CINEMATIC TRANSLATION:
THE CASE OF THE WAR FILM

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In the case of the fictional narratives of war, one may speak of transforming or translating ("carrying over") historically recorded events into fictional ones. Yet, even the very creation of historical fact, or the formation of the "event," has already constituted an initial transformation. One begins with a confused mass of data and ends up, in successful cases, with a coherent historical narrative, for a succession of events is historical only when it constitutes actions whose motives can at least in principle be re-enacted (COLLINGWOOD, 1956: 115). The historian transforms what evidently happened (which is itself mediated by eye-witness accounts, documents, records, documentary films, etc.) into a sequential structure with intelligible meaning; that is, he/she translates events into facts and, even though the referent is of a different order from the novelist's or filmmaker's, what they all have in common, according to Hayden White's theories of historical narrative, is a structured narrative, in which some combination or transformation is involved in its construction—nor is the personal experience of the historian absent. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of the historical account tends to make it appear as factual, distanced, objective, and "real," as opposed to historico-fictional narratives, which admit or are at least aware of their status as rhetorical constructions.

War is a collective event, but war fictions, whether literary or cinematic, inevitably concentrate on the personal: tyically, on the

individual within the dynamics of a small group like a squad or platoon. This concentration on individual or small group experience may be contrasted to the large-scale vision of war available in the historical accounts. Histories attempt to encompass the collective experience of war, recording, for example, the movements, successes and failures, of divisions, corps, and armies. When these works are the productions of actual participants, they tend to be written by military commanders or historical leaders as justifications for their actions. Owing to the emphasis on psychological experience, however, the combat narrative sacrifices this larger vision of the war—what could be called a more "strategic" point-of-view—for the greater limitations but also greater emotional intensity of the particular point-of-view of a relatively insignificant participant, an enlisted man or company-grade officer—someone likely to be constantly exposed to fire, who sees death up close. The "strategic vision" of the commander is lacking for such a participant, who finds himself in a highly chaotic environment with his emotions at the height of intensity. The "win-or-lose" concept of those who direct battles, the results of which are in fact the ultimate determinants of recorded history, may at this level even be irrelevant to him, since his main concern is personal survival (KEEGAN, 1976: 47). From the perspective, therefore, of the initial transformations or translations from the chaos of unordered data to the structural ordering of the historical narrative to the fictional work that seems to take place within this historical context, there is a return—although here experienced not by the reader-interpreter but by the protagonist-interpreter—to an initial "state" of unordered chaos.

Even in the more comprehensive or panoramic war narratives— the classical literary example is Homer's *Iliad*, where the cast is much larger but still necessarily limited—and, by definition, in autobiographical narratives, whether fictional or non-fictional, an account is given of a limited but personal participation of men in battle within this larger context, which itself becomes blurred in

the interests of immediacy. In the case of film, whenever the panoramic view becomes the main point, in detriment to the intensive and personal, the result is disappointing, as in Richard Attenborough's *A Bridge Too Far* (1977), a narrative of the combined Allied operation known as "Market Garden," or *The Longest Day* (Ken Annikin, Andrew Marton, Bernard Wicki, 1963), which attempts to narrate the entire Allied D-Day landings in Normandy. In both these cases, however effective they are as pseudo-documentaries, dramatic intensity is lost to diffuseness. More effective, in this sense, is Stephen Spielberg's now famous twenty-minute opening sequence of the Omaha Beach landing in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), a historically anchored scene of extreme violence undergone by a large group that gradually dwindes down to focus on a few individuals for whom this sequence is merely a prelude to a conventional quest narrative of a squad and their intense interaction. The openly fictional film, appealing to the spectator's imagination and expectations of situations of extreme stress, paradoxically seems more "real" than the supposedly more historical, pseudo-documentary films, which tend to blatantly dramatize in too brief a period events that probably have dragged on for months and that cannot touch on the specator's emotional experience as effectively.

Literary and cinematic combat is therefore primarily a narrative of experience, most typically a first-hand account—narrated in the first person or by an external narrator who closely identifies with the protagonist—of a young, inexperienced male, who undergoes the dangers, rigors, and stress of battle and usually lives to tell the tale: male, because woman have not waged war; young and inexperienced, because while war is waged for political and economic ends by older men, the young must bear the brunt of battle, and because in this situation, for better or worse, war has often been regarded as a kind of ultimate test of manhood, an "education by fire." In the combat narrative, the result is an account of someone who "went through hell" and survived—through no merit

of his own, he must recognize, for in modern war, contingency greatly overrides individual will—and who may or may not extract some lesson from his experience, depending on the work's ideology.

On one hand, these narratives may be perceived—and criticized—as a kind of pornography of violence, since they offer the reader/viewer a vicarious experience, a way to feel the terrors of battle without personal risk. This is certainly the case of films, especially the Hollywood war movie, which also tends to exploit sentimental patriotism, as if the spectator might illegitimately have both his thrills and his moral certainties. Pornography is a relevant word in this context, because in the case of films of explicit sexual activity and those of graphic violence, the film "works" on the spectator's body, arousing physical reactions of desire and fear, respectively, while offering the haven of voyeurism, from which the spectator can experience gratuitous sensations.

On the other hand, the serious war film (or novel), in its insistence on personal experience, typically attempts two things. The first is to be an unsentimental but emotionally involved and involving account of war's human devastation, an attempt to communicate to non-combatants its terrible physical and psychological costs—what one might call its didactic function. Such films are typically anti-war in intent, though not necessarily in reception, for spectators may respond to anti-war films with inappropriate patriotism. This happened in 1932, for example, when an infantry charge of French soldiers across no-man's-land, in Raymond Bernard's adaptation (1932) of the pacifist novel by Roland Dorgelès, *Les Croix de Bois*, had Parisian spectators cheering (O'SHEA, 1996: 137). The second aim of the war film, which might be called its socio-psychological function, is to chart the mental, emotional, psychological, and spiritual conflicts of the individual, i.e. the young soldier's relation to the war, his superiors and his comrades, as well as questions of maturity, rites of passage, and the meaning of manhood.

The notion of combat as a testing-ground for young men derives from the fear naturally inspired by the proximity of violent death,

dismemberment or agonizing wounds. Courage in this environment, where everyone is at more or less equal risk and only chance and the astuteness of one's leaders may determine who will be afflicted, depends on a basic conflict: the individual soldier's desire not to let down his comrades, as balanced against his own intense desire for physical survival. The concentration of the combat film on small, well-defined and comradely groups is therefore not only a result of the preference of writers and directors for a manageable group of characters but also reflects the psychological reality of men in war. The group solidarity and deep friendships that evolve among soldiers in the stress of battle are attested to both in the many testimonies of combat veterans but in virtually all combat novels and films, a very recent example of this theme being Spielberg's episodic television production *Band of Brothers.*

This second aspect is more problematic but not necessarily separate or distinct from the first. Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1985), for example, offers the spectator both the vicarious experience of jungle combat and the usual trajectory of a young soldier (Charlie Sheen) undergoing trial by fire amidst group conflicts of his peers. Given the presence and orientation of a number of other sub-genres of the war film (bio-pics of generals, historico-fictional battle films, prisoner-of-war films, wartime adventure, romance, or spy films, wartime civilian dramas, films about the making of the atom bomb, anti-war films, perhaps others), this is still the basic pattern of war films. Even some of these sub-categories are often subsumed under this combat-film formula. Films about famous battles are often reduced to the viewpoint of a small contingent, like *The Battle of the Bulge* (Ken Annikin, 1965), and anti-war films, like *Paths of Glory* (Stanley Kubrick, 1957), may be seen as combat films in which the action comes to be seen as pointless or is treated ironically. Hollywood war films, whatever their historical context, seem remarkably similar, precisely because that context is usually suppressed. Films about the American Revolutionary or Civil War are structurally and, with the suppression of political considerations,

even thematically similar, to American films about the First or Second World Wars, the Korean or Vietnam wars, since the narrative tends to exploit decontextualized situations of extreme danger to concentrate on human action and reaction.

Thus, the cinema would seem to be an ideal medium for war narratives, as the action of combat, complete with visual and sound devices appropriate for making the spectator experience its "reality," and the concentration on the drama of character interaction and conflict in situations of maximum psychological stress are both elements that narrative cinema exploits effectively. And with the long history of the combat novel, it is not surprising that many war films have their source in literature.

When it is a question of turning war novels into films, however, another kind of translation, the semiotic, comes into play. In this kind of translation, or adaptation as it is usually called, the war film does not differ in the essential concerns from other kinds of adaptations. The main story-lines and characters of novels are usually maintained, though minor characters are omitted or combined, side-plots and commentary may be drastically reduced or omitted outright, endings changed, episodes given different emphases, etc. Fidelity, a now out-moded concept in translation studies, is, in any case, not a serious concern in the case of the films like *Anzio* (Edward Dmytryk, 1968), a pseudo-historial battle film, adapted from an eponymous novel by Winford Vaughn-Thomas, since many more spectators undoubtedly saw the film than read the novel. In the case of a classic work, however, such as Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928) or Ernest Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms* (1929), the two most well-known novels of the First World War to American readers, it may be confidentlly stated that most viewers saw the films to, among other motives, verify the "fidelity" of the adaptation of the novel they have read and cherished. The problem here is that certain expectations about the handling of these productions are raised in the spectator that would not be the case in more obscure works like

Vaughn-Thomas's, and there is therefore bound to be some viewer disappointment about perceived discrepancies. Still, from the translation point-of-view, classic novels, like other works, have their distinct qualities that allow for numerous if not infinite interpretations or adaptations.

There are also some general problems in any cinematic adaptation, notably running-length, that become particularly relevant to the war-film genre. Since a film must be shorter in viewing time than the reading time of its respective novel, cuts must be made and events telescoped. This situation, as I have suggested in the first section, is the bane of the panoramic historical war film, where great events inevitably seem foreshortened, even in a three-hour-long film. But there are also certain elements in a written text based on actual evetns—philosophical or historical commentary, for example—that cannot easily be made visually dramatic. A rhetorical element, irony, which is often important in expressing authorial attitude towards war, can be present in film through effective use of cinematographic devices, as in Kubrick's film, but is often lost in a novel's transposition to the screen. The irony of Hemingway's novel, for example, which includes not only the ironic outcomes of the plot but principally the narrator's distanced language and point-of-view, are completely missing in both Frank Borsage's 1932 adaptation and the 1957 remake by Charles Vidor. Both of these films, as a result, turn the story—an exemplary ironic modernist narrative—into a popular melodrama of a doomed romance, as in so many other second-rate war films, where the war context merely serves as *frisson* for the love story.

In the case of Lewis Milestone's adaptation of *All Quiet on the Western Front* (as opposed to the inferior 1979 remake adapted for television by Delbert Mann), however, the translation is largely successful, and the film itself has achieved classic status. The narrative follows the basic pattern described above, the random day-to-day life of the protagonist Paul Baumer (Lew Ayres) and his give-and-take with a few comrades in battle and at rest. The

devastation of the war is illustrated by Baumer's loss, one by one, of the members of his squad, many of whom only a short time before were his adolescent school-mates. The film effectively established the basic opposition, present in virtually all Great War narratives, between this traumatic reality and the "strategic" fantasies of the old men mapping out campaigns on the table of the *bierhaus* and the pathetic patriotism of the boys in the schoolroom, who call the protagonist a coward when he attempts to enlighten them about the war that is actually being fought. Phony nationalism and war-enthusiasm are exposed as absurdly inadequate.

The film therefore reflects the essential thematic message of the novel, retains most of the main characters and episodes, even as it uses specifically cinematographic language to offer its own focus and viewpoint on events. For example, in the reenactment of the Great War's infantry attacks, the soldiers are shown in the usual initial shot of going "over the top," climbing out of the trenches, to advance across no-man's-land, and then, as is commonly done, from the side and the front, charging grimly into the camera. But, in one instance, they are shot from above, suggesting the antlike, impersonal nature of the soldier in modern war, a point that is emphasized only verbally by the novel's narrator, who complains that in battle the men become inhuman "automatons" (REMARQUE, 1975; 115)—a good example of a semiotic translation from the written medium to the filmed one. A particularly important scene in the novel—of the protagonist's "conversation" with a dead French soldier whom he has bayoneted in a shell-crater—presents no special translation difficulty, however, being a straightforward dramatic monologue that in fact now seems rather stilted in an old-fashioned way. Yet its inclusion is thematically necessary, for before this face-to-face contact, the enemy was merely an abstraction. The reductive political process of identifying men only by uniform is transformed to the personal, where the enemy has become identifiable, a man with a face and a family (a photograph in the dead man's pocket), and, given a different political situation, a possible friend.

Finally, another scene is exemplary for illustrating the possibilities of cinematic translation. In the novel, when one of their wounded fellows lies dying in a field hospital, his mates frankly discuss at his bedside who will inherit his fine English boots—this is no lack of respect for a comrade, the narrator insists, for the dying man would do the same if someone else were in his place. In their ultimate uncertainty, the men become ruthlessly practical and oriented toward the immediate present (in the beginning of the novel, for example, they look on the bright side of having lost a great number of men in their company: as a result of the unexpected casualties, there will be extra food rations). The bedside scene is repeated in the film and its effect is greatly increased by showing the boots worn successively on the feet of marching men, who, as the camera shifts one by one to their faces, are revealed to be the different members of the squad, chillingly suggesting rather than graphically showing that each man is killed in battle, with the boots being inherited in turn by his comrades (BURNS, 2000: 64).

Milestone's cinematic version of *All Quiet on the Western Front* is less impressive in its ideological implications. The film won the Academy Award for best picture 1929-30, which suggests that Hollywood may have "softened" the story to some extent. It may be doubted that a film that sympathetically portrays German soldiers would win an Oscar, but in fact the novel's author subsquently left Germany and became an American citizen, and the "enemy" soldiers in film and novel are not American but French (ROQUEMORE, 1999: 139). Another problem is the softening of the naturalism. In the novel, the trenches are portrayed as very unpleasant places to inhabit; the men are wasted from dysentery, the food is bad, and the trenches are filled with stinking mud and infested with rats. Death often comes not in heroic postures but at unexpected or even ludicrous moments, so that a man might be killed while frantically struggling for shelter or in some trivial, even ridiculous way. These details, though cinematically possible to reproduce, are missing in the film, and the characters speak a slangy American dialect that is

unintentionally comical in the mouths of supposedly German soldiers, which no doubt consciously connects the film with the typical American war films of plain-speaking workingmen from a variety of backgrounds—the "democracy" of the military camp.

More to the point is the ending. At the end of the novel, Baumer, who narrates the story in the first-person, is alive and simply gives expression to his continuing disillusion: "Let the months and years come, they can take nothing from me, they can take nothing more. I am so alone, and so without hope that I can confront them without fear" (REMARQUE, 1975: 295). The film's most famous scene, its final one, depicts Baumer himself being shot by a sniper while reaching for a butterfly. This sentimentalizes the mood of the novel, giving the story a poignancy that the starkness of the novel's narrative avoids, but in another sense the scene is not a completely false addition, either. One feature specific both to fictional and non-fictional accounts of the Great War is the "pastoral" or "bucolic" interlude, a peaceful break from the trenches that was made possible by the well-defined lines clearly dividing the "front" from the rear, non-combat areas. These interludes are made both more pleasurable and more painful again by the ironic contrast with what the soldiers have been through and what they have to face on their return to the front. The scene may be justified by its symbolization and ironization of this bucolic interlude, in that the protagonist finds the peaceful return to nature possible only in death.

Another difficulty, which might in fact seem a major problem of adapting war novels, the contextual transposition to a different time and place, however, turns out to be less so in this instance. As I have argued above, the decontextualized or mainly psychological emphasis of most war films tends to "universalize" the combat experience. The prototype, and arguably the most distinguished example of the combat novel in American literature, is Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), whose historical context is the Civil War, though it was written several decades later. The novel is decontextualized to the extent that the reader could not

really know, except by the colors of the uniforms and references to the "rebels," that it is this particular war that is the setting for the action. The novel's action could take place, *mutatis mutandis*, within the context of almost any war.

Crane's work is often cited as an example of American naturalism, in the importance given in the novel to deterministic forces to the detriment of human will. In Crane, important themes that will become typical of later war narratives in both literature and film, like the courage or cowardice of the combatant, the combatant as spectator and war as a spectacle, and the combatant's separation from and membership in a male group, are all introduced, but are also problematized (BROOKE-ROSE, 1986: 29). Yet, the novel, in addition to the narrative distancing mentioned above, has an impressionistic plot and symbolic language, all of which makes it an exception to the usual examples of war fiction. The protagonist of a combat novel may be the central focus of the narration or he may be the narrator himself, but the difference here proves to be crucial. Crane's "knowing" or impersonal third-person narrator allows for the possibility of irony. Crane's work, then, is naturalistic, portraying a deterministic world in which the subject can do little but be bent and swayed by impersonal forces, but it also explores the psychology of an unreflective subject and ironizes his certainties and convictions, even his fears. The young soldier is so relentlessly exposed by this ironic distance between the narrator and his constantly shifting fear, elation, bitterness, and self-justification, it is doubtful in the end whether he has learned anything at all about the meaning of war, as opposed to feeling a certain undeserved self-satisfaction in having faced it. As argued above, in the typical combat narrative, by contrast, war is a didactic experience.

John Huston's underrated adaptation of *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951) manages to successfully convey the essence of the psychological experience for the young soldier, his confused perceptions, and his shifting emotional states, including blind panic. While the realism of the battle scenes are greater in the film, owing

to the sound and external confusion evoked by the visual medium, the ironic narrative distance toward them and toward the narrator himself is, by the same token, lost. The spectator identifies and sympathizes with the protagonist (Audie Murphy) in a way that the novel's narrator never allows the reader to do. The gritty black and white realism of the film also cannot convey the symbolic quality of the novel's language. Huston has made an exemplary, even classic, war film, but he has not been able to translate what is unique about Crane's novel to the screen. To do so, however, he would have had to forego the naturalistic treatment, as Terence Malik has done in his ponderous (1998) remake of James Jones' novel of combat naturalism, *The Thin Red Line* (1962), in which combat becomes the least important element in a film dominated by pseudo-philosophical voice-over narration and "arty" cinematography.

In a different way from the decontextualized combat film, war films with a "message" manage to be relatively "timeless" in a historical reality where wars, if not the weapons they are fought with, never really become obsolete. In this sense, *All Quiet on the Western Front* or *Paths of Glory* are "about" the First World War, but their thematic treatment stresses the absurdity of all wars. The First World War serves as a splendid example for the anti-war attitudes of these films, as it was particularly absurd in its features, but both these films could have been made within the historical context of another war. For different reasons, the unreflective combat film— say, *Battle Cry* (Raoul Walsh, 1955) or *To Hell and Back* (Jesse Hibbs, 1955)—the typical story of the young man going to war to prove himself or to fight for his country does not need specific historical context either, and films with these themes were particulary common during and after the Second World War, where moral certainties about who was on the right side were clearer than before and since. With films about Vietnam (perhaps even before, as attested by Samuel Fuller's powerful works on the Korean war), these certainties disappeared as social and political attitudes towards the war change. Early examples of the Vietnam war film, like *The Green Berets*

(John Wayne, 1968), where John Wayne merely updates his performance in scores of westerns in a war perceived as having to be fought, contrast with later examples like Oliver Stone's *Born on the 4th of July* or Brian De Palma's *Casualties of War* (both 1989), in which the Vietnam war is seen as a tragic mistake, or even a number of action films like *Bat 21* (Peter Markle, 1988), or *First Blood* (1982) which are ambiguous about their own stance toward it.

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