

# Is there any such thing as an ‘anti-war film’?



Tom Brook

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(Pictorial Press Ltd / Alamy)

**Critics have claimed that all movies inherently glorify conflict, even when they claim a pacifist agenda. Is this fair? Tom Brook investigates.**

The World War I centenary is giving films that oppose conflict a renewed currency. In London this week an anti-war classic, Stanley Kubrick’s 1957 picture *Paths of Glory* set in the trenches of World War I, is being screened at a special film season curated by Sir Peter Jackson. In the US this summer several anti-war classics are being shown in a special series at the American Film Institute, including Jean Renoir’s 1937 picture *Grand Illusion*, which conveys the view that war is futile.

And while anti-war films are being revisited, they continue to be fiercely debated. “There’s no such thing as an anti-war film,” is a quote often attributed to the late French filmmaker François Truffaut. There are different ways to interpret this remark but it’s widely agreed that Truffaut was suggesting that movies will inevitably glorify combat when they portray the adventure and thrill of conflict – and the camaraderie between soldiers.

Anti-war movies may fail because cinema is an inadequate medium through which to convey the horrors of conflict. In this respect anti-war movies may bear some resemblance to films that attempt to retell the nightmare of the concentration camp. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel has stated that Auschwitz represented such a uniquely disturbing phenomenon that no medium could come close to capturing it – and inevitably narrative cinema would trivialize it.

Despite all the challenges facing filmmakers there is no shortage of directors who’ve dedicated their energies to making anti-war films.

Scholars maintain certain key characteristics must be in place for an anti-war film to be effective.



*Paths of Glory* (Photos 12 / Alamy)

For Dennis Rothermel, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at California State University, who has extensively researched anti-war films, they must give a nuanced view of mortal combat. “The random infliction of violent death, abject terror,” as well as “heinousness as a norm of behavior,” are listed by him as among the qualities necessary for an anti-war film – along with a sense of balance and context. For Rothermel, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Paths of Glory*, *Full Metal Jacket* and *The Thin Red Line* are films that satisfy these criteria.

“Like any good documentary it has to show both sides,” says New York University film professor Sheril Antonio, who teaches a class on war films. For her questions need to be asked: “Is war just a national tragedy for the victor and the people we lost, or is war terrible for everybody? If it shows both sides then I think you’re getting somewhere.”

### **Battle of ideas**

But directors who embark on anti-war films often find their picture has a very different impact on audiences from the one they intended. A case in point is Stanley Kubrick’s 1987 film, *Full Metal Jacket*, which focuses on Marines in training in the US and in action in Vietnam. It is routinely cited as one of the best anti-war films ever made.

The film presents an unflattering picture of soldiers dehumanised by a military machine and reduced to killers. “One of the things I like about *Full Metal Jacket* is you see how soldiers who choose to go and fight can also be victims,” says Professor Antonio.

But there are detractors who see *Full Metal Jacket* quite differently. In a review, critic Jonathan Rosenbaum recalls how he accompanied the late US director Samuel Fuller to a *Full Metal Jacket* screening only to hear him proclaim that “it was another goddamn recruiting film.” Fuller believed that teenage boys going to Kubrick’s picture would come out impressed and seduced by the idea of wartime combat.



Platoon (Moviestore collection Ltd / Alamy)

Steven Spielberg’s 1998 picture *Saving Private Ryan*, which focuses on a group of US soldiers during the Allied invasion of Normandy in 1944, has also attracted vastly different interpretations. The film opens with indelible scenes of death and destruction which led some critics to conclude that it was anti-war because it shows that war is hell. “Of course every war movie, good or bad, is an anti-war movie,” to the director told *Newsweek* magazine around the time of *Saving Private Ryan*’s release – an exact inversion of the quote attributed to Truffaut.

But to others *Saving Private Ryan* is anything but an anti-war movie because it demonstrates that war is valid. Toby Miller, author of *Global Hollywood 2*, believes the picture let America proclaim its righteousness. “It’s a legitimisation of the idea that the United States is the last great saviour of humanity – that’s the claim it makes.”

### **Eye of the beholder**

Clearly all filmmakers are at the mercy of the audience when it comes to how their films will be interpreted. “The last author of the film is the audience – at the cost of the director’s intentions,” says Sheril Antonio. From this it follows that somebody who enjoys viewing the spectacle of war may not be so inclined to see the darker, ugly side of combat in an anti-war film. “Any person who glorifies violence and shooting and killing people may only see that aspect of the film and celebrate that aspect of the film, they may not appreciate it as a cautionary tale,” she says.

The mere fact that a screenplay could be interpreted as anti-war can affect its chances of getting studio backing. Conservatives routinely criticise ‘liberal Hollywood’ for making films with themes they perceive as anti-American and anti-military. So within the industry there can be a reluctance to take on anti-war projects – or produce films that could be construed as critiques of contemporary conflicts – lest they be seen as unpatriotic or demoralising for US troops in harm’s way.

Some academics think Hollywood is just too tame and look elsewhere, particularly to the independent sector, for strong critiques of conflict. “It’s no mistake that the war films that interest me for delivering very strong anti-war and anti-violence messages have been produced outside the purview of the Hollywood movie industry,” says Dennis Rothermel.

Every day newspapers and websites bombard us with stories of contemporary wars and conflicts – realities that can appear rather abstract. Even if anti-war films are imperfect, even if they can glorify combat, they still possess the power to make us view war differently and gain insight that reporting can’t give us. A strong anti-war film can make us pause and reflect more deeply on war’s horrific nature, the young men and women who fight in our name, and how they may suffer amid the senselessness of it all.

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