

## Narrative Structure and Ideology. Eisenstein in *Saving Private Ryan*

Laura Fernández-Ramírez<sup>1</sup>; Ignacio Nevado<sup>2</sup>

Recibido: 26 de mayo de 2022 / Aceptado: 1 de octubre de 2022

**Abstract.** This paper highlights the relevance of the structural design of *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998) in conveying its message, in line with S. M. Eisenstein's theoretical principles. An analysis of its scenes has been carried out, identifying their emulation of, or "collisions" with, preceding "schemas". The film presents events characteristic of the classical model of the World War II combat subgenre, but its articulation is unforeseen and evidences authorial action as in the critical model of Vietnam, specifically as in *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979). This contrast integrates citizens of different ideological persuasions. It also borrows the structural model and deceptive ending to a initial enigma from *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) so as to allude to the same theme: the true essence of man, in this case of the veteran, represented by the elderly Ryan.

**Keywords:** Narrative; structure; ideology; *Saving Private Ryan*; war films; Eisenstein

### [es] Estructura narrativa, ideología y catarsis. Eisenstein en *Salvar al soldado Ryan*

**Resumen.** Este artículo destaca la relevancia del diseño estructural de *Salvar al Soldado Ryan* (*Saving Private Ryan*, Steven Spielberg, 1998) para trasladar su mensaje, en línea con los principios teóricos de S. M. Eisenstein. Se ha realizado un análisis de sus escenas, identificando su emulación de "esquemas" precedentes o sus "colisiones" con ellos. La película presenta sucesos propios del modelo clásico del subgénero de combate de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, pero su articulación es azarosa y evidencia la acción autoral como en el modelo crítico de Vietnam, concretamente como en *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979). Este contraste integra en el patio de butacas a ciudadanos de diferente signo ideológico. Asimismo, recurre al modelo estructural y un desenlace engañoso próximos a los de *Ciudadano Kane* (*Citizen Kane*, Orson Welles, 1941) para aludir a su mismo tema: la verdadera esencia del hombre, en este caso del veterano, representado por el anciano Ryan.

**Palabras Clave:** Guion cinematográfico; estructura narrativa; ideología; *Salvar al soldado Ryan*; cine bélico; Eisenstein

**Summary:** 1. Introduction. 2. *Saving Private Ryan*'s message: organic unity principle. 3. Methodology. 4. The audience's cultural heritage: Classical model vs. Anti-Vietnam war model. 5. Classic *Saving Private Ryan*. 6. Classic vs. Anti-Vietnam war's *Saving Private Ryan*. 7. Classic *Saving Private Ryan* + anti-Vietnam war *Saving Private Ryan* + *Citizen Kane*. 8. Conclusion. 9. Bibliography.

<sup>1</sup> Universidad Rey Juan Carlos  
E-mail: [laura.fernandezr@urjc.es](mailto:laura.fernandezr@urjc.es)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4196-9136>

<sup>2</sup> Universidad Complutense de Madrid  
E-mail: [joseveva@ucm.es](mailto:joseveva@ucm.es)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5027-219X>

**Cómo citar:** Fernández-Ramírez, Laura y Nevado, Ignacio (2022). Narrative Structure and Ideology. Eisenstein in *Saving Private Ryan*. *Área Abierta. Revista de comunicación audiovisual y publicitaria* 22 (3), 353-366, <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/arab.82186>

## 1. Introduction

A film conveys a vision of the world; its authors seek “to achieve a deep subtextual interpretation of their films and to shape and to personalize the narrative’s content in line with that idea” (Dancyger, 2016: 40). In accordance with this guiding principle, our paper analyzes the structural design of the film *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998) (*SPR*). This is not a neuropsychological analysis of how audiences understand or interpret films (Carrielynn, Reinhard and Olson, 2016); this study seeks to uncover and describe the narrative strategies used in *SPR*, particularly the structural ones aimed at the effective translation of its ideological message.

The choice of *SPR* responds to its classification within a purely ideological genre such as war (Valantin, 2005; Loftin, 2018), which viewers find appealing for the emotional affect and the spectacle of combat (King, 2009; Hochberg, 2013; Eken, 2019). Specifically, *SPR* was such a massive success with audiences and critics alike that it returned the classic World War II combat sub-genre to the prominence of by-gone eras (Basinger, 1998). Without losing its topicality, the film also became a model for the war-film cycle of the first decade of the 21st century (Biesecker, 2002; Klien, 2005; Gates, 2005). In addition, it served as a reference for contemporary war releases such as *Hacksaw Ridge* (Mel Gibson, 2016) or the Oscar-winning *Dunkirk* by Christopher Nolan of 2017 (Sommerlad, 2018). Moreover, *SPR* had a considerable social impact and political undertones (Slotkin, 2017). These characteristics explain the ample research undertaken on the ideological intent of the film’s narrative and its stylistic resources. Such studies have considered the characterization strategies of its protagonists (Gates, 2005; Kuri and Kaufman, 2020) and that of the enemy (Brown, 2009), its use of the documentary filmmaker’s point of view of (Eagle, 2012), its visual portrayal of violence (Allison, 2017), its editing style (Montero and Fernández-Ramírez, 2015) or the acting techniques used (Eken, 2019). However, no study appears to address the cathartic design of its narrative structure. Beyond the coincidence between the action of *SPR*’s plot and the phases of the classical account (Basinger, 1998), its comparison with anti-Vietnam War cinema –albeit in terms of the archetypes and dramatic arc of its characters– (Gates, 2005), or its relationship with recognizable patterns of other genres such as melodrama (Burnetts, 2009) or horror (Creel, 2020), the film’s structural design has not been analyzed in detail.

This paper considers *SPR*’s narrative structure from an Eisensteinian point of view. Following Loftin’s (2018) model, the analysis starts from theories of Soviet montage and applies them to screenwriting. The research falls within the perspective of Gunning (1990), Stam (2001), King (2002) and Dancyger (2007), who confirm that the narrative and stylistic design of contemporary spectacle cinema manifest a notable influence of S. M. Eisenstein’s concept of cinematic *attraction*.

An attraction [...] is in our understanding any demonstrable fact (an action, an object, a phenomenon, a conscious combination, and so on) that is known and

proven to exercise a definite effect on the attention and emotions of the audience and that, combined with others, possesses the characteristic of concentrating the audience's emotions in any direction dictated by the production's purpose. From this point of view a film cannot be a simple presentation or demonstration of events: rather it must be a tendentious selection of, and comparison between, events, free from narrowly plot-related plans and moulding the audience in accordance with its purpose. (Eisenstein, 2010a: 40-41)

We argue that, although Spielberg's film follows a dramatic plot development, its narrative structure has been defined according to those parameters of *attraction*; its form is tendentious and its design symbolic, in that the film attempts to take the viewer to the affect sought by the production. Finally, we maintain that part of the ideological effectiveness of *SPR* lies precisely in how it articulates the events of the classical model through a structural design that manifests some of the strategies of S. M. Eisenstein, the leading exponent of the construction of emotional engagement in the film-viewing experience in search of a persuasive end. This claim is based on the film's structural analysis. However, it is impossible to know whether Eisenstein's formulations were an intentional premise of *SPR*'s production.

Three of the strategies advocated by the Soviet filmmaker have been applied to the narrative structure of *SPR*. Therefore, studying its formula from these parameters can serve to define the principles that led the design of its narrative structure towards an ideological purpose. Firstly, it is argued that *SPR* presents events characteristic of the classic World War II account through *schemas*. In other words, to determine its reading, the film resorts to structural patterns recognizable to the audience, in this case, patterns used in previous films. Secondly, these structural schemas are foreign to the canonical model of the combat sub-genre and therefore represent a *collision* with the conventional actions and events they present. The perception of these formal collisions that break with the conventions of the naturalistic narrative –causality, linearity and invisibility of the implicit narrator (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, 1985) – help to make viewers aware of its expressive intentionality, prompting them to decode it poetically (Sánchez Biosca, 1996). Finally, this study confirms Eisenstein's approach that the *schemas* and *collisions* that conform its structure have been defined by an organic unity principle, an idea or message that shapes the formal configuration of the story as a *pathetic* work. *SPR* follows a specific compositional formula allowing, as Eisenstein argues, that “the work becomes organic and reaches the heights of genuine pathos only when the theme and content and idea of the work become an organic and continuous whole with the ideas, the feelings, with the very breath of the author” (Eisenstein, 1946: 61). Hence, this paper defends the usefulness of offering the viewer “a suitable formula which will eventually excite the desirable emotions in him” (p.59) in order to convey an ideological message.

The Einsteinian approach to defining a structural pattern in *SPR* is novel. Film analysis using concepts such as *schema*, *collision* and law of *organic unity* has been limited to the analysis of Eisenstein's own work (Ropars, 1978). The search for the structural formula in narrative patterns of earlier films follows Whalley's (2011) work on the film *Pearl Harbor* (Michael Bay, 2001).

## 2. *Saving Private Ryan's* message: Organic unity principle

*SPR* adapted the classical model of the World War II combat subgenre to the context and type of viewer of the late twentieth century. Its narrative and stylistic treatment intentionally depart from previous combat films because, according to Steven Spielberg, in films made during the classical period, “the purpose is to do everything about the war except tell you what it was like to be in one” (in Hasian, 2001: 347). Its classical plot is in keeping with its time of production, when the civic-minded spirit and solidarity of a generation, which survived the Great Depression and the Second World War, seemed to be dying out and was viewed with melancholy (Patterson, 2005). Against a societal landscape marked by the individualism of the Consumer Age and the national division over the lingering Vietnam Syndrome, political discourse adopted the ideological benchmark of World War II as a strategy for national reconsolidation (Ehrenhaus, 2001). On the 50th anniversary of the war, President Clinton urged “let us again lead by the power of example. Let us remember their example [...] Let us find that common ground for which so many have fought and died” (Biesecker, 2002: 394).

In step with this wave of nostalgia and the quest for national reconciliation, *SPR* seeks to appeal to the emotional commitment of a broad spectrum of citizens by conveying a historical debt as a message: “if it weren’t for those veterans, none of us would be having the lives we are having today” (Spielberg, in Bouzereau, 2004). To avoid side-lining the two generations openly critical of US overseas military involvements, whether through direct or inherited memory of the Vietnam War (baby boomers and Generation X), *SPR* “reillusions American national identity in the wake of Vietnam”; “manufactures a redemptive national identity, and constructs an ethically usable past in the present” (Ehrenhaus, 2001:321). The film personalizes the war through an ethical soldier, the veteran, whose desire to do the right thing is portrayed as the honourable the execution of missions (Gates, 2005). *SPR*’s focus on the human aspect, the physiological sensations, allows it to avoid pronouncing on the subject of war (Hasian, 2001) and distances it “from mere political reflection” (Muruzábal and Grandío, 2009: 66). The emotional and ethical reconstruction of the veteran and the portrayal of war missions as something honourable are an attempt at national redemption and a solution to the social fracture caused by Vietnam. This message is the film’s organic unity principle, which drives the production design.

## 3. Methodology

To ascertain whether the structure of *SPR* responds to an ideological design, underscored by *schemas* and *collisions* that seek to translate an *organic unity principle* or message, we follow the system of dialectical analysis applied by Eisenstein in his articles “*Eh*” *On the Purity of Film Language* (2010b) and *Organic Unity and Pathos in the Composition of “Potemkin”* (1946). The principle can be applied to any formal dimension of film, although its use in this study is restricted to analyzing the narrative structure in line with Eisenstein’s second article.

Eisenstein’s system of dialectical analysis is based on the comparison between successive elements and the subsequent deduction of the meaning of their juxta-

position. It stimulates the cognitive trajectory of the viewer, describes what is shown, points out what differentiates one element from the previous one, and its communicative intentionality is deduced through comparison. Each element is described considering its formal schema, relating it to the audience's cultural background, which denotes the acknowledgment and interpretation of recognizable patterns.

The film was broken down into acts (according to the standard formula of beginning, middle and denouement), episodes (according to those described in the canonical model), sequences (according to the changes in localization) and scenes (according to the twists and turns of the action in the sequence). Each segment was described from the contrasts marked by successive *schemas* according to its content or to its formal configuration. The dialectical analysis focused on the degrees of causality, linearity or invisibility of the implicit narrator, the axes of the classical structural model, against which the anti-Vietnam War film formula was contrasted; the two patterns previously detected in the film's design (Gates, 2005). These conform to the cultural background and the audience's initial expectations and condition their reading of a work of this genre.

The repetition throughout the text of specific narrative schemas defined the pre-existing patterns employed. Observing *collisions* between these allowed us to confirm that their selection and articulation are tendentious and serve a poetic purpose, acting as an *attraction* to persuade the viewer to participate in the viewing of the film. As in the case of Eisenstein's second article, the path of the analysis indicated whether the structural system of the text serves its *organic unity principle*; in short, whether the general structural schema of the work is significant in itself.

#### **4. The audience's cultural heritage: Classical model vs. Anti-Vietnam war model**

*SPR*'s plot and message have been linked to those of the narrative paradigm of the classic combat subgenre (Basinger, 1998), yet some aspects of its formal configuration are found in the model of the 1980s war subgenre critical of the US intervention in Vietnam (Gates, 2005). Thus, before analyzing the structure of *SPR*, we define these models, which constitute the benchmarks against which viewer expectations are set (Bordwell et al., 1985).

The aim of films portraying the Second World War during the classical period was to convince the viewer of the importance and necessity of the cause. Their ideological purpose was embodied in films about a squad comprising stereotypical characters according to social models that successfully undertakes a mission. Their predetermination towards glory, articulated by the standard happy ending, sought to convey an expectation of victory in the actual conflict. Furthermore, these films intended to convey to the nation that the sacrifice required by the war enterprise enforced a process of heroic maturation and character-building (Muruzábal, 2007). Thus, the importance of the war was set out through emotional, reflective, and explicit dialogue, justifying the consequences of the conflict on the viewers or their families (Basinger, 1998).

The structure of the canonical sub-genre was codified according to the following events (Basinger, 1986: 55-73):

- The story begins with an episode introducing a seemingly cynical and anti-heroic leader who is at heart noble and honest. His social inadequacy stems from his experience of combat. It is here that the rookie and the rest of the squad are introduced. The first episode is given over to the characterization of the characters' personalities.
- Later, the squad's leader is given a mission that he is reluctant to carry it out because of his previous combat experience, but his commanding officers compel him to accept it. Inwardly he struggles with the fact that his orders will determine the fate of his men. After a training episode, the squad engages the enemy for the first time, and in the ensuing firefight, a squad member is killed. Thereafter, disputes or moral doubts about the mission arise, and the squad shows their human qualities by thinking of home and writing letters.
- As the execution of a new plan begins, another soldier is killed. The reasons for fighting are again called into question, and the leader rallies his men. The final battle is the climax. One or more members of the squad are slain. Their sacrifice for the rest of the squad encourages the survivors. In the epilogue, one of the characters reads a letter or remembers his fallen comrades. Finally, the generic model closes with the image of the flag.

The articulation of the events of the canon is in keeping with the classical narrative formula imposed by the major Hollywood studios as a whole - whether the country was at war or not. It unfolds in the three acts of the heroic fable and follows the causality sought by the classical text, which leads inexorably to a message defined clearly by the text itself. Causality renders the implied narrator invisible, something desirable in classic war filmmaking, in which Hollywood sought to maintain the commercial and entertainment focus necessary to eschew a film's consideration as political propaganda. Any departure from the causal pattern, such as evincing cinematic artifice, was considered disturbing to the viewer, who would perceive it as a poetic intrusion by the director (Bordwell et al., 1985).

The anti-Vietnam War film breaks with the previous schema, partly because it seeks to convey a critical message, highlighting both the rawness and immorality of war and military methods and their dehumanizing effect on the soldier (Valantin, 2005; Slotkin, 2017). This model adopts an expressive configuration - as in *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979) - or a documentary one - as in *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986) - but still, the model is shaped by a solid authorial presence, which poetically conveys a moral appraisal of the protagonist's actions and explores his sensations.

Consistent with *New Hollywood* approaches, the characters in anti-Vietnam War cinema lack defined motives to drive plot development (Langford, 2010). The story does not focus on the articulation of events, nor is it sustained by causal development; instead, the events are shown episodically, and the open narrative offers no clear message. It departs from the conventions of the deterministic naturalism of the classical text, opting instead to replicate the turbulent reality of war itself; a narrative-imposed closure impedes the plot from having a specific meaning. The subjective focalization of the characters and an anti-normative configuration, typical of the *New Hollywood*, highlights the artifice of the film's construction to make it evident that the film is presented as the author's poetic and ideological commentary (Bordwell et al., 1985).



## 5. Classic *Saving Private Ryan*

*SPR*, based on events and narrative characteristics of the classical combat sub-genre, is divided into five acts, including a prologue and epilogue that differ from the main body of the film in that these take place in the present, while the other three acts are set during the Second World War and structured in the mould of the heroic fable. These three acts form the memory of an elderly veteran shown in the film's brief prologue and epilogue. The recourse to the flashback focalized by the elderly man updates the nostalgic discourse and re-reading of the national policy of the time that encouraged Americans to remember and honour their veterans' sacrifice, as was intended by its director (Spielberg, in Bouzereau, 2004).

The prologue and epilogue are paramount to the film's message, although most of the film (2 hours, 35 minutes) is concerned with the squad's mission: finding and extracting Ryan. The brevity of the elderly man's introduction contrasted with the main acts on the squad's wartime experience makes the viewer forget that these are part of a flashback: a strategy that is useful to attach a greater emotional impact to the closure of the story, which will be explored in greater depth below.

The events during the Second World War are faithful to the canonical model of the sub-genre:

- The squad is introduced during the assault on Omaha beach. Captain Miller (a veteran leader traumatized by his wartime experience) is assigned a mission that gives the film its name. The squad members express their doubts through dialogue about the undertaking, and the rookie Upham conveys a romantic view of the war based on the fraternal bonds it forges between combatants. The viewer sees Miller's trauma for the first time (symbolized by the trembling of his hand, which is triggered whenever he has to make decisions that could lead to the loss of men).
- In the course of the search for Ryan, the squad is deeply affected by the death of Private Caparzo, whom a sniper kills. Miller's men take refuge in a church where they voice their internal emotional conflicts, show their more human qualities, and criticize the mission. Wade the Medic copies Caparzo's blood-stained farewell letter, while the rookie Upham reaffirms his romantic view of war. The next day the men receive the information they need to locate Ryan and complete the mission. Miller's insecurity is exposed to his men, who witness his trembling hand. His reaction is to assert his rank and order them to take a machine gun position they encounter along the way. At this point, Wade is killed. This incident marks a second blow to the squad, which sees its cohesion weaken. Some of the men want to execute the German soldier who caused the death of their comrade. Finally, Miller, persuaded by Upham's appeals, discourages the squad from breaking the military code and reconciles the group through a motivational speech in which he explains for the first time his real reason for undertaking the mission: to earn the right to return home.
- Ryan is found, but with the enemy's arrival imminent, he refuses to abandon his post until the order to hold the bridge to allow the American advance towards Paris has been carried out. The group is forced to support him, and a final battle ensues in which they fight with limited resources. Almost everyone in the squad is killed. Miller verbalizes the film's message in his last lesson to

Ryan: ‘earn this’. At this point, a letter is voiced over telling Ryan’s mother of the mission’s success. The opening of the epilogue brings the audience back to the present.

There is no doubting the classical plot roots of *SPR*’s main acts. The storyline advances towards an announced objective (the mission’s success) and is shown from a clear spatio-temporal framework, changing localization and time of day in each sequence. Its development is linear and orderly, as the acts are separated by transitional sequences clearly identified by musical accompaniment (rarely used in the film), its montage structure and the absence of dialogue. In addition, combat sequences showing the brutal ordeal of war are alternated with dialogue-driven scenes where, as in the canon, the themes relevant to the film’s message are verbalized. *SPR* is also subdivided into 33 sequences of average length, atypical in contemporary cinema (Bordwell, 2006). The recourse to a conventional narrative facilitates the reading and accommodates the audience to a familiar model of the epic war films of the 1940s and 1950s. This type of narrative appeals to the viewer with traditional tastes, who associates *SPR* with the conservative tone and message of the classic war film.

## 6. Classic vs. Anti-Vietnam war’s *Saving Private Ryan*

However, *SPR*’s structure continually breaks with the classical model. Its contrasts with the canon surprise the viewer, producing an emotional impact on the audience, recognizing artistic intentionality behind this specific design of classical events. The subjective focalization and the stylized and documentary-style exposition of the combat, the plot’s unforeseen development and the evidence of an authorial commentary in its message are strategies that concur with the anti-Vietnam War cinema template. Their recognition appeals to the viewer critical of armed interventions and again underscores the perception that the film offers a re-reading of the past from a more contemporary point of view. Thus, Spielberg harnesses the anti-Vietnam War film model to address the shortcomings he found in the classic model (in Hasian, 2001: 347).

The prologue conforms to the classical pattern with its demiurgic perspective, making the viewer believe they know the outcome of the events in the flashback (that Miller nonetheless survives since the captain is identified through deception with the elderly man). Thus, without knowing anything about the man tearful at the graveside, the flashback opens with Miller’s leitmotiv: the tremble of his hand minutes before he goes in combat. The audience finds themselves on the beach with whom they *believe* to be the elderly man: Captain Miller.

The first combat scene on Omaha beach marks a stark stylistic contrast (from the omniscience of the prologue’s depiction to a stylized, emotionally focalized visualization of Miller). It signals a change of role for the audience, who, no longer a mere observer, experiences combat first-hand through formally stylized shots portraying Miller’s emotions and moral vision. The viewer can also accompany the captain vicariously from a documentary point of view, similar to the footage shot by war film directors such as John Ford and John Huston in *The Battle of Midway* (1942) and *The Battle of San Pietro* (1944), respectively. The audience’s sense of filmic combat is immediate, for the viewer is sensorially there beside Miller.



In turn, the stylized, protagonist-focalized narration of anti-Vietnam War cinema helps to translate its identical moral vision: war is cruel and its effect dehumanizes the combatant. This type of characterization has no place in the classical model, where the naturalism of the representation comes from the characters' innermost dimensions, primarily through dialogue. In a stylized and poetic form, the combat in *SPR* presents the battle waging inside Miller: the dilemma between his moral conscience and his military duty.

The use of the flashback as *SPR*'s expository formula, the protagonist's trauma as a metaphor of his inner turmoil, and the stylized and focalized combat call to mind the formal features of Captain Willard's first appearance in the Saigon hotel room in *Apocalypse Now*. The symmetry with the pattern of Coppola's film becomes even more apparent as the events of *SPR* unfold. The mission centres on sporadic episodes of intense combat punctuated by everyday moments, highlighting the soldier's experience. It is Ryan's trail that Miller's squad follows, just as in the 1979 film, the course of the river marks Captain Willard's progress towards his encounter with Kurtz. The apparition of combat scenes in *SPR* is not predictable; the strategy of the characters is not known in advance, nor are there any preparatory sequences as in the classical model (except in the film's last battle). As in *Apocalypse Now*, the clashes erupt (as they do in the beach assault, where we do not know the lead players yet) and shock as they would if we were genuinely immersed in combat. Chance, not causality, is guided by a documentary-style experience of war in the manner of the anti-Vietnam War model, and, as in reality, this makes it difficult to foresee what happens next.

Thus, what the protagonists endure on Omaha Beach is not the direct cause of their mission, which is the result of the chance death of the last surviving brother of the Ryan family and the fortuitous discovery of a secretary writing condolence letters thousands kilometres away from the war. The deaths of Caparzo and Wade are unforeseen; the first Private Ryan they encounter turns out not to be the man they are looking for, and the real Ryan they cross paths with only by chance. Miller's death at the hands of the German soldier who killed Wade and whom the squad freed cannot be anticipated because the film begins with a misleading premise (that Miller is the elderly veteran in the prologue).

This flashback closure, while triumphant after the classic model with the achievement of the film's announced goal (Ryan's rescue), provides no clear and closed ending that unequivocally conveys the film's message. Instead, it shatters the only certainty available to the viewer thanks to the filmmaker's artifice, a formal ploy, concealing the fact that the elderly man at the graveside is Ryan. The transition to the epilogue drives home the fact that the film's expressive design, its five-act macro-structure and the director's narrative commentary to whom the film's ending is addressed is not merely content but meaningful in itself. As with the anti-Vietnam War film, the conclusion of *SPR* makes the audience reflect on its formal design and interpret its message.

## **7. Classic *Saving Private Ryan* + Anti-Vietnam war *Saving Private Ryan* + *Citizen Kane***

To convey its message, *SPR* also borrows patterns from *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941). Welles' film is articulated by contradictory memories of Kane, subjectively

focalized by other characters, who seek to answer the question posed in the prologue: the meaning of the last word he utters before his death. Ultimately, the filmmaker clarifies that the structure and focalization of the narrative has a deceptive purpose: an omniscient shot, not focalized by any character as in the rest of the film, reveals the meaning of *rosebud*. Thus, the director himself determines the *true* essence of the protagonist, contradicting the idea we have constructed of Kane from those who knew him.

The macro-structure of *SPR* updates that of *Citizen Kane*. The prologue poses a question for the film to answer: Why is the elderly man weeping? The flashback to the combat sequence showing Captain Miller's trauma suggests that the film is based on the recollection of his war experience. In the epilogue, the filmmaker lays bare what the viewer could not have foreseen in any case: Miller dies at the end of the film, and the elderly man in the war cemetery is Ryan. The reason for *his* tears is the *rosebud* of this account, which reveals the elderly man's essence, in this case, the true identity of *the veteran*. To make way for the resolution, Ryan is digitally morphed into the elderly man – an effect that clashes with the classical style of the film's transitions. Spielberg thereby clearly reveals his work of artistic manipulation and the great *deception* to which he has subjected the viewer. The use of the macro-structural schema of *Citizen Kane* echoes the same theme: it is very difficult to know the true identity of the man - Kane - or the men - Miller and Ryan.

Just as Welles uses the end to reveal the essence of Kane (his lost childhood), Spielberg beckons the audience to know the essence of the veteran: his honour. This is substantiated by the question the elderly man asks his wife, but it is also implicit in the structural ploy that articulates the film. The evidence of deception leads the viewer to wonder how the elderly man Ryan, who did not accompany the squad on their search, can remember events he did not experience. The only possible conclusion is that Ryan's memory keeps Miller's sacrifice alive at his mentor's grave: Miller will live on through Ryan as long as Ryan follows his example. Thus, plot and formal composition converge to guide the viewer to the organic unity principle: "if it weren't for those veterans, none of us would be having the lives we are having today" (Spielberg, in Bouzereau, 2004). The framing of the American flag in the prologue and epilogue underscores that, just as Ryan owes his life to the squad that laid down their lives for him, Americans must unite in paying tribute to the veterans who fought to safeguard the values of their national identity.

Further echoes of *Citizen Kane* are found in *SPR* to constitute the veteran's identity and thus highlight the debt owed to him. Private Ryan is defined by the other characters' views of him at different points in the wartime flashback, much as the tycoon's personality is sketched in the 1941 film. As then, each enforced opinion of him belies the previous one leading to continuous incorrect assumptions about his identity.

An overhead crane shot first shows Ryan as a soldier's corpse on Omaha Beach, his backpack bearing the name "S. Ryan". This omniscient point of view veers from Miller's focalized observation and begins the coda of the landing. This shot is unique in the focalized approach of the sequence, filmed with a hand-held camera and semi-subjective perspectives and very tight shots. This evident collision with the overall planning style is relevant to the story. The audience, who knows from the title of the film that the squad will have to search for Ryan, may surmise that the

mission the protagonists will undertake will be impossible to carry out because, according to this shot, which provides them with privileged (and misleading) knowledge, they believe that Ryan is dead from the outset. The story subsequently sets the audience straight: it is not the Ryan that the squad must find, but his last surviving brother.

Ryan is also held up as a symbol of the nation's mythical origins. By ordering his rescue, General Marshall wants to right a historical wrong: President Lincoln had to pay condolences to a family for the death of all their sons in the Civil War. However, Ryan is also an injustice: to the squad, he is only a man whose life seems to be of greater value than the eight soldiers who are putting their lives at risk to save him. Thus, this two-sided portrayal of Ryan's moral value provides a framework for the characters' dramatic arc and reflects the dialectical debate about war in America at the time of the film's production and to which the resolution of *SPR* seeks to contribute.

Various subjective appraisals influence our feelings for Ryan: With Caparzo's death, Ryan comes to be seen as responsible for the squad's misfortunes. The emotional impact on the viewer of Caparzo's fate is echoed by Reiben, who vents his anger at the character he does not know yet. Miller's focalization also leads him to feel hostility towards Ryan. As the captain remarks in the church, the audience expects Ryan to be worthy of what this quest represents. Later, the squad believes they have found the soldier they are looking for. He is told of the death of his brothers and their mission to bring him home. At this point, the subjective focalization of the squad elicits sympathy for Ryan and guilt (as it does in the squad) for having pinned the blame on him for their comrade's death. However, the Ryan we sympathize with turns out not to be the right Ryan.

Wade's death adds to the group's and the audience's animosity towards Ryan, particularly when, upon meeting the real Ryan, he does not agree to be rescued. As anticipated by the squad and expressed by Ryan himself, the mission is pointless and an injustice that has led to the pointless deaths of its comrades. However, they are moved by the solidary reaction of the young soldier who wants to stay "with the only brothers that I have left". As Horvath declares, saving Ryan goes from being an absurd mission to "the only decent thing we were able to pull out of this God awful shitty mess". This resolves the debate over the morality of the mission, equating the characters' view with what prompted the search, closing the dramatic arc of the squad in line with the parameters of classical cinema. Ryan becomes a moral icon at this point, giving meaning to the characters' sacrifice, as he, like them, places his sense of brotherhood above military orders. But Ryan is not to be an icon either: he is a man who cries like a child at the all-out assault on Ramelle; he is the elderly man who stumbles dejectedly at Miller's grave.

The emotional play of Ryan's identity that shapes the structure of *SPR* leads the viewer, as in *Citizen Kane*, to judge a man erroneously. As Upham recalls, *SPR* places us before the scaffold of war, where it is not easy to judge a man: "War [...] brings men into such swift and close collision in critical moments that man measures man". As mentioned above, the authorial presence in the epilogue establishes what the veteran truly is: an elderly man who has devoted his life to honouring the sacrifice of those to whom he owes it. The value of the soldier and his missions is his moral purpose, and this alone will serve to reconcile and heal the Vietnam syndrome that had divided the nation.

## 8. Conclusion

Our findings show how the structure of *SPR* brings the narrative *schema* of the classical model into collision with that of anti-Vietnam War cinema (in particular *Apocalypse Now*) and that of *Citizen Kane*, which, despite being produced in the classical period, has authorial and expressive structural features. These two patterns contravene numerous conventions of the classical structural paradigm in order, through the former, to engage the viewer emotionally and morally with the characters and convey a *real* experience of war. In the latter case, it encourages the viewer to reflect on the meaningful value of its structural construction. The filmmaker, through a continuous use of these recognizable and purposeful *schemas*, shapes the reading of the conventional events. The formal *collisions* with respect to their standard content make the viewer aware of the filmmaker's evident artifice, and they beckon to seek a metaphorical meaning in the narrative.

With its cinematographic roots in Eisenstein's ideas, this system of persuasive communication is effective and precise for conveying an ideological message far more than when the great director first used it, since today's public is more film literate. The *pathetic* design of *SPR*'s structure through recognizable colliding schemas define and articulate the idea or message, highlighting to the audience that they are before a meaningful formulation that must be decoded and interpreted, leading to a singular perspective: the filmmaker's. The variety of schemas employed, which appeal to different types of people, shows the author's interest in uniting them around a single constructive, moral message, in line with the political strategy of the time. This shows that, in defining its structure, the director always had the viewer at the centre of the filmic war narrative.

## 9. Bibliography

- Allison, Tanine. (2017). "Virtue Through Suffering: The American War Film at the End of Celluloid". *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 45, núm. 1, 50–61. doi: 10.1080/01956051.2017.1271655.
- Apocalypse Now*. (1979). Francis Ford Coppola and John Milius (wrs.), Francis Ford Coppola (dir.), US: Zoetrope.
- Basinger, Jeanine. (1986). *The World War II Combat Film. Anatomy of a Genre*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Basinger, Jeanine. (1998). "Translating War: The Combat Film Genre and Saving Private Ryan". *Perspectives: American Historical Association Newsletter*, vol.36, núm. 7.
- Biesecker, Barbara. (2002). "Remembering World War I: The rhetoric and Politics of National Commemoration at the turn of the 21st Century". *Quarterly of Journal Speech*, vol. 88, núm. 4, 393-409.
- Bordwell, David; Staiger, Janet and Thompson, Kristin. (1985). *The Classical Hollywood Cinema. Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960*, London: Routledge.
- Bordwell, David. (2006). *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*, California: University of California Press.
- Brown, William. (2009). "It's a shark eat shark world: Steven Spielberg's ambiguous politics". *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, vol. 7, núm. 1, 13–22, doi: 10.1080/17400300802602858.

- Burnetts, Charles. (2009). "Steven Spielberg's 'feelgood' endings and sentimentality". *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, vol. 7, núm. 1, 79–92, doi: 10.1080/17400300802602999.
- Citizen Kane*. (1941), Herman J. Mankiewicz and Orson Wells (wrs.) Orson Welles (dir.) United States: RKO.
- Creel, James. (2020). "Gender, Horror, and War: Reading Saving Private Ryan as Horror Film". *Journal of Popular Culture*, vol. 53, núm. 1, 215–223, doi: 10.1111/jpcu.12884.
- Dancyger, Ken. (2007). *The Technique of Film and Video Editing: History, Theory and Practice*, Burlington: Focal press.
- Dancyger, Ken. (2016). "Editing for subtext: altering the meaning of the narrative". *Cineaste*, vol. 34, núm. 2, 38–42.
- Dunkirk*. (2017). Christopher Nolan (wr.), Christopher Nolan (dir.), United Kingdom, Netherlands, France and United States: Warner Bros.
- Eagle, Jonna K. (2012). "A rough ride: Strenuous spectatorship and the early cinema of assaults". *Screen*, vol. 53, núm. 1, 18–35, doi: 10.1093/screen/hjr055.
- Ehrenhaus, Peter. (2001) "Why we fought: Holocaust memory in Spielberg's Saving Private Ryan". *Critical Studies in Communication*, vol. 18, núm. 3, 321-337.
- Eisenstein, Sergei. (2010a). "The montage of film attractions", in Richard Taylor (ed.), *Sergei Eisenstein, Selected Works volume 1. Writings 1922-1934*, London: British Film Institute, 39-59.
- Eisenstein, Sergei. (2010b). "'Eh' On the Purity of Film Language", in Richard Taylor (ed.), *Sergei Eisenstein, Selected Works volume 1. Writings 1922-1934*, London: British Film Institute, pp. 285-294.
- Eisenstein, Sergei. (1946). "Organic Unity and Pathos in the Composition of 'Potemkin'", in Sergei Eisenstein, *Notes of a Film Director*, Moscow: Arts Library, pp.53-61.
- Eken, M. Evren. (2019). "How geopolitical becomes personal: Method acting, war films and affect". *Journal of International Political Theory*, vol. 15, núm. 2, 210–228, doi: 10.1177/1755088219832328.
- Fernández-Ramírez, Laura. (2019). "El lenguaje rupturista y expresivo del realismo bélico clásico". *L'Atalante. Revista de Estudios Cinematográficos*, vol. 27, 105-118.
- Gates, Philippa. (2005). "Fighting the good fight: The real and the moral in the contemporary Hollywood combat film". *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 22, núm. 4, 297–310.
- Gunning, Tom. (1990). "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde", in Thomas Elsaesser (ed.), *Early cinema: Space frame narrative*, London: British Film Institute, 56-63
- Hacksaw Ridge*. (2016). Robert Schenkkan and Andrew Knight (wrs.), Mel Gibson (dir.), United States and Australia: Summit Entertainment.
- Hasian, Marouf. (2001). "Nostalgic Longings, Memories of the 'Good War' and cinematic representations in Saving Private Ryan". *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 18, núm. 3, 338-358.
- Hochberg, Gil. (2013). "Soldiers as filmmakers: On the prospect of 'shooting war' and the question of ethical spectatorship". *Screen*, vol. 54, núm. 1, 44–61, doi: 10.1093/screen/hjs066.
- King, Geoff. (2009). *Spectacular narratives. Hollywood in the age of the blockbuster*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co.
- Klien, Stephen A. (2005). "Public Character and the Simulacrum: The Construction of the Soldier Patriot and Citizen Agency in Black Hawk Down". *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, vol. 22, núm. 5, 427-449.



- Kuri, Subrato K. and Kaufman, Eric K. (2020). "Leadership Insights from Hollywood-Based War Movies: An Opportunity for Vicarious Learning". *Journal of Leadership Studies*, vol. 14, núm. 1, 53–61, doi: 10.1002/jls.21682.
- Langford, Barry. (2010). *Post-Classical Hollywood. Film industry, style and ideology since 1945*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Loftin, Greg. (2018). "Writing-for-the-cut: What can screenwriters learn from film editors about storytelling?". *Journal of Screenwriting*, vol. 9, núm. 1, 85–102, doi: 10.1386/josc.9.1.85\_1.
- Making Private Ryan*. (2004). Laurent Bouzereau (wr.), US: Dreamworks Home Entertainment.
- Montero, Julio and Fernández-Ramírez, Laura. (2015). "La experiencia de la guerra en la pantalla: el desembarco en la playa de Omaha en *Salvar al Soldado Ryan*". *Palabra Clave*, vol. 18, núm. 1, 83-110.
- Muruzábal, Amaya. (2007). *La representación cinematográfica del regreso. El cine de veteranos como expresión privilegiada del género bélico. El caso práctico de The Best Years of Our Lives y The Deer Hunter*. Ph.D thesis, Pamplona: Universidad de Navarra.
- Muruzábal, Amaya and Grandío, María del Mar. (2009). "La representación de la guerra en la ficción televisiva contemporánea". *Mediaciones sociales*, vol. 5, núm. 2, 63-83.
- Patterson, James T. (2005). *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush v. Gore*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Platoon*. (1986). Oliver Stone (wr.) Oliver Stone (dir.) United States and United Kingdom: Hemdale Film.
- Ropars, Marie Claire. (1990). "The Overture of October. Enclitic 2.2", in Jacques Aumont and Michel Marie, *Análisis del film*, Barcelona: Paidós comunicació, 50-72.
- Saving Private Ryan*. (1998). Robert Rodat (wr.), Steven Spielberg (dir.) United States: DreamWorks SKG, Paramount Pictures, Amblin Entertainment.
- Slotkin, Richard. (2017). "Thinking Mythologically: Black Hawk Down, the 'Platoon Movie', and the War of Choice in Iraq". *European journal of American Studies*, vol. 12, núm. 2. doi: 10.4000/ejas.12000.
- Sommerlad, Joe. (2018). "Saving Private Ryan at 20: When Steven Spielberg set the gold standard for war movie realism". *The Independent*, 24 July. Recuperado de <https://medium.com/@JoeSommerlad/saving-private-ryan-20-years-on-how-steinberg-set-the-gold-standard-for-war-movie-realism-cb936f51fee7> (fecha de acceso: 26-01-2021)
- Stam, Robert. (2001). *Teorías del cine*, Barcelona: Paidós Comunicació.
- Valantin, Jean-Michel. (2005). *Hollywood, the Pentagon and Washington. The Movies and National Security from World War II to the Present Day*, London: Anthem Press.
- Whalley, Jim. (2011) "'A process to learn something': Pearl Harbor and the Producer's Game in contemporary Hollywood". *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, vol. 9, núm. 3, 265–282. doi: 10.1080/17400309.2011.585857.