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Political Rhetorics for Film: Argument through Experience in War Movies

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Film Take

Political Rhetorics for Film

Argument through Experience in War Movies

John S. Nelson

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> That's what the movies do. . . . They give us
> lines to say, they assign us parts: John Wayne,
> Theda Bara, Shirley Temple, take your pick.
> Connie Willis (1995, p. 48)

1 Films provide political experiences. They do so for various reasons: to sympathize or criticize, to inspire actions or invent alternatives, to think through ideas or argue contentions. In doing so, they deploy myriad devices of sight and sound. These become powerful, popular conventions for informing and amusing us. Since movies and other electronic media shape our ideas and dispositions, especially for everyday life, we do well to appreciate their rhetorics.

2 The rhetorician who begins with cinematic modes of experience becomes something of a phenomenologist, parsing the appearances available to viewers. Since experiences offered by films come in many modes, they make a feast for the political phenomenologist. Among the most familiar are the closely related dynamics of depiction, demonstration, and illustration. Yet the insistent interaction between literature and cinema has made vicarious experience the main focus of accounts to date. This encourages the analyst to trace how viewers experience situations on screen through identification with a lead character. The character's impressions, decisions, and reactions become our guides to response as viewers.

3 To restrict ourselves to these sorts of cinematic connections, prominent and potent though they are, is nonetheless to treat movies too much like novels or other stories. It is to miss some of the cinema's experiential modes of greatest political and rhetorical importance. With special reference to war movies, let me evoke two others. And to appreciate aspects of their rhetorics and politics, let me emphasize the more distinctively cinematic of the two.

4 Films are the closest the twentieth century came to popular versions of virtual reality in electronic communication. Recent war films have been keenly interested in the dynamics of popular argument and cultural memory available through virtual-reality dimensions of movies. As a genre, war films

argue in important part through mood. This is a postmodern version of ethos as the atmospherics that characterize people, events, and situations. It moves beyond the classical mode of ethos as the standing of speakers with their audiences. In films and electronic media of other kinds, arguments by mood let us viewers experience situations for ourselves. This enables us to assess the plausibility of claims about such settings (Nelson 1998d).

5 This essay explores the ethos arguments in several recent, instant classics of the war genre. Like most war films, these work hard rhetorically to shape our cultural memories of the conflicts they evoke. Their sights and sounds of war seek to leave viewers with summary impressions: general judgments about merits or mistakes of the wars they target. Sometimes the theses of these films address the wars themselves less than the politics in their wake. Yet each argues its thesis by mood as well as character. So we do well to trace their specific claims and devices of argument, analyzing the political aesthetics of persuasion in these films of war.

Phenomenology

> The complex emotional responses this movie evokes can lead us, if we allow them, to a kind of tragic understanding of American life – tragic in the original and the fullest sense, in which the spectacle of unspeakable calamity produces pity and terror and then an unforeseeable and penetrating clarity.
>
> Terrence Rafferty (1992, p. 90)

6 This attention to the political rhetoric of war movies arises at the convergence of three long-standing interests. It connects the phenomenology of persuasion in electronic media, the augmentation of classical and modern rhetoric through several postmodern inventions, and the appreciation of everyday politics apparent in conventions of popular genres for recent novels and movies.

Rhetoric

7 The first concern is the phenomenology of persuasion in argument, especially within electronic media. From standpoints in the disciplines of political science or communication studies, this may seem an odd enterprise. Scholars of political rhetoric and communication emphasize an apparatus for analysis that traces to ancient Greece and Rome. For example, the Aristotelian schemes of forensic, epideictic, and deliberative rhetoric are prominent in analysis by students of public address. If we were to parse each species of rhetoric phenomenologically, we would specify how various individuals experience each kind of argumentation. We might even contrast

experiences by speakers with experiences by audiences for each of these classical modes of persuasion.

8 To some extent, of course, this already has been done – not so much systematically as casually in the process of analyzing individual performances or texts. The analysis might not have been labeled "phenomenology," but its attention to the dynamics of experience might be apparent nonetheless. The barest beginnings for such an appreciation of Aristotle's species of rhetoric can be evoked by a chart.

Species of Rhetoric	**forensic**		**epideictic**		**deliberative**	
time period	past events		present people		future actions	
operation type	end beginnings		negotiate middles		begin ends	
outcome kind	making cases		making comments		making decisions	
activity mode	argue	judge	praise	blame	discuss	debate
transcendence site	arrange	impress	epiphany	lament	converse	play

The chart starts with Aristotle's tripartite contrast. Forensic rhetoric argues cases about events already past that we may judge them accurately and allocate responsibilities accordingly. For Aristotle, at least, this corresponds to the beginning of a story. Epideictic rhetoric praises or blames people in the present. These comments help move us through current circumstances, making this for Aristotle akin to negotiating the middle stages of a story. Deliberative rhetoric discusses or debates future actions. The decisions that issue from deliberations concert and commit the participants to action, at least beginning to end of the story. The chart's last line reflects work in progress by Stanley Cavell and others, suggesting that Aristotle's three species already might be augmented or transcended in telling ways by kinds of rhetoric that become prominent in the postmodern times of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But that story is for another time (Cavell 1997; Nelson 1995).

9 For present purposes, we do even better to reach beyond Aristotle's rhetoric to a contrast of vicarious, virtual, and symbolic experience. Analyzing political advertisements on television encourages us to notice these three dynamics. In particular, ad-makers are using this electronic medium to give viewers virtual experiences of events or people distant from viewers – or otherwise impossible for them to experience in what we often regard as

"ordinary ways."

10 Virtual experience is exceptional these days on film or television, which often feature vicarious experience. The encouragement of vicarious experience is to identify with a focal character and that figure's responses to the settings and happenings evoked by a program or movie. This enables us to experience the situations and events through the experiences of the featured character. A prominent dynamic in novels and other late-modern stories, vicarious experience stitches readers and viewers into a mediated world at the points when and where it is apprehended by the point-of-view characters in that world. The vantages of these characters provide, shape, even dominate the experiences of readers and viewers.

11 Virtual experience, by contrast, mobilizes a host of rhetorical devices to enable and encourage viewers to experience a mediated world as though – or, at times, almost as though – the viewers are themselves one or more characters in that world. The viewers become virtual actors or at least observers *within* the invented world. Even if viewers are not given a single, continual vantage point amid the (other) characters who encounter the situations and enact the events in the imagined world, the viewers are stitched into it so that they experience its sights and sounds as though present that world.

12 To keep the distinction between vicarious and virtual experience from becoming an all-encompassing dichotomy, we do well to recognize at least one another mode of experience that operates on the same levels. Symbolic experience is neither vicarious nor virtual, at least in principle. Condensive symbols invite readers or viewers into probing mythic networks of associations. These typically evoke larger patterns of plot or character within a story or film. The war films under analysis cultivate symbolic as well as vicarious and virtual experiences.

Persuasion

13 The second interest is in linking phenomenologies of argumentation with the ways in which rhetoricians began to identify modes of persuasion in the days of Aristotle. It is helpful, for example, to augment the Aristotelian trio of logos, ethos, and pathos with mythos, tropos, and more (Nelson 1989; 1998e, pp. 143-147). The principle has much to recommend it: proliferate western dichotomies and trichotomies into more ample sets of categories. In fact, we should amplify in two directions: recognize additional modes of persuasion and appreciate further, updated dynamics within each mode. The table to follow is one playful exposition of several possibilities:

Faculty	persuasion	classical	medieval	modern	postmodern
Reason (self identity)	logos (logics)	topics dialectics	stases arguments	rationality calculation	cognitions intellections
Spirit (will, honor)	ethos (ethics)	characters standings	authorities offices	credibility expertise	moods ambience
Desire (appetite)	pathos (pathologies)	passions feelings	senses sensibilities	emotion sentiment	styles aesthetics
Memory (meaning)	mythos (myths)	tales narratives	epics parables	history series	stories novels
Language (criticism)	athos (aporia)	laws letters	maxims handbooks	rules textbooks	slogans aphorisms
Imagination (invention)	tropos (tropes)	turns symbols	figures illustrations	charts diagrams	icons emblems

These enable us to pursue rhetoric in terms more encompassing and adventurous than classical categories on their own. In particular, such complements, supplements, and augmentations aid in improving our rhetorical senses of electronic politics.

14 Vertically within the key second column, political advertising on American television turns time and again to persuasion through mythos (Boynton 1996, 1997; Gronbeck 1989; Nelson 1997). Likewise we need to acknowledge tropos to appreciate many innovations in verbal and visual rhetoric (Nelson 1998e). We would even do well to let a couple of the Three Musketeers name modes of persuasion in the academic news of late: Athos could designate our deconstructive attention to aporia; and Porthos could label our indispensable communication across rhetorics, paradigms, disciplines, languages, and the like. When we are willing to play with figures and concepts, any number of entertaining and potentially enlightening exercises become available in this neighborhood.

15 Horizontally within the table, we can explicate consequences of the fact that ethics emerge directly from ethos as a classical mode of persuasion. Then we can notice how ethos has been redirected in different periods of the west. As to my own ethos, it may be said that I tend to think about classical categories because I have been learning the discipline of rhetoric and communication all too late in life. This likens me to the late-modernizing Jews in Europe. John Murray Cuddihy's book on *The Ordeal of Civility* (1974) shows how

they appreciated the dynamics and consequences of modernization particularly well because they could experience these in such condensed, concentrated ways after the modern age was well advanced. In much the same way, I try to turn my tardy arrival to advantage. The idea is to turn a recent grasp of the rudiments of rhetoric into a few moderately fundamental insights and innovations for the rhetorical analysis of politics, especially in electronic times.

16 Ethos begins, as all rhetoricians know, with the ancient Greek conception of character. This is the performance of the speaker manifested over repeated encounters with the audience. Ethos involves the audience sense of who the speaker is. Thus this character is not an internal dynamic or structure of psyche, as we have been inclined to treat it since Shakespeare. Instead ethos is external, behavioral, reputational. Indeed the other main face or definition of classical ethos is the standing of the speaker – with the audience.

17 The Greek and Roman notion of people in a "public space of appearance" (Arendt 1958, 1963, 1968) – such as the assembly in the agora or the tribunes in the forum – is amphi-theatrical (Mount 1972; Ende 1985). Theirs are words and deeds presented and apprehended in the round, with members of the audience and speakers frequently exchanging roles. Even when the speaking is one-sidedly oratorical, rather than meeting the tests of dialectical interaction urged by Plato's Socrates, the orator for this hour becomes a listener in the next – as one of the previous audients takes the speaker's place. Consequently the participants develop characters or standings with one another. Ethos, as the performance and appreciation of such public or political character, is intrinsically relational. It encompasses, mobilizes, and makes judgments about how each of the participants speaks and acts in relationship to one another. Accordingly ethics just are our practices, assessments, and prescriptions of interpersonal relationships.

18 Antiquity appreciated ethos as character in the sense that the Romans articulated as virtues and vices. In the middle ages, ethos as standing sometimes became assimilated to the offices that speakers hold or perform. Hence it edged over into authority. With modern civilization, there was a drastic constriction of ethos to credibility. Here, however, I want to articulate a postmodern meaning of ethos. It is not really an invention on my part, because it is so ensconced in the culture that we find it in dictionaries and ordinary, everyday talk. This is the sense of ethos as tone, mood, or ambience. I do not want to collapse all these shades of postmodern ethos into one undifferentiated lump; differences among them can be important. For present purposes, nonetheless, we can talk loosely as though they are much the same.

Genre

19 The third project is to connect the first two skeins of inquiry with a long-standing interest in the politics of popular genres. From the start, my inquiries have analyzed political myth-making. This is an interest in rhetoric for politics as it occurs among us in our everyday lives, our mundane communities. In this connection, attention to electronic media becomes mandatory. Attention to film is especially important, because this is where much of the most powerful mythmaking has occurred.

20 What I have been doing for the last decade is marching into one popular genre after another (Nelson 1998a, 1998c, 1999, 2003, 2005). This might be all too much like Sherman marching through Georgia, but the principle is that such conventional politics can be appreciated most accurately and helpfully by comparing each genre with others. Mine are exercises in popular, political, rhetorical appreciation. To date I have experimented with the analysis of westerns, horror stories, science fiction, fantasy, noir, tales of detection, feminist romances, spy stories, superhero sagas, and more.

21 A cardinal principle of rhetorical analysis is that the analyst ought to have some sympathy for a popular genre in order to understand it well. At any rate, I personally have little enthusiasm for performing academic criticism that merely tears things apart or stomps all over them. For one thing, that is too easy; and for another, it teaches too little. So I tend to come later to the genres that do not readily catch my interest, war movies among them. By the time I get to these laggards, though, just bringing them into the web of comparisons can be plenty intriguing.

22 Since popular genres are cultural forms, it can be fun and instructive to play with their formal relations. The forms remain immensely flexible, so any comparisons may be prized for the insights they yield. But their possibilities must not be pushed toward literalist, essentialist, or foundationalist claims about the conventions or politics of particular performances.

Popular Genres	**Political Topics**	**Political Antinomies**
detective tales classical	social disorder	conservatism/liberalism
detective tales hardboiled	political corruption	socialism/liberalism
fantasy adult	identity and responsibility	existentialism/republicanism

fantasy juvenile	death, sex, and identity	existentialism/perfectionism
fantasy sword & sorcery	honor, anger, and interest	feudalism/capitalism
fantasy talking animals	western civilization	conservatism/perfectionism
fantasy urban	postmodern civilization	existentialism/capitalism
horror stories	crises in everyday life politics	existentialism/perfectionism
legal thrillers	law and justice	conservatism/capitalism
noir (films)	social and political spectacle	democratism/perfectionism
romances feminist	the personal as political	feminism/patriarchialism
science fiction	science, change, and society	perspectivism/absolutism
spy stories	bureaucracy and cold war	democratism/totalitarianism
superhero sagas	ambition, identity, and justice	democratism/perfectionism
war stories	character and calculation	realism/idealism
westerns	enforcement and forgiveness	liberalism/republicanism

We do well to remember, moreover, that many fictions and films are multiply genred. The intrinsic ambiguity of any work leaves it open to effects and objections in many directions. The contexts of entertainment or interpretation, too, can make significant differences. Yet the enterprise of political comparisons within and across popular genres still manages to teach me, at least, a good deal about the ideologies, stories, and styles that inform our everyday lives.

23 Because I had never particularly appreciated war films, I had not addressed them until recently. But I wanted to participate in a conference panel where the other people all wanted to analyze rhetorical aspects of war. So I gritted my teeth and got on with it, devoting every opportunity for several months to watching popular films of war. By this time, I had developed a better feeling for how to let the movies themselves help me watch and analyze them. Still no great enthusiast for war films, I nonetheless found myself engaged and appreciative most of the time. What follows, therefore, is a report on what I began in one summer "vacation" of late and have continued since.

War

We're rarely conscious of it, but what really frightens us in movies is often not what we see but what we hear. Not the guy with the knife but the man at the dials, splicing in an electronic "boo!"

David Ansen (1994, p. 58)

24 War movies conventionally are character studies. The idea is that war puts people into the most extreme conditions of life and death. War tests us existentially. Thus war films often resemble the ship-of-fools genre, where odd concatenations of characters face exigencies that bring out the worst and the best in them. Relentless obstacles require conquering if we are to survive and move the troops from one place to another. But mainly in war we must conquer our darker drives. We also must come to constructive terms with realist injunctions to fight wars all out, no holds barred, with personal survival and individual gain what matters most. In films about military training and combat, such realism wars relentlessly with personal and communal codes of honor that insist on higher values and conduct in the most dire situations.

Contention

25 The popular genre of war films is far more interested in making arguments than any other genre I have analyzed to date. There is, to be sure, a famous Hollywood injunction against making or taking any movie to be an argument: "If you want to send a message, use Western Union." The implication is that it is hopelessly reductive – and bad film making to boot – to treat any entertainment from Hollywood as primarily a proposition, let alone a set of reasons in support of a proposition. And in fact, few popular films show much frontal interest in such argumentation. The exceptions – such as the romance *Playing By Heart* (1998), which argues pointedly that human love cannot be explained adequately in words – prove the rule. Yet scores and scores of war movies are mostly and primarily engaged in making arguments.

26 The generic argument, of course, has long been that War Is Hell. Yet even in war, the craven and treacherous somehow can find their match in the courageous and heroic. This can happen even though conditions of terror, futility, corruption, and death conspire to make the destination dubious, the path impossible, the leader lost, the citizen-soldier cynical or insane. Moreover the specific qualities of individual wars can be strikingly different, providing diverse experiences and competing morals for future conduct. It would be surprising if war films were to settle for one small complement of characters in every scene, and it would be amazing if war films were to

reduce all their scenes to a single setting of War as Hell that continues unrelieved for reel after reel. Instead we should expect war films to make more individuated arguments.

27 Indeed war movies are becoming character studies of individual wars. Recent war films advance arguments about the distinctive overall characters of their target wars. This exercise is familiar from books: World War II was the last good war. World War I ended the optimism of the West. The Gulf War became an arcade game for generals, pilots, and viewers. The Korean Conflict always already was the forgotten war. The Revolutionary War founded America, and the Civil War refounded it. The Vietnam War cost America its innocence and possibly its soul. The Balkan Wars pit a new world order of imposed peace against recurrent demons of chaos, tribalism, genocide, imperialism, intolerance, terror, and totalitarianism. Even the exceptions that stay focused on war in a larger sense turn arguments toward theses about what ethics and styles are appropriate for war, whether women or feminized men can conduct war successfully, and so on.

28 Such an argumentative impulse is no less prominent in recent war films. This is why some commentators dismiss them as preachy and manipulative. But it would be better to say, at least of the best in recent films, that they exercise the republican-rhetorical drive to publicize "the lessons of history." These celluloid and digitized lessons parallel the republican-rhetorical project of monumentalizing history in heroic statues, national memorials, battleground parks, and museums for wars safely past. Each of these endeavors strives to construct the "common sense" for its war: the "conventional wisdom" about what was at stake and what happened as a result to give the particular war its defining character and political implications (Shklar 1977).

29 Most of these movies acknowledge explicitly that War Is Hell. Some even embed their distinctive claims about their particular wars within this larger argument. The genre regards it as a lesson too important not to be taught in film after film. So many war films provide their individual arguments as specifications of War as Hell.

30 Each movie tours a somewhat different circle, letting the full Inferno unfold film by film into a generic sense of War as Hell on Earth. As Captain Willard (played by Martin Sheen) observes in Michael Herr's words for narrating *Apocalypse Now*, "I was going to the worst place in the world, and I didn't even know it yet." In the voiceover letters that articulate the argument of Oliver Stone's *Platoon*, Chris Taylor (Charlie Seen) explains, "Somebody once wrote, 'Hell is the impossibility of reason.' That's what this place feels like, Hell." The realist in Terrence Malick's remake of *The Thin Red Line* is Sergeant Welsh (Sean Penn). He tells the dreamer, Private Witt (Jim

Caviezel), "We're living in a world that's blowing itself to hell as fast as everybody can arrange." Even *Saving Private Ryan* evokes this trope obliquely but emphatically when Steven Spielberg has General George C. Marshall (Harve Presnell) order the rescue of the remaining Private Ryan: "The boy's alive. We are gonna send somebody to find him, and we are gonna get him the hell out of there." The war over there is "the hell," of course, and the rescue team must go through hell and inflict a fair amount of its own to remove Ryan from the theater of operations.

31 Each of these war films, like many others, argues a central thesis. This is not the only message of each movie, and it need not be the most important feature of the film, but it is good for comparing claims and devices of argument across films. Here is a taste of the theses:

***War Film* (year of release)**	**Thesis for the Film's Main Argument**
Troy (2004)	War is young men dying and old men talking; ignore the politics. Soldiers obey; don't waste your life following some fool's orders.
Gods and Generals (2003)	Our highest duty is to defend our home, because every state has a primal claim to the fealty of its citizens.
Master and Commander (2003)	In the Royal Navy, you must choose the lesser of two evils.
Tears of the Sun (2003)	The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.
Hart's War (2002)	Colored men expect to have to jump through a few hoops in this man's army.
We Were Soldiers (2002)	Win the battle, lose the war: soldiers fight for each other.
Windtalkers (2002)	Friendship means not always following orders.
Black Hawk Down (2001)	Leave no man behind.
Pearl Harbor (2001)	The smart enemy attacks you where you feel safe. Victory goes to those who believe the hardest – and longest.

To End All Wars (2001)	War is the consequence of a single life weighing less than a feather; war is the final destination of hatred. Except the corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.
The Patriot (2000)	When the war comes home, the home goes to war.
Rules of Engagement (2000)	Rules of engagement may not be just in war.
Tigerland (2000)	The Army makes all men one, but you never know which one.
U-571 (2000)	Wartime commanders must be willing to order men to their deaths.
Three Kings(1999)	The Gulf War was conducted by America for black gold, political boundaries, and televisual spectacles —not to liberate Kuwait, depose Saddam, or help ordinary human beings.
Saving Private Ryan(1998)	We are obliged to make good on the heroic sacrifice of American soldiers in World War II.
The Thin Red Line(1998)	War is a world of endless, crazy contention; yet we can and must imagine other worlds.
Savior (1997)	Intervention in the Balkans can bring radically imperfect but real redemption for Americans.
Welcome to Sarajevo(1997)	War in Bosnia, unpoliced by Western powers, has made beautiful Sarajevo into the fourteenth worst place on Earth, even worse for children.
Courage Under Fire (1996)	In order to honor the soldiers who fought in the Gulf War, we have to tell the truth about what happened over there, the whole, hard, cold truth; and until we do that, we dishonor every soldier who died, who gave their life for their country.
G. I. Jane (1996)	War is women's work too.
Casualties of War(1989)	The extremity of war means we must act with more justice not less.
The Beast (1988)	You can't be a good soldier in a rotten war.

Heartbreak Ridge(1986)	The feminized American warrior can still win.
Platoon (1986)	The Vietnam War pitted the best of America against the worst of America.
Apocalypse Now(1979)	The Vietnam War pushed beyond American morality, sanity, language, and judgment into the heart of darkness.
The Thin Red Line (1964)	War effaces the thin red line between reason and insanity.

The essay at hand lacks room to support its identification of each thesis with detailed analysis of the action, dialogue, setting, soundtrack, and cinematography; but these theses do emerge from attention to such elements in each film. For now, the interest is in electronic arguments through ethos, especially the postmodern ethos effected by cinematic techniques of virtual reality.

Ethos

32 In war, films show, some are lost, some found; some corrupted, some redeemed; and many change in other ways. As a popular genre, war films feature arguments from *ethos*, the ancient Greek sense of *character*, not only as a configuration of what the Romans later called virtues and vices, but also as a mode of persuasion in political arguments. Yet recent movies on war show how electronic media can shift ethos arguments into another mode.

33 Classical arguments from ethos accredit or attack claims due to the virtues and vices of the characters who make them. This happens often in electronic argumentation by radio, television, film, and computers. Television spots for talking heads and popular films with superstars depend centrally on classical ethos when they make arguments. They ask people to take the words of others whose character(istic)s might make them credible. But these find a complement in the reliance of electronic media on ethos arguments that persuade instead by helping people experience more or less for themselves the character(istic)s of the situations at stake.

34 The argument here is that recent war films are turning to virtual-reality devices that argue from *ethos* in its postmodern sense of *mood*, *tone*, *atmosphere*, or *ambience* — especially as *the spirit of the situation*. The postmodern meaning of ethos has made its way into dictionaries and ordinary talk. By kinds and dynamics, postmodern ethoi amplify the persuasive resources of rhetoric, particularly in electronic media (Nelson

1998e, pp. 138-139).

35 Of late, war films deploy a particular characterization of the war's setting as a principal character – sometimes *the* principal character – in articulating the movie's thesis about the war at issue. The setting becomes a pervasive environment for viewers to experience. This is their experience of the war. It furnishes the warrant and often also the backing for the film's thesis.

36 In earlier war films, a prominent tendency is to collect a diverse set of soldiers in some endeavor that mandates effective cooperation for success, even survival. *Stagecoach* (1939), with John Wayne, works this way (Wills 1997, pp. 82-83). So it is clear that a ship-of-fools formula can surface in various genres. War films in this mode trace how their peculiar combinations of warriors interact. The focus is on how individuals in these circumstances manifest or change their characters. The propositions of these older war films receive support from their character studies. Hence this is precisely argument by ethos in the classical sense, concerned with characters as networks of virtues and vices.

37 Yet war films in the last couple of decades target the virtues and vices of the settings to explore the distinctive characters of different wars. To appreciate the arguments of these films, to analyze their rhetorics, is to trace how they persuade viewers to accept their claims. Often they encourage viewers to experience the wars in question vicariously through focal characters in the films. At times, though, they offer viewers virtual experience of the wars by mimicking first-person access to the sights and sounds that distinguish the particular conditions of combat.

38 If the Greek tie between classical and postmodern ethos lies in the connection between *character* and *characteristics*, the Roman link is the republican-rhetorical sense of *spirit*. This is the permeating, animating principle of each person, event, or setting. Thus the Latin word is a major node in the network of republican politics and rhetorical practices. *Respiration* is crucial to life and speech, *perspiration* to work, *inspiration* to invention, and *aspiration* to attainment. *Spires* mark our churches and hopes, *spirals* our genetic structures and republican ideas of time. The breathing-together of *conspiracy* is a recurrent trope of republican politics and Hollywood films. *Expiration* means that time is done and we have "given up the ghost." This connotation of *spirit* as what enlivens, moves, and individuates us led the Romans to translate Plato's three parts of the soul as desire, reason, and spirit. That last becomes synonymous with the personal senses of honor and self which most make people who they are as distinct individuals. Hence *ethos* has been understood as pervasive, motivating, individuating *spirit* almost from the start.

39 As the French-republican *esprit de corps* suggests, such *ethos* as *spirit* can be communal, institutional, situational. Organizations, events, even settings have characters. These speak to our relations and evaluations for such collective and interactive things. The popular genre of science fiction long ago began to make settings such as other planets into principal characters in their narratives (Rose 1981). Thus Solaris is the main protagonist in Stanlislaw Lem's novel of that name (1970), the character of Dune is the overarching concern of Frank Herbert's saga (1965), and the spirit of Mars animates the award-winning trilogy by Kim Stanley Robinson (1993, 1994, 1996). The military source of *esprit de corps*, often considered the key to victory in war (Fallows 1981), makes it inevitable that some films would argue their claims about wars through character-izing their settings and evoking their moods. Thus they persuade by letting viewers experience the ethos of a particular war as the spirit that inheres in its situations.

40 Most electronic media use music to advance whatever arguments they might make, so it is no surprise that war films share in this. Typically the war experience flows from ethos as character through spirit to mood (Nelson 1997, pp. 100-118). The main argument by mood in the 1964 edition of *The Thin Red Line* is the insanity within war; and it is made as much by the clangorous score for the battle scenes as by any cinematic devices of acting, dialogue, or plot. Almost all war movies I have seen make significant attempts to argue by mood, because nearly all use their music in this way. Sound in general and music in particular are crucial devices for creating mood. Therefore sound and music are mainstays for argument by ethos, especially in war films. We know relatively little about how to analyze music argumentatively. If we are to appreciate movies and television programs as media of public address, however, we must develop a vocabulary for musical rhetoric.

41 To emphasize the distinctive character of a particular war might be to take account of special combatants, purposes, weapons, tactics, or terrains. Yet war films are learning from the likes of science fiction that a fine way to evoke all these characteristics is to build them into visual and aural settings that the films treat as akin to characters in their own right. For the time being, let us concentrate on several devices of voice and cinematography that contrast vicarious, virtual, and symbolic experiences.

Experience

42 Vicarious experience dominates argumentation so far in films, including war movies. When films offer virtual experience, typically they provide little tastes in the midst of vicarious experiences. Yet a few movies rely more emphatically on virtual experience, sustaining virtual presentations for minutes at a time. The same can be said of symbolic experience, where films

seek to persuade viewers through drawing them into the contemplation of icons, sounds, and other condensive symbols that provoke extensive networks of mythic connections capable of supporting the propositions promoted by their films. There are many reasons for the virtual and symbolic moves to flicker in and out of prominence while vicarious experiences sustain themselves for many minutes, even whole movies. Some of the various devices themselves suggest why this may be so.

experience mode	**vicarious**	**virtual**	**symbolic**
typical use in movies	predominant or pure	intermittent or mixed	momentary or paused
focusing strategy	theatrical	perspectival	figural
screen configuration	conventional frame	surround or tunnel	intensive focus
camera angles	faces and fronts	backs and sides	artistic or self-aware
conventional perspectives	personal portraits and natural vistas	close-ups and mid-range shots	pseudo-stills and slow or stop motion
access principle	point-of-view	points-of-view	omniscient network
identifying marker	zoom into eyes	alternate among foci	pause and hold focus
stitching strategy for experiences	identification with specific characters	immersion in shifting moods	exploration of diverse ties
distinctive aural and visual devices	singular voiceover, dominant view	plural voiceovers, plural flashbacks	action, object, and sound matches
elements, devices, and principles for characterizing	humans, characteristics, and explanations	rhythms, tones, settings, and deliveries	icons, slogans, and themes

This is a beginning grid developed in pondering the persuasive devices in hosts of war movies, always keeping in mind other popular genres as well. Certainly virtual and symbolic, as well as vicarious, experiences appear in all sorts of cinema, television, radio, computer gaming, and other electronic media of communication.

43 Vicarious experience relies a lot on *framing*. (I hate to invoke this overused word with so many, sometimes incompatible meanings these days in the field of political communication. The trouble is that it fits my needs exactly, and I cannot think of a decent alternative. Maybe I can encourage other scholars to quit using "framing" to evoke backgrounds, contexts, priming, and such – all things named already in better ways. But I had better not hold my breath to see if that happens, so let me proceed with this older, possibly less replaceable sense of *framing*.) Vicarious presentation implies or takes advantage of something like a picture frame around the moving images on the screen. This distances us as viewers from what we can see and hear on the cinematic (configured as theatrical) stage.

44 As a result, we viewers are not part of the action, and this can be accomplished by any number of more specific devices. Shots of long or panoramic *vistas* are obvious examples. As on a theatrical stage, with its framing curtains or walls, the screen can be framed by curtains or the darkness beyond the edges of the images. With theatrical framing, the actors mostly face to the front in order to deliver their lines in the direction of the audience. The scenery and the action are configured to be seen from the same angle. Use of vicarious experience in films also features mostly *frontal shots*, faces turned to the camera that functions as the viewers' eyes. Frontal shots enable viewers who are meant to identify with a focal character to see the other characters turned as though to face that character even as they also follow how that character's face registers responses to what others do and say.

45 Virtual experience depends on putting viewers somehow onto the stage, into the midst of the action. Hence its devices diminish, displace, or eliminate framing. They undo the usual distance between screens and viewers. Instead of vistas that suggest strong separations between foreground and background, medium shots and close-ups can offer virtual experiences of the characters and objects in films. Instead of frontal shots that turn actors relentlessly toward a removed audience that otherwise might loses their words or miss their facial expressions, films designed to impart virtual experiences turn the actors every which way but loose. In *The Thin Red Line*, as directed by Terrence Malick, the camera keeps us in the tall island grasses for long periods, and it locates us on the side or to the rear of (other) soldiers on the move. This is how we viewers would be placed in the middle of the action. Similar shots are sustained at times in storming the D-Day beaches as evoked by Steven Spielberg's direction of *Saving Private Ryan*. Such *perspectival shots* are indispensable to cinema in a virtual-reality mode.

46 Virtual experience through cinema also relies on shifting foci insistently. The Malick version of *The Thin Red Line* provides reveries from a handful of

figures, rather than flashbacks from one or two characters who serve as our vicarious sources of experience. Augmenting the visual foci are voiceovers from many characters. *Saving Private Ryan* makes us viewers into members of the Ryan family, following their father to the site of Captain Miller's grave and giving him room to help them experience in imagination what others suffered and sacrificed that they might live in political freedom. Spielberg and Malick both use the trope of zooming slowly toward a character's face – as though entering through the eyes into the head – before showing what that figure experienced, remembers, or imagines. So we film viewers know to expect a replay of that character's experience-and-personality. In this respect, the bracketing scenes in the Spielberg film focus on Private Ryan, and the body of the film features Captain Miller. We are to share their senses of the Normandy Invasion. The Malick movie provides a multiplicity of perspectives, giving us a sense of moving around in the Guadalcanal operation.

47 As remarked before, however, we need a sense that we are not dealing with a simple dichotomy between vicarious and virtual experiences. As a matter of principle, it is important to inform analysis with many categories. The Spielberg and Malick movies offer ample shares of symbolic experiences. These connect with iconographic persuasion in social movements such as environmentalism and feminism (Modleski 1986; Norton 1993; Szasz 1994). At various times, films seem to pause to display what insists on recognition as a symbol of some larger pattern significant for appreciating the events. Typically viewers are invited to ponder the symbol before the rest of the action resumes. *The Thin Red Line* ends with such a condensive symbol, and *Saving Private Ryan* offers one at a time of transition into battle. The argument is that symbolic experience involves a distinctive phenomenology as well. For the most part, it depends on different cinematic devices.

48 Symbolic experience conventionally sustains a focus on a single, telling object. The invitation to viewers is that they dwell on the mythic resonance of that object, pausing with the film to consider how the self-announced symbol serves as an emblem of something larger than itself in the film or, often, of the film as a whole. The symbol calls attention to itself as such by standing apart from the predominant flow of the film. Typically the symbol appears to the side of other potential foci, and generally the rest of the action pauses or otherwise shifts rhythm so that viewers may entertain meanings for the symbol. Sometimes the symbol itself is or engenders a change in the rhythm of occurrence. The camera often closes slowly on the icon or holds a markedly sustained focus. If the symbol is aural, separating and sustaining it or calling it to the forefront of attention through dampening the acuity of engagement with visual developments also enables the symbol to stand out. (Theme songs and musical quotations can work this way as well.) The visual effect often is slowed or frozen motion: either the symbol does not move at

all, or the camera slows it to heighten the contrast with the other objects and rhythms of the film.

49 Such symbols lure us into their networks of associations. Songs remind us through their lyrics, periods, or rhythms of information that enriches the film. Images provoke us via their colors, components, or contrasts to call upon connections and recognize patterns that we might not appreciate otherwise as pertinent to the movie. In the cinema, matches of actions or objects or sounds insist that we notice how each reaches into others with meanings that can complicate and interpret the film. Cinematic symbols move our experience from one item to another by morphing, merging, matching, and more. Often these figures emphasize how the whole film can be analyzed mythically. As condensive symbols, they are nodes in networks that bring together vast realms of previous experience by viewers. They encourage viewers to notice how seemingly separate elements converge and initially disparate pieces cohere. Thus we experience these symbols as the making of connections not provided literally, logically, or even superficially.

Film

I'm asking the audience – and it's a lot to ask
of an audience – to have a physical experience,
so that they can somewhat have the experience
of what those guys actually went through.
Steven Spielberg on
Saving Private Ryan (1998, p. 31)

50 To probe these dynamics of cinematic experience in greater detail, let us augment the comparison already underway for the remarkable war movies from 1998 with a couple of their equally distinguished predecessors. *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line* argue primarily through postmodern moves of ethos. By contrast, *Apocalypse Now* (directed by Francis Ford Coppola for release in 1979) and *Platoon* (directed by Oliver Stone for release in 1986) advance their theses fundamentally through classical appeals to character. All four show how war films are conventionally inclined to argue political claims through diverse evocations of ethos in its several modes.

51 *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line* argue from our virtual experiences of their wartime situations to their conclusions about the Second World War. Most other war films to date argue from our identifications with their characters. Then we share the judgments of the figures on the screen, or we distrust them, but we sense the wars mainly through responses of these characters rather than interacting more independently with the situations they face. Our war experiences in *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon*

are not virtual but vicarious (Nelson 1997, pp. 195-232). We respond principally to the characters' screen reactions to their screen situations, all separated from us by various devices of framing. When the two 1998 films generate virtual experiences of WWII, they work to counteract framing effects and mobilize different devices to situate us within the events evoked. Some devices are aural and vocal, others are visual.

52 The two films from 1998 tap first-person camera techniques and THX technologies of sound to let viewers virtually experience the combat. Closely related WWII predecessors such as *The Longest Day* (1962) and the 1964 version of *The Thin Red Line* frame actions for viewers. This keeps viewers out of the action, which they must experience through actors on the screen more than a sense of surrounding sights and sounds. The Coppola and Stone films argue from ethos, but mainly by framing colorful and sympathetic characters to follow. There are few efforts to locate viewers within the scenes. The Spielberg and Malick movies provide long moments of largely unframed events, putting viewers into the midst of film figures in action. Thus they manifest their characters of combat less through virtues and vices enacted on screen than through moods and other characteristics of battle experienced by viewers in the theater.

Voices

53 Voiceovers often function as framing devices to keep screen events distant from movie viewers. These reinforce the argumentative reliance on ethos as character because they give us the sounds of thinking, writing, or narrating by a focal character. In principle, intimate access to somebody's thinking might pull viewers into a movie. But the emphasis on a single, point-of-view-and voice figure draws us into that character first and foremost. We experience events vicariously, through the voicing figure. Add a world-weary tone to the voice, and the power to distance viewers becomes so great that the voiceover is a cherished convention of alienation in film noir.

54 Martin Sheen's voiceover in *Apocalypse Now* borrows from these noir aesthetics for the ordinary American, decently curious and honorable, who somehow has been dragged or lured way over his head into the slime. The sound of his voice plus the wonderful music – from the Doors to Wagner – does enable the film to argue in part by mood. Yet *Apocalypse Now* shares the war genre's affinity for spectacle, which typically offers actions far away and safely framed from a particular point of view. The vistas often are long, and we viewers float like bombers above much of the anti-like action. These two framing devices plus Captain Willard's growing sense of horror and grotesque climax in action keep us viewers at bay: away from immersion in the scenes. Instead the film argues its thesis about the Vietnam War principally through our identification with Willard's degenerating character.

We journey *as* him (more than *with* him) into the heart of darkness that is Colonel Kurtz and the American debacle in Vietnam.

55 In mythic homage, *Platoon* casts Martin's son as its American protagonist in Vietnam. Its argument is made primarily by Charlie Sheen's voiceover letters to his grandmother. Again they frame the action, taking us out of it for extended times. His voice is less old and defeated than young, confused, and depleted. Still it attunes us to his experiences of the Vietnam War. *Platoon* provides less spectacle and fewer long vistas to remove viewers from participation in the action. Yet it insistently offers frontal shots of the key actors on screen, framing them in theatrical fashion as a stage of action separate from the arena reserved to the audience. We pull with Sheen's character for the virtuous American (Willem Dafoe), and we may even empathize when Sheen terminates the vicious American (Tom Berenger), but we are not sensing their situations primarily for ourselves. Again the argument is importantly from ethos, but again it is carried mainly by our identification with Sheen's protagonist. *Platoon*'s music learns from *Apocalypse Now* about ironical uses of contemporary music, yet the score seldom engages us enough to shape our moods toward some specific inference about the war.

56 *The Thin Red Line* provides a quick but telling contrast. Malick turns the thoughts of many characters into voiceovers that complement music and cinematography with recurrent reveries. This lets viewers participate in the many worlds of imagination that help configure the film and demonstrate its argument. We are not confined to the singular voice often vital for vicarious experience. We experience more for ourselves the worlds promoted by Malick.

57 Even the treatment of the title theme is instructive. In the novel and both films, "the thin red line" is the wavering, evanescing boundary in war between normality and madness, sanity and insanity, heroism and idiocy, self-sacrifice and self-destruction, or capable prudence and despicable, careerist politics. So the first film is all tumult and noise when it argues the crazy character of war, whereas the second version provides a far greater range of emotions, music, and characters for feeling our way into the invasive anti-reality of war (cf. Nelson, 1998b).

Visuals

58 An early scene in *Apocalypse Now* provides a point-of-view shot that closes slowly on window blinds then parts them to peer onto a Saigon street. In the middle of this sequence, we see Martin Sheen's Captain Willard as the figure sustaining this gaze. So the film it stitches our sense of the situation into Willard's, as enacted by Sheen. Through Willard, we experience the tedium,

anticipation, terror, and disillusionment that characterized the Vietnam War for Americans in the mode of director Francis Ford Coppola.

59 We hear what Willard does as he and we look through the blinds: helicopters. The film is famous for its iconic, spinning blades, its chopper sounds, its spiraling camera, and especially its stunned yet perceptive voiceover by Sheen. These characterize the Vietnam War by immersing viewers in the war's prevalent moods. The voiceover, soundtrack, and camerawork route our sense of the situation through Sheen's performance of Willard. We see as he sees, we hear as he hears, we think as he thinks. Hence *Apocalypse Now* provides an overwhelmingly vicarious experience of the war to support its thesis that the Vietnam War pushed beyond American morality, insanity, language, and judgment into the heart of darkness. *Platoon*, constructed in considerable homage by Oliver Stone to the Coppola film before it, repeats and occasionally twists many of these moves.

60 The challenge for film directors and editors is to achieve an effective consistency in moving among cinematic modes of experience. Malick's movie also combines frontal shots to outline a situation, at times omnisciently but other times vicariously, with perspectival shots to stitch viewers into that situation. Down in the tall grass, we cannot see long distances. Only as we soldiers reach the edges of the grass can the camera look largely unimpeded up the hill toward the machine-gun enplacements that wait to mow us down as the enemy. We see the soldiers frontally, coming toward us. But then the leader passes us, looks back at his men, whom we see frontally from his or perhaps even our perspective. When he continues up the hill, he stays mostly hidden by the grass, but we keep him in partial sight as we move up from behind and to the side. The sense of danger is close to claustrophobic: we would like to see more and better, but we feel the need to stay down and keep on the move so that no machine-gunner higher on the hill can draw a bead on our bobbing helmet.

61 War films used to bulge with panoramic vistas that could cultivate the viewers' senses of spectacle. Recent war films sometimes favor a spectacular restraint consistent with putting viewers into particular places within the battles depicted. They downplay all-encompassing vistas and panoramic frames for spectacles presented frontally. Instead many recent war films use perspectival shots at medium and close range plus the situating and identifying shots needed to blend vicarious and virtual experiences of specific wars.

62 Malick's version of *The Thin Red Line* offers profound beauty, but it is mostly intimate and seldom spectacular. *Saving Private Ryan* is mainly gritty and gruesome, yet also typically American in its sentimentality. The attempt to let us almost literally taste the D-Day invasion is renowned by

veterans for its virtual reality. Just as telling are the similar visual techniques that structure the bracketing scenes in the cemetery. Viewers have the perspective of family members. We follow Ryan down the path and toward the grave of Captain Miller. The film argues that we are the family, the further generations, that Miller and his men sacrificed their lives to make possible by saving Private Ryan. It offers Ryan's grief and gratitude less as entry into experiences of the Second World War, though it does that, than as evidence of the good and obligation created by Allied warriors. Then it stitches together virtual, vicarious, and other modes of experience that enable us to sense the sacrifice and feel the obligation it confers.

63 Both Spielberg and Malick call also on the poetry of films, with dynamics of symbolic experience, to intensify our sensations of the Second World War. One symbolic moment in the Spielberg film comes in the telling transition between march and battle. Drops of rain drum on a leaf. Then the sound of accelerating rain becomes heard as bursts of gunfire when Miller's men approach a devastated village. Assaulted at once by nature and war, these fairly ordinary fellows on the road to rescue Private Ryan and the generations to come, accomplishing an extraordinary transmutation of the vicious into the virtuous in fighting for our futures. Our obligations as citizens follow in important part from their heroism, however much it might be obscured by intervening waters or years. If we will experience what the warriors faced and who they were, as well as how they acted, we can know for ourselves whom to be and what to do.

64 Malick's movie ends in a comparable way. The reveries throughout feature visions of sailing, swimming, sinking, and rising toward light. These culminate in an ending image of a coconut washed ashore and sprouting on the beach. This condensive symbol resolves the film's contentions of earth, air, and even water – where Malick's protagonist, Private Witt, has just died sacrificing himself for the other soldiers. Experiencing the symbol of the seed sprouting on the boundaries of land, sea, and sky, we recapitulate the film's transit of the liminal territory leading into life, death, and thought. We sense the hope needed and deserved after participating in the movie's cruel, crazy, nevertheless redemptive events.

Versions

65 Differences between the two film versions of *The Thin Red Line* tell volumes about the contrast between enactments and experiences, vicarious and virtual realities. The earlier film typically keeps the camera close to the ground or, when the soldiers wade through a swamp, the surface of the water. Yet its camera captures the action mostly from the front, with men moving toward the eyes of the viewers. Moreover it seeks theatrical presentations of bodily movements and inclusive frames for particular

events. When we do empathize, it is with and through its protagonist, Private Doll.

66 As noted, the later film puts the camera where viewers must continually crane to see what is happening. Their vantages are behind or to the side of the main motions of the men. The obstructions to sight and sound are many, and the screen seldom encompasses more than the small part of ongoing events that the camera turns and squirms to bring into piecemeal apprehension. We viewers are in the midst of the action, participating; we are not kept outside some frame, witnessing the enactments of others. The camera does not give us long vistas or hover cleanly above water surfaces. In reverie and in action, it swims beneath to display light above and around us. The manner is beautifully reminiscent of the light glinting from above jungle canopy to suffuse the tropical surroundings toward the beginning and the end of the second film. (*Platoon* offers only one brief canopy shot, toward the start; Spielberg does take his camera briefly below water during the landing sequences, so that we may sense virtually for ourselves the underwater ballet of bullets, bleeding, and death.)

67 The 1998 version of *The Thin Red Line* could be said to argue that war is a world of endless, crazy contention, yet we can and must imagine other worlds. Thus Malick's movie pointedly addresses many modes of experience and imagination. It gives us many domains of experience and imagination to negotiate along with its many viewpoint characters. Sergeant Welsh, played by Sean Penn, is the hardboiled realist. (He lacks the edgy sense of humor in the 1964 performance by Jack Warden, but the character's honorable insistence on war as a hell that effaces needed boundaries between the sane and the insane makes Welsh's hard-headed insistence on realism as survivalism as well as his brand of responsibility for the soldiers under his command much the same in both enactments.) Several other soldiers act and even argue against such realism. As in the 1964 film, Private Doll (Keir Dullea in 1964 and Dash Mihok in 1998) performs a stringent and fanatical survivalism that metamorphoses into a heroically reckless idealism as he strives to impose his own standards on the chaotic conditions of war.

68 Yet the 1998 film de-emphasizes the 1964 polarity between Welsh and Doll. It focuses instead on contrasting Welsh with Private Witt, who is more a day-dreamer than an idealist. It portrays how potent and eventually heroic Witt's imaginings can be, even though Witt never asserts them with anything like Doll's relentlessness or force. Mainly, though, it concentrates on augmenting the focal contrast with many other modes of experience and imagination. We viewers also partake of the careerist realism that characterizes Lieutenant Colonel Tall (Nick Nolte) as it veers from humiliation and desperation to outrage and insanity but then to cunning and possibly even sympathy. We share the humanism of Captain Staros (Elias

Koteas) – as developed from the cautious prudence of Captain Stone (James Philbrook) in the 1964 version. We drink deeply of the perspectives embodied by Corporal Fife (Adrien Brody), Private Bell (Ben Chaplin), and Sergeant Keck (Woody Harrelson). We even taste the briefly sensibilities of Privates Tills (Tim Blake Nelson) and Matti (Larry Romano), Sergeants Storm (John C. Reilly) and McCron (John Savage), Captains Gaff (John Cusack) and Bosch (George Clooney), Second Lieutenant Whyte (Jared Leto), and Brigadier General Quintard (John Travolta). These names provide recurrent opportunities for symbolic experiences, but the film's center of experiential gravity emerges from moving among its many vicarious and especially virtual realities.

69 Wars, the film maintains, are worlds made by modes of ambition and imagination. In a way, the 1998 thesis of *The Thin Red Line* is closely akin to the 1996 argument of Francis A. Beer and Robert Hariman for *Post-Realism* as *The Rhetoric Turn in International Relations* now needed to escape the monomaniacal hold of *Realpolitick* on reasoning for war and diplomacy. The claim is not that realism is wrong or even outdated. It is rather that realism requires other ways of thinking, talking, and acting in order to address war or any other politics adequately. The twentieth-century disposition to privilege realism as the only stance or style worth taking for war or other politics must yield to perspectives that encompass more modes of experience and imagination. The old disposition is one that popular genres of cinema, including films of war, are eminently equipped to help us overcome. Once you have experienced Guadalcanal from the perspectives of so many different fighters, the realism of Sergeant Welsh still seems important, yet even it is starting to learn the necessity and legitimacy of additional principles.

Argument

> A moving picture, because it moves, is the one form of narrative that cannot convey an idea of any kind, as opposed to a generalized emotion. . . . the past is another country, and to bring it to some sort of dramatic life takes a capacity for which there is no English word. It was not until the eighteenth century that a German, J. G. Herder, coined *Einfühlen* – the act of feeling one's way into the past not by holding up a mirror but by stepping *through* the mirror into the alien world.
>
> Gore Vidal (1997, p. 115)

70 My argument, accordingly, is that *Saving Private Ryan*, *The Thin Red Line*, *Platoon*, *Apocalypse Now*, and most other war films are themselves

arguments. As a genre, war films argue claims about wars. They are not the kinds of arguments that the academy is used to acknowledging; and Gore Vidal, for one, seems incapable of recognizing cinematic ideas and arguments as such. They occur in electronic media rather than written texts or oral speeches. Yet the classical apparatus of rhetoric meant for oral speeches then adapted to written texts also can serve surprisingly well to appreciate cinematic arguments and electronic politics in general. Often, in fact, cinematic rhetoric partakes of the very techniques of empathy and virtual reality that Vidal manages to acknowledge before he is done.

71 Therefore we should continue to adapt and expand the resources of rhetoric, making them even more fit for the analysis and invention of postmodern, electronic performances. As war films suggest, we can encompass the current, electronic reach of argument from ethos by expanding the rhetoric of spirit. Let us augment earlier concerns of character and standing, authority and office, as well as credibility and expertise with postmodern dynamics of mood, tone, ambience. Let us practice them all as legitimate kinds of argument. And let us perform them all – academically, cinematically, and politically – as effective modes of experience.

72 In *Saving Private Ryan*, the bracketing scenes establish unmistakably that the film is an argument about the debt we owe Captain Miller and the myriad other soldiers who sacrificed themselves in winning the Second World War. We, like Private James Ryan, are obliged to live our lives so as to make good on their suffering and sacrifice. How are we viewers to know that this claim on us is right? The film stitches us into experiences of the European war that make vivid and personal to each of us the spirit, price, and implications of that sacrifice. We, like Private Ryan, owe our lives and futures to the likes of Captain Miller. We, even more like the members of Ryan's family, must stretch our sensibilities to encompass what Miller, Ryan, his mother, and millions of other people went through to provide the freedom for us to acquit our obligation. If you have been through something like their experiences, the film presumes, you know how and why you are indebted to them.

73 After locating us as members of the family whose future has depended on the sacrifices of Captain Miller, Private Ryan, and the Allied soldiers who won the Second World War, the Spielberg film offers its famous evocation of the D-Day landings. It has moved us into Ryan's arena of knowledge (rather than personal experience) by closing pointedly on his teary eyes, staring into space at the gravesite. Once within the invasion scenes, the camera moves almost seamlessly among omniscient, vicarious, virtual, perspectival, symbolic, and other cinematic modes of experience. To help us feel the suffering, killing, courage, cunning, cowardice, and varied fortunes of the soldiers, *Saving Private Ryan* completes the camerawork with amazing soundtracks that keep us in the middle of the assault for long, desperate

minutes at a time. To draw us further into the action, Spielberg darkens the edges of the screen at times to transform any residual framing effects into the tunnel vision of one concentrating intensely and focusing narrowly because life depends on that.

74 This experiential tunneling comes and goes, as it does for soldiers or others in the midst of manic bursts of activity. The motion slows and speeds in erratic but intelligible ways, especially as we focus vicariously on Miller's struggle to overcome the numbing barrage in order to concert himself and his command to effective action. At the same instants, we are getting a private's virtual view of the captain's confusion and resolution while sensing the dire conditions vicariously through the captain's responses.

75 Please notice the implication that vicarious and virtual experiences are not exclusively cinematic. They are amply apparent in the everyday flows of experience that we naïvely label "direct" or "personal," without stopping to analyze phenomenologically. On the battlefield, military trainers know, privates do look at times to captains for experiences of the situations that they share: this, far more than simple command, helps enable them to maintain military discipline. It helps effect the coordination and facilitate the cooperation crucial for success. The same turns out to be true of symbolic and still other modes of experience. Not only do military training and leadership take advantage of them all, but everyday lives manifest these modes of experience in hosts of situations too readily classified as experienced "individually" or "simply."

76 If we remember this, we should be able to avoid any dubious dichotomies between ordinary, real, or personal modes of experience and cinematic modes of experience. Thus the politics of cinematic experiences are parts of the real and important politics of people's lives. Cinematic politics need not – and should not – be regarded as especially artificial, categorically fraudulent, necessarily manipulative, or patently immaterial. Myths, symbols, and movies are actual and potent components of the politics we experience both officially and informally. It is high time that the political sciences respect films as significant arenas of political action.

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