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Pearl Harbor:

A Melodramatic Narrative of War, Defeat, Victory and Identity

Introduction

To probe into the relationship between war and culture it appears straightforward to ask questions about the cultural representations of war, about *war in culture*, so to speak. Representations of war in popular culture – popular *texts* – may be particularly worthy of scholarly attention as they tend to reach big audiences and are easily retrieved. In the following, I will analyze one such recent popular text on war, the 2001 Michael Bay directed Disney Pictures movie *Pearl Harbor* and the accompanying documentary *Journey to the Screen – The Making of Pearl Harbor* (Herzog & Cowen 2001)¹.

From a social scientific, problem-oriented point of view, it is interesting to investigate both which, if any, socially significant effects a popular text may have on its recipients as well as, which, if any, cues on the culture it was created in we can deduce. In the crudest terms, the former is asking about “what it does to people” and the latter is concerned with “what it tells us about people”. Notably, in those questions the independent and dependent variables are interchanged, already hinting at the conceptual confusion about agency in or behind popular texts, which has led researchers such as Fiske to suggest a process-oriented understanding (1991).

Subscribing to a process-view of popular texts, I will in the following analyze the quality of the representations of war in *Pearl Harbor* and their contexts to evaluate in how far they can stimulate recipients to think critically and independently about war. The historical (in)accuracy of the movie that has commanded so much attention will not be discussed here – rather, it is understood as a text in its own right².

The complications of popular texts – and film in particular – notwithstanding, I will attempt to sketch a theoretically informed and critical perspective on the film that is compatible with the logic of empirical research, that is, a perspective, that in principal, could be tested empirically. Possible methodological approaches to such a test include systematic content analyses, survey and experimental designs as well as qualitative measurements of the content and effect on recipients of the text, all of which are unfortunately beyond the scope of this project.

¹ The specific significance of the making of documentary is that it includes statements by the creators of the film on the film and its meaning. It is, in part, a secondary text while it is at the same time a primary popular text in its own right, a piece of *entertainment* that is to be treated in the same way as the main feature film, *Pearl Harbor*, on which it is about.

² The below analysis thereby concentrates on the metaphorical and historical meanings of *Pearl Harbor*. It is concerned with questions on the significance of representations for the time of the production (today) and in general.

Synopsis

Set shortly before the entry of the United States into World War II, the movie tells the story of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor through the eyes of two boyhood friends and now army pilots, Rafe and Danny. Upon being admitted as a volunteer to the Royal Air Force's Eagles Squadron, Rafe, leaving behind his new love, navy nurse Evelyn, goes to Europe to support the British in the aerial war over the Channel. His plane crashes. After receiving information that Rafe died during the crash, Evelyn and Danny engage romantically. Rafe returns unexpectedly to Pearl Harbor, where Evelyn and Danny are now stationed on the evening before the attack. Evelyn tells Rafe that she is sorry but has moved on. During the attack, Rafe and Danny are the only pilots to fight the Japanese. Evelyn tends the injured in the hospital. Upon special request by President Roosevelt, the army and navy plan a top-secret, exceptionally dangerous mission to bomb Tokyo (the Doolittle Raid), to which both Rafe and Danny are assigned. Evelyn tells Rafe before their departure that she is pregnant from Danny and wants to give her heart to him. Rafe promises to protect Danny. During the mission, the pilots crash into enemy's positions. Danny sacrifices himself to save Rafe's life. When dying in Rafe's arms, he tells him that he, Rafe, will be the father of his unborn child with Evelyn. Rafe is saved and returns to Pearl Harbor and Evelyn.

On The Epistemological Significance of Film for the Social Sciences

"Film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand."

(Curtis 2003)

The diegetic world of film is a system of signs, a language, the analysis of which is complicated and hardly unambiguous.

Popular texts, in this respect, are distinctively equivocal. In fierce opposition to critical approaches to media analysis, such as feminism or Marxism, Fiske argues that popular texts are essentially *polysemic* and allow for a wide variety of (contradicting) readings from amongst which the recipients – *the people*, in Fiske's terms – can choose (1991: 58). This mode of *popular discrimination* differs in a variety of ways from the traditional mode of *critical* or *aesthetic discrimination* in which intellectuals have assumed the role of gatekeepers and guardians, part of *the power-bloc*, in his terms (71). First and foremost, different readings cannot be subjected to any kind of hierarchical ordering; adequacy and correctness of readings exclusively lie in the eye of the

beholder. The question which readings a text allows for is an empirical one that lastly cannot be answered on the basis of the text, but only through the recipients. From this mode of popular discrimination and the independence of text and readings follows the decline of authorship, Fiske argues, and thereby, the decline of authority (61).

This essentially constructivist stance towards popular texts at first glance appears fundamentally incompatible with the logic of empirical research, based on the text. Agency through an author, for once, loses its conceptual significance for popular culture. Moreover, the concept of polysemy and alternative readings appears to be at odds with any causal explanation linking texts to beliefs and representations held by recipients. Certainly, Fiske's theory of popular discrimination is opposed to critical aspirations in research and those perspectives that posit a harsh imbalance in power between producers and recipients, in which alternative readings are casually diminished to instances of alleged false consciousness, in Marxist terms (compare Fiske 1991: 71; Bates 1975: 151ff.).

While Fiske's theory surely is inspired by post-structural ideas, the prospects for causal inference and normative judgment need not be as grim as they initially appear. Firstly, Fiske's assertion of principal polysemy is a conceptual one that is open to empirical qualification; the possibility of alternative readings does not mean that *everything goes* or that all readings are equally likely. It is in fact these questions – the likelihood of popular texts to allow for different, but specific readings that should underpin empirical investigations of representations in popular culture, as would be desirable for *Pearl Harbor*, as argued in the above.

Genre is the one exception to the concept of individualized, independent *popular discrimination*. Fiske argues that genre, in fact, is based on a unique, possibly tacit consensus between the text, the recipient and the producers of the text (1991: 63). It follows, that genre, as a characteristic of the text, in fact allows us to make inferences on the producers and the recipients. In the following, I attempt to analytically exploit this link by criticizing the genre-bound narrative structure of *Pearl Harbor*.

The Melodramatic Narrative of *Pearl Harbor*

Pearl Harbor is a melodramatic narrative. I will explicate the different characteristics of a melodramatic plot, and in turn show how each of them is reflected in the narrative structure of *Pearl Harbor*. I conclude my analysis with a discussion of implications and limitations for possible representations and some specific meanings that result from the various melodramatic aspects in the movie.

It is important to think of melodrama as a genre definition, not with pejorative connotations, but in terms of a sense-making system, whose meaning and particular coordinates can be discovered through the act of interpretation itself (Brooks 1976: xi). According to Brooks, melodramatic narratives are characterized by “its psychological function in allowing us the pleasures of self-pity and the *experience of wholeness* (emphasis added)” furthered and enabled by sharing the *monopathic* emotional expressions of the characters. The characters in *Pearl Harbor* are in fact defined in very shorthand and unambiguous ways epitomizing “generic, all-American archetypes” (Larsen 2001: 1). Similarly conditioned is the emotional realm; overwhelming but simple.

Not only are melodramatic characters typically “flat” and uni-dimensional, they are also fundamentally unenlightened, as Brooks puts it, they cannot question let alone change the universe they are immersed in (1976: 15). The following dialogue lines accurately reflect this incompetence (*Pearl Harbor*, 2001).

(In the harbor in New York City. Evelyn and Rafe will be relocated to Pearl Harbor.)

Evelyn: “What’s gonna become of us all?”

Rafe: “Well, the future’s not exactly in our hands.”

Evelyn: “I guess you’re right.”

(After the attack, before Rafe and Danny leave. Evelyn and Rafe discuss how their personal lives developed recently because of Rafe’s fighting in Britain)

Evelyn: “Rafe, all I ever wanted was for us to have a home and grow old together, but life never asked me what I wanted.”

Clearly, in both instances, World War II is the factor that will – or has – disrupted their lives and that of many others in their surrounding. Despite this obvious influence there is little, if any, explicit mentioning of war. The melodramatic characters in *Pearl Harbor* do not reflect on the impact of war on their personal lives, let alone discuss or criticize the deeper reasons of war. The melodramatic narrative of the movie thereby strictly conditions the text to represent war in terms

of something that happens inevitably. The narrative structure, in a way, makes the occurrence of war unintelligible to the recipient. This narrative, notably, is in contradiction with the actual historic events: the attack at Pearl Harbor was a *tragedy* “where blame and culpability were diffused through systems of racial arrogance, stereotypes, ineptitude, militaristic power and other factors” (Mayer 2002: 8); in any case, it was not unavoidable.

Another reading of the peculiar absence of discourse on the causes and nature of war is that *Pearl Harbor* is in fact not about war, but only uses the attack as a backdrop for the romantic melodrama, as conservative critics have argued: “*Pearl Harbor* exploits patriotism the way other movies exploit violence or sex” (Larsen 2001: 1).

When compared to other recent war movies, most notably Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*, it also appears that *Pearl Harbor* includes relatively few graphic depictions of human suffering³. Rather, the technological sophistication of special effects and computer-generated imagery may overshadow the “human dimension” (Mayer 2002: 19). In fact, contrasted with the vast explosions and dynamic camera movements, the scene in which the *USS Arizona* capsizes, entombing 1,177 sailors alive, is rather marginalized. In part, this aesthetization of the horrors may be due to the abovementioned inability of the characters to face ambiguous and challenging situations. More specifically, to maintain the melodramatic narrative, the film must avoid to raise “the tough moral questions about war’s necessity and cost that underlined Steven Spielberg’s haunting film” (Larsen 2000: 1). But also melodrama, as a genre is opposed to any kind of naturalism (Brooks 1976: 12). In a similar vein, critics who maintain that *Pearl Harbor* (mis)represented the Japanese in a mild light and their cause as unavoidable, too (“They have cut off our oils supply”) for reasons of political correctness and increased marketability of the movie in Japan may have gotten the logic of the melodrama wrong (Novelli 2003⁴; Larsen 2001: 1). History, in melodramatic terms, can be portrayed only as un-reflected and unavoidable, as its narratives are conditioned in those ways.

Brooks lastly points out that melodrama is always also a reaction to disorientation: “It comes into being in a world where traditional imperatives of truth and ethics have been violently thrown into question (...) yet where their instauration as a way of life, is of immediate, daily, political

³ *Saving Private Ryan* has been enthusiastically acclaimed by critics and historians for its unprecedented degree of realism in the depiction of human suffering: “No sentimental notion about war could ever again be sustained in the face of the new honesty. Now comes the chaos that challenges patriotic fever as well as the mind’s capacity to comprehend horror – that D-Day landing on Omaha beach: seasick soldiers slaughtered the minute the ramps on their landing boats are lowered,” Time magazine film critic Richard Schickel wrote. (...) “We see as the soldiers see, from the belly, in flashes and fragments, none more vivid than the shot, rendered almost casually, of a soldier staggering along, carrying his severed arm.” (...) It is quite possibly the greatest combat sequence.” (Wetta & Novelli 2003: 864; Schickel 1998 as cited in *ibid.*).

⁴ “The Disney people did not want to see any demonstrations outside Disneyland Tokyo” (Wetta & Novelli 2003: 873).

concern” (1976: 15). It is no coincidence that the melodrama, as a genre, originated in the time of the French revolution when the Jacobins had radically called into question the *ancient regime*. A similar dynamic of disorientation may be reflected in *Pearl Harbor* when President Roosevelt criticizes the hesitation to enter World War II in the US.

(During the Tokyo raid.)

President Roosevelt: “From Berlin, Rome and Tokyo, we have been described as a nation of playboys and weaklings who hire British, Russian or Chinese soldiers to do our fighting for us.”

It appears that much of the narrative is trying to resolve this disorientation, more specifically the realized but neglected interior heterogeneity of those “playboys” and “weaklings” who by their existence challenge American virtues. The country in fact, was divided, when Roosevelt spoke those words in 1943, between those supporting the war and those preferring isolationist policies. It is peculiar that the creators of *Pearl Harbor* referred back to this speech in today’s times.

While the movie is less excessive with regard to racial stereotypes when compared to respective films from 1942/1943 (Mayer 2002: 18), the film narrative indeed involves manifold dynamics geared towards identity reinforcement by positing an “imaginary coherent self” against an allegedly and essentially different “the other”, speaking in Bhaba’s terms (1994: 66ff). For once, the movie does establish the Japanese as ‘the other’, albeit not in racial terms: there is little insight into the motivations for the attack and no reference to their personal lives “so that the audience is left with the melodramatic implication that the Japanese were/are inherently evil” (Mayer 2002: 18). Against those portrayals is posited a representation of Americans as the ultimate good. Larsen and Mayer argue, that for instance, the “Norman-Rockwell-like scenes of a mother hanging laundry out to dry and boys playing baseball on a dusty field” (Larsen 2000: 1) that are disturbed by the Japanese planes passing by as they approach the military sites frames the attack not just as a military one, but as “an assault on all it means to be an American” (ibid), thereby implying that there is something essentially American. Notably, these visuals, “dramatizing American virtue violated by the Japanese offensive” were used as promotional material for the film (Mayer 2002: 18).

The narrative also include several representations, suggesting that the struggle itself will help America to construct its “imaginary coherent self”:

(In the making of, voiceover.)

“The character of a nation is difficult to discern until its people are put to the test”

(On the carrier, before the Tokyo raid)

Col. Doolittle: “(...) we may lose this battle, but we’re gonna win this war. You know how I know? (...) Them. (pointing at Rafe and Danny). Because they’re rare. And in times like these, you see them ... stepping forward. There’s nothing stronger than the heart of a volunteer, Jack.”

(On the carrier, before the Tokyo raid, talking to Rafe and Danny)

Col. Doolittle: “Victory belongs to those who believe in it the most – and believe in it the longest. (...). We’re gonna make America believe, too”.

In these instances, the project for identity reinforcement and purification takes a distinctly bellicose turn; much like Hemingway (1969) these representations glorify honor, courage, endurance and dignity. They suggest, like Hemingway thought, that the greatest “grace becomes visible only under pressure”. However, in contrast to Hemingway’s writing on war, the melodramatic narrative of *Pearl Harbor* does include only few, and distorted (aesthetized) portrayals of the negative side of war, namely, human suffering.

Further adding to this notion of purification, the narrative also includes moments of catharsis and retribution, both of which are “requisites for the melodramatic function” (Mayer 2002: 19). For once, *Pearl Harbor* idealizes the admittedly military inefficient revenge, the Doolittle Raid on Tokyo. A strong cathartic impetus is also present in the epilog at the end of the movie and a commentary by director Michael Bay in the making of documentary.

(Epilog)

Evelyn: “Before the Doolittle raid, America knew nothing but defeat. After it, there was hope of victory (...). World War II for us began at Pearl Harbor and 1,177 men still lie entombed in the battleship Arizona. America suffered, but America grew stronger. It was not inevitable. The times tried our souls. And through the trial, we overcame”.

(Making of documentary, interview with director Michael Bay)

Bay: “It’s a truly tragic story, but through this tragedy comes this amazing American power that rises from these ashes.”

It is important to note, that these cathartic moments of war also have implications for the private life of Rafe, Danny and Evelyn. Rafe and Danny first re-unite during their aerial attack on the Japanese planes. After the battle, they go to the hospital and ask Evelyn how they can help. In a scene uniquely rich in metaphoric connotations, Evelyn takes blood samples from the two friends, sitting next to each other in harmony, their blood dripping in two coke-bottles. It is

obvious that the battle has helped the two friends, has initially purified the betrayal of Danny and Evelyn towards Rafe.

The romantic problem of Rafe, Danny and Evelyn is finally resolved as Danny dies in the arms of Rafe during the Doolittle Raid, asking Rafe to assume fatherhood for his own child with Evelyn, that he, Danny, will not live to see.

Conclusion

The above analysis suggests that the cultural representations concerning war in *Pearl Harbor* are deeply conditioned by its melodramatic narrative structure. Some of the implications for thinking about war on the basis of this popular text are already discussed in the above.

More generally, the application of a melodramatic narrative structure to – or against the backdrop of – war is worthy of critique. The melodramatic perspective transcends the romance, as is shown in the above, and through the conditions of narration and characters proliferates to the representation of war. *Pearl Harbor* is a representation that understands history in melodramatic terms: it just happens, and there is nothing we can do about it. Such a representation is thoroughly anti-democratic in its narrative logic – which is distinct from content, as argued in the above – and impedes critical and enlightened thinking about the causes and nature of war, rather than stimulating it.

On top of that the analysis has shown that there are substantial elements of identity reinforcement employing self-against-the-other dynamics in the narrative of *Pearl Harbor*, closely intertwined and conditioned by the melodramatic structure of the characters. The conspicuous question remains, what caused the producers to include these dynamics in a movie today, long after the identity crisis of the 1940s was overcome? Apparently, identity reinforcement at the cost of essentializing beliefs is still a valid option for the creators of this movie.

Lastly, the close intertwining of the personal romance with the melodramatic plot of war and its concurrent catharsis as well as the cherishing of “grace under pressure” created and purified by war are two deeply problematic aspects about the narrative structure of *Pearl Harbor*: by its very conditions of telling the story and the characters, it impedes critical thinking on war.

Neal Gabler has drawn a surely polemic and naïve but yet insightfully pessimistic parallel between real politics and melodramatic narratives in popular texts, suggesting a grave impact of the latter on the former (2001: 2):

(Published in the aftermath of the attacks on 09/11/2006 on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon)
“American audiences, long schooled in Hollywood films, know what follows such an attack: swift and deadly retribution. American movies always end in catharsis – with the terrorists captured and restored (...). Americans believe the nation will triumph. We believe it because we’ve seen this movie before”.

Drawing such strong inferences about a causal relationship between political expectations and exposure to popular texts is of course deeply problematic without supporting empirical evidence, as popular texts are first and foremost one thing: polysemic.

However, the present analysis, stressing on the universally accepted standards of the genre “melodrama” suggests that in fact, *Pearl Harbor* in its capacity as a melodramatic narrative of war does not stimulate, but rather by its narrative logic impede independent and critical thinking on war in recipients.

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