TO KILL OR NOT TO KILL: IMAGES OF VIOLENCE AND CRUELTY IN *BAND OF BROTHERS*

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ABSTRACT: The social and political complexities of violent acts during war and the particularities of such moments can be explored through artistic representations that lead to instances of reflection on the nature of brutality. The objective of this article is to raise a cinematic and theoretical discussion on the depiction of violence and cruelty in times of war, more specifically in the miniseries *Band of Brothers* (2001), co-produced by Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks, by choosing a particular sequence to illustrate the point. Such debate highlights the role of memory and warfare, focusing on the effects of violent acts in the American national imaginary regarding the Second World War. The depiction of the "good war" as a recollection of brutalities shapes the past as a haunting episode, one that is constantly replayed through the revival of the traumatic events.

KEYWORDS: Violence; War Miniseries; Second World War.

RESUMO: As complexidades sociais e políticas de atos de violência durante o contexto da guerra e as particularidades destes momentos podem ser exploradas através de representações artísticas que levam a momentos de reflexão sobre a natureza da brutalidade. O objetivo deste artigo é trazer uma discussão cinematográfica e teórica sobre a representação da violência e crueldade em tempos de guerra, mais especificamente na minissérie *Band of Brothers* (2001), co-produzida por Steven Spielberg e Tom Hanks, através da escolha de uma sequência em particular. Este debate enfatiza o papel da memória e guerra, concentrando-se nos efeitos dos atos de violência no imaginário nacional Americano em relação à Segunda Guerra Mundial. O retrato da "boa guerra" como uma coleção de brutalidades configura o passado com um efeito fantasmagórico que é constantemente revisitado através da recapitulação dos eventos traumáticos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Violência; Minissérie de Guerra; Segunda Guerra Mundial.

Throughout the history of humankind, violent combats have generated discussions about the nature of such conflicts and their acceptability in the moral standards of society. The cruelty and violence generated as a result of warfare encounters have damaged not only those who experienced such situations but the general public affected by the consequences of living in a world deeply scarred by brutality. Patricia Pinnock explains in the book *Skyline* her perception of the phenomenon of war: "It is with you always, war, waiting to explode your life and throw you down beside a river to die. War wants death, always; war wants to quiet your mother's songs. War wants your sorrow" (PINNOCK, 2000, p. 15). In this decidedly intense description

of immersion in a war conflict, there is an emphasis on the pain inflicted in the moment of the violent act as well as the afterward losses. Artistic representations of warfare events explore such complexities and are able to delve into the particularities of violent moments, leading to instances of reflection on the nature of brutality. The objective of this article is to raise a cinematic and theoretical discussion on the depiction of violence and cruelty in times of war, more specifically in the miniseries *Band of Brothers* (2001), co-produced by Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks, by choosing a particular sequence to illustrate the point. Such debate highlights the role of memory and warfare, focusing on the effects of violent acts in the American national imaginary regarding the Second World War. The depiction of the "good war" as a recollection of brutalities shapes the past as a haunting episode, one that is constantly replayed through the revival of the traumatic events.

The Second World War remains to this day one of the most violent war conflicts that the world has witnessed. Richard Overy has classified World War II as "the largest and costliest war in human history. The deaths directly or indirectly caused by the war may have reached 60 million" (OVERY, 2009, p. 6). Such an inhumane moment in history is bound to leave scars that reverberate until present days. There were atrocities such as "The Nanking Massacre" in which Japanese soldiers attacked China and "bayoneted, shot, burned, buried alive, and decapitated their victims, and, according to eyewitness accounts, mutilated corpses lined the streets of the city" (WILLMOTT, 2009, p. 25). Hitler's "Final Solution", with its overpowering cruelty, and the nuclear bombs in Oshima and Nagasaki stand as the most memorable and terrifying instances of brutality and human extermination.

Undoubtedly, an event with such enormous worldwide impact would not be left out from the visual media that could capture its motion: cinema. Used primarily as a means of recording the action on the battlefield, films became a way of experiencing the conflict in a mediated manner through the newsreels that were shown before movies or in special political

sessions. The hardships of documenting such footage are observed by Toby Haggith who mentions that the United States army lost most of their D-Day footage from the landing on Omaha Beach during a shipwreck (HAGGITH, 2002). However, a great majority of the filmed sequences made by the British AFPU (Army's Film and Photographic Unit) survived and are available in documentaries (HAGGITH, 2002).

According to Haggith, there were seven cameramen of the AFPU assigned to go with the British troops in the first assault on D-Day (HAGGITH, 2002). They were given special training regarding the operation of the cameras and the aesthetics of the shots. Some similar characteristics among the material recorded by the cameramen are that as they approached the beach "they took shots of their own landing craft, with mid-shots and close-ups of the soldiers preparing to face action and sequences of the approaching beaches and other landing craft" (HAGGITH, 2002, p. 338). The cameramen rarely captured the enemy attacking due to the fact that they had to take cover from the intense fire. The regular shocking footage was that of corpses or enemy soldiers taken as prisoners. Explosions were also rare occasions to be captured, only by sheer luck. Since they could not anticipate action and there was not enough film to keep the camera rolling all the time, they could only capture the aftereffect of bombing and its devastation.

Fictional cinema regarding the Second World War flourished in the early 1940s. Examples such as *Wake Island* (1942), *Bataan* (1943), and *Destination Tokyo* (1943) illustrate a series of characteristics that would later on become trademarks of the war film genre. Jeanine Basinger, in the book *The World War II Combat Film*, explains that World War II movies generated a series of basic traits. She comments that these characteristics range from ethnically mixed groups of soldiers, fixed objectives, issues to be resolved amongst the soldiers, heroes who distance themselves from the others due to their leadership duties, leisure activities of talking and sleeping, the nostalgia of the memory of home, recurrent props such as letters and

maps, and the theme of death (BASINGER, 2003, p. 56-7). Such assembly of attributes can be recognized throughout the war film genre in different contexts and used for varied narrational purposes.

As the decades passed by, the catalog of WWII movies was enlarged and many of the aforementioned characteristics became quickly recognizable to the audience. Filmmakers started pushing the boundaries of verisimilitude in order to be as historically accurate as possible. In *The Longest Day* (1962), producer Darryl Zanuck portrayed the American preparations for D-Day and the attack on the Omaha Beach, one of the sectors that suffered the greatest number of casualties. As Robert Toplin points out, Zanuck tried to make this depiction of war as historically authentic as it could be, giving it a documentary look (TOPLIN, 2006). He then "incorporated a veritable army and navy in the production, obtaining many ships, planes, tanks, and trucks from the NATO allies" (TOPLIN, 2006, p. 306). The criticism on *The Longest Day* appears to deal with the fact that the soldiers, whether enemies or allies, die without any look of pain or sight of blood. Toplin notes that "many reviewers expressed disappointment in the movie's presentation of slaughter on the beaches. Hundreds of extras fall into the sand, they observed, but each victim appears to be unscathed" (TOPLIN, 2006, p. 306).

The absence of gore in warfare representation is directly connected to the Production Code that worked as a censorship to visual images from the 1930s to 1960s. Stephen Prince claims that the "Hollywood's Production Code regulated all aspects of screen content, with an elaborate list of rules outlining what was permissible to show and what was not. These regulations placed great constraints on filmmakers" (PRINCE, 2000, p. 2). During the Code, "screen violence remained relatively discreet, and the camera turned away from its uglier manifestations" (PRINCE, 2000, p. 4). Prince also points out that due to these restrictions, the Code prevented the appearance of a phenomenon that he calls "ultraviolence" (PRINCE, 2000, p. 2). It emerged after the revision of the Code in the 1960s and in parallel with the less

constrained rules established by the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America). Ultraviolence's definition is that it takes regular violence to another level by showing explicit and bloody images of beheading, dismemberment, and wounds (PRINCE, 2000). It serves varied purposes in the discussion of political stances, racial and ethnic issues, and economical concerns while it is used in a wide spectrum ranging from excessive instances of blood portrayal to short and fleeting images of graphic violence.

In 1998, Steven Spielberg directed the World War II film *Saving Private Ryan* which stood out for its graphic portrayal of combat. Robert Burgoyne comments on the initial 24-minute sequence that shows the American troops disembarking on Omaha Beach on D-Day: "The maimed bodies, disfigured faces, detached limbs, and the sights and sounds of bullets and knives penetrating the flesh are presented as the inescapable reality of combat" (BURGOYNE, 2008, p. 51). *Ryan* exposes the audience to what it seems an endless period of time that depicts a great number of soldiers perishing in the fastest and slowest ways that can be possibly imagined. No movie before *Ryan* had been so explicit and immersive in relation to the portrayal of a combat scenario, especially one so devastating as the D-Day.

In addition to the violent emphasis during battle, *Ryan* also brings several other characteristics to the World War II genre. Burgoyne points out the "psychology of cowardice" (BURGOYNE, 2008, p. 50) which questions the extent of heroism during battle. In the film, soldiers flee for their lives, deny going into battle, and freeze on the line of duty. The underbelly of patriotism is shown when the soldier in danger does not think about the duty to his country or the comradery of saving his teammate. The predominant reflex is to save himself even if at the expense of looking like a coward or a deserter.

A cinematic landmark brought by *Ryan* is related to the technological innovations used in the movie. War films have always pushed the boundaries of camera positions, choreography, and special effects. Burgoyne explains that "the film blends computer-generated imagery, live

action photography, reenactments of documentary photographs and sequences, accelerated editing, slow-motion cinematography, and electronically enhanced sound design in an adrenalized montage" (BURGOYNE, 2008, p. 51). By using the hand-held camera, the viewer is immersed in the visual construction of the combat atmosphere. As Haggith points out, the irregularity of the images is accomplished by the use of an image shaker which causes the tremors from the explosions, re-enacting the experiential feeling (HAGGITH, 2002).

Following *Ryan* is the HBO miniseries *Band of Brothers* which aired in 2001 with the total number of ten episodes and a running time of eleven hours, having the participation of eight directors in total. It is based on the 1992 homonymous book by Stephen E. Ambrose who interviewed the Second World War veterans and collected their memories. The main premise is the battlefield portrayal and combat experiences of a group of approximately twenty-five paratroopers of the 101st Airborne, also called Easy Company. Due to the fact that the miniseries has ten episodes, it is possible to insert a greater number of characters with complex storylines. The audience learns their full names, nicknames, ranks, promotions, and demotions. The richness of details aids in the construction of a world where issues such as heroism and battle glory are substituted by images of material and corporeal destruction. The shattering of the soldiers' psychological state accompanied by scenes of mutilation and death portray a demystified version of the Second World War as the "good war". Warfare becomes a protracted and torturous experience for both the paratroopers and the local populace that they come across in their journey across Europe.

More than just portraying the soldiers' military careers, *Band of Brothers* also focuses on portraying the solidification of the comradery among the characters as a way of survival. Whether the soldiers are from different backgrounds, ethnicities, social classes or age groups, it is possible to see the interaction and the bonding that is created under such unique conditions. As stated by Todd McCarthy, *Band of Brothers* arrives on the screen "with its exceptionally

detailed and sharply focused look at the conflict from the point of view of men who were almost continuously in the line of fire for a year's time" (MCCARTHY, 2001, p. 46). In *Band of Brothers*, the soldiers are distant from home for a great amount of time and the only space where they find similar affection to what they have at home is in the close contact with each other, whether it is a physical connection or an emotional bond. The miniseries depicts the creation of micro-societies among the characters who struggle in combat as they witness and perform violent acts.

Each of the ten episodes of the miniseries starts with interviews from the survivors of Easy Company. The real-life veterans are given credit through the testimony about the specific historical moment that the episode addresses, providing a personal and up-close perspective of the combat experiences. According to Stephen Ambrose, "many [veterans] are realizing that they don't have much time left in the world, and many, for the first time, are willing to talk about their experiences" (quoted in SCHATZ, 2002, p. 75). By portraying the memories of the survivors, the miniseries adds a complex layer to the understanding of the events of such a turbulent moment in world history. After the interviews, each episode shows the fictionalized version of the events briefly commented by the veterans.

Band of Brothers is also known by its graphic display of violence throughout the episodes. In several moments, the audience witnesses the dismembering and loss of limbs of the characters due to enemy fire, explosions, grenades, errors in friendly fire, or even self-mutilation in which soldiers accidently shoot themselves. The characters' deaths happen sometimes accompanied by a fellow soldier or in the cold, dark battlefield in a state of complete loneliness. Comraderie is often highlighted in moments of death in the miniseries, as soldiers attempt to save each other's lives. This customary portrayal in the episodes enhances the emphasis on the war experience as a collective event, one that is shared among the soldiers who struggle to find hope in somber moments.

The aim of this article is to analyze a very specific sequence from episode five, entitled "Crossroads", which features Captain Richard Winters (Damian Lewis) as the main character. Winters is depicted as a fearless and competent soldier, the type of leader that instills confidence and trust from the remaining paratroopers. Episode five is structured around flashbacks of a mission carried out by Winters. The editing plays an important role in the chronological display of the mission and the amount of information the audience is allowed to have. As the editing goes back and forth in time and the episode repeatedly portrays the same moment of violence from different angles, the experience of combat becomes a circular and traumatic event for Winters.

The very first scene in this episode is the flashback that is later identified as a recurring memory for Winters. He runs through the battlefield, the camera runs along in a series of shaky close-ups showing parts of his body, helmet, gun, and boots. The general feeling is of nervousness as his heavy breathing is heard due to the exhausting run. The saturated and washed up colors take away any thought of vivacity or hope, unveiling only the grim task at hand. When Winters gets to the top of the hill, he sees and points his gun at a young German soldier who is with his back turned and crouched on the ground. In this moment, Winters' reaction is not portrayed, only the image of the German soldier who turns around and remains on his knees, passive, without much awareness of the situation. Winters shoots him once and the episode cuts to a reverse shot of Winters pointing his gun and the German soldier falling. Winters' corporeal position, with his legs stretched apart and feet firmly planted on the ground, demonstrates that he is in total command of his actions and ready for battle. Such willingness for combat starkly contrasts with the German soldier's lack of situational awareness and unpreparedness for his violent demise.

This short flashback lasts for thirty seconds, from the moment Winters is shown running up to the point he shoots the soldier. The amount of time he takes to make the decision to shoot

the young boy is of five seconds. The other twenty-five seconds are devoted to him trying to arrive at the top of the hill. Later in the episode, the time frame and content of the flashback is modified according to Winters' memory and conscience. The weight of the act of killing, particularly such a young soldier, transforms the depiction of his memory of the event, pointing to the intricate way that history is remembered and transmitted.

One of the main points to be discussed in relation to this flashback is connected to the taboo of killing during war conflicts. As Georges Bataille explains in the book *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, the act of cannibalism has become incompatible to our current society but "not so the desire to kill" (BATAILLE, 1986, p. 72). He explains that the wish to kill is connected to the restrictions made by a social taboo just like the desire for sexual activity is prohibited in certain instances of society. The taboo in relation to taking away someone's life "only serves to limit killing to certain specific situations" (BATAILLE, 1986, p. 72). When murder happens, it is condemnable by law, it becomes criminal. However, there are certain exceptions that defy accepted taboos such as duels, feuds, and war.

In *Band of Brothers*, the soldiers, both allies and enemies, are placed in the transgression of this taboo. Men carrying all sorts of guns, from knives to grenades, from pistols to machine guns, have a singular purpose in their walks along the countryside and urban centers of France or Germany: to eliminate opposing forces. The miniseries portrays the lack of space for a dialogue concerning the act of killing in the military environment. In the depiction of the experiences of low rank soldiers, who receive orders from the superior officers and are expected to comply with them, the most common expressions used rely on a vocabulary of devastation, such as, "take down", "destroy", "secure", "make sure it is ours" or plainly "kill them" "level them" and "exterminate them."

Baitalle continues discussing the issue of humanity and the limits of violence in a battlefield environment. He mentions that "war was different in kind from animal violence and

it developed a cruelty animals are incapable of" (BATAILLE, 1986, p. 78). This discussion raises the issue of the intention of men during combat, whether their actions in the battlefield reflect pure instinct of survival or if there is a certain amount of pleasure or insensitivity in the cruel act of killing. Bataille also mentions that violence in war times is "frequently followed by a massacre of the enemy [and] torture of the prisoners" (BATAILLE, 1986, p. 78). Violence is seen then as a circular phenomenon, one that inspires a cyclical behavior based on brutality.

In relation to Winters and the German soldier, since the act of killing during war is socially sanctioned because of its exceptional situation, the American soldier relies on the assumption that he is part of a military organism inserted in a battlefield environment that consents the performance of such acts. In the heat of battle, trying to survive and accomplish his task, Winters executes his target mission of conquering that space. Burgoyne raises a discussion about the uncivilized behavior of soldiers during war times in cinema. He comments that war films depict "the release of violence and aggression, the suspension of civilized norms, the cultivation and training of the soldier's body as a "killing machine"" (BURGOYNE, 2008, p. 52). Transgression is authorized which leads to the normalization of the act of killing and the soldiers being the instrument of such actions.

Another flashback of Winters and the German soldier happens when the American soldier is given a free pass to Paris and travels by train. This is the moment when the narrative depicts Winter's post-traumatic process, his difficulty in overcoming the violent occasion when he killed the young German soldier in the battlefield. Such a traumatic experience is the consequence of a cruel and violent act performed in the line of duty under orders to be followed. By portraying Winters' emotional struggle, *Band of Brothers* highlights the fact that military ranks and chains of command restrict the free will of soldiers who are immersed in the realm of obeying orders.

The sound effects and lighting play an important role of triggering the memories from the battlefield in relation to the scenes on the train. The constant sound of the train speeding along the tracks seems to have an effect of entrancing Winters into his own recollection of memories. Aided by the lights being on and off on the train, he looks at the other passengers behaving naturally, for instance, as a man reads the newspaper. Winters associates the flickering of the lights with the battlefield as he remembers nighttime missions in the dark and the flashing of the rifles' muzzles. In addition, Winters looks at an old man who is sitting down, calmly smoking a pipe, and looking outside the window. He then associates this image with an instance of leisure time among the soldiers who are passing cigarettes around in a relaxed manner. His mind is tuned in one particular frequency, that of war. In this sequence, Winters associates every image he sees in civilian life with his past experiences in the battlefield.

The face of the young German soldier returns, as if in an apparition, when Winters looks at a young French boy who is on the train (Pictures 1 and 2). In the episode, the alternate images of the two boys are visually positioned on the left side of the frame which allows the comparison to be more transparent. Despite the difference in context between the two young boys, their facial expression is a parallel of recognition to Winters, a haunting memory that materializes itself through similarities in physical appearance, youth, and frame position.

Picture 1 – The French boy
(SPIELBERG and HANKS, 2001)

Picture 2 – The young German soldier
(SPIELBERG and HANKS, 2001)

The visual comparison between the two boys is the trigger to a more detailed flashback of the moment when Winters climbs the hill and encounters the young German soldier. In a medium shot, Winters holds his rifle and faces the boy in an image that gives access to the

American soldier's facial reaction. He momentarily contemplates the presence of a German soldier in front of him and in such close distance. The youth of the soldier is revealed as he slowly rises to his knees. Differently from the initial flashback, Winters does not shoot right away. As the seconds go by, the camera gets closer to Winters, in a gradual process of depicting his inner emotional state of hesitation. The episode portrays different camera distances, such as a long shot that shows Winters' full body and enhances the proximity between the two soldiers, a medium long shot that gives a greater focus on Winters' reluctance in shooting, and close-ups that highlight the bewildered mental state of the American soldier instances before committing the violent act (Picture 3). As the camera moves closer to Winters, so does the focus on his inner world as he kills the soldier. The result of this movement is the highlight of the dark nature of the American paratrooper, and the construction of his character not only as an all-around leader and warrior but also as a cold-hearted killer. Such negative behavior costs him instances of emotional instability in the unfolding of his post-traumatic experience.

Picture 3 – The different camera distances (SPIELBERG and HANKS, 2001)

The portrayal of the young soldier suffers some changes throughout the flashbacks. In the initial flashback, he is depicted as a generic German soldier that represents one more casualty, without any noticeable reaction. He symbolizes the transgression, the person who suffers the effects of the concretization of the broken taboo, that is, the moment in which killing is allowed in times of war. In the final flashback he is given a moment of awareness. Moving from a long shot of him on his knees, to a medium long shot, it is possible to see his features. He does not demonstrate fear as there is even a faint smile on his face. As the seconds go by, the recognition of the enemy by the young soldier becomes more apparent and Winters' hesitation develops into a climax of choice. It is when the German soldier appears in a close-up

that reality sinks in, the weight of the opposing uniforms forces them to take contrary sides. The boy realizes that the pointed gun will soon fire and his expression turns from a smile to desperation and fear (Picture 4). His jaw drops, his eyes blink, but there is no more time to react. The shot is fired.

Picture 4 – The German soldier in a close-up (SPIELBERG and HANKS, 2001)

In the last flashback, the same gunshot is shown four times, through different angles and camera distances, unlike the initial flashback in which the shot is fired only once, causing the German soldier to fall on his back. With the use of slow motion, Winters is shown in a low angle, medium close-up, firing his weapon while the empty cap flies in the air. His face tightens up, his lips are closed, and he proceeds to discharge his order. The first of the four different angles in which the German soldier is seen getting shot is a close-up of the boy's face (Picture 5). There is no visual representation of the bodily damage through this angle. The image captures the impact of the gunshot that propels the soldier to fall back. The fast editing connects the same event being portrayed from a different angle, this time depicting the German soldier's back, allowing the effect of the gunshot to be observed (Picture 6). A red spray fills the air, spilling the blood of the young boy who then falls to the ground while Winters remains impassive up on the hill. The third angle is a medium shot of the German soldier in which the wound area is more visible accompanied by the boy's facial reaction (Picture 7). He falls back with his eyes open in a display of disillusionment and loss of hope. The fourth and final angle moves away from the German soldier's reaction and comes back to Winters' perspective, since it is depicted from his point of view (Picture 8). The image evokes the position of power of the

American soldier who retains control of the situation by being in possession of a lethal weapon and taking advantage of the tactical element of surprise. The repetition of the act of killing functions as a painstaking reminder of a pathological behavior in the warfare scenario, in this case in the Second World War, where the unconditional power to kill becomes a brutal spectacle manifested by an overwhelming display of violence.

Picture 5 – Close-up of German soldier
(SPIELBERG and HANKS, 2001)

Picture 6 – Image from behind the young soldier
(SPIELBERG and HANKS, 2001)

Picture 7 – Medium shot of the German soldier
(SPIELBERG and HANKS, 2001)

Picture 8 – Winters' perspective
(SPIELBERG and HANKS, 2001)

The final flashback presents how Winters interprets the experience of killing as a painful event by portraying the moment in a more detailed manner than the first scene of the episode. His grief-stricken conscience is foregrounded, indicating how Winters is depicted as both the perpetrator of violence and a psychological victim of trauma. Time seems to have been stretched since the interaction between the two characters in the initial flashback lasts five seconds while the final remembrance of the violent act takes twenty-three seconds. The perception of time has increased to almost five times its former impression. Winters takes seventeen seconds to shoot while the remaining six seconds show the boy getting shot four times. *Band of Brothers* represents the act of killing, a depiction that has become a recurring

trademark in the war film genre but innovates the swift moment of the loss of life through the emphasis on its significance to both soldiers involved in the process. By extending time and constructing the moment that precedes death with a layered portrayal of the soldiers' reactions, the miniseries delves deeper into the complexity of the act of killing, representing the violent shortcomings of the American soldiers, the encounter with a somber depiction of the Allies and their post-traumatic process.

In conclusion, the haunting memories of the act of killing in *Band of Brothers* function as an invitation to revisit crystallized concepts about past historical events, such as the perception of the Second World War as a conflict marked by the clash of good versus evil, the Allies versus the Axis. The uniqueness of the context of warfare has led Bataille to observe that wartimes are seen by society as an exception to the rule of "thou shalt not kill" (BATAILLE, 1986, p. 72). The lifting of the taboo of killing during war has facilitated scenarios of conquest and the subduing of nations, leading to the escalation of conflicts of greater scope and the brutal reverberation of worldwide slaughter. By focusing on the significance of a particular act of killing during war, *Band of Brothers* highlights the rippling effect of cruelty and its consequences in the construction of national memory regarding warfare. The haunting of the image of death, particularly of a young boy, functions as a generational reminder of trauma inflicted by excessive power and violence.

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