

FILM ON THE MARCH!

Visual documents of war and the cinematic war genre.

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Research

on the 15th of January, 2019

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Abstract:

This research uncovers the artistic influence that visual war documents have on the cinematic war genre by analysing key archival documents, war genre films, and scholarly texts. The practice of emulating visual war documents in genre films to craft realistic depictions of war has become a key convention in the cinematic war genre throughout the twentieth century. In recent years the proliferation of visual war documents available through the internet has contributed to widespread familiarity with war images, particularly newer types of visual war documents such as helmet camera footage. These visual war documents are unique to the conflicts of the twenty first century and offer the potential to further the boundaries of the cinematic war genre. However, the emulation of newer visual documents in contemporary war cinema is noticeably lacking, with filmmakers instead continuing to emulate the characteristics of older war documents. By analysing key archival documents and war genre films this research project defines, critiques, and proposes future possibilities for the cinematic war genre. This research also implements creative practice research and offers a short film which tests the arguments of this thesis and experiments with the war genre form. The purpose of this research project is to extend scholarly, artistic, and audience awareness of the influence of visual war documents on the cinematic war genre.

Statement of Originality:

*This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university.
To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously
published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis
itself.*

Signed: 

Date: 15/01/2019

Acknowledgements:

This research project could not have been completed without the help and generosity of the following people and groups:

Macquarie University, Faculty of Arts, MMCCS Department – For this opportunity, support, and funding.

Dr. Iqbal Barkat – For supervision, encouragement, support, and most of all, for challenging me to do better.

Dr. Karen Pearlman – For advice, support, and assistance in networking.

Marcus Eckermann – For advice, support, and much needed technical expertise.

Avanti, Cathy, Michael & Erin – For your support, generosity, and care. I could never have completed any of this without you.

Forestry Corporation of NSW – For allowing the production of *Watch* at Belanglo State Forest, and for the support of the rangers on duty.

The cast and crew of *Watch* – Marie Butler-Cole, Jordan Saville, Colin Wilson, Daniel Martin, Eugene Ulman, Victor Hawk, Erik Vent, Raphael Dubois, Igor Bulanov, Raisa Yudasin, Yuriy Pinyugin, Sergei Cherniakoff, Chris Drew & Jack Welch – our film would not have been possible without your hard work and your generosity; I am eternally grateful.

Chapter One:

Declaration of War

“The concept of reality is always the first victim of war.”

- Virilio, 1984/1989, p. 43.

On the 6th of June 1944, Hungarian photojournalist Robert Capa landed on a now infamous stretch of French coastline codenamed ‘Easy Red Sector, Omaha Beach’. The event was D-Day, the Allied invasion of Fortress Europe in World War Two. In the ensuing chaos Capa shot as many photographs as he could before returning from the battle. Due to an error during their development, only eleven of the photographs survived, with those that did embodying a distinct and chaotic visual style (Haggith, 2002, p. 336).



Above: One of Robert Capa's *Magnificent Eleven* (1944).

In 1998, Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* was released to critical acclaim. The opening half hour of the film draws particular attention for its realistic, graphic, and harrowing depiction of the first waves of US soldiers to land on Omaha Beach during Operation Neptune in World War Two. Although the widely known opening sequence of *Saving Private Ryan* takes place on a different sector of Omaha Beach, the visual similarities in composition, movement, and framing, between Capa's photographs and the cinematic recreation are striking.



Above: A still image from *Saving Private Ryan* (1998).

The visual similarities between Capa's *Magnificent Eleven* and Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* are no coincidence – the filmmakers intended to emulate the characteristics of archival documents from World War Two in order to make the film appear as realistic as possible. The desire for realism in the cinematic war genre has developed throughout the twentieth century, and the practice of emulating visual documents of war has come to shape the contemporary war genre as we know it. This research examines the influence that visual documents of war, like Capa's *Magnificent Eleven*, have on the cinematic war genre, but also asks what filmmakers must do to account for the changes to how war is fought and recorded in the twenty first century.

The second chapter of this thesis will analyse key examples which reveal how filmmakers utilise particular cinematic techniques to emulate archival visual documents in war genre films. This chapter will build upon the work of Virilio, Gunning, Barthes, and Baron to argue that the practice of emulation is enabled through the *reality effect* (Barthes, 1968/1989), the *archive affect* (Baron, 2013), and the immediate indexical qualities of war images (Gunning, 2004). This practice, which is a form of remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 1999), is central to the cinematic war genre and allows filmmakers to craft realistic depictions of war on screen, that are based upon the extensive archive of visual war documents.

The third chapter considers the changes to how war is fought, recorded, and archived in the twenty first century. The rise of the internet as an archive of visual war documents has granted viewers an access to excess and fueled the normalisation of war through the overexposure of war images. However, the potential for the internet archive to positively shape the cinematic war genre in the future will also be highlighted in this chapter, with particular attention being drawn to contemporary visual war documents such as helmet camera and drone footage. These 'new' types of visual war documents

offer unique visual perspectives on war which can challenge engrained perceptions of human conflict and reshape the cinematic war genre through the practice of emulation. Despite this potential, many contemporary war films do not acknowledge the internet archive, or the fundamental changes to how war is fought in the twenty first century, as this chapter will highlight.

The fourth chapter will focus on the potential for the internet archive to positively shape the cinematic war genre and to encourage the cinematic re-perception of war. The technique of defamiliarisation will be outlined, as well as cinematic techniques of reflexivity which can challenge traditional cinematic representations of war. The film *84C MoPic* will be used to illustrate this potential, and to outline how emulating different visual perspectives can challenge traditional cinematic representations of war. The creative practice component of this research will be introduced in relation to these ideas. The short film, titled *Watch*, is told from the perspective of a helmet camera attached to the protagonist, and emulates contemporary visual war documents from the War in Donbass sourced from the internet archive. This short film experiments with the arguments of this research, and challenges traditional cinematic representations of war, in order to create a reflexive and subversive war genre film.

This research project aims to increase understanding of the influential connection between visual war documents and the cinematic war genre. I propose that the war genre form can be used by filmmakers to encourage audiences to reflect on and re-perceive engrained notions of war as necessary or justifiable – this research will test this proposition through a short war film, and hopes to contribute to the future of the cinematic war genre and the discourses which surround war.

Chapter Two:

Recreating the Real

“...a war film is hardly ever ‘just’ a war film...”

- Hodgkins, 2002, p. 75.

VISUAL WAR DOCUMENTS

Wars have been fought and recorded throughout human history. Literary records of war such as the *Iliad* and the *Mahābhārata* survive to this day. Of particular value it seems however, are the visual records of wars fought throughout history; those records which *show* war, rather than simply tell. Prior to the birth of photography, painting and illustration were the primary means of visually recording and representing battles and wars. By the end of the nineteenth century however, photography was readily adopted to document war, and would be used extensively during the First World War from 1914 to 1918.

Paul Virilio is a scholar who has made significant contributions to understanding the connection between war and cinema in such works as *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (1984/1989) and *Pure War* (1997). Virilio notes that during the First World War only aerial photography - at that time in its infancy - was truly capable of recording the scale of destruction caused by mass artillery and the movement of troops, which could then be interpreted by those in command (1984/1989, p. 80). The First World War was a proving ground not only for military tactics and weapons, but also for the development of photography and cinematography. Virilio proves this connection with many similar examples and argues that the connection between war and cinema is clear; the two have developed alongside one another throughout the twentieth century

due to technological necessity. For Virilio, the technology of war and the technology of cinema are closely entwined.

“Projectiles have awakened and opened their many eyes: heat-seeking missiles, infra-red or laser guidance systems, warheads fitted with video-cameras that can relay what they see to pilots and to ground-controllers sitting at their consoles. The fusion is complete, the confusion perfect: nothing new distinguishes the functions of the weapon and the eye; the projectile’s image and image’s projectile form a single composition.”

(Virilio, 1984/1989, p. 83).

A key point for Virilio is the increasing distance at which wars are fought due to the further development of war technologies. These developments can be explained by an increase in speed, which Virilio argues has led to the creation of weapons which are more devastating, are more effective, and have driven a fundamental shift in the way that wars are fought (Virilio & Lotringer, 2008, pp. 57-65). In turn, this fundamental shift has forced militaries to conceal their troops, weapons, and positions, whilst utilising technology designed to reveal the enemy; these are the “logistics of perception” (Virilio, 1984/1989). Virilio takes this argument further, stating;

“...alongside the ‘war machine’, there has always existed an ocular (and later optical and electro-optical) ‘watching machine’ capable of providing soldiers, and particularly commanders, with a visual perspective on the military action underway. From the original watch-tower through the anchored balloon to the reconnaissance aircraft and remote-sensing satellites, one and the same function has been indefinitely repeated, the eye’s function being the function of a weapon.”

(Virilio, 1984/1989, p. 3)

As Virilio highlights, the logistics of perception play a crucial role in the strategy and tactics of war, but they also inform how war is recorded and archived. Visual documents of war are the remnants of Virilio's logistics of perception and are curated to form an archive of visual information. This archive of visual war documents takes many forms and is not confined to one tangible location; the archive is composed of many pieces and is governed by the discourses that also determine which visual documents are valued over others. The watching machine that Virilio refers to, is able to function through this archive long after the end of a particular conflict, and it informs collective perceptions of war, as well as how war is viewed.

In order to appreciate the importance of visual war documents, it is also necessary to consider Tom Gunning's interpretation of indexicality.¹ Borrowing Charles Peirce's term, Gunning addresses the "truth claim" of traditional photography, which he notes is widely assumed to be driven by the indexical qualities of photography (2004, p. 39). The indexical qualities of a photograph - or film footage - refer to the ability of the physical image to refer to something outside of itself. A photograph of a war signifies the discourses of that war while also existing as a separate physical object, even though the moment it captures has passed into history. Although Gunning concedes that the ability of a photograph to visually signify a particular moment in history does explain part of human fascination with photography, he adds that the "indexically based truth claim of photography" is "the product of social discourses as well as the indexical quality of the camera" (2004, p. 48; emphasis added).

¹ Tom Gunning's work builds upon the term coined by Charles Peirce, and offers a critical re-interpretation of the importance of indexicality in photography. Although Gunning focuses mostly on photography and concludes that indexicality does not solely explain the power of photography, his interpretation of the concept is a crucial starting point for this research, as his contribution draws from and synthesises the work of Bazin and Barthes.

“...the apparatus, in itself, can neither lie, nor tell the truth. Bereft of language, a photograph relies on people to say things about it or for it.”

(Gunning, 2004, p. 42)

The truth claim of photography is a double edged sword; photographic images are able to accurately and objectively record detailed visual information about a particular moment in time from a specific perspective, but all of this power is mediated by the social discourses embodied by (and around) the subject, the photographer, and the viewer. Importantly, as Gunning notes, “an index need not (and frequently does not) resemble the thing it represents” (2004, p. 40). A visual document such as a photograph or footage does not (and cannot) resemble war itself, but instead signifies social discourses surrounding the absent referent. This means that visual documents of war are governed by the discourses which surround the wars they record, and furthermore, that the archive which contains these documents is also governed by discourse.

THE CINEMATIC WAR GENRE

As photographic technology continued to develop in the early twentieth century, so too did the generic forms which shaped narrative cinema. The foundational years of narrative cinema saw the repetition of recognisable techniques and motifs across different narrative films which came to define different genres. Many notable war genre films have been produced throughout the twentieth century including, *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (J. Searle Dawley, 1912), *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (Rex Ingram, 1921), *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Lewis Milestone, 1930), *Paths of Glory* (Stanley Kubrick, 1957), *The Longest Day* (Ken Annakin, Darryl F. Zanuck & Gerd Oswald, 1962), *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), *Platoon* (Oliver Stone,

1986), and *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998).² Whilst many war films produced over the last century do depict historical battles and violence, Hodgkins reminds us of the contemporaneous nature of the war genre;

“A war film is hardly ever ‘just’ a war film; due to the intense and problematic subject matter intrinsic to the genre (that is, the governmentally condoned homicide of other human beings), war films often possess philosophical and ideological implications far broader than their ostensible storylines might suggest.”

(Hodgkins, 2002, p. 75)

Hodgkins analyses a number of war genre films produced during the 1990s which are set during World War Two, and demonstrates how these films explore questions and themes of the (then recent) Gulf War. Hodgkins provides a strong precedent, reminding us that representations of war in genre cinema are always contemporary and clearly reflect the discourses, fears, and ideals of their time.

The question of how to represent war in genre cinema is one which has been addressed by many filmmakers. During the early years of narrative cinema, filmmakers pioneered the trend of emulating visual documents of war in genre films to create realistic representations. A clear example comes from Georges Méliès’ *The Last Cartridges* (1897), a short film adapted from an 1873 painting of the same name by Alphonse de Neuville. The film, which is just over one minute long, features a group of soldiers defending a destroyed house as they scramble to collect the last rounds of

² This is by no means a comprehensive list, nor does it reflect the subtle variations in war genre films across different countries and cultures. These particular films are notable examples due to their prominence within the war genre.

ammunition from the floor. The scene depicted in the film matches the composition of Neuville's original painting incredibly closely:



Top: *The Last Cartridges* (1873 painting), by Alphonse de Neuville.

Bottom: *The Last Cartridges* (1897 film), by Georges Méliès.



The Last Cartridges (1897) is one of the earliest examples of a genre film emulating a visual document of war. Neuville's 1873 painting (which depicts the Battle of Bazeilles fought between French and Bavarian soldiers) is itself an artistic representation of war that serves as a visual document. Méliès' film version of *The Last Cartridges* is a realistic cinematic depiction of war and shows soldiers fighting a desperate battle on screen, despite the fact that it is merely a cinematic adaptation of a representative painting. Méliès' *The Last Cartridges* reveals the practice of emulating visual war documents in genre cinema and also illustrates Barthes' "reality effect" (1968/1989, p. 148). Barthes argues that the absence of the referent enables a sign to occupy a position of power and to assert its own claim to realism.

"The very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism: the *reality effect* is produced, the basis of that unavowed verisimilitude which forms the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity."

(Barthes, 1968/1989, p. 148)

In the absence of the real war, a war genre film need only refer to a visual document from the war in order to generate the reality effect. Furthermore, the visual document which is emulated does not need to be a primary or 'real' document in order to generate the reality effect as this example shows – reality is in the eye of the beholder – and as Gunning asserts, the "index need not resemble the thing it represents" (2004, p. 40). The trend of emulating and adapting visual documents of war in genre cinema set the cinematic war genre on a course which would develop throughout the twentieth century, resulting in a collection of cinematic techniques used by filmmakers seeking to craft realistic depictions of war on screen.

Another key theoretical tool to understanding the connection between visual documents and genre cinema is provided by Jaimie Baron. Baron refers to the *archive affect* and argues that it is “deeply entwined with historical desire, the desire to know and/or ‘experience’ history, to make present what is by definition absent - the past - when all we have left are its fragments” (2013, p. 123). Baron explains further;

“The desire for presence is the desire for the archive affect, for an awareness of the passage of time and the partiality of its remains, for an embodied experience of confronting what has been lost, and the mortal human condition. We seek to renew this affect again and again in order not only to *know* the past but also to *feel* it.”

(Baron, 2013, p. 128)

The archive affect manifests itself as a desire to understand the past through an experiential connection, which Baron argues can be partly fulfilled (but never fully) by archival documents. This partial sense of fulfilment leaves the viewer with a desire to see more. Baron elaborates on this desire with an excellent example;

“A whole genre of films [...] has appeared based around previously ‘lost’ or recently ‘found’ images of World War II ‘in colour!’ These films do not promise to provide any new ‘information’ or a radical ‘revision’ of the established historical narrative but rather a revelatory affective experience generated by found colour footage of what was previously only known in black-and-white.”³

(Baron, 2013, pp. 124-125).

³ An interesting example of this type of documentary film is Peter Jackson’s *They Shall Not Grow Old* (2018), a documentary film consisting of World War I film and sound which has been restored and colourised to an incredible level of detail using contemporary methods and technology.

Baron's argument is strong, particularly because visual war documents and genre cinema appeal directly to the viewer's visual and aural senses. The immediacy of the image and its ability to appear realistic (despite contemporary digital manipulations), contribute to the desire for historical connection and understanding. Visual documents, according to Barthes, are accepted as realistic precisely because they are "justified by their referent alone" which is always absent (1968/1989, p. 147). When visual war documents are emulated in genre cinema a similar outcome occurs, with the 'realism' of the genre film being justified by its simple connection to archival documents, as if the genre film is able to stand in for its referent. Therefore, by emulating visual war documents filmmakers are able to impart the qualities of realism onto a genre film, due to the self-justifying reality effect and the desire for the archive affect. This practice of emulation has become the backbone of the cinematic war genre over the last century, and can be seen in many war genre films.

EMULATION & REMEDIATION

The practice of emulation is based upon the desire to visualise realistic images of war in genre cinema. By sharing similarities with visual war documents, a war genre film is able to generate authenticity and credibility, due to the reality effect. But there is a key missing piece of the theoretical puzzle: the practice of emulation – which is central to the cinematic war genre – is a form of remediation. This practice enables the indexical qualities of visual war documents to be applied to a text that lies outside of the archive, without alerting the viewer to this. Bolter and Grusin provide a clear outline of the strategies of remediation:

“Hypermedia and transparent media are opposite manifestations of the same desire: the desire to get past the limits of representation and to achieve the real. They are not striving for the real in any metaphysical sense. Instead, the real is defined in terms of the viewer’s experience; it is that which would evoke an immediate (and therefore authentic) emotional response. Transparent digital applications seek to get to the real by bravely denying the fact of mediation; digital hypermedia seek the real by multiplying mediation so as to create a feeling of fullness, a satiety of experience, which can be taken as reality. Both of these moves are strategies of remediation.”⁴

(Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 53; emphasis added)

Viewers are not supposed to recognise the practice of emulation in genre cinema, instead, they are supposed to accept the image as a realistic sign of a war. An abundance of cinematic techniques are used in the production of war genre films to ensure that the suspension of disbelief is upheld, and the viewer is able to become immersed within the diegesis of the film without interruption or distraction. Consistent framing, eye-lines, angles, and camera placement work hand-in-hand with establishing shots, overlapping audio-visual cuts, stabilised camerawork, and continuity editing, to ensure the viewer is able to understand the images presented to them and focus on the story. By “bravely denying the fact of mediation”, war genre films are able to present realistic depictions of war without raising questions of their own authenticity (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 53).

Importantly, in striving to emulate visual documents of war in genre films, filmmakers are also emulating the *techniques* which produced those documents in the first place.

⁴ In this context, a war genre film can be considered a form of transparent media, whereas archival footage of war available through the internet is a form of digital hypermedia.

One such technique which is common in the war genre is the use of a 'shaky cam', designed to mimic the jolts and bumps of handheld camerawork in the middle of a war, and to appear to resemble combat footage recorded by soldiers or journalists. This specific technique is an example of emulation which remediates visual war documents to craft a cinematic representation that appears real. This particular technique has been used many times and has become a convention within the war genre.⁵ In this way, remediation has become a strategy which is used in the war genre.

The effects of remediation are not limited to the aesthetic style of a film however; remediation causes change. The remediation of visual war documents – through the traditional archive, through the internet archive, through countless documentaries, through emulation in genre films – re-organises images of war to give them meaning. As Baron notes also, the archive is inherently fragmented; it is composed of both excess information and missing pieces (2013, pp. 109-110). This excessive detail and missing information is amplified when visual war documents are emulated in genre cinema. Certain visual details are lost while others are emphasised due to a series of artistic choices and limitations of the genre film form. Furthermore, it is important to note the fact that visual documents of war re-mediate war itself. The subjectivity of the camera – whether it is handheld, or attached to a drone – decides what is and is not recorded. There are always missing pieces of information in visual war documents, which is compounded through the archive, and amplified through emulation in war genre cinema.

Visual realism is an aesthetic quality which is valued within the cinematic war genre, and is a feature which is sought by filmmakers. The emulation of visual war documents – often achieved by emulating the camera techniques which lead to their creation in the

⁵ The 'handheld' or 'shaky cam' technique is certainly not unique to the war genre, but its use within war films has become an engrained convention through repeated use across many films.

first place – enables this visual realism to be crafted and justified by its relation to visual documents. Kane argues that war and visual realism is a “question of ethics and politics” (2011, p. 46). The complex interplay of visual realism and questions of moral, ethical, and political representations in the war genre has been the focus of many scholars such as Haggith (2002), Hodgkins (2002), Gates (2005), Kane (2011), Pötzsch (2012), Binns & Ryder (2015), McDonald (2015), Binns (2017), and Finlay (2017). A common thread between each of these scholarly works is the analysis of generic techniques which influence particular cinematic representations of war. These works provide a strong foundation for this research project, which directs focus towards the broader impacts of technique on the war genre.

SAVING ROBERT CAPA & REMEDIATING PRIVATE RYAN

In 1998 a key filmic text within the war genre was released to critical acclaim. *Saving Private Ryan* was praised by critics and audiences for its realistic depiction of World War Two through detailed and violent battle sequences (Haggith, 2002, p. 332). The success of the film has earned it a place in “cinematic mythology” (Binns & Ryder, 2015, p. 94). The opening half hour of the film draws particular attention and praise because of its realistic, graphic and harrowing recreation of Omaha Beach. As Haggith notes, this realism is achieved through “mimicking the style of combat film shot by Allied cameraman” (2002, p. 332). The director of the film, Steven Spielberg, further explains the approach taken during production:

“Very early on in the process, we knew that we did not want it to look like a Technicolor extravaganza about World War Two. We wanted it to look very

much like colour newsreel footage from the 1940s, which is highly desaturated and very grainy and extremely low-tech.”

(Steven Spielberg, *Saving Private Ryan: Making Saving Private Ryan*).

Relatively little combat footage of the infamous amphibious invasion of Omaha Beach exists, and less so of the first waves of U.S. soldiers to land at Dog Green sector. As Haggith notes, the British cameramen who landed on different beaches and filmed much more footage, were still unable to film most of the events due to the unpredictability of the combat and the risk to their own lives (2002, pp. 338-339). In fact, one of the closest visual documents from Omaha Beach are a set of photographs taken by Hungarian photojournalist Robert Capa in an adjacent sector of beach known as Easy Red.⁶ The surviving photographs have a distinct and chaotic visual style, mostly due to an error during their development (Haggith, 2002, p. 336). When Capa's *Magnificent Eleven* are compared with a number of shots in the opening combat sequence of *Saving Private Ryan*, the movement and composition of Capa's visual documents are clearly present in the film.

⁶ Robert Capa was a pseudonym developed by Endre Friedmann (Robert Capa) and his professional partner, Gerda Taro. Capa disembarked at a different section of Omaha Beach to that which is depicted in *Saving Private Ryan*.



Top: One of Robert Capa's *Magnificent Eleven* (1944).

Bottom: A still from the opening sequence of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998).





Top: One of Robert Capa's *Magnificent Eleven* (1944).

Bottom: A still from the opening sequence of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998).



Spielberg also drew inspiration from documentary films such as *The Battle of Midway* (1942), *With the Marines At Tarawa* (1944), and *The Battle of San Pietro* (1945)⁷ (Haggith, 2002, p. 335). By drawing inspiration from these different documentary sources, Spielberg and the film crew were able to emulate the look and sound of documentary footage and make the combat sequences of *Saving Private Ryan* look like vivid World War Two footage. Spielberg elaborates on the technical lengths that the filmmakers went to in order to emulate the look and sound of World War Two footage;

“We just had a camera, stripped the lenses right down to the kind of lenses they actually had in the Second World War, and we shot the film with 90 degree shutters, a lot of the war sequences are shot with 45 degree shutters, which was sort of the shutter degree of some of the old film cameras of the 1940s that were used making those newsreels.”

(Steven Spielberg, *Saving Private Ryan: Making Saving Private Ryan*).

This reveals how the documentary style of *Saving Private Ryan* was achieved technically, as well as the intention behind going to these technical lengths - the filmmakers aimed to create a realistic depiction of war. It also highlights the importance of emulating the *techniques* which created the original visual documents. The cinematographer of *Saving Private Ryan* explains;

“By applying 45 degree shutters, we achieve staccato in the actors’ movement. We achieve a certain crispness of explosions. Everything becomes slightly more realistic.”

(Janusz Kaminski, *Saving Private Ryan: Making Saving Private Ryan*).

⁷ It should be noted that *The Battle of San Pietro* contains restaged battle sequences, as John Huston arrived after the battle had finished.

The filmmakers of *Saving Private Ryan* had access to a wealth of visual World War Two documents to inform their cinematic representation. The abundance of black-and-white World War Two photographs and footage has provided a representative collage of the conflict for many viewers in the years after 1945. Countless documentary series have been produced and cut together from archival World War Two footage. These visual documents of the conflict not only inform the viewer of what the Second World War looked like, but also “speak to the potential viewer’s desire [...] for historical meaning [and] for an experience of historical presence” (Baron, 2013, p. 124). Visual documents of World War Two have been widely viewed for seventy years over many platforms including the cinema theatre, the television, and the internet. This exposure has informed many viewer’s perceptions of the Second World War. What can be seen in archival footage and photographs from the Second World War has defined what was ‘real’ about the conflict for many viewers, particularly those who did not experience it firsthand. Visual documents of World War Two have generated a reality effect over seventy years of exposure, and just as Barthes argues, they have become self-justifying archival documents due to the absence of their referent (Barthes, 1968/1989, p.148). Of course, for those who actually experienced the Second World War firsthand, the world looked the same as it does now; the differences were cultural not visual. Visual documents of World War Two do serve as an invaluable source of primary evidence for historians and general viewers, but have also warped the visualisation of World War Two into a grainy, shaky, often black-and-white set of images. Today – to paraphrase Barthes – a World War Two genre film need only look like World War Two footage in order to legitimise its claim to truth.

Saving Private Ryan provides a clear example of the common practice of emulation in war genre cinema, however, the film is also a unique example which reveals the potential for a war genre film to overshadow and replace visual war documents.

The influence of *Saving Private Ryan* is notable in many films, television documentaries, and particularly video games which have been released after 1998. Prominent examples include *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* (2002), *Medal of Honor: Frontline* (2002), *Call of Duty 2* (2005), and *Call of Duty: WWII* (2017). Each of these successful video games have drawn strongly from *Saving Private Ryan*, and contain strikingly similar characters, lines of dialogue, and entire sequences which match the composition, pacing, and narrative of *Saving Private Ryan*. The cinematic document has begun to take the place of the archival visual document, and other artists have begun to emulate *Saving Private Ryan* as a visual document of war, even using other mediums. Tom Hanks, who portrayed Captain Miller in *Saving Private Ryan*, asserted that the film was in fact a historical document, claiming that “with the technology that is at hand now as far as movie-making goes, we’re making a historical document here” (Tom Hanks, *Saving Private Ryan: Making Saving Private Ryan*).

Speaking of the film, Steven Spielberg hoped that “if we’ve [the filmmakers] played our cards right and done our jobs, the audience will think that we were there” (Spielberg, *Saving Private Ryan: Making Saving Private Ryan*). The perceived ‘realism’ and ‘truth’ depicted in the film is inherently limited by the medium of film, which itself is limited by the source material of visual archives. Through emulating and extrapolating upon the original visual documents of the first waves to land on Omaha Beach, *Saving Private Ryan* has incidentally become a visual document; one which contains more detail than the original visual documents, and yet still cannot represent every detail. The gaps in the archive caused by the limited visual documents from Omaha Beach have been obscured by the vivid detail and realism of *Saving Private Ryan* which now appears to present an accurate account of the battle.

At the time of its release, *Saving Private Ryan* shocked audiences. Gone were the glorious days of the wide framed “D-Day shot” from *The Longest Day* – in its place was a graphic and unflattering depiction of graphic war violence (Binns & Ryder, 2015, pp. 93-94). *Saving Private Ryan* forced viewers to engage with its war-images by confronting them with shocking violence and close up shots of a previously grand historical battle (Binns & Ryder, 2015, p. 94 & 97). Within twenty years of overexposure however, the shocking violence of *Saving Private Ryan* is now familiar and normalised – what is left now, is a film that serves as a visual account of the battle which is far more vivid than the original archival documents. In setting the standard for realistic and graphic depictions of war, *Saving Private Ryan* has irrevocably altered the cinematic war genre. Since its release, and for many more years to come, the film serves as the standard against which all other war films with a claim to cinematic realism are judged by viewers. This is problematic for two reasons; firstly, the morally grounded narrative depicted in the film is strongly tied to the realistic images of the film – a problem that has been explored by scholars such as Gates (2005), and McDonald (2015). This creates a problematic equivalence between realistic images of war and morality, because as Gates argues, while realistic depictions of war in cinema may achieve increased verisimilitude, “they do not necessarily offer a more *accurate* portrayal of war and most often merely mask increasingly idealistic moral assertions” (2005, p. 298). Secondly, the inherently fragmented nature of the visual document which informed the visuals of *Saving Private Ryan* raises pertinent questions about the genre film. We must ask what information has been lost, or created, through the remediation of the original visual documents, and how this has shaped, informed, or warped viewer perceptions of war over the last twenty years.

Chapter Three:

The Internet Archive

“The sheer numbers of international wars waged in the past fifty years, coupled with a growing appetite for immediate and graphic evidence of the violence, has made the horrors of war common, banal, and everyday.”

- Kane, 2011, p. 46.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF WAR

Changes in the ways that war is fought can be mapped to social, technological, and cultural developments throughout history. In the twenty first century, the efficiency and capability of weapons continues to expand into more destructive and precise moments of violence which are justified through ideological and nationalistic perceptions of war as a necessary evil. As previously noted, Virilio argues that the increasing speed and accuracy of weapons is a key factor that influences how war is fought, and thus how war is perceived (Virilio & Lotringer, 2008, pp. 57-65). The compression of time and space on the battlefield, much like the compression of time and space in the editing of film, has changed how war is perceived by the viewer. Virilio provides a clear historical example of the compression of space and time in war;

“Once the optical telegraph came into operation in 1794, the remotest battlefield could have an almost immediate impact on a country’s internal life, turning upside down its social, political and economic field. The instantaneity of action over a distance was already an accomplished fact. Since then, as many people have noted, geographical space has been shrinking with every advance in speed, and strategic location has lost importance as ballistic systems have

become more widespread and sophisticated. This technological development has carried us into a realm of factitious topology in which all the surfaces of the globe are directly present to one another”.

(Virilio, 1984/1989, p. 46).

As the means of war continue to become more instantaneous, the balance between information and force also continues to shift. Powerful satellites, fire control systems, body cameras and unmanned aerial vehicles provide advanced militaries with an unprecedented line of sight, and the images that they record are available as an archive of information unique to the wars of the last two decades. Despite these changes in technological efficiency, Virilio’s logistics of perception still remain relevant as contemporary wars are still determined by the ability to conceal one’s own assets whilst revealing that of the enemy; the ability to see war. Satellite and drone footage are simply the logical progression from the aerial photography of the wars of the twentieth century. Warfare has continued to develop overall, but the reasons for creating visual documents of war have not changed; new perspectives have simply been added to the archive.

One such perspective which has been added to the archive of visual war documents is provided by body camera footage. The practice of attaching a camera to a combatant’s helmet or vest provides an intensely subjective form of war footage. Helmet camera footage in particular has become a common method of recording war, and involves the combatant securing a lightweight camera to the top, front, or side of their headgear. This placement of the camera creates an off-centred effect which does not precisely align with the combatant’s eye-line. The resulting footage is a visual document with a near first person perspective. The combatant, who is now a camera operator, is able to record everything within the camera’s field of view, including audio interference and

noticeable shaking and bumps as they move. Helmet camera footage would appear to offer the perfect truth claim; the indexical qualities of the image generate the reality effect, and rather than shying away from the subjectivity of the combatant, the image embraces the enhanced immediacy and verisimilitude that it provides.

This characteristic of helmet camera footage is the antithesis of traditional narrative cinema, which seeks to maintain the suspension of disbelief through a variety of techniques that make sense of different scenes, times, and objects. Even genre films which utilise handheld 'shaky-cams' to mimic documentary footage of war – such as *Saving Private Ryan* – are carefully blocked and edited to ensure that the viewer is able to make sense of the chaos.⁸ In reality war is a total assault on all of the combatant's senses, and requires the individual to carefully interpret their surroundings to make sense of their environment; a reality which is often lost through continuity editing in narrative cinema. I propose that helmet camera footage is able to reflect this reality more closely than traditional methods of recording war as it requires careful interpretation from the viewer in order to interpret the events recorded. Although the extremely up close and subjective qualities of helmet camera footage do provide the viewer with more detailed, up-close information, it does not immediately offer a greater *understanding* of the events which are recorded. Instead, the chaotic nature of warfare, coupled with the intensely subjective and uncontrolled method of filming, create a confusing visual document which requires active interpretation from the viewer in order to make sense of the footage.

⁸ Binns & Ryder (2015) and Pötzsch (2012) are scholars who have addressed different aspects of how combat sequences are framed and composed in war genre films, including how these artistic decisions influence the representation of war.

One particular conflict which reflects the changing nature of war in the twenty first century is the ongoing War in Donbass. This conflict is a hybrid war, consisting of many overlapping belligerents, a deadly mixture of old and new war technologies, and a significant presence on websites across the internet. The reasons for the war are as complex as the combatants involved, and the internet serves as a platform for reportage, propaganda, and intelligence scouting in the conflict. Countless hours of lightweight drone footage and handheld or body camera footage is available through the internet from all sides of the non-conventional conflict; the War in Donbass has established its presence in the internet archive.

THE INTERNET ARCHIVE

Visual war documents inform viewers about historical events, particularly moving images which depict events as they unfolded from a certain perspective. However, this function of visual war documents is inherently limited. As with any visual document the image which is recorded is subjective; for all of the information a visual document provides, it also leaves out more. As Baron stresses, the archive itself is composed of both excess and missing pieces:

“A filmmaker [...] can never use all of the indexical traces of the past in one film or even in many films. Every document is always only a fragment of the vast trove of indexical recordings scattered throughout the world in physical or digital form. At the same time, however, there are certain gaps in the archive - whether records [were] never made, lost or discarded, or gradually degraded or disintegrated over time.”

(Baron, 2013, pp. 109-110).

The inherently fragmented nature of visual documents and the archive that they are placed in leaves the viewer with a desire to see more. However, in recent years the increasing accessibility of the internet has enabled the accumulation of digitised copies of visual war documents to the point of excess, and much like war and editing, the compression of time and space through the internet has changed viewer perception. Now, the desire to see war online can be perpetuated and fulfilled indefinitely by an access to excess.

“The digital archive [...] is both selective and valueless. What finds its way into the digital archive depends on who finds what images and chooses to make them available. Furthermore, all images on the internet have the potential for a problematic equivalence because of their endless number and their often random emergence. At the same time, the utopian dream of the internet and the digital archive is that of access, communication, and connection”.

(Baron, 2013, pp. 117-118).

The internet has the potential to serve the viewer as both the utopian source of all information and records, but also as a platform through which any trace of meaning can be lost through the excessive exposure to war images. This is the great catch-22 of the internet archive: the abundance of, and overexposure to, visual documents of war give the viewer a false sense of fulfilment and understanding; a false sense of the complete picture. At the same time, the inherently fragmented nature of visual documents, and the archive through which they are available, leaves the viewer with the desire to see more visual documents of war; to further the (inherently limited) sense of understanding. As Kane summarises, the “appetite for visual realism has been both satiated and denied” (2011, p. 46). This paradox may appear to be the central issue of the internet archive, but Kane raises another aspect to consider;

“...it is not the desire to see horror and abominations that is the problem; rather, the issue is how we see and engage these images of atrocity. Who shares these perceptual fields, for what reasons, and under what conditions? The how of seeing - which techniques and desires reveal or mask war - makes war and visual realism a question of ethics and politics.”

(Kane, 2011, p. 46)

Many platforms accessible through the internet facilitate the dissemination of visual war documents. Video streaming sites such as YouTube contain countless hours of combat footage that have been leaked or officially released by militaries. In particular a number of prominent YouTube users, including *Funker530*, *Military Archive*, *WarLeaks - Military Archive*, *RAW LEAKS*, *War Clashes*, *Ukraine War Awareness*, *Military Footage & Archive*, and *Military World*⁹, feature entire channels of combat footage which attract thousands of subscribers and viewers who watch war footage online. These channels curate footage from recent and ongoing conflicts and provide a platform for viewing drone footage, weapons systems footage, journalistic footage and helmet camera footage of war. Many of the videos on these channels are edited in such a way as to resemble the more traditional archival documentaries that Baron describes (2013, p. 123). The footage is usually cut down between different scenes to feature the most engaging parts of the narrative, which is generally the shooting and explosions associated with warfare. Whilst many of these micro-documentary videos include warnings about graphic content and disclaimers denouncing war and emphasising the ‘educational’ nature of the videos, the viewer is often left with only the spectacle of the visual documents - the most exciting parts of armed conflict. The problem arises when

⁹ To name only a few. Many such micro-platforms can be found on other websites, however, YouTube has been listed here due to its prominence and wide userbase.

the archive appears to give a complete picture, due to the seemingly endless number of visual documents available at any time. These visual fragments of war can contribute to a false sense of understanding and perpetuate the desire to see images of war. The desire to understand war through visual documents, coupled with the overexposure of visual war documents, has made the “horrors of war common, banal, and everyday” and normalised the phenomenon of war itself (Kane, 2011, p. 46). Considering the changes to how war is recorded and archived through the internet, and that the widespread familiarity with visual war documents shapes viewer perceptions of war and influences genre cinema, we must ask what the cinematic war genre will look like in the coming decades. As the internet overshadows traditional archives, we can expect to see contemporary visual documents such as helmet camera or drone footage proliferate in genre cinema as well. This development could potentially contribute to a false wholistic understanding of war in unforeseen ways, or potentially reshape cinematic perceptions of warfare.

Moreover, contemporary visual documents of war require a reconsideration of Virilio’s logistics of perception in the twenty first century. Certainly, the outcome of war is still determined by the ability to conceal one’s assets while uncovering the enemy, however, contemporary visual war documents have added a new aspect to consider. The excessive information contained within the internet archive is difficult to contain or control, as has been demonstrated by examples such as the WikiLeaks website, which involves the release of sensitive military documents to the public. Furthermore, a new logic of perception has arisen, which involves the use of the archive as a show of force. This shift, which can be traced back through television coverage from the Vietnam War through to the Afghanistan War, has now spread to the internet. As well as trying to contain sensitive or controversial visual documents, military bodies in the twenty first

century must now use the internet archive to reassure civilian societies and to display their destructive capacity to potential and actual enemies.

DUNKIRK & AMERICAN SNIPER

How war is fought, recorded, and archived may have changed in the twenty first century, but it would appear that the practice of emulation in the contemporary war genre has not accounted for these changes. Christopher Nolan's 2017 war genre film, *Dunkirk*, re-envisions the infamous Operation Dynamo during World War Two which involved the mass evacuation of Allied soldiers from France in 1940. The film features an aesthetic of visual realism, following in the footsteps of many war films before. However, the cinematography of *Dunkirk* enables the viewer to make sense of the geography and events at all times, and supports the large scale narrative which reframes a tactical military defeat as a proud national victory of unity.¹⁰ Gates highlights the core of this contradiction in the contemporary war genre;

“...this is where realism comes up against fiction; while the new Hollywood war film may offer this realistic or ‘true’ portrait of battle, this realism merely masks the fictitious account of war the film simultaneously offers. It is these two warring impulses in this new cycle of the genre with which I am concerned: the realistic and the moralising.”

(Gates, 2005, p. 301)

Dunkirk is visually realistic, but its narrative is morally grounded. To further complicate this issue, the moralised narrative of *Dunkirk* does not reflect contemporary discourse

¹⁰ It is interesting to note the release of a war film like *Dunkirk* in the wake of Brexit, and the broader social and political influence of the war genre which Hodgkins (2002) highlights.

but instead reflects the discourses of war present during the Second World War. The visual techniques used in the film – whilst visually stunning and realistic – have become bundled with a moralistic understanding of war as necessary. Rather than emulating specific visual documents of war, *Dunkirk* appears to emulate the conventional techniques of the war genre itself.

By embodying the discourses of war present during the Second World War (that is, the discourses of war as necessary and morally justifiable), *Dunkirk* offers a revival of those perceptions of war. Baron identifies this very outcome – “there is a danger [...] that accompanies the archive affect insofar as it verges on a nostalgia for a romanticised and idealised past and a fetishisation of the archive” (2013, p. 128). As Baron warns, this nostalgia may be felt for the past which can never be recovered, but also for a past “at least in its idealised state, [that] also never was” (2013, p. 129). This potential outcome of the archive affect is dangerous in an era where the proliferation of war and the militarisation of otherwise civilian assets grows ever more pronounced.¹¹

Most importantly, *Dunkirk* does not acknowledge the changes to visual war documents and the archive in the twenty-first century. The access to excess which defines the internet archive has changed how war is archived and perceived, and war itself has changed drastically since the Second World War. A film such as *Dunkirk* which gives meaning to war through its narrative and cinematography, offers visual fulfilment of the archive affect, and appears to present a real account of war simply by emulating visual techniques which signify realism. *Dunkirk* does not challenge engrained cinematic perceptions of war, but instead contributes to the genre cinema archive of films about

¹¹ Examples include the increased militarisation of police and peace keeping forces, ‘wars’ against poverty or drugs, the rise of ‘security’ in the age of terrorism, and the increased number of overlapping protracted proxy wars.

the Second World War. The attempt to give meaning to the conflicts of the past through narrative film blends seamlessly with the desire for visual realism in the war genre film, and “the fusion is complete, the confusion perfect” (Virilio, 1984/1989, p. 83). This is the greatest challenge which faces the contemporary war genre. Viewers are not only familiar with war through years of exposure to its visual documents; they are also familiar with cinematic depictions of war. This familiarity breeds a sense of normalisation – the normalisation of war in the lives of viewers – and rather than critiquing this perception of war as normal, contemporary filmmakers continue to emulate the conventional techniques of the war genre which define realistic depictions of war.

Other war genre films which depict more recent conflicts also appear to ignore the changes brought about through the internet archive. Clint Eastwood’s 2014 film *American Sniper*, visualises the story of U.S. navy seal Chris Kyle during the Iraq War. The film raises themes about the morality of killing in war, and the psychological impacts of war on survivors; it is a visually realistic and grim depiction of war which does not celebrate grand victories. Despite these narrative concerns however, *American Sniper* does not challenge the generic conventions of the war genre. Instead, Eastwood employs conventional techniques, including the use of shaky camerawork to emulate the extensive journalistic documents from the Iraq War. The result of these stylistic choices is a film which epitomises the engrained conventions of the war genre. Although the camera follows Chris Kyle closely throughout *American Sniper*, it remains objective by maintaining distance between the viewer and the character. This objectivity, which resembles the journalistic visual documents that the film emulates, contributes to the truth claim of *American Sniper*. Numerous scenes throughout the film are framed through the scope of Chris Kyle’s weapon and establish a subjective shot, however, these moments contradict the otherwise objective camera employed in the film. The

cinematic techniques used in the film which are designed to emulate journalistic war footage also emulate the perceived objectivity and truthfulness of journalistic footage.

Films such as *Dunkirk* and *American Sniper* are now a part of a genre archive, which enjoys the liberties of clearly defined and recognisable cinematic conventions developed over many years (Gates, 2005, p. 300). The focus on, and appreciation of, realism and authenticity in war genre cinema is reflective of the broader misconceptions of warfare in society. *Seeing* war does not necessarily equate to *understanding* war. Despite this inconvenient truth, media saturation of war-images and the access to excess which defines the internet archive has perpetuated the perception of 'war as hell' into the twenty-first century, without addressing the broader questions which must be asked (and answered) of war – what is the purpose of war, and can it be prevented? A war genre film which emulates the visual characteristics of the war genre and attempts to give meaning and structure to the phenomenon through a purposeful narrative and morally driven characters, fails to represent the overwhelming, destructive, and pointless nature of war. Films such as *Saving Private Ryan*, *American Sniper*, and *Dunkirk* do convey the "essence of combat" – a vague affective understanding of how terrifying and destructive war is – through their highly realistic battle sequences (Binns, 2017, p. 147). But when housed within a broader, often morally driven narrative, they fail to illustrate war as undesirable. This is one outcome of the archive affect, but Baron defines another:

"I would suggest that the archive effect and its accompanying affect have the potential to lead to *either* a [...] nostalgic desire to recreate the past in the image of the 'perfect snapshot' or a nostalgic but self-conscious awareness of the past as past."

(Baron, 2013, p. 130; emphasis added)

By ignoring the changes to war, its recording, and its archiving, contemporary filmmakers perpetuate a nostalgia for war which values realism above all else – the “perfect snapshot” (Baron, 2013, p. 130). I propose that a realistic cinematic depiction of war which emulates contemporary visual documents, is able to challenge engrained cinematic representations of war by offering alternate perspectives and encouraging viewers to reflect on their own perceptions of the images which inform the discourses of war – a “self-conscious awareness of the past as past” (Baron, 2013, p. 130).

Chapter Four:

Film On The March!

“War is sweet to them that know it not.”

- Pindar, *Dulce Bellum Inexpertis*.

84 CHARLIE MOPIC

Warfare has consistently evolved throughout history, and yet cinematic depictions of war have stagnated throughout the twentieth and twenty first centuries. Filmmakers have mostly chosen to craft increasingly realistic depictions of war thanks to improving technology, rather than challenging generic norms and questioning the excessive exposure to war images which defines the contemporary era. An exception to this trend was released in 1989. *84C MoPic*¹² – an independent war genre film directed by Patrick Sheane Duncan – is set during the Vietnam War and shows the perspective of a U.S. army cameraman embedded with U.S. soldiers.¹³ *84C MoPic* is a prime example of the practice of emulation because the film explicitly mimics documentary footage. Although *84C MoPic* tells a semi-fictional story, the use of a diegetic camera within the narrative gives the film the appearance of being documentary footage from the Vietnam War. In *84C MoPic*, the cameraman is a character, and the subjective camera provides a point of view that the audience is able to identify with. This deliberate cinematic technique

¹² The title of the film, *84C MoPic*, is an abbreviation of the military occupational specialty number assigned to the character who operates the diegetic camera in the film - 84 Charlie Motion Picture Specialist. This character is nicknamed 'MoPic' for this reason and is only seen on screen briefly during the film.

¹³ Specifically, *84C MoPic* tells the story of a cameraman embedded with a Long-Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP) trekking through enemy territory. The very idea of the narrative is implausible, as LRRP units were intended to move through territory undetected, and therefore kept their group sizes small and equipment to a bare minimum. The addition of a combat cameraman is highly unlikely given the nature of the tasks required by LRRP units. However, the documentary style of *84C MoPic* lends credibility to the characters and the narrative, giving the film the appearance of an authentic and realistic account of the Vietnam War.

creates an unusual effect for the viewer; it closely aligns them with the diegetic world through the perspective of the camera but still disorients the viewer, particularly during combat sequences as the camera shakes violently and MoPic attempts to avoid injury while filming. This is the same effect that occurs as a result of handheld documentary footage of war; the camera is operated by a participant in the combat who attempts to film the events without being killed. As Binns and Ryder articulate, “in the context of a firefight [...] the bearer of a camera has little scope for artistic control” (2015, p. 88). The outcome of this style of documentary camerawork is a disorienting account of combat, filmed from oblique angles close to the ground, where the most violent imagery is usually captured up close after the fighting has finished (Haggith, 2002, p. 335). This effect is recreated in *84C MoPic* by emulating this type of documentary footage.

84C MoPic is one of the earliest examples of the found footage style in genre cinema, coming a decade before the influential *Blair Witch Project*.¹⁴ This approach is unique especially when paired with the highly subjective visual style of the film. The result of Duncan’s intensely personal and subjective account of the Vietnam War is a reflexive film which relies on the viewer’s own familiarity with Vietnam War footage. Dubbed the ‘first Television War’, the lasting effects of the Vietnam War reach much further than the battlefields or survivors. Virilio marks the Vietnam War as a key point in the recording of war and the logistics of perception, noting that “since Vietnam and throughout the seventies, the mediation of battle has grown ever more pronounced” (1984/1989, p. 83). Likewise, Kane makes note of the “televised images of death” seen on the home front, which incited anti-war protest and political upheaval, especially in America (2011, p. 46). Much like the combat footage from World War Two, the abundance of war images recorded during the height of the Vietnam War not only informed the home front at the

¹⁴ Only a small number of feature films had experimented with the found footage technique and found success by 1989.

time, but also perceptions of the conflict into the future. By presenting *84C MoPic* in a familiar style to the visual documents of war that audiences could recognise, Duncan was able to craft a contemplation on the nature of war from the perspective of the soldier that audiences could understand and believe. By emulating the look and sound of visual war documents *84C MoPic* generates and legitimises its own truth claim (Gunning, 2004), thus presenting the narrative and story as real and true, while also allowing the audience to question that truth claim through reflexivity. This reflexivity comes about through deliberate techniques which foreground the subjective camera in the film, but also by the audience's familiarity with similar (real) images of the Vietnam War and the social discourses surrounding those images (Gunning, 2004, p. 48).

The journalistic documentary style of *84C MoPic* is familiar to audiences, but its use in a war genre film as a cinematic technique is (especially at the time of its release) unfamiliar. *84C MoPic* is an interesting example because it does not simply emulate visual documents to achieve realism; *84C MoPic* emulates a particular *method* of recording war. This approach not only heightens the sense of verisimilitude that is generated by the film, but also creates a self-aware depiction of war. Inherent to the found footage style that is employed in *84C MoPic* is an understanding that the camera is diegetic and that it exists alongside the events which are taking place, rather than offering an omniscient or objective perspective. Key moments in the film are marked by characters directly addressing the camera and acknowledging its existence, as well as one scene in particular during which the camera is turned onto the character of MoPic, who then addresses the camera directly. This subtle self-awareness which reminds the audience of the diegetic camera affects the meaning of the film. As a result of this technique used by Duncan, *84C MoPic* is as much about the recording of the Vietnam War, as it is about the actual conflict. Whilst the intensely subjective camera of the film draws the audience as close as cinematically possible to the experience of the soldier, it

also distances the audience, reminding them that the film is a constructed representation of war. This is how *84C MoPic* embodies a reflective discourse on the Vietnam War as well as discourses around 'the television war'.

84C MoPic uses emulation to realistically represent war but also to draw attention to how we record and see war. In doing so, the film takes a perspective which is familiar to audiences (the journalistic camera), and presents it in an unfamiliar structure (a war genre film). This unfamiliarity is confronting for viewers and requires them reflect on the images they are presented with, while also considering the Vietnam War, its extensive recording, and the discourses surrounding war more broadly. Despite the contemporary trend in the war genre to ignore how war and its recording have changed over decades, *84C MoPic* provides an example of a genre film which tweaks the practice of emulation to craft a realistic and self-aware representation of war. This approach to genre filmmaking offers the potential to reshape cinematic perceptions of war through the practice of emulation, and gives viewers the opportunity to question the truth claim of realistic war genre films.

DEFAMILIARISATION

John Ford's 1942 documentary film, *The Battle of Midway*, features a short sequence in which the filmstrip is "thrown off the camera gate and out of frame by a shell blast", briefly revealing the constructed nature of the film to the viewer (Haggith, 2002, p. 335). In traditional narrative cinema, a technical mistake such as this would have ended up on the cutting room floor. Despite the tendency to cover up or remove such 'mistakes' in both documentary and genre cinema, Ford chose to keep this moment in the documentary film, which results in the viewer being made acutely aware of the medium

for only a moment. Rather than sabotaging Ford's film however, this moment of reflexivity actually enhances the truth claim of the visual document. In war genre cinema, the inclusion of audiovisual elements that would otherwise be considered a mistake gives the illusion of the film being an unadulterated, unedited, impartial, and objective visual document.

Reflexivity is often emulated in war genre films, and clear examples can be seen in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), *Black Hawk Down* (2001) and *Tae Guk Gi* (2004).¹⁵ These genre films contain moments in which the camera lens (and thus, the resulting image) is rocked violently by a nearby explosion, or blood, dirt, and grime are flung against the lens obscuring the field of view as if it were the viewer's own eye. Somewhat paradoxically, these moments of reflexivity remind the viewer of the constructed nature of the image, while also lending credibility and heightening visual realism. These reflexive war images also serve another important function; they force the viewer to actively interpret the often unexpected images in front of them due to their unfamiliar presentation. Binns points to Shklovsky, who proposes that through "prolonging the [viewer's] 'length of perception', [...] a composer or artist facilitates a new way of perceiving reality" (Shklovsky; in Binns, 2017, p. 35). This process of interpretation is the result of specific techniques which make a familiar phenomenon strange for the viewer, forcing them to critically engage with the images and interpret them. McDonald offers a similar explanation by drawing a distinction between images of war which focus on spectacle as opposed to those which attempt to evoke an affective response.

"[The] war-image as spectacle are visuals of war violence encased by a cause-effect narrative and framed in a heroic transcendental morality. Conversely, war-

¹⁵ This is by no means an extensive list of the war genre films which utilise this technique, or similar techniques which subtly break the fourth wall while maintaining the legitimacy of their truth claim.

image as affect are visuals of war violence not situated within a linear cause-effect narrative, often have ambiguous or non-heroic outcomes, and defy conventions of the war film, which leaves these war-images open and places a demand on the viewer to explore the multiplicity of their meanings or capacities.”

(McDonald, 2015, p. 238).

Binns proposes that techniques of defamiliarisation “comprise a cinematic methodology by which film-makers seek to approximate the ‘essence’ of combat” (2017, p. 147).

These techniques can take many forms, such as the shaking camera of *Saving Private Ryan*, or the ‘blood on the lens’ seen in *American Sniper* and countless other war films.

Binns describes a number of these techniques which are evident in many contemporary war genre films.

“Seeking a synergy with the realism, grittiness, and immediacy of news reportage and documentary, film-makers telling the stories of the American incursion into Iraq (and the surrounding conflicts and operations) often eschew tripods in favour of a shaky, unstable, and baseless image. The cinematography of these films is ever-moving, constantly being knocked around and often hiding the main characters behind props and the miscellanea of the *mise-en-scène*.”

(Binns, 2017, pp. 98-99)

Many of these techniques have become normalised through repeated exposure in genre films, and as such have lost their ability to appear truly unfamiliar to viewers. In the contemporary era, viewers expect to see a shaking camera with blood and dirt flung against the lens during a battle sequence – extensive exposure to visual documents of war and other war genre films have rendered these techniques ordinary. Techniques which have become normalised conventions within the war genre may help to craft

increasingly realistic depictions of war, however as Gates reminds us, these techniques may also hide idealistic moral assertions about war (2005, p. 298).

Despite the fact that many of these techniques are now engrained conventions, there is an important distinction between traditional filmmaking methods of emulation (such as the shaking camera of *Saving Private Ryan*), and the specific emulation of reflexive visual war documents (such as the diegetic camera of *84C MoPic*). As Bolter and Grusin argue, “transparent digital applications seek to get to the real by bravely denying the fact of mediation” (1999, p. 53). This denial is evident in traditional war genre films where the viewer is not supposed to acknowledge the constructed nature of genre film. This has the effect of drawing attention away from questions about the legitimacy of the images, and instead foregrounds the narrative (which is often morally driven). By comparison, the very nature of helmet camera footage – and of a genre film which emulates that footage – embraces the mediated nature of the image, rather than denying it. The previous example, *84C MoPic*, embraces the subjective diegetic camera, and as a result signifies the discourse which surrounds the recording and viewing of war, as well as war itself.¹⁶

Tim O'Brien, author of *The Things They Carried*, describes the framework of a true war story;

“A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behaviour, nor restrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the

¹⁶ Notable sequences which also signify the discourses of the ‘television war’ can be seen in *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1986). These films feature scenes in which television camera crews are present, and both offer a commentary on the absurdity of their presence on the battlefield.

end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie.

There is no rectitude whatsoever. There is no virtue. As a first rule of thumb, therefore, you can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil.”

(O'Brien, 1990, p. 68)

I argue, that the practice of emulation in war genre cinema can be adapted to emulate helmet camera footage, in order to challenge engrained cinematic perceptions of war, and open up a space for viewers to actively participate in the contemporary discourses which surround the phenomenon of war.

WATCH

Watch is the title of the short war genre film which has been produced for this research project. The film is set during the ongoing War in Donbass and is told from the perspective of a diegetic camera attached to the protagonist. *Watch* emulates helmet camera footage from the War in Donbass to create a contemporary depiction of war which uses defamiliarisation to encourage critical audience engagement (Binns, 2017), while also challenging conventional representations of war in genre cinema. The setting of the film has been chosen due to the abundance of visual documents from the conflict available through the internet, particularly helmet camera footage. There are a number of examples from the internet archive which demonstrate both the unique perspective of helmet camera footage, and its prominence on the internet:

1. 'Ukraine War - Novorossian Rebels In Heavy Combat Action During Assault On Donetsk Airport':
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TkLLP15IfDc>
2. 'Ukraine War - Helmet Cam Firefight Combat Footage: Novorossian Rebel Attack On Ukrainian Checkpoint':
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gbOPA2yYFyI>
3. 'Ukraine War - Failed Pro-Russian Attack: Combat Footage Caught In Open Field':
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9cc6usXhwY&t=87s>
4. 'War In Ukraine : Helmet Cam':
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tR622hJx-I>
5. 'War in Ukraine Pro Russian Rebels In Heavy Combat Action During Clashes With Ukrainian Army':
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_R8QYskHXM&t=222s¹⁷

Example two in particular (titled 'Ukraine War - Helmet Cam Firefight Combat Footage: Novorossian Rebel Attack On Ukrainian Checkpoint') demonstrates many of the key characteristics of helmet camera footage; the intense subjectivity of the helmet camera makes it difficult to decipher what is happening, and captures the disorienting nature of the attack, more so than any objective detail. Importantly, although *Watch* is set during the War in Donbass, it is not thematically focused on that particular conflict. Instead the

¹⁷ At the time of writing these links were still active. If they are unavailable, a simple keyword search of 'helmet camera Donbass' through YouTube will yield similar or identical videos.

thematic focus of *Watch* is the recording, archiving, and viewing of visual war documents in the twenty first century.

The unique visual perspective afforded by a helmet camera results in a highly subjective perspective throughout the film. The diegetic camera of *Watch* follows the protagonist's movement and allows the viewer to see the perspective of that character, while also recording interference with the camera such as shaking and bumps as the character moves. The film has been edited to foreground long takes, and instances in which the camera is knocked or becomes obscured have been intentionally left in the film to generate verisimilitude. The audio recorded for the film has been edited minimally in order to preserve and emphasise the audio quality, which was recorded with a microphone attached to the protagonist. This technical choice results in intensely positional and subjective audio which reflects more accurately what the character would hear, as opposed to a high quality microphone which can be placed in optimal positions during filming. This technique is also closer to how combatants would actually record helmet camera footage in war. As noted in the third chapter, the unstable visuals of helmet camera footage are the antithesis of traditional narrative cinema and *Watch* uses these unfamiliar images in genre cinema to encourage critical engagement from viewers. The actor/camera operator was able to rehearse scenes prior to filming, but during filming, the composition and framing of the images was intentionally uncontrolled. This allowed the camera to follow a natural reaction from the protagonist, resulting in a subjective and unfamiliar style. The inclusion of cinematic detritus such as these elements is intended to mimic actual helmet camera footage of war as closely as possible and to lend credibility and authenticity to the film, but to also open up a space for the viewer to question the film. In this way, the film uses reflexivity as a technique of defamiliarisation to encourage the viewer to question the verisimilitude of the film and its constructed nature.

The narrative of *Watch* is archetypal within the cinematic war genre – ‘a group of soldiers is sent on a dangerous mission behind enemy lines’. However, unlike many other war genre films, the narrative of *Watch* is designed to critique conventional representations of war and to foreground the visuals over the story. The narrative of *Watch* is intentionally insignificant with little more than vague character motivation propelling the events of the film. Instead, the focus of the film is on moments of verisimilitude and reflexivity which acknowledge both the camera, and the method of filming. Each sequence depicted in the film is a cinematic recreation and emulation of existing visual war documents acquired from the internet archive. Throughout *Watch*, extended sequences which are tangential to the narrative play with the conventional expectations of the war genre and offer a minor commentary on the vast uneventfulness of war which is often omitted from war genre films. The combat sequences seen in *Watch* also use the helmet camera perspective to experiment with the genre form. The firefights are fast and difficult to decipher visually; this side effect of the helmet camera is able to effectively convey the confusion of war more subjectively than traditional generic techniques. The closing sequence of the film, during which the protagonist inadvertently films his own death, is another example of reflexivity used in the film to encourage the viewer to question the images they are presented with. This sequence in particular is based upon an existing visual war document which depicts the death of a Daesh fighter in Iraq, in which the combatant records their own death.¹⁸ This particular video is available through this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KvBEtaCC7cw>

¹⁸ The phenomenon of a participant or onlooker filming their own death during combat is certainly not unique to the twenty-first century. Notable examples include Damien Parer, an Australian war photographer who was killed whilst filming on Peleliu in World War Two, and Neil Davis, another Australian war correspondent who inadvertently filmed his own death whilst reporting on a coup in Thailand.

This example raises many questions about the visual document, including; why was the footage recorded? What does the footage show? How was the footage recovered? Why was the footage archived on the internet? And, what is the purpose of viewing such footage? These are the types of questions which should be asked of genre cinema, but are often overshadowed by the desire for visual realism and authenticity.

Watch also makes use of two other subjective cameras in addition to a helmet camera. A handheld video camera operates as the 'journalistic camera', and a mobile phone camera is also seen briefly. These additional perspectives function alongside the main helmet camera to reflect the highly mediated nature of contemporary warfare, and are designed to point to the absurdity of excessive documentation, particularly in warfare. *84C MoPic* provided a strong precedent upon which to base the handheld video camera sequences. By revealing the act of recording, *Watch* foregrounds and signifies the discourses which surround the mediation of contemporary wars, and encourages viewers to reflect on the phenomenon.

Each of the artistic decisions which led to the creation of *Watch* have been made in order to emulate contemporary visual documents as closely as possible to craft a realistic representation of war, and to challenge conventional expectations of the war genre. For decades, war genre filmmakers have been concerned with exploring war and the discourses which surround it, with little focus being directed towards its recording and viewing. *Watch* aims to draw attention to the influence of visual documents of war on genre cinema, and to open up a space in which viewers can reconsider the role that the recording of war and its viewing plays in contemporary society.

Chapter Five:

After Action Report

“Only the dead have seen the end of war.”

- Santayana, 1922, p. 102.

The practice of emulating visual war documents has come to define the cinematic war genre; it allows filmmakers to craft self-justifying and realistic depictions of war which satiate the desire for visual realism and historical connection. In an era of increasing militarisation and seemingly perpetual warfare, it is necessary to reassess collective perceptions of war which may drive or deter the incredibly destructive phenomenon.

The methods of recording and archiving visual documents of war continue to develop alongside war itself. The internet has emerged as the new archive of visual war documents, offering viewers an unprecedented access to excess, and also shifting Virilio's logistics of perception (1984/1989). Despite these shifts, war genre cinema remains relatively unchanged. The conventional techniques of the genre enable contemporary filmmakers to craft visually realistic depictions of war, which often foreground morally justified narratives.

The influence of genre cinema, and of cinematic representations, extends beyond the screen however; there exists a potential to change how we perceive war by challenging the engrained perceptions and representations of war. By presenting the phenomenon of war as unfamiliar, filmmakers can open up a space for audiences to critically engage with the contemporary discourses which surround war and its recording, and perhaps

most importantly, encourage viewers to reflect upon their own desire to visualise war. This outcome can be achieved by altering the practice of emulation.

By reflexively emulating visual war documents and the techniques which produce them, filmmakers are able to craft war films which challenge audience expectations, while still maintaining an aesthetic of visual realism. Through foregrounding the role that the recording and archiving of war plays in our own perceptions of war, filmmakers can draw attention to the hidden strategies of remediation which may otherwise mask morally driven narratives that justify war.

In particular, this research has argued that the subjective camera is able to achieve this reflexivity in war genre cinema. Helmet camera footage is just one contemporary example of this broad representational strategy which is available to filmmakers seeking to challenge engrained perceptions of warfare. It is possible to craft affective depictions of war which are visually realistic, but to achieve this, filmmakers must constantly seek to depict war as something unfamiliar as well as destructive. It is through this approach, that war genre cinema is able to open up a space for viewers to actively engage in the discourses which surround war, its recording, its archiving, and its viewing.

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