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Hollywood's Image of the Second World War

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David Ayer's *Fury* (2014) and the Depiction of Violence in War

by

Frank Jacob

“War never ends quietly” is written on the movie poster of David Ayer’s 2014 movie distributed by Columbia Pictures. And it is right; war really never ends quietly, as it also never begins without a first shot. However, that is not the only true aspect which is provided by the movie that is telling the story of a Sherman tank crew during the last month of the Second World War in Europe.¹ In general, it is providing the story of the tank commander Don Collier (Brad Pitt), and his crew, consisting of Trini Garcia (Michael Peña), Boyd Swan (Shia LeBeouf), Grady Travis (Jon Bernthal), and Norman Ellison (Logan Lerman), a young man without military experience who was sent to the front to serve as an assistant tank driver.² Due to the fact that the American tank units were outgunned by the German Tiger tanks, not much is left of the unit itself, just consisting of some tanks. The depicted one, named *Fury* by the crew, is therefore providing the microcosm of the movie. These five men, who are willing to survive this last stage of the war, are tied together by the act of collective killing and destroying.

Next to the story of the last days of the war, the Hollywood movie provides several story lines. It describes the war trauma³ of Don Collier, who just wants to see the war end because he has experienced the death of many people and in a way the destruction of human civilization. But he is well aware that the war does not simply end. Therefore, he needs Norman to be aware of his position and task inside the tank.⁴ It is his duty to kill people to keep the tank itself, meaning the people inside, alive. Therefore, he forces the inexperienced young man to kill a German soldier

¹ Still one of the most comprehensive accounts on the Second World War is Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms. A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

² The multi-ethnic group resembles in a way the modern American society.

³ On trauma as a consequence of war see Nigel C. Hunt, *Memory, War and Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁴ The tank changed warfare itself during the Second World War and became a more important part of it than in the decades before. Fred K. Vigman, “Eclipse of the Tank,” *Military Affairs* 8:2 (1944), 101-108, especially 101.

during a lynching situation⁵ after a battle. The film consequently also depicts the process of the young soldier who was not willing to kill another human being at the first instance until the time when he got used to killing them without doubts and even with some kind of pleasure. During the final battle against a SS unit, he is just functioning, killing the Germans while shouting “Die fucking Nazis!”

However, the movie does not simply follow the storyline of the last days of the war⁶ as well as Norman’s development from pacifist to violent using part of the microcosm of a tank.⁷ It also depicts the lives of the soldiers during war. The combat experience creates a unity of people who are different. The difference is shown when Collier takes Norman to a place where a German woman is hiding her younger female cousin. While Norman is in a way ordered by Collier to have “fun” with the younger woman, the sergeant shaves and demands the other woman to prepare some fresh eggs. The whole scene is an expression to overcome the war for a short instant. However, the other members of the tank crew enter the scene and bring the war back to the peaceful scene. They function as some kind of reminder, and by their presence, they are destroying the personal moment of peace of the sergeant.

Finally, the situation is solved from a direct violent conflict by the fact that the soldiers share the same memories and just want to survive the war together. This determining event is brought back very fast when the US troops have to move on. The fact that war creates its own time frame⁸ is symbolized by a German bombing of the town due to which the house is destroyed and the two German women are killed. Norman, who has just experienced physical love for the first time, is robbed of his hope for a happy future by the war itself. While this is also part of his process of his personal acclimatization to violence itself⁹, it also strengthens the bonds to the tank as a place of a specific safe microcosm.

⁵ On lynching violence and its roots see Robert W. Thurston, *Lynching. American Mob Murder in Global Perspective* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), 19-64.

⁶ With regard to the last days of the war *Die letzten 50 Tage: als der Krieg zu Ende ging*, ed. Joachim Käppner and Robert Probst (Munich: Süddeutsche Zeitung: Edition, 2005) provides a comprehensive German perspective.

⁷ Due to its seclusion the tank is an ideal research object to study microcosms of warfare.

⁸ Georg Klute, “Kleinkrieg und Raum,” in *Begegnungen und Auseinandersetzungen. Festschrift für Trutz von Trotha*, ed. Katharina Inhetveen and Georg Klute, (Cologne: Rüdiger Koppe Verlag, 2009), 284.

⁹ Norbert S. J. Brieskorn, “Grausamkeit – Gewalt – Macht,” in *Globalisierung der Gewalt. Weltweite Solidarität angesichts neuer Fronten globaler (Un-)Sicherheit*, ed. Matthias Kiefer and Johannes Müller (Stuttgart: Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 2005), 80.

When we try to explain the levels of violence, which are experienced or depicted in the movie, we can trace different aspects. First of all, war is always a form of collective violence due to which one group of people is trying to kill another group.¹⁰ However, the microcosm of a Sherman tank also explains that violence can be carried out by a group.¹¹ Just as a consequence of the coordinated group action of the five men, the tank becomes a deadly weapon. Despite this level of description, *Fury* also highlights that war creates cruelty.¹² Without an existing order that is achieved by the attachment of the people to a specific kind of law, lynching violence such as the group killing of an unarmed German POW becomes something like an event that is possible to cheer the emotions of the war-tired US soldiers.

While the movie ends as expected with a heroic battle of a minor group of people in a hopeless situation against the SS unit, *Fury* is also an expression of the estimations of a US audience, as the movie is able to depict the several spheres of violence in war in a very sensitive way. It also does not act with common stereotypes of war movies that work with black or white patterns, but rather depicts remaining elements of humanity in warfare. That is not only achieved by Collier's attempt to escape war for an instant, but also by a depiction of the German enemy from different perspectives: children in uniform who are trying to destroy the American tanks¹³, refugees fleeing from the battle scenes, and even a SS member, who is willing to show mercy when he finds out that Norman is hiding beneath the tank after the lost final battle.

If we ask for the historicity of Hollywood, *Fury* is definitely one of the better examples that not only provides a well shot perspective of the tank battles of the Second World War, but also provides a decent insight view into the life of soldiers, who were facing violence in many different forms day-to-day. How that experience is challenging humanity in general and a soldier's consciousness in particular is well explained. Therefore, *Fury* could be rated as one of the movies which is able to create an understandable impression of the history of the Second World War and which might be used in military history classes to pass this kind of imagination

¹⁰ Karl Heinz Metz, *Geschichte der Gewalt. Krieg – Revolution – Terror* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2010), 299.

¹¹ Peter Imbusch, *Moderne und Gewalt. Zivilisationstheoretische Perspektiven auf das 20. Jahrhundert*, (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2005), 31-35 tries to explain the several different types of violence.

¹² For the phenomenon of cruelty and a historical as well as sociological approach see *On cruelty, Sur la cruauté, Über Grausamkeit*, ed. Jakob Rösel and Trutz von Trotha (Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, 2011).

¹³ The so called Volkssturm recruited all remaining human resources to fight against the Allied invasion of Germany. On this phenomenon see David K. Yelton, *Hitler's Volkssturm. The Nazi Militia and the Fall of Germany, 1944-1945* (Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 2002).

onto the younger students who are not able to imagine what a war experience in a US Sherman tank might have looked like.