

More letters on *Saving Private Ryan*

10 September 1998

To David Walsh:

I read with interest your exchange with AC, which led me to re-read your original review.

I found *Saving Private Ryan* to be a highly ambiguous film. On the one hand, the story was pure cliché, and not very well executed. This aspect was well explained in your review.

As you correctly point out, aspects of the story were in fact downright reactionary. I was really quite sickened by the stupid subplot involving the bookworm. The message here was that intellectuals are bad and dangerous. At the end (miraculously, he's never killed although he stumbles around the heart of the action) he kills the German he saved earlier, with a sort of Peckinpah macho redemption, but then inexplicably repeats his earlier error by letting the other Germans run away. What was all this about?

There was another aspect of the film, however. Although I saw the film over a month ago, I still cannot get the scenes of battlefield carnage out of my mind. While perhaps we all know in the abstract that 'War is hell,' the scenes of the Omaha Beach landing and the final battle gives the concept of modern warfare a new concreteness. To my knowledge, there has never been war film footage remotely close to this. (Peckinpah's *Cross of Iron* might be closest). There is something significant about this achievement, although I haven't quite worked out what it is.

JA

Your review of *Saving Private Ryan* had some interesting points. However, please do not quibble concerning the relative sizes of the American and Russian contributions to Germany's defeat. Certainly the Red Army suffered losses the Americans could not imagine, and bore the brunt of the fighting. But without Lend-Lease, without pressure from the West, none of it would have mattered. Remember that America had much less to fight for than Russia. We fought Hitlerism; Russia fought for her very life. Would the

Red Army have supplied U.S. troops and invaded Germany if the situation were reversed? Would the Bolsheviks have intervened on America's behalf, as America did for them? I think not. So do not complain. Be glad that our combined strength was enough to destroy the Wermacht, and leave it at that.

DD

Regarding Steven Spielberg's latest opus, I couldn't agree with David Walsh more. I recently saw it, and I can say that any hopes it might have been another *Schindler's List* were quickly squashed during the first hour. Aside from the incredibly hackneyed plot, stock characters, tediousness, and predictability, what struck me about it was the insular, pathetic smallness of its ideas and its insidious nationalism. Insofar as the smallness of its ideas is concerned, it was like most American movies churned out by Hollywood: kitchen sink emotions in which men bear their hearts on their sleeves while under pressure; reducing everything that happens to individuals to their immediate biographical reality, never mind the social milieu from which they come or social questions; pat lessons of the heart learned under terrible pressure. All very predictable! Wouldn't you know that Tom Hanks's character, underneath all his stoicism, is really a terribly sensitive guy? Wouldn't you know that the German soldier who's freed turns out to be the killer of one of the main characters?

I found Spielberg's patriotism--the real theme of the movie--jingoistic: generals whose ideals are noble and motives unimpeachable because they wrap themselves in the great ideals of Abraham Lincoln; soldiers who question nothing of any consequence and who are expendable in the pursuit of the abstract freedoms this country gives us; an American flag--which frames the film--soiled, yes, and perhaps a little tainted, but by God, still Old Glory herself and worth fighting for!

Much has been said about the movie's battle sequences, especially the one at the beginning. True, it

is magisterial in its technical execution; so much talent, such incredible command of technique. But the truth is that it left me emotionally cold. It had the effect of distancing me from the fate of the soldiers; at that point there was no one I knew or cared for.

Now, sometimes an artist does want his/her audience to be emotionally distanced because he purposefully wants his audiences not to be so emotionally involved that they lose sight of the intellectual ideas or themes of the work in question. Brecht was famous for using this technique. But what were the ideas being presented in *Private Ryan*? That war is hell? That men learn to appreciate each other? Talk about clichés! What kind of anti-war film is this that questions nothing, that has not one iota of skepticism about the system that created it, that has not one ounce of criticism of the military brass?

For truly anti-war films, I refer some of your readers to 'All Quiet on the Western Front,' 'Paths of Glory,' 'Oh What a Lovely War,' 'Apocalypse Now,' and even 'Platoon.' And, believe it or not, Sam Peckinpah's 'The Wild Bunch.'

RR

I read the review by David Walsh on *Saving Private Ryan*. Anyone that is familiar with history is greatly aware of the fact that WWII was not just Omaha Beach. This movie was made by an American for an American audience and it accomplishes its goal at portraying war as a horrible and most avoidable pursuit in any culture. If you want to produce a similar work from an east European perspective and the eastern front experience then go ahead. If you are as detailed with the facts in their context as Spielberg was I am sure the film would do well.

GW

See Also:

Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*: Small truths at the expense of big ones

[31 July 1998]

A comment on the *WSWS* review of Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* and a reply by David Walsh

[1 September 1998]



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