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Action! On the Correlation Between American Cinema and Conflict
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Shoot. Cut. Action. An idea of violence has been encoded in the language of film ever since the medium’s earliest days. The link between combat and cinema has troubled many observers, who have asked whether depicting bloodshed and atrocity on a big screen, using sexy stars and expensive firepower, only endorses it in some way. Certainly, there have been at least as many rousing propaganda pictures as there have been punishing anti-war tracts, and audiences have rallied around the former as much as they have shied away from the tough-sell latter. In this history of the American war movie we will consider whether a filmmaker’s urge to call the shots inherently ratifies, justifies and glamorises conflict – or are their aims are more complex and ambiguous?

Early cinematic depictions of war offered romantic spectacle, tinged with nagging self-doubt. When the first Academy Awards were held in May 1929, the Best Picture prize went to William Wellman’s WWI fighter-pilot epic Wings, released two years earlier, setting up a correlation between conflict and awards-season silverware that remains in place today. Wellman’s film was championed for its striking aerial combat sequences but remains at heart an old-fashioned love triangle – like the later Pearl Harbor (2001) – resolved when one of the fighters duelling for our heroine’s hand is shot down and killed. That sometimes happens in war, the film concludes; but cinemagoers came out less perturbed than stirred by two-plus hours of swoops and swoons.

Wings sparked multiple imitators, Howard Hawks’ early talkie The Dawn Patrol (1930) among them, yet increasingly the anti-war sentiment it rather hesitantly ventured pushed its way into the very forefront of mainstream thinking. The toast of 1930s awards season would be Lewis Milestone’s affecting All Quiet on the Western Front, from the Erich Maria Remarque novel. By the end of the decade, the none-more-romantic Gone with the Wind (Victor Fleming, 1939) could achieve one of its most memorable effects by craning back to show Vivien Leigh’s Scarlett O’Hara adrift amid the multitudinous wounded of the Battle of Atlanta.1

However, it was World War Two which became the first truly cinematic conflict. The sudden availability of relatively lightweight cameras allowed the action to be recorded as never before. Indeed, the camera itself became a valuable weapon in both sides’ arsenals, whether attached to snipers’ rifles to enable precision targeting, or free-floating as an extension of the propaganda machine. The theorist Paul Virilio has ventured that Hitler’s grand design for Germany required the ‘transformation of Europe into a cinema screen’2 upon which the war could be projected ‘as an epic’;3 such awareness of scale and spectacle is evident in 1934’s Triumph of the Will, Leni Riefenstahl’s skewed record of the Nuremberg Rallies.4

The Triumph of the Will’s existence suggests that the cinema suddenly became central to the ideology of conflict, a battleground in itself. The romantic portrayal of previous wars – handsome young men going off to fight for noble causes, snapshots of their sweetheart in pocket – would now come to be challenged by a new and sometimes problematic realism. War was no longer an abstract concept, unfolding in some faraway field, but taking place in the very heart of cities and towns, and the movies adapted accordingly. Three distinct cinematic subgenres would become identifiable in the years between 1939 and 1945, summarising the experiences of soldiers and civilians alike: patriotic ‘flagwavers’, reportage/newsreel/propaganda, and eventually the homecoming drama.

To address the first of these, we might consider one of the most beloved American films of all time: 1942’s Casablanca. Here was a major Hollywood studio (Warner Bros.), mere months after the attack on Pearl Harbour, rushing into production a film in which an isolationist hero (Humphrey Bogart) is finally roused into action to save the foreign girl that he loves. This was the romance of war, elevated to new levels of

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1 A clip can be found here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qSEVyzKmlyU.
3 Ibid., p. 54.
4 I have written more extensively about the documentary’s decidedly theatrical staging here: http://cinesthesiac.blogspot.co.uk/2011/08/1001-films-triumph-of-willtriumph-des.html.
sophistication. If audiences can’t fall for Ingrid Bergman in a beret, the filmmakers reasoned, we might all surrender to the Fascists. ‘We’ll always have Paris,’ Rick reminds Ilsa at the film’s denouement, an utterance made all the more bittersweet by the knowledge that the French capital was, at that moment, very much up for grabs.

In such films war was portrayed unequivocally as the good fight, and it is clear Hollywood and the military authorities enjoyed a close relationship over this period. Stars such as Henry Fonda, Clark Gable and James Stewart signed up for combat, others went on tours to promote war bonds or boost troop morale. Cinemas were flooded with such titles as Captains of the Clouds (Michael Curtiz, 1942), Action in the North Atlantic (Lloyd Bacon, 1943) and eventually Days of Glory (Jacques Tourneur, 1944). Hitler found himself with high-profile adversaries: Charlie Chaplin (in 1940’s The Great Dictator) and Donald Duck (in 1942’s ‘Der Fuehrer’s Face’ [sic]).

Story-wise, the flagwavers were, in the main, very much Hollywood confections: a first-act setback followed by consolidation and a concluding triumph over adversity. A more grounded approach to the combat could be found in the period’s newsreels, weekly missives meeting the urgent need for reportage on loved ones, while briefing cinemagoers in dogfighting tactics and new medical treatments. Notable American directors were assigned to record images of the causes and consequences of conflict: Frank Capra (It’s a Wonderful Life, 1939) embarked upon the Why We Fight series (1942-45), while George Stevens (Gunga Din, 1939) was among the first let into Dachau upon its liberation in 1945.

The masterpiece of American wartime documentary is John Huston’s 1945 film The Battle of San Pietro, which goes some distance beyond the standard reportage remit. Having followed 1941’s The Maltese Falcon with the sub-Casablanca flagwaver Across the Pacific (1942), Huston was tapped by the U.S. Army to film the action unfolding in an Italian valley crucial to the Allied advance. We could view it as an early example of embedded journalism, were it not that Huston’s crew were apparently free to roam far and wide, both to give in dispatches a sense of the region’s geography and climate, and to show in close-up the bodies of American troops being bagged and tagged. What is striking now is how much the documentary adheres to the three-act structure beloved of conventional studio product. The Allies’ initial attack was repelled, incurring heavy casualties; only when ground troops were reinforced with the deployment of aerial, tank and parachute divisions, the film’s never-more-valuable supporting players, could a fight back begin. San Pietro suggests how the line between Hollywood and reality had become blurred, if not removed entirely. Such documentaries, like the newsreels, would unrel on cinema screens before and between the flagwavers and, in doing so, press the idea of a just and noble war upon the general public. Fact and fiction had become part of the same package.

But how might screenwriters tie up this carnage into a satisfying ending? By 1946, American servicemen were returning equally bruised and buoyed by the Allied triumph, and the movies responded with a series of homecoming dramas, of which the best-regarded remains The Best Years of Our Lives (William Wyler, 1946). This potent three-hour national catharsis charts the attempts of three veterans, Dana Andrews, Fredric March and real-life serviceman and amputee Harold Russell, to return to civilian life. Unapologetic in its melodrama, it includes such immortal scenes as that in which Andrews’ aviator tours an airplane graveyard, the ghostly fuselages coming to stand both for fallen comrades, and the survivors’ rusting post-War prospects. The film was rewarded with seven Oscars. The most controversial documentary of the era went even further in describing the trauma suffered by US servicemen, and received a Government

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5 A comprehensive list: http://www.jodavidsmeyer.com/combat/military/actors_in_wwii.html
6 Footage can be seen here: http://www.criticalpast.com/video/65675065998_war-bond-rally_Henry-Morgenthalu_Greer-Garson_movie-stars
7 One such newsreel, spoofed by Orson Welles in 1941’s Citizen Kane, went under the title ‘The March of Time’; these, along with a remarkable archive of American, British, Soviet, French and German newsreels, can be found on YouTube.
8 A clip can be found here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tU0d3DVcKoY
suppression order for its troubles. *Let There Be Light* (1946), again directed by John Huston, was commissioned as an official record of army aftercare, undertaking a survey of 70 or so soldiers sequestered at Edgewood State Hospital in Long Island, New York. Lengthy, uninterrupted takes reveal the full extent of the traumas incurred and attempt to delineate the process of treatment, as the stuttering, shambling or otherwise shell-shocked patients submit to punishing sessions of physical and psychological therapy.

For the first time here, one senses an American-operated camera really looking long and hard at what combat might do to the average GI, which explains the authorities’ reluctance to release it. Cited as damaging to recruitment prospects and troop morale, the film was seized by the military police shortly after production, and only entered into general circulation in the early 1980s. Yet, despite the suppression, even a document as challenging as this cannot ultimately resist a kind of endorsing Hollywood tidiness as in the climactic PE sequence, the once-stumbling soldiers are shown stepping up to the plate to hit a succession of home runs. Triumph over adversity, as expressed through baseball. What could possibly be more American?

For some, then, World War Two could be packaged as a neat victory, confirming the received wisdom that good will always defeat evil. But even a cursory study of the period’s films reveals loose ends and unresolved issues, and as American eyes turned towards Asia, dissenting voices began to make themselves heard. Filmmakers Robert Aldrich (*Attack*, 1956) and Sam Fuller (*Merrill’s Marauders*, 1962) served as the avant-garde of a wider questioning of authority, and its application in military situations. Within a year of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the movies had responded with *Dr Strangelove*, Kubrick’s great satirical vision of nuclear annihilation, and *Fail-Safe*, Sidney Lumet’s sober rendition of a similar scenario, which had President Henry Fonda pondering whether he can bring himself to push the button.

Whether mouthy or merely quizzical, such films would have been unthinkable a decade before, when America was still congratulating itself for World War Two. By the mid-60s, with US combat units heading out to Vietnam, it was clear a schism was opening up both socially and cinematically. On one side sat Old Hollywood, pandering to an ageing audience with laboured Roman epics and creaky adaptations of stage musicals – the officer class, as it were. On the other, there stood the New Hollywood, represented by those young cineastes who had grown up in the Aldrich-Fuller-Kubrick era, and been compelled to question what their forefathers were telling them – representatives of the rank and file who were expected to do the fighting, but were objecting in unprecedented numbers.

There were still plenty of films around that were, like a veteran holding forth in a bar, trotting out the same old war stories, many now international co-productions. *The Longest Day* (Annakin/Marton/Wicki/Oswald, 1962) reached out to German filmmakers to achieve greater authenticity in its re-enactment of the Normandy landings. 1970s *Tora! Tora! Tora!,* co-directed by the American Richard Fleischer and Japan’s Toshio Masuda and Kinji Fukusaku, attempted a more balanced retelling of the Pearl Harbor attack between Wings-style aerial sequences. However, little nuance could be discerned in 1968’s *The Green Berets,* a Tet-era relic initiated by co-director John Wayne to counter growing anti-war feeling. It nevertheless became a box-office hit providing some evidence of the extent to which America had become divided.

Two films bearing the signature of the emergent ‘moviebrat’ Francis Ford Coppola – 1970’s *Patton* (written by Coppola and directed by Franklin J. Schaffner) and 1979’s *Apocalypse Now* (co-written and directed by Coppola) – bookended the 1970s, and illustrate the marked shift in attitudes towards the military during this period. The first, a lengthy demonstration of the legendary general’s tactical nous, was evidently Old Hollywood: produced by Fox, directed by a studio mainstay, as Schaffner had had a big 1968 hit with *Planet of the Apes,* and the eventual recipient of seven Oscars. The second, an extraordinary riff on Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* completed as Vietnam smouldered, was something new: an independent production obliged to loan its helicopters not from the US Army, who shunned the project, but from the Filipino president Ferdinand Marcos.

*Patton* wasn’t blind to its subject’s egomania, but treated him with some deference. The guy got the job done in World War Two, after all. In contrast
Apocalypse Now’s Colonel Kurtz is a stone-cold murderer and tyrant, utterly corrupted by his mission and hell-bent on doing his own thing. One of Coppola’s co-writers on this turbulent project was the notably right-leaning John Milius (later to direct 1984’s hysterically anti-Communist Red Dawn) and one senses that even this gun nut was, through the character of Kurtz, expressing dissatisfaction with those in positions of power.⁹

From affording military office a degree of respect, the movies had become, momentarily, openly critical. Apocalypse Now, which used the imagery of war to damn the horrors of war, has come to stand as the defining cinematic monument to the spectacular mess of the Vietnam misadventure. Coppola’s grand folly was built on the shoulders of many other endeavours, and it’s noticeable that those cinematic forms established during WW2 – the flagwaver, the newsreel/reportage film, and the homecoming drama – all took a turn for the critical over this period. Ever since the success of Easy Rider (Dennis Hopper, 1969), now a countercultural landmark, then a touchstone for disaffected young audiences, the studios were rushing to court any long-hair who would rather stage sit-ins than ship out. If there was money to be made in fighting the power, Hollywood wanted its share. Material that might once have made peppy, acquiescing flagwavers suddenly became overt interrogations of men in military uniform.

Robert Altman’s M*A*S*H (1970), which opened almost simultaneously with Patton, respects the skill of its protagonists – boozy, womanising surgeons working in a military hospital during the Korean War but, like them, wryly wonders whether all this blood loss and time-killing was really necessary in the first place. The Last Detail (Hal Ashby, 1973) feels like a sour update of the celebratory post-World War Two musical On the Town (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1949). Two petty officers (Jack Nicholson and Otis Young) allow the young sailor they’ve been ordered to escort to the brig a few last days of freedom, but their fun runs out in chilly Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where they’re confronted by institutionalised brutality and incompetence.

Three decades of technological developments, and the emergence of cinema vérité and independent production cooperatives, meant the documentary was in a very different place to where John Huston left it at the end of World War Two. Peter Davis’s 1975 film Hearts & Minds, a masterpiece of dissent, makes the strongest imaginable case that the hearts and minds the US authorities were keenest on winning during Vietnam were not those of the Vietnamese, considered at the highest levels of government to be a minor concern, but those of the good folks back home who had to be indoctrinated if this neo-colonialist project was to be completed.

One word that recurs within its critical mass of testimony and which still resonates today, in our age of remote-controlled combat, is ‘clean’. Davis notes how pilots on bombing raids were kept at a remove from the carnage they created, and shows how this idea had been exported back to those watching in the American heartlands. For Davis, Vietnam had been presented as the latest evolution in the ongoing war between clean-cut American capitalism represented by well-scrubbed soldiers, and leaders you can trust, like Nixon, and corrupting communism portrayed by dark-skinned peasants, hiding their weapons in muddy paddy fields. Davis’s backers in Old Hollywood – Columbia Pictures – refused to distribute this incendiary film. Subsequently it was issued independently and went on to win the Best Documentary Oscar.

If flagwavers were becoming few and far between, and documentary was developing more sophisticated lines of attack then the homecoming drama, positioned at the very heart of the mainstream, was getting bleaker with every passing year. The frontrunners for 1979’s Best Picture Oscar were Michael Cimino’s nightmarish The Deer Hunter depicting Russian-American steelworkers’ return from Vietnam as walking dead men and Hal Ashby’s scarcely more optimistic Coming Home where military wife Jane Fonda is torn between her Marine Corps husband and the paraplegic veteran she takes for a lover.

Where once Hollywood had wholeheartedly endorsed military activity, it now rewarded dissent. Proud Quartermaster Henry Fonda had

⁹ Milius’s marginal place within Hollywood merits closer study, and there’s a good overview here:
been eclipsed by his Oscar-winning daughter ‘Hanoi Jane’. It is impossible to understate how Vietnam affected American movies. You can glean some idea of the war’s impact from the prolonged spell of cinematic self-analysis that followed in the next decade. The Big Red One (1980) picked over combat scars incurred during WW2, and gave the veteran Sam Fuller his late masterpiece. Southern Comfort (Walter Hill, 1981) was an appreciably pulpy shocker that spun a parallel ‘Nam narrative around blundering reservists in the Louisiana swamps. Full Metal Jacket (1987), presented Kubrick’s chilly analysis of war cause-and-effect. Furthermore, the heavy-hitting double bill of Platoon (1986) and Born on the Fourth of July (1989) dug deep into the combat experiences of Oliver Stone and those of soldier-turned-activist Ron Kovic.

And yet already the tide was turning. After the election of Ronald Reagan in 1981, a new popular conservatism came to grip and reassure the American nation that that year’s signature film would be Mark Rydell’s gentle/inert On Golden Pond, which reunited the Fondas, and pretended Vietnam, and its generational divides, simply had not happened. The eighties would be a decade where Hollywood studios bought into this dominant ideology wholesale. If that meant making movies that in their glossy aesthetic, expensive bits of kit and subtly, or not so subtly, subjugating tone, resembled recruitment promos more than they did actual entertainments, then so be it.

After two decades of social unrest and with Cold War tensions mounting once again it turned out there was an audience for these films, hungry to see fresh-faced young American men reasserting authority over the world’s chaos in three acts. Not all soldiers or airmen looked as good in uniform as Richard Gere did in An Officer and a Gentleman (Taylor Hackford, 1982) or Tom Cruise in Top Gun (Tony Scott, 1986) but otherwise these films had a calculated degree of authenticity on their side. They would deploy considerable Army and Navy resources to sell combat to a generation too young to have received their papers for Vietnam.

Top Gun, in particular, was practically an in-barracks production, such that when the film emerged on video, studio Paramount’s offer of placing a Navy recruitment commercial among the trailers was turned down by the Pentagon. No need, said the powers-that-be, the film itself was commercial enough. No surprise, given that emergent mega-producers Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer had previously turned over the script to naval chiefs for significant revisions, and received in return several F-14 aircraft for use in the film’s aerial combat sequences. The deal paid off. The film became one of the decade’s pre-eminent box-office hits, and reportedly boosted US aviator recruitment by as much as 500 per cent. 

More sombre assessments of military history would emerge before the millennium, as in Ed Zwick’s respectable Civil War drama Glory (1989) and Steven Spielberg’s elegiac Saving Private Ryan (1998). But dissent was mostly shunned. Keith Gordon’s A Midnight Clear (1992), a haunting take on William Wharton’s off-message WW2 novel, went largely unseen, while Terrence Malick’s The Thin Red Line (1998) split audiences with its oblique narrative strategies, and its idiosyncratic insistence that war is bad because it stamps down the long grass.

Top Gun’s ultra-commercial combo of hardware and hard bodies swaggered into the 90s action movie, with its pumped-up Special Ops heroes. The romance had crept back into combat as America reasserted its dominance in the Middle East and the Balkans. In retrospect, it seems apt this particular strand of American cinema should come to a halt in summer 2001, with the Bruckheimer-produced, Michael Bay-directed Pearl Harbor. An attempt to top not just Top Gun but Titanic, this prodigiously expensive, mostly insufferable epic returned to the Wings line of war-as-spectacle, dividing its characters up into graspable good/bad factions, and deeming even Tora! Tora! Tora!’s cursory rhetorical balance to be beyond its reach. When they eventually buzz in after days’ worth of on-the-ground soap opera, the Japanese pilots are regarded in the same way as the aliens in Independence Day or Mars Attacks!: as inscrutable annoyances separating all-American square-jaws from their sweethearts.

Only a few months later, though, another aerial

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10 A fuller account of Top Gun’s production can be found in Robb, Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies, (Prometheus Books, 2004), pp. 180-182.
assault would throw all the cinema’s certainties about combat up into the air where they have remained ever since. One of the first and most common responses to the events of 11 September, 2001 was that they somehow resembled a movie. A pyrotechnic payback for the decades of carnage American filmmakers had blithely inflicted upon the rest of the planet. Just as 9/11 served to undermine confidence in US national security, so the medium’s primacy as a means of representation would come under attack over the fractious next decade. Presented with such overwhelming real-life trauma and spectacle, who now needed cinema? This attack would take place across several fronts. From cable TV which backed the Spielberg-produced Band of Brothers, a 2001 miniseries that expanded on the themes of Saving Private Ryan, newly sophisticated console games like the Call of Duty series, which debuted in 2003, soldiers’ own YouTube postings, and still photography as in the pictures of prisoner abuse in Abu Ghraib, which told their own stories. The wry Gulf War One movie Three Kings (David O. Russell, 1999) had opened with a question ‘Are we shooting?’ posed by an American soldier (Mark Wahlberg) to his brothers-in-arms, and something of its representational uncertainty would haunt those American cameras following the troops into Gulf War Two. Are we shooting? If so, what are we shooting?

For all that the Stars and Stripes were defiantly raised outside public buildings in 9/11’s wake, few filmmakers wanted to be seen waving flags. There was an immediate post-9/11 hit in the Bruckheimer-produced Black Hawk Down (Ridley Scott, 2001) which turned a 1993 failure in Mogadishu into a heartland-rousing triumph by making martyrs of its handsome Army Rangers, and monsters of the Somali locals. However, conventional patriotism was thereafter limited to such reliably conservative figureheads as Mel Gibson (We Were Soldiers, 2002) and even Clint Eastwood’s WW2 diptych of Flags of My Fathers and Letters from Iwo Jima (both 2006) displayed a sobriety and equanimity missing from, say, The Green Berets.

With the mainstream media unsure how to cover the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts documentary stepped in to fill the vacuum, though even here there seemed to be as much lefty handwringing as there was effective rabble-rousing. Michael Moore seemed to catch the nation’s mood with his smash-hit polemic Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004), but then the target of its ire, George W. Bush, was re-elected only a few months later. More substantial analysis of American militarism was offered by Errol Morris in The Fog of War (2003) and Charles Ferguson in No End in Sight (2007). As if to underline the sense of history repeating itself, Eugene Jarecki recycled the title of Frank Capra’s WW2 series for his considered Why We Fight (2005).

The mainstream was lost in profitable fantasy in re-launching Spider-Man in 2002, and announcing Batman Begins in 2005 so multiplex treatments of the war were rare, and rarely successful. The gimmicky Redacted (Brian de Palma, 2007) was a Blair Witch-derived found-footage gag on the notion of embedded cameras, shrill and hectoring in its rhetoric. Stop-Loss (Kimberly Pierce, 2008), sparked by the increasingly under-resourced Army’s policy of returning battle-wearied troops to the frontline, got bogged down in shouting and roughhousing, and somehow encapsulated all the noisily flailing, ineffectual anti-war protests of its decade.

More creatively valuable has been the third wave of homecoming dramas, now very much composed along character-driven, indie-ish 70s lines. Ryan Redford’s Oliver Sherman (2010) is a quietly gripping thriller about two old friends, reunited after several years apart. One (Garret Dillahunt) became a trained killer in Iraq, while the other (Donal Logue) started a family in a small all-American berg. Liza Johnson’s Return (2011) is unusual in focusing on a female combatant (Linda Cardellini) struggling to adjust to her previous existence as a small-town wife and mother. In both films, the home front and the battlefront are presented as irreconcilable.

Such modestly-budgeted films perhaps owe their existence to The Hurt Locker, Kathryn Bigelow’s 2010 Best Picture winner. This is also partly a homecoming film, updating The Best Years of Our Lives’ airplane graveyard in the scene which leaves its soldier hero (Jeremy Renner) stricken amid the banality of a supermarket’s cereal aisle. But it is also a detached action movie, in which Bigelow seeks to milk the tension inherent in
bomb disposal while offering a critical perspective on the collateral psychological damage incurred by American troops in Iraq. Unlike *Avatar*, its closest rival at the 2010 Oscars, which advanced a more integrationist line of foreign policy, *The Hurt Locker* remained stand-offish, and in doing so illustrated how badly America had been burnt by the preceding decade of conflict.

Some of that stand-offishness carried over into Bigelow’s most recent project, 2013’s *Zero Dark Thirty*, the film which may best summarise the current confused state of play in the relationship between combat and cinema. In outline form, *ZDT Zero Dark Thirty* resembles a flagwaver, dramatising the lead-up to the killing of Osama bin Laden by Navy SEALs in May 2011. It was attacked as such by critics Michael Atkinson and Slavoj Žižek,¹¹ who speculated on the close links Bigelow and writer Mark Boal reportedly enjoyed with US intelligence.¹² The film’s vicariously thrilling first-person action scenes, a gift to *Call of Duty* fans, and its endorsing narrative trajectory which suggested that the events of scene one, the torture of an Al-Qaeda operative by the CIA, led necessarily to scene 220, Osama’s last stand. To these critics, *Zero Dark Thirty* was a pre-emptive commemoration of recent history, a clear example of the camera jumping the gun – a film as questionable as that ‘Mission Accomplished’ banner Dubya unfurled back in 2003. And yet the film is shot through with an ambivalence and distance befitting an age where Obama drones can be piloted from afar by graduates of the *Top Gun* academy. With the film’s final image of homecoming, its heroine breaking down aboard an aircraft carrier, Bigelow oversees the American war movie’s latest transition, from the romantic to the authentically conflicted, the action-packed to the consequence-chastened. We’re light years from *The Dawn Patrol* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, the epitome of bleeding-edge Hollywood, amply illuminates those complexities facing the modern filmmaker whenever he or she calls action.