Nostalgic Longings,
Memories of the “Good War,”
and Cinematic Representations
in Saving Private Ryan

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This essay focuses attention on some of the polysemic and polyvalent dimensions of Spielberg’s Saving Private Ryan. The author argues that this film needs to be viewed as an intertextual fragment, where audiences, rhetors, and critics co-produce their interpretations of the rhetorical meaning of D-Day and the “Good War.” The essay advances the argument that critical memory studies help us understand how various representations and absences in the film allow for a number of different nostalgic and oppositional readings of the film. Because of the ambiguous nature of this cinematic representation, both supporters and detractors could claim that this was a realistic film that supported their own views on warfare.

Each day, at least a thousand of the more than six million American veterans of World War II pass away. Now in their seventies and eighties, many of these surviving witnesses watch in horror as new generations voyeuristically critique the “Good War” that was once considered to be one of the defining moments in U.S. history. Most of the generals and politicians who directed the many campaigns in Europe and the Pacific have long since passed away, and the building of new memorials assuages only some of the pain of realizing that the once stable memories of the past appear to be crumbling into an oblivion of postmodern fragmentation. As White astutely observed in 1997, “America’s nostalgic war memories are beginning to fray around the edges” (p. 709). Beckham (1999), who visited Normandy in the mid-1990s, similarly remarked that:

World War II has faded into legend, succeeded by Korea and Vietnam and the Persian Gulf War and two wars in the Balkans. We’ve been anesthetized. Even the memory of the Cold War and the threat of a nuclear war doesn’t chill us the way it should. What is overshadowed what was. That’s just the way things are. . . . At Normandy and in cemeteries all over the world, millions of headstones bear the names of young people called to war. . . . Our country is full of heroes, boys [sic] who became men in battle, old men now,
who withstood and gave up more than we will ever now. (p. 33)

Beckham is of course not alone in her hopes that we honor those who have made sacrifices in the past.

Given this cultural milieu, it should come as no surprise that Spielberg’s *Private Ryan* (1998) has received massive public and critical acclaim. One critic proclaimed that the film was a “millennial epic,” a war “movie to end all war movies” (Johnston, 1998, p. 47). Cohen (1999) observed how many Veterans of World War II who saw the film “streamed out in stunned, wet-eyed silence” (p. 35). This cinematic representation had such resonance that America Online created web sites and chat rooms so that “millions” of members could come “online to meet and talk, to exchange information and make friends, to laugh and yell and debate and cajole” (Case, 1999, p. 10). When some patriotic viewers lamented the absence of any monologues that discussed the origins of the conflict, Krauthammer (1998) came to Spielberg’s defense: “World War II speaks for itself. It needs no spin. Only a moral idiot can doubt its justice. And it was clearly not this director’s intent to devalue the cause” (p. A-25).

Yet an increasing number of commentators have begun to argue that reverence for our World War II veterans should not require that we avoid critiquing the motivations and interests involved in the waging of all wars. Don’t different communities have conflicting views of what it means to be patriotic, dutiful, and honorable? Months before the announcement of the winners of the Academy awards in April of 1998, one skeptical reviewer prophesied that audiences would witness performances of “filial piety,” where the “baby boomer” sons and daughters would kneel before “their WWII fathers in a final, fin-de-siècle act of generational genuflection” (Doherty, 1998, p. 68). The evocative power of this cinematic representation has helped to create a complex tapestry of negotiated texts, a vivid example of what Nora (1989) has called “les lieux de mémoire,” or sites of memory. Such places provide communication scholars with unique challenges and opportunities because the critic has to employ a method of analysis that allows her or him to look at the polysemic (Ceccarelli, 1998; Condit, 1989; Fiske, 1986) meanings of contested fragments. At the same time, the critic tries to be attentive to the performative dimensions of artifacts, now that “text construction” is the “primary task of audiences, readers, and critics” (McGee, 1990, p. 274). This is especially important in memory studies where audiences are constantly coping with the traumas of times remembered and forgotten.

In this essay, I decode the meaning and valences associated with Spielberg’s *Private Ryan* by looking at a few of the representations in the film and their “intertextual animation” (Solomon, 1993) with other texts provided by critics and citizens. In recent years, a growing number of scholars have been interested in explicating the role that individual and collective “memories” play in the public sphere (Browne, 1995; Carlson & Hocking, 1988; Dickinson, 1997; Ehrenhaus, 1988, 1989; Foss, 1986; Gallagher, 1995; Gillis, 1984; Haines, 1986; Katriel, 1994; Nora, 1989, 1992; Schudson, 1992; Schwartz, 1982, 1995; Sturken, 1997; Zelizer, 1992; Zerubavel, 1995). I augment their investigations by looking at
the role that “nostalgia” plays in what I call “critical memory studies.”

In order to carry out this task, this essay is divided into five major segments. The first section outlines some of the key assumptions that inform “critical memory studies” and its relations to nostalgia and remembrance. The second portion is primarily descriptive and lays out the basic plot of the movie. The third portion then highlights the nostalgic arguments of many defenders of the movie, who have treated it as a realistic portrayal of the Allied invasion of Normandy in 1944. In the fourth part I discuss how some critics and audiences have interpreted Saving Private Ryan as an anti-war film, where watching the movie becomes a ritualistic act of confession. Finally, in the assessment, I conclude that these intertextual debates over the historical accuracy of the film (and the intentions of the producers) have much to tell us about the needs of the present and our recollections of the past.

Critical Memory Studies, Nostalgia, and Remembrances of “The Good War”

As we begin life in the twenty-first century, there is little question that our mass mediated age has witnessed a revival of interest in understanding the affinities that exist between the problems of the present and the traditions of our past. “All at once heritage is everywhere,” notes Lowenthal (1998), “in the news, in the movies, in the marketplace—in everything from galaxies to genes” (p. xiii). In recent decades, both elites and ordinary citizens have not only studied, but performed various historical remembrances as they immerse themselves in activities like the collection of calendars and scrapbooks, participation in youth movements and festivals, and visitations of memorial libraries, monuments, and museums. Schwartz (1998) recently observed that:

As residual patterns of belief often reflect deliberate efforts to renew ties to a past that emergent patterns challenge, it is no surprise to witness thousands of amateur oral historians seeking to recover the ethnic communities of their parents and grandparents, hundreds of thousands of Americans undertaking genealogical inquiries to identify their forebears, millions of Americans admiring archetypal warrior-presidents in the films Independence Day (1996) and Air Force One and a great surge of monument building beginning in the 1980s—the very decade in which revisionist history (conceding only the sins of the American narrative to be grand) matured. (pp. 94–95)

Because of the rhetorical nature of these sites of memory, visitors are able to bring together their prior preconceptions of the past (experienced directly or vicariously) and tie them to the symbolic meanings that are evoked by the presence of various rhetorical artifacts. For example, visitors to the Vietnam memorial sometimes come to such sacred places in order to “imbue it” with “a diversity of meaning” (Ehrenhaus, 1989, p. 96). Jameson (1997) has similarly remarked that “so-called nostalgia films” allow for “allegorical processing” that mobilizes visions of the past (p. 7).

The polysemic and polyvalent nature of such artifacts and audience reconstructions has meant that memory studies have themselves become a part of the larger cultural wars. Burke (1966) was ahead of his time when he admonished us to never forget that “any given terminology” is both a “reflection of reality” and a “deflection of reality” (p. 45). Novick (1999) has recently noted
that we “choose to center certain memories because they seem to us to express what is central to our collective identity” (p. 7), and that such sedimentations are “impatient with ambiguities of any kind” (p. 4). Our acceptance of salient memories as historical facts thus becomes a negotiated production that involves both rhetors and audiences.

What artifacts we choose to study, the interpretative frameworks that we employ, and the amount of distance that we adopt in our investigations are all choices that have consequences. Maier (1993), for example, worries that “the surfeit of memory is a sign not of historical confidence but of a retreat from transformative politics” (p. 150). Approaching the issue from a very different angle, Schwartz (1998) attacked many of the post-modernists who apparently trivialized the importance of traditional memories, and argued that our “commemorative activities” are more than just nostalgic feelings for an inauthentic past (p. 97).

In this essay, I advocate the adoption of a perspective that I will call “critical memory studies”—where the critic tries to employ a self-reflexive method that balances the need for inquiry with tolerance for alternative perspectives. Here the scholar tries to avoid the twin problematics that come from excessive valorization or denigration of the past by broadening the scope of the project to include the voices of various critics and audiences who do not share similar ideological predispositions. This is especially important in any analyses of the “Good War,” because the “disresemblance [sic] of World War II is as disturbingly profound as the forgettary [sic] of the Great Depression . . .” (Terkel, 1984, p. 3). Such a move helps us to understand that the renewed interest in traditions, heritages, and memories of the past is not just an academic obsession, but a reflection of cultural trajectories and societal interests as well.

One key aspect of such critical memory studies involves the question of “nostalgia” and our memories of particularly traumatic conflicts. Scholarly interest in the manifestations and consequences of nostalgic thinking has a lengthy, but checkered, past. This special type of collective memory has been a part of Western discourse since the late seventeenth century, when the term “nostalgia” was used to describe an alleged medical ailment of Swiss missionaries who worked in distant lands. One variant of the tale argued that “homesickness” was a malady that was partially cured when people came up with ways of returning to an “idealized past,” a spatial and temporal space different from a threatening present (Steinwand, 1997, p. 9). In more modern eras, it has been the “commercialization of nostalgia” that has allowed millions of voyeurs to “recreate the cultural artifacts and mass experience” of the past (Graham, 1984, p. 348).

In most studies of nostalgia, this yearning for imaginative reconstructions is treated as a some form of individual or social illness, a defect in the individual or national character. The older associations of nostalgia with physical ailments have been supplemented with lexicons that highlight the mental disturbances that purportedly accompany these feelings of homesickness. Over the centuries, those who have openly expressed their feelings of longing for the past have been characterized as “unmanly,” [sic] “unpatriotic,” and “defeatist” (Dudden, 1961, p. 517). By 1984, Lasch could argue that “the victim of nostalgia clings to an idealist past,” and lives in a “reac-
tionary” world where sentimentalism reigns (p. 65). Such pathological descriptions implied degrees of erroneous thinking, emotional instability, and an inability to adapt to the trappings of modernity. For example, Goldstein (1999), in his analysis of *Saving Private Ryan*, argued that the movie was created in an “era of nostalgia” that forgot that “the greatest generation exists only in our minds” (par. 22).

A critic deploying a critical memory perspective might respond that such stances provide us with only a partial understanding of the complexities involved when individuals and collectives reminisce about the past. Nostalgic feelings—that come from intertextual interanimations (Solomon, 1993)—involve many layers of prefigurations and sedimentations that cannot be dismissed as simply psychological disorders. Iconoclastic dismissals of the past, that invert temporal hierarchies so that we privilege the present, have their own cultural amnesias. As Steinwand insightfully pointed out in 1997, “nostalgia ought not simply to be dismissed as a distortion of ‘the other’, because every reflection on where we are going and where we have been depends on such distortion” (p. 10). The security of an experienced or idealized past provides a great deal of comfort for those who are bothered by the trappings of modernity. This quest for a “simple and stable past” acts as a refuge “from the turbulent and chaotic present” (Lowenthal, 1989, p. 21).

It is my contention that even before the film was released, the producers, script writers, and promoters of *Saving Private Ryan* understood the importance of these nostalgic feelings and fed these public hungers for uplifting World War II memories. “Well before the film’s debut,” remarked Spiller (1999), “we could hear the drumbeat of publicity” (p. 41). Doherty (1998) echoed these sentiments when he noticed:

More than any other entertainment film of recent memory, however, *Saving Private Ryan* comes wrapped in an esthetic of realism that is its red badge of pure motives and high purpose. Pre-publicity advertising massaged audience reception and dictated the terms of victory: the imprimatur of veterans being more avidly solicited than the thumbs-up sign from film critics. Recruiting from the local VFW and American Legion, TV news shows marched D-Day veterans into multiplex malls and recorded their tearful post-screen exits. (p. 68)

Over time, millions of Americans and other viewers were bombarded with information from interviews, film clips, photo opportunities, press releases, and Internet chat rooms.

These attacks and defenses of Spielberg’s *Private Ryan* are of course not just debates about the historical accuracy of the film or the motivations of the promoters. They are also fragmentary elements in the much larger cultural wars that on issues of politics, power, and pedagogy. As Romanowski (1993) insightfully averred several years ago, film “has long been recognized as a powerful transmitter of culture, because it transmits beliefs, values, and knowledge; serves as a cultural memory; and offers social criticism. Consequently, the cinema remains a continual battleground in the cultural conflicts in America” (p. 63).

In these cinematic debates over the retrieval of the past, both our histories and collective memories are constantly being reconfigured and re-appropriated for generations who have vastly different experiences, values, and expectations. The fluidity of these social
constructions emerges from the “world of ordinary language” where the “meanings” of the past are “observed negotiated” (Clark & McKerrow, 1998, p. 33). Our historical remembrances are therefore never completely settled or stable, and the past becomes merely the prologue as new battles on the “Good War” are waged over the content and form of our textbooks, libraries, and museums. As Pickering (1997) observed in her analysis of official and vernacular D-Day celebrations at Normandy, traditional rhetorics are constantly being “assaulted by the revisionary movement of history” (p. 183).

These multi-vocal dimensions of the film have allowed both hawks and doves to rave about its historical accuracy, its apparent realism, its vivid portrayal of the horrors of war, and its purported underlying messages. Generations who were either too young to remember the conflict, or who were not even alive in the 1940s, can now choose up sides and vicariously engage in surreal debates over the depictions and meanings of bygone events. The evocative power of movies like Saving Private Ryan reminds us that the commercial success of cinematic representations is based on more than simply commodification of knowledge—these creative meanings also depend on a delicate symbiosis between rhetors, audiences, and textured fabrications. The rhetorical dimensions of memory studies complicate the ways that we think about our histories and remembrances of warfare.

**Historical Emplotments and Remembrances of the Normandy Invasion**

Unlike many other previous films about the Normandy invasion that begin their chronicles with detailed explanations of the massive Allied planning that preceded the landing, Spielberg’s Saving Private Ryan highlights the views of the common soldiers who waited anxiously in the landing craft that hit Omaha Beach. The movie begins with a mysterious graveyard scene where an elderly gentleman and his family are in search of a particular burial marker, but upon finding that resting place, we are immediately transported back in time to the events that took place in the early morning hours of D-Day, June 6, 1944.

Audiences watching this part of the movie feel as if they too are in the landing vehicles that make up the massive Normandy flotilla. For the most part, these are silent men, “some are puking, as much from fear as from seasickness, others praying, all of them tense and subdued. They are long past banter and bravado. When the ramp goes down, we go with them into the maelstrom of water and metal” (Hertzberg, 1998, p. 31). The first twenty-five minutes of Saving Private Ryan focus on the horror and randomness of violence, as viewers are invited to stand alongside terrified Rangers who face a “tempest of machine-gun fire” that “devours the leading group of men” (Shepard, 1998, p. 23). After taking casualty rates of sometimes 80 and 90 percent, the surviving men slowly make their way up the slopes so that they can finally face the enemy. At this point in the movie, the camera turns back to beach, and we notice one name on the back of a dead soldier’s pack—“Ryan, S.”

Much of the action in the movie surrounds the activities of a Captain Miller (Tom Hanks), who finds that in the aftermath of D-Day that he will be sent on a controversial mission behind enemy lines. He and a few of his men
will be asked to save the life of another Ryan (Francis), a paratrooper with the American 101st Airborne Division. Ryan’s other three brothers have been killed in battle, and someone is going to have to tell the family back home in Iowa about the tragedy. In one of the most poignant scenes in the movie, a military car slowly winds its way through a dusty road that takes the occupants to the front of a typical mid-Western farmhouse. Intuitively audiences realize that we must be at the boyhood home of the Ryans, and when both a minister and an officer get out of the vehicle, we see Mrs. Ryan collapse on her front porch.

Miles away, an emotional General George C. Marshall (Harve Presnell) has decided that this same Mrs. Ryan needs to be spared the loss of her last son. When one of the other members of his staff wonders about the relative importance of this single life, Marshall responds by reading to the audience the contents of the famous Bixby letter, a short note purportedly written by Abraham Lincoln that was sent to another grieving mother during the Civil War. This letter is of obvious importance to General Marshall because he is shown quoting some of the last sentences of the document from memory. The search for the surviving son thus becomes a moral imperative. Although many of the characters in Saving Private Ryan are fictional, some of the events that are portrayed in the film are based on some real life families—the Nilands and the Sullivans, who actually lost several sons during World War II. Spielberg has also appropriated some of these plot lines from Stephen Ambrose’s Band of Brothers (Shepard, 1998, p. 23).

The scene shifts back again to the shores of Normandy where Captain Miller and seven other Rangers learn that they are the ones who have been selected to find Private Ryan. “The movie’s apparent theme,” noted Cohen (1999), is whether “it is worth risking the lives of eight men to save one” (p. 36). After having survived the carnage of the beach landing they are in no mood for this assignment, but orders are orders. As they set out across enemy territory, they occasionally discuss some of the reasons why the higher echelons have sent them on their journey. Early on in the movie Captain Miller remarks that “Ryan better be worth it,” but by the end of the film few of the Rangers have any doubts about the importance of saving Francis Ryan.

Miller’s platoon is multi-cultural in its composition, and audiences are allowed to see some of the trials and tribulations of a dependable NCO (Tom Sizemore), a Jew (Adam Goldberg), a devout Southern sharpshooter (Barry Pepper), an Italian (Vin Diesel), and a “Brooklyn wiseguy” (Ed Burns) (Denby, 1998, p. 45). After having survived several campaigns together, these are veterans and a tightly knit group, and they clearly don’t enjoy the company of new recruits. After learning that the platoon will need to cross occupied territory, Captain Miller searches for an interpreter who can speak both German and French, and he eventually gains the services of Corporal Upham (Jeremy Davies), a newcomer to battle who is initially shunned by the rest of the platoon. Upham is an idealist soldier/writer who knows more about a typewriter than he does a rifle, and he soon learns that brotherhood in the field is very different from the romantic images that are found in the pages of novels.

During the middle parts of the movie, audience members are carried
along as Miller and the rest of his team deal with hidden snipers, homeless French families, crashed gliders, and German prisoners. We quickly realize that these pragmatic veterans are survivors in part because of their resourcefulness and single-mindedness. When Miller’s platoon finally finds Francis Ryan, they tell him about the deaths of his three brothers, and they hope that this will mean a hasty return to the Normandy shores. These hopes are quickly dashed as Ryan explains that he has to stay with the rest of his buddies who are holding a key bridge at Ramelle. Miller decides that his group will also stay with Private Ryan at the bridge.

In the ensuing battle, most of Miller’s platoon dies in combat, and he himself becomes mortally wounded as he fights off everything from a high caliber, motorized machine gun to a German Tiger tank. Just as it looks like the enemy will take the bridge, the “day is saved by the sudden arrival of air force ‘tank busters’” (Vandervort, 1998, p. 895). As Miller is about to die, he tells the surviving Ryan to “earn it” and make sure that he lives his life in a way that counts.

At the end of the film, we are again transported back into the future, and audiences slowly become aware that it is Private Ryan who was the elderly gentleman who made that lonely trek across the graveyard at the beginning of the movie. We now have enough information so that we can understand that the graveyard must be in Normandy and that Ryan has come back to Miller’s grave site to pay homage to his memory. In these closing scenes, Ryan turns to his wife, and says: “Tell me I’m a good man. Tell me I’ve led a good life” (Caldwell, 1998, p. 50). Regardless of our political proclivities, we leave the theater with a sense of tragedy and loss, a recognition that wars take away from us many Millers. Although the producers of the film never delve into the question of just who started the war or why Normandy had to be invaded, we get the message that even skeptical soldiers shared some unique bonding experiences. As Spielberg told one critic, the “nobility of that mission became a symbol. His going home represents all going home” (Shepard, 1998, p. 23).

Nostalgic Yearnings, Trauma, and the “Realism” of Saving Private Ryan

Interest in World War II films has waxed and waned, and these changes often reflect the mercurial attitudes of audiences who have different generational needs and expectations. In the 1950s and 1960s, movies like Battle-ground and 12 O’Clock High tried to give viewers some inkling of the pressures and nobility of war, but by “the late 1970s, the Second World War had ceased to be of interest to popular filmmakers” (Shepard, 1998, p. 23). In the 1990s, things have drastically changed, as audiences across the country have shown an interest in reading works like Brokaw’s (1998) The Greatest Generation. One New York Times critic, Canby (1998), remarked that “[W]ith Saving Private Ryan, war is good again” (p. C-3). This is perhaps an exaggeration, but it nonetheless reflects the renewed interest that Americans have in learning about and commemorating some of the events of World War II.20

For millions of these viewers, seeing Saving Private Ryan was not and is not just a source of entertainment, but a quest for understanding and respect.21 For example, one forty-six year old
investigator with the Virginia attorney General’s office, Lucy Robinson, told reporters that after seeing the movie, she would “never miss another Veteran’s Day parade” (“Interest,” 1999, p. B3). In a letter to the editor of the New Orleans Time-Picayune, White (1999) remarked that the movie was more than “marketable nostalgia,” because it told a story that used “to be learned by most of the schoolchildren of the United States by the time they reached the 4th grade” (p. B-6). White went on to observe that he had recently buried his father “with his paratrooper wings pinned to his lapel” (p. B-6). Beckham (1999) explained that “Saving Private Ryan” “didn’t teach me anything. But it reminded me of things we seldom think about when you don’t have to shut off the lights at night and draw the shades and write in the semi-dark to the boy whose star hangs on your front door” (p. 33).

Watching Saving Private Ryan also became a cultural event where different generations sometimes saw the movie together and then discussed some of the pain and trauma that came with remembrance. The America Online message boards allowed more than 30,000 members to express their thoughts on the movie (Case, 1999, p. 11), and a book was produced that compiled these anonymous reactions (Kornbluth & Sunshine, 1999). Visitors to these internet sites talked about such issues as post-traumatic stress, alcoholism, memory loss, and the terror of Western Union messengers. In one typical commentary, one participant remarked that “Saving Private Ryan reminds us we must NEVER stop remembering them all and what they went through for all of us” (Kornbluth & Sunshine, 1999, p. 29). Another contributor claimed that while watching the movie he tried “to put myself in Dad’s boots. I really found myself there, and I think now I understand better why he had such a hard time talking about Omaha Beach” (p. 17).

Many observers have been attracted to the film because Spielberg seems to have created a narrative that shows some of the chaos of warfare without denigrating the motives of those who participated in the conflict. Yes, we can complain about the randomness of death, the disparate power relationships in the ranks, or the wrongheaded decisions made by unknown bureaucrats, but here there is no questioning of the motives of the politicians who got us into World War II or the heroism of those who fought it. One admiring critic remarked that:

There is a difference between saying that one died absurdly in war—grotesquely, arbitrarily, as on Omaha Beach—and saying that one died for an absurdity. It is the difference between realism and cynicism, between Saving Private Ryan and anti-war propaganda. . . . There is not an ounce of cynicism in the movie. No Oliver Stone, no Joseph Heller, not even John Le Carre. It is all guts, yes. But glory too, subtle and deeply moving. (Krauthammer, 1998, p. A-25)

Hertzberg (1998) similarly opined that, “it has no agenda other than to capture the experience of being a combat soldier in the last global war. . . . You never feel Meaning place a hand on your shoulder” (p. 32). For many viewers, this was a film that didn’t have a lot of ideological baggage.

Yet in spite of these compliments, there were patriotic viewers of Saving Private Ryan who argued that the film was not commemorative enough and that it should have been more respectful of World War II veterans. From within this perspective, we have a lot of
Millers, so why do we need to see German prisoners shot in anger, or cowardice under fire? In a typical passage, Suid (1998) complained that “Spielberg does a great disservice to the very men he is trying to memorialize in his film by showing them as undisciplined, cowering soldiers instead of the well-trained troops they were” (p. 1186). One reporter for the Washington Post alleged that critics were not “calling for some long, lachrymose oration on the nature of Nazism or the price of freedom,” but some “single phrase from these gutsy GIs about the wider panorama and purpose of their fight” (Krauthammer, 1998, p. A25).22 “Saving Private Ryan suggests a vacancy,” noted Rothkopf (1999), because the “grave reasons behind the war need not be explored or questioned” (pp. 28–29). Furthermore, Spielberg’s “film shrinks from an explanation of any kind, with the ultimate effect of seeming insensitive to the enormity of the fascist [sic] threat and the convictions of those who died in battles” (p. 29).23

Spielberg has himself admitted some of these absences, and he has responded that avoiding these ideological debates over the meaning of the war has allowed him to provide a unique cinematic representation:

This war has not really been explored on film except with ulterior motives. During the war itself, it was explored for purposes of bolstering the home front, or encouraging enlistment, or selling War Bonds. When the picture was over—after The End—you’d have the emblem of the little minuteman standing sentinel and “Buy your War Bonds at this the theatre.” You’d only do a low shot if the soldier is standing, so he can tower magnificently above you. Soldiers die with lovely last words that sound like they were written by poets. The gunfire is never loud enough, the damage is never honest enough—all because the purpose is to do everything about the war except tell you what it was like to be in one. (quoted in Hertzberg, 1998, p. 32)

Spielberg would eventually emerge triumphant from this debate, and he received numerous awards from a number of military organizations. The chief of staff of the U.S. Army, General Reimer, gave the famous film maker that organization’s highest civilian decoration. Not to be outdone, the American Legion created a new “Spirit of Normandy” award for Spielberg (Cohen, 1999, p. 35). Perhaps there were other members of the post-war generations who would also learn about the importance of commemorating the achievements of the “Greatest Generation” (Brokaw, 1998).

Caldwell (1998) may have gone too far when he quipped that some viewers were angry that they themselves had not had the chance to fight the good war, but some forms of nostalgia are clearly in the air. Surviving in a post-modern world often means living with uncertainty, skepticism, and partiality. There are those who yearn for another time and place where at least some bedrock principles reigned. As Gitlin (1995) explained:

Our secular twentieth century has known two great universalizing passions: universalizing in the sense of maintaining that humanity as a common nature and a common destiny; passions in the sense of world views affirmed with a depth of conviction that led millions of people to sacrifice their lives in their names. . . . Today, we witness an exhaustion of that core believed shared by Americanism. . . . What proliferates in the West is the “post” mood. We belong to a time of aftermaths: we are after Auschwitz, after Hiroshima, after the Gulag. (p. 85)
Set adrift in an ocean of circumlocutions, some of us yearn for an idyllic past where men and women thought they knew some of the key purposes of life.

**Oppositional Readings and Critiques of War: Forgetting Private Ryan**

Although nostalgia for the values of the past may represent the dominant mood of both movie goers and critics who have seen *Saving Private Ryan*, there are those who simply do not understand or disagree with the patriotic messages in the film. For some members of the audiences who come to the film in the post-Vietnam era, Spielberg’s celluloid representations will always be fictional, a part of a much larger “heritage” industry that celebrates an idyllic past that never was. Nostalgia has some “compensating virtues” (Lowenthal, 1988, p. 13), but it also reflects that societies may be experiencing losses, anxieties, and pain (p. 8). For viewers who believe that they have been immunized against this malady watching *Saving Private Ryan* simply reaffirms the conviction that no war is worth the casualties or the sacrifices that are made. Fiske (1986) has argued that there are always potential oppositional readings of texts, and neither the film makers’ intentions nor the preferred interpretations of the movie exhaust its semantic possibilities. Audiences who still remember the trauma of Vietnam believe that they can still respect the sacrifices of the individual soldiers while simultaneously critiquing the motivations that brought us war.

In the case of *Saving Private Ryan*, it may be possible that the movie makers have “unwittingly” opened “those old wounds of doubt” and deconstructed “democracy’s greatest moment” (Blake, 1998, p. 17). For example, Siskel, who liked the film, called it an “action filled anti-war film” (quoted in Caldwell, 1998, p. 48). Another critic remarked that the movie suggests that although the “Baby Boomers” understood the stakes in World War II, one suspects that “they would never have fought it themselves” (Cohen, 1999, p. 35).

There are perhaps two key scenes in *Saving Private Ryan* that seemingly invite these oppositional readings—the graveyard scenarios and the inclusion of the character of Corporal Upham. As noted above, the entire film *Saving Private Ryan* is framed by two graveyard scenes at the beginning and end of the film, and for patriots, the focus of attention should be on the older soldier who quietly searches for the key resting place of an old friend or acquaintance. He is the one who passes rows and rows of crosses and Stars of David, and we are made to realize the tremendous sacrifices that have been paid by countless men and women.

Yet what happens when we shift our gaze away from the elderly soldier and toward those who accompanied him to Normandy? Then we begin to see how this gentleman is followed “from a respectful distance” by members of his family, and one of them snaps “a disrespectful photograph” as the “man crumples before a grave” (Doherty, 1998, p. 68). The puzzled and courteous looks of his entourage remind us that generational memories are not the same and that histories are fragile objects when placed in the hands of those with different experiences. Those who knew individuals like Miller would be shocked that anyone could forget, but other memories and other pasts are
competing for attention. Our contemporary cultural memories are in part formed through photographic images, television, and cinema, and these “screens” actively block out “other memories that are more difficult to represent” (Sturken, 1997, p. 8). Memorials and monuments may help bolster some memories, but they must be symbolically tied to the psychic and material needs of the present.

For many skeptics or critics of war, the most compelling figure in Saving Private Ryan may not be either Miller or Ryan, but rather Corporal Upham. In many ways Upham becomes an iconic figure who represents the ambivalence of the generations who either could not or would not have recognized the moral certainties of the “Good War.” Upham’s foibles and moral quandaries on the screen remind audiences that the Vietnam War was not the only war that had its “syndrome.” Upham is one of the few members of Miller’s squad who survives the fighting at the Ramelle bridge, but viewers know that he has often shirked his duties and played the role of the coward. In one scene in Saving Private Ryan, he hides in a foxhole when he is supposed to be taking precious ammo to his embattled brothers. Upham is thus an intriguing figure, one that some of us simultaneously loathe and yet understand. As Wrathall (1998) explained:

An interpreter seconded to Miller’s squad after the landing at Omaha, Upham is the character closest to Spielberg himself: he knows about war, and can quote Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade,” but he has never seen action. . . . Upham is bright, but nervous and clumsy. From the start he is set up as the innocent—in time-honoured movie tradition—will surely come under his own under fire. . . . Later, during the final battle in Ramelle, Upham is paralyzed into fear. Spielberg keeps playing on our expectations that he will snap out of it and do something heroic. But he never does. . . . Only at the very end of the film does Upham finally take action, recapturing the German and shooting him in cold blood. But it’s hardly an act of redemption. (p. 35)

Spielberg’s inclusion of Upham shows us how some characters can become ciphers, emotive signifiers that can convey some of the less noble sentiments of warfare. Caldwell (1998) notes that parts of Saving Private Ryan provide us with examples of cowardice and criminality that “undercuts” the “patriotic message” of the movie (p. 49). Spielberg startled some of his admirers when he publicly admitted that Upham “was me in the movie. That’s how I would have been in war” (p. 49). Such admissions led one columnist (Grenier of the Washington Times) to say that Spielberg seemed to be “rather proud of his cowardice” (Caldwell, 1998, p. 49).

In many ways, Upham is a strategically ambiguous character because he hails us to think of some of the class as well as generational dimensions of the War. He is not the typical grunt in the war, one of the faceless millions who have gladly made sacrifices for either his “people” or the American way of life. Upham is a cautious, thinking soldier, the type of intellectual who clearly looks out of place—a person who more closely resembles the person who went to Canada or reluctantly fought the Vietnam War. Unlike Miller, the teacher turned patriot, this is a person who did not understand the importance of heroism or sacrifice. When we see Upham, we don’t just think of World War II, we think of a perspective—a hesitance to believe in any “Good War.” Upham’s detached interest in the war distances him from the
others in the platoon, and when he tries to convince them that they should not be shooting prisoners, his notions of transcendent morality seemed to be idiosyncratic and naive. As Lane (1998) averred, Upham is “devoid of combat experience, unable to interpret the lingua franca of mass slaughter” (p. 79).

Spielberg’s focus on the ordinary soldiers who fought the wars thus provides us with multiple characters and possible interpretations, and our socially constructed worlds influence the ways that we identify with, or vilify, some of these figures. Critics are now reminding us that wars are fought by many Uphams, ordinary human beings who try to survive in worlds caught between chance and necessity. There are many different forms of memories and yearnings, and not all of them were patriotic. “Like their Civil War forebears, GIs suffered terribly from ‘nostalgia’—a passionate wish to get home—which worried their generals,” noted Shepard (1998), “It may also be that the post-war films played this down and gave the American soldier a sense of collective purpose he did not have at the time” (p. 23).27 Samuelson (1999) echoed these sentiments and argued that his review of a 1943 study shows that combat veterans were not always in a hurry to return to the front lines (p. A-33).

For many members of the generations who did not fight the war, the moral calculus that places a high value on the saving of a single life may seem out of place, the measuring stick employed by earlier generations. One gets the feeling that perhaps there are those viewers who left the theater wondering if the sacrifice of Miller—and hundreds of thousands like him—was really “worth it.”

Assessment

Communication scholars might be interested in deploying critical memory studies that look at the polysemic ways that audiences interpret evocative rhetorical artifacts. Many commentators who have discussed the film have either celebrated Saving Private Ryan as an accurate depiction of our motives during World War II, or they have vilified Spielberg for producing a nostalgic movie that hinders our understanding of the complexities of war. On the surface such polar stances appear to be antithetical, but a deeper reading shows that both relied on foundational positions that refuse to accept the multi-vocality of this cinematic representation. This celluloid representation was just one small part of the “intertextual interanimation” (Solomon, 1993) that was set in motion when promotions, books, journal articles, and even internet chat lines were established to provide audiences with forums that allowed them to voice their opinions on a plethora of topics.

In analyzing a film as controversial as Saving Private Ryan, it is important to remember that there is no Archimedean spot that will allow us to rise above the vagaries of the mundane world. From a critical memory perspective, there can be no one “real” or “accurate” history that can be discovered by any film or other technological device. Regardless of our political proclivities, we each have notions of what it means to be “anti-war,” and Spielberg is not the only individual who has had to grapple with the issue of how to deal with the motivations involved in modern warfare.

We all have nostalgic longings about an idyllic past, but we often disagree on just what those traditions should look like. Rather than thinking of these
feelings as pathological deviations from some single essentialist reality, we need to be cognizant of the myriad ways that various communities engage cinematic representations. There were millions of participants in World War II, and they each experienced the horrors of warfare in their own way. Moreover, the intervening years between V-J Day and today has witnessed many other international conflicts that shade the selective remembrances that we have of our past and our future.

Such a stance does not mean that all representations are based on histories that are total fabrications or that we cannot have better or worse constructs. As Schwartz (1982, 1995, 1999) and Schudson (1992) have both explained, there are shared traditions and memories that exist outside the text that provide some perimeters for plausibility and veracity. The shared emotions that are evoked by similar symbols cannot be summarily dismissed as the sentimental trappings of commodified productions—the textured feelings of shared patriotism and honor are really enough. Doherty (1998) mused that:

_Saving Private Ryan_ radiates grace, gravitas, and good intentions. It flickers less as a motion picture than as a ceremonial flame for Americans, on the cusp of the millennium, to look back at the linchpin event of the twentieth century and to mediate upon the cost paid by the men who won the Good War... If _Schindler’s List_ (1993) sang Kaddish at the Wailing Wall, _Saving Private Ryan_ lays a wreath at Arlington Memorial Cemetery. (p. 68)

Unlike other films that appear to us to be merely entertainment, this particular piece of celluloid has resonance, and it allows viewers to blur the lines between the past and present. In some ways, we might not even care that the Bixby letter may be a fake, or that Spielberg made millions—the traumas of the past come alive as we realize that other generations had their own moral quandaries. As Blake (1998) opined, Spielberg “resurrects for our contemplation those noblest sentiments of self-sacrifice in the service of justice, a side of the story that we in the snug world of academic speculation after the bomb and Vietnam too easily dismiss” (p. 17).

From a critical memory perspective, Spielberg’s _Saving Private Ryan_ is a rhetorical masterpiece because it provides us with a graphic example of what Ceccarelli (1998) has called “strategic ambiguity” (p. 404). Such a stance allows “two or more otherwise conflicting groups of readers converging in praise of a text” (p. 404). By avoiding any detailed commentaries on the motivations of the leaders or the ordinary soldiers who fought the war, Spielberg encourages viewers and critics to enthymetically fill in these absences in ways that allow radicals, moderates, and conservatives to see this film as an “anti-war” film that supports their ideological predispositions. The polyvalence in the production complements its polysemy. Leftists can congratulate the creators of the film for recognizing the existence of Uphams, the graphic depiction of the carnage of the war, and the unanswered questions that haunt the grave scenes. Moderates can identify with Miller’s humanism, his willingness to acknowledge the need for occasional reforms in wartime bureaucracies, and his candid belief that this “PR” mission is temporarily keeping him from coming home. For conservatives, the movie shows that the bonds of brotherhood and sisterhood that developed during World War II have not been forgotten and that Americans
have worked through their “Vietnam Syndrome.” The nation may now be ready to once again recognize the eternal importance of character, virtue, honor, and sacrifice.

A critical memory approach also reminds us that salient films are more than just artifacts that have been produced for commercial purposes. Those celluloid representations that tap into our individual and collective psyches tell us as much about our present needs and desires as they do about the events that took place in Normandy in 1944. “The simplifications that make for commercial success,” noted Samuelson (1999), “have the good effect of awakening historical memory—and the bad effect of creating myths” (p. A-33). Granted, but such a stance perhaps underestimates the amount of emotional and cognitive attachment that various audiences have to those myths.

Out of fairness, critical memory scholars also need to point out that all cinematic representations can only hint at some of the symbolic and material influences that bring about war. The absence of any discussion of the social, economic, political, and cultural causes of the war may have helped Spielberg market the film and buttress claims regarding the authenticity of the film, but it has brought charges that the movie intentionally or unintentionally glorifies warfare and encourages American exceptionalism. When Menand (1998) watched the film, he observed how members of the audience wept at the scenes involving Mrs. Ryan and the death of American troops, but few viewers seemed to be considered with the deaths of the German soldiers. The ambiguous protection of American “motherhood” appeared as a template with its own paternal logic, a self-explanatory frame of argument that needed no dissection.

One of the most intriguing issues that comes from the interanimation surrounding Saving Private Ryan involves the question of how these discussions will impact our future views on war and diplomatic politics. Some viewers contend that the film either reflects or refracts patriotic feelings that are accurate barometers of public sentiment. Does this cinematic representation provide us with ominous signs? While defenders of the film might argue that some wars are necessary and that there is a difference between respect and veneration, audiences may be re-enacting some of the same plot lines while leaving behind the context that gave rise to those prior feelings. In one of the most devastating critiques of Saving Private Ryan, Weisberg (1999) remarked that:

It may be sheerest coincidence that a real war has arrived right in the midst of a nationwide vogue for a bygone war. But one way or the other, the depiction of the Second World War in these two films [Saving Private Ryan and the Thin Red Line], as well as in Tom Brokaw’s best selling oral history, The Greatest Generation, is subtly influencing the way I and most other Americans think about the crisis in the Balkans. Do these representations of the war in the 40’s make us more eager to fight in the late 90’s, or more reluctant? They do sober us to the physical reality of war, but they are nonetheless deeply nostalgic. They recall combat in Europe and the Pacific as the proving ground of manhood, an ultimate test of character, our last national bonding experience. (p. 17)

When both private and public social actors characterize Milosevic as a modern Hitler, the sedimented layers of historical remembrances are reconfigured into contemporary textures of feel-
ings that invite us to once again rise to the challenge.

One of the most fascinating aspects of this movie involves the way that fact and fiction become blurred, as the very representation of the “Good War” becomes a catalytic fragment in a much larger tapestry of meaning. In mid-November of the year 2000, groundbreaking is supposed to begin on a multi-million dollar monument honoring World War II veterans. It should come as no surprise that as soon as Tom Hanks became a spokesperson for this cause, donations soared. At least in the near future, it looks as though the vast majority of viewers will be content to celebrate the film as an example of American martial prowess, an illustration of how the aberrant memories of Vietnam are outweighed by the normality of the “Good War.” Now some movie goers can create their own identities as worthy beneficiaries of a national heritage that has been bequeathed by countless Millers and Ryans who have new bridges to hold. Defending the movie against intellectual critics becomes a performative exercise that ritualistically displays one’s patriotism. In this America, we had better not see any more Uphams.

Notes

1. Conley, a spokesperson for the American Battlefield Monuments Commission, estimated that “about 1,000 of the 6.3 million World War II veterans die each day” (O’Donoghue, 1999, p. 23).
2. An excellent collection of World War II oral histories can be found in Terkel (1984).
3. Some critics have echoed these sentiments. Hertzberg (1998), for example, has commented on the national “desensitization program” that has been going on for more than forty years that allows us to represent violence that is “more ubiquitous and graphic” (p. 30).
4. Only rarely have I seen this movie publicly referred to as “evil.” For an atypical counterexample, see Ouran’s (1999) lament that the movie “condones war crimes (the killing of prisoners of war)” and was therefore “an evil film” (p. 64).
5. Streible remarked that “Steven Spielberg represents a generation of Hollywood film makers who grew up too young to have fought... the film represents children burying their parents; it’s a generational, cultural moment” (“Interest,” 1999, p. B-3).
6. Gronbeck (1998), in his analysis of the relationship between history, argument, and collective memory, noted that many parts of the past are “inaccessible,” which means that critics should be attentive to the “partial, usually self-centered and even self-interested” components of documentary preservation (p. 48).
7. The etymological roots of “nostalgia” come from the combination of the Greek words “nostos” (to return home), and “algia” (a painful condition) (Rosaldo, 1989, p. 108). For one of the best theoretical discussion of the cultural preconditions that are needed for individual and collective nostalgic thinking, see Chase and Shaw (1989).
8. This of course raises a key question for film makers and critics, that being whether any film ever truly represents any underlying “reality,” Spielberg once told a columnist that while he believed that the “Holocaust” was “ineffable,” combat was not (Hertzberg, 1998, p. 31).
9. Spielberg’s vague answers to questions about his motivations have contributed to this ambiguity. For example, when he was asked about whether this was an “antiwar film,” he responded that “I think it’s an antiwar film only in that if you want to go to war after seeing this picture, then it’s not an antiwar film” (Hertzberg, 1998, p. 32).
10. Hindes (1998) pointed out that Saving Private Ryan was the “graphically brutal depiction of a war that ended before 80% of the U.S. population was born” (p. 6).
11. Spielberg would later explain that during these terrifying first 25 minutes of the film during the Normandy landing, he was “asking the audience” to have a “physical presence, so that they can somewhat have the experience of what those guys actually went through” (quoted in Hertzberg, 1998, p. 31).
12. On the surface, Saving Private Ryan appears to be a movie that rarely goes into any detail about the reasons that the American troops are fighting in World War II. Yet Spielberg and the other producers of the film provide audiences with hints of possible motives—getting home to loved ones, brotherly love, respect for martial ranks. These inducements seem to pale, however, when compared to the importance of American “motherhood.” Menand (1998) has argued that “[i]f soldiers do not fight for motherhood, what do they fight for? . . . Fighting to return the only remaining boy to his grieving mother is a thousand times more concrete than fighting to liberate a few Frenchmen. . . . What’s France to a mother?” (p. 7).

13. The Bixby letter read:

I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should 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.

I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you 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.

Yours, very sincerely and respectfully, A. Lincoln (quoted in Burlingame, 1999, pp. 64–65)

Burlingame (1999) has criticized the inclusion of the Bixby letter in the film because there is some historical evidence that the note may not have been written by Lincoln and that Mrs. Bixby may not have lost five sons. Vandervort (1998) has also described the scenes with Marshall as “mawkish memorials to the sacrifices of war” (p. 895).

14. Spielberg has explicitly noted that the Niland incidents were the “kernel of truth about which this morality play has been fictionalized” (quoted in Caldwell, 1998, p. 49). During the summer of 1944, two of the Niland sons were killed on D-Day, while another was believed to have been killed in Southeast Asia. The last brother, Fritz, was a member of the 101st Airborne Division in Normandy. This last son was saved by Father Francis Sampson, who apparently found the paratrooper and got him home (Spiller, 1999).

15. The Sullivans were five brothers who served in the U.S. Navy and were all on the warship Juneau when it sank in 1942. In Saving Private Ryan, one of the members of Marshall’s staff explains to the audience that most brothers were split up after the Sullivan affair to prevent this type of suffering.

16. Captain Miller also admits that he thinks this is a “public-relations stunt,” but as the film progresses, audiences get the impression that the mission takes on much more significance for both Miller and the rest of the platoon.

17. Conspicuously absent are any major black characters in the film. An anonymous writer for the Los Angeles Sentinel argued that this was remarkable given the fact that the 761st Black Panther Tank Battalion was “responsible for liberating the concentration camps at Buchenwald and Dachau” (“Who Saved,” 1999, p. A-8).

18. Other critics have decoded different meanings from these graveyard scenes. Cohen (1999), for example, thinks that the survivor who comes to the Normandy graveyard may think that “courage and skill bring success,” but these never “seem able to guarantee physical survival or psychological peace” (p. 39).

19. For an excellent overview of many of these movies, see Spiller (1999). Discussions of Spielberg’s film may help bring about a renaissance of interest in earlier World War II films. Vandervort (1998), for example, noted that “reactions to Saving Private Ryan by newspaper columnists, in particular, have reflected a kind of amnesia about combat films—as if no one but Steven Spielberg has ever attempted to portray the experience of combat honestly” (p. 896).

20. Spielberg, the director of the film, proclaimed that he “made this movie as a memorial” (quoted in Hertzberg, 1998, p. 33).

21. At times, these cinematic representations also remind some of the guilt that accompanies survival. One veteran, writing to Newsweek magazine, claimed that:

We were not heroes. We were part of more than 14 million men [and women] who had signed up, put on uniforms and dug in to do a job that had to be done. The fact that three of my high-school friends did not come back and never even lived out their teens, while I am 74 years old and still stomping around on the planet enjoying life, has given me a deep sense of guilt that has never left me. (Stroud, 1998, p. 16)
22. Cohen (1999) has also complained that “children and grandchildren, the beneficiaries of their sacrifices” seem to have forgotten “the men who fought this great war” and who “achieved one of the most monumental victories of all time” (p. 39).
23. Suid (1998) similarly interjected that the “failure to put in even one sentence, somewhere, about why Adolf Hitler had to be defeated becomes even more ironic in light of Schindler’s List (p. 1186).
25. Lane (1998) has complained that Spielberg could have done without this “sappy epilogue,” where the “pilgrimage faithfully undertaken by veterans” seems like “arm-twisting” to “a moviegoer” (p. 79). I believe that this interpretation of the final scene misses some of the generational dimensions of the film.
26. It will not be until the end of the movie that the audience guesses that this must have been the Normandy memorial.
27. Karl Menninger, the American Army’s chief psychiatrist, found that whereas the Russians were fighting to avenge their loved ones, the British for survival, and the French to get back their country, “the doughboy fights because he has to. He fights for his buddies and because his self-respect won’t let him quit!” (Sheppard, 1998, p. 23).

References


