

Final Film Analysis

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Final Film Analysis: Saving Private Ryan

At the time of its release, *Saving Private Ryan* was hailed by numerous critics as one of the finest war films ever to be made. The film is a powerful epic that brilliantly showcases the expertise of narrative and cinematics. This film analysis will analyze *Saving Private Ryan* through the lens of genre theory. As applied to film, genre theory can allow for analyzing certain messages being conveyed to an audience. There are different approaches within the genre theory, such as the aesthetic or ideological approach, each focusing on different levels of a film and the production process. As such, films can be classified into categories where other works share certain similarities in areas such as filming technique, character, narrative, or other formal features. By aligning the framework of the genre with the filming technique, plot structure, and overall mise en scène, *Saving Private Ryan* is most certainly a must-see film that sparked a debate amongst film historians and film critics about what the World War II combat genre constituted and how combat films should be made in the future. This film analysis paper will reflect upon the various skills I have developed in analyzing films throughout this course and conclude with a description of why *Saving Private Ryan* is one of the most entertaining, thought-provoking, and influential films ever made.

Saving Private Ryan was directed by Steven Spielberg, who was responsible for guiding the technical teams and ensuring that the creativity and effort of the actors in their roles were best utilized. Robert Rodat is credited as the writer for the film and was responsible for developing the script. The cinematography was handled by Janusz Kaminski, which meant he oversaw all the camera crew, delivering the technical artistry of the film. Film editing was done by Michael Kahn, who was responsible for ensuring that all the final film scenes were cogent, and the final edit connected all the dots as demanded by the production team. The major actors of the film

included: Tom Hanks as Captain Miller, Tom Sizemore as Edward Burns, Matt Damon as Private Ryan, Barry Pepper as Private Jackson, Paul Giamatti as Sergeant Hill, Vin Diesel as Private Caparzo, Adam Goldberg as Private Mellish, Giovanni Ribisi as T/4 Medic Wade, Jeremy Davies as Corporal Upham, Ted Danson as Captain Hamill, and Dennis Farina as Lieutenant Colonel Anderson. The responsibility of these actors was to bring to the screen the bravery and sheer chaos of the invasion of Normandy, otherwise known as D-Day, and carry that forward into the rest of the film. *Saving Private Ryan's* plot relies on the convincing portrayal of the aftermath of one of the largest amphibious invasions attempted in human history (Landon, 1998). A significant sub-theme was the soldiers questioning military leadership and the purpose of their mission. Together, the cast and crew delivered a genre-defying combat film- a rated R multimillion-dollar epic drama with a runtime of 169 minutes.

A summary of the plot of *Saving Private Ryan* can help to outlay the story that the film delivers and orient the treatment of the theme of this analysis. On June 6, 1944, a battalion of American soldiers arrived on Omaha Beach in the English Channel. They are immediately met with unrelenting machine gun fire from German fortified positions overlooking the beach. In a scramble to reach safe positions, scores of soldiers are left dead and drowned, while the captain of one unit, John H. Miller, guides his men through the chaos and out of the line of fire. After gathering the remaining men in his platoon, Miller steadily makes his way through the defenses of the beach, creating a space for the rest of the battalion to exit Omaha and claim victory in the battle of Normandy (Landon, 1998). Following the invasion, Captain Miller's squad is given a mission to save a Private Ryan, whose three brothers have tragically died in quick succession during combat. The dramatization of the landing in Normandy left audiences stunned with its realistic, jaw-dropping depictions of combat action, death, and destruction. Director Spielberg is

credited with utilizing every filmmaking technique available to him to deliver an opening World War II combat sequence never previously attempted, winning him an Oscar for Best Director in 1999. He used his cast and crew and each plot sequence of *Saving Private Ryan* to develop a story about a struggle to define combat, courage, and sacrifice when faced with the threat of tyranny, unrelenting warfare, and an unusual combat mission.

Initially, the film uses a classic war narrative involving a platoon of soldiers who are asked to take on a mission to save the last of four brothers, Private Ryan, after his three siblings perish in combat in quick succession. This is an excellent example of how the film is in line with the genre theory of World War II films that has been described eloquently by Basinger & Arnold: “a hero, a group of mixed types, and a military objective of some sort” (2003, p.3). Basinger & Arnold also suggest that “They take place in the actual combat zones of World War II, against the established enemies, on the ground” and are “all presented visually with appropriate uniforms, equipment, and iconography of battle” (2003, p.23). The film follows all these genre-defining tropes, albeit with an unusual assignment. Nonetheless, the opening third places the audience with “certain expectations about what will happen and what rules apply in this particular narrative world” (Lacey, 2017, p. 135). As the audience settles in, Spielberg is then free to develop the more complex and nuanced aspects of the film, and it is here where *Saving Private Ryan* begins to break against the genre orthodoxies. Captain Miller, for example, is portrayed as a typical leader, however, his commitment to the mission is revealed based on his desire to escape the war and return to his wife. Combat films in America had never so openly cast a leading protagonist as not solely patriotic and heroic. Although the theme of desiring to return home is also in line with the genre, its depiction is clearly unusual. Thus Spielberg subverted the

norm, adding complexity to Miller's character and making the movie that much more interesting and unpredictable.

The violence depicted in *Saving Private Ryan*, especially during the opening sequence, is the most significant design element of the film. The director utilizes the prowess of camera technology, sound technology, editing techniques, narrative flow, visual storytelling, performance, and color to catapult the viewer directly into the combat experience (Fisher, 2017). The story is anchored around Captain Miller and provides the audience with three motifs that repeatedly recur in response to war: a shaking hand (performance), the elimination of sound (cinematic), and a refusal to explain his background before joining the army (narrative). These are clearly depicted as both internal and external, and the audience is acutely aware that they result from the stress of combat. Eliminating sound was an exceptionally brilliant film design and served as both a psychological and narrative tool (Landon, 1998). For example, Miller's hearing could have been directly damaged by combat, and the filming technique effectively portrays the emotional trauma.

In some ways, the combat film genre has always been rooted in need to ameliorate war's brutality and chaos to its audiences. In effect, even with high levels of propaganda in many combat films, these films have served the social function of answering the public discourse question: "Why are we doing this?" Although different movies in the genre have arrived at a whole range of jingoistic answers, the question has been asked throughout the genre's history (Fisher, 2017). In the United States, where concepts of patriotism and nationalism are strong socio-cultural and political symbols, Hollywood and filmmakers have been an influential part of the public psyche of war and social conception of overseas conflict, leading to financial returns and widespread support for films (Donascimento, 2019). *Saving Private Ryan* capitalizes on

this, depicting an American flag waving in the first scene, perhaps one of the strongest social symbols of American respect and love of country.

The tropes of patriotism and nationalism are a feature of an ideological genre that is common across combat films, most often depicted to elicit an emotional response from the film-watching public. By placing the flag at the start of the film, Spielberg clarifies the overarching message the audience can take away from the film. And yet, repeatedly, *Saving Private Ryan* questions the fundamental premise of war: the sacrifice of one to save many. Much of the dialogue outside of the events in battle is devoted to the continuous debate on the morality of the squad's mission. None of the characters make the case as was made by the General who authorized the mission, that the purpose is justified to protect an innocent mother from bearing the loss of all four of her children to combat. As far as the soldiers in Miller's squad are concerned, the notion of saving Private Ryan is lunacy, nothing to say of the grief that their own mothers may suffer as a result. Although the film bases the mission's ethos on the infamous true story of the soldiers of the Civil War, the action of General Marshall in *Saving Private Ryan* to authorize sending eight soldiers into a conflict zone for the sole purpose of retrieving a single soldier rests largely on rhetoric and a public relations campaign. Therefore, the morality of choice to Miller's squad remains unreconcilable and the mission only salvageable due to the narrative themes of comradeship amongst the squad and the leadership skills of Captain Miller.

There remain many other theoretical frameworks with differing tropes and filmmaking techniques that one can use to analyze and discuss *Saving Private Ryan*. The framework of genre theory helps to contextualize the filmmaking techniques highlighted in this paper and offers one of the more prevalent approaches to examining the film by Steven Spielberg (Fisher, 2017). In addition, the paper offers good examples where the director has extracted audience responses or

posed thought-provoking questions. In many ways, *Saving Private Ryan* keeps with Grant's description that "genre movies are those commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations" (2007, p.1). However, as discussed in this paper, the realistic violence, atypical depiction of protagonist motivation, and constant struggle to define the purpose of the mission are all themes that defy the genre of combat filmmaking and create an opportunity for a more complex discussion of how the film made use of genre tropes and filmmaking techniques to deliver a now-iconic World War II combat film.

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