground tunnel, before forcing a path back the way he had come to shoot the explosion of the Hawthorn Ridge mine. This movement must have been laborious and stressful, but it demonstrates an impulse shared among many news cameramen and photographers; the consuming desire to be in the right place at the right time. A cameraman's urge to go forward can only be satisfied to the extent their equipment permits it. On the Somme, Malins was operating at the limit of his equipment's mobility. In following years, cameras became smaller and lighter, facilitating the more dynamic style of filmmaking seen in the combat photography of, for instance, the Second World War.

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[17]See also Roger Smither, 'A wonderful idea of the fighting': The question of fakes in 'The Battle of the Somme', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio & Television*, vol. 13, no. 2 (June1993) pp. 149-168 https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01439689300260181 Accessed 25 March 2024

[18]Left - Lancashire Fusiliers wait to attack on 1 July 1916, in a still from *The Battle of the Somme*; Right - still from a film sequence staged for inclusion in the film. Courtesy Imperial War Museums FLM 1672 / Q 70169.

Perspective: Immediacy and Veracity

The mobility of the camera has become a key visual aesthetic; with film cameras giving way to video cameras, to camcorders, and then to digital cameras, and with cameras shrinking to sizes that permit them to be routinely mounted to individual soldiers' helmets or body armour, we have become accustomed to images that ostensibly place us directly in the shoes of participants. It is striking that this first-person perspective, commonplace in video games since the early 1990s, is relatively rarely seen in cinematic filmmaking. Indeed, the first-person perspective is perhaps more often seen in footage filmed on bystanders' smartphones in response to spontaneous events, or in footage taken by public officials – notably police officers – using body-worn cameras. As with first-person perspective video games, and with the spontaneity of such images, we tend to identify ourselves with the camera's perspective, leading us to associate handheld or body-worn video footage with immediacy and veracity.

The availability and mobility of such cameras, and the ability of digital cameras to store large amounts of imagery on small memory cards, has allowed new styles of filming to emerge. Less hampered by the restrictions of a reel of film or a cassette of tape, filmmakers allowed their cameras to roll more freely, at times capturing spontaneous events. One striking example is seen in Tim Hetherington and Sebastian Junger's film *Restrepo,* a documentary filmed in 2007 while accompanying a platoon of the US Army's 503rd Infantry Regiment during a combat deployment to an outpost in the Korengal valley, in eastern Afghanistan. In the film's opening scene, filmed from the back of a US Army Humvee, an exploding roadside bomb jolts the camera, and a chaotic firefight breaks out.[19]

The Closed Door: Fear & Anticipation

Just as cameramen and photographers prize the ability to be 'on the ground', so game developers have sought to put their players in the midst of combat action. In *Six Days in Fallujah*, players take the role of an American infantryman fighting in the 2004 second battle of Fallujah in central Iraq. The battle witnessed intense urban fighting, frequently at close quarters, pitting American and Iraqi government forces against insurgent forces led by Abu Musab al Zarqawi's Al Qaeda in Iraq militant group. Speaking to IWM, game developer Peter Tamte emphasised the image of the closed door. Speaking with US servicemen about their experiences of the battle, with frequent house-to-house fighting, many emphasised to Tamte the fear they came to associate with closed doors. Beyond a closed door, a soldier might encounter an insurgent ambush, a booby trap, or an empty room, but they would never know which, their fear and

[19]Hetherington was killed while covering the Libyan revolution in 2011. His archive was acquired by IWM in 2017.

apprehension peaking as each door swung open. For Tamte, this fear of the unknown became an emotional keynote.[20]

In developing their game, Tamte initially intended to build a geographically accurate virtual model of the city of Fallujah. As development progressed, however, Tamte and his colleagues recognised that while an accurate model of Fallujah's real geography might offer some advantages in formal realism, it also presented a perennial video game design problem; a fixed level layout enabled players to become familiar with it, and to anticipate enemy attacks. This familiarity robbed doorways of their fearful foreboding, and undermined the sense of lethal jeopardy that was key to the game's affective experience. Instead, developers implemented a procedural generation system. In video games, procedural generation refers to the use of developer-made content and algorithms, alongside the computer's ability to generate randomness, to produce objects, levels, environments, graphics textures and other content. The best-known contemporary uses of procedural generation include the planets and star systems of science fiction games such as *Elite: Dangerous* and *No Man's Sky*, and the blocky, pixelated landscape in *Minecraft*. In *Six Days in Fallujah*, procedural generation redraws the map, rearranging streets, buildings and even the layout of individual rooms, each time the game is loaded. By making it impossible for players to memorise the game's layouts, procedural generation helps to restore the uncertainty, and so the apprehension, felt by players as they approach a closed door. Combined with other design choices such as the high lethality of enemy fire, this system sought to express something true about the experience of house-to-house fighting in Fallujah; the constant risk of an instantaneous eruption of deadly violence at point-blank range.

One can question whether video games are capable of truly reflecting any aspect of reality but the use of procedural generation in *Six Days in Fallujah* returns us to a fundamental difficulty of depicting war on screen. Insofar as the game's environments are procedurally generated, and not based directly on the actual geography of the Iraqi city, the depiction of the city is therefore unrealistic, notwithstanding this unrealism being in the service of evoking a realistic emotional state in the player. It's striking to consider the echo here of *The Battle of the Somme*, which a century earlier had deployed staged footage in order to complete, for its audience, the realism of the film's emotional arc.

The Sanctity of Bereavement

Six Days in Fallujah also points us to another recurring theme in the depiction of war on screen; the sensitivity that surrounds the rendition of military action as entertainment. *Six Days* was announced in 2009 while the Iraq War was still ongoing. Brought to the attention of family members whose relatives had been killed while

[20] Interview with IWM 2022.

serving with western military forces in Iraq, the announcement of the game aroused indignant condemnation. Reg Keys, whose son, military policeman Lance Corporal Thomas Keys, was killed in 2003 when a hostile crowd of Iraqi civilians stormed a police station in which he and other members of his unit were sheltering, remarked to the *Daily Mail*,

> Considering the enormous loss of life in the Iraq War, glorifying it in a video game demonstrates very poor judgement and bad taste. It is particularly crass when you consider what actually happened in Fallujah. These horrific events should be confined to the annals of history, not trivialised and rendered for thrill-seekers to play out, over and over again, for ever more.[21]

Retired British Colonel Tim Collins OBE, a figure known for his widely reported 2003 eve-of-battle speech to 1 Royal Irish Regiment, was also critical of the game. Faced with controversy in the UK and, even more intensely, in the United States, *Six Days*' Japanese publisher abandoned the game, cancelling its release. *Six Days in Fallujah* would eventually be re-announced in 2021 and released in 2022.

It is natural to empathise with Reg Keys and others who felt that a shooter video game based on real events in an ongoing war was in poor taste. Keys' criticism carries all the more weight because he speaks with the authority of a bereaved father. Yet concern that war entertainment media risked harming bereaved families is hardly a recent issue. When *The Battle of the Somme* was released in August 1916, the battle in France had been ongoing for more than a month, and tens of thousands of British soldiers had been killed and wounded. Writing to the *Times* newspaper Hensley Henson, the Dean of Durham cathedral, considered the film to be 'an entertainment which wounds the heart and violates the very sanctity of bereavement'.[22] Even allowing for Henson's reputation as a controversialist, there seems to be no reason to doubt that he was articulating a feeling that many of the war's bereaved might have endorsed. Similarly, at least one cinema exhibitor declined to show the film, despite its enormous popularity, instead displaying a sign reading 'We are not showing *The Battle of the*

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[21]Daily Mail Reporter 'Iraq War video game branded 'crass and insensitive' by father of Red Cap killed in action' *Daily Mail*, 7 April 2009 https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1168235/Iraq-War-video-game-branded-crass-insensitive-father-Red-Cap-killed-action.html Accessed 17 January 2024

[22]H. Hensley Henson, 'A Contrast And A Protest' *The Times*, 1 September 1916, p. 7. The Times Digital Archive. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CS118687521/TTDA?u=iwm&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=9fe5dcaa Accessed 29 January 2024.

Somme. This is a place of amusement, not a chamber of horrors'.[23] It can be difficult for twenty-first-century audiences, accustomed to news cameras showing us bloody violence within hours of its occurrence, to appreciate just how shocking *The Battle of the Somme*'s imagery could be.

Henson's description of *The Battle of the Somme* as 'entertainment' also draws our attention to an important point of distinction between media that are unambiguously produced and marketed as entertainment – which would include most video games – and those media that might be described as 'documentary'. A century after Scottish filmmaker John Grierson coined the term 'documentary film', we are now familiar with the factual and at least notionally truthful aesthetics of documentary film. We are accustomed to documentarians claiming that their work has a vital message to convey on an important issue of the day. In this, documentary makers would typically deny that their work was 'entertainment', a term laden with connotations of frivolity and triviality. And yet, the continuing appearance of documentary films alongside all manner of other entertainment, whether in cinemas, on television, or via online video streaming services, the identical mode of consumption of all screen-based media, and the need for even the most high-minded of documentaries to attract an audience, inevitably leads to a tension between the documentary aesthetic and the more nakedly commercial imperatives of entertainment.

Towards A Documentary Aesthetic

Just as documentary film grew out of a medium deeply rooted in popular entertainment, we can also see video games beginning to discover the potential of the documentary aesthetic, and its capacity for holding an audience's attention through thoughtful engagement with an urgent issue of the day. In 2017 French independent developer The Pixel Hunt's released *Bury Me, My Love*. Designed for play on smartphones, *Bury Me, My Love* is an interactive narrative that casts the player as Majd, a Syrian man living in Damascus as his wife, Nour, attempts to flee the Syrian civil war to safety in Europe. The game plays out as if in a messaging app, with messages from Nour popping up throughout the day to ask for the player's advice, support, and encouragement. The player's interaction with Nour is limited only to responding to her messages through a selection of written answers, or of emojis. Even so, the game quickly develops a gripping sense of jeopardy, as Nour faces hazards ranging from roadblocks and hostile border guards, to extortion at the hands of taxi drivers or people smugglers, and dangerous river or sea crossings. Depending on how the player chooses to respond to Nour's messages, the relationship between Majd and Nour

[23] Roger Smither, '"Watch the Picture Carefully, and See If You Can Identify Anyone": Recognition in Factual Film of the First World War Period', *Film History*, vol. 14, no. 3/4 (2002), pp. 390-404. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3815439. Accessed 25 March 2024

subtly changes over time, and her story can end in numerous different ways. Nour might reach safety and security in a European country or find herself trapped in a refugee camp on the Syrian border. She may even die, of drowning or cold, while attempting to cross one of Europe's border rivers or seas. However the story ends, the ending is delivered as a voice-acted voicemail message. When I played *Bury Me, My Love* Nour died of hypothermia after failing to cross the River Evros on the Greek-Turkish border. Hearing Nour's shivering voice tail off as she told me how very cold and very tired she was, remains a lingeringly memorable gaming moment, and one that points to the capacity for the narratives of fictional video games to offer experiences that build our empathy for real people affected by war and conflict.

Speaking to IWM, Pixel Hunt founder Florent Maurin described how, around 2015, coverage in French newspapers had drawn his attention to the hazardous journeys being made by Syrian refugees attempting to reach safety in Europe. Desiring to make games about real world issues, Maurin seized upon the way that smartphones enabled refugees to stay in touch with their families, and also functioned as an essential tool to navigate the innumerable geographical and political-bureaucratic obstacles on their way to safety. Maurin realised that the private conversations we have via our messaging apps are intimate and intensely personal, and using a messaging app as the vessel for a game about refugee experiences offered an authentic frame in which to tell these stories, and through which players could empathise with the experience.[24] Speaking elsewhere, Maurin has described his ambitions for 'reality-inspired' games, that is to say, games that shared some of their ethical framework with journalism or documentary-making. For Maurin, such games would emphasise the reality of their settings, would be built upon robust research and documentation, and would be particularly informed by interviews with people with first-hand experience. In a break from traditional game design, such 'documentary' games would be much less player-centric than most video games.[25]

As a smartphone game *Bury Me, My Love* reminds us of the ubiquity of screens in modern life, even for those making perilous journeys as a refugee. When *The Battle of the Somme* film was released, the consumption of images war on screen was limited to cinemas or to other, sometimes improvised, screening spaces. With the proliferation of television after the Second World War – a conflict dazzlingly depicted in combat cinematography and newsreel and feature film propaganda – the Vietnam War would be widely considered the first 'television war', with television images becoming the primary medium for moving-image reportage. Today, much of our consumption of war and conflict imagery reaches us via our phones; when Russian

[24]Interview with IWM 2022.

[25]GDC 'Exploring helplessness in Games with Bury Me, My Love', 22 October 2018 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDzsSvFZhJ8. Accessed 18 December 2023.

forces invaded Ukraine in February 2022, an enormous volume of images of the fighting would appear on social media.

Disempowerment & Satire

Shortly before the Russian invasion, the author spoke with developers at Polish game company 11 bit studios. In 2014, they released *This War of Mine*, a survival game in which players attempt to sustain a small group of civilian survivors living under siege in a ruined city. Inspired by magazine coverage of the siege of the Sarajevo during the Bosnian War of the 1990s and drawing also on the developers' family memories of the German occupation of Poland, *This War of Mine* offered an intensely bleak look at the difficulties and moral compromises of life under brutal occupation. Much as *Bury Me, My Love* adopted a less player-centric experience than most games, in the same way *This War of Mine* disempowered the player through the sheer difficulty of keeping their survivors safe and healthy. In doing so, *This War of Mine* subverts the tendency of video games to cast their players as either superheroic soldiers or all-conquering commanders, and reminds us that, if we were to find ourselves plunged into war tomorrow, most of us would be civilians. This subversion destroys the escapist power fantasy that underpins many war-themed video games and permits *This War of Mine* to be read as an anti-war text.

Not all anti-war games are immediately recognised as such. Running alongside IWM's War Games exhibition was a selection of playable retro video games from systems ranging in time from the Atari 2600 of the early 1980s to the first generation of Sony PlayStation from the early 2000s. Among the games on display was *Cannon Fodder*, a 1993 action game by celebrated British developer Sensible Software (Figure 6). Originally developed for the Commodore Amiga personal computer, *Cannon Fodder* tasked players with leading a small squad of soldiers through a series of battles. While the concept might sound familiar, *Cannon Fodder's* execution created a powerful piece of anti-war satire. Before every level, the player would see new recruits lining up to wait their turn to fight. Though only fourteen pixels tall, every soldier was named, capable of promotion, and their death in battle would be marked between levels with the appearance of a headstone on a hillside overlooking the line of waiting recruits. As the game progressed this hill would come to be covered in grave markers; a constant, even oppressive, reminder to the player of their failure to keep their named recruits alive. Together with the use of a scoreboard tally of 'home' and 'away' deaths to represent the player's 'score', this interlevel screen strongly evoked the 1969 satirical British war film *Oh! What a Lovely War.*[26]

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[26]Speaking to the author, developer Jon Hare denied a specific intention to evoke *Oh! What a Lovely War*. The fact that the impression is nonetheless strongly given perhaps denotes how influential, or how widespread, that film's satirical depiction of the war had become. On the initial audience reaction to *Oh! What a Lovely War* see Dan

Figure 6: A visitor plays *Cannon Fodder* in IWM's War Games exhibition.[27]

Despite the game's obvious satirical intent, starting with the title, the release of *Cannon Fodder* elicited a notable controversy. The game's use of a red poppy, and the strapline 'War has never been so much fun' attracted the ire of the *Daily Star* newspaper, which duly stoked outrage by inviting adverse comment from such keen gamers as the Royal British Legion and Viscount Montgomery, the son of Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery.[28] Speaking to the author, *Cannon Fodder* developer Jon Hare described how he and his colleagues were conscious of developing games for an intelligent British video gaming audience who would understand the satirical intent behind the game's mechanics and presentation. Speaking of his own inspiration, Hare described himself, having been born in 1966, as a member of the post-war generation, and noted the influence on him of British television war comedies including *Dad's Army,* first broadcast 1968-1977, and *Blackadder Goes Forth,* 1989. It is striking to note the difference; by the early 1990s both of these series were celebrated parts of the pantheon of British television comedy, and neither the gentle ridicule of the former

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Todman, *The Great War: Myth and Memory*, (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2005) p. 64.

[27]Photo © Imperial War Museums.

[28]Jonathan Guy, 'Poppy Game Insult To Our War Dead' *Daily Star,* 26 October 1993

nor the bitter sarcasm of the latter seem to have prevented critics or general audiences from seeing them as ultimately respectful depictions of their subject matter.[29] To see war subjected to the same satirical treatment in video games however, seems to have been too much to bear for outrage-baiting tabloid journalists.

Convergence: Hollywood & Video Games

In looking at *Cannon Fodder*, we can see how video games draw upon or are inspired by depictions of war in other media. Historian Dan LeMahieu has noted how the media of the early twentieth century exhibited a marked tendency to 'converge', that is to say, that newspapers became more imitative of speech in their language as their audiences broadened, while also making greater use of photography to illustrate their journalism. Similarly with the advent of sound film in the late 1920s cinema newsreels became more akin to the tabloid press in their use of language.[30] In another game featured in IWM's retro games zone, we may be able to detect similar trends in the media of the late twentieth century.

In summer 1998 Steven Spielberg's epic war film *Saving Private Ryan* was released in cinemas. One of the most influential war films ever made, the film reflected Spielberg's abiding interest in the Second World War. Spielberg's ambitions for communicating the Second World War were not limited, however, to the silver screens of the world's cinemas; he also envisioned telling war stories through video games. While producing *Saving Private Ryan* Spielberg conceived a video game that might explore the war for video game-playing audiences too young to see *Saving Private Ryan* in cinemas.[31] The result was DreamWorks Interactive's 1999 first-person shooter *Medal of Honor.*[32] Though *Medal of Honor*'s origins were relatively unusual, being conceived alongside a major film project, it neatly reflects the increasingly close relationship between video games and film. For many years video games have expounded their narrative through the use of 'cutscenes' or short animated sequences between levels. As video game hardware has become more capable, and video games' narrative ambitions have grown, these cutscenes have increasingly come to resemble short movie scenes, with fully animated 3D characters, voiced by professional actors, and with cinematic scene blocking and camera movement. Video games increasingly aspire to emulate the spectacular and lifelike visuals of big-budget motion pictures, while their interactivity

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[29]Todman, *Great War: Myth and Memory*, p. 146

[30]Dan Lloyd LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) p. 231-232.

[31]Edge Staff 'The Making Of…Medal of Honor' *Gamesradar*, 30 March 2015. https://www.gamesradar.com/making-medal-honor/. Accessed 16 February 2024.

[32]In small ways, *Medal of Honor* nods to IWM; the game's menu screen evokes the Cabinet War Rooms, now run as a museum by IWM, and one in-game mission references IWM's museum ship HMS Belfast.

fosters a degree of audience participation and engagement of kind impossible within the bounds of traditional filmmaking. In the case of *Medal of Honor,* while owing a debt to earlier titles such as *Wolfenstein 3D,* the game would prove a critical and commercial success, spawning sixteen sequels on numerous platforms, as well as an enormously successful competitor franchise, *Call of Duty*.

Call of Duty has become one of video gaming's biggest games series, typifying the big-budget, all-action blockbuster. It is striking that these adjectives would usually be associated with Hollywood movies, and their application to video games perhaps reflects a shift in cultural power. More tangibly, the *Call of Duty* franchise is one of several to have become gigantically lucrative. Its 2019 instalment, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare,* which appeared in IWM's War Games exhibition as a case study in art and sound design, reportedly earned in excess of $600 million in its first three days on sale.[33] In this, it exemplifies the growth of the video game market such that, worldwide, video game revenue now surpasses that of the film and music industries combined.[34]

Games like *Call of Duty* are not simulations. They are unapologetic entertainment, typically preferring to offer their players spectacular set-pieces and an often rollercoaster-like combat experience, buttressed by such gameplay conventions as the player character's superhuman ability to absorb gunfire. Yet even so, there remains a degree to which such games do offer an at least recognisably realistic depiction of war. During the author's research for IWM's War Games exhibition, one officer serving with a British infantry battalion remarked to him that, disembarking from a helicopter under fire in Afghanistan, the officer once found himself thinking 'this is just like *Call of Duty*!'[35]

This officer's remark brings us to one final aspect of the relationship between war on screen and video games. Films and video games offer artful interpretations of war and conflict, and we consume them for our entertainment and diversion. Both can range from brash, bombastic entertainment to pained, thoughtful reflections. Yet both ends of this spectrum, whether manifested in video games or films, can shape our

[33]Paul Tassi, '"Call of Duty: Modern Warfare" Sales Top $600 Million In Three Days', *Forbes,* 30 October 2019. https://www.forbes.com/sites/paultassi/2019/10/30/call-of-duty-modern-warfare-sales-top-600-million-in-three-days/?sh=3e3272f17956. Accessed 29 January 2024.

[34]Krishnan Arora, 'The Gaming Industry: A Behemoth With Unprecedented Global Reach', *Forbes,* 17 November 2023 https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbesagencycouncil/2023/11/17/the-gaming-industry-a-behemoth-with-unprecedented-global-reach/?sh=135c335e512f. Accessed 29 January 2024.

[35]Conversation with the author, 2020.

perception of what war is, and what war means. Alongside our consumption of television news and drama, and other war-related reportage online or elsewhere, film and video games form part of our media consumption of war and conflict. They become part of the framework within which we understand war, both historical and contemporary. The Imperial War Museum's War Games exhibition attempted to discuss these and other issues, but inevitably could only cover a small number of the thousands of games that now comprise the corpus of video games. Much remains to be done by scholars of video games, of media, and of war, to define the place occupied by video games in the public understanding of war and conflict, and their interaction with other depictions of war on screen.

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- Michael Howard, 'Men against Fire: The Doctrine of the Offensive in 1914', in Peter Paret (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), pp. 510-526.
- The UK National Archives (TNA), CAB 19/33, Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Sclater, evidence to Dardanelles Commission, 1917.
- Shilpa Ganatra, 'How Derry Girls Became an Instant Sitcom Classic', *The Guardian*, 13 February 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/feb/13/derry-girls-instant-sitcom-classic-schoolgirls-northern-ireland Accessed 20 April 2019.

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