

# Introduction: The Visual Semiotics of War

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Wars interrupt history, at least according to our modern consideration of a historical process whose innate nature is peaceful. In reality, violent conflicts determined most of the historical developments in the last two centuries, when modern technology and ideological ideas turned classic cabinet wars into destructive abysses that nobody could fully escape.<sup>1</sup> However, the impact of wars is also felt in peacetime, be it through the fear of another violent escalation in the near future,<sup>2</sup> the commemoration of heroic acts related to the last war,<sup>3</sup> or the speculation about warfare and its possible consequences for the next generations.<sup>4</sup> War seems to be a particularly dominant aspect in our lives, regardless of the fact that humanity considers itself to have advanced to a more peaceful level of co-existence.<sup>5</sup>

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- 1 Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Abacus, 1995).
  - 2 See exemplarily Rachel L. Holloway, »The Strategic Defense Initiative and the Technological Sublime: Fear, Science, and the Cold War,« in *Critical Reflections on the Cold War: Linking Rhetoric and History*, eds. Martin J. Medhurst and Henry W. Brands (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), 209–232.
  - 3 Frank Jacob and Kenneth Pearl, eds., *War and Memorials*, 2 vols. (Paderborn: Schöningh/Brill, 2019).
  - 4 Stig Förster, ed., *Vor dem Sprung ins Dunkle: Die militärische Debatte über den Krieg der Zukunft 1880–1914* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2016).
  - 5 Such a view seems to be quite popular and is advertised by some well-read authors, e.g. Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence has Declined* (New York: Penguin, 2012). Others disagree with such an evaluation, e.g. Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (London: Allen Lane, 2017). The rise of nationalism since the end of the Cold War has also intensified tensions on a global scale, as nation states have considered themselves threatened by globalization and transnational migration. See Frank Jacob and Adam

While (Western) Europeans in particular are inclined to believe in a peaceful world, because they have had the luxury of forgetting about wars and their violent and destructive consequences in the years since the end of the Second World War, the conflicts related to the end of the Cold War and the rise of nationalism in the post-Soviet world show how fragile the peaceful order of the continent is in reality.<sup>6</sup>

In the 19th century, wars were turned into public events, and photographs allowed newspaper correspondents and soldiers to share an insight into events related to these violent conflicts, even if the latter took place in faraway countries against unknown enemies.<sup>7</sup> Wars became a central element of national identities and were initially nationally and later ideologically charged to take a hold on whole societies that were mobilized for the war effort. Critics were silenced as the violent struggle was not only perceived as gallant and an expression of chivalry<sup>8</sup> but also a necessity to prove masculinity and national

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Luedtke, eds., *Migration and the Crisis of the Modern Nation State?* (Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2018). Peaceful co-existence therefore seems to be quite unlikely, especially once the struggle for resources really begins. Nicholas Spulber already reflected on the challenges of the 21st century more than two decades ago. See Nicholas Spulber, *The American Economy: The Struggle for Supremacy in the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 207–252.

6 Elisa Satjukow, *Die andere Seite der Intervention: Eine serbische Erfahrungsgeschichte der NATO-Bombardierung 1999* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2020). On the reinvigoration of nationalism since the end of the Cold War, see also Frank Jacob and Carsten Schapkow, eds., *Nationalism in a Transnational Age: Irrational Fears and the Strategic Abuse of Nationalist Pride* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2021).

7 Frank Jacob and Mark D. Van Ells, *A Postcard View of Hell: One Doughboy's Souvenir Album of the First World War* (Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2018), xvi–xvii. For a discussion of the depiction of colonial wars in post-Second World War British cinema, see Wendy Webster, »There'll Always Be an England: Representations of Colonial Wars and Immigration, 1948–1968,« *Journal of British Studies* 40, no. 4 (2001): 557–584.

8 Allen J. Frantzen discusses this interrelation with a focus on the First World War. See Allen J. Frantzen, *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

greatness.<sup>9</sup> The expansion of Europe and the establishment of a capitalist world-system<sup>10</sup> not only created exploitation and underdevelopment<sup>11</sup> to serve capitalist accumulation,<sup>12</sup> but it also created struggles between colonizing and colonized peoples, as well as between the great powers as they began to expand at the expense of their rivals.

After the medium of film was added to the portfolio of war correspondents and entertainers alike, the public—i. e. cinema and, later in the 20th century, TV audiences—was regularly confronted with war and the respectively created semiotics of these wars,<sup>13</sup> be it in the form of news coverage, documentaries,<sup>14</sup> or films that were shown in the local cinemas.<sup>15</sup> Once Hollywood turned to war films, an ever-growing number of these were produced and have become, and not only in the US, an essential aspect of popular culture ever since.<sup>16</sup> War

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- 9 Ann-Dorte Christensen and Palle Rasmussen, »War, Violence and Masculinities: Introduction and Perspectives,« *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies* 10, no. 3–4 (2015): 189–202.
- 10 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 71–105.
- 11 Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1972).
- 12 Rosa Luxemburg, *Die Akkumulation des Kapitals: Ein Beitrag zur ökonomischen Erklärung des Imperialismus* (Berlin: Paul Singer, 1913).
- 13 Frank Jacob, ed., *War and Semiotics: Signs, Communication Systems, and the Preparation, Legitimization, and Commemoration of Collective Mass Violence* (London: Routledge, 2020).
- 14 Bernd Kleinhans, »Der Erste Weltkrieg als Medienkrieg: Film und Propaganda zwischen 1914 und 1918,« *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 16–17 (2014): 32–38. See also Christian Götter, *Die Macht der Wirkungsannahmen: Medienarbeit des britischen und deutschen Militärs in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015).
- 15 On the genre of war films see Heinz-Bernd Heller, Burkhard Röwekamp and Matthias Steinle, eds. *All Quiet on the Genre Front? Zur Praxis und Theorie des Kriegsfilms* (Marburg: Schüren 2006).
- 16 Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard, *The Hollywood War Machine: U. S. Militarism and Popular Culture*, 2nd ed. (London/New York: Routledge, 2016); Robert T. Eberwein, *The Hollywood War Film* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Kathryn Kane, *Visions of War: Hollywood Combat Films of World War II* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982); Andrew Rayment and Paul Nadasdy, eds., *Hollywood Remembrance and American War* (London/New York: Routledge, 2020);

is therefore often quite present within society, and depending on the intentions of the filmmakers and the expectations of the audiences—or, more precisely, the interplay between their *Erfahrungsraum* and *Erwartungshorizont*, as Reinhart Koselleck termed it<sup>17</sup>—the films can transport different narratives. Audiences can be encouraged to be attracted to or influenced by the filmic depiction of wars and their history, the relations between wars as historical events, their commemoration according to patriotic and nationalist reinterpretations of the past, and the political agenda inscribed into the filmic presentation of collective violence in relation to emotionally triggered reactions like honor, pride, or demands for revenge.

Wars in films are consequently always more than just the staging or presentation of a historical event; they offer an interpretation of these events that usually corresponds with other aspects, e. g. society's evaluation of war per se, or wishes about how specific events related to war should be commemorated within the public conscience. Of course, films can also act as a medium to criticize war, but the functionality of the filmic stagings of collective violence is usually determined by the interaction between producers and the audience of the film. While this interaction also becomes a message about war,<sup>18</sup> whether the original meaning can still be deciphered by an audience or not depends on the time of its creation and screening. This also emphasizes the fact that films about war are not always to be understood, but only if the events and moral positions portrayed remain in accordance with those shared by the society and the (national) context in which the film is shown.

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Lawrence H. Suid, *Guts and Glory: Great American War Movies* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978); Guy Westell, *War Cinema: Hollywood on the Front Line* (London/New York: Wallflower Press, 2006).

17 Reinhart Koselleck, »Erfahrungsraum« und »Erwartungshorizont«: Zwei historische Kategorien,« in Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2010), 349–375.

18 For a detailed analysis of the communicational aspects of media, see the classic text by Marshall McLuhan: Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Mentor, 1964).

The following chapters try to provide a variety of insights into these relationships, and although they focus on different time periods and aspects related to the semiotics, narratives, and perceptions of war in film, they all circle around certain questions related to war films in general. These are:

1. To what extent do war films present historical events that are already socio-culturally embedded within national narratives, and to what extent do their semiotics support or challenge common views about wars and collective violence?
2. Which conscious or subconscious images or visual semiotics are used within war films to connect the audience to the film and its narrative?
3. How do films create, transport, or intensify the perception and interpretation of wars within societies?

To answer these, each of the contributions of the present volume engages with specific war films and connects their respective war-related motifs and narratives with these questions.

First, Bruno Surace discusses the Garibaldian motif in *Il grido dell'aquila* (1923, dir. Mario Volpe) and *1860* (1934, dir. Alessandro Blasetti) to show how the Fascist regime in Italy used such films to connect itself to the historical legacy of Giuseppe Garibaldi and the national unification of the country. The next chapter deals with the semiotic construction of jihad in the science fiction novel *Dune* by Frank Herbert and the homonymous films of 1984 and 2021. In this chapter, Frank Jacob shows the extent to which the novel is based on orientalist semiotics that are also depicted and evoked in the films, especially when one considers the prominent story of Lawrence of Arabia that acts as a historical and cultural reference point in both the novel and the films alike. Giuditta Bassano then takes a close look at Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk* (2017) to analyze the semiotic aspects related to the film that offer some kind of open reading for the audience, one that swings between the patriotic visualization of

classic Hollywood films about war and a more original staging of the plot. In her chapter, Nicole Beth Wallenbrock examines the semiotic aspects of French actor Alain Delon's role in war films related to the Franco-Algerian War and bases her analysis on the theoretical concept of Roland Barthes' writings about myth. In the following chapter, Jessica Wax-Edwards provides a comparative case study of Amat Escalante's *Heli* (2013) and Fernando Frías' *Ya no estoy aquí* (2019, *I'm No Longer Here*) to analyze the necropolitical conditions depicted in relation to the daily lives of young Mexicans and the drug war in the country. The final chapter of the volume examines how far films can be used to display traumatic memories and commemorate war experiences. Cecilia Canziani therefore takes a close look at the video works of Omer Fast, Steve McQueen, Maya Schweizer, and Clemens von Wedemeyer and offers deep insights into them.

All in all, it seems clear that the volume as a whole can hardly offer more than some methodological and theoretical reflections based on some case studies, but this should also be considered an advantage, because it thereby offers a broad variety of ideas and considerations that could and hopefully will be applied in further studies that take a closer look at specific aspects presented here, especially since there are many aspects of the interrelationship between war and film that seem to be interesting and important areas of study. The editor therefore hopes that this volume will inspire scholars in different fields to look further into topics presented herein related to war in film.

### Works Cited

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