

No Longer Human: How Media that Depicts World War II Fails Its Ontological Goals

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ABSTRACT

This essay dissects how media that depicts World War II through the mode of realism fail to accomplish their ontological goals. It examines three pieces of media made in the late 1990s and early 2000s: the films *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *Dunkirk* (2017) and the *Call of Duty* video game franchise (2003-). I explain how the sublimated desire to view violence by watching a Nazi die collapses under moral scrutiny, and how the desire to make their death and the preceding combat as realistic as possible works counterintuitively to mask the real horror of war. The essay goes on to argue that *Dunkirk* succeeds in portraying the horror of war by utilizing the negative space present in audiovisual silence. The essay will conclude with an analysis of how the lack of negative space in realistic films degrades the quality of critical analysis of depictions of the most horrific moments in history.

“Every film about war ends up being pro-war.” Truffaut’s lofty claim appears provocative, but upon an interrogation of our era’s most popular war films, how strong does it hold? Media that depicts war hasn’t always been a slugfest rife with camaraderie—immediately after World War I, dozens of films and books portrayed the brutality of the new era of warfare. Abel Gance’s 1919 French film *J’accuse* features the ghosts of soldiers accusing villagers of forgetting about their sacrifice. But this type of film—the depiction of brutality in combat—paused after World War II. In fact, films that depicted World War II reveled in the violence they displayed.

This essay will analyze how the vast majority of media that depicts World War II fails to do so. It will first start with an exemplar of realistic war media, Steven Spielberg’s 1998 film *Saving Private Ryan*. Then it will cover a few of the *Call of Duty* games produced in the 21st century. Finally, I interrogate Christopher Nolan’s 2017 film *Dunkirk*, arguing how *Dunkirk* successfully portrays war by de-emphasizing realism.

In order to discuss how both the *Call of Duty* shooter games and *Saving Private Ryan* fail to depict war, one must first understand Jean Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra. In his essay *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard argues that humans negotiate intangible concepts by rendering them as concrete symbols, or simulacra. Baudrillard argues that those in power twist simulacra—those who control the media control our perception of the world. Simulacra have a linear progression, slowly twisting to separate from the intangible, severing human thought from pure conception of the intangible, ensnaring them in the unreal. This essay will focus on a specific part of the progression of simulacra: the hyper-real. Baudrillard argues that media that claim to portray the intangible as accurately as possible fail—the simulation will inevitably omit something from the intangible, and the omitted fact will cease to exist in the public consciousness. For example, as Baudrillard writes in *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1991), during the invasion of Kuwait, trustworthy news channels began describing America’s massively overpowering military force barreling through Kuwait as a war. However, there is widespread debate among academics on whether America’s invasion of Kuwait constituted as a war. Sadly, the debate never broke into the mainstream due to the media’s accidental lie of omission—to this day, the invasion of Kuwait is labeled as a war. Baudrillard goes on to elaborate that simulacra aren’t necessarily only formed around the intangible, but also around concepts too big to conceive of wholly, with war as the primary

example. Media that claims to depict war exactly as-is fails because it will inevitably omit a key concept, fragmenting it within the collective consciousness. Following Baudrillard, at the core of every war film is an attempt to negate the real.

Steven Spielberg's seminal work *Saving Private Ryan* is the first film from this era that negotiates the contradiction between the brutality of war and the banality of being a soldier. It achieves this feat by removing any drop of character from the characters themselves. Characters are effectively bland pastiches of singular character traits ostensibly held by real soldiers; for example, Daniel Jackson, the sniper, is religious; Miller, the captain, has PTSD; and Reiben is rebellious. Each character is pressed down into a simulacrum of a real person. While the technique of pressing characters down into pastiches of themselves is nothing new, *Saving Private Ryan* appears to use it to de-emphasize their humanity. Spielberg himself is quoted as wanting a less sanitized, more realistic version of war—in a 2018 interview Spielberg states, "I didn't want another war-movie stereotype. I was trying to get as close as I could to the experience of what a combat soldier at Omaha Beach might experience." The dialogue is minimal and cliched; the real highlight of the film is its brilliant depiction of violence. Moreover, *Saving Private Ryan* was one of the first films that wanted to depict war exactly as it had happened. In the same article, Ian Bryce, the film's producer remarked that he didn't "know that the audience [was] ready for that kind of graphic detail." Moreover, he continued that it "was very important to Steven that it be very real and very frightening and very graphic." Spielberg sacrifices interesting characters and clever dialogue for cameras, prop explosions, and tanks. In fact, his quest for realism cost him the sum of \$12 million for one 20-minute scene. The Omaha Beach scene at the beginning of the film cost about 20 percent of the film's 65 million dollar budget. The budget went into weapons, not wordplay.

The violence spouted from the film's core is highlighted in the famous half-track scene. The scene starts off with the realist's favorite technique: a shaky camera, used to imply the foreboding of the characters as they walk through a field. The unstable, nauseating camera adds to the idea that even during moments of relative peace, men must be fully ready to kill for the state. Moreover, the camera almost never focuses on any of the characters; the faces of each soldier are left vague and indescribable. This helps actualize each character as a bundle of personality traits the audience can attach to them, similar to the faceless, quiet protagonists of the Role-Playing Games (RPGs) that it would soon inspire. As a 2018 IGN review of the first *Call of Duty* game states, "while there's not really any story or character development, some faces will become familiar as they carry over from mission to mission."

As Spielberg's soldiers quietly walk through the grass, the camera following behind, Tom Hanks' captain character turns around. The camera, again, cannot find it in itself to focus on his face. He yells, suddenly, "Half-Track! Cover!" The shaky camera suddenly solidifies and pans down as he crouches, his vigilance and readiness to kill for the state being rewarded by alerting his crew to a potential threat. The half-track, notably, is not referred to as a tank. For the viewer, this creates a sense of immersion; the soldiers are so knowledgeable about warfare that they know the half-track is a tank. The half-track tank is covered by a row of flowers, as an expressionless soldier drives it. This is a separation of the characters: On one side of the clearing, there are flowers, along with characters we respect and enjoy. On the other side of the trench, there is violence, and a cowardly enemy.

Notably, as the tank drives by them, and indeed, for the remainder of the scene, the camera is no longer shaking. As the German tank sends out layers of bombs, the soldiers begin shooting at the fog—concealing the results of their shots as they receive return fire. The concealment of the shots, regardless of whether the enemies were struck or not, would prevent a realization that one has killed another human being. Similarly, enemy corpses despawn in video games to prevent the player from fixating on the gory result of combat and war.

Then, the exchange of bullets is complete, and other American soldiers emerge from the dust. The momentary exchange of brutality is forgotten and the men who died are a part of the forgotten. The two groups of remaining American soldiers exchange their information. While the scene and the exchange are both brief, the quiet undertone is that the violent exchange that just occurred, and the names and bodies of the dead German

troops, is arbitrary—after all, the following exchange of the rank and troop number affixes the ability to live straight to an arbitrary number. The sign to represent one’s right to live comes in many different forms, but in video games, it often comes down to uniform color. The red team must always kill the blue team. Likewise, *Saving Private Ryan*’s version of reality is life affixed to name and rank, while in the real world, war is far more nuanced, with more opportunities for human connections beyond lines. The result is effectively a film with pure violence: no analysis of war, no retrospective on the Second World War, no grand point—just a group of men slaughtering those on the other team. This mentality trickled into the culture of America, permeating throughout the infant mass consumer market of first-person shooter games.

To fully understand the cultural sway of the video game in relation to the progression of war as a simulacrum, this essay will briefly discuss Tanine Allison’s excellent study *Destructive Sublime: World War II in American Film and Media*. Allison argues that a game’s camera is a function of its attempt at realism. Games that are in the first-person are designed to fully immerse you, so it makes sense that the camera is oriented so that you see in the way you see in the real world. Moreover, Allison argues that the shakiness of the camera is reminiscent of the constant sensory overload of war, bringing the unpleasantness of war into the comfort of your own home. Taking this point in light of my thesis, the camera, or the tool that creates the simulacra of realism, has an obvious lie of omission—the self. The self is never seen in shooter games. There are no mirrors (arguably, for technical reasons), nor other points of view—the character is omitted in realism, while the self is centered. War shooter games do not discuss the effects on a soldier’s psyche, because in their hyper-realistic depiction of war, the soldiers do not have a psyche. They don’t even have thoughts, or a brain—they are ragdolls, designed and used for war. There is no realism here. That is saved for the gameplay.

The star franchise of the first-person shooter genre is *Call of Duty*. The first three games (2003, 2005, and 2006) were centered around the Second World War and drew heavily from Spielberg’s film in their character pastiches, their shaky “camera,” and their thoroughly nullified depiction of war. In fact, the *Call of Duty* franchise mentions the Holocaust a total of one time in the entire series. The first depiction of the Holocaust in the *Call of Duty* series takes place in the fourteenth installment of the series, *Call of Duty: WWII*, and it is treated as a footnote. The camp is presented as abandoned, with no mention of the gas chambers. In fact, the most revealing atrocities are a few halfhearted nooses, with flashbacks talking about how the “weakest were made an example of”—ostensibly as to not ruin the fun of the would-be gamers. In fact, the focus of the scene is not on the suffering of the Jewish community—the focus is on finding a fellow soldier and escaping the drudgery of the camp. This is the moral core of the *Call of Duty* games—a halfhearted shrug in the general direction of brutal violence, before hopping right back to the gameplay. In fact, the gameplay disperses flashbacks of a young Jewish boy at his father’s grave with fast, brutal gunplay.

Thus, it can be ascertained that *Call of Duty*’s goal is to work against depicting war in a realistic fashion—despite its advertisements arguing the contrary. The first game’s trailer footage is grainy, with little to no scoring—just a single man and a shaky camera, blasting his way through a desolate battlefield. The game itself was met with positive reviews, mainly praising the grit, the reality, the portrayal of a war from so long ago. Until 2007, each of the games would tell the story of an Allied assault on a German military base. This demonstrates a strange fetishism around World War II. As Allison argues, World War II was quite literally a destructive sublime—a time where Allied soldiers could kill with no moral qualms. Thusly, American media that depicts warfare will most commonly revolve around World War II—it is the last war that can ostensibly be justified in that it was against morally repugnant Nazi Germany. However, Allison continues, the games must demonstrate a nuanced understanding of the horrors of World War II in order to earn their morally just violence. In contrast to Allison, I argue that video games like *Call of Duty* don’t sufficiently do so. *Call of Duty* cannot both call itself realistic and refuse to portray the true horror of Nazi Germany. By presenting a gutless, half-full version of the nightmare of World War II, the franchise effectively curtails any possibility of nuance in regard to the violence it portrays. The games effectively flanderize war: they boil the nature of war down to its most simple, fundamental characteristics in order to depict it “realistically.” But this pastiche of realism fails. In the

same way The Simpsons' neighbor Ned Flanders has devolved over the years from a more complex character into his simplest traits, the Call of Duty games have reduced war down to a cartoon of war's violence.

The games fail to move on from World War II. After the first five games, the series began to switch into its own, entirely fictional wars, but these were simply fictionalized versions of WWII. For example, the thirteenth game in the series, *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare* (2016), has an interesting premise: the game is set almost entirely in the solar system. Almost comically, the game features no aliens; in fact, the plot is similar to the plot of the first twelve games, now shot up into the stars. The western world has formed a treaty called SATO (the Solar Associated Treaty Organization), but a small faction known as the SDF has splintered off to form a totalitarian, Mars-based government. The plot is reminiscent of the old narrative trappings of the media that depicts World War II; a small, totalitarian nation rapidly builds up its resources before declaring war on the western part of the world. There is a demonstrable regression towards the now decades-old, rehashed "plotline" of World War II. That regression persists in the other games as well; in a very real way, World War II is the paragon of war for the American.

However, there is another form of violence these games portray, a violence that digs at the sanctity of the mind. Since the First and Second World Wars, modern media has been obsessed with shell shock. At its core, shell shock is an outlet of paranoia. As R.D. Laing writes in *The Divided Self*, shell shock and other trauma-adjacent disorders stem from a subconscious belief that the war is still going on—that the patient is not truly safe, that they must forever be vigilant. A substantial quantity of war media features a character with shell shock; *Saving Private Ryan's* Miller is explicitly written to have PTSD, but that becomes an afterthought as he transforms into a killing machine. During a pivotal scene, his hands stop shaking as he takes a key shot in the middle of a battle—his character arc is overcoming his recognition of the brutality of war to accept the pure sublime of violence.

However, by definition, non-character-driven movies cannot adequately criticize how war creates trauma, because the soldiers themselves are not portrayed as people. This leads to mental health being portrayed senselessly, lacking adequate nuance to portray an issue more complex than the film can handle. As a result, the depiction of shell shock transforms from a sobering recounting of the true brutality of war to a mockery of the trauma victim. The character of the trauma victim becomes a curiosity—a character to examine, to pity, to neglect. The neglect of the shell-shocked reflects in their treatment after the war. As Dorothea Dix and future psychologists would argue, the shell-shocked soldier would be thrown into asylums, destined to rot and to be subjected to violence. The mental violence of shell shock transforms into a desire to see a new, strange, permeating form of brutality inflicted on the soldiers. Thus, realistic war films fail to portray psychic violence in any adequate shape or form. Moreover, any potential areas to portray nuance are mitigated by not presenting war as the issue, but the soldier's reaction as the real problem. To war films, the nature of war is not conducive to trauma—it is the soldier who is incapable of processing war. Only when the soldier rejects their trauma and embraces the destructive sublime is their character arc complete.

Nolan's *Dunkirk* (2017), on the other hand, is the antithesis to realism. While the other pieces of media discussed in this essay fixate on the notion of depicting war as exactly as possible, *Dunkirk* alters the simulation by positing itself as a naturalist film. *Dunkirk*, at its core, is a story about humans returning to their animal state. While the story of *Dunkirk* is typically thought of as a beautiful rescue to be lionized by the public, Nolan argues that a heroic depiction fails—that any attempt to depict soldiers as heroes must be interrogated for their environment of deep, brutal violence.

Dunkirk is stylistically a naturalist film because it argues war is a function of the deepest, most animal piece of human nature: tribalism. Its main characters are reduced to animals by both the enemies and themselves. As the movie progresses, a crew of soldiers escaping the French Commune assemble to form a makeshift escape squad. In one pivotal scene, while a crew of escaping soldiers hides in an overturned ship, German soldiers begin using the ship as target practice. When they decide to escape the ship, under fire, the main character accuses a Frenchman, Gibson, of being a German spy, pushing him away from the boat and causing him to

drown. It is this twisted core of animalism that transforms Dunkirk into a film that is truly anti-war. Dunkirk is anti-war because it does not posit itself as portraying war accurately. It instead focuses on the mental decay of the humans behind the guns.

Each of Dunkirk's scenes represent the slow decay into animalism, but one scene illustrates it best. While attempting to escape the French Commune, a soldier realizes that something is killing soldiers who try to leave via boat. The scene starts off in action, the color-grading almost monochrome, the soldiers blending in as they push a boat onto the shore. As they push, the camera focuses on two young men walking back from the ocean. The music is tense, yet hollow; something bad has clearly happened. In the next few minutes, they will learn what it was. The camera abruptly focuses on three men, dead, lying on the shore. At this point, a thin synth-pad starts to play, taking the music from being hollow and suspenseful to just being suspenseful. The camera then makes rapid cuts to soldiers getting on boats and leaving for the sea. The juxtaposition between the respective shots of dead soldiers lying on the beach and the soldiers off to sea, combined with the mesmerizing, suspenseful music implies that the same fate awaits those men. A naval captain paces the beach as more and more soldiers leave for sea. One of them fails to get enough momentum, so they all come back and try again. The moment is almost played for laughs, yet with the suspenseful music, it is clearly meant to symbolize the men who didn't get a second chance.

The scene cuts to three men, sitting in silence, watching as another man walks into the sea. They don't talk or react with shock, but the suspenseful music seems to grow louder. The horrors of war seem to justify the man's suicide. Then, the first piece of dialogue in the scene. A man who watched the suicide gets up, and the viewer assumes it is to report it. However, he tells the captain that "The tide is turning"—both literally, meaning the tide of the war, and the ocean's tide. When the captain asks how he knows, the soldier responds, "the bodies come back." The matter-of-fact use of the present tense lends the scene a sense of normalcy; similar to the unreliable narrators of Russian literature, the depiction of death and violence, even suicide, is juxtaposed with a reminder that death, like the tides of the ocean, is simply a part of life. In fact, the camera movements add to this—there's no panning, no dramatic angles, nothing left to the viewer's imagination. Death is depicted in a dull, matter-of-fact way. In fact, in the last part of the scene, a soldier with a blank, yet strangely emotional, expression pushes a dead body away, and watches it drift. As he pushes it, the music talks; a synth-pad resolves the key to major. This matter-of-fact resolution is the one of the only scenes in Dunkirk that slows down, taking time away from being a Hollywood blockbuster to reflect poignantly on the effervescent nature of life. Yet, the speechlessness of the soldiers watching the bodies float back creates an almost toxic form of relief. The film uses a concept known as negative space here. Negative space, in any medium, is the act of making an artistic observation by highlighting the lack of a concept. For example, horror movies accentuate their atmosphere by shrouding rooms in darkness, or by never revealing the monster up close. Here, Nolan emphasizes the unknowable agony of the soldiers and the banality of death by having them speechless at the constant death.

The subconscious part of our brain is relieved to know that this type of death is natural, and expected, in a war, just as the tides are expected in an ocean. However, the conscious part of our brain argues that these could be characters we could have known; the man who wandered into the ocean could have been the main character of the film. In fact, every character that dies unexpectedly could have been a hero of Dunkirk—instead, they are resigned to a statistic. This draws the sharpest comparison to the ceaseless torture of warfare. Dunkirk is a refreshing exception to the "war is hell" trope. While post-neoliberal media that depicts war slows down out of necessity (the Call of Duty series contains many "memorial" scenes), that slowdown is juxtaposed with the sudden, rewarded violence one comes to expect in a video game. Dunkirk seems to slow down purposefully, taking time to demonstrate how the lives of these men are more than effervescent. Returning to Baudrillard's theories, these lives are omitted in realism: because it wouldn't be "realistic" to depict these deaths in other, more gritty films, they become omitted, and they cease to exist in the public consciousness.

At its core, the war-shooter genre hasn't decayed—it has been rotten since the beginning. The rot lies in any attempt to market a piece of media as realistic. Realistic depictions fail, point blank. Realistic depictions

of war fail because war, as a collection of inherently incomprehensible actions, cannot be reconciled with a depiction in media. Thus, when popular media shoots for realism, it misses and crashes in the fields of unnecessary violence. The result is a destructive sublime, but with no justification. In fact, it is necessary to step back and analyze the effects of these games from a broad, anthropological lens.

When pre-teen audiences play *Call of Duty*, this might be the first depiction of the Holocaust they could get. When a teen watches *Saving Private Ryan*, they might leave with the impression that doctors cure trauma in order to get soldiers to continue being tools of the state. And when an adult watches *Dunkirk*, it may be too late—the massive distortions made in the name of realism might have altered their perspective on war so much, they won't be able to interpret the message. Indeed, their ability to criticize media might have failed catastrophically, interpreting *Dunkirk* as just another war film.

Moreover, how does the narrative of *Call of Duty* interact with wars like the ones in Iraq and Afghanistan? If children grow up believing that World War II was justified tautologically, will they continue believing that Iraq and Afghanistan were permissible? When we understand the true nature of trauma, will we cure it for the purpose of re-inserting soldiers into warfare? When the US military uses Xbox controllers to maneuver their submarines, are soldiers incentivized to treat civilians like targets? As the future of the American military complex remains uncertain, Generation Z and Generation Alpha's ability to critically analyze media will indeed become critical. However, it is evident that the lack of nuance in World War II media realism transforms the violence of war into shells of monsters, with no more realism than a blatant pastiche of a single brutal moment in history.

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