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Redefining Melodrama: *Saving Private Ryan* as Male Weepee¹

Introduction: Sentimental Spielberg and Genre-mixing

Spielberg essentially makes two very different types of films: adventure films (which by his own admittance combine well with popcorn consumption)² and more serious fare. In the latter case, Spielberg looks for mature themes, historical or political content, worthy causes and noble characters and, above all, he tries to distance himself from his commercial products, which are oriented towards a more juvenile audience. However, the Manichaeism present in the narratives, the *pathos* experienced by the characters (notably the protagonist), the exaggerated nature of the situations and the spectacular and graphic *mise-en-scène* are sheer melodrama as well as blockbuster material. Ironically, by striving to make respectable films well placed within a dramatic paradigm, Spielberg, I will argue, sometimes goes too far, indulging in an aesthetics of excess that is redolent of melodrama in general, the ultimate goal of which is to bring the audience to tears.

Scornfully known as “weepies,” melodramas were, from their inception on the stage, associated with female problems and frailty. However, in the 1950s, film directors such as Nicholas Ray, Vincente Minnelli and especially Douglas Sirk introduced fragile protagonists of the male sex, thus creating what Thomas Schatz calls the “male weepee” (237). Nevertheless, this is a contentious categorization. First, melodrama is a very elusive genre, and there are, historically, two opposing descriptions of its nature and contents. Indeed, Christine Gledhill, in her account of the evolution of stage melodrama, reports that, in the 18th century, the melodramatic inclination was divided

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2. In *The Story of Hollywood* (chapter 10, “Hollywood Now”), Spielberg says: “The movies I make are movies that I make selfishly for my own enjoyment, things that I would like to react to in various ways. And I make these movies to eat a lot of popcorn, clap, laugh and have a good time” [6:17].

into bourgeois plays making use of sentimentalization, stressing the individual and appealing to the personal, on the one hand, and, on the other, popular theater essentially providing spectacle and everything that goes with it (exotic sets, special effects, plus the integration of earlier performance traditions such as tumbling and acrobatics) (39). Steve Neale, basing himself exclusively on the film industry's publicity machine, claims that, until the 1970s, what was considered melodrama or melodramatic was the opposite of a tear-jerker (*Genre* 179–204). Melodrama meant films filled with sensorial excitement, considered as “male” by today's standards: hard-boiled detective *film noirs*, gangster movies, psychological, paranoid and gothic thrillers. These movies were packed with violence, crime, guns, blood, thunder, physical action, tension, speed, etc. Over the years, the magazine *Variety*, a mouthpiece for the industry, described films using expressions that tied melodrama to virility: “Virile melodrama,” “he-man melodrama,” “mainly masculine story” and “meller with an all-male cast” (Neale, *Genre* 187). Even the canonical melodramas of the 1950s, for all their bourgeois and familial settings, were described by the press in very manly terms: “full-blooded melodrama,” “high-octane situations and characters,” “juvenile delinquency melodrama,” such as *East of Eden* (Elia Kazan, 1955) and *Rebel without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955), both starring James Dean (Neale, *Genre* 187). As in the earlier stage melodrama, the cinematic variety was based on the conflict between good and evil, with the compulsory victory of good, hyperbolic aesthetics and a lot of emotion and sentiment, as well as a plot replete with action, breath-taking suspense and emotions. According to Neale, following Daniel Gerould, the maximum intensity of feeling was as much part of the characters' lives as of the viewer's experience; the characters were mere instruments of feeling (Neale, *Genre* 198).

Secondly, although it can be considered a genre, melodrama, precisely because it is so elusive, is also a sensibility (Mercer and Shingler 94). In fact, genres do have sensibilities attached to them, according to their staple characters, situations, settings and motifs. A hard-boiled detective story is different from a musical comedy, even when there is a gentle female character in the former and a cynical male in the latter. What matters most is the overall style, as well as the narrative pattern. This intrinsic sensibility in the film itself affects how viewers react to it. This explains why melodramas induce such powerful stimulation in the audiences, either through excitement or tears. Actually, because of its association with weakness and femininity in a pejorative sense, melodrama tends to be confused with the “woman's film,” which has a woman-centered narrative (both the protagonist and the narrative concerns are female) and is directed towards an audience of that gender as well (Gledhill 283–349; Neale, *Genre* 188–196).¹

1. See the articles written by Mary Ann Doane (283–298), Linda Williams (299–325), Tania Modleski (326–338), and Annette Kuhn (339–349), in the book on melodrama edited by Christine Gledhill.

Rick Altman and Janet Staiger argue that film genres are naturally mixed products and that they have always been so (Altman 123–143; Staiger 203–217). “Inbreeding,” as Staiger prefers to call this phenomenon, is not a novel characteristic of the post-modern attitude towards genres, since it was already in place in the Studio era.¹ Indeed, market logic dictated that a film should be attractive to as many people as possible: men and women, young and old. Thus, filmmakers purposely blended different sensibilities in films, whereas the studios themselves merely implied generic affiliation so as not to drive off a considerable part of the audience.

Altman indicates that studio publicity campaigns would choose at least one male genre and at least another female genre and put it together with a third option genre, which he calls *tertium quid* (128). According to this rationale, the result could be “War film” (male), “Weepee” (female) plus “Historical/costume,” e.g., a combat movie made to arouse tearful emotions and set in a historical context such as World War II. *Saving Private Ryan* fits this description perfectly. Altman mentions that mixed genre films used to be labeled according to the “dominant” genre. In a patriarchal industry, it would seem natural that the male audience’s preferences should come first, but women were a forceful influence since, as indicated by Staiger, they were major decision-makers in family entertainment choices (209). No wonder that heterosexual romance, as the most important vehicle of sentiment, was usually included as a secondary plot line often capable of influencing the main plot. The merging of different genres, even if it was in great measure decided upon gender affiliation, worked as a rearrangement of the usual standardized formula and was, therefore, a welcome source of novelty for all audience types.

To my mind, the expression “male weepee” should be reevaluated and stripped of its negative connotation. Moreover, it should be widely applied, outside of the family melodrama of the 1950s from which the term derives, since melodrama itself is not reducible to its familial core, especially in its castrating sense. I contend that the mixing of genres can result in a more fruitful artistic product if the filmmakers have a specific thematic purpose, as does Spielberg in *Saving Private Ryan*. Genre-mixing results in a multi-layered emotional experience for the viewer, which is even more complex when each of the individual genres that compose the mix turns out to be controversial, as is the case with both melodrama and combat movies, for which there is no unequivocal definition. This makes it all the more possible for a filmmaker to combine them in order to increase both momentum and sentimentality, thus creating a redoubled emotional experience.²

1. Altman points to the fact that the creation of simple, clear and mutually exclusive categories was the result of archival needs and not actual industry practices. Genres were, wrongly, treated as labels.

2. Moreover, Schatz claims that, in the evolution of melodrama, the classical and baroque periods are undistinguishable, which seems to me to be an added advantage for their combination (223).

In this chapter, I contend that *Saving Private Ryan*—despite its obviously war-driven title, military contents and heroic protagonist of uncontested manliness—is actually a male weepie. My argument concentrates on the emotional focus of the film in its portrayal of combat. The following analysis seeks to evaluate the workings of sentiment according to its perception by the viewers, in order to see how it reaffirms and simultaneously undermines the traditional combat movie paradigm as developed by Basinger (2003 and 2006) and Sitter (2012). I will do this from two different but concurrent perspectives: (1) the use of the combat film narrative pattern and stock characters, *but* as a depiction of familial values and related topoi; (2) the adoption of the combat film style as being typical of “male flicks,” *but* viewed from a non-normative subjective perspective. In both circumstances, the main characteristics of melodrama indicated by Christine Gledhill¹ (1987) are considered alongside Steve Neale’s (1986) notion of “pleasurable tears” in order to convey the importance of *Saving Private Ryan* as a male-oriented weepie.

The Home at the Front: A “Male Flick” with a Twist

Saving Private Ryan is a “combat movie” in that it takes place in the WWII scenario of Normandy and involves practically non-stop military action (Basinger, *World War II* 10²). However, the heart of the film very much points to domestic and family values more than is usual in a war film, where they are usually reduced to conversations among the soldiers or the writing of personal letters.

Christine Gledhill’s 1987 collected volume on melodrama is significantly entitled *Home Is Where the Heart Is*. The “family melodrama” of the 1950s, a term coined by Thomas Elsaesser in 1972, requires that home be the privileged, geographical and symbolic *locus* of the narrative, established by the rule of the patriarch, to which everyone, particularly the wife and mother, must bow. From this perspective, “home” is a site of self-sacrifice, claustrophobia, and social and psychological repression. All the conflicts take place in the familiar core, and people are defined by their role as fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, etc. (Schatz 227–228). However, according to Neale, drawing from Jacques Lacan, one of the pleasures of watching a tear-jerker is to enact a symbolic union with the *mother* (“Melodrama” 20–22). Therefore, as a sensibility—because not all films that make us cry are melodramas, but all sentimental melodramas do make us cry—a melodrama can be aligned with the rule of the mother and a benign notion of family. This, I will argue, is at the melodramatic heart of *Saving Private Ryan*.

1. Manichaeism (e.g., good *versus* evil); ethical conflicts presented in a symbolic, albeit non abstract, way; emblematic characters (e.g. archetypes such as father and son); suffering and *pathos* derived from innate virtue and kindness; sympathy and pity felt by the viewer towards the hero.

2. Basinger actually claims that “[m]ilitary films not involving active combat should not be included” in the genre (11).

The film takes us from one armed confrontation to another, accompanying a group of men from the moment they prepare to land on Omaha beach on D-Day until, a few days later, they make a last stand, trying to defend a bridge at Ramelle.¹ They land, under heavy enemy fire, with many other Rangers who soon get slaughtered. After securing it for the Allies, they are further endangered and separated from the rest of the Company by a strange mission: to go and find one man, a simple private, the sole survivor of four enlisted brothers, in order to restore him to his mother, alive. This comes as the ultimate irony for these men who survived the massacre on the beach. It is also the ultimate wish of all mothers: that they should have their loved ones safely returned to them. The film constantly strikes this chord, starting with the recitation, by General George C. Marshall, of the famous Bixby Letter President Lincoln had sent to another grieving mother during the Civil War, an act which ultimately leads to his decision to order the rescue mission of Ryan [33:06–34:11]. A certain Captain Hamill, whom the group meets at the front while looking for Ryan, confirms the importance of this return [62:37].

The leader of the mission is Captain Miller, played by Tom Hanks, who is chosen for his combat skills. It is up to him to single out the rest of the group: eight men in all. Together, they form a cross-section of American male types in conformity with the combat movie paradigm: a majority of WASPS, followed by two minority representatives: a Jewish American and an Italian American.² The group is composed of stock combat movie figures: the born-leader protagonist, Captain Miller; the seasoned veteran, Sergeant Horvath; the sharp-shooter from the South, Private Jackson; the wise guy from Brooklyn, Private Reiben; the doctor, T4 Medic Wade; and the naïve intellectual, Corporal Upham. Even the Private Ryan of the title, when eventually found, turns out to come from one of the agricultural states of the Mid-West which, according to Basinger, lends so many men to combat films (*World War II* 68).³ Their identities only become known to us after a good part of the landing scene at Normandy has played out, as they scream their family names to each other over the battle noise. Once named, they acquire the status of sympathetic characters.

On their journey to find Ryan, they become a close-kit group, reinforcing the family ties that are so central to the film. Thematically, *Saving Private Ryan* is a film about brothers, in the literal as well as metaphorical sense, in a way that goes beyond the usual comradeship seen in this sort of cinematic fare. At one point, Captain Miller observes: "This Ryan better be worth it!" [65:25]. When Ryan is finally found, he proves to be so, not so much because

1. The film combines the two possible outcomes of the classic films of the 1940s: victory or defeat (KANE 93).

2. Although the film itself does not stress this fact, the actor Vin Diesel, who is of African-American ancestry on his father's side, is proud of his racial origins.

3. Presumably, because they represent wholesome values of small-town America in the populist 1940s.

he is an apt and resourceful fighter,¹ but because he refuses to abandon his post, claiming that the men around him are the only family he has left and that his mother will understand [106:42].

Two of the deaths endured as the price paid to accomplish the mission of saving Ryan fulfill a combat movie cliché, in that the two minority representatives die shockingly. On the one hand, Spielberg manages to mitigate the political incorrectness of that classical must in war movies of the 1940s by endowing them with additional emotions; Caparzo and Mellish are more than just filmic platitudes, a necessary body count. On the other hand, it is precisely because of the added emotionality (and gore) these scenes contain that they shock even more than usual. All in all, it should come as no surprise that these deaths are, socially and symbolically, connected to family values and issues. Indeed, Caparzo, the Italian, dies because he is too much of a family man. Against his captain's best judgement, he tries to help a little French girl to come out of her half-destroyed house because, as he says, she reminds him of his niece [50:16]. He is shot by a German sniper while holding the girl, and his last words are for his father back home. Mellish, the Jew, is killed at the hands of an SS officer, in a strangely intimate scene where the German lies on top of the American, forcing Mellish's bayonet into his chest [139:20]. Their faces nearly touch, and the sweat on the German's brow drips down onto Mellish as the SS man calms the American into oblivion with the sound "Shhhh!" and the indication that everything will be all right. He seems as much to be having intercourse with the enemy as lulling a child to sleep. There is a personal touch to this death that far surpasses the irony of a Jew being murdered by a member of the SS. The mothering attitude of the German can be seen as a symbolic union of sorts, a more humane way to dispose of a Jew, by putting him to sleep in the battlefield and not in a gas chamber.

According to Neale, whenever the viewer knows more than the characters, he or she is bound to cry during situations that result in the death of sympathetic people ("Melodrama" 11). The POV shot through the sniper rifle allows the viewer to know that the sniper is in full control and that it is only a matter of time before Caparzo is dead (Fig. 1) [52:48]. Observing the whole scene and not being able to help the marked victim is, no doubt, an excruciating experience for the viewer, who feels half responsible for the character's death. Similarly, in Mellish's case, the viewer is able to see both the hand-to-hand combat between the German and the Jew, taking place in one room, and the petrified Upham, the intellectual corporal, who has frozen on the stairs only a few meters away. Not only is the viewer unable to save Mellish, but he or she is also unable to make Upham move; a little less fear on Upham's part and Mellish would have been saved. This outcome is doubly painful when the viewer realizes, later on, that Upham is going to survive the whole ordeal, whereas better soldiers than him, notably Mellish, do not.

1. Ingeniously suggesting an alternative method for throwing mortars without the tube.



Figure 1 – *Saving Private Ryan*: POV shot of Caparzo through the sniper's rifle.

If the German who kills Mellish is a sort of parental figure from Hell, Captain Miller is the exact opposite. In a film without combat generals, unlike other such films, Miller is not only the highest-ranking officer of the main action, but he is also the role-model for this band of men. Reiben, the wise guy from Brooklyn, may contest the mission to find Ryan and also, occasionally, Miller's decisions, but he follows him anyway and genuinely mourns the captain's death at the end of the film. Miller is married and, as it turns out, in civilian life he is a school teacher and little league softball coach. He is the American husband-next-door, and as such, is easy for American audiences to relate to, irrespective of their gender. In the last part of the film, he assumes the role of surrogate father to Ryan, keeping him safe. As Neale observes, any character who can behave in a motherly fashion, be able to love, care, protect, be tender and sacrifice herself/himself, is a symbolic mother, ensuring the spectatorial pleasure through the achievement of the universal human goal spoken of by Lacan: symbolic fusion with the mother ("Melodrama" 17–18).

Although manly, Miller is not immune to frailty. At the beginning of the story, just before the landing on the Normandy shores, his hand is seen trembling, an involuntary motion caused by combat fatigue [4:44]. Even before the viewer knows Miller's name or his military worth, attention is drawn to this symptom of weakness. It recurs throughout the film, so that even his men notice it on several occasions. It would be tempting to consider Miller as the victim, in the purest melodramatic vein. Yet according to Noël Carroll, from a cognitive perspective, "[t]he standard film melodrama is not just a study in victimology" (36).¹ Miller never behaves like a victim. True, he is symbolically emasculated, but like the paradigmatic combat hero, Miller has been forced into dire circumstances and fulfills expectations. There are

1. Even completely ill-fated characters, which Miller is not, are admired by audiences because of the way they negotiate their misfortune.



Figure 2 – *Saving Private Ryan*: slow track-in on Wade talking about his mother.

two exceptions: (1) the unnecessary order to attack the bunker entrenched under a German radar station, which causes the medic's death (for which Miller is seen crying, alone, afterwards) [90:34]; and (2) the decision to free the German prisoner nicknamed Steamboat Willie, which will later result in Miller's own demise [146:44]. However, in both cases, he explains his decisions with a family-oriented rationale: he wants to earn the right to get back to his wife, and every barbaric act he commits pushes him farther away from home. He is not afraid of exposing his feelings and, in fact, he is all the greater for it in the eyes of the viewers. Having dealt with doubts and difficulties, he overcomes them in order to set an example to his men.

Like Miller, almost all of the men in the outfit are seen crying in one form or another: a tear trickles composedly down Ryan's cheek when he is told of his three brothers' deaths [104:36];¹ Mellish, Caparzo, Wade, Upham and Reiben also cry at different points of the narrative. This is not uncommon in combat movies, where it is not shameful for men to cry. Nevertheless, unnecessary sentiment is used in one of these scenes: during the only break the men have from action, Wade talks about how, as a little child, he would stay up waiting for his mother, a nurse, to come home at night and tuck him in; he remembers that sometimes he would inexplicably pretend to be asleep and, as nostalgia and guilt wash over him, tears shine in his eyes, highlighted by a slow track-in shot until the camera frames his face in close-up (Fig. 2) [67:00]. From Neale's perspective, what he is crying about is the fact that he finally realizes he cannot undo his actions and reverse time ("Melodrama" 8–11).

Instead of one climactic battle, as is usual and necessary in combat movies, the group undergoes two: the landing at Omaha Beach and the last stand in Ramelle. Together, they represent the two templates of combat proposed by Basinger: (1) journey, movement and victory; (2) stasis, last stands and defeats (*World War II* 57). It is true that the bridge is held and that some of the

1. Later, during the final assault at the bridge, he definitely breaks down in tears.

men live to tell about it, but the majority die, including Miller. In the classical combat movie of the mid-1940s, even the lost battles were considered by the official discourse as moral victories. In *Saving Private Ryan*, we have the exact opposite: a real historical victory that is felt as a defeat. The usual pattern of intense action followed by a period of calm is somehow less noticeable in this film, as the group never goes on leave and keeps pushing on until they find Ryan. The only restful moment depicted in the film takes place at a church at night, but the bombardments outside undercut the silence of the scene, which is further undermined by the conversations taking place between the soldiers, unable to sleep [66:01]. During this scene, a war ritual is performed, stressing the family values and the sentimentality of the film: the (re)writing of a letter to be sent home to Caparzo's family (because the original was stained with blood).

The main military objective is to win the war, as Miller states before ordering the group to attack the German position beneath the radar, but there is a familial undercurrent to this [81:52]. The group could circumvent that position and avoid that specific confrontation with the Germans; they only engage because Miller is conscientious. He is not portrayed as the typical patriot who thinks of nation before family. Rather, it is because he thinks of other soldiers and the probability that they might be killed (and thus not return to their families) that he wants to engage, thereby momentarily departing from the mission to find Ryan. It is as if he wanted to give everybody a chance to go home. Kathryn Kane mentions that, in the Hollywood combat movies produced during WWII (from 1942 to 1945), the focus was very personal (87). The films depicted the struggle between good and evil, civilization and savagery; the protagonists were everymen swept up by forces beyond their comprehension, who hoped to survive in order to return home. Miller wants to "earn" his right to do so, not by simply complying with orders, but by maintaining righteousness in what he does. His men act likewise: Sergeant Horvath says that saving Private Ryan might just be the most important thing they do in the war (implicitly referring to the human value of the act).

There is a personal and moral note in what the men understand to be the reason for them to fight. When, with his dying breath, Miller says to Ryan "Earn this," meaning the sacrifice others have done for him, he is not thinking of military acts but of actions that might benefit humanity. Kindness must be repaid with kindness, a humanitarian notion at best, and therefore, common to all audience members. Ryan understands that this is what Miller is referring to, and in the closing cemetery scene, this is what he discusses with his wife: "Tell me I'm a good man" [154:14]. The viewers also probably want to know if he has earned the sacrifice of his brothers in arms. However, the assurance that he has brings meager consolation for the deaths of the group members and especially Miller's. The viewers leave the movie theater in anguish and tears because there is no superior patriotic cause to justify Miller's death. In fact, all he ever wanted—to return to his wife—became impossible. In other words, the pain of all the wives and mothers who could not welcome their "boys" back is flaunted in our faces, and the result is an indescribable

emptiness. The feeling is reinforced by the way that Miller had spoken of his wife wearing gardening gloves, and then refusing to say anything else about her [121:26]. This deliberate silence on his part makes her take on added significance in the viewer's mind, building her up into a kind of myth instead of a flesh-and-blood woman. It also stresses the solitary image that he clings to, so much so that, ultimately, the iconic woman becomes a symbol of his loss. Myth and symbol together evoke an idealized past, since Miller had not seen her for a while. Miller's death is the ultimate irreversible fact in the film because it epitomizes the complete loss of innocence.¹ Through his death, his wife's symbolic purity dies again. On another, less metaphorical level, Miller's death is especially poignant due to its circumstances: he is killed by a man whose life he had earlier spared and only minutes away from the arrival of Allied reinforcements who help secure the bridge. Had he not saved the German, he would not be dead; had he been able to hold on for a little longer, he would have been rescued. His death seems futile because it is consummated as a last minute fatality, instead of a last minute rescue.

In good combat movie tradition, women are less than secondary characters, but they are always on the viewer's mind. After all, as Reiben points out, everybody has a mother [41:34]. By generating soldiers, mothers keep wars going, and it is ultimately their loss when soldiers die. Still, in this film, women perform simple but crucial acts. The enterprising spirit of the secretary who recognizes Ryan's last name and the half-stoical attitude Ryan's mother displays when she receives the tragic news of her sons' deaths are crucial to the transmission of sentiment. That mothers are very much on the soldiers' minds can be attested by the fact that when they die, the maternal figure pops up on their lips as a verbalization of affect, for instance when Wade utters his last words: "Mama? I want to go home. I want to go home. Mama. Mama. Mam . . ."; the camera intensifies the moment by closing in on him during his dying breath [87:32].

Guts, Glory and Tears: Combat and Loss

Saving Private Ryan is the quintessential combat movie. The landing at Normandy remains to this day one of the most violent pieces of cinema directed in American film history, not only because of the carnage and its gory details, but because it is introduced without warning, through a cut. Lasting 24 minutes and taking place only one scene after the beginning of the film, it completely takes the audience by surprise, launching a deliberate assault on their senses and sensibilities. The stentorian soundtrack, whose volume is purposefully raised throughout the whole segment, largely contributes to the

1. More than the hardened cynicism acquired by Upham, who first fraternizes with the German prisoner Steamboat Willie only to find out, too late, that he is not worthy of his good intentions.

effect, especially since the scene is completely devoid of music, in contrast with the beginning of the film.

The first scene of the movie takes place in a military cemetery in Normandy. Death is, therefore, presented from the beginning as a grandiose subject, underscored by John Williams's dramatic music; drums are used to create a martial tone, while the bugle reminds us of the ritual of taps, a tribute paid to the dead [1:06–4:05]. Moreover, the first shot of the film reveals the Stars and Stripes with which every American is familiarized from a very early age. On a straightforward narrative level, this might hold great appeal to an American audience, but on a metaphorical level, it holds even greater appeal to indiscriminate viewers, based on its emotional charge. Banners, such as a nation's flag, stand for high values and collective sacrifice. Backlit in the sunlight, the American flag itself is denaturalized, which makes it almost translucent and, I would suggest, an instance of the sublime,¹ connoted with fascination. The flag is unfurled and beaten by the wind, the only instance of natural motion in the cemetery. The atmosphere invites contemplation and, especially, the activation of memory. Against a backdrop of crosses and stars of David, the anonymous senior citizen who goes in to pay tribute to his comrades in arms fallen decades before and is later discovered to be the Private Ryan of the title, stands out all the more. Violins can be heard as he collapses next to a specific cross; the audience is meant to share in his discomposure. Several shots of longitudinal rows of crosses and tracking shots framing the crosses from behind in extreme detail, foreground the universality of death as much for the character as for us (Fig. 3). The rest of Ryan's family, who had maintained a reverential distance, runs to the aid of the elderly man in what is the film's first demonstration of male vulnerability. We are yet to recognize him as a veteran, and we do not know the reason for his emotion. At this stage, he is just an old man in need of help, but he is not without dignity. After all, he has just walked up to this grave alone, in what is both an acknowledgement of his solitude and of his place in the community of the cemetery. The other members of his family seem out of place there, almost

1. Kant conceived of the sublime only as applied to nature and natural elements or manifestations, whereas Burke thought it was associated with pain and fear and connected to something human. Using the main principles touched upon by the philosophers, Freeland prefers to focus on the properties of awe and elevation. Getting rid of the terror contained in the Burkian concept of "rapturous terror," she mentions the exhilaration and excitement present in rapture, especially when it is linked with something great and overwhelming. In a work of art, the sublime can be pleasurable and not just painful (Kant thought of it as a sensory overload). For Freeland, there is no moral law implied, as in Kant, only imagination and consciousness (instead of reason). Therefore, she tends to consider "sublime" any art object which "prompts a shift from sensory, emotional involvement to aesthetic involvement and cognitive appreciation" (74). This appreciation is both for the moral matters present in the film and for the film as a film (thus recognizing the mastery involved in the way certain ideas are transmitted to the viewers). Ed Tan and Nico Frijda also consider that "an environment in which one feels tiny and insignificant" is one of the three themes that melodrama uses to provoke sentiment. The viewers are subdued into helplessness and submission by a feeling of fascination (62).



Figure 3 – *Saving Private Ryan*: the universality of death.

like tourists (the younger man actually takes photographs), reinforcing by contrast his moral fortitude.

From this timelessness of fixed crosses, a cut transports us to Omaha Beach on June 6, 1944, via a shot that tracks forward to Ryan's face and ends in an extreme close-up of his eyes. The sheer quantity of memorials in the first scene and its location—a site of mourning and emotion *par excellence*—prepare us for the experience of war from an emotional standpoint. No previous speeches or explanations of righteous causes are provided, an imperative motif of the war movie (Basinger, *World War II* 73; Sitter 83–84), and no tactics are unveiled, as in the Darryl F. Zanuck production *The Longest Day* (Ken Annakin *et al.*, 1962). The film absolutely throws the viewers, already possessed of heavy hearts and an elegiac sentiment, into the middle of the conflict. The silence of the cemetery contrasts with the sonorous blasts of the battle, causing a rupture in the viewers' sensorium within a continuity of emotional pain.

The motif of the cross is one of many abstract parallelisms used in the film. It is both a symbol of respect and a marker of death. The dark metal structures placed in shallow waters on the sand as a defensive counter-measure by the Germans against a maritime invasion echo the white crosses in the cemetery, for it is precisely on this beach that many of those deaths took place (Fig. 4) [4:20]. As an object of faith, the cross makes sense in a war, where death is on every soldier's mind all the time and they turn towards the divine. Several soldiers, amongst them the sharpshooter, who quotes the Bible before a kill, are seen kissing one on several occasions for good luck [6:02, 20:23] However, the symbolic nature of the cross transcends its immediate narrative function. The mass of anonymous men landing in Normandy is symbolically marked for death. There is an undercurrent of all-encompassing victimization already playing on a subliminal level here, due to the Jewish-Christian context. In fact, Jesus Christ could be considered the primal sacrificial victim whose free



Figure 4 – *Saving Private Ryan*: the defensive structures on the beach that recall the cemetery.

will was limited. He had a job to do—to save the humanity from its sins—and in order to accomplish it, for the greater good, He had to die by His own Father's orders. This motif, particularly present in WWI films, was out of place by the classical period of WWII representations, which concentrated much more on combat itself than the ideas that led to war or stemmed from it. Because of the first scene of *Saving Private Ryan*, there is an atmosphere of doom throughout the film, which is deliberately associated with humanity and good deeds. The pure of heart are condemned to die; apart from Ryan, only the coward Upham, whose inertia caused the death of Mellish, and the contrarian wise guy Reiben survive in the end. Unlike other combat movies where the whole group perishes, there is a careful selection of who lives and dies according to the maximum emotional impact achievable. Ryan is saved in order to validate the sacrifice of Captain Miller and the other five members of the group, and to guarantee the tear-jerking finale.

The landing at the Dog Green Sector of Omaha Beach is an apotheosis of thunder and noise. Although undeniably realistic in its depiction of chaos and mayhem, it clearly operates as melodrama that conveys spectacular action. It succeeds in achieving what Basinger preconized as a necessity of the genre: "The audience [should be] ennobled for having shared [the fighters'] combat experience" ("World War II" 177). Still according to her, in so doing, fighters and viewers become "comrades in arms" (177). This makes *Saving Private Ryan* an extremely physical film as much for the viewers as for the characters. It also engages film viewers to the fullest. Carl Plantinga considers that, in watching a film, "meaning is embodied" (3), not only because the film has intrinsic meanings conceived to appeal to the viewers' affect in general (including conditioned reflections, physiological reactions, mimetism, etc.), but also because of the way viewers react consciously when watching the said film (being struck by fear or pity, for instance). Although the film

endeavors to maximize immersion by depicting the action from up close, viewers ultimately channel this scene primarily through their senses and process it in large measure through their emotions. In other words, they feel the war and the overkill as much as they perceive the consequences thereof. Basically, Spielberg's movie is a very challenging experience for the audience. The extremely mobile camera and the extremely fast cutting would alone grant this landing the epithet of "excessive."

Spielberg's masterful *mise-en-scène*, however, extends well past these two devices: the blood splashed on the camera lenses; the use of numerous close-ups of anguished faces; the backlighting of the machine guns on the German bunkers as the camera moves behind them at close range; the waves crashing against the landing crafts; the underwater shots of soldiers struggling with their gear as bullets whizz by them; a flickering effect and manipulations of the camera's recording speed (e.g., two different speeds in one single shot); the lateral tracking shots from behind the iron barriers; the roaring and clashing sound of machine-gun fire, blasts and grenade explosions; the camera trembling as if affected by the blasts around it; spatters of sand everywhere, especially when the soldiers run on the beach; lens flare; ambient sound and sound frequencies united in a single shot.

All of these techniques are typical of what Kristin Thompson calls "cinematic excess" (489). Underlying her argument is the notion that, in classical Hollywood cinema, everything in the image, sound and narrative has to be motivated by the protagonist's actions, whereas more artistic or stylized films strive to make their excessive elements more noticeable. It could be argued that, in *Saving Private Ryan*, formal techniques are, in effect, foregrounded. On the one hand, in the Omaha Beach scene, viewers are hard put to identify the protagonist's motivations, outside the fulfillment of his mission. On the other, although the effects do serve to relate an attack on a beach that resulted in massive casualties, they show what no other combat movie had dared to show in this scale before.

The *mise-en-scène* techniques listed above, along with the body parts scattered on the sand and the tracking shot going past the men in the assault vehicle in which Captain Miller awaits to reach the shoreline, place the viewer in the middle of the attack and attempt to make him/her really experience combat. This could be described as empathy, were it not for the fact that the spectator does not feel the genuine pain of the soldier whose guts are exposed in plain sight and cries "*mama!*" twice.¹ All Spielberg can produce is an approximation of real feelings and sensations. The most effective way to achieve this is through the use of techniques emphasizing subjectivity in

1. I am aligning myself with Plantinga here. The word "empathy" is used differently by several authors, but the most general implication is that there is a complete sharing of emotions between characters and film viewer, with the spectator viewing through the characters' eyes and feeling through the characters' emotions. Plantinga considers this to be an impossibility: when a viewer feels danger, he or she is not in actual danger, therefore the resulting fear is sympathetic emotion for the characters and not for his/her own person (31–33).

the story world proper; for instance, the shot where the camera goes underwater, accompanied by the muffled sound of soldiers' legs making progress towards the shore, and emerges again, to the deafening sounds of combat. Miller, as the protagonist of the film, is given extra screen time in this scene, although we still do not know, in the sole context of the film, his name and narrative status. His subjectivity is privileged over the subjectivity of other fighters, and the viewer is allowed to *experience* the combat from his perspective while also feeling the impact of the combat on him. For instance, when he looks around, during the landing, the elimination of ambient sound and its substitution for sound frequency along with a camera flicker effect place him simultaneously at the heart of the battle and removed from it [8:55–10:00]. He only comes to when another soldier cries to him. This is an obvious example of affect in general: a sensation which momentarily breaks up the character's consciousness. Although it is a subjective reaction, it is not an emotion (the most likely in this case being fear); but rather a corporeal reaction of the visceral type, directly involving seeing and hearing. It is important to establish Miller's subjectivity from the start because the narrative is aligned with his goals, values and morals. It is also crucial that the film presents his automatic responses, since, from a cognitive perspective, Miller stands here for all the soldiers being thrown into combat, exhibiting unconscious bodily reactions in face of the sensory aggression he is subjected to. This dual subjectivity can be construed as an opposition between passivity and action typical of melodrama (especially in the 1950s). Miller's mental freezing in this scene can be interpreted as a further sign of weakness and a symbolic emasculation. Schatz mentions that such inabilities are enough to make those films "as much male weepies as they are female ones" (237). However, the anxious males of 1950s melodrama have no self-esteem and are powerless to change the status quo. Miller does not fit into that profile. Throughout the film, he makes informed decisions that exceed his immediate orders, but without jeopardizing them, and he is a capable leader of men (for instance, when he decides to reveal personal information in order to defuse a crisis in the platoon) [1:36].

Because the events depicted in the invasion of Normandy occurred in 1944, the general outcome is well known to the viewer who is, therefore, unable to change it. Consequently, he or she possibly feels even more impotent than the soldiers themselves, who, right after landing, are pinned down on the beach in range of enemy fire. The present day viewer feels carried away by sublime exterior forces of the kind previously mentioned, whereas the soldiers, devoid of free will as they are during the landing and not knowing their fate, simply want to survive. The randomness of that survival is made obvious by the example of the soldier who is saved by his helmet and takes it off appreciatively, only to be killed by the very next bullet [16:54]. As Corporal Upham later says, quoting Tennyson's 1854 poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade": "Theirs is not to reason why/Theirs but to do and die" [41:46]. However, until they do die—most of them anyway—the anonymous

mass of soldiers (representing the army as an entity) will become a mighty individual mind, focused towards a higher and personal goal (symbolized by Ryan). The group of eight men we accompany in their mission provides the link between one thing and the other. Agreeing to stay and die for Ryan is the major act of sacrifice for these men, but also the major act of free will where they become more than just soldiers (and thus sacrificial sons) following orders. They evade one potential category of melodrama (the victim) to fall prey to another (self-immolation), which makes them even more honorable and deserving of the tears they elicit.

The return to the cemetery at the end of the film reinforces the gloom of the first scene [32:28]. The crosses and stars of David are no longer anonymous. Ryan's tribute to Captain Miller is potentially embraced by the viewers. The old Ryan asking his wife "Have I led a good life? Have I been a good man?" in order to know if he was worth the sacrifice of his mentor and savior, is the question viewers will leave the movie theater with. However, from Neale's perspective, the end is by no means cathartic because the sentimental resolution is always a product of spectatorial powerlessness, even in such cases where there is a so-called happy ending ("Melodrama" 11–12). The last cemetery scene of *Saving Private Ryan* is imbued with a tremendous feeling of loss, not only because of the masses of dead soldiers buried there, but ultimately because we are now aware of the cost of saving the remaining ones. From our point of view, in the end, Ryan is just not "worth it," no matter what he did and how he lived. Besides, according to Neale, the "happy ending" corresponding to the rescue of Ryan prevents the viewer from accompanying Miller's adventures further. As a result, a part of us regrets that Ryan has effectively been found and saved. This blocking of the viewer's desire for the protagonist's future and the film's continuation (Neale, "Melodrama" 20–22) results in tears born out of frustration, as well as from an unconscious desire to reclaim the narrative (a strategy commonly used by children with their mothers). However, because Captain Miller is dead, and has been so for several decades, no narrative continuance is possible. WWII is very much an event of the past. Other combat movies do not play on this emotional chord, at least not with such deliberate intention. *Saving Private Ryan* proves that films about men and manly actions can also be tear-jerkers. Men not only cry, but they also deserve to be cried over, profusely.

Conclusion: Mixed Feelings in a Hybrid Film

As a dramatic sensibility, melodrama is also quite compatible with other types of narrative. Robert B. Heilman, in *Tragedy and Melodrama: Versions of Experience*, recognized the coalescence of war stories and melodramatic structures, alluding to the fact that both revolve around the distinct nature of good and evil. For him, "action films" and "passion films" (melodrama) are merely two sides of the same coin, as Lipkin points out (286). In *Saving*

Private Ryan, it is our emotional memory of the human drama it contains and the value of the search for one man that further gives the film a mythical dimension, elevating it to greater heights and making it memorable for all of us. The audience can be composed of a cross-section of society because the film appeals to that which binds us all together: humanity.¹

When considered in relation to the war movie paradigm, especially in Basinger's description of it, and the most salient characteristics of melodrama in both its variants, *Saving Private Ryan* is a hybrid. In terms of genres and/or sensibilities, this means the film abides by certain conventions of these genres, but with variation. Spielberg stresses the main aspects of each genre/sensibility, directing a product that is greater—and more excessive—than the sum of its generic parts. There is both more action and sentiment here than is usual in either the war movie or the melodrama. The realistic depiction of the battle scenes, resulting in the viewers' close proximity with the characters and especially Captain Miller, makes his death and the remembrance thereof through a flashback all the more unbearable. Although the film depicts scenes of war in its terrible magnitude, it is ultimately the personal dimension that can make it unforgettable for the viewers. Two other classical WWII war movies, the "Good War" as it came to be known, prove just how much *Saving Private Ryan* excels in the war genre. In *Bataan* (Tay Garnett, 1943) and *Destination Tokyo* (Delmar Daves, 1943), both extensively discussed by Basinger, there is no internal focalization (as understood by Edward Branigan 86–110) of the events depicted. POV shots are avoided and the feelings of the characters are only expressed by the younger and inexperienced characters but in a very composed manner; the other soldiers express their fear verbally, but conduct themselves as seasoned and hard-boiled veterans.² Perhaps the best object for comparison would be *Fury* (David Ayer, 2014), starring Brad Pitt as the sergeant leading the five men crew of an American tank. Made after Vietnam and Desert Storm, *Fury* reflects a return to the old paradigm of combat movies, filled with morality, bravura and, most importantly, a lot of action. However, there is no internal focalization and no pressing for the self-reflexive subjectivity that characterizes Spielberg's film. In short, *Fury* is nothing more than an unmitigated combat movie.

Unlike melodramas with a fragile male character, such as *Bigger than Life* (Nicholas Ray, 1956), *Written in the Wind* (Douglas Sirk, 1956) and *Tea and*

1. See Pascal Couté's chapter in this collected volume.

2. These soldiers do not wear their emotions on their sleeves, for narrative as well as ideological reasons. During the war period, a combat movie was mitigated propaganda, as much to raise the morale of the troops as to help families cope at home. To explain why these men fought was considered vital, as opposed to revealing their sentiments towards the war itself in the process of living it. WWI, Vietnam or later depictions of WWII, by not being contemporaneous to the events depicted, are/were not under such an imperative and could have pacifist intentions or downright disenchanted ones. Criticism, either in the form of good moral intentions and/or traumatized cynicism, was not a staple of the combat movie of the 1940s, where the men could be seen laughing but not crying, where there could exist a comic-relief character but no sentiment of the teary-eyed variety.

Sympathy (Vincente Minnelli, 1956), *Saving Private Ryan* is excessive but not hysterical. According to Elsaesser, “[m]ale weepies” of the 1950s, and Douglas Sirk’s in particular, have a very histrionic acting style, mostly because the suffering experienced by the protagonist has to be externalized in good old classical Hollywood style (52–56). This resulted in a very intense viewing experience. But because of the artificiality involved in the *mise-en-scène* and other visual codes, it seems to me it has a less enduring effect. It is not processed in the same way as something that may affect the viewer directly, in cognitive terms.¹ It is my contention that those films caused more anguish and less tears than *Saving Private Ryan* or the melodramas with female protagonists, who are marked by something very important and which is lacking in those 1956 three films: self-sacrifice. Whereas male weepies make you think, women’s films make you cry. Sentiment is, therefore, the key for the tear-jerking finale. For Ed Tan and Nico Frijda (53–55), whose assessment corroborates Neale’s, crying is a response to helplessness and occurs in situations experienced as overwhelming, in which the viewer feels unable to control or to distance him-/herself from the situation. The amount of tears in proportion to how much the loss is felt produces itself at climactic moments of the film.

That said, the end of *Saving Private Ryan* is actually composed of two scenes which work in tandem to produce the desired teary-eyed effect. The first is the resolution of the last stand at Ramelle, where Miller is killed [108:17]; the second is the import of Miller’s last words for Ryan [150:09]. Death scenes are definitely climactic moments, and last words are ensured tear-jerkers. This alone would be enough to make anyone cry. However, Spielberg goes even farther by creating an ending that is truly bittersweet in more ways than one. The private spends his entirely life trying to honor the men who saved him by being “a good man,” and he is so unsure that he needs his wife to confirm that he succeeded. Nonetheless, some viewers may feel he has failed. He may have warranted humanity by being a good man, but he did nothing to create a better humanity (he certainly did not find a cure for cancer or invent a new lightbulb, as Miller half-seriously had said he wished Ryan would do) [65:32]. Placing the General’s voice-over, reading the letter sent to Ryan’s mother, over an image of the living Ryan standing by the corpse of the sacrificed Miller reinforces the nature of the sacrifice made and becomes extremely ironical, thus inverting the significance of the enterprise: “Nothing, not even the safely return of a beloved son can compensate you or the thousands of other American families who have suffered great loss in this tragic war.” The “costly sacrifice laid upon the altar of freedom,” contained in Abraham’s Lincoln Bixby letter, is probably what the viewers mostly draw from this scene. Added to this, because the story was mainly related from

1. As Elsaesser puts it: “The tellingly impotent gesture, the social gaffe, the hysterical outburst replaces any more directly liberating or self-annihilating action, and the cathartic violence of a shoot-out or a chase becomes an inner violence, often one which the characters turn against themselves” (56).

Miller's perspective, his dying request is all the more important, and we may feel that the result comes short of the demand. The loss of Miller's life cannot be compensated, no matter what. Spielberg's intention was probably to take the viewers' frustration and feeling of loss to a new extreme, though he may have gone too far: by making the hero of the film say "earn this," he partially robs him of the selflessness of his sacrifice. Miller is charging something for a decision he made himself. In a way, telling someone to "earn this" is already setting them up to fail. That is probably why the last cemetery scene is so excruciating to watch: Ryan is good, but not good enough.

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Part Four

Spielberg & Identity Politics