

**THE PROMOTION OF NEO-CONSERVATISM THROUGH  
CONTEMPORARY HOLLYWOOD FILM WITH REFERENCE TO  
SPIELBERG'S SAVING PRIVATE RYAN (1999)**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This article proposes that current mainstream Hollywood film deliberately espouses a kind of neo-conservatism, replacing the apocalyptic pessimism typical of the so-called crisis cinema of the eighties. One might welcome this search for new meaning in life, were it not that one suspects that much of this filmic reaffirmation of the value of sacrificial violence by heroic individuals in order to restore an ailing society is, arguably, a mere media construct that extends the hegemony of supranational corporatism throughout the West. The author presents a brief survey of war films that has had considerable box office success during the last decade or so, arguing that Hollywood cinema has realigned itself with a kind of "Fort America" mentality in spite of the anti-Bush sentiment so vocally expressed by actors at the 2003 Academy Awards ceremony. In conclusion, the author analyses Spielberg's Saving Private Ryan (1999) in order to show to what extent the elements of framing and composition reflect, reinforce and comment on the narrative of Saving Private Ryan, creating a sub text that clearly strengthens American neo-patriotism.*

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## INTRODUCTION

American, in particular Hollywood mainstream film is (next to TV) arguably the most pervasive mass communication medium in South Africa. As such, it cannot be denied that it has a significant effect on individual viewers as well as on viewer "communities". It is acknowledged that popular "commonsense" assumptions that the mass media exerts have a direct, measureable influence on human behaviour which represents a simplification of a complex issue, as indicated by current developments in media effects theory (Gauntlett 1998). Consequently, this article does not presume to link the complex socio-cultural changes that are occurring in South Africa (and elsewhere) to a single "sources" or "catalysts". On the other hand, it cannot be denied that, due to its popularity, especially amongst the youth of SA, mainstream Hollywood film does have an influence on contemporary opinion, ranging in scope from fashion to gender roles, democracy, justice and religion. The world-wide controversy generated by Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), and the vocal debates it engendered locally, is a case in point.

It is my contention that mainstream Hollywood film has a high level of *indirect* information impact on local audiences. Unlike the propaganda films of the 1940s and 1950s, current film "informs" audiences on the entire range of societal aspects listed above in *indirect*, but powerful ways (the newly-coined term "infotainment" is significant in this regard). During the past decade a noticeable swing to what I would term a form of neo-conservatism has become very noticeable in Hollywood productions. In this article I shall briefly trace this shift from the postmodernist film narratives of the 1980s and early 1990s to the neoconservative (*post* postmodernist) narratives which started to emerge in the middle nineties and which dominate current American cultural production. Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1999) will then be analysed as an example of the neo-conservative Hollywood film.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The development of film studies as a recognised discipline can be traced to language departments at universities in the sixties and seventies, where film was introduced as texts that could be interrogated by using literary theory. It is therefore understandable that film theory has been strongly influenced by literary theory, and it explains why structuralism, rooted in the work of the linguist De Saussure and the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, played such an important part in early film theory. Today the work of pioneers such as Christian Metz (1974) have been superseded by a host of approaches and theories, ranging from narratology (Vladimir Propp, Tzvetan Todorov), reception aesthetics (Wolfgang Iser, H.R. Jauss), psychoanalysis (based on Freud and Lacan's work), feminism theories (Constance Penley, Joan Copjec) and post-structuralism (Brunette and Willis (based on the work of Derrida)). Various permutations of these approaches and theories are possible and inform current perspectives on film such as queer theory, theories of race and representation, and post-colonialism, to name but a few.

Recent film theory manifests a certain backlash against the excesses of structuralism and post-structuralism by reinserting social and historical context in the analysis of film (Stam 2000: 327). It is increasingly conceded that the isolation of film text from social histories and realities, which led to its analysis as a structured, coded discourse which led to greater importance being placed on the interrelations between signs than on the relation between the sign and the referent, was flawed.

In this article I combine aspects of a (structuralist) analysis of cinematic technique within the socio-political context of the film's production and reception. This is done in an attempt to make the indirect, neo-conservative *appellation* (in the Althusserian sense) by mainstream Hollywood film visible. The following research assumptions inform this project:

- The "meaning" of any text is neither finite nor stable, but an interpretative construct;
- At the same time such an interpretative construct is not random, but based on codes and conventions associated with the text genre as well as with the society in which it is produced;
- These codes and conventions are frequently culture-specific, although some are "universal" in the sense that they span cultures and are not limited to a particular time in history;
- Since conventions are social agreements and as such reflect aspects of the political, economic, belief, value and other systems of particular societies at given points in time, they reflect aspects of ideology;
- The author of a text uses codes and conventions both consciously and unconsciously, and his/her use of such codes invariably causes points of *aporia*, those gaps, fissures or contradictions that deconstruct the text in the sense that it affords alternatives to the *obvious* reading / interpretation / meaning of the text.

In my analysis of *Saving Private Ryan* my main concern will be to investigate to what extent the elements of framing and composition reflect, reinforce and comment on the narrative of *Saving Private Ryan*, bearing in mind that care should be taken that the visual elements generated through specific cinematographic techniques and expressed as frame, shot and scene, are analysed and interpreted in the context of the narrative as a whole. Further, that the narrative itself should be understood in the socio-historical context of the film's production, which in turn is impacted on by audience expectations.

Wolfgang Iser (1978: 53) was one of the first theorists that moved the primary focus from the text to the reader / interpreter, arguing that attempts to determine the *meaning* of a text were doomed to fail. Instead he proposed that it is of greater importance to determine what a text *does* to its readers, and what a reader does to the text. Investigating the interaction between text and reader therefore becomes more important than attempts to determine its meaning in an absolute sense. This does not mean that narrative technique structure is disregarded. On the contrary, Iser's reception aesthetics attached great importance to these aspects by investigating how the text elicits response

from the reader. According to Iser a text presupposes a certain kind of reader by incorporating and manipulating the meaning expectations of the reader/interpreter. Texts are produced for specific audiences, taking their socio-historical contexts into consideration. This also implies that the "meaning" generated by the interaction between text and reader and reader and text is not static, but evolves with subsequent readings. Similarly, later generations of readers situated in altered socio-political contexts generate altered meaning(s).

### THE EMERGENCE OF A POST POSTMODERNIST ERA

I shall start by briefly exploring the socio-historical production context of *Saving Private Ryan*, which I shall argue is *post* postmodernist. To this end I shall argue that the (emerging) social context that informed the production of the film is the result of a reaction against the postmodern condition as expounded by Lyotard (1984). Before I discuss my notion of an emerging post poststructuralist society, a brief discussion of image production/appropriation from a postmodernist perspective is called for.

Although it is sometimes argued that postmodernism does not refer to a particular historical era, it is generally accepted that the postmodern *moment* (as it is sometimes referred to), is discernable in Western society from the late seventies to current times.

Several prominent critical thinkers have commented on the production / appropriation of images and the generation of meaning (or rather lack thereof) in this postmodernist society. At the radical extreme Baudrillard (1983) insists that it is impossible to distinguish between the sign and the referent in contemporary society, since the original has been replaced with the *simulacrum*. Olivier (1996: 97), commenting on Baudrillard, states: "(...) we live in a totally simulated world, where the images, symbols, signs and concepts which are ordinarily regarded as mediating reality, have become self-sufficient. In other words, they no longer 'refer' to an object or a world, but comprise a 'hyperreality' of simulation in which we are trapped as in a closed, endlessly self-referential, self-simulating or self-replicating (...) circular process".

In terms of such a perspective on society, it has become impossible to generate meaning; moreover, if true meaning could be construed, we would not be able to convey that meaning because we do not have legitimate codes. Differently put: we have no remaining master narratives since we are caught up in the catastrophes associated with the dysfunction of late capitalism, postindustrialism and media culture. This disappearance of the ultimate 'referent' is the result of a mediated society, a society that is not real, but a media-construct. To my mind Lyotard (1984: xxiv) voices the *intellectual* pessimism brought about by this condition that has pervaded the eighties and early nineties in Western society: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as an incredulity toward metanarratives". (The metanarratives he refers to are of course the metadiscourses that legitimate the truth-claims of science.)

In contrast to this intellectual pessimism, the disillusionment of the *ordinary citizen* (which characterises much of the eighties and nineties) can be better defined as the loss of faith in those *master* narratives which predates positivism, and which remained more or less intact throughout modernity. These master narratives construct the "bigger

picture” within which the contradictions, discontinuity and randomness that are part of real life could be seen as necessary, “logical” and even beneficial. In the eighteenth, nineteenth and to a lesser extent the first half of the twentieth centuries the “Great Chain of Being” and “Circle of Life” were examples of master narratives that dominated Western society. Although many of these narratives have their origin in religion, they also permeated the secular in the guise of, for example, optimistic liberal humanism. It is my contention that the collapse of these and other master narratives, rather than an intellectual incredulity towards metanarratives, constitutes the postmodern condition for the ordinary citizen.

Returning to my notion of an emerging post postmodernist society: contrary to intellectual debates in the eighties and early nineties on the demise of meaning (especially in the human and social sciences), there is evidence of the emergence of a new belief in historical progress in terms of knowledge and justice amongst ordinary citizens. I see this as a largely unconscious counter-reaction by “ordinary” people to the nihilism that pervaded the postmodern moment. Unfortunately this unconscious yearning of the ordinary person for a lost time when life was meaningful is being consciously exploited (and therefore perverted) by (Anglo-American) politics / multinational corporations. It is as if Christopher Sharrett’s warning in *Crisis Cinema* (1993) has been taken heed of in a perverse way:

“... catastrophe is not the product of our poststructuralist trained imaginations but of our depoliticization and irresponsibility. Contemporary theory aside, critics must pay attention to the apocalypticism of the postmodern moment simply because the horrific nihilism of cultural production indeed has a relationship to measurable, material circumstances of society. We must also note – and a little panic here would do us all good - how loudly the current power structure has announced the apocalypse with its “end of history” declarations as supranational corporatism “wins” the Cold War”. (My emphasis)

The “measurable, material circumstances” of Anglo-American society is indeed being manipulated by the dominant Western power structures through the use of cultural production, in particular through mass media.

If neo-conservatism (which I consider to be the dominant post postmodernist condition) had a slow start in Thatcherism, it certainly picked up pace with the first Gulf War, and September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 put it in overdrive, culminating in the second Anglo-American attack on Iran in 2003. Taking 1991 (the year of the first Gulf War) as a starting point, it is possible to show how Hollywood cinema has realigned itself with this neo-conservatism in spite of the anti-Bush sentiment so vocally expressed by actors at the 2003 Academy Awards ceremony.

In this regard, a short survey of Hollywood productions of the past decade or so reveal several examples of hugely successful war films (in terms of box office figures and / or Academy Awards) that show strong evidence of what I would term a neo-conservatism couched in contrived patriotism and neo-liberal humanism. Significantly, eight of the

twelve films listed below are situated in a distant historical past. Ted Turner's *Gettysburg* (1993) re-enacts the historical battle of Gettysburg during the American Civil War, Roland Emmerich's *The Patriot* (2000) deals with the American War of Independence while six films, of which five were released in 2001/2002 have the Second World War as setting: *The Thin Red Line* (Terrence Mallick 1998), *Band of Brothers* (Steven Spielberg, Tom Hanks 2001), *Pearl Harbour* (Michael Bay 2001), *Enemy at the Gates* (Jean-Jaques Annaud 2001), *Windtalkers* (John Woo 2002) and *Hart's War* (Gregory Hoblit 2002).

*Black Hawk Down* (Ridley Scott 2001) and *Behind Enemy Lines* (John Moore 2001) respectively tells the stories of a U.S. military raid that went wrong in Somalia in 1993, and a fighter pilot shot down over Bosnia in 1995, while Randall Wallace's *We were Soldiers* (2002) gives another account of war in Vietnam, this time through the eyes of General Harold Moore, whose autobiography the film is based on. Latest in the crop of American feel-good-about-ourselves war movies is Antoine Fuqua's *Tears of the Sun* (2003) which deals with the heroic exploits of a US Navy Seals team in war-torn Nigeria. Almost all these films affirm the concept of sacrificial violence to some extent. (See René Girard (1972) for a detailed discussion of the relationship between violence and sacrifice).

A good example of a neo-conservative film that attempts to restore the belief in meaningful life is Mel Gibson's *Brave Heart* (1995), winner of five Academy Awards. It is ostensibly a red-blooded battle epic set in the fourteenth century; in reality it is a metaphor for newly found American patriotism that valorises sacrificial violence. In the climactic scene of the film, Wallace is drawn and quartered. To the end he refuses to capitulate to King Edward I, choosing to die what becomes a martyr's death, rich in crucifixion symbolism. Given that personal freedom is a concept foreign to the era, his dying cry "Freedom!" is clearly calculated to touch contemporary audiences.

But it is not only the sacrificial slaughter of the protagonist Wallace that reveals it as an American fable. In an earlier scene Wallace attempts to unite the clans of Scotland by pleading with Robert the Bruce, a contender for the Scottish throne, to convince the Scottish nobles to take up arms. The Bruce's father, literally manifesting the moral decay of the Scottish nobles (he is a leper) plots the betrayal of Wallace in the interest of advancing his son's political career. In a poignant scene, where his father rationalises deceit and compromise in the interest of political advance, the Bruce curses his father, crying that he gave Wallace his word. Essentially this refers to a code of honour, exemplified in countless Westerns, where a man is only as good as his word. Trusting a man on the basis of his word is linked to the *belief* theme, reinforced by the recurring *motif* of pledges and tokens. This stands in direct contrast to the Scottish nobles' constant "negotiation" in the pursuit of self-serving terms and compromises. In another confrontation with his father the Bruce rejects this calculating pragmatism, shouting: "I want to believe!" This shout refers to more than the hero Wallace's unwavering belief in ultimate Scottish independence and freedom, it expresses a yearning for a selfless, and therefore, meaningful life.

In the final scene of the film the Bruce pushes aside political pragmatism and leads his army into victorious battle with the English, and; in a final validation of the concept of sacrificial violence, urges his men: "You bled with him, now bleed with me!" And for the benefit of those slow members of the audience that has not yet realised the significance of the foregoing, Wallace's broadsword is hurled into the air and pegs into the grass of the battlefield, a shimmering, waving cross.

### REACTION TO "CRISIS CINEMA" OF THE EIGHTIES

This realignment from postmodernist scepticism to neo-conservative belief which I discern in Hollywood productions over the last ten to twelve years is particularly noticeable since it manifests itself in the wake of an era dominated by what Christopher Sharrett (1993) calls crisis cinema. According to him the most important films of the eighties, "... when not viewing material conditions at the end of the century as catastrophic and unrecuperable, suggest that the sensibility of the postmodern moment (...) projects a profound nullity and bankruptcy" (1993:4).

This is certainly true of Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), which although not an eighties film can be considered a precursor to Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). In the decade which follows, the most significant films would build on this sense of apocalypse, not as revelation, but as disaster, doomsday: Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), David Lynch's *Dune* (1984) and *Blue Velvet* (1986), David Cronenberg's *Videodrome* (1983), *The Dead Zone* (1983) and *The Fly* (1986) and the Mad Max trilogy by George Miller (1979, 1981, 1985).

### PRIVATE RYAN AS AN EXPRESSION OF NEO-CONSERVATISM

This brings me to the significance of *Saving Private Ryan* in terms of my hypothesis of an emerging neo-conservatism in Anglo-American society, perverting the ordinary citizen's yearning for meaning in life which followed in the wake of the collapse of previous master narratives by constructing a surrogate master narrative through the manipulation of mass cultural production.

Barbara Shulgasser's comments in a review of the film published in *The Examiner* (Friday, 24 July 1998) exemplifies this yearning for a new sense of value and meaning, and, to my mind, substantiates my thesis:

I must begin this review by reiterating my stand on the work of director Steven Spielberg. I think its cheap thrills and thudding sentimentality have contributed to the general infantilization of American movies. That stated, it is my pleasure to announce that not only is "Saving Private Ryan" the best movie he ever made, but it is a terrific movie by any standards. Spielberg is growing up.

World War II was one of the last times in recent history when Americans felt proud of being one of the most militarily powerful nations on Earth. It was a time when we could believe that our firepower would actually be used to do good in the world. The soldiers who fought knew they were eradicating evil. They could persuade themselves that the brutality of war might actually be justifiable. And the people back home were rooting for them to accomplish the mission. (My emphasis)

I shall now attempt to illustrate that Spielberg in fact did not “grow up”, as Shulgasser maintains, but that she, like other American film critics (See the reviews by Kenneth Turan (*The Times*, Friday July 24, 1998) and Roger Ebert (*Chicago Sun-Times*), two of America’s most prominent critics, who both laud the “accuracy” and “realism” of the film), have fallen prey to an emerging neo-conservatism that blinds them to the fact that they are, at the turn of the millennium, no closer to finding real meaning and purpose in life than during the disillusionment of the eighties. The sense of purpose and pride, the new sense of patriotism espoused by these films, are products of mass cultural production manipulated by the hegemony of Western supranational corporatism.

### NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

The story of the saving of private Ryan is presented as a framed narrative. The film opens and closes with a scene of present day James Ryan, now in his seventies, visiting the American World War II memorial cemetery in St Laurent, France. This framing narrative, which runs for 6 minutes and 35 seconds, is split into two parts of almost exactly the same duration: 3 min. 22 sec. and 3 min 13 sec., respectively. The perfect symmetry of the two scenes (in reality a single scene) is further punctuated by identical opening and closing shots of the American flag.

The main narrative, which runs for 2 hours 34 minutes and 51 seconds is divided into distinct “chapters”: the landing at Omaha beach (23 minutes 17 seconds), the Chief of Staff sequence (5 minutes 46 seconds), the Mother sequence (1 minute 42 seconds) which splits the Chief of Staff sequence into two symmetrical units of 2 minutes 56 seconds and two minutes 50 seconds respectively, and the mission to save Ryan, which runs for 2 hours 4 minutes and 6 seconds.

The rescue mission follows the structure of typical quest narratives as described by Propp (1968) and Campbell (1968): the hero is *called* (Capt. Miller receives his orders); he is *joined by helpers* (men from his company); their quest takes the form of a *journey* during which they must conquer numerous *obstacles* (firefights); the hero faces a *moral dilemma* and begins to doubt himself (sequence at the radar station) but *prevails* with the support of a trusted friend (Sergeant Horvath); the journey leads to an inevitable, *climatic battle* where *good faces evil* (assault on Ramelle); the hero conquers and *returns the object of the quest to his community* (Ryan is reunited with his mother).

### RECEPTION OF THE FILM

The narrative structure described above is completely at odds with the truth claims made by Spielberg, the historian Stephen E. Ambrose and WW II veterans in the production notes and extra material contained in the DVD release of the film. The film is described as “realistic”, “unglamorous”, “a current, definitive document on the history of the world” that accurately represents the “looks and smells of what battle and combat is really like”.

These claims are further reinforced by interviews conducted with World War II veterans and their relatives, most notably the one conducted with the family of the four Niland brothers, which culminates in the following words by a surviving daughter of one of the



brothers: "There is a legacy of honor that goes with this family, and that's why we are very proud".

Roger Ebert, arguably the most popular American film critic, supports these truth claims in his review of the film:

(Spielberg) has made a philosophical film about war almost entirely in terms of action. *Saving Private Ryan* says things about war that are as complex and difficult as any essayist could possibly express, and does it with broad, strong images, with violence, with profanity, with action, with camaraderie. It is possible to express even the most thoughtful ideas in the simplest words and actions, and that's what Spielberg does. The film is doubly effective, because he communicates his ideas in feelings, not words. I was reminded of *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1998).

Jim Keeble, in a travel article for the *Sunday Times* (25 April 1999) reports that the film is inspiring tourists to flock to Normandy, quoting a 40% increase in visits by Americans since the film was released. Inspired by "the simple yet exceptional heroism of the film's characters" he also visited Normandy where he met several Americans whose visits had also been inspired by the film. "I had connected with the men in the film, who were about my age, and my pilgrimage was an attempt to experience again the feelings I had had in the cinema – of fear, courage and fraternity".

In spite of expressing some disillusionment because the geography of the film proved to be invented to a considerable extent (Ramelle is a fictional town, and Neuville-au-Plain, the large town where the character Caparzo is killed trying to rescue a little French girl, is merely a hamlet comprising a church surrounded by muddy fields), Keeble ends his article thus:

The rippling Merderet river, the lush green meadow – these were free for me to enjoy because of the courage and sacrifice of the men and women of D-day. As I stood on the pretty but seemingly inconsequential bridge in rural France, I heard the words of Hanks to Matt Damon at the end of *Saving Private Ryan*: "Earn this".

In contrast, Wade Major's (undated) review in Boxoffice Online (<http://www.boxoffice>) exposes a number of issues regarding the truth claims made by the film:

*Saving Private Ryan* marks an even more dramatic departure for Spielberg than *Shindler's List* or even *Amistad*, a departure that ultimately catches the director in a moral quandary from which he makes a most inelegant, even troubling exit. (...) What is presented (...) is a surprisingly conventional war film conclusion that actually appears to justify the preceding carnage as an act of honor, courage and justice. (...) Though it is unlikely that either Spielberg or Rodat would have consciously meant to imply that the barbarism of war as depicted in *Saving Private Ryan* is either noble or heroic, that is, indeed, the message that viewers discerning enough to see past the technical mastery will take home with them, a message that is further re-enforced in the film's rather silly and unnecessary present-day frame story.

## THE THEME OF SACRIFICIAL VIOLENCE AND SUPPORTING MOTIFS

The theme of redeeming, sacrificial violence is overtly expressed in the dialogue of the characters in several scenes (Miller after the death of Wade at the radar installation, Horvath to Miller on the bridge at Ramelle and Ryan when he refuses to leave, telling Miller that his mother would understand his choice to risk death rather than leave his comrades). This theme is introduced by the character of General Marshall when he quotes from a letter by Abraham Lincoln to a Mrs. Lydia Bixby on the death of her five sons during the American War of Independence. It is repeated in the letter General Marshall writes to James Ryan's mother (made all the more dramatic since it is presented as a voice-over during Miller's death scene). The contrived nature of this theme is exposed by the fact that Spielberg exploits it in spite of it being a well-known fact that Lincoln's letter was based on inaccurate information (*Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, 1809-1865*. Volume 8).

On another level, the theme is carried by a range of motifs, ranging from intertextual references to Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade, Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum est" and Shakespeare's "We few, we lucky few, we band of brothers; For he to-day that sheds his blood with me shall be my brother" to the use of visual metaphors that exploit several cinematographic techniques, specifically in terms of framing and composition.

Let me deal with the intertextual references first.

Initially the brotherhood motif is introduced with some ironic distance in the scene where the Upham tries to befriend the members of the squad and is rudely rebuffed. At this time he is reading a book on which he explains to the squad: "It's supposed to be about the bands of brotherhood that develop between soldiers during war."

Reiben reacts to this with scorn: "Brotherhood? What do you know about brotherhood? Get a load of this guy, Fish."

This initial distancing from a romantic perspective on war is reinforced in the following scene where Upham quotes Tennyson and is again rebuffed:

Upham: Theirs not to reason why, theirs but to do and die.

Reiben: What the fuck is that supposed to mean, huh? We're all supposed to die, is that it? Soon this distancing is inverted. Wade is fatally wounded, and in a dying scene that runs for 3 minutes and twenty seconds the camera stays in a medium close-up on the squad members' hands, as they try to stem the bleeding. This scene marks a turning point in the film, and the theme of sacrificial violence is connected visually and through dialogue with the motif of brotherhood. This culminates in the "brotherhood" scene at Ramelle where Ryan refuses to leave upon hearing of the deaths of his brothers, and declares that his squad members are the only brothers that he has left. In deference to the American myth of the *last stand*, which is closely linked to the idea of ultimate sacrifice, the otherwise stoic Captain Miller names the last fallback position the Alamo. It is from this position that the bridge will be blown if they are overrun by the Germans, and this is where the mortally wounded Hank's character faces the German tank with his Colt 1911 A 1 Colt pistol. One cannot but be reminded of John Wayne as Davy Crockett in *The Alamo* (1960), hailed as "a diamond-hard, 'rough-hewn' masterpiece

... emotionally and dramatically potent enough to make all hearts beat with pride.”  
(Extract from review in *Chicago Daily News* featured on the video sleeve.)

## CINEMATOGRAPHIC TECHNIQUES

Clearly, one of the prime objectives of good directing and good shooting is to have the physical elements reflect, reinforce and comment on the narrative elements (Brown 2002:15).

In conclusion, I wish to analyse a number of key sequences to determine how cinematic technique is exploited to add subtext to the narrative. The term cinematic technique here refers to *filmspace* (determined by framing and the type of shot used), *composition* and *camera dynamics*, including choice of lens.

Generally speaking, the following nine types of shot are distinguished in terms of the *size* of the image relative to the frame (wide shot, full shot, medium, head and shoulders, big head, cowboy, tight two, dirty single, clean single) and the *purpose* of the shot (establishing shots, connecting shots, cutaways, reaction shots, eyeline and point of view shots). Composition refers to the visual design principles which govern the visual image, such as unity, balance, tension, rhythm, proportion, contrast, texture, directionality and depth, while camera dynamics refer to the placement and movement of the camera used to achieve certain visual effects. The execution of visual design principles is dependent on camera dynamics combined with choice of lens in conjunction with aperture size, shutter angle and type of film stock used.

It is not my intention to launch into an exhaustive analysis of the cinematic techniques employed by Spielberg, rather I want to limit myself to a brief comparison of the most obvious techniques used in a number of key sequences. I shall start with a brief comparison of camera technique employed in the Omaha beach sequence as opposed to the technique used in the radar installation and defense of Ramelle sequences. I shall then briefly explore how Spielberg uses composition to add symbolic subtext to the Chief of Staff, Mother and Radar installation sequences.

## OMAHA BEACH SEQUENCE

The so-called “Hitchcock’s rule”, namely that the size of an object in the frame should equal its importance in the story at that moment (Brown 2002:25) can be expanded to include the length of time the object remains in view.

As already mentioned, this sequence runs for 23 minutes and 17 seconds, clearly establishing its importance. The dramatic intensity of this sequence is only properly appreciated when compared to similar sequences from *The Longest Day* (1962) and Samuel Fuller’s *The Big Red One* (1980). Fuller’s sequence, which covers the same action covered by Spielberg, runs for 8 minutes. Although it is dramatically far more intense than similar sequences in *The Longest Day*, it misses the subjective intensity of the *Ryan* sequence because it employs conventional camera technique. Fuller uses a mounted camera from a number of static positions and relies on cutting to create pace. During the first part of the sequence there is some attempt to use a subjective camera by taking low point of view shots just above the waterline and by using tight framing.

This is soon abandoned in favour of wider shots that allow the viewer to orientate himself/herself. These are supplemented by tracking shots from a dolly that follows the action in a non-disorienting way.

The battle scenes from Lewis Milestone's classic film adaptation of the Erich Maria Remarque novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) begs comparison, if only because Spielberg admits to having been influenced by the film (Production notes: DVD release of *Saving Private Ryan*). Three sequences are of particular importance, namely the assault on the German trenches by the French (6 minutes and 16 seconds) and the cemetery sequence up to the point where the French soldier jumps into the shell-hole occupied by the protagonist of the film, Paul Baumer (4 minutes 13 seconds). The third sequence captures the death of Paul and is of particular importance because of the tribute Spielberg pays to the symbolism generated the the frame composition used in this scene.

Milestone employs very low camera positions in the battle sequences (difficult to achieve with the primitive equipment of the time) combined with very fast cutting to speed up the pace of the action. To my mind the very fast inter-cutting to two machine gun crews (shots of approximately half a second in duration) in the second assault scene inspired Spielberg's equally brief silhouette shots of the MG 42- gunners firing from the pillbox at the beaching troops. Another aspect of Milestone's camera technique that is of particular significance for the Spielberg sequences is the use of low point of view shots that allows the viewer to experience the terror and disorientation of the protagonist.

The final scene of the film is in stark contrast with the battle scenes. Although suspense is generated by inter-cutting to the sniper lining up on the unsuspecting Paul who stretches out his hand in wonder to a butterfly outside his trench, the focus is not on the action, but rather the composition of the frames. The final frames capture a close-up of Paul's hand as it relaxes in death, almost in the same way that Captain Miller's trembling hands (a recurring *motif*) are finally at rest in death in the final scene of *Saving Private Ryan*. Unfortunately the director spoils the impact of what should have been the end of the film by using a present day framing story that exploits cheap sentiment.

### **COMPARISON WITH OTHER BATTLE SEQUENCES IN THE FILM**

The Omaha beach sequence gains much of its intensity by drawing the viewer into the sense of disorientation and confusion that dominates it. In this regard much has been said about the "documentary" style of filming, using hand-held cameras, the use of lenses from which the coating has been stripped chemically to render the gritty feel of 1940's camera footage, and Spielberg's decision not to storyboard the scenes (I also suspect that no master scenes were shot).

Of equal, if not greater importance is the framing used. Almost the entire sequence is filmed in medium close-up, with "dirty singles" and "tight twos" being the norm. This leaves the viewer at the mercy of the directional forces of individual shots, without being able to orientate himself / herself according to the geography of the landscape

(save being aware that the sea represents the rear and the bluff with its menacing pill boxes the front). Even when the battle is won, and Horvarth remarks to Miller that it is "quite a view", Spielberg refrains from giving the viewer a panoramic view of the beach, but instead uses a crane shot which reveals only a limited view of the beach before it moves into a close-up of the name Ryan, stenciled on the backpack of a dead soldier.

It is only after the Chief of Staff and Homestead sequences (D-day plus three) that the viewer is given a panoramic view of the beach and sea with warships, landing craft and blimps in a shot that strongly reminds of a similar one in *The Longest Day* (1962).

In contrast, the battle sequence at the radar station, although it still employs some handheld camerawork, allows the viewer to orientate himself / herself by being presented, to a large extent, as a point of view narrative by presenting the action from Upham's (distant) perspective. The scenes following the assault action are made up of carefully composed shots rich in symbolism, such as the shots of the smoking MG 42 machinegun, which, due to its compositional strength, exudes an aura of evil.

Why the change in cinematic technique? It is because the film has moved from "objective" or "documentary" mode to a mode that suits a (subjective) narrative. From now on there will be an increasing use of the wide, panoramic shot of human figures in a landscape that dominates in a way that is reminiscent of John Ford's Western landscapes, the only difference being that browns are substituted for lush greens. The action scenes that follow are still dramatic, and they are still predominantly shot with handheld cameras, sometimes employing shutter angles below 90 degrees in order to produce the stuttering motion effect of, for example, the assault scene on the German half-track outside Ramelle. Nevertheless, even during the final climactic battle scene in the town of Ramelle, the viewer is never disoriented and is presented with battle *narratives* that tell a clear story, and the story is that of the last stand where men of honour refuse to yield in the face of enormous odds, and make the ultimate sacrifice.

### **CINEMATIC SUBTEXTS OF THE CHIEF OF STAFF AND HOMESTEAD SEQUENCES**

As mentioned, the Chief of Staff sequence runs for 5 minutes and 46 seconds, and is split symmetrically by the Homestead sequence that runs for 2 minutes and 50 seconds.

In contrast with the Omaha beach sequence, these sequences make extensive use of lighting and use rich, saturated colours. The pace is slow, and the camera dwells on several faces in close-up. The first part of the sequence contains no dialogue, but voice-overs present snatches of the contents of letters to next of kin being typed. The camera then follows one of the supervisors when she reports the fact that three Ryan brothers had been killed within days of each other, thereafter follows the characters as they move to the Colonel's office. In a very well-composed shot where conventional wisdom is thrown aside, Spielberg has the camera facing the dominant source of light, resulting on part of the frame being "overexposed". This places the face of the officer reporting to the colonel in the strongest position of the frame.

The sequence is “interrupted” and cuts to the Homestead sequence (which will be analysed shortly) at the point where the Colonel is informed that the mother will receive all three telegrams informing her of her son’s deaths that very afternoon. This, of course, is in keeping with the well-known narrative of “showing” rather than “telling”. It also serves two other purposes: the Homestead sequence is designed to play on the viewer’s emotions and to rally sympathy for the mother (all mothers!), whereby General Marshall’s decision to risk the lives of many to save one is silently endorsed by the viewer.

Secondly, it introduces the mother *motif* that will form the discussion of Miller’s squad members when Reiben debates the logic of the “math” that risks the lives of eight for one. As is the case with the brotherhood *motif*, the soldiers introduce it in a cynical way, creating an initial “distance” to a motif that becomes increasingly emotionally charged. When Reiben is told to think of Ryan’s “poor mother”, he counters by saying that they all have mothers, that, hell, even the Captain had a mother – which he retracts after a second of thought, offering that, whereas everybody else had mothers, the Captain had probably been assembled from spare bodyparts of dead GIs. The viewer, however, has already been “primed” by the Homestead sequence so that Wade’s protracted death scene (3 minutes and 20 seconds in comparison to the innumeral death scenes on Omaha beach that are shown in brief shots, sometimes less than a second in duration), where he cries out to his mother that he wants to go home, arouses gut-wrenching emotion.

The second part of the Chief of Staff sequence is as rich with subtext as the first. The scene is the General’s office, and the props are, as in Ryan’s mother’s house, not mere furnishings, but perform a dramatic function. In this regard the portrait of Washington, the American Flag, the Bible and especially Abraham Lincoln’s letter are powerful symbols that firmly establish the central theme of pride and sacrifice. The frame compositions in this sequence are built on triangles, and again Spielberg uses the dominant light source in an unconventional way by not avoiding glare and lens flare – instead he uses it to create visual tension that, in conjunction with “choreographing” the characters into a triangle, draws the viewer in to unconsciously side with Marshal as he faces the objections voiced against a rescue attempt. This sequence is so emotionally loaded that the viewer experiences a distinct sense of relief when Marshall prevails.

Again, framing and composition is carefully planned in the Homestead sequence using the well-known principles of unity, balance, contrast, tension and texture in shots. Outside shots use saturated colours, while the interior shots make maximum use of light and shadow. Here it should be noted that in analysing individual frames, one should bear in mind that film is not a static medium. One should therefore also pay attention to the duration of shots, and the direction of movement.

The sequence consists of eight shots:

- A long shot of the homestead that runs for 12 seconds. This is a very strong visual composition which typifies the American family by placing it in an idyllic rural setting.
- Interior shot of the kitchen, silhouette of the mother against the kitchen window (9 seconds) reinforcing traditional domestic values.

- Exterior close-up shot of the porch, revealing four symbolic stars in the window (6 seconds).
- Exterior close-up of mother in kitchen window showing mother washing dishes (12 seconds).
- POV shot through kitchen window on road and fields (9 seconds).
- Exterior long shot of car approaching the homestead (similar composition to shot 1) (4 seconds).
- Interior shot, medium close-up of mother becoming aware of the approaching car, window reflection used as a compositional device (9 seconds).
- Continuation of shot seven, but now showing hallway interior with the open door creating a second frame into which the mother moves as a silhouette. This shot generates tension by contrasting movement (mother and car) with the static image of a photograph of the four Ryan brothers under an American flag, highlighted in the dark hallway. Although the shot is fairly static, it runs for 42 seconds, drawing attention to the fact that its content is important, if not in terms of action, then most certainly in terms of its symbolic subtext.

## CONCLUSION

The preceding analysis of the cinematic technique employed in *Saving Private Ryan* supports an interpretation that rejects the claims made regarding the film's "documentary-like" realism and accuracy. It further supports the thesis that the film is a mass cultural production aimed at promoting and reinforcing an emerging neo-conservative American society *that impacts on Western society as a whole*. As is the case with most ideological constructs, it can be deconstructed in the way I have done in this article. But perhaps the kind of spontaneous deconstruction (or Freudian slip) contained in the following short report is more telling:

### **Steven Spielberg Thanked For War Efforts**

Steven Spielberg (photos) has had messages of thanks pouring in for personally funding the November 11 groundbreaking ceremony launching the building of the National World War II Memorial. The Saving Private Ryan (1998) director received messages of gratitude from former American Senator Bob Dole, the American Battle Monuments Commission and the National World War II Memorial Campaign for his erection [sic] in Washington ([www.imdb.com/PeopleNews/2000](http://www.imdb.com/PeopleNews/2000) accessed 23 June 2003).

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