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Subject Area - Film Studies

Saving Private Ryan

Saving Private Ryan by Steven Spielberg.

Steven Spielberg's acclaimed 1998 war film Saving Private Ryan tells the story of the search for Private James Francis Ryan (Matt Damon), an American soldier missing in Normandy, France, during the Second World War. Captain John Miller (Tom Hanks) receives orders to assemble a group of soldiers to find the fourth son of the Ryan family, who have received notification on the same day of the death of three of their sons while in action.

The film opens with an aged veteran visiting the American Cemetery in Normandy with his wife, children and grandchildren. He falls to his knees and breaks down in tears at the graveside of a fallen comrade. The film then cuts to a twenty-five minute sequence which has become the focus of much close analysis and critical commentary. The reconstruction of the US landings on Omaha Beach on the 6 June 1944, at the beginning of the Normandy invasion, places the viewer at the centre of the bloody onslaught, as machine-guns fire mercilessly into the bodies of the soldiers as they make their way forward into German defences. Bodies are ripped apart (a soldier holds his exposed intestines), limbs fly in the air (a soldier bends down to pick up his lost arm), bodies catch fire, and the ceaseless unnerving rattle of gun fire, represent a stunningly powerful and vivid experience for the film's viewers. "The intense and fearful exhilaration created by a freely and rapidly moving camera is central." The graphic realism of the sequence; with the continuous jerky movement of hand-held cameras, capturing the madness and confusion of the battle; and the painstaking attention to gory detail, with blood and water splashing the camera lens, was to be heralded by many as one of Spielberg's defining cinematic achievements.

Hendrik Hertzberg wrote on the film's release in 'The New Yorker': "What makes 'Saving Private Ryan' utterly distinctive is the sense that it has no agenda other than to capture the experience of being a combat soldier in the last global war." The vivid depiction of death and injury experienced by Captain Miller, as he succeeds in leading his company of Rangers at Omaha Beach, sets the tone for the remaining two hours of the film, as the viewer follows him in his next mission to find and return James Ryan to his mother.

Captain Miller assembles seven men for the task, and the soldiers move into Normandy's neighbouring Neuville. Private Carpazo (Vin Diesel) is the group's first victim, when he is shot dead by a German sniper. With tempers fraying and internal mistrust building, the locating of James Frederick Ryan, the wrong soldier, leads to further dissent. However Captain Miller finally discovered Ryan's whereabouts, in Ramelle, following a chance meeting with one of his friends. On the way to Ryan the soldiers lose their second victim, Wade (Giovanni Ribisi), and Miller's leadership is again questioned when he prevents a surrendered German being shot by one of his men, named Reiben, (Edward Burns), and sets him free. Captain Miller succeeds in reasserting trust, confidence and comradeship in the group by revealing personal details about his past and origins, including his position as an English teacher.

Susan Hayward writes: "the gore of war is matched by the unheralded heroism of an individual who stands for humanity." When the group of remaining soldiers finally reach Ramelle they find American paratroopers, including Ryan, defending the town from advancing German troops with very few soldiers. When told of their mission, and the death of his brothers, Ryan refuses to stand down, instead courageously heading for the bridge which will need to be held, asking Miller and

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his men to join him. As the German tanks arrive, Miller reluctantly agrees and takes command of the few soldiers. Heavily outnumbered, malnourished and exhausted, most of Captain Miller's men are fatally injured. Spielberg again graphically visualises the horror of war as one man is stabbed, another shot in the throat, and another shot down with repeated unrelenting gun fire. Spielberg uses camera distancing and focal points as a means to involve the viewer within the frantic action of this battle sequence. The knowledge that somewhere above snipers prey on the men is constantly drawn upon. Captain Miller himself is eventually shot down and soon dies in the arms of Ryan as backup arrives too late from another American infantry. The town is saved, but only three men, including Ryan, survive.

As the film ends the veteran at the graveside of Captain Miller is revealed to be James Ryan. He stands to attention and salutes the American flag, which lies on the grave, acknowledging his comrade's sacrifice and honour in his own and his country's name.

Saving Private Ryan received much critical acclaim, including eleven Academy Award nominations. Steven Spielberg achieved the Best Director award, Cinematographer Janusz Kaminski and film editor Michael Kahn's contribution to the film's brutal realism was also acknowledged by the Academy. Produced with an estimated budget of "\$70 000 000" Saving Private Ryan was theatrically released by Paramount Pictures, and distributed by Spielberg's Production Company DreamWorks, and made "\$30, 576, 104" on its opening weekend alone. The continued popularity of the film, by audiences and critics, and what has led many to label the film as the best War film ever made, is attributable to the timelessness of the visual effects and memorable scenes (most notably the opening Omaha sequence, and the final battle for the bridge). The historical accuracy and artistic license of the film has been invariably considered in the decade following the release of Saving Private Ryan, but the consensus is that the style and form of the film ensure a powerful and captivating, if harrowing, experience for any viewer. It is a film which places audiences at the centre of the narrative; viewers are "encouraged to review and consider what they see- and, if point-of-view matters, to contemplate why." As with his earlier graphic Holocaust film Schindler's List (1993), Steven Spielberg's ambition is to exceed visual entertainment, using reconstructive dramatisation as a means to 'experience' the unimaginable in a wholly believable way.

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