RES MILITARIS
REVUE EUROPEENNE D ETUDES EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF MILITARY STUDIES
Social Science Journal

Teaching and Learning through Cinematic Images of the Military

By

Remi M. Hajjar
This article is my own work! I do not represent or speak for the US Military Academy at West Point, New York, or the US Army.

Abstract

This article is a personal account of and reflection on my experiences teaching an undergraduate course titled "Cinematic Images of War and the Military", each spring semester from 2014 through 2021 (all semesters except 2020) at the United States Military Academy (USMA) at West Point, New York, for a total of seven iterations. In such an exercise, using the first-person singular is best.

Senior sociology majors in their last semester at USMA took this course on the sociology of military films. USMA graduates around 1,000 students every year and provides them with a baccalaureate degree and a commission as an officer in the US Army. All newly minted West Point graduate lieutenants spend at least five years on active duty. This paper will discuss some pertinent background about the class including parts of my teaching philosophy; some reflections about teaching and insights gleaned in the different blocks of the course ; and will offer a conclusion about this course and my fulfilment in teaching cinematic analyses of military films to senior cadets.[1]

Background to the Class and a Bit about My Teaching Philosophy

When I reported to West Point for a second assignment as a faculty member in the summer of 2013, the sociology program asked me to refurbish and teach a sociology of military films course in the spring semester of the 2013-2014 academic year. The course had been taught many years prior to 2013, and the sociology program wished to bring that course back into the curriculum. I accepted that request (not sure if I had much of a "vote" at the time, although I was eager to teach the course), and I have deeply enjoy teaching that course ever since the first time. This paper shares my reflections, incorporating students' perspectives, about this course.

I found the course enabled our classes to engage in deep thought about interpreting film as a form of art and cultural expression, the application of sociology and other academic fields, relevant professional insights about the armed forces and society, warfare and other military operations,[2] a variety of historical and contemporary topics, the mission of West Point, greater knowledge of self, and enhanced insights about civil-military relations. Each time I taught the class new lessons surfaced from different students' thoughts and our discussions; new movies; fresh global, national, or military events; and other dynamic factors.[3] I enjoy learning from millennial and generation Z students; the cadets had a lot to teach me – and from their perspective, I hope they gleaned some interesting insights from an "old" Generation X professor and Army colonel. Knowing that the senior students in this spring course always are

[1] Hajjar, 2020.
[2] Ender & Hajjar, 2019.
[3] Ender, 2019.

months away from graduating West Point and becoming newly minted US Army officers provides a special moment to delve into leadership and professional lessons during the class. I found the class helped stave off the classic symptoms of "senioritis" often suffered by West Point "Firsties" (nickname for seniors) – and "end-of-academic-year-itis" for me. I found the small class size, typically ranging from ten to eighteen cadets per section, very conducive to creating robust conversations in our weekly (and sometimes twice weekly) course meetings of two hours.

Sharing a bit about aspects of my teaching background and philosophy that manifested in this course will help set the stage for what follows. I prefer teaching juniors and seniors, and from the fall of 2013 to the present, the vast majority of my students have been seniors with a sprinkling of juniors. I like teaching seminar-style courses that border on using a graduate-level approach, at least one that stylistically resembles most of the classes I took as a sociology graduate student at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. I assign fewer papers than many other undergraduate courses, but those papers assigned typically bear more comprehensive requirements and weight; the military films course required two papers (equivalent for a mid-term and a final exam).

I work hard to create a student-centred class environment that helps pupils create and construct their own meanings, and structure my classes to try to achieve this goal. In the military films course, each student must serve as a seminar leader for a one full class, requiring the student to guide an in-depth class discussion about a movie, class readings tied to that lesson and movie, professional insights, and to incorporate the other students' reactions to the movie and readings. I also assess class participation, and let the class know that both quality and quantity count for their verbal in-class contributions. I found tracking and tallying class participation much easier to do during the numerous student-led classes. Finally, I asked students to bring in a short one-page paper of reactions to each lesson about our focal movie and the accompanying reading assignment. A reaction could constitute academic, professional, personal, or other thoughts that occurred during or after a film analysis, or from lesson readings. I periodically reviewed the reactions to simply check if students did them; I did not grade the quality of the reactions. I checked for effort and whether students wrote personal reactions to the assignment and movie. The reactions helped students, particularly introverted cadets, to serve as a "script" or agenda of items they wished to discuss at class. Many of these evaluated items – the reactions, the student-led seminars, and class participation – structurally set the conditions for a student-centred class.

Another critical way I helped to create class climates conducive to strong student participation entailed limiting my own commentary in the class. Doing this effectively became a careful balancing act for me to achieve as a teacher. I wanted most of the talking to come from the students—causing me to avoid too much lecturing. So I pick and choose times to comment carefully, to sometimes help deepen the conversation and use of sociology to analyze films, share professional lessons from my 29+ years as an Army officer and four years as a cadet, and offer some thoughts about how the movies pertained to my life experiences, world events, and other topics.

As a teacher I've learned that authentic and candid teacher discourse in class tends to prompt similarly genuine student sharing, which deepens trust, depth, emotional investment, and other ingredients that breed positive learning environments and class climates. In these open classes, many important messages and revelations surface that extend well beyond academic applications. When cadets publicly come out of the closet as a sexual minority for the first time in a class; discuss their experiences with racism, sexism, being religiously out-

grouped, or other forms of discrimination; talk about abuses suffered in their families or private lives; and other very personal stories, as a teacher I think these heighten the class's honesty and courage, underscore the importance of our agreement to maintain group confidentiality, and ultimately promote education and growth for students and teacher alike.

Finally, I would like to share that I also aimed to use the course to review sociological theories, concepts, and themes cadets learned throughout their tenures as sociology majors. At the first lesson and class meeting, I ask students to bring a short three-page paper that summarizes some of the core aspects of sociology (i.e., summarize a few of the major sociological perspectives; define race and ethnicity; define sex and gender; civil-military relations; etc.), including some of the favorite things they learned in their major. This short sociology review paper becomes a list of items for students to ponder as the course proceeds to see how core sociological themes pertain to movies, readings, and class conversations. This review of sociology theories and concepts throughout the course also helps seniors to prepare for the upcoming sociology major fields test that occurs every year at the end of the spring semester.

The Blocks of the Military Films Course

The organization of the main body of this paper uses the blocks of the course as its guiding structure. These blocks include humor, race and ethnicity, sex and gender: the expanding role of women in the military; traditional masculinity in the military; Ground Hog Day; socialization; postmodernism in military films; foreign films; contemporary films: global war on terrorism (GWOT); and death and dying. Each subsection that follows aims to give a flavor for some of the main movies watched, academic theories and concepts discussed, professional insights covered including thoughts about leadership and civil-military relations, personal thoughts and enhanced self-awareness, and other reflections that stood out as worthy of mentioning. The goal is to provide a reader with a taste of what transpired as the course flowed from one topic to another, and the lessons the class learned along that dynamic journey – including changes over time.

Humor

One the common movies we watched in the humor block is Good Morning Vietnam (1987), starring Robin Williams as a disc jockey in Vietnam. This movie shows how humor can help to alleviate pain, trauma, disillusionment, scars, and other difficulties suffered during war. Williams bucks the traditional military hierarchy several times in the movie to provide soldiers with jokes, sarcasm, and other commentary that reveal truthful sentiments about Vietnam, such as whether or not the war was escalating in scope and severity in the mid-to-late 1960's, drug use, and other taboo topics that enabled soldiers to escape their plights and laugh – in many cases about things they probably already knew. For most of the movie, a general officer in Williams's unit protected him from the wrath of other more rigid leaders who wanted to remove Williams and punish him—especially the unit's command sergeant major. The general sensed that Williams' antics, which sometimes broke the rules and cultural norms such as military respect and order, brought tired and disillusioned soldiers needed comic relief. Near the movie's end, the command sergeant major set Williams up to get killed by having him travel on a very dangerous road. A Vietnamese friend of Williams winds up saving him from being killed in that hazardous place, but that event leads to the movie's major surprise.

Williams pursues a Vietnamese woman throughout the movie, and befriends her brother and family in the process. He creates a good relationship with her brother, Tran, and even protects him from US soldiers earlier in the movie. But the movie's surprise climax is that Tran secretly works with the Vietcong (enemy) and plots attacks against U.S. soldiers. Tran's friendship with Williams is strong enough whereby Tran chooses to save Williams' life, but Williams' association with Tran gets him kicked out of Vietnam, even though Williams did not know Tran served the enemy until the movie's climax. The class used this part of the movie to discuss the historical difficulty of defining the enemy during wars, which especially emanates as a crucial issue in counterinsurgencies such as Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan.

As one who studies cross-cultural competence, I appreciated the cross-cultural lessons in the movie and the importance of seeing different perspectives.[4] The movie teaches the audience a bit about Vietnamese culture as Williams befriends a young local woman and her family, including different cultural mores and norms (Williams learns that dating rituals and norms in the U.S. do not translate to Vietnam). The movie also created important reflective questions for our class to explore. One example is what if we grew up in a poor Vietnamese family during the time of the movie, or even in rural families in Iraq or Afghanistan in the last 20 years ? Would we be quick to support US and coalition forces knowing that we might suffer violence from the Vietcong, militias fighting against the US and coalition in Iraq, or the Taliban in Afghanistan ? As American and coalition partner soldiers faced complex military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan since 9/11, many of the key lessons learned during the Vietnam War still resonate – including how to build rapport with foreign people as a key part of the mission.[5] These are merely a few of the intriguing conversation topics that often ensued when our class analyzed and discussed the movie, Good Morning Vietnam. In addition to the fruitful education fodder stemming from discussing the film, I get enjoyment from many of Robin Williams' movies.

Race and Ethnicity

Given the sociology major seniors in this course are demographically unique, I observed strong student interest in discussing the topics of diversity and inclusion. One of the course's most popular blocks is race and ethnicity. Several movies have worked well for this block, including Antwone Fisher (2002), Glory (1990), Remember the Titans (2000), and others. In the spring of 2019, a woman led our class discussant about Antwone Fisher, and she surfaced an intriguing question. She asked whether a movie could accurately capture the "black gaze" – a lens or view into and of African American and black subculture – without having a black director ? That question and many others pushed us to learn, ponder, and ask why that might be the case ? How often have black people directed movies over the course of cinematic history in the US, especially movies about the military and race relations therein ? We never reached a definitive answer to her provocative, insightful, timely, and fruitful question, but several cadets – especially black cadets in that class – concurred with her premise that a black director tends to more accurately capture a "black gaze" than non-black (typically white) directors. In the spring of 2021 a student wrote a novel paper about the dearth of "whole black characters" in movies for his mid-term project, emphasizing how Glory seemed to fall short whereas Antwone Fisher allowed the audience to see fuller and richer black character development in the movie. Finally, another cadet shared with me in the spring of 2021 about a potential over-emphasis on African American topics and an under-emphasis on other races and ethnicities in some of our conversations, particularly a shortage of experiences of Asian

[4] Hajjar, 2010.
[5] Hajjar, 2014.

American soldiers. These experiences have taught me to adapt the course and incorporate new perspectives, be sensitive to and curious about the views and insights of different students, and the value of empowering all students to have a voice to promote learning.

Although the movie Remember the Titans conspicuously explores race relations on one of America's first mixed race high school football teams in the early 1970's, its tie to the military is subtle yet transmits a powerful message. One of my favorite symbolic messages in the movie that brings together black and white football players onto one team for the first time during heated race relations in the school's Virginian community is that two of the most open-minded players come from military families. These two white players also come from different social class backgrounds. Louie Lastic is a large-framed lineman who comes from a Navy family, presumably from an enlisted sailor's family. In one scene Louie sat down with black players at a lunch table at a time in the movie when the team was fractured along racial lines. A black player angrily asked him, why don't you go sit with your own people ? Louie simply stated, I don't have any people, and he remained seated with black players. A black player named "Preacher", who often brought Christian themes and songs into the movie, seemed like one of the most open-minded players as well, and he quickly accepted Louie and encouraged his black friends to let Louie remain seated with them. A bit later in the movie the audience finds out Louie has no expectations to attend college, and considers himself "white trash" (strong lower working class habitus). At that point the head coach, Yoast, discretely tells Louie to visit him for academic tutoring and mentorship. By the movie's end we find out Louie's test scores and grades qualified him for college, and he hugged and profusely thanked Coach Yoast.

The other white player who quickly becomes an important bridging element on the team at a time with significant racial tensions as the team first formed is a transfer student nicknamed "Sunshine". His father is a US Marine Corps colonel who spontaneously brings his son to a team practice. As the two main coaches tell the colonel that his son cannot play on their team because his position is already filled, the colonel explains that he didn't want his son playing for the other local football team because that team doesn't accept different races. He states if young people can serve and fight together in the military, then they should go to school and play sports together. In that scene, the coaches observe Sunshine throw a football very far with great accuracy, and they agree to let him play on the team. Sunshine's dad's rank of colonel reveals his upper middle-class status. The movie also suggests Sunshine might be gay. He kisses a boy in the locker-room, presumably as a prank, but the movie leaves the question open and never provides a clear answer about Sunshine's sexuality.

Although this paper discussed the two military kids as important cultural bridges on the football team, the reader should not infer that the military is a perfectly harmonious place for minorities to serve, including ethnic, racial, or other minority groups. On the one hand, Moskos and Butler argue that in the period of about fifteen to twenty years at the end of the Vietnam War, the military did serve as one of the most racially well-integrated places in US society – one where black people routinely ordered around white people and soldiers of different races commonly hung out with each other.[6] This was not a common practice in many other places in civilian US society in the 1980's or 1990's in the US. On the other hand, some scientists argue that despite many changes for the better for black officers and soldiers in the military, the

[6] Moskos & Butler, 1996.

continuing shortage of black general officers in the US Army remains a glaring problem in need of resolution.[7]

The discussion about Remember the Titans also must include a discussion of a favourite actor, Denzel Washington, who has appeared in a litany of movies as a soldier, pilot, and police officer. In Remember the Titans, Washington serves as the head coach for a high school football team that integrates black and white players for one of the first time in the nation's history. Washington's military roles in other movies – such as Glory, Antwone Fisher, Courage Under Fire, and others have also created robust sociological conversations in our course. Washington specializes in being a strong leader who often suffers, reveals deep resilience, and tends to overcome obstacles and prevail. Getting to dissect his acting prowess as part of this course is a true joy. With regards to the course block on race and ethnicity, although the movies may over-represent African American topics, the course at large has movies that also show viewpoints of other races and ethnicities (such as Good Morning Vietnam). But I will seek military films that represent different groups, especially soldiers and characters of Hispanic descent, moving forward as a needed future course innovation.

Sex, Gender and the Expanding Role of Women in the Military

Given the expanding role of women in the US military[8], including graduates of the elite US Army Ranger School, we seek movies that explore this timely topic. We have watched strong women leads in both military movies and others that show similarity to military service, such as Divergent (2014), Hunger Games (2012), and The Matrix (1999). Two mainstay movies we've watched in the course include Courage Under Fire (1996) and G.I. Jane (1997), with the latter receiving the greatest level of cadet interest over the past six years. G.I. Jane casts Demi Moore serving as the first woman to graduate from the coveted and elite Navy Seal School. She undergoes brutal physical and psychological harassment, and cunningly and bravely navigates a political barricade that nearly derails her special forces training. Many interesting topics emanated in our class conversations about G.I. Jane. One point is that movie came out in 1997, nearly two decades before the first women began to graduate from the US Army Ranger School (similar to US Navy Seal School). Thus, this movie served as another creatively forward-looking Hollywood movie that accurately predicted changes in military policy.

The class also typically discussed Demi Moore as the main actress, and cynically questioned why the movie had to portray the first Navy Seal as an attractive woman. Many scenes in the movie showed her body in wet, tight fitting clothing, and there is a shower scene that shows partial nudity. Interestingly, the movie directly addresses the factor of selecting a physically attractive candidate for the elite school. A woman politician, Anne Bancroft, who has great influence in deciding who attends Seal School as the first woman candidate, exclaims that Demi's file reveals a naval officer who is fit (a competitive swimmer), intelligent (won an award for writing), and beautiful. The politician rejected other equally qualified candidates based on their looks, including one who "looked like the wife of a Russian beet farmer", or another who needed a chromosome test (i.e., the politician deemed too masculine in appearance). The politician also met with Demi Moore's character before her entrance into Seal School to ensure she was not "batting for the other side" and was "a solvent heterosexual". She argued this was important so Demi's entrance into the school would not get ruined if

[7] Smith, 2010.

[8] Sandhoff & Segal, 2013.

scrutinous investigators uncovered she was a sexual minority or lesbian. Given the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy was enforced in 1997, that theme fit the times. Parts of our class discussions include how national and military culture have changed over time, with an evolving acceptance of women, the LGBTQ community, and other minority groups.

The class conversations enabled us to discuss many of the classic points of debate about why women should (or should not) serve in frontline or combat military roles. Some of these include women becoming distractions to the men (sexual attraction, flirtation, intimate relationships forming), the need for physical abilities including lifting heavy weights and other challenging requirements, unique medical and hygiene needs compared to men, and so on. The movie helped us examine and review the sociological literature about women's role in the military, review US military society and culture of the time of the movie (1997), and compare and contrast that era to the current America and armed forces. The movie's climax puts Moore in an actual secretive combat scenario with high stakes where she saves an injured Seal by dragging him off an active battlefield to safety. Ironically, she saved her wounded head drill sergeant, who skeptically questioned her many times during the military training in the movie about whether she would have the physical strength to carry a large soldier out of dangerous combat conditions.

We watched Courage Under Fire (1996) a few times, which also enabled us to explore the rising role of women in the military. Meg Ryan portrays an Army captain and helicopter pilot who, during a rescue operation in Operation Desert Shield and Storm, decides to turn her medical aircraft into a fighting aircraft to help save some pinned down US troops. Her team creates and drops an improvised bomb on enemy combatants as a way to protect US soldiers in the desert. In the process of doing this unique mission, Ryan's helicopter gets shot down and she's trapped in the desert along with a handful of her soldiers. Their recollections of her actions comprise the heart of this film. Denzel Washington is the officer assigned to investigate whether Ryan's actions merit the nation's highest award for valour – the Medal of Honour – which would make Ryan the first woman soldier ever given that top honour. Washington battles his own demons of depression, alcoholism, and sheer humiliation after the tank unit he commanded in the same war accidentally committed fratricide. His tank shot another US tank accidentally at night with ambiguous battlefield conditions ; he confused a friendly tank with an enemy tank during a very hazy and manic moment of night combat. The Army initially lied about what transpired in that accident and battle, further pushing Washington towards depression and alienation. His assignment to investigate Ryan's case gave him an opportunity to reinvigorate his career, and indeed, his life.

The different soldiers who recount what happened when Ryan's medical team spent a night pinned down in the Iraqi desert vary widely. Some accounts cast Ryan as a stoic, decisive, indomitable, and highly effectively combat leader who not only saved the lives of her team, but also saved the lives of nearby US soldiers – the ones her medical team originally tried to save in the first place. Another account casts Ryan as indecisive, highly emotional, ineffectual, defeatist, and that her weak leadership put her team at great risk. By the movie's end, the audience finds out the truth: Ryan acted decisively, effectively, bravely, and that she did indeed save the lives of her own team in addition to the nearby and stranded US troops. She is killed in her heroic sacrifice, but the cause of her death remains vague. The audience discovers a combat arms sergeant (assigned to the medical team for added security), who defied her and even accidentally shot her during a heated exchange with the officer, stranded her in the desert where she died. The movie provides rich fodder for multifaceted discussions, including mainly

military men's resistance (at the time of the movie) towards women entering combat arms roles. Like G.I. Jane, this movie foresaw the future, with women soldiers today now entering Infantry, Armour, and other combat arms branches – ones that in past times were off-limits to women. During the spring of 2021, a few cadets argued that these two movies, G.I. Jane and Courage Under Fire, might communicate messages that counter the idea that women belong in the military's elite, combat arms given the nearly insurmountable cultural and structural obstacles the protagonists faced. Another student critiqued the fact that the audience mainly learns about Captain Walden in Courage Under Fire based on the input of male soldiers who served with her (and her parents); her voice was absent in her own military autobiography.

Finally, this block reminds me to keep my eyes and ears open to military films that delve into the topics of LGBTQ soldiers, and I recognize the course has a void regarding this topic. I think the next generation of military films will cover LGBTQ soldiers who courageously and effectively lead soldiers in combat. Cinema needs to cast light on the reality that sexual minorities have served and led other troops in the US military throughout history, and their selfless service merits a movie to underscore their contributions. Their service in secrecy in a nation and organization that for many years stigmatized them only increases the necessity to illuminate their courage.

Traditional Masculinity in the Military

We watched many movies that directly or indirectly explore masculinity, especially traditional military hyper-masculinity. Over the years we have watched Full Metal Jacket (1987), Major Payne (1995), GI Jane, and the classic, The Great Santini (1979). In The Great Santini, Robert Duvall plays hyper-macho Bull Meecham, a combat veteran fighter pilot who cannot establish boundaries between his military identity and family life. He seeks to impose military order on his own family, sometimes deploying physically, psychologically, and emotionally stringent – and at times abusive – behaviours towards his own family. He admits he's an old war veteran who currently suffers as "a warrior without a war", when he shares many drinks with a military friend at a local bar. Alcohol serves as a necessary catalyst that empowers Bull to occasionally share his feelings of emptiness, in part for not being able to return to combat. The audience also observes his white family's openness about African-American people in their community, which the movie portrays as a bit uncommon in their southern US town many decades in the past. This movie also provides insights about the lives of military families and children.[9] When we watched and discussed this movie in the spring of 2019, one cadet shared with our class that our conversation about The Great Santini helped him to finally understand his own combat veteran father's likely undiagnosed PTSD.

A few years ago, I advised a cadet who wrote a senior thesis and final paper in the military films course about veterans who reflect about combat and reveal a deep contra-diction – both yearning to return to the deep camaraderie, feelings of purpose, and the excitement of war while simultaneously dreading and being haunted by its darker sides and traumatic memories. This is another topic we discuss in class : how many current US military veterans

[9] Ender, 2005.

struggle with PTSD, including not reaching out for help, and how this connects to the warrior ethos (ultra-toughness) embedded in hyper-masculine military culture. We talk about how leaders need to re-craft asking for help as a form of courage to influence suffering veterans to reach out when necessary.

Groundhog Day

How does the movie Groundhog Day (1993) apply to the military ? The Groundhog Day concept – a monotonous and seemingly inescapable repetition of the same day over time – applies to military deployments that have similarly excruciating sameness and mundanity.[10] The concept became so popular during the post-9/11 Iraq War that even General officers used the expression to describe military life in theatre. The tricky part for most soldiers who are not serving in high action missions is that 99 boring days in a row can dangerously reduce motivation, awareness and reaction times, which make an attack that occurs on the proverbial 100th day more deadly and dangerous. So that is one part of how the Groundhog Day concept applies to the armed forces : leaders must prevent their units and troops from getting caught in a socio-psychological trap of sameness, dullness, predictability, and extreme routine. This trap of mundanity can lead to increased rates of anomie, depression and despair. I enjoyed discussing my experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq with cadets in ways that showed healthy patterns and routines, and how to keep soldiers focused on the mission at hand and socially connected to each other – like a deployed family. I also incorporated lessons learned during the summer of 2019 in a forward deployed unit in Eastern Europe where I experienced some Groundhog Day feelings. The leadership lesson is to find innovative ways to keep soldiers engaged, thinking, connected, and aware of little details to avoid surprise attacks and to keep themselves psychologically healthy. Ender (2012) reported how some creative commanders in Iraq would let bored soldiers, who may not necessarily have specialties or training for frontline operations, periodically rotate in and out of such roles to stave off boredom (while giving overworked soldiers a needed rest).

There is another reason why I enjoy teaching the movie Groundhog Day. I had a quick but humorous encounter with Bill Murray at the red-carpet premiere for a different movie, The Monuments Men, back in 2013. When I asked him : “Mr. Murray, could we take a picture together ?”, his classic sour charisma surfaced when he looked at the awards on my uniform and answered : “Well, I’ll bet one of those ribbons is for marksmanship, so I’m going to say yes !”. Further, Murray’s support of some of my favourite hometown teams, such as the Chicago Cubs, furthers my favourable opinion of the actor. However, despite my positive thoughts about Murray, some quick research about Murray clued me into the reality that like a lot of other celebrities and people in general, Murray is not without his demons and problems. Nonetheless, I am a Murray fan, which made a new experience I had in the military films class a few years ago when we discussed Groundhog Day even more jarring.

I taught twenty-four cadets (split up in two different sections) in the spring of 2019, and for the first time ever a few women cadets voiced their disgust and deep discomfort with this movie. One said she had to turn it off as she watched it for our homework assignment. She complained that Murray’s character, Phil Connor, was a sexual predator. He did indeed use his repetition of the same day to gain information about local townswomen he found attractive so he could deploy what he remembered in future iterations of that day to sleep with them. Further, one of the major themes of the movie was Connor’s nearly perpetual rejection by his co-worker, Rita, and his continued aggressive attempts to sleep with her. He was forceful, manipulative,

[10] Ender, 2012.

deceptive, and obsessed with this goal – until his character changed course in a much more positive direction at the movie's end. I think the impact of the MeToo Movement and other emergent public outrage over powerful men who attacked and assaulted women (and in some cases young men) led to this new reaction in class – reflecting changes in broader US and international culture about intolerance of and speaking out against sexual harassment and assault.

What I lament as a teacher is that for many years, we used this movie and did not discuss the behaviours that link to predatory (rapist) patterns. It's highly probable some of my former students perceived and felt disgust in watching Murray's creepy, predatory antics ; perhaps some students dismissed them as more suitable of the times (the movie came out in 1993). But at least some students in the 2019 class surfaced this timely point that has relevance for Army leaders as it informs us about how the nation and military needs to change cultural habits and values – and to speak up ! We made this topic a more explicit learning point in the 2021 iteration of the class. This is an important topic to discuss given the Army continues to struggle to better incorporate women into its ranks and to change its longstanding, traditional, and hyper-masculine culture. I am grateful that some cadets brought their disgust with parts of the movie to our attention as a teaching lesson. I'm also a bit embarrassed that this realization did not occur to me as something that needed deliberate discussion in the past. I'm learning and growing, too, as a teacher. I continue to appreciate learning in this course, even if some of the lessons are sharp, unpleasant, and cause me reflective discomfort. But learning and growing will enable me to remain relevant as an educator and mentor to cadets (soon-to-be Army officers), while helping the Academy, Army, and nation to continue to change and evolve.

Socialization

Several movies worked well in the course to illustrate the topic of military socialization,[11] including Full Metal Jacket, Remember the Titans, Men of Honour (2000), and Major Payne. Shortly after teaching this course for the first time, I learned that my personal opinions about whether I enjoyed movies or felt films had good quality should not cloud the issue of whether they were relevant to the course and cadet learning. In the spring of 2014 when I first watched the movie Major Payne, I found it very distasteful, poorly made, and quite awful. But it was on a list of movies for the socialization block of the course on an old draft of the syllabus, and I elected to keep it on my syllabus. I didn't know much about the movie, but I liked the idea of giving students more movie choices, so I took a risk by keeping it as an option. A student chose Major Payne, and we watched it on our own for homework. I noted that in our student-led discussion of the film, our analysis of the movie worked well to illuminate military socialization (i.e., use of a total institution[12]), masculine military culture, combat veterans with PTSD and their re-integration into civilian life, and other topics. I also noted in that semester for our mid-term paper, Major Payne was one of the most widely written about movies, and the students did a fine job of illustrating myriad sociological and professionally relevant topics when discussing that film.

In our discussions of Major Payne, I enjoyed pointing out to the class that the diverse squad had all kinds of young kids, including cadets of different races and even a disabled kid. But I asked why this diverse military squad of cadets incorporated so many different people, including a disabled boy, yet it did not have a single woman cadet! ? I pointed out this conspicuous oddity to the class, and how some of the sexist punishments used by Major Payne

[11] Van Maheen, 1978.

[12] Goffman, 1961.

for poor performance included having boys wear dresses and march around campus, and calling them girls in derogatory manner. Discussing hyper-masculine military culture and sexist themes that emanated in the movie – and the boundaries in that military unit that excluded and outgrouped women – became an important conversation and learning point. By introducing this discussion point and pondering how the military (and other groups) transmit such messages, we see how structure and culture create environments that communicate the theme that men are allowed, and women are not welcome. As the US military continues to allow women to serve in an expanding set of roles, including combat specialties and frontline Infantry units, these kinds of educational moments will help young, educated leaders to enter the force being more attuned to how culture and structure can constrain (or empower) women and other minority groups.

One of the most important takeaways from watching Major Payne (now a few times) is that whether I like or enjoy a movie is not too important. What is most relevant is whether the movie brings the lesson material to life and resonates well with students! If a "lousy movie" (even if the critics give it low ratings) gains cadets' attention and motivation to watch, ponder, analyze, write about, debate, discuss, and reflect, then that's a fine movie to use in our course. A movie that still causes me to cringe when I watch it, Major Payne, created some very educationally fruitful class conversations and analyses because it resonated with students. It was a successful learning vehicle for the class.

Postmodernism in Military Films

Despite the complexities of postmodern theory and perhaps its fading popularity in some academic circles, this remains a beneficial block of the course. We typically watch Inglorious Basterds (2009) by Quentin Tarantino, who is known for producing postmodern films. I think postmodern theory helps explain the military and its culture, which is partly why I like to keep this block in the course.[13] Our class conversations about Inglorious Basterds take many directions, including a review of Tarantino's cinematic body of work that often involves revenge fantasies, deliberately excessive violence, odd wording and colouring on many frames, pastiche and myriad references to other movies (especially spaghetti westerns), use of unique symbols such as Samurai swords, deep philosophical discussions among characters, empowerment of minorities, an assault of hegemonic power structures,[14] and other themes. In Basterds, Christoph Waltz won the Academy Award for best supporting actor for his sharp portrayal of an ultra-cunning German colonel who can find well-hidden Jews and detect secret enemy plans.

In the opening scene of the movie, Waltz uses a huge tobacco pipe (a tribute to the Sherlock Holmes pipe) and uses multiple languages and a clever psychological strategy to trick a French man to admit he's harbouring Jews in his basement. Waltz's stormtroopers kill the hidden Jews, except one young girl who escapes. Interestingly and mysteriously, Waltz himself had a clear shot of this little girl as she escaped, but he elected not to shoot and let her run away. Later in the movie, the escaped girl is an adult woman who plots the assassination of Hitler and his highest-ranking subordinates. She partners with the Basterds, who are a small special forces gang of American Jews who specialize in killing and terrorizing Nazis, to successfully kill Hitler and many senior Nazis. Brad Pitt leads the Basterds, and although he's

[13] Hajjar, 2014.
[14] Denzin, 1991.

not Jewish, he has Native American ancestry – which he explains is one reason why he enjoys scalping Nazis and captured German soldiers.

There are numerous twists and contradictions embedded in Inglorious Basterds, including the portrayal of German soldiers as seemingly more civilized and humane than the American Basterds who hunted, targeted, tormented, tortured, and killed them. Waltz uncovers the Basterds' plot to assassinate Hitler later in the movie, but he also foresees the inevitable defeat of Germany in the war. So the ever-canny Waltz secretly strikes a deal with top American leaders to allow the Basterds' plan to go forth. In his deal with the Americans, he personally surrendered, provided the Americans with intelligence about German plans, and was assured of his own safe passage to the US. Pitt and the Basterds found out about his deal, and although they don't kill Waltz, they carve a swastika on his forehead, so he's forever known as a Nazi.

Our class conversations explore why the movie uses excessive gore (to remind the audience it is fictitious), the revenge-fantasy trope, the Nazi-Basterds dichotomy, character analyses (Waltz, for example), and they address many other academic and professional points. For example, we debate whether postmodern theory enhances understanding of the movie's contradictions, tensions, messiness, pastiche and spoofs, and whether this contested theory also helps to comprehend the contemporary world, nation, and military. In these discussions and debates, our interpretation and reflective skills, communication abilities, and creative thinking all sharpen. In sum, these discussions boost students' cultural understandings of different people (America, Germany, others), the nature of war, the social psychology of revenge, the military, the processes that lead to mass extermination (Holocaust), the messy amalgamations and contradictions inherent in people and organizations, and other sociologically, professionally, and personally relevant subjects. This education helps to cultivate emerging global citizens and leaders of character.

Foreign Films

The foreign films block of the course has focused mainly on Life is Beautiful (1998), which was nominated for and won several Oscars, including best foreign film, picture, actor, director, writer, screen play, film editing, and music. Over the years, many cadets initially frown upon the need to watch a film in a foreign language with subtitles (revealing a bit of ethnocentrism – "why can't we watch a film in English ? !"), but the preponderance of students wind up deeply enjoying the film and our conversations about it. The movie mainly tells the story of a Jewish-Italian father who desperately tries to keep his family alive while in a concentration camp during World War Two. The movie's main actor, Guido (Roberto Benigni, who won best actor), is gifted at spontaneously creating fictitious narratives and portraying different roles to adapt to numerous situations throughout the movie.

Two especially poignant scenes in the movie vividly reveal his expertise in dramaturgical adaptation, or his uncanny ability to create an impression and aura out of thin air to fit social cues and situations. First, early in the movie, Guido courts his love interest, Dora. In one scene, Guido pretends to be a high-ranking inspector from an Italian headquarters who descends upon Dora's small school where she teaches. His goal is to impress Dora with his (albeit fictitious) speech and visit ; he talks about the superior Aryan race. He gives a speech that at the surface level seeks to espouse Italian fascist (with clear Nazi influence) ideological themes of having tremendous pride in being a superior race, but beneath the surface it mocks such narrow-minded and ludicrous visions of grandeur. During his strongly worded speech about Italian superiority, given to Dora, her colleagues, and students, Guido points to parts of

his obviously feeble (and ugly?) body, and publicly proclaims his body parts' superiority and excellence – such his perfect ears and even superior belly button !

The second scene occurs during his incarceration in a concentration camp, when a German guard asks the group of Jewish prisoners whether anyone can speak German. No one volunteers at first, but Guido steps up and uses this opportunity to be a "translator" to keep his son at ease and alive during their incredibly perilous imprisonment. As the German guard barks out orders (with no one knowing what he is really saying), Guido pretends to translate what is being said by yelling directions to a fictitious game of hide and seek to the prisoners, including tips on how to win. Many of these "hints" emphasize the importance of not being seen by the guards; Guido's goal is to keep his son hidden and out-of-sight from the German guards, so he stays alive. During this part of the movie, Guido explains that the winner of the game receives an actual army tank – something that motivates his son ! The movie's ending has American soldiers entering the conquered prison complex of buildings, with some riding in tanks, which the son sees with great excitement. He gets a ride on an American tank as he exits the prison complex. Guido's clever use of deception, positive thinking, dramaturgy and impression management, humour, and his indomitable spirit (which earlier in the movie his uncle underscores the importance of in the face of growing fascism, hatred, and hostility towards Jews) help keep his son and wife alive. Guido is killed by a guard shortly before the movie's climax; he draws the guard's attention away from his hidden son to save his son's life. The message of hope and the human spirit to stay alive, against tremendous odds, resonates well.

This movie also enabled the class to discuss the processes of how some groups systematically outgroup, stigmatize, and exterminate other human beings, which has occurred many times in history. Life is Beautiful shows how the governing and dominant group marginalized, discriminated against, and eventually mass-murdered an entire group of people (Jewish people, and other minority groups). Prejudice, discrimination, racism, sexism, and "McDonaldization", among other sociological theories and concepts, received discussion in this class. The systematic extermination of a group of people portrays the McDonaldization thesis as perhaps the most inhumane and extreme form of hyper-rationality : the efficient, predictable, calculable, and controlling processes used during the Holocaust to exterminate millions of Jews and other people deemed undesirable.[15] During our spring 2021 conversation about the movie, we made linkages to contemporary extremism movements throughout the world and nation, and also to reinforce lessons learned during the US military's stand-down day in the spring of 2021 to discuss the potential for extremism in our own ranks – and how to counter such influences.

Contemporary Films : Global War on Terrorism (GWOT)

For this block of the course, our class frequently watched and discussed The Hurt Locker (2009), an Academy Award Winning movie. The movie has aggravated a handful of officers I serve with at West Point (including a few who specialize in bomb disposal missions with experience in Iraq and Afghanistan) due to their strong thoughts about its lack of realism. The movie focuses on a small bomb disposal unit in Iraq that works under great pressure while performing its mission. The tension about "what is a good movie" compared to what is a realistic story creates a fruitful conversation topic in this class. Does a movie need to produce purely realistic scenes to create cinematic art worthy of praise from its audience, including movie critics ? Of course not ! Do elegant fantasies often trump realistic portrayals as pieces of cinematic artwork ? Of course ! So we did not watch The Hurt Locker because I thought it would well prepare soon-to-be lieutenants for bomb disposal missions in their future Army

[15] Ritzer, 2000.

careers. Instead, I selected this contemporary film because it explores one of the two main post-9/11 combat theatres, Iraq, and because it richly reveals many themes, concepts, and theories students studied as sociology majors at West Point. These themes included masculinity, the impact of postmodernism and the information age, cross-cultural competence, leadership, the harmful outcomes of war (PTSD and other psychological damage – invisible injuries), and other salient topics.

The main character in the movie, Will, is an action-addicted bomb diffusing expert with great experience in his trade. He lives almost entirely for the adrenaline rush linked to the hazardous bomb defusing mission. He often acts in the movie like a reckless cowboy who does not communicate well with his Army teammates, and has an estranged family back in the US. He develops a strong connection with a young Iraqi boy that he plays futbol (American soccer) with in the movie, and he also purchases DVDs from his new young friend. In one scene, Will erroneously thinks the young boy was murdered and tortured, and in his grief-stricken rage, he breaks the Army's safety rules and goes off post into the local community at night seeking revenge. He comes up empty-handed, but he eventually sees the boy alive again shortly after that scene. But we see Will's connection to the young Iraqi boy, whom he does not know well, as emotionally stronger than his connection to his own family back in the US. The only other time Will seems distraught is during his short leave in the US at the local grocery store, where a shopping aisle with hundreds of cereal choices bewilders him. We can also tell he feels detached from his young child and wife, and the movie ends with Will back in Iraq with the clock re-set to 365 days and counting for his next combat deployment.

We also discuss the backstory for the movie's Academy Award, which reveals an underdog winner. Director Kathryn Bigelow's low-budget movie, The Hurt Locker, came out of nowhere to beat the hugely expensive blockbuster and predicted Oscar favourite, Avatar, in 2009. Not many women had ever directed an Academy Award winning movie prior to that time, nor had any woman ever won the best director award. Bigelow won best director, The Hurt Locker won best movie, and the movie garnered four other Oscars! Additionally and interestingly, Avatar was directed by Bigelow's former husband, James Cameron.

In our discussions of the movie I enjoy surfacing that the three main actors seem a bit like a nuclear family. Will, the team leader, is the aloof and masculine dad, defusing bombs like a techno-Cowboy. The staff sergeant team deputy, a physically strong black man (Anthony Mackie), portrays a nurturing mom-like-role, always looking out for the team's physical needs, emphasizing communications, and doing all he can to have his team come back alive and well as his top priority. The third soldier on the team, a young specialist, often manifests as a scared child who is obsessed with dying – he tells the unit's psychologist he is certain he will get killed. That trio of Will, the rogue bomb defusing guru (traditional masculine qualities – like a dad), the sergeant who nurtures and aims to keep the team together (traditional feminine or motherly qualities), and the young specialist with his deeply self-absorbed, child-like fears create an odd "core nuclear family" in this movie. The family metaphor spurred some useful class conversations about masculinity, femininity, fear, PTSD, strength, communication, leadership during combat, team balance, and other academically and professionally germane subjects.

Death and Dying

In the death and dying block of the military films course, we watched different movies, but Saving Private Ryan (1998) received the most attention. This movie explores the case of a squad of US Army Rangers who get ordered to find Private Ryan, who is the last remaining son of four brothers who is alive in World War Two. This squad undergoes myriad challenges,

and death receives focus from numerous angles. As the movie opens and small ships with US troops move towards a beach, the soldiers experience incredible enemy fire and many soldiers die – several quite graphically – while travelling towards the beachhead. In other scenes, soldiers from the squad get killed, and we see how the squad has no choice but to process their deaths quickly and continue the mission in order to survive in combat. The audience sees first-hand how the seeds of deeply suppressed PTSD and other emotional ailments get planted; and how soldiers learn to ignore symptoms and painful emotions to survive and carry out the mission in war. We also see how families and the Army back home deal with death. The entire premise of the movie is based on the decision of the Chief of Staff of the US Army, who after discovering the Ryan family has suffered the loss of three sons in the war, orders the Army to save the fourth Ryan son. We see how the Ryan family, especially the Mom, receives the news of the deaths of three of her sons at her front door. Staying on the theme of moms, many dying soldiers throughout the movie cry out to their moms in their final breaths, so we witness the symbolism of mom as a person who brings people to life, who cares for a baby under great duress and harsh circumstances, and whom many people cry out for in their final moments of life. Many religious symbols also surface in the movie, such as the sniper who recites Biblical passages before he shoots, and different soldiers who touch their spiritual adornments (i.e., crosses, Jewish stars) during different scenes.

Beyond insights about death and dying in the military, the film creates fine conversations about small unit leadership under dire circumstances. Tom Hanks is the US Army captain in charge of the squad ordered to find Private Ryan. After many complaints about the validity of the mission (why should the squad's soldiers risk and give their lives to save one soldier ?), Hanks eventually admits to his unit that he questions the necessity of the mission, especially as his squad suffers casualties along their journey. But he also states that if accomplishing the mission helps him get back home to his wife, hometown and high school class (he's an English teacher), then he'll conduct the mission. The movie also provides a glimpse of how marginalized minority groups vie for mainstream acceptance and citizenship through military service. The squad has Jewish-American and Italian-American soldiers ; in the first half of the 20th Century these ethnic groups vied for equal citizen status in the US, and also strove for an equal opportunity to achieve the American Dream – or to make it into the upper middle-class.

Conclusion

I deeply enjoy teaching this course and learning along with students. The feedback from students is generally very positive. A strong majority of students report appreciating the seminar design, student-centred approach, creative paper options (i.e., many options for the mid-term paper), open and multifaceted conversations, and the chance to view movies in a new, analytical, and critical light. A few students complain about wanting more structure, more teacher input, and about some of the movies we watch. Every time I teach the course I learn new things, including similarities and differences between my Generation X and the cadets' Millennial (and Generation Z) worldviews, how US national and military culture and structure change over time, the value of cross-cultural competence for leaders, and of course new interpretations of old and new movies alike. The nebulous nature of interpretations of works of art further complicates and enriches teaching such a course, as it forces our class to negotiate a world of grey areas and myriad views. Students learn to communicate their positions and what catches their attention, while simultaneously realizing that others will perceive new and different things. Listening and learning from the group helps students to re-examine their own views, learn about and from others, and gain an enhanced perspective about meanings,

symbols, themes, and others' interpretations and insights. Further, this class illuminates the relationship between the armed forces and civilian society. This course also sets the conditions for creativity in interpretations, analyses, speaking, and writing, which helps counter any rigid bureaucratic influences stemming from other aspects of life at a military academy.[16]

Pragmatically, we use the military films course as a creative way for second semester sociology seniors to review sociological concepts and theories prior to their major field test, which takes place at the end of the spring semester. We also discuss "lieutenant lessons" in the course, which soon-to-be Army officers find beneficial. Some of my colleagues shy away from teaching seniors in their last few months at the Academy for fear that "senioritis" and other distractions will make the class harder to steer. I enjoy the challenge – and simultaneously acknowledge that West Point seniors in their final semester are also planning moves to their first duty assignments, getting physical exams required for commissioning, in some cases are planning weddings, and have other things going on. Nonetheless, I appreciate their saltiness, restlessness, willingness to pushback and create healthy debates, and the fact that their graduation is right around the corner. I graduated West Point a few short years ago (1993!), and I have an appreciation for all the obligations of seniors and their desire to leave! On the whole, we enjoy the class very much as we collectively create a class atmosphere that pushes and elevates our thinking – despite everything else going on in the lives of excited seniors at West Point nearing their graduation and commissioning!

References

DENZIN, Norman K., Images Of Postmodern Society : Social Theory And Contemporary Cinema, London, Sage Publications, 1991.

ENDER, Morten G. & Remi M. HAJJAR, "Teaching War From A Sociological Perspective : The West Point Exemplar", Res Militaris, Vol.9, N°1, Winter-Spring, 2019.

ENDER, Morten G., "Military Brats : Film Representations Of Children From Military Families", Armed Forces & Society, Vol.32, N°1, 2005, Pp.24-43.

ENDER, Morten G., "Charlie Don't Surf : The Military, War, Film, And Teaching", Journal Of Military Education, October, N°6, 2019, Pp.54-73.

ENDER, Morten G., "Boredom : Groundhog Day As Metaphor For Iraq", Pp.311-324 In Janice H. Laurence & Michael D. Matthews (Eds.), The Oxford Handbook Of Military Psychology, New York, Oxford University Press, 2012.

GOFFMAN, Erving, Asylums : Essays On The Social Situation Of Mental Patient And Other Inmates, New York, Doubleday Anchor Books, 1961.

HAJJAR, Remi M. And Morten G. ENDER, "Mcdonaldization In The US Army : A Threat To The Profession", Pp. 515-530 In Don M. Snider & Lloyd J. Matthews (Eds.), The Future Of The Army Profession, New York, Mcgraw Hill Custom Publishing Company, 2005.

HAJJAR, Remi M., "A New Angle On The US Military's Emphasis On Developing Cross-Cultural Competence: Connecting In-Ranks' Cultural Diversity To Cross-Cultural Competence," Armed Forces & Society, Vol. 36, N°2, 2010, Pp. 247-263.

HAJJAR, Remi M., "Emergent Postmodern US Military Culture", Armed Forces & Society, Vol.40, N°1, 2014, Pp.119-145.

HAJJAR, Remi M., "Military Warriors As Peacekeeper-Diplomats : Building Productive Relationships With Foreign Counterparts In The Contemporary Military Advising Mission," Armed Forces & Society, Vol.40, N°4, 2014, Pp.647-672.

HAJJAR, Remi M., "A Diverse Young Man's Pursuit Of The American Dream : From West

[16] Hajjar & Ender, 2005.

Point Cadet To Army Officer And Professor," Res Militaris, Vol.10, N°2, 2020.
MOSKOS, Charles C. And John S. BUTLER, All That You Can Be : The History Of African American Participation In The U.S. Military, New York, Basic Books, 1996.
RITZER, George, The Mcdonaldization Of Society, Thousand Oaks, CA, Pine Forge Press, 2000.
SANDHOFF, Michelle & Mady Wechsler SEGAL, "Women In The U.S. Military : The Evolution Of Gender Norms And Military Requirements", Pp.273-294 In D. Kennedy (Ed.), The Modern American Military, New York, Oxford University Press, 2013.
SMITH, Irving III., "Why Black Officers Still Fail", Parameters, Autumn 2010.
VAN MAANEN, John, "People Processing : Strategies Of Organizational Socialization," Organizational Dynamics, vol.7, n°1, 1978, pp.19-36.