'A cataclysm of carnage, nausea, and death'¹

SAVING PRIVATE RYAN and visceral engagement

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In Steven Spielberg's 1998 film *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN*, the opening 'Omaha Beach' sequence was without a doubt the film's most consistently praised and discussed aspect in popular reviews, virtually all of which singled that sequence out for its virtuoso film-making. Even otherwise lukewarm reviews gave Spielberg his due for producing 'quite possibly the best combat sequence ever made' (Richard Schickel in *Time*) and an effect that was 'a powerful experience (...) a lot of people will weep' (Roger Ebert in the *Chicago Sun-Times*).

The reactions elicited by the Omaha beach sequence, 'an excruciatingly sustained' (Owen Gleiberman in *Entertainment Weekly*) twenty-five minutes long, were not inadvertent. In interviews promoting the film's release, Spielberg said he intended to avoid the romanticism of earlier World War II films, and create a kind of 'newsreel' realism in the vein of Robert Capa documentary photographs. This conception he framed in the rhetoric of greater realism: he believed this was the way to get closest to how war really was and really is. Of course the film techniques of bleached negatives, an unsteady camera, unexpected cuts and disjointed time sequencing tell some part of the story for how the 'most vivid and visceral war scene ever filmed,' (Gary Kamiya in *Salon.com*) was constructed. But this does not tell us how, specifically, this effect of extreme bodily and emotional engagement described by so many critics and ticket-buyers is achieved in this film.

The academic study of the physically manifested effects of film (why for example, do films make us cry, feel turned on, or start with fright?) tends to be a particularly gendered and genre-oriented discourse. Study of the so-called 'body genres' has been limited primarily to horror, pornography, and melodrama by scholars, most influentially by Linda Williams, Carol Clover, and Vivian Sobchack, and expanded upon in other realms by Laura Marks and Steven Shaviro, among others. It would seem obvious that war films, with their excessive interest in pain and the manipulation of the body

would have been well-studied in this context. However, this seems only sporadically to be the case.

In this paper, I intend to examine the way in which recent, usually feminist writings on the viewers' physical response effect in 'body genres,' can be applied to the Omaha Beach sequence in *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN*. However, I do not only want to show how this effect can help explain the viewers' intense bodily reactions to the film. I wish also to study this moment in the popular discourse surrounding war films and their depiction of 'realism' in relation to war, and how the attention this sequence received betrays a distinct change in the approach to war films. More specifically, I will illustrate how the commentary by film-makers and critics demonstrates the rhetorical merging between realism and bodily engagement. Finally, I hope to understand *how* the visceral body effects in *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* mean in the film, and what this choice means for contemporary war films within the popular discourse.

Film reviews and rhetoric

Popular press reviews contemporary to the release of *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* attest to the bodily impact the Omaha Beach landing scene had on its spectators. Mainstream American critics with broad readerships such as Richard Schickel of *Time Magazine*,² Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times*,³ Owen Gleiberman of *Entertainment Weekly*,⁴ and Janet Maslin of the *New York Times*⁵ all emphasize this sequence's visceral effects as the film's highlight.

I will quote a particular review, Gary Kamiya in Salon.com,⁶ at length here not only because it eloquently brings to the fore the visceral engagement that all these American critics noted, but also to serve as a descriptive summation of the sequence:

'The film's most extraordinary sequence is its depiction of the landing on Omaha Beach on D-Day. It begins with a shot of troops huddled on a landing craft. The swells rock the boat up and down, the air is gray and heavy. No one says anything. A man leans forward and vomits, then another. There is no gunfire. The camera pans over the men's faces, and the fear that burns in their eyes is made more terrible by the realization that we are not going to be playing by Hollywood rules here, but by the more arbitrary laws of chance that actually govern war. That man there, clutching his rifle and trembling, is not going to be saved because he is praying, or thinking of his children, or because he has been singled out by the camera; he is going to jump into the water, take two steps, be hit

by three .50-caliber gun bullets in the chest, fall into the water and drown before he can bleed to death. The man next to him is going to duck down behind an anti-tank obstacle and have his legs cut off by shrapnel. The camera keeps looking at the faces. Fish in a restaurant tank.

(...) Now the camera (masterfully handled by cinematographer Janusz Kaminski) is running, twisting on the beach, chaotic flashes of light coming from half-seen points on the cliffs, the ground rising up and coming down, explosions going off like dice rolls. Men are shouting out orders, but we can't make out what they're saying. We're surrounded by death, jiggled gently in the palm of his hand.

Out of the corner of our eye – everything seems to happen just beyond where we can quite see it clearly – we see a man stumbling along without his arm; he stoops down and insanely picks it up, vanishes. Now we're back underwater and everything is silent – has it all stopped? – and then suddenly we're back on the beach, the sky is screaming, invisible pieces of metal are hurtling in from all directions, hitting sand, metal, water, hitting human bodies that scream, cry for medics, howl, die. As if in a hallucination, we keep thinking there's some kind of logic here, some master key. Over there, it's safe over there. Then over there blows up.

For an incredible, endless half hour, Spielberg hurls the viewer into the midst of this inconceivable inferno of twisted metal, shrieking shells and human agony. It is a *tour de force*, probably the most vivid and visceral war scene ever filmed.⁷

The rhetoric of 'realism' continues in interviews promoting the film's release with Steven Spielberg, who continually referred to the Robert Capa documentary photographs and 'newsreel' authenticity, saying, 'I wanted to achieve reality.'⁸ He pushed this further by asserting he was, 'assuming the role of a combat cameraman, not assuming the role of an artist.' Spielberg presented greater realism and less mediated romanticism as his moral duty: 'I would be doing an extreme disservice to veterans if this was simply one more movie that glamorized World War II.' In another interview, Spielberg stated explicitly how he wanted the viewer to feel during this sequence: 'I wanted the audience in the arena, not sitting off to one side. I didn't want to make something it was easy to look away from.'⁹ Although Spielberg and his associates constantly invoke 'reality' and 'realism' as their objective, it seems that what they really want to construct is a reality effect based in visceral bodily engagement.

Bodily engagement theory review

The above quotes leave little doubt that a visceral reaction was both carefully constructed and vividly experienced in the Omaha Beach landing sequence. The problem of how physically-felt effects are engendered in the spectator is a question only recently begun to be studied in depth by scholars. Though these studies treat different genres and have various polemical interests, a review of the research in particular by Linda Williams, Laura Marks, Steven Shaviro and Vivian Sobchack on bodily effect can help shed light on *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN*'s power.¹⁰

Linda Williams has been among the earliest and most influential theorists on describing and critiquing what she calls the body genres: horror, melodrama, and pornography. Williams has been important in subjecting the 'barely respectable' characteristics of these films to academic rigor, which academics usually write off as too embarrassing or vulgar. However, Williams believes that the address to the 'lower' emotions and to the bodily effect elicited from the spectator (what she calls the 'jerk' effect, as in tear-jerk, fear-jerk, or jerk-off) 'can be organized as a system.'¹¹ These marginal genres usually exhibit 'excess,' which can be read as gaps in the classical regime. These gaps often betray an instability in gendered subject positions, allowing for a potentially liberating, non-totalizing viewing position.

The genres she has chosen to study rely heavily on the highly gendered spectacle of the female body displaying the pertinent features of bodily excess: the spectacle of the body caught in the grip of intense stimulation or emotion, the display of ecstasy, and the uncontrollable convulsion or spasm of the body 'beside itself' with sensation. Though Williams notes the rise of 'male weepies', she does not treat the spectacle of the male body caught in sensation. However, her categories are useful for rethinking how war films might harness the system of physical and emotional excess, marking a more male-gendered cite of bodily display.

Vivian Sobchack is also concerned with the body's reactions in the cinema. She seeks to account for the 'as if real' feeling experienced by the viewer in his or her lived body, or as she puts it, the carnal foundations of cinematic intelligibility. Relying on a careful and dense use of phenomenology, Sobchack argues how the body mediates 'chiasmatically' vision,¹² language, experience, and image.

Most importantly, Sobchack wants to show how we are touched by films in a non-metaphorical way, and how meaning is created as the senses bleed into each other, collapsing the presumed clarity of objectivity and subjectivity, commingling our bodies and the representations on the screen. To describe this process, Sobchack renames the spectator the 'cinesthetic subject', coined from synaesthesia, a medical condition that causes

5 **OSCARS**
WAARONDER
BESTE REGISSEUR · Steven Spielberg

A STEVEN SPIELBERG FILM

tom hanks

saving private ryan

edward burns matt damon tom sizemore

de missie is een mensenleven.

SAVING PRIVATE RYAN

the vivid, automatic crossing-over of sense boundaries (so one tastes a triangle, for example) and coenaesthesia, the pre-logical way sensory information is varyingly heightened and diminished, like a baby's non-hierarchical experience of sensation at a birth.¹³ Unlike in familiar psychoanalytically-based subject theory, the cinesthetic subject is ambiguously located both on- and off-screen.

However, as Sobchack points out, despite cross modal communication, we don't literally 'touch' the objects on the screen, so what's happening? In this way, Sobchack feels the need to account for this experience on several levels of phenomenology, both the experience itself and the description of it later. She characterizes the oscillating, ambivalent, and often ambiguous 'undecidable' (cinematic and linguistic) experience in more specific detail:

'However, insofar as I cannot literally touch, smell, or taste the particular figure on the screen that solicits my sensual desire, my body's intentional arc, seeking a sensible object to fulfill this sensual solicitation, will *reverse its direction* to locate its sensual grasp on something more literally accessible. That more literally accessible sensual object is *my own subjective lived body*. Thus, "on the rebound" from the screen – and without a reflective thought – I will reflexively and carnally turn toward my own carnal being to touch myself touching, smell myself smelling, taste myself tasting, and, in sum, sense my own sensuality (...) But just as certainly, in other ways, the sense I have of sensing is also enhanced in comparison with much direct sensual experience – this because my partial sensual grasp of the original object is completed in and through my own body where it is reflexively "doubled" since I have become not only the toucher but also the touched.

(...) the cinesthetic subject feels his or her literal body as only one side of an *irreducible and dynamic relational structure of reversibility and reciprocity* that has as its other side the figural objects of bodily provocation on the screen.'¹⁴

Sobchack's account emphasizes the pre-rational, reflexive connection between the literal and figurative bodies in the seats and on the screen. 'On the rebound' from the screen, the spectator experiences an intense but diffuse sensual solicitation. The skin becomes sensitized in the reciprocal exchange of what she calls, 'an overwhelmingly *general* and intensely *extensive* mode of being.' While Sobchack's conception is somewhat abstract, this 'rebounding' sensual sensitivity is an adroit way to describe the experience of the Omaha Beach sequence in *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN*, as will be illustrated in an example later on.

Within her larger project describing the sense engagement within intercultural film as a way of engaging with memory, Laura Marks's chapter on the Memory of Touch delineates what she describes as 'haptic visuality', and the ways non-audiovisual sensations might be portrayed in film. Like Sobchack, Marks is also engaged with the phenomenology of Bergson and Merleau-Ponty, concerning the image addressing the body multisensorily, and not purely visually. For Marks, cinema is an extension of the body, not just the eyes, of the lived body as sensible. However, Marks' study differs from Sobchack's in that it adds a more specific description of the kinds of cinematic images that encourage this effect.

Crucially to Marks, in haptic visuality, 'haptic looking tends to move over the surface of its object rather than to plunge into illusionistic depth, not to distinguish forms so much as to discern texture', de-emphasizing a cognitive engagement with the narrative.¹⁵ Marks describes the techniques for producing cinema's prohaptic properties as those that privilege the materiality of the film, for example: changes in focus, graininess, effects of under/over exposure, optical printing, and emulsion work on the physical surface of the medium. All of these discourage the viewer from distinguishing objects and encourage a relationship to the screen as a whole, and also multiply points of visual contact all over the screen. The physical response is activated when the viewer makes him- or herself vulnerable to the image. In viewer/image mutuality, the viewer is more likely to lose him or herself in the image, to lose a sense of proportion. In direct opposition and refutation of a Mulvian definition of 'visual pleasure,' the viewer is *not* the master of the image, but rather at one with it. The Omaha Beach sequence relies heavily on the seeming lack of proportion, narrative incoherence, and mutuality with the image for its prohaptic power.

Steven Shaviro's polemic project in *The Cinematic Body* is to reject even more strongly than Marks the idea of psychoanalytic 'mastery' or 'stability' as the source of visual pleasure, and suggests in its place a kind of masochistic pleasure based on the violent shattering of the subject.¹⁶ The spectator takes pleasure in the image precisely because of the abdication of control. In this way, visual pleasure is amplified by the fragmentation, defamiliarization, dislodging, and de-contextualization experienced in the viewer's body. The abolishing of distance and the cutting off of objects from their referents (like Sobchack's collapsing of objective and subjective) means that sounds and images are 'reactivated,' multiplied and intensified, precisely by being cut off from their source or origin.¹⁷

Shaviro describes the pleasure of filmic images as primarily violent, the 'images literally assault the spectator, leaving him or her no space for reflection.'¹⁸ This violence 'literally anchor[s] desire and perception in the agitated and fragmented body.'¹⁹ Shaviro's ideas are less useful here for a way

to say exactly how film causes physical effects, but rather in pointing out the visual pleasure activated by the shock effects of violence. *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN*'s disorienting visual techniques (which will be discussed below), along with its movable, fragmented, panicked-soldier POV (point of view) camera and masochistic subject positioning make Shaviro's theories of visual pleasure particularly useful in this study.

These positions create an aggregate vision of the kind of bodily engagement at work in *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN*. In valorizing physical response as an essential part of cinema, they share a disdain of attempts at 'critical distance' in film viewing, and emphasize the transformative possibilities in excessive genres and forms. Further, all four theorists reject any psychoanalytic 'mastery' or deep structure as the explanation for bodily response. These studies can help us re-think cinematic response experienced by a highly sensitized 'cinesthetic object' within a system of physical and emotional excess and (here male) bodily display in relation to *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN*. The collapsing of the on-screen and off-screen space, (of subjectivity and objectivity) is experienced bodily as a perverse pleasure, and aesthetically, pleasure and sensation are multiplied by disorienting and shattering visual and audio techniques.

SAVING PRIVATE RYAN, Omaha Beach and bodily engagement

Theories of physical response to films help to grasp how film engages the body and understand how we can experience genuine, non-metaphorical sensations as film spectators. Though specific films are mentioned in the studies above, it is often unclear how much these sensations are effects of film in general or even specific genres, as opposed to how individual films work to effect the body.²⁰ It can be interesting and instructive to test these ideas on a particular film outside the range of the specific genres treated. In *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN*, the film uses these same 'general' cinematic effects described above, though exploits and amplifies them, leading to a particularly deliberate 'assault' on the body of the observer.

It is obvious that the film-makers desired a sense of 'reality,' but what did that mean when they made technical and aesthetic choices for the film? In a popular press interview largely to help explain the visceral effects of the film, cinematographer Janusz Kaminski, editor Michael Kahn, and sound designer Gary Rydstrom explained their approach and how they used it to enhance the film's sense of 'realism.'²¹ It is interesting that the rhetoric of 'realism' around the techniques used follows quite closely Laura Marks' descriptions of the 'prohaptic' properties of haptic visuality.²² In addition, note how the film-makers seem to largely conflate realism with bodily engagement.

Cinematographer Janusz Kaminski's conception for building an overall visual style, came from a desire to (echoing Spielberg) 'shoot like a bunch of actual combat cameramen', and again, that chiefly meant making a live-action version of Robert Capa's uncomposed-looking photographs.²³ To achieve this spontaneous documentary feeling, Kaminski and team used shaky, hand-held cameras, inconsistent focus, and varying exposure levels and lighting conditions, '(...) so there wasn't any optical continuity. We wanted viewers to feel completely disjointed from image to image (...) like the camera is one of the soldiers, going up and down, hiding, afraid it's going to get shot.' Moreover, to imitate Capa's bleached and faded look of the color film he shot during the war, they stripped the lenses of protective coatings to flatten the dark-to-light range, turning blacks gray and blue skies white. As a result, this lack of optical continuity denies a stable place for the viewer to work out any fantasy of mastery. The camera shifts in its personification among what appears to be many different soldiers (even German soldiers), returning now and then to some familiar faces, and occasionally also taking an disembodied 'eye of God' POV. Evincing Shaviro's masochistic sense of violent dislocation, one could say the Omaha Beach sequence 'dislodges sensation from its supposed "natural" conditions. The dematerialized images of film are the raw contents of sensation, without the forms, horizons, and contexts that usually orient them.'²⁴ The uncentered framing means that gruesome incidents are glimpsed at the margins of the frame. The camera then quickly cuts away from the disturbing image, further destabilizing the viewer.

Michael Kahn, the film editor, reinforces this view, saying he also intended to convey the sense of rapid change and inconsistent point of view, 'so we cut against expectations, against any reassuring rhythms,' making the movie's pacing unsettling and jerky. According to *Entertainment Weekly*:

'The editor took footage shot at half the normal speed – 12 frames per second – then double-printed each still frame. Result: Projected at 24 frames per second, the pacing of the action is "normal", but everything moves in a strobed-out manner (a common music-video look).'²⁵

Tellingly, Kahn says: 'Doing it in traditional slow motion was not realistic'. Within this regime of 'realism' the aesthetic effect of slow motion does not seem to elicit the desired viewer response. Like William's description of body genres, the editing aims for a strong, startling 'jerk' effect in its excessive spectacle of the body in the throes of pain and fear and continual evidence of the body's permeability; blood, vomit, and tears.²⁶ Also, like the framing, the editing does not allow the viewer to rest on any one bullet

wound for very long. Each death takes a second to register, creating a kind of 'aftershock' effect.

Taking advantage of Dolby Digital and other sound technology in theaters the film-makers aim to mimic what is one of the most commented upon experiences of battle by veterans: the sounds. In *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* this is the filmic component with probably the greatest direct physical impact on the viewer. According to sound designer Gary Rydstrom, he and his team worked to create a 360-degree sound field, part of Spielberg's plan of enveloping the cinema-goer in the battle 'arena'. In this manipulation of the sound, the action, he explains, 'isn't at a fixed, safe distance in front of you. You're in it'. Rydstrom emphasizes the 'authenticity' of his created sound world, referring to interviews with veterans about the 'blur of bullets' coming from German machine guns, and also recording the sound of bullets connecting with animal flesh.²⁷ Rydstrom wanted to create the impression of the constant deafening din of battle by alternating the contrast between very loud and the quieter 'rest' sounds. And indeed in the sequence, the cutting in and out of the sound (to mimic, for example, the temporary deafness after a shell explodes near by) results in a strongly felt 'lack' of sound.²⁸ In this way, the enveloping sound techniques work especially well to collapse the sense of subjectivity and objectivity, so that in Sobchack's words 'the cinesthetic subject constituted at the movies as ambiguously located both "here" off-screen and "there" on-screen'.²⁹

One particularly wince-inducing scene, coming about ten minutes into the film, can perhaps better illustrate the film-makers' post facto explanation. In this representative short scene, lasting about five to ten seconds, a man lies on his side facing the camera, a field surgeon behind him tries to care for a wound in his shoulder. The framing is tight, and in the scene's few seconds the camera shakily moves in even tighter on the gaping shoulder wound. Vivid red blood spurts out of the wound and the surgeon's inadequate scissors glint as they roughly stab deep into the exposed lesion. In agony, the wounded man wails, 'My God, it hurts'. Although it is very loud around them with gun fire and explosions, the man's words and torturous screams of pain are very clear.

Bodily engagement occurs in the individual lived body. Therefore, in demonstrating this scene's visceral effect, I will rely on an interpretation of my own reaction. Lacking a sense of context, (I have no idea who he is, or where he is lying on the beach, and I am lost temporally in the battle) I focus on the planar texture of the wound. The subjective (my shoulder) and the objective ('his' shoulder) collapse, and as Sobchack describes, 'on the rebound' from the screen, and without rational thought, I flinch as the scissors probe. My body squirms and cringes, but it is not 'my' shoulder I feel, but some diffuse 'in-between' body. The close-up framing of deep, rough

bodily penetration, along with the spectacle of the body in agony and the gushing of bodily fluids melds this scene to a kind of pornographic regime described by Williams. I feel helpless and shocked by the carnage, but when the camera cuts away after only a few seconds, I am left ambivalently exhilarated by the intense, though dispersed feeling.

From the comments and example above, it is clear that the film-makers have a surprising and unconventional, though effective, idea as to what constitutes 'realism.' It seems that in order to gain more in 'realism,' the film-makers needed to manipulate the profilmic image and recorded sound to an extreme degree, with the intention of how to best hail the body of the spectator. These techniques, according to Marks, enhance haptic visuality because they, 'multiply points of visual contact all over the screen' and 'discourage the viewer from distinguishing objects and encourage a relationship to the screen as a whole'.³⁰ In re-creating the inconsistency of the senses of the human subject in an extreme, panic situation, the film-makers acknowledge the need to simulate the sense of a living subject, and address the body directly. In joining these techniques to the spectacle of the body common to 'body genres', the film-makers have created a potent and imaginative conception 'reality.'

Narrative emplotment and implications

As virtually all the commentators point out, the Omaha Beach sequence in *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* is extremely long.³¹ Moreover, from a plot standpoint, it is completely gratuitous to the remainder of the film. If the sequence is absolutely unnecessary and therefore 'excessive,' why was such a great effort made to film it, and what does its inclusion mean to contemporary emplotments of war narrative? As has been established above, much of the popular rhetoric of the film surrounds a desire for or appreciation of 'realism' in the film. The film-makers clearly felt this bodily engaged 'realism' would serve as the best vehicle for transmitting their interpretation of the historical 'meaning' of D-Day.

It seems the subtext underneath this conflation is the perception on the film-makers part that our spectacle-driven, post-classical film climate of bigger explosions and bloodier shoot-outs has dulled audiences' senses to violence. When Spielberg defends the gore in his film by saying, 'I would be doing an extreme disservice to veterans if this was simply one more movie that glamorized World War II', he means, these men didn't die robbing a bank or rubbing out gangsters, but rather, died for a noble cause. A noble cause deserves steadfast realism. Star Tom Hanks sums up this memorializing and venerating approach with his characteristic folksiness:

'After all, a few million people got together and decided to save the world'.³² This statement is common of the 'common-sensical' rhetoric used to cancel any possible doubt to D-Day's laudability.

This sort of 'justifiable violence' in film rhetoric corresponds smoothly with the current view on World War II as the last 'justifiable war.' As one of the reviewers implies, Spielberg's *oeuvre* is highly indebted to notions of World War II as a just war.³³ After the questionable morality of Vietnam and the perceived economic motivations of the Gulf War (not to mention the messiness of ethnic conflicts world wide) *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* uses bodily engagement to exploit a nostalgia for a 'righteous,' non-post-modern war when words like patriotism and sacrifice for your country 'really meant something.' A tagline summation for the film might be: War is hell, but some things are worth dying for.

SAVING PRIVATE RYAN seems to have been made with the assumption that not only audiences are de-sensitized to 'gratuitous' violence, but that it is also a situation that needs rectifying:

'In other war movies, when an American GI gets hit, the commanding officer can write home that he never knew what hit him, that he didn't suffer. Well, it almost never happens that way. What you get is your guts coming out of your stomach, and you've gotta stuff 'em back in. You want morphine and you want water and you want your mother and you want a cigarette. In Spielberg's movie, that's what happens.'³⁴

In order to achieve (and further explain) this 're-sensitization' intention evident in the quote above, the discussions around realism in *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* have remotivated feminist film discourse on body engagement in a surprising way. The assumptions in the quote above, and the kind of 'realism' employed in *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN*, rely heavily on William's characteristics of body genres: penetration of the body, the spectacle of the body in the throes of emotion, and the 'jerk' effect. These attributes have long been associated by theorists of many stripes with the gendered visual pleasure of feminine display.³⁵ It is striking to see this approach used in the highly masculinized war genre. However, Spielberg's comments suggest that for him, adding what might be called *feminized bodily realism*, the explicit display of intense pain, suffering, and sacrificial bodily penetration, was the way to 're-sensitize' viewers to the extraordinarily corporeal and heroic, however distant, sacrifices of a just war.³⁶

Spielberg's message plainly hit the intended nerve. After praising the film's realism, many of the reviewers responded to film's moral ramifications in their interpretations of the film:

'Steven Spielberg (...) wants us to think about that, about how "the deep pride we once felt in our flag" has given way "to cynicism about our colors". Here Spielberg, the creator of *SCHINDLER'S LIST*, the film that more than any other justifies the justness of World War II, asks us to examine the war's morality in a different light. He is saying now that the lives that were given up in this conflict were every bit as valuable as the lives saved by those sacrifices.'

'No one who sees this movie would ever want to go to war – but no one with a conscience could feel anything other than immense gratitude for those who did. The next time I stand in front of a field of white crosses, I will have a little clearer sense of just what I am trying to remember.'

These two quotes, along with Spielberg's, reveal assumptions both about gratuitous film violence and the contemporary role of war films as 'memorials' to veterans. Both Spielberg's team and the critics, find the use of bodily engagement an appropriate way to cut through cynicism bred by post-modern irony and spectacle.

However, in the face of nearly universal celebratory acclaim, one critic was astute enough to point out the trap inherent in calling *RYAN* 'realistic':

'One, that for all of "Ryan's" vaunted realism, there's little in that admittedly fine movie that hasn't been seen in previous war films; the only difference being that gore quotients and editing styles have been becoming increasingly amped over time. And, two, that there's never been a war movie that *TRULY* tells us what it is to go into combat. Until the movie is made that can actually kill you, there never will be.'

Ty Burr's contextualizing is an important corrective to the aggrandizing praise of the other reviewers. Nevertheless critics and ticket-buyers were clearly 'touched' by what they saw in *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN*, but lacking a precise expression for their emotion-filled experience, could only call it 'realistic'.

Conclusions

'Using the overpowering techniques of modern film, Steven Spielberg has cut through the glory-tinged gauze that shrouds World War II to reveal its brutal reality, creating a phenomenology of violence unsurpassed in the history of cinema.'

The overall project of much of body genre and bodily engagement studies is to disprove a Mulvian 'visual pleasure' regime which excludes a 'healthy' female subject position. For this reason, Linda Williams, Vivian Sobchack, Carol Clover, Kaja Silverman, Gaylyn Studlar and many others have looked both beyond 'classical Hollywood', to previously denigrated genres, and problematized 'male subjectivity' to reveal cracks in the grand narrative of the classical system. In this way, feminist film theory, while often problematic, has opened up a broader range of possibilities not only for interpretation and analysis, but also for filmic expression across genres.⁴²

Their project has found surprisingly successful popular relevance in the case of *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN*. Although Steven Spielberg has long relied on emotion and the 'jerk' effect to 'touch' audiences in the greatest number possible, this film seems to attempt to solicit the viewers' body in a particularly direct way. Though there is no doubt that the emplotment of *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN*'s Omaha Beach landing sequence reinforces a mythology about World War II being the last 'justified war,' it manifests unexpectedly in a melodramatic, de-subjectified, abstract, abjectifying pornographic spectacle of death. I am not suggesting that *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* is a 'feminine' war film, or that war films are becoming 'feminized'.⁴³ I am suggesting that *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* is evidence of war films' engagement with concepts of 'realism' which are strongly indebted to feminist theoretical discourse on haptic visuality, the re-evaluation of rigid subject positioning through the collapse of on-screen and off-screen space, and above all revalorizing the 'carnal density' of the lived body.

Notes

- 1 Owen Gleiberman, 'SAVING PRIVATE RYAN', in: *Entertainment Weekly*, July 24, 1998 (www.ew.com.).
- 2 Further, most of the reviewers, Schickel included, emphasize the alignment the spectator feels with the vulnerability of many soldiers on the beach. 'We see as the soldiers see, from belly level, in flashes and fragments (...) seasick soldiers slaughtered the minute the ramps on their landing boats are lowered; other men clambering over the sides trying to avoid the fire, only to drown under the weight of their packs; the surf turning red with the blood of the slaughtered; some who make it to the narrow beach huddling immobilized yet pathetically vulnerable behind what little cover they can find. A few inch forward, hoping perhaps that being a moving target is safer than being a stationary one' (Richard Schickel, 'Reel War', in: *Time Magazine*, Vol. 152, No. 4, July 27, 1998).
- 3 'For the individual soldier on the beach, the landing was a chaos of noise, mud, blood, vomit and death. The scene is filled with countless unrelated pieces of time (Roger Ebert, 'SAVING PRIVATE RYAN', in: *Chicago Sun Times*, July 1998).

- 4 'He [Spielberg] puts us directly inside the consciousness of men in battle, and he does it from the outset (...) The fronts of the boats drop open, and the enemy gunfire explodes with a sickeningly dense and relentless cracking, the camera trembling as if the earth itself were coming apart. Red bullet holes appear on the men's helmets, and bodies drop like rag dolls. (...) For nearly half an hour, Spielberg uses his unparalleled kinetic genius to create an excruciatingly sustained cataclysm of carnage, nausea, and death' (Owen Gleiberman, 'SAVING PRIVATE RYAN', in: *Entertainment Weekly*, July 24, 1998. www.ew.com).
- 5 'Its vision of combat is never allowed to grow numbing. Like the soldiers, viewers are made furiously alive to each new crisis and never free to rest. The battle scenes avoid conventional suspense and sensationalism; they disturb not by being manipulative but by being hellishly frank. (...) the film explodes into panoramic yet intimate visions of bloodshed. (...) These scenes have a sensory fullness (the soundtrack is booming yet astonishingly detailed), a realistic yet breakneck pace, a ceaseless momentum and a vast visual scope. Artful, tumultuous warfare choreography heightens the intensity. So do editing decisions that balance the ordeal of the individual with the mass attack under way' (Janet Maslin, 'SAVING PRIVATE RYAN: A Soberly Magnificent New War Film', in: *New York Times*, July 24, 1998. www.nytimes.com).
- 6 Gary Kamiya, 'SAVING PRIVATE RYAN Review', in: *Salon.com*, July 24, 1998. www.salon.com).
- 7 This review/article is especially interesting and useful, since it is not only reviewing the film, it also has a strong thesis as about war films and SAVING PRIVATE RYAN's place among them. Also, it is worth noting that Kamiya is not generally a film critic, but rather a political journalist.
- 8 Jeff Gordiner, 'Message in a Battle', in: *Entertainment Weekly*, July 24, 1998.
- 9 Schickel, 'Reel War'.
- 10 For the purposes of this paper, I will be concentrating on these particular studies: Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Durham 1999; Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, Minneapolis, 1993; Vivian Sobchack, 'What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh', 2000 forthcoming book chapter, excerpted on the web: www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/05/fingers.html; Linda Williams, 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess', in: *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4, Summer 1991, pp. 2-13.
- 11 Williams, 'Film Bodies', p. 3.
- 12 According to the OED (Oxford English Dictionary): '*chiasmus*: Inversion in the second of two parallel phrases of the order followed in the first (e.g. to stop too fearful and too faint to go). Also *chiasma*: Biol. the point at which paired chromosomes remain in contact after crossing over during meiosis'. I think it is a useful term to portray linguistically the way sensation crosses and melds across boundaries temporally and spatially.
- 13 More precisely, Sobchack defines coenaesthesia as 'the perception of one's whole bodily state as the sum of its somatic perceptions and refers to a certain pre-logical unity of the sensorium that exists as the carnal foundation of that hierarchical arrangement of the senses achieved through cultural immersion and practice. Thus, the term is used to describe the general sensual condition of

- the child at birth. In sum, while synaesthesia refers to exchange and translation between and among the senses, coenaesthesia refers to the way in which our equally available senses have the capacity to become variously heightened and diminished, the power of culture regulating their boundaries as it arranges them into a normative hierarchy.' (Shobchack, 'What my fingers knew', p. 7).
- 14 Idem, p. 10-11 (emphasis author's own).
 - 15 Marks, *The skin of the film*, p. 162.
 - 16 Shaviro's primary aim is to propose an 'Anti-Oedipal' Deleuzian alternate to the 'phobia' of the affects of images in most contemporary theory, and reinscribe the body of the (specifically academic) film-goer into the realm of 'carnal density'. Most of the other three academics also use Crary's term from *Techniques of the Observer* as well. Shaviro also relies heavily on Bataille's theories of abjection.
 - 17 Shaviro, *The cinematic body*, p. 36.
 - 18 Idem, p. 50.
 - 19 Idem, p. 55.
 - 20 We know, for example, that *THE PIANO* does work on Sobchack's body, or *BLUE STEEL* on Shaviro's, but not what is particular to those films (and not films in general) that make them 'haptic'.
 - 21 Steve Daly, 'Allied Forces', in: *Entertainment Weekly*, August 21, 1998. This article appeared about a month after the film was released. 'YAN by this time had already become a big hit and the Omaha Beach sequence had become widely celebrated as the film's highlight.
 - 22 To review, these prohaptic properties include: changes in focus, graininess, effects of under/over exposure. Other haptic effects of film: optical printing, solarization, scratching and emulsion work on the physical surface of the medium. Graininess certainly produces a tactile quality. (Marks, *The skin of the film*, pp. 172-175.)
 - 23 Daly in 'Allied forces': '[Capa's] D-Day images haunted Kaminski because "you feel that these people are already dead".'
 - 24 Shaviro, *The cinematic body*, p. 31.
 - 25 Daly, 'Allied forces'.
 - 26 Williams, 'Film bodies', p. 10: 'Fantasy is the place where "desubjectified" subjectivities oscillate between self and other occupying no fixed place in the scenario.'
 - 27 According to the Daly interview, Spielberg was so set on not using the movie cliché of echoey ricochets that he 'called many, many times about it', Rydstrom says (Daly, 'Allied forces').
 - 28 'I've heard of audiences thinking it's their own hearing they've lost,' says Rydstrom (idem).
 - 29 Sobchack, 'What my fingers knew', p. 8.
 - 30 Marks, *The skin of the film*, p. 174; p.172.
 - 31 In fact, the parts I'm focusing on in this study take place in the first ten minutes. After that, though continuing with the style, the sequence already starts to be more conventional having a context with a platoon to identify with.
 - 32 Gordiner, 'Message in a battle'.

- 33 In *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN*, this is underscored when viewers are economically reminded of the Nazi atrocities in *SCHINDLER'S LIST* towards the end of the Omaha beach sequence. After the platoon captures a German bunker, the Jewish soldier sobs while holding a 'souvenir' Hitler Youth knife, both mourning those killed on the beach and reminding the viewer what all this bloodshed is really for.
- 34 Note all the references to sensual imagery. Quoted in Gordiner, 'Message in a battle'. Historian Stephen Ambrose, Spielberg's D-Day consultant for the film was clearly very influential to the way Spielberg and company rethought the depiction of World War II battle scenes in *Britannica* online: 'In earlier films, such as Darryl Zanuck's 1962 D-Day epic *THE LONGEST DAY*, soldiers die quick, romantic, noble deaths, never knowing what hit them. "That happens in about one percent of the cases", says Ambrose. "Ninety-nine percent of the time, they know damn well what hit them. They're 18 years old, they're terrified, and they're not at peace with their maker or anything else like it." Spielberg's Omaha Beach is deafening and chaotic, in sharp contrast to the battlefields of an earlier generation of World War II films. 'In those films, without exception, the battles are too clean, too neat, too surgical, too short, too good to be true', says Ambrose' (private-ryan.eb.com).
- 35 Kamiya's phrase, 'the pornographic allure of battle' in the Omaha Beach sequence, neatly reinforces the association with body genres.
- 36 The constantly reported fact that Spielberg sent his actors to 'boot camp' training with a real former Marine to better experience 'deprivation,' and avoid 'phoniness' of war films was also part of the rhetoric surrounding the realism of the film. The actors also had to expose their bodies to discomfort to play soldiers 'realistically.' (Gordiner, 'Message in a battle').
- 37 Schickel, 'Reel war'.
- 38 Kamiya, 'SAVING PRIVATE RYAN review'.
- 39 Ty Burr in *Entertainment Weekly*, cutting through the rhetoric, he notes sagely: 'We like to believe, stuck as we are in our own cultural timeframe, that the way the media present the world is always getting "better" – more true, more realistic, more honest. That a black-and-white film made in the late 1940s can't be as "real" as one made in the late 1990s, with all its graphic blood, guts, and swear words. (...)What's amusing, in a long-view fashion, is how we seem to react to each new combat classic as if *THIS* was the way things truly were – only to slough it off when the next one comes around.'
- 40 Purely anecdotally, it seems with a rash of TV films, best selling books (most strikingly newsreader Tom Brokaw's *The Greatest Generation*), and the upcoming blockbuster wannabe *PEARL HARBOR* that *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* has been hugely influential in reviving triumphalist and righteous rhetoric on World War II.
- 41 Kamiya, 'SAVING PRIVATE RYAN review'.
- 42 It might be a controversial standpoint to say that film theory influences film production, but seeing that film schools require theory classes, it does not seem coincidental that, for example, *FIGHT CLUB* follows (temporally, at the very least) masculinity gender studies, and the *MATRIX* follows Baudrillard.
- 43 I don't have any idea as to what that would mean, only that expressions of emotion have come to be seen as less explicitly gendered feminine, and that emotion has become more acceptable in normative male viewers.