

Memory, War and American Identity: *Saving Private Ryan* as Cinematic Jeremiad

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□—*The American jeremiad long has been an established rhetorical form that operates as a corrective to conditions gone awry. In response to a “falling away,” the jeremiad issues a call to the community to return home to idealized foundational principles. The American experience in Vietnam produced in the national community a crisis of faith in foundational principles and precipitated a crisis of representation of national identity. This essay argues that the secular American jeremiad emerges prominently in Steven Spielberg’s film Saving Private Ryan. Through a close reading of the film, contextualized by the preceding twenty years of popular cinematic lamentation following Vietnam, I argue that the film operates, in part, as a rhetorically skillful response to the post-Vietnam crisis of national identity. I further argue that Spielberg both acknowledges and appropriates the crisis, offering viewing audiences a “way home” to mythic America. The essay concludes with a discussion of the tensions between the conservative mandate in the jeremiadic form and the possibilities for social transformation.*

In the midst of growing national civil strife over the legitimacy of America’s Vietnam War, 1972 Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern issued a call to the nation in his flat Midwestern tones to “Come Home, America.” Rejecting that call, the electorate handed McGovern the greatest defeat in American presidential politics. Far more comforting than this Jeremiah’s cry in the wilderness were Richard Nixon’s reassurances that

America did, in fact, occupy the moral high ground, that national moral character was not fundamentally flawed, that purpose remained clear, and that the founding principles of national community continued to guide American action abroad and at home. However, despite Nixon’s pronouncements of peace with honor and strategic American withdrawal from Southeast Asia, the war precipitated a crisis of national identity that persists to this day (Bates, 1996; Beidler, 1982; Capps, 1990). Its resonances may be found in the widely documented crisis of American masculinity (e.g., Bates, 1996; Jeffords, 1989), in the marginalization of the returning Vietnam veteran, in George Bush’s 1989 inaugural address and in his January 1991 address to the nation on the eve of the Gulf War, in public reactions to Robert McNamara’s mea culpa, in Senator Kerry’s apo-

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logia for alleged war crimes, and in American popular war films.

Even as McGovern implored America to “come home” to the covenant from which it had fallen away, national faith in the American mythology that nourished Nixon’s victory was crumbling; indeed, Watergate instantiated the crisis of Vietnam. More than just another political scandal, it laid bare a violation of the fundamental political contract between government and citizens. It revealed a systematic policy of lies, deception, fraud, and civil rights violations by the national government towards its people in pursuing its war policy. Cynicism about the political process is one of its legacies. The emergence of “gate” as the metonymic suffix for all political scandals is another (Schudson, 1992). The Vietnam syndrome stands in opposition to the American metanarrative of unified national identity.

Jeremiadic rhetoric operates as a corrective to contemporary conditions gone awry. But how can one issue a call to come home when fundamental faith in that covenant has been so deeply shaken? For those disillusioned or turned cynical, earnest declarations of redemption through a return to the principles of that covenant are likely to be read ironically or comically. How can one issue a call to “come home” when the legitimacy of that contract has been subverted? And when matters turn to remembrance of those who sacrificed on the battlefield in the name of that covenant, how can rhetoric justify those sacrifices as meaningful? Bates (1996) argues that “[t]he Vietnam War prompted thoughtful Americans to search the Puritan legacy for answers to basic questions: How did we get into such a demoralizing and ultimately unsuccessful war? Why did

it take us so long to get out? What did we learn from the experience?” (pp. 12-13). For Bates, these questions echo the jeremiadic tradition in American discourse. But rather than examining conventional sites of official, communal discourse, Bates locates the site of these reflections in post-Vietnam popular film and literature.

This move by Bates bespeaks a discursive crisis of representation. The desire to “come home” may persist. The viability of national community may depend upon it. But the resonances of trauma throughout the community may militate against the viability of conventional forms and forums of jeremiadic rhetoric.¹ Consequently, rhetorical and cultural scholars may look to popular discourse for evidence of the “working through” of national trauma and of movement toward “coming home.” In this essay I argue that the secular American jeremiad emerges prominently in Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*, in part, as a rhetorically skillful response (Hasain, 2001) to the post-Vietnam crisis of national identity. I further argue that Spielberg both acknowledges and appropriates the crisis, offering viewing audiences a “way home” to mythic America.

First, I discuss the capacity of popular discourses (such as film) to work through issues that may be too volatile or ineffectual for official formal discourse (e.g., Bodnar, 1992). Second, I turn to production and reception histories of key post-Vietnam films; these public discourses articulate the challenges of returning home to the foundational principles and aspirations of the American national community. Third, and within this context of contestation and struggle, I examine *Saving Private Ryan* as a fully developed cinematic jeremiad, the culmination of a reclama-

tion process in which noble sacrifice is once again articulated earnestly. Here, I explore the challenges of translating discursive forms to visual media. Finally, I conclude with observations about traumatic memory, the jeremiad and American national identity.

“The Wars We Took to Vietnam”²

The joy of our hearts has ceased; our dancing has been turned to mourning. The crown has fallen from our head; woe to us, for we have sinned. (Lamentations 5:15-16)

Memory is a prominent subject of post-Vietnam war cinema, both for the soldier and his nation. For the cinematic combat veteran, memory itself is often impossible, always painful, and sometimes fatal. Characterized veterans in *Coming Home*, *Born on the 4th of July*, and *Heaven and Earth* are haunted by traumatizing memories of battlefield mistakes and casualties, and of failed relationships at home (e.g., Katzman, 1993). *Apocalypse Now* and *Heaven and Earth* voice the anxiety that western masculine identities disintegrate in the corrosively feminized culture of Southeast Asia (see Jeffords, 1989). Characterized warriors invented by Coppola and Stone self-destruct, either because they cannot remember their pre-Vietnam identities or because post-Vietnam America alienates them. *The Deer Hunter*'s most tragic character, Nick Chevoteravich, literally blows his mind with a handgun rather than remember his lost American identity (Burke, 1992). In a broader sense, these examples of personalized traumatic memory mark the post-Vietnam crisis in collective memory of mythic American heroism. Marilyn Young (1996) explains:

The issues of the Vietnam War brought into question the founding premise of U.S. history itself. It was an axiom of this history that the United States . . . stood for self-determination, freedom, and democracy. The longer the Vietnam War lasted, however, the less tenable that proposition became . . . Vietnam [became] an acid bath in which received myths dissolved, and so presented a serious threat to the nation's very sense of self. (p. 200)

This perceived threat to a coherent national identity constitutes an enduring trauma in the public space of American popular and political culture. Michael Schudson (1989) explains that

[t]raumas . . . are past experiences [that] people (or organizations or nations) cannot ignore even when they would like to . . . [S]ome part of the past, like it or not, is lodged in the mind, like a wound that injures, and so changes the body and forces the body to respond to heal itself – but never quite the same as it was before. (p. 110)

In post-Vietnam American culture, rhetorical appeals to a mythic American past are constrained by and through traumatic national memory of the war (e.g., Engelhardt, 1995). Significantly, this traumatic memory was constructed, in part, through the visual and discursive practices of popular cinema.

Bates suggests that reading post-Vietnam films within the rhetorical tradition of the American jeremiad can illuminate the resonances of national trauma. As Sacvan Bercovitch (1978) argues,

[o]nly in the United States has nationalism carried with it the Christian meaning of the sacred. Only America, of all national designations, has assumed the combined force of eschatology and chauvinism . . . Of all symbols of identity, only *America* has united nationality and universality, civic and spiri-

tual selfhood, secular and redemptive history, the country's past and paradise to be, in a single synthetic ideal. (p. 176)

In other words, "[t]he essential American historical metanarrative has been based on a belief in the fulfillment, over time, of the enduring principles of the Founding Fathers [w]rongs would always be righted and the originating vision realized in due course" (Young, p. 200). Consequently, one might reasonably anticipate the Vietnam War "to have been absorbed into the standard historical narrative [b]ut . . . it came instead to threaten the integrity of the narrative itself" (p. 200).

A study of popular film for expressions of the jeremiadic form focuses attention on subtle and refracted (Bakhtin, 1981; Volosinov quoted in Hall, 1982) articulations of standard rhetorical forms in American culture. In both rhetorical and literary history studies, the jeremiad has been studied exhaustively as a genre of discursive practices (e.g., Bormann, 1977; Carpenter, 1978; Johannesen, 1985; Ritter, 1980). This essay draws attention to *visual* rhetorical practices in American public life. The jeremiad has had three rhetorical functions in American literature and public address: to name the covenant (the special people), to make public lamentation for a decline (a falling away from a promise), and to imagine redemption (connect the past to the future). In the secularized jeremiad of the twentieth century, appeals to scripture "have been replaced by a rendering of the national past" (Ritter, 1980, p. 158). This rhetorical construction of a usable past identifies Americans as a special people with a sacred mission and appeals to secular texts of great cultural salience (Jasinski, 2001; Murphy, 1990).³ In order to consider how appeals to the discursive tradition of the

jeremiad might be translated for the cinematic medium, we must also consider elements of genre (or audience) expectation and the ideological potential of the rhetorical form (e.g., Berco-vitch, 1978; Dionisopoulos, et al., 1992; Jasinski, 1997b, 1999a; Murphy, 1990). Subsequent sections of the essay will consider the challenges of visual transformation of discursive practices and the ideological implications of oxymoronic appeals to temporal relations (the future depends upon the past).

In terms of national memory, both Spielberg and reviewers of *Ryan* position the Vietnam War and American representations of it as an implied audience for contemporary war cinema. In a special *Newsweek* supplement, Spielberg (1998) reveals the significance Vietnam holds for him as a filmmaker. He begins by recollecting a childhood fondness for American war film directors such as John Huston, John Ford, and William Wellman. The first movie Spielberg ever made, at age fourteen, was a re-enactment of the cinematic battles he and his friends had seen at the movies, where "there was lots of glory and lots of dying." But, he says, shifting to American involvement in Vietnam, "the years of glorifying war were coming to an end, and a new kind of dying was moving our way, uncut and uncensored." The Hollywood combat genre faltered, Spielberg claims, "when the casualties from Vietnam stormed into our living rooms seven nights a week for nearly a decade" (p. 68).

Three specific characterizations of his own work in *Ryan* reveal Spielberg's sense of audience and film convention, and hence traumatic memory of Vietnam. Significantly, these features also appear in published commentary and scholarship on the film. First,

Spielberg acknowledges the post-Vietnam crisis for collective memory of shared national purpose:

I think when we fight, war is no longer about a greater good but becomes intensely personal. Kids in combat are simply fighting to survive, fighting to save the guys right next to them. (p. 68)

This feature of *Ryan* is identified by both admirers and detractors as an entailment of the Vietnam legacy (e.g., Caldwell, 1998; Goldstein, 1999). Second, Spielberg acknowledges that at the end of the twentieth century, no American filmmaker can tell a morally unambiguous story about war. "At its core," he says of *Ryan*, "it is also a morality play" (p. 68). Reviewers of the film are especially divided on this point, arguing passionately about various moments of moral crisis in the film.⁴ Third, Spielberg expresses unabashed adulation for those "dogfaces who freed the world It's their stories that now should be told," he concludes (p. 68). Since popular narratives of World War II continue to circulate in film, television and trade literature, Spielberg's claim that these stories need to be told *now* echoes jeremiadic calls to recoup a mythic past.

Spielberg's discussion of Vietnam in relation to *Ryan* resonates with the oxymoronic potential of the jeremiad. The formal logic of the jeremiad can frame any contemporary malaise as a falling away from a mythic past. In order to ensure a harmonious or glorious future, the community must embrace that past. But, given American political and social upheavals in the twentieth century, how does one construct a mythic vision of the future in the face of a discredited mythic past? Invoke the jeremiad, but update the application. Spielberg begins with the falling away, the entailments of post-Vietnam trau-

matic memory (the "greater good" is lost). He acknowledges the "sin" which disrupted communal ethos (*Ryan*? It's "a morality play"). He concludes with a call home to the mythic past (our ancestral fathers are a special people who "freed the world"). And here, inevitable questions arise about ideological entailments of the jeremiad.

Literary historians of the American jeremiad have disagreed sharply for many years about the capacity of the jeremiad to accommodate critical reflection or function as an expression of dissent. At the center of this often heated quarrel is Bercovitch's conceptualization of the jeremiad as hegemonic. Bercovitch (1991, 1993) argues that American hegemony fosters dissent merely as a "staple of social revitalization." Therefore, radicalism or radical change must be aligned with "structures of continuity" in order to be transformed into the American Way (1991, p. 981). For Bercovitch, jeremiadic dissent is "an appeal to, and through, the rhetoric and values of the dominant culture" (p. 984). David Harlan (1991) disagrees vigorously. He argues that Bercovitch's theorizing oversimplifies a complex symbolic field. As Harlan reads Bercovitch, the jeremiad "becomes an Ur-Americanism that not only underlies all differences but collapses all oppositions and reconciles all contradictions, transforming every [expression of dissent] into an implicit assent" (p. 955). By contrast, Harlan believes in the "redemptive power of remorse and regret" (p. 970), and he counter argues that the jeremiad can be "an incentive to self-interrogation and an inducement to grow less sentimental about ourselves" (p. 961). Recent work in rhetorical studies raises similar questions about whether the jeremiad "limits the scope of reform

and the depth of social criticism" (Murphy, 1990, p. 402). Murphy and Dionisopoulos, et al. (1992), for example, concur with Bercovitch (1978) that the American jeremiad is ideologically conservative.⁵ Jasinski (1999a) argues that in accepting Bercovitch's containment thesis, Murphy and Dionisopoulos, et al., engage in an "uncritical acceptance of a disjunction between the jeremiad and radical political advocacy and action" (p. 4).⁶

This essay seeks to extend this scholarly conversation by examining a specific instance of struggle for control of public articulation of the jeremiad.⁷ To that end, I focus on cinematic management of multiple idioms, traditions, ideological perspectives, and gazes. The following section demonstrates how post-Vietnam cinema constitutes an implied audience for *Ryan's* jeremiad.

Production and Reception of Post-Vietnam War Cinema

Jerusalem sinned grievously, therefore she became filthy; all who honored her despise her, for they have seen her nakedness; yea, she herself groans, and turns her face away. (Lamentations 1:8)

One prominent motif in post-Vietnam film is lamentation. In his *Newsweek* interview, Spielberg (1998) acknowledges the corrosive influence of television news coverage of the war upon the nation's faith in "just cause" wars and upon Hollywood's earlier cinematic portrayals.

I think that films [prior to Vietnam] did little to prepare us for Southeast Asia. Those tragic events shattered every Hollywood war stereotype when the casualties from Vietnam stormed into our living rooms . . . (p. 68)

Films that lament the loss of national certainty and moral purpose express

the difficulty or impossibility of "coming home." They portray mounting anxiety (Miller, 1953; Ritter, 1980) about a "time of troubles" (Bormann, 1977) for American national identity. Notable exemplars include Hal Ashby's *Coming Home*, 1978; Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*, 1978; Frances Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, 1979; Oliver Stone's *Platoon*, 1986, *Born on the Fourth of July*, 1989, and *Heaven and Earth*, 1993; Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*, 1987; and Brian DePalma's *Casualties of War*, 1989. As lamentations, these films articulate a destabilized mythic national identity (e.g., Gibson, 1994). The warrior characters lament a falling away from a political covenant and call for redemption of promises not kept or not yet realized (e.g., Conlon, 1990). The characters perform lamentation through cinematic depictions of grief, trauma, and anxiety. Appeals to redemption through construction of a heroic past are constrained by war protest idioms, themes of paradise lost, and masculine anxiety (e.g., Whillock, 1988). Redemption is impossible for some characters; combat fatalities, insanity, suicide and murder figure prominently in these narratives (e.g., Burke, 1992). For survivors, the route to salvation lies in individual confession, mortification, and martyrdom.

Spielberg recognizes, albeit in passing, that in the years after American withdrawal from Vietnam, popular television and film became prominent public sites where traumatic memory of the war was constructed (e.g., Dionisopoulos, 1990; Gitlin, 1983). The myriad expressions of anxiety took a variety of forms, formulas and ideological agendas. References to the war appeared across many television genres, most frequently through the condensa-

tion signifier of the characterized Vietnam veteran (e.g., Katzman, 1993). Seventies television offered frequent commentary on the war and related issues through programming sites such as *M*A*S*H*, *All in the Family*, and *Lou Grant* (Gitlin, 1983). On April 22, 1979, ABC broadcast the critically acclaimed made-for-television movie "Friendly Fire," starring Carol Burnett and Ned Beatty as the disillusioned parents of a son killed because of American military errors in the field (Shales, 1979). Eighties television offered adventure stories about well-adjusted male veterans, such as the characters of *Magnum, P.I.* (Haines, 1990) and *Miami Vice*. The melodrama *China Beach* explored the collective angst of male combatants through the experiences of female American personnel in Vietnam (Owen, 1993; Vande Berg, 1993).

Long a staple of American television, the Vietnam veteran (and his war) emerged slowly in Hollywood filmmaking, a fact noted sarcastically by *The Washington Post*:

Hollywood made box-office hay out of the war with "The Deer Hunter" and "Coming Home" and even had the gall to congratulate itself on Oscar night for admitting, years after the last American troops pulled out, that the war had actually occurred. (Shales, p. K1, 1979; see also Canby, 1978b)

Indeed, American viewers watched their first "live" war via the public site of television news broadcasting. There, they encountered the ubiquitous rhetoric of daily body counts, unthinkable reports of American behavior at My Lai, and the images of a chaotic American retreat from Saigon (Hallin, 1986). In fact, as Katzman (1993) notes, "[p]art of the veterans' [fictional and cinematic] reception had to do with Vietnam's place as the first television war . . ." Because of extensive televi-

sion coverage of the war, "[it] was no longer clear who was good and who was evil, who was a hero and who was a villain, or who was an exploiter and who was a victim. From this uncertainty emerged a new cinematic veteran" (p. 8).

The post-Vietnam cinematic veteran differed from his World War II celluloid fathers (Basinger, 1986; Engelhardt, 1995; Severo and Milford, 1989). Realist representations of the injured body in *Coming Home*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Platoon*, and *Born on the 4th of July* bore the disfiguring marks of technologies of destruction (Szamuely, 1988; Norden, 1985). Shocking images of emotional devastation, murder-suicide, and madness appeared regularly in film narratives such as *Apocalypse Now*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Full Metal Jacket* and *Heaven and Earth* (e.g., Canby, 1979; Comber & O'Brien, 1988). Themes of moral aimlessness and American atrocities in Vietnam emerged in several films, but none so dramatic as the visual metonyms of My Lai in *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon* and *Casualties of War* (Fainaru, 1990a; Michener, 1979; McMahon, 1994). Nobility and national purpose were disarticulated; costs of the war were framed as "meaningless" sacrifice (Szamuely, 1988, p. 48). Films such as *Coming Home*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Platoon*, and *Born on the 4th of July* grappled with the challenges of post-war re-integration in post-heroic national culture (Comber & O'Brien, 1988; O'Brien, 1979; Szamuely, 1988). "Fear and anguish are far more evident than heroism," concludes the film reviewer for *The Jerusalem Post* (Fainaru, 1990b). In short, as the *New York Times* observed in a 1999 retrospective commentary, the cinematic Vietnam veteran was "a tormented lost soul, the permanently dam-

aged survivor of a nihilistic hell too terrible to be put into words" (Holden, 1999, p. 12).

By 1985, both popular and academic critics had begun to write about a genre of Vietnam War films (e.g., Caldwell, 1989).⁸ Commenting on the memory work performed by those films, Doherty (1988/89) explains: "The Vietnam film has not yet settled into the ripe generic dotage of the private eye or western genre, but it has reached the point where previous Vietnam films, as much as Vietnam memory, determine its rough outlines" (p. 24). The film narratives generally are told in the tragic rather than conventionally heroic genre (Bates, 1996; Canby, 1978a, c). They generally include visual and verbal depiction of the pointless sacrifice of American life, extreme emotional and physical trauma to the American male, and failure of military leadership in the field (Maychick, 1989; Szamuely, 1988). Many stories depict American war atrocities. As McMahon (1994) notes, "[b]y the early 1970's, stories of atrocities had become part of the national discourse, particularly with the publication of images from the My Lai massacre" (p. 14). Atrocity stories and vignettes illustrate that war can no longer be aligned seamlessly with notions of duty, honor, or national moral authority (Fainaru, 1990b; Kroll, 1979). Narrative logics offered the possibility of individual redemption through character confession, mortification, and martyrdom. The possibilities for redeeming a unified national identity are tentative, at best (Kroll, 1978a, b; Szamuely, 1988). In short, the films mentioned here are structured as lamentation.

Many reviewers note that the films "rebuke us with. . . visceral visions of a war that ravaged an ancient land and

deeply damaged America" (Johnson, 1994, p. B1). At the same time, however, the films construct a contradictory perspective on national identity, embracing both mortification and celebration. Doherty (1988/1989), Cardullo (1987), and Comber and O'Brien (1988) argue that the central ideological problematic in the post-Vietnam genre is the simultaneous expression of national atonement *and* celebration. That is, the film narratives tell the story of "a ghastly mistake" (Szamuely, 1988, p. 49) even as they exalt "the courage and nobility of the American presence" (Doherty, 1988/1989, p. 30). In all of these films, a hegemonic white male gaze constructs relations between East and West (Bates, 1996; Jeffords, 1989; Rushing & Frenztz, 1995). Visually and thematically, film director Michael Cimino appeals to "Yellow Peril" race stereotypes (Dower, 1986; 1996) to constitute America's "enemy" in *The Deer Hunter*. American survivors of the war are bewildered or destroyed by their encounter with Asian people and stalwart in their allegiance to past ideals of American national identity (Canby, 1978c, d; Kroll, 1978a, b). Francis Ford Coppola characterizes Asiatic people as "noble savages" – child-like, primitive and dependent upon the leadership, vision and violent fantasies of white western men (see Bates, 1996). Similarly, Stanley Kubrick figures Asian national identity as sexual corruption (Mayo, 1999). The much-beleaguered American foot soldier in *Full Metal Jacket* wonders aloud why his life is put at risk for a foreign nation with so little regard for self-sacrificing Americans or the responsibilities of participatory democracy (Bates, 1996; Doherty, 1988/1989). In sum, though cinematic American soldiers confess their sins and lament their

lapses, the constructed gaze of the narrative scrutinizes Vietnamese nationalism, and by implication, suggests that Southeast Asia may not have been a worthy candidate for democratic intervention.

A similar contradiction appears in strategically paired themes of disillusionment and displacement (Doherty, 1988/1989, p. 26). For Doherty and others, the gritty realism of post-Vietnam war films represents an angry disarticulation of the grand illusions of heroic sacrifice and assured victory in World War II cinema. Doherty explains: "As if in penance for the excesses and duplicities of the past, the Vietnam combat film embraces a stony narrative authenticity and cynical verisimilitude – or at least it must appear to" (p. 25). Through visual and discursive verisimilitude, post-Vietnam cinematic realism denounces its own paternity. Viewers are sutured into the horrors of combat action via point-of-view perspectives (Nelson, 2000), fast-paced editing, and the stylized *patois* of the cynical combat veteran (Doherty, 1988/89). At the same time the films express disillusionment, they also work to displace racial conflicts at home. Doherty explains:

the American dream of homoerotic interracial brotherhood is played out in the jungles of Vietnam no less than on the waters of the Mississippi. If racial animosities remain acute in the rear echelon, racism is a dangerous indulgence in the bush. (p. 28; see also Bates, 1996)

Similarly, Jeffords (1989) argues in her analysis of the genre that "[t]he collectivity of war . . . encompasses all [American] men who engage in battle . . . and overcomes all barriers between races" (p. 57). For Jeffords the fantasy of racial harmony among American soldiers in Vietnam not only

conceals American domestic race practices, but also conservative gender ideologies. She argues that "[t]he war in Vietnam was an eruption of the gendered structure of American society that released the pressures of race and class change through reinforcing the lines of gender" (p. 84; see also Gibson, 1994).

No post-Vietnam war filmmaker is more renowned for his angry, realist cinematic portraits (e.g., Beaver, 1994; Cardullo, 1987) or conservative gender politics (e.g., Owen and Ehrenhaus, 1997) than Oliver Stone. Stone's work in *Platoon*, *Born on the 4th of July*, and *Heaven and Earth* epitomizes the disillusioned cinematic soldier and veteran. Like Cimino, Stone's evocation of homosocial bonding among combat soldiers displaces racial animosity from the American socio-political scene to the geo-political scene of primitive Asian nationalism. Moreover, like Cimino, Coppola, and Kubrick, Stone deploys hegemonic masculinity to displace the crisis of mythic male heroism in post-Vietnam American culture. The gendered character of this crisis is apparent throughout both filmic and literary narratives about the war. Comber and O'Brien (1988) argue that "[t]he anxiety about what it means to be a hero slides into an anxiety about what it is to be a man. A threatened and deeply troubled masculinity . . . is . . . a recurrent feature of Vietnam films . . ." (p. 255). Significantly, post-Vietnam war films articulate a fear "that American manhood, weakened by the women's movement, [is] no longer adequate to the demands of a war" (p. 255; see also Jeffords, 1989).

Perhaps no one visual and discursive motif better illustrates the crisis for American masculinity in these films than the deeply conflicted deployment

of the gun as icon of mythic American might. As Conlon (1990) observes, post-Vietnam films “question what self—if any—is left to the male once the armored tower, ‘top gun’ self has failed.” The instruments of war – most specifically the gun – have been associated with moral authority and imperialist expansion (e.g., Bates, 1996; Doherty, 1988/1989; Rushing & Frentz, 1995). And in American popular cinema, reasons for going to war typically have been represented as morally justified causes (e.g., *Sergeant York*, 1941; *The Alamo*, 1960; *The Longest Day*, 1962). In cinematic stories about “the Nam,” however, structured relations among the male soldier, his gun, moral authority and victory are challenged.

First and most common, the gun is figured as an instrument of murder in the war zone. For example, the massacre of unarmed Vietnamese men and women is one of the pivotal scenes in *Apocalypse Now*. Reading the scene as iconic, a *Newsweek* reviewer at the 1979 Cannes Film Festival wrote about the “echo of My Lai” in Coppola’s work (Michener, 1979, p. 100). Similarly, in *Platoon* and *Casualties of War*, angry American soldiers shoot to death unarmed Vietnamese peasants in retaliation for the deaths of their comrades (see McMahan, 1994). In *Coming Home*, a suicidal American combat veteran makes reference to atrocities committed by his comrades “who . . . have exploded with sadistic violence across the native population” (Conlon, 1990).

In a second motif, the gun is figured as a metaphor of American self-destructiveness and violence. For Cimino, the visual metaphor of Russian roulette signifies the destructiveness of the Vietnam War for white American males (Burke, 1992). De Palma and Kubrick reproduce and explore phallic struc-

tural alignments between the rifle and the penis in American military practices. In both films, young American combat soldiers seek “to become their rifle[s] – hard, precise, and ready to inflict death without feeling any remorse” (Bates, 1996, pp. 141-42).⁹ In *Coming Home* and *Heaven and Earth*, maladjusted veterans characterized as “gun-crazy wreck[s]” threaten to kill their wives with military rifles (Johnson, 1994, p. B1).

Third and finally, the gun is explicitly eroticized. In *Apocalypse Now*, for example, “a gunhumping dance” (Kroll, 1979, p. 57) performed by Playboy Bunnies at a USO show causes a riot. However, not all instances of sexualization are violent or connected to the degradation of the feminine or women. Stone’s evocation of homosocial bonding between two soldiers in *Platoon* via the practice of “shot gunning” marijuana smoke subverts the legitimate uses of the gun, while at the same time illustrating “the primacy of the bonds between men” (Jeffords, 1989, p. 99). The scene emphasizes multi-ethnic and racial tranquility among combat soldiers, as they share drugs and dance together. The emotional and physical intimacy of the scene suggests that men will risk their lives for each other, if not for the nation. Playful and artfully mis-matched editing choices open the scene for homoerotic reading; in two shots, the gun barrel rises vertically, hard and erect, from the bottom of the frame, though the prior shots of the gun position the barrel horizontally and mid-frame. A related reading of the scene supports Jeffords’ argument that “[t]he goal of these theatrical pieces is to reestablish the collective bonds of masculinity that exclude any need for women” (p. 72).

To popular and academic critics,

then, post-Vietnam film conventions reveal disillusionment with the heroic and celebratory representational practices of earlier Hollywood war films. The heroic warrior transforms into traumatized, damaged masculinity. The ubiquitous presence of whiteness transforms into a “fantasy of racial harmony” among men, obscuring race and gender antagonisms at home and American chauvinism abroad. In the cinematic past, warriors left the nation to defend “home”; their victorious return mitigated the traumas they may have borne, and it eased their reintegration. These warriors may have left “home,” but “home” never left them. By contrast, in “the Nam,” “home” transformed into “the world” (e.g., Englehardt, 1995). To be in “the Nam” was to have left “the world.” To endure and survive “the Nam” was to have absorbed the traumatizing ruptures, disjunctions, and discontinuities with “home.” The connections between the world of “home” and the world of the warrior were severed.

Spielberg's Challenge: Imag(in)ing The Cure

Return, oh faithless sons, I will heal your faithlessness. (Jeremiah 3:22)

Faced with contemporary audience familiarity with post-Vietnam cinematic conventions, how can one compose a narrative that leads us “home”? The challenges are imposing, and as I discussed earlier, Spielberg acknowledged their scale. More to the point, Spielberg met those challenges (Hasian, 2001). In *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), Spielberg reunifies white, masculine identity. He (re)imagines a time before the social dislocations of mid-century movements for gender and racial equality. He restores moral authority to the

modern American nation-state. Perhaps most important, he confronts and engages cultural cynicism about the legitimacy of blood sacrifice to the nation. In fact, as I noted earlier, Spielberg views post-Vietnam cultural malaise as evidence of falling away from the covenant (i.e., “the greater good” is lost). The sin of moral failures in Vietnam must be atoned; thus for Spielberg, *Ryan* is a “morality play.” The call home to the foundational tenets of a mythic past is *Ryan's* charge.

Saving Pvt. Ryan re-directs the focus of American traumatic memory to the ethically usable pasts of World War II, what Englehardt (1995) calls “victory culture.” Released nearly a decade after the height of production and reception of popular films about the Vietnam war, and ten years after the dedication of Maya Lin’s postmodern memorial to the war dead, Spielberg’s film pays masterful tribute to the visual and verbal tropes of public American lamentation about Vietnam. In paying tribute, he transforms post-Vietnam representational logic from traumatic memory to commemorative recollection. This transformation can be tracked and examined by reading *Ryan* as a cinematic jeremiad.

In this recovery project, Spielberg posits memory itself as a precious and dwindling resource. He crafts representation of national ethos through the visual metaphor of witnessing. And he “cures” the ideological crises of “coming home” through appropriation of the feminine and erasure of race conflicts in American history. To read *Ryan* as jeremiad, I look for resonances of conventional rhetorical forms in cinematic translation. In this case, I look for evidence that the American warrior can “see” from a position of moral authority, that heroic national vision

has been restored. Through identification with the prophet's sight, audiences too may look at warfare from a position of moral authority. As cinematic jeremiad *Ryan* offers the audience a mirror image of possibilities for restored democratic ethos.

You Must Remember This: Our (White) Fathers Saved the World

Walter Benjamin (1968) once wrote that "[t]o articulate the past historically . . . means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger" (p. 255). For Spielberg, the moment of danger is contemporary cultural amnesia about a mythic America where the covenant between warrior and democratic state was honored and honorable, where Americans performed a sacred mission to save democracy and European Jewry (see Ehrenhaus, 2001), and where American national identity was unified and uncontested (see Hasian, 2001). *Saving Pvt. Ryan* offers redemption from the Vietnam syndrome through re-invention of a pre-Vietnam and pre-nuclear American democratic ethos – unshaken by foreign and domestic policy disasters or the uniquely American identity politics that emerged out of the "civil" wars of race, gender, and sexuality.

Yet, Spielberg never quibbles with the post-Vietnam legacy that war is hell for American white men; in fact, he frames his story *as* traumatic memory. Whereas memory work was a troubling subtextual theme in the films of Coppola, Cimino, Kubrick, Stone and DePalma, memory is foregrounded as *the* central visual and narrative theme in *Saving Pvt. Ryan*. The film begins and ends with visual tropes of the traumatic memories of Ryan, a white male American survivor, trig-

gered by his pilgrimage to the United States military cemetery at Normandy. When he locates the grave of Captain John Miller, the man responsible for saving his life, Ryan literally falls to his knees with the pain of recollection. And from there – on his knees in anguish – he recollects¹⁰ the horrific landing at Omaha Beach and the haunting overlay of the dying words of John Miller to the young Ryan: "*James, earn it; earn this.*"

The paucity of Tom Hank's dramatic concluding speech stands in stark contrast to Stone's self-conscious closing monologue in *Platoon* or the rambling lament of Col. Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*. After Capt. Miller gasps these words, and dies, the camera pulls back respectfully from his body; through a series of reverse shots, Miller's three surviving men grieve over his body. The narrative then loops back to the point of origin, to the now senior citizen, James Francis Ryan, who stands weeping amid the rows of trim white crosses. In a liminal encounter, he tells Miller, "I've tried to live my life the best I could." He implores his bewildered spouse, "Tell me I'm a good man." The scene dissolves into a translucent overlay of the American flag. This brief tribute makes compelling sense in the context of the story that has been told. Five of eight main characters have died – brutally – in service to their country. Three remain alive to shoulder the responsibility of *commemorating* the war as a covenant of faith in democratic idealism. In the context of the film narrative, this faith has been forged at considerable cost. Pvt. Ryan has learned of the many American lives expended to save his own. Cpl. Upham has experienced the devastating collapse of his Emersonian idealism about war and the rules of fair play.

The most cynical character in the ensemble cast, Pvt. Reiben, has been moved by the courage and selflessness of his comrades to abandon cynicism and embrace the wrenching necessity of human sacrifice for the greater good. In contrast to post-Vietnam cinema, *Ryan* offers the homily “war is hell, but necessary and even heroic hell” (“War,” 1998, p. 70). Unlike post-Vietnam cinematic veterans, redemption of trauma for the survivors of *Ryan* is possible through performed identification with American national ethos, through faith forged within the context of male military duty.

The narrative looping in *Ryan* strategically reconstructs the confessional and mortification rituals so characteristic of the earlier films. Their confessional motifs suggested that there were terrible things about war that the civilian audience did not know. Their mortification motifs suggested that the survivors grappled with crippling anxiety about the actions of the United States in entering and exiting the war. Spielberg integrates these moments of crisis into his story, but does not privilege them as primary themes.¹¹ Rather, he relegates these visual tropes of crisis to scene, thereby reviving the possibility of constructing (rather than *deconstructing*) national identity through memory work. Stephen Ambrose (1998), historical consultant to Spielberg on *Saving Pvt. Ryan*, articulates succinctly the commemorative logic of the film.

One of the unique things about war is the way it thrusts ultimate responsibility onto the very young. In World War II, on the American side, the kids accepted it, endured and prevailed. They were the sons of democracy, and they saved democracy. We owe them a debt we can never repay. (p. 59)

In contrast to the surviving characters in the post-Vietnam cinema, the older Ryan’s trauma stems from fear of *forgetting* a unified national purpose, paid for in blood and absolved through noble outcome. Visual tropes of trauma that derive from the Vietnam syndrome (moral uncertainty, imperialist madness, senseless sacrifice, troubled masculinity) recede into the background (the immediate past); previously disabled icons of national identity lost to the syndrome (the flag, honorable military service, military history, war in the service of democracy) move forward to diegetic and visual prominence in the story (the present). In *Ryan*, memory work has become commemorative, rather than confessional. Under Spielberg’s direction, the cinematic veteran develops heroic vision; he can, therefore, once again function oxymoronically (Ritter, 1980) to wed ideas of national progress to an idealized past. One reviewer of *Ryan* put it very succinctly: “[Spielberg’s] view of tradition is one that leaves the present infinitely wanting” (Goldstein, 1999, p. 4). I shall return to this point later in my discussion of *Ryan*’s gender and race composition.

The Post-Vietnam Cinematic Gaze and Relations of Looking in Ryan

Spielberg’s film illustrates that traumatic memory need not interfere with the commemorative functions of jeremiadic logic. *Ryan* shows us that remembrance of trauma can be sacred and beautiful, like a “patriotic hymnal” (Carson, 1999, p. 70) about “the glory of military heroism” (Zinn, 1998, p. 38) that stands as a “solemn memorial” (Doherty, 1998, p. 68) to American national ethos. But how does Spielberg engage the paradox of realism con-

structed by post-Vietnam cinema? (Or does he?) *Commentary* critic Christopher Caldwell (1998) claims that one question motivates most published responses to the film: "Is *Saving Private Ryan* all-American or cynical, pro-war or anti-war?" (p. 48). For Caldwell and others, the realism in *Ryan* poses a genuine conundrum (see Cohen, 1998/1999). How can an artist represent the brutalities of war – necessary for depicting the true measure of hardships endured – without simultaneously condemning war as barbaric? "Realism," says Caldwell, "inevitably makes war itself abhorrent" (p. 50). Ultimately, Caldwell does not object to *Ryan*'s "unprecedented" realism. Rather, he objects to a discursive paucity of what he calls "public values" or "reasons why the war is being fought" (p. 50).

Indeed, one of the more striking features of Spielberg's work in this film is the way he privileges vision over utterance, as borne out in the criticisms of Caldwell and other commentators (e.g., Edwards, 1998). These reviewers express disappointment that explicit utterance of key ideological positions is missing in the film (see Ehrenhaus, 2001). In Spielberg's cinematic sermon, however, the prophet's vision frequently is more eloquent and compelling than his speech; what he sees is more often the point of the story than what he says. Marita Sturken (1997b) explains, "[p]hotographs and images from television and film build on the traditions of lithography, historical drama, and the historical novel in retelling the past, but the cultural value of the camera image as evidence of the real shifts this reenactment into new territory of verisimilitude . . ." (p. 42). Further complicating the matter, Spielberg draws attention to the power of realism in this film by drawing atten-

tion to the mode of production. The camera lens itself is made visible (through splattered blood prop) during the highly touted beach-landing scene at the beginning of the film. The viewer is reminded of the camera's presence, even as s/he is subjectively positioned within the terrifying action of the story.

Spielberg's manipulation of realism operates as a rhetorical strategy for displacing the primacy of post-Vietnam traumatic memory in the national metanarrative. In order to call the nation home to heroic national identity, Spielberg needs to overcome the rhetorical constraints on homecoming posed by his cinematic predecessors. As noted earlier, Spielberg acknowledges post-Vietnam war cinema as an implied audience for *any* contemporary war film. But, he seems to understand that looking at horror, in and of itself, may not be the problem. Rather, it is a question of whether one can look at horror from a perspective of moral authority or indifference (see Sontag, 1973). In the lingering shadow of Vietnam, can American audiences be persuaded to look at the ugliness and carnage of war as a sacrament to freedom? Perhaps, but only if established relations of looking in post-Vietnam cinema are challenged successfully. Many of *Ryan*'s reviewers accept Spielberg's invitation to re-imagine heroic vision. Embracing the moral authority offered by the film, the commentator for *American Heritage* gushes:

Saving Private Ryan has illuminated in the most vivid way just how much of a debt those of us who were born in the sunny decades after the war owe the people who paid with their lives to buy us that sunshine. (Snow, 1998, p. 9)

Refusing the invitation, a reviewer for *Cineaste* critiques both *Ryan* and the cinematic apparatus:

The guilty secret here is that far from being horrifying and repulsive, the stunning spectacle of sight and sound is a joy to behold and harken to from a theater seat, pure cinema at its most hypnotic and intense. Godard is right: war on screen is always exhilarating. (Doherty, 1998, p. 69)

Writing about his own combat experiences in Vietnam almost a decade before *Ryan's* release, Tim O'Brien (1990) describes the visual primacy of war aesthetics:

It can be argued . . . that war is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty. For all its horror, you can't help but gape at the awful majesty of combat . . . It fills the eye. It commands you. You hate it, yes, but your eyes do not . . . (p. 87)

Taken together, these comments rebut Caldwell's argument that realism *necessarily* renders war abhorrent. For the purposes of this study, I want to illustrate how *Ryan's* visual primacy enables the formal features of the jeremiad, how *Ryan* invites reconnection to a mythic American past through cinematic performances of "witnessing."

Spielberg's call to commemorate (and thus to "come home") in *Ryan* is rhetorically constructed through the visual metaphor of witnessing. The key visual tropes in this film are constructed through various acts of witnessing the *unspeakable* carnage of war: fatal intersections of human technologies and bodies; flagrant American violations of rules of engagement; military practices which are **F**(ucked) **U**(p) **B**(eyond) **A**(ll) **R**(ecognition); compassionate euthanasia in the field; and, the received wisdom that young soldiers frequently die calling for their mothers. But two parallel scenes at the beginning and the end of the interior narrative, both from Captain Miller's subjective point of view, are fundamen-

tal to constructing the narrative logic of witnessing; this logic shifts the grounds of memory work from perennial trauma to commemorative practice, enabling the possibilities for jeremiadic appeals to the past. In the beach landing scene, slow motion and sound distortion signify that Captain Miller is momentarily stunned and deafened by mortar concussion. Within a sixty-second framework of temporal and acoustical distortion, Spielberg uses the subjective camera to draw the viewing audience into Miller's nightmare. The long shot, the jump cut and acoustical distortion signify shocked detachment (Doherty, 1998; Jameson, 1998); all around us, we see (but cannot hear) men dying – in *unspeakably* horrible ways. Near the end of the sixty-second temporal and space rupture, in an extreme close-up, John Miller looks directly into the camera, thereby addressing the viewing audience with a sustained gaze of mute horror.

Similar visual and auditory composition is repeated at the end of the interior story, where once again, Miller is momentarily stunned by artillery concussion. This time, through Miller's eyes, we witness Pvt. Ryan's hysteria as he sits helplessly in the middle of a "last stand" battle, screaming in shock and terror. Again, Miller gazes directly into the camera. Thus, at the beginning and at the end of the war epic, the audience is positioned to be made aware, as historian Susan Crane (1997) puts it, of "receiving another's testimony" (p. 1382). The interior loop of visual witnessing from Miller's perspective (the past) matches the exterior loop of witnessing from Ryan's perspective (the present). This interpellation of war trauma offers the viewer vicarious access to the past, providing "not only information about the past, but appro-

priate emotional orientations to it" (Schudson, 1989, p. 111). Thus, the matching exterior and interior narrative loops create a visual hermeneutic unity that appeals to a heroic national purpose.

The primary "witness" in *Ryan*, Captain Miller, is the embodied vehicle for reintegrating what Bercovitch sees as the central tension of the American jeremiad: any problem can be explained or subordinated to "the progressive upward reach of the nation's destiny" (Huggins, 1991, p. 25). While all of the main characters bear witness in the course of the story, John Miller is the moral epicenter of the narrative, the embodiment of decency and moral restraint in the midst of madness (e.g., Carson, 1999; Cohen, 1998/1999; Doherty, 1998). Miller can also be read as embodied logic of the jeremiad, "those ideals and attributes of character to which Americans as a chosen people owed their immediate successes and ultimate salvation" (Carpenter, 1978, p. 108). That is to say, Miller displays the traits of the idealized American in jeremiadic logic: "dedication, self-sacrifice, competition, personal responsibility, conscience, self-confidence, hard work, and respect for law and order" (Johannesen, 1985, p. 164). Whereas post-Vietnam cinematic veterans are angry, disillusioned, and crippled by remorse, John Miller offers the possibility of moral authority, that conduit for homecoming so damaged by the legacy of Vietnam (Morris and Ehrenhaus, 1990). Highlighting the possibilities for "coming home" to the mythic past, one conservative commentator praised *Ryan* as "refreshingly free of irony after a long period in which Vietnam-era cynicism held sway" (Caldwell, 1998, p. 48). This comment, and the commercial success of *Ryan*,

suggests that traumatic memory of the Vietnam War can be understood as a "falling away" from mythic legacies of national greatness. Properly positioned, even war-wary post-Vietnam audiences can embrace earnest declarations of duty and sacrifice, and *perform* acts of bearing witness to the legacy of the Greatest Generation (see Hasian, 2001; Sturken, 1997a, b).

Spielberg's camera frequently positions the viewing audience to look with, as well as at, the prophets of homecoming. This stands in contrast to the cinematic gaze of the seventies and eighties (Limon, 1994).¹² Post-Vietnam filmmakers, especially Stone, tend to patronize viewing audiences (see Sturken, 1997a). For example, each of Stone's Vietnam films structurally positions audiences as "civilian" or "feminine" (and thus as naive, uninitiated, or duplicitous). The viewer is presumed to be unenlightened about the "realities" of war (see Sturken, 1997a). By contrast, Spielberg sutures viewers into his story visually, calling upon them to witness *with* the prophets. This sort of constructed immediacy is immensely powerful. As Crane (1997) notes, "[w]itnessing is a lived experience; it is an awareness of receiving another's testimony, and of having the impact of that experience remain as part of one's historical knowledge" (p. 1382). Significantly, because we have looked at the horrors of war *through* the eyes of Miller and his men, we have looked *with* moral authority. Through *Ryan's* constructed gaze, we come home to "the consolation of a seemingly pure time, when we shared a common enemy and a set of beliefs that united us . . ." (Goldstein, 1999, p. 44). Through these techniques, we (the audience) are positioned within the jeremiad.

Spielberg uses cinema to construct a

public site for memory work about American history. He works to position his audience as agents *within* the story of history. He casts World War II as a shining moment in the historical flow of an emergent national story; his narrative invites viewers to perform the continuation of that national story. Of critical importance, and in contrast to the post-Vietnam films that contextualize *Saving Private Ryan*, the viewer, not the storyteller, is empowered to determine how the national saga will unfold; we, the viewers, are asked to bear witness, and to be guided by our own testimony.

By contrast, the post-Vietnam gaze often effaced civilian viewers because the stories were about personal trauma and ritualized grieving for having borne the sins of the fathers. There is little hermeneutic space for viewer participation in the process of national identity, both because the legitimacy of national identity is rendered suspect and because the Vietnam veteran is the only legitimate author of his war story (see Hansen, et al., 1992; Limon, 1994, pp. 5-6). But in Spielberg's story, the possibility of *our* redemption (like Ryan's) lies in our willingness to commemorate a democratic ethos that is etched in human blood and that withstands the inevitable imperfections of the human condition. Captain Miller restores the possibility of "authorized" looking via cinematic spectacle. Through Miller, Spielberg re-directs the rhetorical forcefulness of realism from disillusionment to reillusionment (Ehrenhaus, 2000). One reviewer explains this re-direction in terms consistent with the jeremiad: "All that bloodshed, all that pain, all those torn limbs and exposed intestines will not deter a brave people from going to war. They just

need to believe that the cause is just" (Zinn, 1998, p. 38).

Coming (All the Way) Home

In order for Spielberg's film to shift the assumptive grounds of public imagination from perennial crisis to commemorative practice, his story needs to modify at least two inter-related entailments of the post-Vietnam crisis; these modifications reinvigorate the ideological potency of the jeremiad. First, the disgruntled private citizen pressed into military duty must be reimagined as an honorable and heroic public servant (citizen-soldier). And second, the gun as signifier of lethal force must be re-sacrilized as a legitimate instrument of the state. Neither of these entailments can be addressed effectively unless the malaise of troubled masculinity represented in post-Vietnam cinema can be cured. Spielberg engages the problem through two strategies. He imagines non-male, non-white citizens as absent presences in the national metanarrative, and he appropriates feminist critiques of conventional masculinity.

Re-imagining the soldier-citizen. Because Spielberg acknowledges the Vietnam War as implied audience, he pays tribute to the anguish and anxieties articulated through post-Vietnam cinema. He offers an unflinching restatement of the "cowardice and criminality" (Caldwell, 1998, p. 49) revealed in those political laments. Like his predecessors, he atones for the lapses of Vietnam while celebrating American bravura. However, Spielberg's cinematic jeremiad works to re-illusion traditional icons of unified national purpose discredited by post-Vietnam stories – icons of nationalism (e.g., the American flag), revered political patri-

archs (e.g., Abraham Lincoln), and the defense of sacred purpose through lethal force (e.g., the gun, “the Alamo”; see Doherty, 1998). Through complex character interactions with Captain Miller, Spielberg works on the primary tensions that traumatized Vietnam veterans and helped to fragment American national identity in the post-Vietnam years. Through Miller, the other key male characters witness and ultimately embrace a reconstituted American democratic ethos embedded in the postmodern narrative premise of “both/and.”¹³ The “both/and” logic is imperative for overcoming the masculine anxieties of post-Vietnam cinema and for sanitizing the historical race and gender practices of the Greatest Generation.

Problematic white masculinity recedes in *Ryan*. We still see cinematic traces of the WWII ethnically integrated combat unit (see Doherty, 1998, 1988/1989; Goldstein, 1999; Hasian, 2001; Jameson, 1998) that also appeared in post-Vietnam cinema. And, like pre- and post-Vietnam combat films, white American male interests still drive the narrative. What’s new in *Ryan*, however, is a “postmodern mix-and-match” (Goldstein, 1999, p. 44) of gender nostalgia and post-feminism, constituted through John Miller and his relations with his men. While I agree with commentators who read Miller as “beloved WASP commander” (Goldstein, 1999, p. 47) or “idealized everyman leader” (Doherty, 1998, p. 70), I argue that he is more than a familiar face in the “multiethnic sampling of homo americanus” (Doherty, 1998, p. 70). My critique of the film grounds his heroism and leadership in American cultural post-feminism. In this regard, Miller is an ideologically innovative configuration of masculin-

ity within the conventions of combat cinema.

Modleski (1991) identifies three characteristics of post-feminism: (1) the re-centering of male interests; (2) presumptive heterosexuality; and (3) assumptions of formal equality between men and women (p. 6). Arguably, the first two characteristics also operate in post-Vietnam cinema, as evidenced in critical reception of those films. But there is little evidence that male characters have enlightened or feminist views of gender that might support commitments to equitable gender relations at home. And it is precisely in this regard that Miller stands in striking contrast to the men in his command. In these points of contrast we see the sensitive new male of post-feminism – at once conventionally masculine in ability and bravery, yet in sync with feminist critiques of masculine institutions of power. Moreover, this trope of gendered integration works to reconcile generational tensions between Greatest Generation and Baby Boomer masculinities (see Doherty, 1998; Goldstein 1999). In subsequent sections, I will illustrate how Miller and his men appropriate feminism and femininity.

Captain Miller embodies post-Vietnam anxieties in the field (the shaking hand, the dazed stare), yet benefits from post-post-Vietnam ethical vision. He is at once afraid, burdened, fatigued – he weeps from sheer exhaustion and grief. Yet, he is disciplined, resourceful, responsible (Edwards, 1998). He is both courageous and compassionate, a warrior dedicated to his duty, and yet disdainful of romantic idealizations of war (Cohen, 1998/1999). He both sees the remarkable ineptitude of American military command hierarchies and continues doggedly to affirm that social

order and perform his role as soldier. In the Burkean sense, he is without guilt. He sees American soldiers violate military codes of conduct, yet offers no verbal comment. When provoked, he violates no ethical boundary. He is both a committed, monogamous heterosexual, and utterly at ease with the hetero- and homoerotic repartee of the men in his command. He teaches high school English literature, and he is a seasoned warrior. His men speak the cinematic *patois* of combat verisimilitude; Captain Miller is fluent in the speech practices of the combat soldier, even as he is renowned for his silences and restraint.

Perhaps most important, when threatened with mutiny by an insubordinate young soldier, Miller relies upon conventionally masculine leadership *and* feminized conversational style to thwart a rebellion *and* perform honorable conduct on the field of battle. In a key scene Miller releases a German prisoner of war rather than execute him. Mutiny erupts among the American soldiers, and just as they are about to “frag” each other, Miller startles them with a speech about his “home town” identity and the burdens of war:

I'm a school teacher. I teach English composition, in this little town [in] Pennsylvania. In the last eleven years, I've been at Thomas Alva Edison High School. I coach the baseball team in springtime So, I guess I've changed Sometimes I wonder if I've changed so much my wife is even going to recognize me And [I wonder] how I'll ever be able to tell her about days like today.

Miller concludes his speech with gestures of compromise and reconciliation. His final words to the rebellious soldiers in his command establish Miller's connection with an idealized ethical national identity, re-visioning hon-

orable military conduct: “Know that every man I kill, the farther away from home I feel.”

In combat or war cinema, we expect to encounter speeches of inspiration (e.g., *Sergeant York*, *The Alamo*) or threat (e.g., *Platoon* or *Causalities of War*) designed to overcome resistance (see Belton, 1994). As viewers, we recognize the conventionally characterized “leader” by his ability to inspire or intimidate men into cooperation. To say the least, speeches of personal self-disclosure, self-reflection and compromise – in response to rebellion – fall outside generic expectations.¹⁴ Significantly, under John Miller's re-gendered style of leadership, the mission to save Pvt. Ryan reunites the significance of following orders (frequently discredited in post-Vietnam cinema) with moral human agency in the midst of chaos, terror, and obscenity. Noting the rhetorical forcefulness of the scene, one film reviewer comments:

In the end, their men follow the Millers of this world not simply because of The Cause or even formal discipline and mere habit, but because of a *moral authority* rooted in competence and character. (Cohen, 1998/1999, emphasis added)

John Miller “saved democracy,” to use Ambrose's phrase, by asking audiences to re-imagine a good (white) American (man) in combat conditions, who does his duty compassionately and morally. Because Miller embodies the integrated experience, vision and trauma of the pre- and post-Vietnam warrior, he is at once private citizen and public servant, the ideal citizen-soldier of the jeremiad. Through a post-feminist masculinity, Miller recoups moral authority and rehabilitates discredited white masculinity, thereby offering a cure for the malaise of post-Vietnam masculinities.

Resacrilizing the gun. As previously illustrated, cinematic stories about “the Nam” feature numerous scenes where guns are used both in violation of, and independently of, high moral purpose; these uses destabilize the myth that warfare *can* be guided by moral purpose. In striking contrast to expressions of moral dis-ease or subversive pleasure in post-Vietnam cinema, Spielberg’s sermon works to reunite the gun with high moral national purpose. He does this primarily through visual and discursive characterization of an American sharpshooter (see Jameson, 1998). Commenting sarcastically on the historical revisionism of this characterization, a reviewer for *Esquire Magazine* (ironically, the historical purveyor of white masculine culture), remarks:

In a bygone movie era, Barry Pepper’s divinely inspired, Scripture-quoting sharpshooter would have been played as a psycho—for satiric purposes in the sixties, and just for yuks after that. Spielberg turned him back into Sergeant York, and his feats make the real one’s [sic] look like tiddly-winks. (Carson, 1999, p. 74)

Pvt. Jackson is existentially and aesthetically differentiated from the other male soldiers in the unit. In the context of the narrative, he is the only character who is able to sleep. His comrades, who are too exhausted and traumatized to rest, remark with bemusement and some envy that Jackson sleeps because his “conscience is clear.” He is the only soldier in the group of eight who does not participate in sexualized conversational banter as a means of stress reduction. Jackson’s blonde, neat, clean-shaven good looks contrast sharply with the dark, ruffled, grubby appearance of his comrades. Even his wounds from a firefight are largely invisible to the viewing audience. Significantly, Jackson is the only main charac-

ter who dies heroically in a sacred place, a church tower. In Jackson’s characterization, there is no visible or discursive trace of post-Vietnam moral anxiety about using guns on behalf of the nation. Like Miller, Jackson is utterly at ease with the social order and his place in it; he, too, is without guilt.

Spielberg re-sacrilizes the gun as signifier of lethal force through visual and discursive alignments of sacred purpose. The first images of Jackson in the film associate him with religious faith. As Jackson and other men prepare to disembark from the deadly transport boats, Jackson kisses a crucifix and silently mouths a prayer. One reviewer refers to him as a “Sergeant York Type from Fundamentalist country” and a “prayerful sharpshooter” (Jameson, 1998). Each of the three times he is given a direct order to use his skill as a sniper, the Americans are outmatched by the Germans, who have more men, more firepower, and better strategic positions. Each time Jackson prepares himself to kill German soldiers, he prays a prayer evocative of the Old Testament Psalms where Jehovah’s chosen people sought divine intervention in contests of lethal force:

Be not thou far from me, oh Lord.

Oh my strength, haste thee to help me.

*Oh my god, I trust in thee, let me not be ashamed; let not my enemies triumph over me.*¹⁵

Visual composition of Jackson’s prowess as a sniper consists of low angle, tight shots of his face, hands, and rifle, signifying the strength and moral superiority of the character. Each time Jackson performs his mission, the audience is sutured into his viewpoint; first we see the establishing shot of Jackson looking through his scope, and then the subjective camera positions us to look *with* Jackson through the scope.

We see that Jackson's kills are "clean"; his shots are precise, his enemies die instantly, though not bloodlessly. Paul Virilo (1989) explains that "[t]he act of taking aim is a geometrification of looking," an imaginary and idealized extension of ocular perception (p. 2). Looking through Jackson's "eye of the mind" (Bhabha, 1995, p. 59), viewers witness a restored American vision of righteous destruction. The surgical shots (both gun and camera) work to restore memory of war as an honorable contest of skill and chance; what Jackson does with his gun is both fair and admirable within the established rules of war (see Fussell, 1975; Keegan, 1999). Moreover, because Jackson kills with such finesse and grace in the midst of mass carnage, his use of the gun is available for aesthetic interpretation. By transforming the act of killing into an art form, traumatic memory of moral uncertainty, atrocity, and defeat is displaced in favor of commemorative recollection of righteous retribution, of victory. Rhetorical displacement of trauma is possible, in part, because Jackson's scopic gun works metaphorically to re-center American moral authority in modern warfare. As Homi Bhabha reminds us, the "central metaphor for rational, national identification is the scopic regime;" western man *is* the center of his universe (p. 59). He thinks (or speaks or shoots); therefore, he is. Jackson's graceful performance under life-or-death pressure restores legitimacy to mythic images of American military might and a *shared* vision of national destiny.

Absent presence. Miller and Jackson re-emerge in the cinematic national metanarrative as material memories of moral national victory, salient icons of an idealized past. However, their presence in the narrative is contextualized

through selective cultural amnesia: Women return to the margins of the nation story;¹⁶ citizens of color disappear altogether.¹⁷ As *The Village Voice* observes, *Ryan* evokes a "world where (white) men were men and everyone else stayed out of sight" (Goldstein, 1999, p. 47). Such notable absences in the film narrative merit careful scrutiny. Sociologist Elizabeth Jelin (1998) argues that "[t]o forget . . . does not imply a void or a vacuum. [Rather], it is the *presence of the absence*, the representation of what was once there and no longer is, the representation of something that has been erased, silenced or denied" (emphasis added).

In *Saving Pvt. Ryan*, women assume the positions consistent with conventional historical representation: the sexual object, the warrior's *raison d'être* (why he fights), the helper, and the reproducing mother (Honey, 1984; Rupp, 1978). Femininity is strategically sexualized in the narrative in order to contain homoerotic possibilities, a generic convention in American war narratives (e.g., Belton, 1994, pp. 164-183). Sprinkled throughout the story are interludes and digressions where members of the all-male unit tell erotic stories about women and girls in order to establish a heteronormative boundary in the all-male military units. Pvt. Ryan, for example, gets in touch with his grief over his dead brothers by recalling a ribald incident involving all three brothers and illicit sex with an (absent) "ugly" young woman in a rustic hayloft. Captain John Miller, on the other hand, never joins his men in these ritualized heterosexual fantasies; thoughts or feelings about his spouse are private, off limits to his men, and to the viewing/listening audience. Yet, "she" is why he fights. He states explicitly in the near-mutiny scene that his

only reason for continuing the (dubious) mission is so that he can go home to his wife:

Ryan. I don't know anything about Ryan. I don't care. The man means nothing to me, he's just a name. But if, you know, if . . . finding [Ryan] so he can go home, if that earns me the right to get back to my wife, well then, then that's my mission.

As befits a conventional democratic hero, Miller figures his (absent) wife as the idealized image of peace, contentment and sensual pleasure. He likes to watch her prune the rose bushes. It is easy to imagine Mrs. Miller as a national treasure, since she stands in paradigmatic opposition to the debased object of Ryan's snickering contempt. Throughout the film, Spielberg invokes traditionally prescribed war roles for white American women – to (re)produce the sons of democracy and to help behind the scenes (e.g., Honey, 1984; Piehler, 1994; Rupp, 1978). The very premise of the film is predicated upon the sacrifices made by mothers to the nation state, as revealed when General Marshall insists that Pvt. Ryan be returned to his mother as her sole surviving son.¹⁸ To explain this decision to his all-male staff, the General reads aloud from a rare historical artifact, a letter of condolence written by Abraham Lincoln to a woman who lost five sons in the Civil War. In the letter, Lincoln memorializes the sacrifice made by this and many women to the cause of democracy:

I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine that would attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the republic they died to save. We pray that our heavenly father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement and leave only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must

be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

Near the end of the film, in the interior narrative loop, we hear (in voice-over) the letter General Marshall has written to Mrs. Ryan; there, Marshall quotes the last line from Lincoln's letter as the camera positions viewers to look over Pvt. Ryan's shoulder at the dead Captain Miller. As the face of the youthful Ryan morphs into the senior citizen, masculine blood sacrifice and feminine reproductive labor are re-united in commemorative celebration.

Although biological women recede into the margins of this war story, the feminine is prominently inscribed in and on the male characters. Jeffords and others (e.g., Bates, 1996; Wood, 1986) argue that appropriation of the feminine and displacement of women is a common strategy in post-Vietnam literature and cinema. Jeffords explains:

The apparent breaking of gender boundaries that occurs when men "occupy with ease, and without inhibition, the position of the female" is simultaneously a spectacle to distract from the reaffirmation of gender boundaries and a controlling of gender movement through the reinstatement of rational violence. In this way, the apparent occupation of the feminine position by the masculine is not seen as a challenge to constructions of gender but instead an appropriation of them. As Zoe Sofia phrases it, "masculinist production depend[s] upon the prior cannibalization of women, and the emulation of female qualities." Men do not *become* women in these narratives, they occupy them. (p. 105)

Modleski (1991) argues that "male feminization," where males are empowered at the expense of women, is a primary characteristic of post-feminism (p. 7). Male hegemony, she argues, "ultimately deal[s] with the threat

of female power by incorporating it" (p. 7). The *Village Voice* reads *Ryan* through the same lens. They observe that for males of the Baby Boomer generation, the film holds a special allure.

This yearning for a dangerous yet admirable past has a special weight for [those] who have had to temper their birthright of power over women. They may be willing, even eager, to shed this burdensome supremacy, but a residue of rue remains. (Goldstein, 1991, p. 47)

The male characters of *Ryan* occupy feminine spaces in several ways, but most prominent among them are the death scenes of key characters. The first casualty of the expedition to locate Private Ryan is Caparzo, who exposes himself to enemy fire by offering comfort to a small French girl. Mortally wounded, he bleeds to death while his anguished comrades look on helplessly, penned down by sniper fire. Marking the terrible (though noble) cost of Caparzo's desire to rescue children in a war zone, Miller snaps, "*That's* why we can't take children." The next gunshot casualty in the search for Pvt. Ryan is Wade, the "compassionate medic" (Doherty, 1998). His demise is the most visually complex of all the death scenes, and unusual for the levels of emotional intimacy shared among combat soldiers. After he is shot, Wade's comrades form a tight circle around his prone body, literally cradling him. The camera focuses on their hands and faces as they fumble to give medical aid, and in the face of Wade's certain death, offer emotional comfort with a lethal dose of morphine. By far the most unusually gendered death scene is that of Mellish, the Jewish American soldier. He is the only primary character "penetrated by a blade in a deadly *pas de deux* that plays like an

act of coitus" (Doherty, 1998, p. 70). Ehrenhaus (2001) reads this scene as represented "rape" of the Jew by German Nazism.

Arguably the most distinctive occupation of the feminine by a masculine character is Miller, who embodies a decidedly contemporary spectrum of emotions and perspectives for American men. This is never more convincingly performed than in the near-mutiny scene previously discussed. Members of Miller's unit react with rage and despair when he refuses permission to execute the German sniper that killed the unit's beloved medic. The scene builds inexorably to chaos and potential disaster – a familiar convention in post-Vietnam cinema. Unexpectedly, Miller breaks with genre expectations for this moment of hierarchical crisis in combat (Bates, 1996; Belton, 1994). He stuns his men into silence and cooperation through intimate self-disclosure; he tells his life story, explains his view of the war, and offers the mutineers transfers out of his command. Then he walks away and begins to bury the dead.

Spielberg's choice to privilege reflective speech over cinematic action in a highly charged moment of masculine confrontation is strategically important, especially when one considers the primacy of mute witnessing in the film. Even as the characteristically taciturn Miller reveals that "going home" to his wife is the highly conventional reason he fights, the unexpected act of conversational intimacy in the context of mutiny inscribes a feminine gendering upon and within his character. Especially in the conventions of action cinema, men move the narrative through action – not through conversation and disclosure (Tasker, 1994). Miller's feminization can be read in at least two

ways that restore legitimacy to masculine idealization of national identity and to the jeremiad.

The mutiny scene honors the conventions of post-Vietnam anxiety about moral purpose. Yet, the resolution of the crisis maintains the possibilities for recouping unified national purpose by the end of the narrative.¹⁹ The possibilities for moral authority in the scene stem from Miller's dedication to ethical principles of conduct, *and* from the emotional intimacy and generous options he offers rebellious men. Compared to post-Vietnam depictions of hegemonic masculinity in military training and combat, Miller's approach to aggressive confrontation instantiates Modleski's assertion: Masculinity *can* occupy feminine narrative space. In this manner, historical characterizations like John Miller can function to discredit the urgency of feminist critiques of past and present American gender practices, or to imply that contemporary feminist critique is obsolete.

The feminization of John Miller also serves to reinscribe democracy as feminine. Earlier, I noted that Miller's willing defense of democracy is instantiated in memories of his wife pruning roses. He fights for her (and thus, for democracy) and to return home to her; she is the absent presence who serves as the conduit home. However, in Miller's own death near the end of the interior narrative loop, he speaks *as* feminized democracy. His vulnerability as a mortally wounded soldier is the focus of the camera and the three surviving members of the unit. Miller's dying words to them (and to the witnessing audience) requires commemorative memory work: "Earn it, earn this." The camera lingers on Miller's lifeless body as the voice-over of a renowned military leader (Gen. Mar-

shall) reads the words of a mythic American president (Lincoln) to commemorate why (white) American men fight and die for their nation state. This discursively framed visual representation of sacrifice for noble purpose encapsulates a mythic American past. Moreover, as the camera lingers over the now-stilled hand tremor of Miller, anxieties of post-Vietnam memory are stilled.

Within this mythic framework, Democracy is whitened and feminized, constituted as an idealized ontological condition of perfection, ever needful of protective vigilance. There is no sense at all, within the visual and discursive logic of Spielberg's jeremiad, of Democracy as robust, as active and imperfect, or of how democracy might be practiced in a racially and ethnically diverse culture.²⁰ *Saving Private Ryan* takes us back to a time and "a nation where people of color were virtually missing from public life" (Goldstein, 1999, p. 47). When asked to account for those absences, Spielberg reportedly fell back on arguments of historical accuracy; that is, "blacks didn't fight in most of the great battles" (Goldstein, p. 47). Setting aside the factual claim of this statement (see Hasian, 2001; Morehouse, 2000; Motley, 1975; Piehler, 1995), it is perhaps sufficient to note the unintended irony of Spielberg's reply. Black presence in the United States Armed Forces, "except as stewards and support troops, would have been disruptive to the Greatest Generation" (Goldstein, p. 47), whose contributions as ideal Americans Spielberg asks us to commemorate.

What would happen to the "nation story" (Berlant, 1997) of World War II if absences in Spielberg's story were given presence? In other words, can American democracy be disarticu-

lated (Hall, 1982) as white male sacrifice, and rearticulated as an on-going set of performative practices where competing and contesting interests engage in discourses of power? No doubt, various American “pasts” would, as Benjamin observed, flash up as moments of “danger” for the mythic imagination. Imagine that “danger” in the form of a disclaimer at the end of Spielberg’s film, or Tom Hanks’s solicitation of funds on behalf of the proposed WWII memorial on the Washington Mall.

Legal gender discrimination continued largely undeterred for at least thirty years after the war. Legal apartheid for the descendents of American race slavery continued for at least twenty years after John Miller’s dramatic finale. African American service in the United States armed forces was contested during and after the Civil War; American armed forces remained racially segregated throughout World War II. Japanese American citizens spent the war in internment camps, even as some of their sons, brothers and husbands served the nation as soldiers. Although the United States Congress in 1924 finally recognized Native North Americans as citizens of the United States, Native Americans in Arizona and New Mexico still were ineligible to vote at the advent of World War II.²¹

By invoking the presence of these alternative experiences of the nation-state, we can see how *Ryan* suppresses the ruptures of race and gender politics in the story of American democracy and privileges a mythic dream of integrative social order. The final question explored by this essay is whether the jeremiad encourages ideologically conservative practices. Thus, I conclude with observations about the relationships among traumatic memory, national identity, and jeremiadic discourses in the public space.

Conclusion

Participation in the American national community frequently occurs through acts of spectatorship (Hasian, 2001; Sturken, 1997a, b). Popular film is a public site where matters of national identity, morality and historical representation are negotiated. The vividness of film, in general, and the intensely vivid depiction of combat in post-Vietnam popular film, in particular, speaks to the emergence of image as equally significant with lived experience as a source of meanings, understandings, and commitments (Sturken, 1997b). Cinematic soldiers and veterans produced through conventions of post-Vietnam cinema and literature express profound anxieties about war and American identity in ways that may have been too challenging for official formal discourses (Bodnar, 1992; Ehrenhaus, 1989), at least prior to “9/11.” As we have seen, post-Vietnam conventions of moral chaos and human devastation influenced Spielberg’s constructions of heroic national identity in *Ryan*, as well as subsequent critical and popular readings of the film. I have argued that Spielberg engages post-Vietnam conventions through a visual translation of the American secular jeremiad.

The question of whether or not the American jeremiad can facilitate social critique finds no unequivocal resolution in this study. Clearly, the focus on cinematic rather than oratorical address narrows the possibilities for generalization, even as I argue for the fluid movement between discourse and image. More important, the possibility of social critique through the jeremiad will always depend upon the optimism and hope with which one reads Gramsci. Bercovitch’s (1978) “containment thesis,” informed by his reading of

Gramsci, constructs the jeremiad as an inherently conservative rhetorical form, a perspective more evocative of Althusser than Gramsci. More recently, Bercovitch (1991, 1993) concedes the possibility of struggle in human sense making. “‘America’ [is] a symbolic field, continually influenced by intrinsic sources, and *sometimes changing through those influences*” (1991, p. 984, emphasis added). However, he adds, American hegemony “*characteristically absorb[s] and adapt[s]* [those influences] to its own distinctive patterns” (p. 984, emphasis added). It is not clear whether Bercovitch believes struggle is likely, or whether the outcomes of the struggle challenge the common sense of cultural taken-for-grantedness.

More expansive readings of Gramsci lead us elsewhere. Hall (1982), for example, theorizes hegemonic struggle as characterized by far greater uncertainty about outcomes, not as a “functional reproduction of the world in language, but . . . a social struggle – a struggle for mastery in discourse – over which kind of *social accenting* is to prevail and to win credibility” (p. 77, emphasis added). All of the films cited in this study articulate a crisis in American national identity, yet the interests of dominant Western subjectivity continue to drive the stories. The white male warrior laments sins of the nation, and then memorializes the locus of his trauma – an American national identity coalescing around differences and diversities that increasingly rupture mythologies of unified white masculine citizenship. *Ryan* articulates a longing for ideological consensus in the form of white masculine power (see Novak, cited in Johannesen, 1985).²² At the same time, as suggested by Caldwell’s review, *Ryan* raises a troubling question: Can *any* war be fought by

“rules of engagement” which do not belie the inevitability of war as chaotic, dehumanizing, and brutal? Comber and O’Brien (1988) observe that no matter how much “ideological work” popular film does to align historical experience with conservative agendas, “other disturbances surface” (p. 259). Hall’s perspective on hegemony suggests that historically conservative rhetorical forms and practices cannot always conceal contradictions and ruptures. Critics need to look for the *social accenting* constructed by and through these forms and practices. In *Ryan*, I find substantial evidence of the ideological potency of the conservative retrenchment of which Bercovitch warns. Yet, I also find the rupturing legacy of Vietnam, as evidenced through the production and reception contexts of *Ryan*. The crux of this cultural struggle to remember the past lies in the contradictions of Spielberg’s realism: The full measure of sacrifice requires a full measure of horror. The full measure of horror destabilizes ideological claims to “just war.”

In *Ryan*, Spielberg reconciles acknowledgement of post-Vietnam trauma with the longing for conditions and myths threatened *by* that trauma. Thus, guns and blood sacrifice are resacralized; conventional gender roles and race relations are reaffirmed. And yet, the instantiation of national identity in Captain John Miller is facilitated through a subtle manipulation of gender practices and race struggles that were, in fact, unimaginable at the advent of “the Vietnam syndrome,” much less during the “good war.” Mythic transcendence in *Ryan* effaces the historical struggles of female and non-Anglo American citizens; ironically, transcendence is made possible through the democratic ethos crafted *by* and

through that struggle (see Campbell, 1989; Condit & Lucaites, 1993; hooks, 1981). In *Ryan*, the disgraced ethos of white masculine heroism is rehabilitated through appropriation of the human rights ethos of the women's rights and civil rights struggle for parity in American democracy. In Miller we find the reconciliation of paradox that the jeremiad seeks; the reconstituted democratic ethos that Miller embodies is available for public imagination only through historical conditions that subvert the very stabilities Spielberg seeks to resacralize and reaffirm.

Post-Vietnam popular war films, bounded in this study by *Coming Home* and *Saving Private Ryan*, suggest an ongoing struggle that reveals "the bound-

aries of political consensus in the American audience" (Ritter, 1980, p. 166). War stories with narrative logics of moral certainty no longer characterize American national identity,²³ even as white masculinity remains the most potent icon of American civic virtue. Decades of political upheaval, social reform, and cultural critique have tempered reverence for the origin myths of the American national community. Yet, the struggle to de-couple white masculinity and civic virtue remains a primary goal for advocates of race and gender parity in American politics and culture. Bordo (1992) puts it well: "The Great White Father . . . just keeps on returning, even amidst the seeming 'ruptures' of postmodern culture." □

Notes

¹For evidence of the turning away from commemorative obligations by the official voices of the national community, see Ehrenhaus (1989). In this essay Ehrenhaus discusses two events relevant to official "forgetting": Gerald Ford's address to the nation as Saigon fell and the concealment of construction on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier for the Vietnam War.

²This subtitle is taken directly from Milton J. Bates's book, *The Wars We Took to Vietnam: Cultural Conflict and Storytelling*.

³In rhetorical studies, the jeremiad has been used to examine presidential acceptance speeches (Ritter, 1980), the rhetorical uses of calamity (Bormann, 1977), the character traits of idealized citizenship (Johannesen, 1985), the characteristics of embodied heroism (Carpenter, 1978), and the uses of the jeremiad by African-Americans (Jasinski, 1997b).

⁴Hasian (2001) considers these disputes evidence of polysemy in the film.

⁵In his study of Robert Kennedy's impromptu eulogy for Martin Luther King, Jr., Murphy concludes, "the jeremiad cannot serve as a vehicle for social criticism" (p. 404). In their study of King and the Vietnam War, Dionisopoulos, et al., conclude that King rejected "the traditional form of American dissent" (p. 98) by questioning rather than adhering to traditional American values.

⁶Rejecting what he views as a dualistic conceptualization of jeremiadic logic (1997b, p. 89), Jasinski argues that King "craft[ed] a radical jeremiad . . . by imbricating the jeremiad" with the idiom of anti-war rhetoric (1999b, p. 5).

⁷In my efforts to extend the conversation, I bring together postmodern conceptualizations of "inventive practice" (e.g. Jasinski, 1997a; McGee, 1990) with "cultural struggle" (e.g., Hall, 1982; 1992).

⁸It is not my aim to argue for or against attempts to standardize study of these films. Rather, I review these discussions of genre as a way of illustrating the public interpretive frame for the films. For a useful discussion of film genre work, and its relevance to study of Vietnam War cinema, see Whillock, 1988.

⁹In *Casualties of War*, an American squad leader instructs his men on the military philosophy of gang rape. Clutching his rifle in one hand, and his penis in the other, he chants an inversion of a familiar cadence song: "This is a weapon [penis], this is a gun [rifle]. This is for fighting [penis], this is

for fun [rifle]." In a murder-suicide scene, *Full Metal Jacket* also explores the gendered brutality of American military training. After indoctrination with a similar cadence song, Pvt. Leonard Pratt kills his drill sergeant rather than surrender his rifle, which he has given a female name. "A moment later, in a gesture that dramatizes the sexual ambiguity of the recruit's relationship with his rifle, he fatally consummates his marriage with 'Charlene'" (Bates, 1996, p. 142). For discussion of these cadence songs in actual American military training programs, see Knight, 1990.

¹⁰In the interior narrative of the film, Pvt. Ryan parachuted in with the 101st; hence, he was not actually part of the beach landing. However, the seamlessness of the visual transition from the elder Ryan to Miller and the beach landing suggests that the senior Ryan "remembers" on behalf of the viewing audience. Mike Sugimoto (2000) argues that "the memory which Ryan possesses is not his own, ultimately not even Miller's, but Spielberg's articulation of a collective, national memory; long repressed but about to resurface onscreen" (p. 9).

¹¹As part of the "background" ambience of the film, John Miller sees, but does not comment on, thematic visual vignettes that are foundational to post-Vietnam war stories. For example, American soldiers kill surrendering enemy soldiers, foot soldiers lack basic necessities which are plentiful in the rear echelons of command, the chain of command in the field is characterized by confusion and chaos, Miller's unit is "overrun" by the enemy, and the primary aims of Miller's unit are survival and loyalty to the brotherhood.

¹²Coppola does suture the viewer into Willard's point of view in the opening scenes of the narrative (see Nelson, 2000). But that shared vision disappears once Willard leaves Saigon and enters the combat zone (the jungle). There, the viewer is positioned "outside" of the action. See Cardullo (1987) for an excellent discussion of how the combat veteran's perspective is constructed in these films, especially in the films of Oliver Stone.

¹³See Steven Seidman's (1994) discussion of the postmodern turn in American culture. Seidman, Bordo (1992), Modleski (1991) and Jeffords (1989) argue that even as mythologies of unified Western, white, masculine superiority have been fragmented by recent cultural and political challenges and crises, hegemonic masculinity has proven remarkably adaptable to that fragmentation, to the postmodern logic of "both/and." Jeffords's study of post-Vietnam cinema and literature demonstrates how hegemonic masculinity reconfigures itself *as* fragmented, and thus "beset." Modleski theorizes how hegemonic masculinity appropriates the cultural spaces of both feminism and femininity. I argue that these rhetorical strategies are central to the gender and race politics of *Saving Private Ryan*.

¹⁴It is not my aim here to interpret this scene from an essentialist perspective on gender. Work on conventions of gendered speech in cinematic combat films (e.g., Basinger, 1986; Belton, 1994; Tasker, 1994) as well as the broader public space (see Romaine, 1999) support my contention that the implied intimacy of Miller's self-disclosure runs contrary to conventional expectations for masculine leadership and utterance.

¹⁵These utterances are taken from the first and second scenes where Jackson is called upon for his sharp-shooting expertise. Significantly, these scenes work to restore visual and discursive memory of American soldiering as noble, morally justified, and highly skilled.

¹⁶Lynne Hanley (1991) writes, "Since women are presumed to be absent from war, they are presumed to have no story to tell. The only woman who can claim authority to speak about war is the rare woman who has been at least near the combat zone, the odd nurse or motorcycle corps volunteer" (p. 7). Similarly, Hayden White (1981) observes, "For in fact every narrative, however seemingly 'full', is constructed on the basis of a set of events which *might have been included but were left out*; and this is as true of imaginary as it is of realistic narratives. This . . . permits us to ask what kind of notion of reality authorizes construction of a narrative account of reality in which continuity rather than discontinuity governs the articulation of the discourse" (p. 10).

¹⁷In the early landing scene, the camera pans the faces of two American soldiers played by Asian American actors. This is the extent of non-Anglo presence in the film.

¹⁸American governmental concern for the bereaved mothers of lost warriors, much celebrated in this film, merits close scrutiny. Historically, the United States military's primary motivation for "saving" the sole surviving son was preservation of the family's paternal name. Furthermore, in the

metanarrative about American warriors and wars, the son must disavow connection to his mother in order to become a warrior (see Jeffords, 1989). This is a key feature in Spielberg's narrative. Early in the film, the medic (who dies calling for his mother) recalls that he shut his mother out of his emotional life as he grew up, and he wonders aloud why he did so. The reason becomes apparent: Boys must separate from their mothers in order to become men. So, when Pvt. Ryan finally is located and told that he is going home to his mother, he refuses, explaining that his duty is to his comrades: "Tell her that when you found me, I was here and I was with the only brothers that I have left. And that there's no way I was going to desert them. I think she'll understand that. There's no way I'm leaving this bridge." Significantly, this is the only time in the film narrative where Captain Miller is persuaded *not* to follow orders. Miller and Ryan put the loyalty of the male warrior (to other warriors) and the interests of the democratic state (to achieve victory) ahead of the interests of the mother. As one reviewer of *Ryan* put it, the battlefield is "a place where danger lurks at every turn and . . . the only defense is the cohesion of the male unit. . . . [T]he real story is the relationship between the unit commander and his boys" (Goldstein, 1999, p. 47. See also Heller, 1990; Piehler, 1994).

¹⁹I am indebted to an anonymous CSMC reviewer for this insight.

²⁰I am indebted to Robert Ivie for helpful comments on this point.

²¹See Miller, 1996, p. 220 for an account of voting restrictions for Native Americans. The other discriminatory practices mentioned in the fictive disclaimer are widely acknowledged.

²²Johannesen writes, "Novak (1974) argues that the assumption of white, male, Anglo-American superiority is fundamental to the Puritan strain of the traditional American Dream" (p. 164).

²³It remains to be seen how post "9-11" discourses will shape the possibilities for "just war" claims.

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