

Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet Militarism and Melodrama: The Cultural Work of Combat Death

Abstract: This essay examines the role of melodrama in the American war film, focusing on three post-WWII examples. The main argument centers on the national alliance between melodrama and militarism based on a shared intolerance for the notion of death as meaningless and in vain. Both melodrama and military ideology employ elaborate rhetorical and narrative strategies to unfold deaths into larger systems of meaning, such as the nation, or in more personal terms, as a rite of passage. One of the most common narrative devices present in the military melodrama is the death that converts survivors to the values of the virtuous victim. The essay examines the shared conventions and different strategies of the following three films: *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), *Platoon* (1986), and *Top Gun* (1986).

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Introduction

The discourse of war representation, both in texts and especially in cinema, is always and exclusively that of realism. Each memoir, each novel, and each film purports to show you war ‘as it really was’. Some even claim to make you feel what it is to be in the middle of combat. Yet war writing and war cinema are highly conventionalized genres, often following highly codified patterns and plots. For the Hollywood war film, no conventions are more important or more powerful than those drawn from melodrama. I will be arguing in this essay that there is a natural alliance between melodrama and military discourse based on the investment of both modes in the idea of a meaningful or redeemed death, that is, a death that is not in vain.

This essay will not only examine the role of melodrama in staging and managing the affect generated by on-screen depictions of soldiers dying, but also examine the links between sociological theories of self-sacrifice and the typology of this convention in melodramatic narratives. The larger context and

stakes of the staging of military death needs to be understood through a theory of the nation and nationalism, and the place of the military, of patriotic devotion, and military self-sacrifice, in relation to the national frame. The main films I will look at in this essay are *The Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), *Top Gun* (1986), and *Platoon* (also 1986). None of these films appear on the surface to be melodramas, yet all function according to a similar logic and rely on the device of transformative death for their emotional choreography.

First, the unavoidable question of definition. Like any important cultural category, melodrama has been defined in startlingly different ways. Some scholars focus on its apparent moral Manichaeism, others on the pathos displayed by characters or invited in audiences, and still others on the lack of realism in plot development or the importance of music and other non-verbal forms of emotional cueing. In a helpful move, Ben Singer accounts for this diversity by describing melodrama as a ‘cluster concept’, a genre that is defined by a group of elements, not all of which will be present in any given text. The five features that he offers as part of the melodramatic cluster are the following: strong pathos, heightened emotionality, moral polarization, nonclassical narrative mechanics, and spectacular effects (Singer 2001: 7). Another fairly simple, and even more influential, definition of melodrama has been Linda Williams’ discussion of it as a cultural mode that appears across a wide variety of media and which is focused on the mobilization of sympathy for a virtuous victim and the moral legibility this suffering provides (Williams 2001: 29). This definition is particularly important for my own understanding of the function of melodrama.

Although suffering and pathos are tacitly linked to the issue of death, and often occur in relation to the death of a key character, few scholars of melodrama have explicitly focused on the dynamics of the melodramatic death as such. And yet, it is precisely death that is the object of the most elaborate staging of affect, comprising both prolonged display of pathos and anxious ideological containment of its potentially disruptive effects. The death scene of a virtuous victim is frequently the dramatic climax of a melodrama (I mean climax in the dramaturgical sense, emotionally, and not necessarily at the end of the narrative), usually presented in a drawn-out scene (one that stops the narrative and creates space for pathos), and subject to the most heavy-handed operations of consolation, attribution of meaning and agency, and reassurance to the readers or spectators that the death is not a meaningless waste.

In the nineteenth century, when modern melodrama was emerging as a dominant form, one of the most common strategies for rendering death meaningful was to use Christian notions of the afterlife and salvation. For example, in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, when Little Eva dies, she is depicted as literally going to a better place, in a Christian sense. A “bright, a glorious smile” covers her face,

and she tells us what she sees as she dies, “O! love, –joy, –peace!” (Stowe 1994: 257). Not only is the reader comforted by knowing that she has gone to heaven, by all appearances, but her death is also not in vain insofar as it has clear and immediate consequences.¹ In dying, Eva is able to more effectively transmit her values to the people around her. The effect is a literal conversion narrative. Thus, in the immediate wake of her passing, and still in the grip of the pathos of Eva’s death, Ophelia is able to tell Topsy that she can love her, and to weep while she says it, so that “from that hour”, the narrator informs us, “she acquired an influence over the mind of the destitute child that she never lost” (259). In fact, Topsy’s redemption, beginning with her socialization and Christianization, is due directly to this moment, and thus Topsy’s successful adult life as a missionary is the direct result of Eva’s death. Similarly, Tom’s death brings about the conversion of Sambo and Quimbo, two of the most cruel and degraded of Simon Legree’s slaves. Again, his death is not only a moral victory for him over Simon Legree; it also has powerful consequences on those around him, who are transformed by his death into adopting his values. This conversion mechanism, which gives a virtuous character’s death tremendous agency, is paradigmatic for the narrative function of the melodramatic death in general.

Although nineteenth-century literature often figured this agency literally in terms of religious conversion, melodrama does not need an explicitly religious framework in order to offer meaning and solace for death, and can employ its own forms of a moral occult, to take Peter Brooks’ term. In fact, Brooks argues, in *The Melodramatic Imagination*, that while melodrama represents an “urge toward resacralization”, it also represents “the impossibility of conceiving sacralization other than in personal terms” (Brooks 1976: 16). By “moral occult” Brooks means “the domain of spiritual forces and imperatives that is not clearly visible within reality, but which they [authors using melodrama, such as Henry James or Balzac] believe to be operative there, and which demands to be uncovered, registered, articulated” (21). In short, the moral occult is the larger meaning or sense of things that demands to be recognized. One of the most important ways that this moral occult works, in a secular context, is by having the virtuous victim’s death affect another character, often a main character, and convert him or her to the values represented by the victim. In this way, by being attributed a powerful agency and influence on the world of the living, the death is saved from meaninglessness, from being in vain, and from the metaphysical and moral void that has gaped at Europeans since the eighteenth century, when melodrama first appeared.

¹ For a discussion of this scene in the context of Victorian religious fiction, see Tompkins 1985 (128–130).

It is no coincidence, in my view, that this period when melodrama is emerging as a modern mode of resacralization, as Brooks puts it, is also the moment that the modern nation is taking form in Europe and the Americas. The nation itself is arguably a kind of substitute for religion, insofar as it is a form of kinship and community, an imaginary community, in Benedict Anderson’s terms, that conceives of itself as an entity that is more than the sum of its parts. The nation is not just a collectivity of individuals within a certain geographical boundary, shared language or shared customs. A nation is a mystical entity, quasi-religious, no matter how legalistic its self-definition is in its constitution and legal documents. In the words of Ernest Renan, French historian of the late nineteenth century, the nation is “a soul, a spiritual principle” (Renan 1996: 52). It is constituted by two things: a narrative of the past, usually of ancestors that have sacrificed themselves for the nation, almost always of some violent foundational act which must be remembered, a war, a massacre, a martyrdom. The other is what Renan calls “present day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received” (1996: 52). Suffering and martyrdom are key elements of this formula, in Renan’s description of it: “[o]ne loves in proportion to the sacrifices to which one has consented, and in proportion to the ills one has suffered” (1996: 52). In other words, a nation is not just a political organization to which one belongs. It is an entity that organizes a group of people according to forces and principles that are not entirely subject to rational consideration. Renan calls them spiritual and speaks of “the soul”. Emile Durkheim, writing at almost the same time, speaks of clans and totems that channel the collective energy of the group into a literally religious principle (Durkheim 1965: 235–236). Both assume that the nation constitutes an entity that is more than the sum of its parts – that it is transcendent!

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we may think we are far beyond such primitive notions of nation identity and national feeling. Yet it is clear from looking at the history of the United States since WWII that notions of self-sacrifice for the nation, as well as killing others in order to protect or further one’s own nation or group, are more present than ever. The term that has been used to approach this subject in a scholarly manner is that of Civil Religion, associated in the US context with Robert Bellah, whose 1967 essay on “American Civil Religion” launched a heated debate about the subject for nearly two decades. In the 1980s, the Civil Religion concept lost much of its traction in American academia, largely because it took the concept of religion too literally and textually. As recently as 2011, a book on American Civil Religion contents itself to examine only the political speeches of presidents to find references to the Bible and religious concepts (Haberski 2012). However, a more effective ap-

proach to Civil Religion would be different: it would examine how nationalism – with its institutions, rituals, values and structures of feeling, to use Raymond Williams' phrase – functions as a religion itself (rather than having a special relationship to another religion, such as Christianity, or Islam, or Judaism, though it also can). In other words, the nation – like a religion – offers a supra-individual and non-materialistic meaning to life and death, and especially to collective life and to death in the service of that collective life, also known as death in the service of one's country. In other words, the nation offers modern subjects a moral occult.

The important point here, for us literature scholars, is that this process of transforming death into national life is not automatic. It occurs with and depends on the help of narrative and other cultural forms. At the very least, it requires a retrospective telling of the story of death within the national narrative frame. Undeniably, the story of Jesus Christ and his self-sacrifice for Christians is an important ur-text in the history of this trope in a Christian context. Christ's willingness to die for humanity has been held up as a model for military martyrdom on many occasions, and shares with it the basic feature of martyrdom for a collectivity, a people. Yet the conceit of dying for one's country predates the crucifixion and finds one of its most famous and potent expressions in the Roman poet Horace (65–68 B. C.), whose words “[d]ulce et decorum est pro patria mori”, from an ode (III.2.13) urging Romans to prepare for war in order to ensure peace, can be found on countless war memorials and serves as motto for numerous regiments and armies. If Horace's original work was an entire ode, we see that a single line, possessing alliteration and rhythm, is enough to envelop this dubious claim in an attractive package and lend it an air of truth. If poetry has such power, it makes sense that patriotic poetry must be combatted with its own devices. It is no surprise then that the greatest refutation to Horace ever written was by the British poet Wilfred Owen, whose posthumously published poem about a gas attack, “Dulce et Decorum Est” (1920), remains one of the most powerful antiwar texts of all time. Since World War I, thanks to poets like Owen, and to the sheer scale and waste of that war, it has become uncommon to praise war death directly, at least in literature. The cult of the fallen soldier, as described by George Mosse, is a phenomenon most strongly associated with the late nineteenth century, and which waned considerably after the First, and especially after the Second World War (Mosse 1990: 201–225). At least it did so in Europe and many other countries.

However, the United States did not bury the cult of the fallen soldier as thoroughly as did its devastated former allies. Instead, the concept of giving one's life so that the nation may live (to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address) retained much of its traction in American post World War II cul-

ture, despite its flagrant contradiction with other American values such as individualism and the pursuit of happiness. Unlike most of its European allies, the United States did not turn its back on warfare, preparedness and militarism in the wake of the war.² Instead, it needed to keep service-age men ready and willing to return to combat, as they did in the Korean War (1950–1953) and the Vietnam War (1964–1975), and in other smaller conflicts. Since much of the literature that emerged from World War II, such as Normal Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* (1948) and *Catch-22* (1961), was distinctly demystifying of combat and military service in general, and poetry has been a bastion of anti-war writing since World War I, it was Hollywood cinema that became the principle purveyor of militarism in America.³ However, in keeping with Hollywood's tendency to attempt to satisfy many desires at once, often creating profoundly ambivalent and contradictory film-texts, most popular war films are not overtly and simplistically patriotic propaganda. On the contrary, many of these films are far more complex and mixed in their ‘messages’ and implications than one would expect. Nevertheless, few can resist the temptation to represent combat death as meaningful and redeemed in some way, often by folding it into the narrative as a catalyst of conversion to or confirmation of military service as a valuable experience for others (often both on a national and personal level). The mode in which this is invariably done is melodrama, thus channeling affect through sympathy for a virtuous victim, whose death transforms someone close to them and specifically converts them to the values that the victim embodied.

In the following section, I would like to examine three popular war films, two of which are known as excellent recruiting films (Suid 2002: 123, 500). The first, *Sands of Iwo Jima*, depends heavily on the performance and persona of John Wayne, and is largely responsible for creating his Marine hero image. The two other films are interesting to compare because they were released the same year (1986) but could hardly seem more different: *Platoon* and *Top Gun*. While *Platoon* claimed to be the most realistic war movie ever made, *Top Gun* was an unabashed homage to daredevil fighter pilots and a foreshadowing of the cinema-gaming-military franchises that are now popular.⁴ The first is based on director Oliver Stone's own memories and experiences of the Vietnam War, and

² The main exception to this rule was France, which engaged in a war against Vietnamese independence from 1946 to 1954, and then against Algerian nationalists from 1954 to 1962.

³ For a discussion of the relationship between Hollywood and American militarism, see Koppes and Black (1987), Suid (2002), Basinger (2003), and Bronfen (2012).

⁴ In fact, the studio responded to the film's success by releasing a video game based on it in 1987 for PC and several game platforms including Nintendo.

the other takes place in the present – i. e. the mid-1980s – and serves mainly to showcase Tom Cruise and his F14-A Tomcat fighter aircraft. While none of these films would ever be considered a melodrama by viewers or distributors, all four rely on melodramatic conventions for their emotional effects, especially the representation of the death of a virtuous victim-hero (often an important character but not the protagonist). All four also rely heavily on their soundtrack for their emotional impact, and tie the music closely to the emotional effect they wish to achieve. My purpose in reading them together is to decode the way in which melodrama is applied as a narrative device and specifically the way it channels powerful emotions, often linked to father or brother figures, into the service of militarism.

Sands of Iwo Jima

This 1949 film by Allan Dwan is a generically hybrid work all around, reflecting its post-war production. On the one hand it is a military training and combat film, following the conventions identified by Jeanine Basinger in her authoritative study of the combat genre (Basinger 2003: 147–154). In this story line, it follows John Wayne, the hardened Marine Sergeant John M. Stryker, played by John Wayne, and his preparation of a group of young recruits for their landings on Tarawa and Iwo Jima. On the other hand, the film contains a romantic plot, featuring Peter Conway (played by John Agar), a new recruit who falls in love and founds a family during the course of the film, thereby serving as a foil to Stryker, whose personal life is a failure marred by a broken marriage and lapsed relations with his son. The film also contains moments of comedy, and moments of documentary-like realism, real navy footage of warships at sea or Marines landing on Tarawa, and a re-creation of the flag planting on Iwo Jima.

Despite its claims of historical realism, *Sands of Iwo Jima* follows the conventions of melodrama in all important respects, including the use of music, the orchestration of sympathy for a virtuous victim whose virtue is not easily recognized by others in the world of the film (though the audience is made to see it early on, creating strong dramatic irony), and a representation of death that lends it meaning and agency. The key to the film's success is without question the character of John Stryker as he is played by John Wayne, a relatively young actor at that time best known for westerns, yet already developing a film persona as a father figure. Just a year earlier, he had played Thomas Dunson in Howard Hawks' *Red River* (1948), a hard-hearted father to the character played by Montgomery Cliff. In fact, as early as 1942, in *Flying Tigers*, Wayne was playing paternal roles. The characters he played in *Red River* and *Sands of Iwo Jima*

had in common something that would become Wayne's signature role, namely, both are men who appear as hard-hearted fathers but who are revealed to love their sons deeply if inarticulately.⁵

Much of the plot in *Sands of Iwo Jima* revolves around Stryker's strictness as an instructor and leader of his new recruits, leading to tensions and open conflicts as he berates and literally beats them into fighting shape. Yet, while his men chafe under his authority and believe him to be unnecessarily cruel, the audience is permitted to see his real sensitivity under the gruff exterior. Most importantly for the operation of melodrama, they see not only that he *feels* but also that he *suffers*. The key scene for this revelation is near the middle of the film, when Stryker and his principle antagonist (Conway, played by John Agar) are dug into a beach on Tarawa and hear Stryker's best friend, a Lieutenant Bass, wounded outside their perimeter and calling Stryker's name. Stryker knows that rescuing his friend would give away their position and so refuses to help him or allow Conway to help, leading the latter to tell Stryker that "you're not even human". The audience, however, is shown Stryker's face under his helmet in a long close-up revealing not only heavy sweat but what could be construed as tears. In this manner, the audience is made to recognize something that Stryker's men do not yet see: his ability to feel. More importantly, the audience sees Stryker's pain, both here in this scene where hearing his friend's calls clearly agonizes him, but also in an earlier scene where Stryker drinks himself unconscious because his ten year old son has not written a letter. Learning that this is a regular occurrence, we know that Stryker is a man living with chronic heart-ache of which the alcohol abuse is a visible symptom.

Sergeant Stryker is thus the virtuous victim in the film, whose death will be redemptive. He is killed by an overlooked sniper near the end of the film, ironically just after Mount Suribachi has been secured and as he is lighting up a cigarette. This is the summit of Iwo Jima where the famous Joseph Rosenthal photo of the flag-raisers was taken, an image that lies at the core of the movie, which was written largely in order to provide a pretext to re-enact it. Ironically, although Stryker is killed, the film gave birth to the enduring myth of John Wayne as Marine hero. A myth all the more ironic in light of the way Wayne found excuses throughout the war to not enlist though many older Hollywood actors with families did (Wills 1998: 107–110). In the years that followed, Wayne would play variations of his role as Stryker in other films, including in *The Longest Day* in 1962. The generation that served in the Vietnam War grew up in the shadow of the Wayne military myth, and a staggering number of soldiers in

⁵ For a detailed discussion and critique of this portrayal of Wayne, see Wills 1998 (156–157).

Vietnam cited *Sands of Iwo Jima* as the reason they enlisted (Suid 2002: 130). Ron Kovic explicitly recalls this film and weeping while watching it to explain his desire to be a Marine when he finishes high school (Kovic 1076: 55). The fact that Kovic recalls crying is significant and often overlooked in articles that attempt to account for the way the film inspired men to enlist. The point is that it is not the heroic feats or military victories in the film that marked Kovic, but the scene where audiences are invited to feel for Stryker's death: an elaborate and lengthy scene structured according to the melodramatic temporality of *too late*. In the moments after his death, his men learn that Stryker had begun writing his son a letter, but had not had time to finish it. The soldiers read the letter out loud over his body, weeping silently as they finally realize what the audience has been made to know all along, namely, that the tough officer was also a loving father. In classical melodrama style, the film takes a long break from the action to allow spectators and characters alike to feel the full pathos of his death.

Thus, one of the main ways that the film redeems Stryker's death is to show it as the moment that his true nature and especially his virtue (as a loving father) is recognized by the people around him. Another is to channel the emotion of the letter-reading scene directly into a re-enactment of the flag-raising on Suribachi. The patriotic image of planting a flag on enemy soil, of military teamwork and unity, and implicitly of the ultimate victory of the United States in WWII, serves as a means to refocus and contain the grief over Stryker's death into a narrative of military success. This is the most overt example of civil religion and nationalism in the film, and it is portrayed as pure emotion. Tellingly, the flag-raising is accompanied by a non-diegetic use of music to emphasize the military paradigm: a drumroll is heard, followed by the Marine Corps Hymn. The hymn is especially important in the film since it is played at the beginning as well as the end. If at the beginning the hymn serves mainly to indicate that the film is about the Marines as a military institution, at the end of the film the hymn is no longer merely a sign but a potent cultural symbol which has been charged with the emotion generated by Stryker's death.⁶

Finally, the film also redeems Stryker's death by showing it to have a real and discernible effect on his men, to convert them more fully to the cause that he died for. Many had grumbled about the fighting and expressed cynical views about the war. In particular, Conway, the rebellious substitute son within the unit, had violently rejected Stryker and his military values and life. At one point he tries to fight Stryker physically, and throughout the film he forcefully articu-

lates a disdain for the values that Stryker represents, namely, military discipline and male toughness. Although Conway comes to a grudging respect for Stryker's ways after the two landings show the importance of military discipline, it is the scene of Stryker's death and the reading of the letter that produces a full conversion of Conway. First Conway takes the letter and says he will "finish it for him", signaling a strong identification with Stryker's voice. Then, to consolidate the fact that Conway has internalized Stryker's values and voice – literally – he tacitly assumes Stryker's role as leader and urges the men to move along by using Stryker's own signature expression, "[a]lright, saddle up – let's get back in the war". In this way, Conway has fully assumed Stryker's values (at least for now), demonstrating a conversion similar to that described earlier in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Instead of allowing the possibility that the senseless death of a principal character lead to any questioning of the desirability of military service and combat, the film immediately and powerfully redeems it by linking it with the victory in Iwo Jima and WWII in general and by giving it melodramatic agency within the familial narrative of figurative father-son relationships. In a very powerful sense, the death is saved from meaninglessness, from being for nothing, by being given an agency and a meaning.

Platoon

Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986) was considered a landmark film when it was released, setting a new benchmark for war film realism. As part of what some critics call a second wave of Vietnam war cinema (O'Nan 1998: ix), *Platoon* appeared realistic in comparison to previous films such as *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter* and was the first made by a Vietnam veteran. Nevertheless, the film is structured according to many conventions of melodrama, including a fairly Manichaean organization of moral values, a heavy reliance on music, a casting of characters into what Linda Williams calls "primary psychic roles" (e.g. father-figure, brother, villain), a clear use of the pathos and action dialectic, and most importantly, a series of increasingly important and emotionally forceful deaths (Williams 2001: 40). In fact, death is established early on in the film as a major theme and preoccupation of the film: the first shots of the movie show dead bodies of soldiers waiting on the tarmac to be loaded onto the plane from which Taylor, the protagonist, has just emerged. However, in the wake of the Vietnam War and its many disillusionments, the process of rendering war death meaningful shifts away from civil religion and the military as institution, towards more personal forms of redemption, such as a coming of age.

⁶ For a discussion of how emotion and shared attention charges group emblems (such as a hymn) with emotional energy and renders them sacred, see Collins 2004 (36–42).

First of all, like many combat melodramas, *Platoon* is structured through a crescendo pattern of increasingly significant deaths. The first death occurs on Taylor's first march, where he and a man named Gardner are the two new replacements. By the end of the first night, Gardner is dead, serving as a lesson to Taylor of his vulnerability. Another lesson is offered by the film through the next death, that of Monty, an African American soldier. This death is a key incident because it is linked to the My Lai-style revenge that Taylor and his buddies attempt to unleash on a Vietnamese village half-way through the film. My Lai was the name of a village that American soldiers massacred in 1968 in one of the most notorious cases of civilian abuse by American servicemen. Nearly 400 people including women and children were executed in cold blood, and the incident was covered up by the Army for over a year. During the trial, the defendants argued that they had recently lost some of their members and were upset. *Platoon* recreates the conditions that could explain a My Lai incident by having the soldiers discover Monty not only dead, but cruelly attached to a tree. As in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, the film pauses at this moment and allows ample time for the pathos of the scene to be felt, showing each horrified and grief-stricken face in close-up. When the soldiers enter the village in the next scene and begin to terrorize the villagers, the logic follows the classic melodramatic device of pathos leading to action. Although the scene is disturbing, Stone's decision to show the soldiers as suffering from grief in the moments preceding their violence serves inevitably to justify as well as explain their actions. Thus, as a cinematic attempt to honestly examine the United States' responsibility for war crimes in Vietnam, the film definitely falls short.

The most important death of the film, and the moment that appears on the posters advertising the movie, is the crucifixion-like death of Elias. Elias is a sergeant and therefore a hierarchical superior to Taylor, one who takes care of him on the first march and quickly becomes a key father-figure. Elias not only represents the voice of moral authority in the film, protecting the weak and stopping the abuse of civilians in the My Lai scene described above, he also represents the main moments of relationship, bonding and play in the film, portrayed in the pot-smoking scene (where Elias and his friends smoke and dance together to a Smokey Robinson song entitled – significantly for a melodrama! – “Tracks of My Tears”). He is the most obvious virtuous victim in the film, whose murder and betrayal by Barnes, another sergeant and the principal villain in the film, becomes the occasion for the key scene of sacrifice, as a wounded Elias runs through the jungle chased by scores of North Vietnamese soldiers who shoot him repeatedly. Elias' death is visually represented in terms of a Christ-like pose recalling the crucifixion, and both Elias' name (a variant of Eli, or God) and his extreme virtue in the film make this comparison plausible. The

effect of Elias' death is complex, since according to the logic of conversion that I have explained earlier, Elias represents an alternative to the impulse to take revenge, therefore his own death cannot be easily revenged. As a matter of fact, we see Taylor and his friends debating the possibility of assassinating Barnes in retaliation, but nothing comes of it.

The conversion narrative in *Platoon* is further complicated by the fact that Stone splits the virtuous victim character into two people: Elias and Barnes. Although Barnes can be taken as the villain of the film, and he is in fact often depicted as a monster or as a devil in the Christian iconography of the movie (if Elias is the Christ, Barnes is the snake, as he crawls literally in the grass in the last scene of the film), he is also a double for Elias. They are the two antagonists of the film, mirror opposites of each other, but also linked in important ways (e.g. both are experienced veterans and both care deeply about their men). In fact, Barnes is made relatively sympathetic to the audience in melodramatic terms by the way he is shown to suffer. When men under his command die in a booby trap, Taylor discovers Barnes visibly upset. More importantly, after killing Elias, Barnes gets drunk and comes to the tent where Taylor and his friends are debating revenge. The drunkenness serves the same purpose here that it did in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, when it was used to show Stryker's pain, as Barnes too is clearly suffering, and this renders him less villainous than he would otherwise be. In fact, Barnes resembles Stryker in a number of ways, including the use of Wayne's signature expression “lock and load”. Barnes' death is also made meaningful in the film because it is represented as necessary for Taylor's final rite of passage.

This, finally, is the main way that the film redeems these two deaths, and in fact, all the deaths in the film: in terms of a coming-of-age narrative for Taylor. In the post-Vietnam context, personal narratives take center place, and *Platoon* frames its grunts'-eye view story in terms of a rite of passage for the main protagonist. The final voice-off narration, which has structured the film and which is supposed to represent letters written by Taylor to his grandmother, describes him feeling like the “child of two fathers”. Their deaths are given meaning in the film by having served as necessary for Taylor to achieve manhood. They have not been in vain because they have served as growing experiences. The film implies that this is somehow true for the nation in general. Like Taylor, America has fought a kind of civil war between its better and worse natures, and if the result for Taylor is a more mature and balanced adulthood, as we can infer from his wise self-assessment in this voice-off, then perhaps the war has also served – the film implies – as a rite of passage for the nation. It too has lost its innocence, as suggested by the film poster (“In war the first casualty is innocence”), but thereby gained maturity.

As in the other films, music plays a central role in choreographing both emotion and meaning in the film. The centerpiece of the film, musically, is Samuel Barber's "Adagio for Strings", a composition that has been described by Alexander J. Morin, author of *Classical Music*, as a piece "full of pathos and cathartic passion" that "rarely leaves a dry eye" (2001: 74). Like the Marine Corps Hymn in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, the "Adagio" both opens and closes the film and gives it its musical signature. Significantly, unlike the other piece, it is not linked to a particular military institution, and represents pure pathos. Elegiac and slow, performed by an orchestra, the piece works well as a kind of majestic funeral composition. It is also played several times during the film, including at the end of the village-burning scene, and just before and after a major battle during which Taylor's company is particularly ravaged. The tone of the piece conveys great pity and compassion and signals that the men who are dying are worthy of being mourned in a serious and collective way.

This brings me to one of the most important functions of melodrama: its rehabilitation of a socially marginal subject. The channeling of sympathy and even empathy for virtuous victims has often been harnessed to the cultural work of converting a stigmatized identity into a subject worthy of inclusion in the collectivity. One of the first kinds of stigmatized identity to be the object of melodrama is that of the fallen woman (for example, Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple*). Other notable examples include the African American slave (e.g. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) or the immigrant worker at the turn of the century (e.g. *The Jungle*). If this is a recurrent dynamic of the work of pathos in melodrama, who is being rehabilitated in the war film? I would argue that since the Vietnam War, Hollywood melodrama has been working intensely to rehabilitate and redeem the American soldier. It is the serviceman who is consistently portrayed as the virtuous victim, who arrives in Vietnam innocent, is made to suffer in a crucible of grief and disillusionment, but is finally presented as redeemed and better for his trial. This is explicitly the narrative structure of *Platoon* and the elegiac music makes the point emotionally poignant and clear. The mid-1980s was precisely the moment when the United States was reconsidering its condemnation of the Vietnam veteran as a dangerous psychopath, and a number of symbolically important gestures of reintegration and reconciliation were being made to honor veterans. The political climate, with Reagan's desire to rebuild the strength and prestige of the military, was an important factor in this movement. *Platoon*, despite its claims to hyper-realism, was a part of this broad cultural effort to redeem the soldier and refurbish the military.

Top Gun

If *Platoon* redeems the soldier by making him a Christ-like martyr, Tony Scott's *Top Gun* aims to rehabilitate the military by putting the fun and adventure back in. Often striking the tone of a recruitment commercial, *Top Gun* repeatedly emphasizes the appeal of the navy jet fighter pilot as a man who is recognized as the "best of the best", and spends long minutes on sunrise and sunset shots of fighter jets being prepared for take-off. According to Ben Singer, the dialectic of pathos and action can vary considerably from one film to another since melodrama is what he calls a cluster concept, meaning that the genre's "key constitutive factors can appear in any number of different configurations" (Singer 2001: 54). In *Platoon* and *Top Gun*, we have two films on two ends of the pathos/action spectrum. In *Platoon*, there is plenty of action, but the film's overall mode privileges pathos, whereas in *Top Gun*, the privileged mode is action. Nevertheless, there is still an important core plot element that brings pathos and loss into the heart of how the film works. Both films strive to redeem military service at a time when it was at a historic low in terms of reputation and cultural capital.⁷

The story of *Top Gun* also involves troubled father and son relationships, heightening the emotional stakes of the story for male audiences. The protagonist, Pete Mitchell (nicknamed 'Maverick' or 'Mav' for his unorthodox and daredevil maneuvers) is chosen to participate in an elite navy Fighter Weapons School in Miramar, California (also known as 'Top Gun'). Maverick's father had also been a fighter pilot during the war in Vietnam, and had crashed under mysterious circumstances in 1965, widely believed by Maverick's peers to have been caused by a mistake, leaving Mav to live in the shadow of a failed and absent father. Maverick's Radar Intercept Officer, who flies in the plane with him and accompanies him to Miramar, is known as 'Goose'. Already a husband and father, Goose is a far more cautious man, but the two friends are so close that Mav tells Goose he is the 'only family' he has. In fact, though the same age, Goose functions as a kind of ersatz father-figure up until his death, when he is replaced in that role by a senior officer who flew with Maverick's father.

While much of the appeal of the film derives from the fighter jet training scenes, the two encounters with enemy MIGs, and the love story, Goose's death is the emotional core of the film. During a training session, Maverick flies very close to another aircraft and gets caught in its jet wash, triggering an unrecoverable spin that forces Mav and Goose to eject. Goose, however, is ejected into the

⁷ For a more ample discussion of *Top Gun*'s role in the rehabilitation of the military's image, see Suid 2002 (485–502).

jet's canopy and dies from a broken neck. The scenes that follow are created to extract maximum pathos from his death: Mav cradling Goose's head in the water like a *pietá*, Mav collecting Goose's personal effects from his room and giving them to his tearful wife, and so on. The conversion narrative device that I have been describing in the three other films is not only present here, but becomes a kind of problem in the narrative. Since Goose represented caution in contrast to Mav's recklessness, his death initially transforms Mav into being far too prudent. Unable to take risks, or even to take a safe shot, Mav loses confidence and decides to quit. He is saved from failure by finally learning the truth about his own father's death in Vietnam from a paternal senior officer who was there, a revelation that seems to inspire him to graduate. A final mission against a real enemy, during which Mav hesitates but finally overcomes his fears, reveals that Maverick has found an appropriate balance between recklessness and fear. Like Taylor, Maverick is the child of two fathers by the end of the film, having interiorized and balanced the values of his biological father and the fatherly friend. At the end of *Top Gun*, Mav gets back on the right track and makes up with his girlfriend, finally adopting all the values that Goose represented, i. e. maturity, family, and duty. The final redemption of Goose's death is in Maverick's rite of passage, like Taylor's. This seems to be the most common way in which post-Vietnam films in the 1980s offer to make combat death meaningful.

Finally, as in the other films, music plays a crucial role in the movie, with several pop songs serving as emotional refrains, such as Berlin's "You Take My Breath Away" and The Righteous Brother's "You've Lost That Loving Feeling". In addition, the "Top Gun Anthem" (Harold Faltermeyer) which opens and closes the film won a Grammy Award in 1987 for Best Pop Instrumental Performance. The theme song is mainly electronic and features a long guitar solo. It is used to accompany the opening shots of the fighter aircraft as it is prepared at dawn, and thus assumes a tone of quiet excitement that leads into the more overtly aggressive song "Danger Zone", by Kenny Loggins, as the planes take off. Much of the music is more subdued and often romantic, which makes sense given that the principal affect staged in the film is desire (for achievement, for recognition, for the constantly displayed beautiful bodies, etc.). Nevertheless, the emotional center of the film is the pathos generated for the loss of Goose, and the final action is deeply motivated and informed by this loss.

I finish with a discussion of music because this is a central but often overlooked aspect of film melodrama. In all three films, however, the soundtrack is far more than background sound. Music not only plays an active role in cueing and shaping the emotional experience of spectators, but it also often serves to help break down the barrier between the world of the film and the world of the

spectator, in keeping with melodrama's perennial desire for fusion between character and viewer. In all three films, the key songs are charged with emotional energy through the film and become potent symbols of the film's values. For example, in *Sands of Iwo Jima*, the Marine Corps Hymn serves as emotional and ideological bridge with the Marines in particular but military service more generally and functions therefore as an instance of Civil Religion. In the two later films, we saw that patriotism and Civil Religion are less important and the value of the military experience is couched in more personal terms, namely, as a rite of passage. Nevertheless, in all three films, family dynamics, and specifically the conflicts and relationships between fathers and sons, are given a primary role in generating emotion, drama, and ideological work.

The essay has also focused on a dimension of the melodramatic mode that is especially important to the war film, but which has not been well theorized until now: death. The war film must always inevitably deal with the question of combat death, and melodrama has been a privileged narrative mode for the Hollywood war film regardless of how realistic the film pretends to be on the level of representation. Melodrama choreographs emotion and narrative around the suffering and death of a virtuous victim, often a key character but not the protagonist, whose values are transmitted to survivors as a result of their deaths, lending meaning and agency to this otherwise potentially toxic or demystifying event. If the antiwar film and novel strive to show war death as a tragic waste of life, the military melodrama works to present it as enfolded within a larger meaning or narrative, a militaristic version of the moral occult in which men find their true worth. If, as a culture, Americans wish to become one day less dependent on war, we will need to better understand how the war film has used the melodramatic mode to weave a cinematic fantasy of war deeply into our affective understanding of family, masculinity, national belonging and coming of age.

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