

**THE ROLE OF DOCUDRAMA FILMS IN AMERICAN PUBLIC  
MEMORY: WORLD WAR II AS “THE GOOD WAR”**

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by

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Role of Docudrama Films in American Public Memory: World War II as “The Good War”.

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Docudrama films are some of the most popular and controversial movies ever made. Their box office success and critical acclaim have made them an enticing venture for filmmakers and studios, yet they can attract a firestorm of debate if handled incorrectly. Docudramas are a paradox in themselves; not completely fact, not completely fiction. Yet their power to influence and shape ideas is undeniable. And for the majority of Americans, docudramas serve as a commanding, if not singular, source of their knowledge about historical events. Because of this immense scope, there are important questions that need to be investigated about docudrama’s role in the creation of American public memory, and the lens through which it shows us historical events. This paper will investigate what makes docudramas uniquely complex, and how docudramas are important historical texts. Specifically, I will look at filmic portrayals of American involvement in World War II through content analysis of three major WWII docudramas.

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

“The so-called dramatization or fictionalization of alleged history is extremely dangerous and misleading, and is something to which the broadcasting authorities must give close attention.”

This statement was made by Sir Ian Gilmour to the British House of Commons in April of 1980, just as the docudrama *Death of a Princess* was inciting outrage and controversy across racial and national lines over its depiction of the events surrounding the death of Princess Diana. The uproar that occurred - and Gilmour’s severe statement - demonstrates the intensity with which people react to filmic representations of the past. Docudrama films, those which are a fictionalized depictions of historical events, are some of the most widely popular and increasingly contentious movies ever made. Their box office success and critical acclaim have made them an enticing venture for filmmakers and studios, yet they can attract a firestorm of debate if handled incorrectly. Why is this? What about docudramas make them such a lightning rod for controversy? Many scholars and industry professionals attest to their persuasive power, but where is their place in the cannon of film genre? These films are an important part of modern cinema, and therefore an understanding of what defines docudrama, where they fit in the spheres of fiction and nonfiction, and why they can be problematic can give us a greater vantage point from which to view history through film.

The principal challenge of analyzing docudrama films is defining them. While they are called by many names (fact-fiction drama, drama-docs, historical film, etc.), docudramas share a common theme: they are fictional narratives based on true events (Rosenthal xiii). The name itself reflects

the duality of their definition, the “docu” referencing their close association to documented reality, the “drama” referencing their fictionalization. Docudramas cannot belong wholly to either category; scholars agree that “telling stories and representing history are fundamentally distinct tasks” (Lipkin 32). Documentary is a genre which is grounded in its “presentation of facts with little or no fiction” (Rosenthal 1). Therefore, docudramas do not fully fit into this sphere; they differ in style and storytelling, and offer far more narrativization of their source material. These differences are vital enough to separate docudramas as an entirely separate genre, since “even a documentary dependent upon re-creation will place subject over story”, and docudramas are primarily interested in storytelling versus educating. Documentarians take great pains to maintain historical accuracy, and take almost no dramatic license with events, characters, timelines, and dialogues (McKrisken 3). While enlightening, documentaries are first and foremost informative rather than entertaining, and “do not necessarily balance both [factual] and fictional narrative strategies” (Lipkin x). They are strongly instructive and can be part of public memory creation, but the narrativization of history that docudramas provide often makes them more impactful than their nonfiction counterparts. While “documentary photographic and film images of [the historical event] carry particular national meaning, contemporary Hollywood films play a primary role in telling the story of [the historical event]” (Sturken 86).

However they differ, docudrama’s tie to documentary film cannot be denied, for they share a common theme of history on screen, and both make claims to realism. Like documentaries, the source material for docudramas varies: some use historical novels, scholarly texts, transcripts of proceedings or court cases, or personal records from historical figures. The screenwriting process for a docudrama can often involve working closely with a historian or research consultant who helps address any historical inaccuracies that may be in the script. These consultants can also

work closely with the art department to ensure that the visual aspects of the film are as accurate historically as the dialogue. Many directors of docudramas spend millions of dollars to visually recreate the historical setting for their film, down to the smallest details. This effort shows that not all Hollywood films are made without any disregard for the truth.

Yet as much as they strive for accuracy, Hollywood films are bound by a number of factors that keep them from directly reenacting historic events on screen. Narrative flow, entertainment value, budget restrictions, and “the need for dramatic impact” all restrict the capability that docudrama filmmakers have from addressing history in the straightforward manner of a historical text (McKrisken 3). Rather than a direct recreation, we should think of docudramas as “a mimetic interpretation” of the past (Sturken 85). They portray, rather than imitate history. Therefore, docudramas will always disappoint those looking for the thoroughness of an explanatory historical text. Docudramas cannot entirely fit into the same genre as works of complete fiction; these films are worlds and stories created entirely from the mind of a writer, whereas docudramas do have an anchor (however minor) in empirical fact. However, since they are far more concerned with telling a story than educating audiences about history, their focus on plot development and characterization far outweighs their desire reenact history exactly as it occurred. In the vast majority of docudramas, filmmakers seek to tell an individual story within the larger context of a historical setting. Therefore, fully examining the causality and context of the historical setting is most often outside the scope of the film. Docudramas often have “two conflicting intentions – to represent [history] realistically and to examine its larger meanings through metaphoric interpretation.” (Sturken Page 88). The fact that these two intentions are conflicting is what creates the greatest challenge for docudrama filmmakers. It is impossible for them to be completely thorough in their explanation of the historical context of their film, yet

their claim to fact means that they have some obligation to their source material. Like all artists, docudramatists want to tell a significant and compelling story; however they have chosen specifically to tell a “real and relevant story involving real people” or situations (Woodhead 478).

This style of storytelling that docudramas often employ - the “human experience in the midst of historic change” narrative is part of what makes docudramas so appealing to audiences and critics alike. Docudrama films have had huge box office success throughout Hollywood history. From the biopics of the studio era to the big-budget feature films of today, history has always supplied immense and profitable source material for writers of movies and television. Historical narratives often humanize well-known events, providing strong cathartic potential for viewers. Audiences’ previous knowledge of a famous story also usually draws their curious attention, which makes docudramas even more marketable (Hollander 2). Just as people are eager to purchase a gossip magazine or tabloid to read about the sensational, docudramas can often offer the “juicy details” about a well-publicized news scandal that inquiring audiences are looking for. Likewise, their ability to offer previously hidden or unknown information about even the most well documented aspect of history can make docudramas appear to have the “inside scoop” on events. When asking if there was “something especially compelling about films based on true stories”, historian Dr. Steven Lipkin found that “it was easier for people to believe in a story if its characters and actions had a basis in actuality. It was intriguing to get the “inside story” about how things had “really” happened. It was easier to “relate to” what others had “really done,” implying that something could be learned from the experiences shown because they had occurred in actuality” (Lipkin xi). The fantasy of fictionalized films can sometimes detach audiences from characters on screen, but docudramas can bridge this gap between the portrayed and the real.

Docudramas can also address sensitive or shocking events in a way that makes them more approachable and understandable, even if it dials down the truth of the situation. These films “afford a means through which uncomfortable histories of traumatic events can be smoothed over, retold, and ascribed new meanings” (Sturken 85). This popularity gives docudramas an incredible platform for persuasion. As Dr. Trevor McKrisken states, “the sheer number of films being made in Hollywood since the end of the Cold War about particular episodes and events from American history, and the increasingly self-conscious ways in which filmmakers themselves have theorized their role as public historians make this an important area of study” (McKrisken 10). This scope of influence that docudramas have makes them an important topic for scholarly research.

Docudrama filmmakers employ the same creative conventions of movie magic that any other filmmakers use, such as “dramatic story, character, look, emotional intensity” and others in order to entertain audiences (Rosenstone 41). Some of these docudrama filmmakers are even former documentarians, who use techniques “derived from factual documentary” (Woodhead 481). However, in the case of historical films, use of these stylistic practices can be seen as cheaply tricking audiences into seeing history as the filmmaker wants them to. The danger with historical films is that “the audience will be misguided...They will fail to understand the difference between fact and fiction. They will be misled regarding history” (Rosenthal xix). The audience may be limited in their knowledge of what is real versus what is created on screen, and the filmmaker can look like they are intentionally trying to blur the line that separates truth and fiction. The public can feel cheated and lied to when they think that a film has misrepresented history, and have often taken legal against filmmakers and studios. Although an implicit understanding exists between filmmakers and audiences about the exact accuracy of docudrama



films, there are still serious legal ramifications that can arise when making a docudrama. False light, invasion of privacy, copyright infringement, defamation, and intentional infliction of emotional distress are all claims that could be lobbied against docudrama filmmakers (Grunefeld 483). And even if lawsuits are not filed, filmmakers also have to deal with historians who make strong claims about filmic treatments of historical events. Many people berate films for their inaccuracy, suggesting that filmmakers simply exploit historical events as a way to capitalize on public interest. Scholars have criticized filmmakers for being bound by American nationalism and therefore skewing their representation of historical events to favor a more pro-American position (Sturken 121). This suggestion of partiality and a biased perspective in filmic representations of history is often the debate that most fiercely attacks docudrama filmmakers. The list of complaints that have been lobbied against docudrama films is nearly endless, highlighting how complicated the task of balancing fact and fiction can be. As one docudrama filmmaker stated, “When you make a film about real people, about something that really happened - you’ll never get it right. There is always somebody who’s going to disagree with you”.

To some, this demand on docudrama filmmakers to present history in a completely accurate and unbiased manner is seen as not only unrealistic, but outside their responsibility. Because docudramas do not belong to the category of documentaries, historians cannot expect filmmakers to strictly adhere to the conventions of documentary and forgo the conventions of created works. One critic suggested that the popular tagline “Based on a true story” that often accompanies docudramas should serve “as both a boast and a disclaimer” (Bowden 3). Most films only explore one perspective, and are fundamentally artistic, and therefore they cannot be expected to focus exclusively on historical accuracy (Lipkin 33). As Dr. Robert Toplin suggests, “historical

movies are, by their very nature, firm-minded portrayals of the past, not balanced, objective ones...they cannot [entertain] if they present history in the scholarly manner of an encyclopedia entry” (Toplin 11). The transition of any written text to a visual media will undergo some sort of alteration, because films are bound by different conventions and are shaped by different intentions than written history (Rosenstone 41). One critic described a screenplay as “more like a sonnet than a novel” and that docudramas which often take place in immensely complex and far-reaching historical contexts “can only be told with broad impressionistic strokes” (Bowden 2). History is not the easiest source material for filmmakers to work with – the “facts” and their causes/effects are often up for interpretation, depending on which historian you ask. Therefore, the “truth” of a film is somewhat of a subjective idea, but remains what is considered most important about a docudrama. The question then is: what constitutes a “good” historical film representation? Most critics concede that the accuracy of small details like costuming and set design are less crucial than the overall messages and themes being put forth about the events being depicted. The discussion of effectiveness then center around “how the process of creating a film or video inevitably alters, in some way, the truth or accuracy of history...what gets lost in the translation of the event from its verbal state to a visual/pictorial one; that is, how condensation and narratization alter the facts deemed “not essential” to the narrative to fit both a medium and the conventions of a genre” (Rosenthal 26). Some scholars praise films which leave the audience asking more informed question about history, rather than simply trying to tell them all of the answers. This is often a risky endeavor for filmmakers since “narrative conventions in most Hollywood films demand ‘closure’ by the time of a film’s end” (McKrisken 6). However, history is always open to further interpretation, and according to some critics, a “good historical film should leave the viewer wanting to know more, to dig deeper and question the validity of

the film's viewpoint and think about possible alternatives" rather than presenting them with a singular view of what occurred (McKrisken 6).

The reason for all of this controversy is that docudramas possess an incredible amount of persuasive capacity. This means that docudramas hold an authoritative position as the lens through which huge audiences see historical events. For the majority of Americans, docudramas serve as a commanding, if not singular, source of their knowledge about historical events (Sturken 85). Whereas news images and documentation can hold meaning, "contemporary Hollywood films play a primary role in telling the story" of what has occurred in our nation's history (Sturken 86). Docudramas make claims to realism by attaching themselves to true historical events, yet are not completely obligated to represent history as it actually occurred (Woodhead 481).

There is perhaps no greater picture of the persuasive power of films than that of docudrama presentations of history. Whether on the small screen or in the cinemplex, fact-based films have the potential to be a monumental success among viewers. Yet they can be a risky venture for filmmakers; coming under fire from those being depicted, historians seeking objectivity, or the public looking for truth. Docudramas face a complex challenge due to the fact that they blend the strategies of both documentary and narrative, yet "belong wholly to neither" (Lipkin x). Their ability to sway audience perceptions of history compounds this complexity. There are "subtle ways that a producer's choice of materials and editing decisions can turn a film into a powerful instrument to promote thought and stir emotion" and an examination of these methods can help us understand how films are used persuasively ("The Filmmaker" 1214). And while audiences will always be disappointed if they want films to be a definitive and wholly explanatory representation of historical events, critical analysis of filmic versions of history are not without

merit. Docudramas are as much a tool for studying the points in history that they were made as they are a tool for understanding the points in history that they depict. Films reflect the social, political, and cultural environment of the world around them, and they can therefore be treated as primary sources for historical study. After all of the controversy about historical accuracy and bias, we can step back and examine the films for when they were made, and what they can show us about that time. One critic called this “the saving grace of films about history” – that they “become pieces of history in themselves” (Murray 5). When we view docudramas in this way, they can reveal the perspectives that American filmmakers from different eras had on their collective history.

## CHAPTER II

### METHODS

In my research, I began with a broad look at current research on docudrama films, making use of articles, chapters, film reviews, and essays across subject areas. I preferenced scholarly material over the writings of journalists or critics; however these voices contain a valuable expertise, and I did not ignore their contributions to the discourse. The rationale behind my textual choices was diverse writings which would give me a view of docudrama from the perspective of a film scholar, historian, rhetorician, critic, etc. I collected these writings to use as a foundation for my own film analysis, the results of which are detailed in Chapter III. Rather than begin with a close reading of WWII docudramas, I first investigated how docudramas are made, what sets them apart, and how audiences perceive them. All of these insights allow me to read docudramas through an educated lens, keeping in mind the challenges that docudrama filmmakers face, and how these films are used persuasively.

After establishing this broad scope of the subject, I took a closer look at three different WWII docudramas in order to compare and contrast their method of representation. I chose *The Longest Day*, *Saving Private Ryan*, and *Flags of our Fathers* for my analysis. These three films represent distinct times in Hollywood history as well as American history, and my study of them takes these contexts into consideration. In analyzing these films, I pay particular attention to how they depict America's participation in the war, and how they balance narrative and truth. I also investigated these films as historical texts, examining how their placement in American history shaped the lens through which they depicted the past. Finally, I describe the similarities and

differences in these films' representation, and use their example to summarize my findings about the unique role of docudramas in American collective memory.

## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS

War has always provided docudrama filmmakers with compelling source material, and public interest in these points of history has created a valuable opportunity for commercial success. One of Hollywood's greatest military technical advisors, Dale Dye, suggests that the appeal of war films was because "war is man's greatest adventure" (Rubin 233). However, the heightened drama of these events means that filmmakers are faced with questions that are often unanswerable, and audiences that are often difficult to please. There is a scope of drama that is unheard of within other genres – "every human emotion that's imaginable from the absolutely atrocious to the absolutely most honorable is on display" (Rubin 233). The powerful dramatic capability of war films means that audiences can have intense emotional reactions to them. And as contemporary Hollywood films reach growing audiences, more individuals will have seen war depicted on screen than will ever have to participate in it (McKrisken 92). World War II is largely regarded with pride in America's collective history; a time where the "greatest generation" pulled together to defeat evil and preserve democracy. Filmic depictions of it have long reflected this sentiment – and their perspective has evolved into a "perceived reality" of America's involvement. While attitudes about war in general have evolved throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, depictions of World War II can help us understand how filmmakers have framed this part of our nation's history.

One of the most famous docudramas in American cinema is the sweeping 1960s D-Day epic, *The Longest Day*. With four directors, and an international cast of thousands, it was one of the

greatest technological feats of its day. The film was a box office hit and a critical success, earning an Academy Award for cinematography and special effects (Ambrose 236). *The Longest Day* is based on a book of the same name, which was written as an all-encompassing examination of the battle of Normandy. The book's author, Cornelius Ryan, was a war correspondent during the battle, and interviewed hundreds of WWII veterans for the project (Rubin 90). Like many docudramas, *The Longest Day* depends on the reliability of its source material to give the film credibility – the film's trailer boasts that it is based on "Cornelius Ryan's universally acclaimed bestseller". The film's main selling point in the advertising campaign is D-Day itself, rather than the character's experience with it. The trailer for the film is very broad; it lists the film's stars and shows large-scale battle sequences, but very little details or dialogue. This treatment is uncommon among modern docudramas, whose plots are more often centered around an individual character within the historical context.

The other main selling point of the film is its international cast of actors – the trailer boasts it has "top talent from four countries". This global partnership of performers mirrors the foreign policy of the 1960s – the creation of NATO and global collaboration against communist threats. The film's top producer, Daryl F. Zanuck, spent millions of dollars to ensure the film looked believable – borrowing equipment, uniforms, and even troops (used as extras) from militaries around the world. The Allied forces in *The Longest Day* are played by leading men, such as Sean Connery, Henry Fonda, and John Wayne – Zanuck hoped that recognizable faces would make the different characters easier to follow ("Hollywood's 26). These dashing Hollywood stars shine in their performances; John Wayne's famous "Send 'em to Hell" speech is full of charisma, and his perseverance through injury proudly displays American grit and bravery. The film showcases the strength and unity of the Allied invasion with sweeping shots of thousands of soldiers and



fleets of ships that explode onto Normandy's beaches. This display of American industrial strength in 1943 situates America at the top of the world economically in the mind of the audience (Ambrose 236). Because of America's Cold War-era alliance with Germany, the Nazi characters are not as vilified in *The Longest Day* as in other WWII films. Instead, the German High Command is the butt of the film's jokes – their surprise and confusion upon realizing Normandy has been invaded is portrayed with amusement. The portrayed success of the Normandy invasion is not mishandled – it was indeed a great victory for the Allies. But where *The Longest Day* comes under scrutiny is the film's preference for spectacle over substance. Thousands of soldiers die a simple and painless death, falling cleanly onto the sandy Normandy beaches. Many reviewers found this a significant flaw in the film; there are no injuries, no agony, with soldiers dying "handsomely, with their box-office appeal intact" ("Hollywood's" 26). Rather than depicting how infantrymen had to slowly work their way closer to enemy barricades, the film's climax shows the barricades being demolished and American soldiers charging past the German lines (Ambrose 239). Several other scenes made similar changes to history; choosing to show a more exciting method or heroic effort on the part of the Allied forces. Zanuck was not at all bothered by these changes, and was quick to tell his critics that "there is nothing duller on the screen than being accurate but not dramatic". Although he invested greatly in the film's visual accuracy, clearly Zanuck's priority was also with the film's entertainment value, something that docudrama filmmaker struggle with endlessly.

However, *The Longest Day* works much like a documentary in its style and presentation. Compared to modern docudramas, it spends very little energy trying to accentuate the drama of the event, or make the experience more relatable for the audience. The characters are recognizable, but not known to the audience – there is almost no character development or need

for back story. The film is displayed like a full on military text: full of jargon, and based on the experiences of actual WWII veterans (“Hollywood’s” 28). Yet one of the main criticisms of films like *The Longest Day* is that while they worked hard to recreate the war’s events, they choose not to portray the carnage of war frankly. Those who die in *The Longest Day* are instead brought down with one clean shot; no one is wounded or suffers the pain of injury. This is so unrealistic that one critic called it “little more than Hollywood fantasy” (Ambrose 240). However, the commercial success of *The Longest Day* indicates that perhaps audiences in 1962 were not interested in candid presentation of the horrors of war. *The Longest Day* was a huge financial risk – at the time, it was the most expensive black and white film ever made - but Zanuck was confident that he could present audiences with a message they were happy with (“Hollywood’s” 26). The film makes a strong statement about the power of unified democracies – French, British, and American soldiers worked together both behind and in front of the camera, just as the Allies joined forces to defeat their common enemy (“Hollywood’s 26). As the United States faced Communist threats, arms races, and social changes, a film depicting the strength of justice and democracy was exactly what the hope of the entire nation, and *The Longest Day* reflects that optimism.

More than 60 years later, another World War II docudrama would depict the battle of Normandy, and change how audiences saw war on screen. Stephen Spielberg’s 1998 classic, *Saving Private Ryan* is perhaps the most famous World War II docudrama in the history of American cinema. One critic called it “a dramatic paradigm shift” for combat films (Rubin 224). The film opens with the assault on D-Day, but it centers on the mission of a unit sent to retrieve a marine who has been called back to the States due to the death of his brothers. Unlike *The Longest Day*, *Saving Private Ryan* was an original screenplay, written by Robert Rodat. Rodat was clear in his

intention to create a fictionalized narrative within the context of World War II, even if he had been inspired by true accounts of soldiers across history. And so instead of relying on firsthand accounts, Rodat crafted his narrative from the filmic conventions of the combat film genre. This genre had developed significantly since the 1950s and 60s, and reflected much of what we see in modern docudramas; a single narrative within a larger historical context. Other genre conventions included the “diverse combat unit” that had a myriad of smaller characters for the audience to connect with.

The modern-day combat film is much more about conveying the experience of war than its predecessors – which accounts for the immersive-style of the opening sequence. This conveyed an important message for audiences who were “a generation of Americans who have never risked their lives to defend the free world” (“Hollywood’s 27). Spielberg had grown up seeing old Hollywood war movies, as well as hearing veterans like his father share their war stories. He noticed a vast difference between the horror his father’s friends had endured, and the heroism depicted in war films. He says “I kept wondering, how come movies haven’t done it this way, if that’s what really happened?” (Rubin 233) So when Spielberg set out to recreate the war on screen, he wanted to give people what he felt would be a more authentic feeling of having experienced battle. As Dr. Robert Toplin described it, “This was up close and personal war – a form of storytelling that is simultaneously horrifying and fascinating.” He achieved this feeling through use of a handheld camera, placing the audience in the action. Likewise, his use of sound was meant to mirror what the characters were hearing (muted when they went underwater, whizzing of bullets that went past them, etc). Spielberg had said of previous war films, “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 really like to be in one.” (Rubin 234)

It was clear that in making *Saving Private Ryan*, Spielberg felt that he was addressing many of the grim realities of war which had previously been avoided in past docudramas. However, the film still has a clear perspective: it portrays World War II as a necessary evil, the ‘Good War’, a “worthy struggle against the evils of tyranny, oppression, and militarism.” (“Hollywood’s 27) This was how Americans remembered World War II in the 1990s, especially compared to so many of the grisly foreign conflicts of the 1980s and 1990s – which seemed to accomplish very little.

The 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of D-Day had been celebrated only a few years earlier, and had renewed general interest in WWII veterans and their experiences. America also had strong hopes for “cost-free international peace in the post-Cold War world”, and so a film showing the horror of war supported that sentiment (“Hollywood’s 28). However, it took a while for *Saving Private Ryan* to be picked up. War films were a risky endeavor to make, since American audiences “had been sharply critical of military engagement because of their disillusionment over the Vietnam conflict.” (“Hollywood’s 27) Americans had endured the relentless footage of warfare in Vietnam, and simply weren’t interested in paying money to go see the same things depicted on screen. So the makers of *Saving Private Ryan* faced a significant challenge – they wanted to convey the reality of war, but their audience needed to see it as more meaningful than the perceived worthlessness of wars like those in Vietnam or Korea. So Rodat and Spielberg worked together to create an emotional narrative to sit at the forefront of the film. The emphasis on characters in *Saving Private Ryan* (particularly Tom Hank’s character) makes the film much more emotionally driven compared to films like *The Longest Day*. This is true for most modern day docudramas, where “the history familiar in our textbooks is in the background, but the stories of people are in the foreground” (“Hollywood’s 29). The film is not primarily concerned with

informing the audience about D-Day, but rather giving them the experience of combat through their viewing of the film. *Saving Private Ryan* does not dwell on the historical context or reasoning; the film “offers few historical markers about the purpose and strategy of the war planners” (“Hollywood’s 29). Because *Saving Private Ryan* is based on film troupes from other combat films, it did not have the stark accuracy of *The Longest Day*. Historians have concluded that while the depiction of battle is accurate, the events depicted in the film “could not have and did not happen... Spielberg’s film ‘strains and far exceeds the limits of dramatic license’” (“Hollywood’s 28). The film is more reflective of modern day docudramas, which are praised for the emotional pull but criticized for their inaccurate representation of history.

While modern cinematic history tends to emphasize character over information, these films can still provide powerful commentary on a historical event. A prime example of this type of docudrama is the 2006 film, *Flags of Our Fathers*. Directed by Hollywood legend Clint Eastwood, the film chronicles the events surrounding the famous photograph of the flag raising at Iwo Jima. Like *The Longest Day*, *Flags of Our Fathers* relies on the audience’s fascination with the historical event – the trailer boasts that it is “the real story” of the famous photograph. It makes strong claims to realism by using historic photos and news images, as well as draining the color from much of the battles sequences, making it look almost like old B&W film.

While the subject of *Flags of Our Fathers* is Iwo Jima, the film is more concerned with the aftermath of war than with depicting the battle itself. The film takes a critical look at how war affects men, and “raises pointed questions about how heroes, wars, are packaged and sold” (Ansen 2). The audience gets a strong first impression of this argument in the opening scene: one of the flag raisers (Doc Bradley) has a nightmare about one of his fallen comrades, shouting “Where is he? Where is he?!” into the dark. The story is told in the present day by his son, as he

interviews the men depicted in the famous photo. Through use of flashbacks, the film establishes causality for the actions of the protagonists, and makes strong claims about the effects of war. The film's greatest argument is the intersection of actual experiences of war with America's ideas about it – the idea of a “hero” being a major point of conflict. The three men in the photograph constantly struggle with this title that the nation has given them, one that they would never have given themselves. Ira Hayes, in a moment of drunken desperation, pleads with his commander, saying “I can't stand them calling me a hero”. The more that these men are elevated and applauded for their contribution to America's military action, the more the men are disillusioned. The Americans are much more complex than their counterparts in *The Longest Day*: the soldiers are played by relatively unknown, young actors, and they are not entirely likeable. Throughout the film, Americans participate in the “casual racism of the day”, calling one of the Native American characters a variety of racist nicknames - one bar owner even refuses to serve him (Ansen 2). Likewise, the most visible antagonists in the film are not the Japanese, but the American leaders who parade the soldiers around to make money off of them. A departure from earlier version of “the greatest generation”, *Flags of Our Fathers* does not shy away from the grimier aspects of the war effort. The film asks questions about how we frame our history; the photograph as an example of how we create a useable version of the truth that we can cope with. The narrator remembers the sentiment that the Iwo Jima picture “could win or lose the war”. Through examining the way the photo was used, the film questions how “images are used to manipulate reality” (Ansen 2). The veterans in the film point out this disconnect between America's glorification of the war and their experience, suggesting that heroic soldiers are “something we create, something we need” when in fact these men “certainly didn't think of themselves as heroes... and they died without glory”. It is easy to understand the veteran's

cynicism as the film constantly juxtaposes scenes of extreme violence and trauma with scenes of opulent celebration of the war effort. These flashbacks and violent depictions of battle are akin to those in *Saving Private Ryan*, similarly highlighting how technological developments in film have changed how war movies are shot. In order to showcase the relentlessness of the battle, Eastwood has the camera cut to the same shot of a Japanese machine gun again and again, as it intercuts shots of American soldiers being picked off.

However, *Flags of Our Fathers* is less about the spectacle or experience of war, and so there are instances where the camerawork is more restrained and detached from the action. Like *Saving Private Ryan*, *Flags of our Fathers* faced a post-Vietnam audience, but it also faced an audience living in an information-saturated culture. Every flaw in the government's PR campaign post 9/11 had been seen again and again, and every action taken by the military could be documented by embedded journalists and cell-phone wielding bystanders alike. As one critic described it, "it was easier to control the way we looked at war back in the days depicted in *Flags of our Fathers*" (Ansen 3). It is a testament to the development of cinema that a film, which frames our current view of the past, would attempt to question the ways that past generations framed their view of the past.

Like most docudramas of the post-Vietnam era, *Saving Private Ryan* and *Flags of Our Fathers* are neither celebrations of war nor arguments against it. And while films like *The Longest Day* balance a documentary-like objectivity in their style, they also make significant claims about what WWII meant to Americans. All three of these films can be seen as reflective of the era in which they were produced, and all three balance fictionalization with historical accuracy in their own way. An information-driven film like *The Longest Day* pays close attention to detail and gives clear and accurate historical context. However, it chooses to show the cost of war with

almost naivety, with soldiers dying “with lovely last words that sound like they were written by poets” (Rubin 227). And yet an emotion driven modern docudrama like *Saving Private Ryan* more explicitly depicts the experience of combat, but it might fictionalize other events for the sake of its narrative. A balance of these two interests is a film like *Flags of our Fathers*, which uses the drama of the historical event itself to drive the story of its characters. Audiences, historians, and critics disagree on what type of film would be considered the “best” kind of docudrama, or the “most accurate”. When dealing with history, which is messy and constantly open to interpretation, there is often no final conclusion at which to arrive. What filmmakers can agree on is that images of the past can be exploited or manipulated, and that the way we portray the past matters a great deal. As a WWII veteran depicted in *Flags of our Fathers* suggested of his fallen comrades, “we should remember them the way that they really were”. Docudramas are self-aware enough to recognize that we have “a deep seated need to avert our eyes from the horror of war by gazing up at the more comforting vision of the heroic” (Ansen 4). And so as film develops and evolves, perhaps filmmakers will gain a greater understanding of how to truly depict events or individuals “the way they really were”.



## CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION

My research has certainly left me with new and exciting questions that can be asked about these films. I was particularly interested in the questions raised by *Flags of our Fathers* about framing history, especially since dramatic films can often be a tool for such framing. I would love to do a more detailed study on that specific film, and see how criticisms of the film compare with the media's criticism of the war in Iraq. Likewise, *Flags of our Fathers* is a film that shows great self-awareness, and I would be interested in looking for other films that ask questions about the manipulation of information. Another aspect of docudramas that I was particularly interested in but was unable to study significantly in this project was its impact on audience perception of history. It is clear that docudramas are particularly controversial because they "are significant sources of history for large segments of the American population" (Rosenthal 28), and so this is a question that could have lasting implications. Both content analysis and audience survey would be beneficial in studying the exact impact of these messages. As of now current research has only gone so far as to say that we know films impact how audiences view history, but they are not the only defining factor in their perception. As one critic suggests, "It is disingenuous to insist that movies and TV shows have no effect on how people perceive the world, but it is also arrogant to presume exactly how people process entertainment" (Murray 4). This would be a valuable question to answer as it would affect how filmmakers might view their responsibility and their persuasive capability. The lack of depth in my discussion of film's specific role in public memory creation is a definite weakness of the project. Another weakness of my project would be that I didn't analyze any films from the 1970's-1980's: a significant time in American

history. A subsequent study could be looking at WWII films from each post-war decade, and see how the perspectives on the war change and evolve. However I'm pleased with the foundation of film criticism and genre study that this project has given me, and feel that the findings are consistent with the current discourse.

However effective they may seem to one group or another, docudramas will always be valuable for those looking to see how attitudes about history change. An understanding of the context of a film's production is the key to analyzing how and why the filmmaker made the choices he did, and how it reflects the culture of the day. This was a new aspect of film theory that I learned about through my research, and it has given me a new lens through which to see some of my favorite films. Docudramas in particular can tell us how audiences perceived themselves and their history, and offer a window into the culture of the past. Through my analysis of the three WWII films I looked at, I found that the foreign policies and military activities that were happening at the time of the film's production greatly impacted how they represented WWII. I had hypothesized that these films would portray WWII as "The Good War" in American history, and that was partially true. In some ways these docudramas showed the heroism and courage of the men who participated in the war, and their patriotic sense of purpose. However, *The Longest Day* tended to focus on the spectacle of the war itself, offering little criticism of the war's causes and effects. *Saving Private Ryan* focused on the experience of war. While it did ask questions about the cost of war (through its portrayal of death and destruction), the film offered very little commentary about the value of these men's efforts. *Flags of our Fathers* was the most inquisitive of the three films, and was extremely critical of our nation's war machine, and how it chews up and spits out individual men. So it would be going too far to say that all docudramas

idealize World War II or those involved in it, however I would agree that compared to filmic depictions of other US wars, WWII is treated with the most honor.

Through an examination of docudramas, I found that the primary questions surrounding docudrama have to do with responsibility and effectiveness. Regarding effectiveness, the chief question is what constitutes a “good” docudrama? Upon reading the arguments of film scholars, historians, critics, and journalists, I have found that different groups each have their own version of how an effective docudrama represents history. Some are primarily concerned with precise reenactment; the film must look, sound, and feel like the events that they are based on. Others, however, feel that this is too restrictive of an expectation; they simply want docudramas to leave audiences with a proper understanding of the big picture of the event. Others demand that docudramas ask new and fresh questions about history, and present audiences with a unique perspective. Until Hollywood understands how to make a “successful” docudrama, they will endlessly struggle to please diverse critics.

The other questions surround responsibility – audiences still endlessly struggle with how to view fact-based films. The hybrid nature of docudramas means that while they make claims to realism, they are bound by film conventions which keep them from being able to simply represent history. There is an understanding that exists between filmmakers and audiences, but it is implicit. As Mark Bowden from *The Atlantic* suggests, “Everyone understands the rules of this game. Theater is theater, not a scrupulous presentation of fact.” But the suspension of reality that audiences experience in a film setting makes logical questioning difficult. Should we really expect audiences to allow themselves to be completely immersed in a story but maintain a clear head about the details of the historical context? In some ways, it would seem that filmmakers set themselves up to be vilified when they market their film as “BASED ON REAL EVENTS”

while fully aware of the dramatic licenses they took. On the other hand, some would suggest that filmmakers are artists, not educators – they should not be held to the same standard. Is a filmmaker a caretaker of history? Some see themselves as “public historians” that strive to tell stories they feel are important (McKrisken 10). Therefore their responsibility to the public is still very unclear. As modern docudramas continue to serve a culture which is increasingly information saturated, the demand for full disclosure and truth may steadily rise. The obligation of an artist to their audience is a debate that has never been resolved, but when it comes to docudramas, it is a question which may soon demand an answer.

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