

# An Interview with Filmmaker Jordan Martinez

First Sergeant Russell Tuason faces a dilemma: does he deploy once again to Iraq to lead the troops he has been training, or does he take a meritorious retirement from the Army and begin a family with his wife Krissy?

His best friend, Sgt. Emmanuel Sanchez (Ramon Rodriguez), tells him that he has already proven himself and has no need to return to battle, that he can “ride off into the sunset.” However, In Jordan Martinez’s 2019 film *The Gatekeeper*, Tuason feels that if he retires he will be abandoning his duty and his men, sacrificing his honor, but if he deploys he will be jeopardizing the hopes and dreams of his wife Krissy (Jennifer Marshall), and the promises he made to her. In an argument with his wife, he says, “If I don’t finish what I’ve started, then what kind of leader does that make me?,” a conflict that is at least as old *The Odyssey*. Tuason is torn between what he “wants to do” and what he “should do,” between family and duty. He chooses duty.

*The Gatekeeper*, Jordan Martinez’s first short film, begins with this conflict. Martinez explains that he “wanted to convey that going back is a choice. Russell doesn’t have to go, but he feels his sense of purpose or duty is to ensure the safety of his men.” Later on, we discover that Russell’s sense of duty isn’t the only thing compelling him. “Perhaps in his mind he believes he is choosing duty for the right reasons. Or is he lying to himself?”



The character of Tuason is portrayed by Christopher Loverro, an Army veteran of a 2005 deployment to Iraq, former SWAT Team member, and founder of Warriors for Peace Theatre. He remarks that he “struggled with suicide when I returned from Iraq, so much of what the character was going through were things I could relate to in my personal life. Everything my character in the film experienced were things that I could relate to or experienced personally or someone I served with experienced. I pulled from my own personal military bio or used soldiers and leaders I served with to pull from.”



The action shifts to Iraq, circa 2004, with Tuason's company in a firefight with insurgents (shot at Blue Cloud Movie Ranch in one day of production). As Tuason enters a courtyard scanning for the enemy, camera work and special effects lead to a sense of spatial and temporal dislocation, creating disorientation and uncertainty. He hears the faint cries of a woman and enters a door which leads into a church. In a flash forward, he sees a flag-draped coffin (his?) and a woman, who in a later scene is shown to be his grieving widow.

Martinez, born in 1990, served for 10 years in the Army, which he joined at 17, training as a paratrooper and eventually becoming a Civil Affairs Specialist, with a deployment to Afghanistan. He says, "I was attracted to the military as a child. My sister was in the military at the time and I wanted nothing more than to go on an adventure and see the world. When I was about sixteen years old I knew my goal would be to

join after high school and I wasn't afraid of going overseas even though the wars were going full speed."

After he left the service, Martinez had some jobs in various film productions. He learned about the graduate program in Cinematic Arts at USC and "made the second best decision of his life" to apply. He was accepted, and thus Martinez fulfilled a life-long dream to make movies, which began when he was eight years old growing up in Southern California. Brian DePalma's *Scarface* (1983) made a significant impact, as did *What Dreams May Come* (1998), starring Robin Williams. The Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix* (1999) and Christopher Nolan's *Inception* (2010) were influential, he says, for their conceptual frameworks. While at USC, Martinez studied with such top industry professionals as Robert Nederhorst, Visual Effects Supervisor on *John Wick 3*, Academy Award Winner Michael Fink, and John Brennan, Virtual Production Lead on *The Lion King* (2019). *The Gatekeeper* is ground-breaking in utilizing on such a small project "motion-capture previsualization," a type of digital storyboarding which allows complex scenes to be created before shooting, thus saving time on the set. All told, the film came to fruition over a year and a half, from the script to post-production to screenings at film festivals. *The Gatekeeper* is Martinez' final project for his Master of Fine Arts in Cinematic Arts from USC. He graduated in December, 2019.

As the firefight continues the company is pinned down, and Tuason, now in command, faces another choice: return to the base or maintain its position and take the fight to the enemy. He decides that they will "stand our ground," a fatal mistake that leads to the deaths of everyone in the company except Tuason. When he returns stateside he suffers from intense survivor's guilt and believes that he "should have died there with them . . . They all died because of me." At his best friend's, Sanchez's, funeral, shot at the Los Angeles National Cemetery, he hopes to obtain absolution from Sanchez's widow,



but she tells him that her husband is dead “all because you wanted to be a hero,” and referring to their daughter: “and now she has to grow up without hers.” This sends Tuason further into depression.

As he contemplates suicide, he is visited by Sanchez’ ghost. Sanchez is an emissary, but from where? Heaven? Hell? Is he the gatekeeper? As Tuason makes a final pact with Sanchez, he has visions of his childhood, his men, his wife and their newborn daughter being given up for adoption. The final shot of the film is a close up of Tuason’s face, eyes questioning, searching. Martinez provides no answers, preferring ambiguity and individual interpretations.



The film has been called a “military thriller” and a “psychological thriller,” but Martinez says “it could be a military thriller, a psychological thriller, a supernatural

thriller, a drama, a war film, and in all honesty it can be all of these. It just depends on your perspective. This was my initial goal in making the film because no one wants to be told what to believe. I really wanted it to start a conversation, perhaps even pose the question, 'What did I just see?'"



Martinez, left, during his Army service.

Martinez wanted the film to be accurate in military aspects. Even though he was in the service for 10 years, he relied on Retired Army Sergeant Daniel Stroud to insure authenticity.

In a twist, Stroud was Loverro's First Sergeant in Iraq in 2005 and Martinez's Command Sergeant Major in Afghanistan in 2012. The casting of veterans in major roles and the use of veterans behind the camera was crucial to him, not only for realism but also to allow vets to tell their stories in the non-stereotypical ways he sees in many big-budget films. "Veterans were in front of and behind the camera," he

explains. "Veterans are the first to destroy a film for its lack of authenticity since they are trained to find flaws. Therefore, they are the hardest to please. I wanted to ensure I had extra attention to detail to make sure they were immersed in the experience since bringing them back to those memories of service was extremely important to me." He notes that he's received many emotional responses from military wives and veterans. He adds, "it's an honor to be able to connect with those closest to the material." His sentiment is shared by the film's co-star, [Jennifer Marshall](#), a Navy veteran from Denver, CO, who notes that she has occupied many roles related to the military: she has served, she has been a wife at home while her husband deployed, and she has lost friends both while serving and then to PTSD after coming home.

"I was honored to play the role and bring my real-life experiences to making her a real person." Marshall adds, "It's essential that veterans in Hollywood work with other veterans and bring our stories to the forefront. The alternative is Hollywood telling our stories for us . . . often times riddled with errors and half-truths."

Loverro says, "War veterans offer an understanding and breadth of knowledge that give them an advantage a civilian actor or director might not have. That's not to say civilians can't make great films about war, obviously many have. However, during the making of the film we felt what we were telling 'our' story and that process in and of itself was cathartic."

Beyond authenticity, Martinez's overarching reason for making the film was to address PTSD and the human toll as a result of war, and by extension other types of trauma. Having lost friends to suicide, he wanted to show that an extreme decision has ramifications beyond the individual. He points out that civilian rates of suicide are also high and that many of those who have committed suicide had experienced trauma. "I think this film can touch on trauma of all types and that those experiences can negatively influence our judgment, leading us



into a treacherous depression or a dangerous thought process.”



He hopes the film can start an honest conversation about what the military does to people, and that the purpose of the military can be both fighting wars and also healing those who fight in wars, and better preparing them for how war changes them as well as helping veterans readjust to civilian society. Aspects of the military mentality can take a toll not only on vets but also family members and he believes that more discussion in the country as a whole could help prevent veteran suicide.

Martinez's long-term plan is to obtain funding to make a full-length feature of *The Gatekeeper* and receive theatrical distribution. He has a treatment for the entire film that he is ready to pitch to major studios. His goal is that the film will bring this conversation to national and international audiences.



*The following is an interview between professor Larry Abbott and filmmaker, Jordan Martinez.*

**LARRY ABBOTT:** Can we start with a bit about your background and how you came to be a filmmaker?

**JORDAN MARTINEZ:** I was born in 1990. I'm from Southern California. I grew up all around the area when I was a kid. My mom was a single mom. She moved around, county to county pretty much. I enlisted in the Army in 2008. Once I joined, I became a paratrooper, joined Civil Affairs, and eventually became a Civil Affairs Sergeant. I was deployed to Afghanistan in 2012 to 2013, in Kandahar Province.

After that, I was still in the Reserves, all the way up until last year. The last couple years, I started working in Japan for USFJ. I officially got out last year, a total of 11 years, most of it Reserves.

I started getting into film in 2013, when I got back from Afghanistan. I met a couple veterans who brought me to some organizations in Hollywood, got me some jobs here and there, and I started doing a lot of background production assistant work.

I realized that that was not the path toward becoming a director, which is what I always wanted to be from childhood. It's a very difficult journey to become a director. There was a lot of opposition, but if I wanted to have a chance, I needed to get educated. I had my Bachelor's Degree in Communications & Film, but I didn't feel like it was really a substantial degree. I didn't feel like it really taught me the technical skills I needed to work in an evolving film industry.

I entered the film program at USC and I've been there for the last four years. I learned a lot about the technical side, and I met a lot of great people, and got more experience. That's exactly what I wanted, to have more stuff on my reel, build my

network, learn more about the technical skills that are involved in filmmaking.

I had the opportunity to be mentored by an Academy Award winner, one of the visual effects supervisors for *John Wick: Chapter 3*. He was a great mentor of mine and still is. He helped me out with making *The Gatekeeper*, as far as telling me where I was going wrong, what I was doing right. *The Gatekeeper* was definitely the pinnacle of my work at USC.

**ABBOTT:** Why did you decide on a military theme?

**MARTINEZ:** I realized early on that military films are not really being told. It's funny, because I didn't really think, when I started in the film industry, that I was going to be a director of military-related films. I didn't think that was my path. I didn't think much about that genre-wise.

When I started going to USC I really started to think: Okay, I need to double-down on this because there's no one else doing the job. There are no movies, in my opinion, that are really, at the moment, doing a lot of justice to the experiences of serving in post-9/11 wars. I started getting my feet wet with that.

2016 was very divisive. I really feel like it was similar to—maybe not quite the same, because I wasn't born in that era—but similar division-wise to the Vietnam era. You had a lot of protests. You had people who just didn't like the military. It's unfortunate, but you get a lot of this in strongholds like Los Angeles and New York.

Regardless of all that, I made military-related films when there were people who didn't really like the underlying messages, who thought they were controversial. But I told them that they were accurate and often based on actual events that happened to people.

I work very hard to get my films as authentic as possible

because I know, as a veteran, how much we are willing to totally tear apart a movie. We look at something like *American Sniper* or all these high-budget movies and we say, "Hey, you had \$100 million. Why couldn't you get this shit right? Why couldn't you hire someone, a veteran, to help you out or even tell the story?"

I think that's part of the disconnect that I hope we'll see change. We already are seeing "veteran" being its own diversity category. We're not really being represented in the film industry at all. If you look at the demographics, veterans are the least represented in the film industry.

I think that this is changing, and I've already seen the beginnings of it. I hope it continues to change because veterans want to be able to tell their own stories. They want to be able to enjoy films that are accurate and that honor the sacrifice that veterans have made in service to this country to further the ideals of freedom and democracy that have really been under attack for quite some time.

I'm not political in any way. I'm very independent-minded, but I do believe in America. I do believe that the sacrifices of our veterans are being misunderstood and not really being taken in total account.

We look at Veterans Affairs, we see tons of suicides. For me, I've known people who have either attempted or actually committed suicide in the military. It totally turns the world upside down for everyone around them. Friends and family are destroyed. I think, for far too long, it's been brushed under the rug.

The idea of *The Gatekeeper* began in 2015, believe it or not. It was my first film at USC. The original idea started when I saw *What Dreams May Come*, which is a Robin Williams film. It's something that many of us think about in the military. It's a military ideology: Valhalla, Warrior Heaven, and all that.



In the film Robin Williams' character goes into hell to save his wife. I felt this was a keen idea of film in general, an interesting concept, and I combined that with the ideals of the military and the genre of the military itself. I think it is its own genre at this point. My film is not really a thriller. It's not really military. It's not really a drama. It's all of those combined.

When I made the short film, sort of a prequel, I didn't have enough money. Back in 2015, I didn't have the assets. I did it for my first project at USC. It's a very, very restrictive time constraint. You have five minutes! But it was really well-liked. A lot of people liked the concept, but it just wasn't a big enough production. It didn't have enough screen time. It didn't have all those things that are necessary for a film.

USC is a very, I would say, liberal-minded campus, nothing wrong with that, but they are not into seeing the military in a positive light. I'm not making the military positive or negative. I'm making it authentic.

That's something that I think is not being recognized in Hollywood. The military is either portrayed as super evil or super good. That's just not what it is at all. It's not super good. It's not super bad. It's just an ideology that people fall into who are supposed to support the Constitution and the country of the United States.

That's the perspective that I didn't see represented, so I decided to keep making films that show what it's like being overseas as a soldier. I made a second film about Afghanistan. It was about a child suicide bomber. It got a lot of heat. A lot of people didn't like the fact that I was getting into controversial things about the war.

I said, "Okay, cool. I'm hitting a button here. I'm hitting something. I'm getting a reaction out of people, which is, for

better or worse, good." As long as it comes from truth, I think that that's a good place. Eventually, through my time at USC, I learned more and more, and I became known as "the military director."

**ABBOTT:** How important is authenticity?

**MARTINEZ:** Eventually, I was getting close to the end of my time at USC. I was there for four years, from 2016 until December of 2019. The process for making a thesis film is really about three semesters, a little over a year, and the script for the thesis film was really pretty much the same thing as my original short, which was essentially the same concept as *The Gatekeeper*. I have the same main actor, who's a good friend of mine, Chris Loverro. He himself is a war veteran. He's an amazing patriot, amazing veteran, amazing theatrical actor. My relationship with Chris is so strong I knew that I was going to be able to pull this film off with him.

For *The Gatekeeper*, he was instrumental with helping me build the firing range shown in the film, with helping me get right certain things that a high-ranking soldier would do. Even though I was in the military for ten years, I couldn't know everything. I think that's where Hollywood gets it wrong. They have directors who have spent zero time in the military, and then they don't even listen to the military advisor that the studio has provided for them.

I really tried to make the film as authentic as possible, as military people will totally rip apart any little thing that's incorrect in a movie. It's like, hey, if I'm going to be known as a military director, I better make sure I have this complete on lock the weapons, the uniforms, the jargon, the tactics, everything single thing has to be completely on point.

**ABBOTT:** How did the actual shoot progress?

**MARTINEZ:** We filmed *The Gatekeeper* in six and a half days. That was all we could afford within our budget. I was lucky enough to be able to get some financial help. I did spend a lot of my own money to get the project going, which I saved during my time in service, and then also I got scholarships and grants. I was very fortunate to get help from the Robert Rodriguez Scholarship, as well as a few other people that were kind enough to donate as well.

I built a lot of connections within my time at USC as well, so the weapons and the locations and everything like that, a lot of it I got for free or next to nothing, which was a huge help in being able to pull this thing off.

I had great help from people who chipped in their time, chipped in their energy, a lot of veterans that I knew within Hollywood that I had built a relationship with who knew me came out of the woodwork to make this film come alive. Jennifer Marshall, she's probably the most well-known actress in the film. She's been in *Stranger Things*. She's been in *Hawaii Five-0*. She has her own television show on CW called *Mysteries Decoded*.

It was a long and grueling process, but also a great process to collaborate with cast members who are veterans. I wanted to make this movie after I learned that a friend of mind had committed suicide around May 2018. I found out that he had hanged himself. It finally struck me that veteran suicide is a big problem. Essentially, I wanted to be able to convey to veterans, in their own language, how suicide is not the answer, no matter how depressed one is. Anybody can be susceptible to suicide.

**ABBOTT:** How does this concern come out in the film?

**MARTINEZ:** The lead character, Tuason, is the highest-ranking member in the platoon, the first sergeant. Even he can be susceptible to depression. That's what I wanted to show.



You're not weak for showing guilt.

A lot of this movie has to do with my own experiences. Some of the characters reflect my own perception about how the military really functions. Too many times we hear things that are not helpful to soldiers. I think there can be some change within the military to help people.

In my opinion, it's definitely against human nature to kill one another and see one another killed, and it can cause quite a lot of damage psychologically and spiritually to people.

That's the thing a lot of people don't see, too, especially from the outside, is that the experience is not all sobs and horrors. It's also very exhilarating and addicting. I virtually don't know any veteran who wouldn't go back overseas. I honestly don't think I know one. Every veteran I talk to, if you asked them today, "If you could put your gear on and you could go back to a war zone, would you do it?" I would guarantee you 75%, if not more, would say that they want to.

Once that feeling is in your blood, once that level of excitement is in your blood, it's impossible to top. Risky behavior, driving a fast car—that's why you see a lot of veterans on motorcycles, because that's the closest they can get to the type of thrill that makes them feel alive.

There's absolutely a psychological effect that combat has on people. Whether it's addicting or thrill-seeking, or whether it's a combination cocktail of all of those things, there is that element that you see in *The Gatekeeper*.

For me, I think there are a lot of similarities in the cultures of religious ideology and military ideology. There's loyalty. There's the idea of seeing each other in the afterlife. There's the idea of a higher purpose, of renouncing the individual self for the group.

That's what I wanted to show in *The Gatekeeper* as well. The whole scene, to Tuason, is about him believing that he's going to see his friend in the afterlife. This is something that is absolutely real in the military.

**LA:** Sanchez, Tuason's best friend, does appear as a ghost. What exactly does the title refer to?

**JM:** The title refers to multiple things, but the main thing is the gate between heaven and hell. That's what Sanchez' character in the afterlife is supposed to portray. It also has a dual meaning because the main character is somebody that essentially keeps the enemy at the gates as well. That's the big question: Who is really the gatekeeper? It is Tuason or is it Sanchez?

I also wanted to make this film connecting to people that believed in theism or people that were non-theist. That was very important to me. I wanted it to be connected on both sides. There's a huge religious element to the film, even in the beginning, when he says, "You're gonna send these guys to the afterlife." It's very strong in the narrative.

What I wanted to convey with this is that Tuason's belief system is, in my opinion, religious. The United States is still a Christian religious country.

**LA:** What were you after at the end of the film?

**JM:** At the very end, did he go to hell, or was it a hell he felt psychologically? You can perceive it in both ways. We all share this one thing that's on our minds more than others: the thought of death and the thought of going back into the earth, if there is life after death, and all of these other types of constructs. The life-after-death construct is definitely heavy—and has always been heavy—within the warrior mentality, because there's just so much of it within that culture.

I definitely had a very deep philosophical angle that I wanted to show. The main thing is that a lot of veterans are suffering and they are not only feeling guilt, but there is also the ideology of honor that is in the military ideology.

I think honor's great. It's great that people have the Medal of Honor. And the ideas and concepts of honor are good in a lot of ways. But I also think, in other ways, when we start to really look at it, it can have negative effects. How do you define honor? Can honor be fully achieved? What is the effect of lost honor?

I don't think people in the very strongholds of Hollywood care, to be honest with you. I don't think they really care about the veterans' suffering. I think they believe that the wars are evil. I think that this is a huge, how do I say, misfortune. It's a huge misfortune for all of us, because we're not getting movies like *The Gatekeeper* that can ask more questions. I want the audience to ask questions. I don't want to tell you what exactly it means. I want you to find a deeper meaning to it.

For me, my deeper meaning is: When we tell somebody they need to aspire to a sense of honor, and then you take it all away from them overnight, all these ideas of being a soldier, with the Tuason character, he didn't feel like he had achieved that honor, and that's where the guilt comes in, where he felt like he wanted to go back to combat, because he wanted more of this experience. This can absolutely crush and destroy people.

**LA:** The ending of the film is ambiguous. Tuason goes to the hospital and talks to Sanchez. You use some special visual effects.

**JM:** Not to give away any of this, but what I was trying to say with that—the veins, the choking—is it really does feel like we cannot communicate with the rest of the world. The pain he was feeling throughout the film suffocated him. That is much



more common and much more real: the war within the self.

Tuason joins the firefight to save his troops, which is definitely an honorable thing to do, but he makes the decision to not retreat and essentially go for revenge, for the satisfaction of killing the enemy and completing the mission. It doesn't work out. More of his men are lost because of his decision. He loses everything, including his own mental health.

You can't talk to the military about PTSD or you will be yanked from your command. All sort of repercussions would happen if you had any psychological disruption, especially during that period in Iraq of the '03-'05 era.

The military has definitely gotten better at this, but Tuason felt that he couldn't to talk to anyone within the military or within his family. He's being psychologically choked. He can't breathe at that moment because he's being pulled back into hell as well. So, there's a supernatural element combined with the element of his being suffocated, in so much pain, with this depression, this guilt, not being able to connect with anyone. It's a dual feeling that I was portraying there.

And then, with him at the very end, I wanted to add some suspense if he was going to kill himself or not. I wanted people to see what it is like to be in that suicidal state so they don't get to that state. I want veterans to feel what it would actually be like to be in that state—you're probably not immediately going to die in any certain circumstance. I don't care if you jump off a roof. You're probably still going to be conscious for some period of time, according to scientific data.

Even if you shoot yourself in the head, you're probably going to feel that pain of not being able to go back, the real regret. Who knows what goes on at that point? We don't know what kind of ideas and dreams you have before you leave this

world. I wanted to show that Tuason felt the pain, he saw the pain, of leaving his wife and have her shatter to pieces. She'll never be the same person again after her husband's death.

**LA:** When she's in the hospital bed, giving birth to the child she always wanted, the image of her is in black and white and her face is distorted.

**JM:** She's distorted. That's what the underlying message is that she's a shell of what she could've been and he gets to see the baby girl. He gets to feel the real pain of his ultimate decision, which is irreversible, of killing himself. That's what I want veterans to see.

And not just veterans. I wanted to connect with everyone. Even though this film is centered toward the veteran, I think a lot of people can understand the suicidal impulse. It doesn't matter if you were a first sergeant in the Army. That doesn't matter. What matters is that we all feel trauma. We all feel pain. We all sometimes feel like quitting, especially right now, with this coronavirus situation. There's a lot of depression, I'm sure, going on. The real tragedy is to give up and to give in. Taking your life is something that will affect all of those people around you in many different dimensions.

I wanted to be able to send that message to the big screen, because we're just seeing too much of this happening in our society. It's really an epidemic, maybe a pandemic, but there are is a shocking number of veterans who are committing suicide. I've seen it happen too many times. We've see the data.

**LA:** What were your influences growing up, filmmakers or otherwise?

**JM:** I'm a huge fan of *Scarface*. When I was eight years old, in 1998, I saw *Scarface* for the first time, and that's when I knew I wanted to become a filmmaker. There was something about

that film that made so much sense to me. It was just such a beautifully directed film.

Obviously, it was a little beyond my time. I was very young and the movie was probably ten years old at that point, or whatever, at least. But I just connected with it in such a way, and I kept watching it and watching it and watching it. It's a three-hour movie. I just fell in love with the artistic side of that film.

*The Matrix* was also a favorite film of mine from my era. There's a sleekness to *The Matrix* that I tried to emulate—being in another world, different dimensions. That's kind of what you see in *The Gatekeeper*. I tried to combine that sleek and slickness as much as I could.

**LA:** *The Gatekeeper's* structure is certainly non-linear.

**JM:** Exactly. The whole movie is really jumping between timelines. That's something I picked up from *Inception*. It's not my favorite movie by any means, but I do appreciate the non-linear “what's real, what's not real” element. I liked the concepts it was trying to master, and I borrowed a lot of those things, as much as I could, to put into *The Gatekeeper*.

Every film borrows ideas from others. We all know this. It's just what happens. There's a lot I borrowed from *What Dreams May Come*. You could arguably say *The Gatekeeper* is *What Dreams May Come* meets *American Sniper*. That's really what it is.

There's this whole ideal in the military “sweat more, bleed less.” But death can come to anyone in the military. Under bad leadership, everyone can be vulnerable to death.

But you are also vulnerable under good leadership. It could be an unfortunate event. It's really your perspective. Death is random. It's the luck of the draw. It doesn't matter sometimes how skilled you are. It can matter, but it's multitudes of things. We all like to think—and we are all trained in the

military to believe—that it's not luck, that it's really how well-trained you are.

I think we have to talk about these tough things in order to really bring change. We can't have them taboo forever. We've been so under the spell of "Oh, yeah, you can never talk about politics. You can never talk about religion. You can never talk about veteran experience, because they're all sacred."

I don't buy into that. I think when we don't talk about those issues, it leads to this toxic cocktail of isolation. Veterans in the Vietnam War and the current wars, too, have been forced to kill children. We see a little bit of this in *American Sniper*. People are using children as soldiers, and that really can screw up the psyche of a soldier, being forced, essentially, to kill children. That's just one example—women, children, innocents.

So, if we don't talk about it, if we're barred from talking about it and we're being forced to live within this illusion, that has repercussions and can damage veterans.

**LA:** Have you shown the film to other veterans? Any feedback from them?

**JM:** I have. I did a screening, an educational screening, in downtown Los Angeles, where USC is. I showed it to a bunch of veterans. We had a huge amount of people come. It was the first actual screening of the film. I had people cry. I had a woman whose husband was a Vietnam veteran, and she said there was so much of that film that she, as a wife, could connect to. So, that was really powerful for me to see her so emotional from this film.

I've shown it to other veterans as well. They have been very emotional after seeing the film, knowing that I tried to show the truth in the way that veterans think, and that veterans within our communities are essentially silent when they kill themselves.

Honestly, I don't think I've had a veteran who hasn't understood the film at some level. Combat veterans love the film. They totally get it—Army, Marine Corps. It doesn't matter what era, because the movie is showing what the ideals of military service are.

But the film is not just for vets. I wanted to be able to connect with civilians. I think they are emotional through it, in a sense, and they can see how war can have negative impacts overall on people's mental health. Suicide is not just a veterans' issue.

I would love to be able to get this in front of people in Washington. I've been working toward that as well. But if I can get tapped in to Washington, I think there could be some great ideas in being able to work together and promote content that is more accurate to mental health issues.

**LA:** You've said, "I want to make a difference and start a conversation. I think *The Gatekeeper* can save veteran and civilian lives."

**JM:** That's the overall goal of the film. You could call it a deterrent. Sure. But we use deterrents in society all the time. We have police deterrents. You can't go to the beach right now in LA. You get a \$100 ticket.

So, deterrents aren't necessarily a bad thing. They can be used for good, especially when society needs to be pushed back in the right direction.

You take somebody who's had an enormous amount of power, enormous amount of respect and responsibility, and then they get out of that world. Maybe they hated aspects of it and maybe they loved aspects of it, but now there's nothing. We couldn't really get into it within the film. There just wasn't enough time. But that element of nihilism, that's what I firmly believe is the number one killer. I think what a lot of veterans go through is a sense of needing direction and

purpose.

I want to stop them from killing themselves and make other narratives that are better. It's a huge thing for me to be able to hire veterans. I hire a lot of veterans with my own money. I don't live in a mansion over here in LA. I live in a very small apartment. But I paid a lot of veterans to be able to come out, help me out, and make a film that, overall, is essentially a deterrent—specifically for veterans, but it could also be for everyone in these dark times.

**LA:** You see that theme of the difficulty of returning to the civilian world in a lot of the films and the novels and the stories. In *War*, Sebastian Junger mentions Brendan O'Byrne, who comes back to society and nothing is life and death anymore, whereas, in war, an untied bootlace could mean your death. You come back to the civilian world and nothing has that import anymore.

Tim O'Brien writes about a buddy of his, Bowker, who comes back from Vietnam but can't fit in anywhere. He drives around and around in circles all day, before finally killing himself.

You see this in Hemingway's story "Soldiers Home." Krebs comes back and he can't fit into the family anymore. He can't fit into society. Religion fails him. At the end of the story, he just leaves; he can't bear being back home again.

Anyway, your film is notable for using 3D motion capture and digital storyboarding. How important was that to you?

**JM:** I'll put it this way: there were not enough hours in the day to finish the film without that previsualization, because it's so important from a production angle.

It is a storyboard on steroids. Using that technology would've probably cost me \$30,000 in Hollywood, at least. But, because I used USC's technology and the information that I learned from being a student there, I was able to plan every single



shot of my movie. We shot all the Iraq war scenes in one day. That was an incredible amount of footage to be able to capture in one day. Everything was planned because I had that previsualization.

A lot of the process of movie-making—even George Lucas talks about it—is to keep it in the parameters that you have, the resources, the time, the ability. I was able to mobilize all the various components—and you know what the beauty of it is?

My experience in the military is all about planning. It's all about preparation and then execution.

So, because of my background, I was able to have that discipline and plan the film out as much as I possible could. I think *The Gatekeeper* looks a lot closer to a Hollywood film than a lot of student projects because of that reason, because of my background. My military training helped out a lot.

**LA:** You have multiple settings. There is a cemetery, the interiors, a hospital, battle scenes, a rifle range.

**JM:** The VA actually allowed me to film at the West LA National Cemetery. I filmed the range out in the middle of the desert. I actually built that range with my bare hands and help from my command sergeant major and a couple other Marines.

The film was impossible to do without the veteran community. When we all come together, when we all have a common goal, and when we all know that this problem is eating away at our society, we can accomplish great things. That's what I want to do.

**LA:** You co-wrote the movie. Could you talk a little bit about your co-writer?

**JM:** Connie Siu was the co-writer. I wanted to have a civilian help me make it more understandable, and she was great in helping out with the female character. In the early stages of the scriptwriting process, there wasn't enough substance for

the Krissy character. I wanted to have a strong woman, because you need a strong woman for a strong man like Russell.

I didn't want to screw that up, because women, especially in the military films, are not really represented that well. I didn't want to be branded that way. But, at the same time, women are not in the infantry, so you've got to have a realistic story. I just had to toe a line in being able to convey that wives have a huge role to play, during and after deployment. After he's done with the military, he's got to have, hopefully, a family to develop and look forward to. The same could hold true for a woman in the military with a civilian husband.

I wanted to have a woman on the team in the writing stage that could really help out with not only me asking her, "Does this make sense to you as a civilian?" so I don't go too far into the military jargon. She also helped with getting things done as well as a producer.

**LA:** How much did you create or work on the musical score?

**JM:** I wish you could see it in theaters because that's really where you can hear the score to its fullest. It kills me to have to show it to people online, but you've gotta do what you've gotta do. The score was a huge part. I was very connected to the score. I probably had about five sessions with the composer, and those sessions probably lasted about three to four hours, on average.

It was a live score. We recorded it live with many musicians and opera singers. It was an amazing experience. It was probably one of the greatest experiences I've ever had to have an actual score on the film.

Mateus de Castro Machado Freire graduated from USC last year. I knew of his work. His music is like—you listen to it and you automatically think of Steven Spielberg's films.

I reached out to him. He's from Brazil and was living there at the time. After he saw the rough cut of the film, he said he would fly up to California and make the score, and that's exactly what he did. He flew from Brazil, came to California, and just slaved away at the score. You've got to understand that there are a lot of deadlines. There are a lot of time constraints. I loved what he did. We worked very hard on the score. I will probably work with him in the future for the right project.

I think my favorite part of the score is the war scene. That's the longest song. It's about four or five minutes long. He's just a master at transitioning the tone of a film. That's really important. It switches tone from thriller to war to almost like horror in one moment. He did a spectacular job. He was a composer in Brazil before he went to USC. He was a violinist for many years. He's just a true artist, a great friend.

**LA:** To wrap up, the film touches on many issues, such as the returning veteran and the transition to civilian life, the military mindset, the aftereffects of war. What are your concerns beyond the film?

**JM:** I think many returning vets feel a loss of purpose. I think art can restore purpose. Chris Loverro, who plays the main character, Tuason, is a huge advocate for acting as a therapeutic method for veterans. If he can get veterans into showing their emotions again, I think it is freakin' phenomenal. For so many years, you're being told no emotions, kill without emotion, operate like a machine, be a machine, lean like a Marine machine—all of this propaganda that you are just a cog in a machine.

That works well for the military environment, but when you get out, your emotions being gone can lead to extreme mental damage. When you're fearful of using your emotions, never use them, and to be like a savage—which is kind of the culture of

the military, I would say—I think there should not be a ceremony but maybe an exit—maybe more focus on that, focus on, “Hey, these things that we taught you in the military may not help you in the civilian world.”

We can't talk about women in society in the same way that you do in the military. The military is a fraternity. You can't treat people in civilian society the way you do in the military. It just doesn't work. You would be chained up. You can't treat other people like machines. That's what you did as a sergeant in the Army or Marine Corps. You're copying like Mr. Smith in *The Matrix*. You're making more mini-clones of yourself.

That mentality is hard to come out of when you've been so impressionable to it. I joined when I was 17 years old. I was a paratrooper by my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday. What I'm saying is that it can help you in many ways and it can really damage you in a lot of ways. It's taken a while in order to overcome the negative things that I learned within the military.

I didn't really have a father. I grew up pretty much with a very distant father, you could say. The military was more of an impressionable father figure than my own father. The things that they taught me were not good in a lot of ways. They were good for being in the military, but they weren't good for being a civilian in other ways.

Leadership? Yeah, okay, that's good. So, anyway, what my point is at the end of this is that maybe the military can adjust. Maybe they can—whether it's at the exit of your time in service or maybe they just adjust the culture, just in general, to be in a way that is less—I guess you could say trusted, especially to the youth, the people that are the youngest.

If you're an officer and you join the military, you're probably 22 or 23, because you have to go to college first.

So, in that time, you're able to develop your own philosophy. You're able to have more life experiences. And you may not be totally susceptible to an onslaught of demeaning, horrible treatment and ideology, because you're a lieutenant. You're kind of above all of that.

I'm a big supporter of the military, but I also believe in change. I think that there's change that has come, and I think there could be more change that will be able to come.

Military rape is a huge problem—huge, a huge. How are you going to be comfortable sending your daughter into the military when you hear that rape is so prevalent, especially in certain branches? We've got to change the military culture.

That's a whole other conversation, but the actress, Jennifer, is very open about being raped in the military. That's horrible. People shouldn't have to go through that. How can you be raped by another Marine, soldier, sailor?

You can't do the things that you did in the service that were celebrated. Society, especially in liberal society, will make you a total outsider, a total outcast, and you'll suffer.

With that, the wars have drawn down. We're not getting a huge influx all at once of people that have just come straight out of the battlefield. I think if we improve these things we can have less suicide. We can have a better military force. We're always going to need a military force. There's no way around that.

The other ideology of the liberal doctrine, in my philosophy, thinks that we don't need a military. The military is belittled and people think that vets are a bunch of wackos and killers. That's not the way to think about that, either.

Hopefully there can be a middle ground, a neutral position, that can understand that we need the military but at the same time see veterans in a more positive, welcoming light.

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# Mr. Mendes' War: Film Review, '1917'

*"You have to construct a journey for the camera that's every bit as interesting as the journey of the actor. What I wanted was one ribbon, like a snake, moving forward, in which the information that you needed happened to fall in front of where the camera was pointing."*

*-Sam Mendes*





It is a glorious thing to live in an age that is learning to remember the Great War.

Once the Centennial passed, I started to worry that WWI would fade back into obscurity.

There would be nothing more to it than the occasional badly-produced documentary, rehashing all the basic facts. Or the once-a-decade feature film composed primarily of maudlin melodrama and scenery-chewing. Great War geeks would be reduced, finally, to re-reading what little their local library has on the subject (invariably, a shelf or two perched on the edge of the vast glacier of paper that is EVERY BOOK ABOUT WWII EVER PUBLISHED, which even the most modest county library is guaranteed to have).

We'd keep on of course, as we have for decades, finding solitary joy in studying the minutiae of this defining moment of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, only telegraphing our interests by posting Siegfried Sassoon's "Survivors" on social media every Armistice Day. We know how to live like this.

And it may yet come to that again, in ten years or so. But for now, the Great War retains a prominent place in scholarship and the public eye. Peter Jackson's *They Shall Not Grow Old* (see my [review](#) for WBT last year) was the first great post-Centennial media event, generating accolades, controversy and awards, and proving so popular it was re-released in theaters twice in one year.

Sam Mendes' masterful *1917* carries on this legacy, and in my honest and no doubt potentially unpopular opinion, surpasses Jackson's film in almost every way. I know, we're talking about two fairly dissimilar things here. The statement stands. *1917* evokes the character of the Great War, it contains the soul of the War, and it conveys these ideas to the audience in a way that documentary cannot do. In short, were you forced to show someone who had never heard of the Great War only one film that evoked the nature of the War, you would choose *1917* over *They Shall Not Grow Old*.

For one thing, it is shorter; for another, it is much more compelling; finally, it is free from the glaring flaws of Jackson's film. *They Shall Not Grow Old* suffers from low-key

jingoism and Jackson's bizarre visual insistence on depicting only white British infantrymen (it turns out there were other people there).

*1917* is the WWI movie I've been waiting for my whole life.

Yet after I saw it, and then read more than a few reviews of *1917*, I was left with one major question:

What movie did y'all see?

Because the *1917* I've encountered in the criticism is not in any sense the film that I watched.

For example, Manohla Dargis writing for the [NYT](#) describes a film containing "next to no history" and refers to the entire piece as "a carefully organized and sanitized war picture from Sam Mendes that turns one of the most catastrophic episodes in modern times into an exercise in preening showmanship."

Justin Chang on *Fresh Air* was generally more positive, but like many other reviewers spent ages decrying the film's technical skill. (If you're somehow unaware, the major conceit of Mendes' film is its use of a simulated single tracking shot, actually achieved through a variety of cinematic tricks—if you're interested you can see exactly how it was done on YouTube.) In fact, the most persistent line of bitching about this movie has been that it's "too perfect", with the NYT reviewer even throwing out an offhand line about the movie spending too much time on getting the buttons on the uniforms right.

To which I have to respond: have you ever MET a Great War geek? Get the buttons wrong on the uniforms and you will quite literally never hear the end of it on the Internet. And anyway, maybe I'm missing something here with this whole "sure, it's technically magnificent, BUT" angle. People WANT it to be sloppy?

This film is the opposite of sloppy. This is theater, ready for any contingency. This is opera, or better yet a musical, with sets and costumes meticulously and obsessively constructed. This is in every sense a careful production. I'm really missing why this is a problem. With that said:

Sam Mendes gets this a lot.

Fifteen years ago, people said the same shit about *Jarhead*.

Fie on the critics (for now, anyway). If you haven't seen this movie, you need to understand what it was really like to dive into it on the big screen. Because this film is beyond epic. It's beyond "a good film", beyond even the proverbial "good war film"—it is an *experience*.

It is immediate.

Overwhelming.

Shocking.

The success of this film lies in the concept of cinema-as-immersion. Toss the viewer straight into the milieu and drag them along, whether they will or no, through all the horror and the madness and the despair that was the soldier's lot in 1917. Of course it doesn't dwell on politics or slap you in the face with the grade-school primer on the whys and wherefores of alliances and Archdukes. There is, quite simply, no time for that.

The plot of the film centers on two Lance Corporals of the East Surrey Regiment, Blake and Schofield, played by Dean-Charles Chapman and George MacKay. Fans of *Game of Thrones* will recognize Chapman as an all-grown-up version of King Tommen Baratheon, First of His Name\*.

\*The fact of his starring role in this film prompted the following exchange. While we were on the way to the cinema, my wife said to me "Who's directing this?"

ME: Sam Mendes.

MARY: What else has he done besides James Bond?

ME: *American Beauty. Revolutionary Road. Jarhead.*

MARY: Oh. Oh God.

ME: What?

MARY: I just got this incredibly clear picture of Tommen dancing around with a Santa hat on his junk, to a tinny clarinet-and-piano '20s jazz version of "O.P.P."

ME: <inarticulate with laughter>

MARY (*imitating Cab Calloway*): Ya down with O.P.P? Yeah, you know me!

At that point I nearly wrecked the car.

I digress (but you laughed). Blake and Schofield are first seen on their backs in an unspoiled field, trying to get in one of the naps that soldiers everywhere can manage at the drop of any hat, when they're interrupted and summoned back to HQ in the trenches. Along their way, they pass by any number of black British soldiers from the West Indies Regiment.

Jackson's film made no acknowledgement whatsoever of the service these people made during the war. Mendes, whose Trinidadian grandfather was a messenger serving in much the same capacity as Blake or Schofield, is careful to honor the sacrifices of these brave people who served despite the racist and classist treatment they suffered while doing their duty. All of this is accomplished in the first five minutes.

Awaiting them is General Erinmore, portrayed by an extra-gruff-and-crusty Colin Firth. Our Heroes are informed that there is a mission of extreme importance that must be undertaken immediately; the German "retreat" to the Hindenburg

Line has been revealed through aerial reconnaissance to be anything but, and their comrades in the 2<sup>nd</sup> under Colonel Mackenzie are walking into a deathtrap. Their orders to attack will ensure the deaths of 1600 men. As Blake's brother is a lieutenant in the 2<sup>nd</sup>, Blake is chosen for this mission and entrusted with orders from General Erinmore to call off the attack, and as he is allowed to choose one man to go with him, of course he chooses his best mate Schofield.

These are literally the only moments of peace the film has until its end. From this moment forward, everything is propulsive, violent, and fast. Even the scenes of relative inaction are fraught, with the promise of calamity never further away than the next street or the next trench.

From here, the camera follows Blake and Schofield with all the obsession of a stalker. Through the use of wildly varying color palettes, Mendes carefully establishes "chapters" in the film. The British trenches they leave are orderly, earth-colored, dusty but tidy. Their entry into No Man's Land, with its foul slurry of churned mud, discarded boots, and body parts, is clearly Chapter Two: a sudden break with the imagery seen before reveals a landscape riddled with the grey of rotting flesh, the brown of human shit, the occasional burst of gold or green to remind one that this was once a place where people lived with their families, farmed, tended their business.

The initial shots of No Man's Land are strikingly reminiscent of Max Ernst's *Europe After the Rain II*:





Max Ernst. Europe After Rain II: 1940-42.

There is a moment of dark Great War humor when the two encounter Lieutenant Leslie (Andrew Scott, familiar to viewers of *Sherlock* as Moriarty) who lends them flare guns (“Throw them back when you’re done, we’re forever out of these”) and reminds them that on the way to their destination, they should “mind the bowing chap”. The Bowing Chap is revealed to be a decaying corpse suspended from barbed wire, a shoutout to the works of the inimitable Otto Dix, whose “Corpse on Barbed Wire” is one of the most memorable pieces of art from the War.

Further, a lingering shot on the corpses of two horses evokes the work of Dix, whose art provided an inspiration for Jackson’s *They Shall Not Grow Old* as well. “Horse Cadaver” is apparently every WWI movie director’s favorite; in both movies, the shots of dead and decaying horses are arranged precisely in the same aspect and POV as Dix’s picture.

Stomach-turning images of this kind can and should be employed by those who would make movies about war; *1917* pulls no punches here. During their dangerous sojourn in No Man’s Land and the German trenches, rats swarm everywhere and flies infest all surfaces, including *inside* a gaping wound on a corpse. Lance Corporal Schofield cuts his hand on barbed wire and then trips, firmly inserting his wounded fist into the bacteria-laden hole where rats were feasting not moments before. It is both disgusting and entirely realistic; the

chief cause of death in every war before the First World War was from infectious disease, not combat. If one were feeling particularly apocalyptic, one could definitely argue that the number of people felled by the Spanish flu during and after the conflict showcases the continuing role of Pestilence following along in the wake of War.



Otto Dix. Horse Cadaver, Plate 5 from 'Der Krieg' (The War), 1924.

From the German trench (where Schofield is nearly killed, only saved by the valiant efforts of Blake) they proceed to a bombed-out French farmstead. Here the plot takes an unexpected turn, as the corporals observe a dogfight between the Boche and two English pilots, which ends with the German plane crashing mere yards from the broken-down barn where Blake and Schofield have taken shelter.

And it is now where things begin to go horribly awry.

The German fighter plane crashes and catches fire. The pilot screams for help. Blake and Schofield don't wait for moral considerations or strategic concerns: they pull him from the wreckage as though he were their own comrade. He is burned and wounded, and Schofield suggest they employ the *coup de grace*, but Blake demurs.

Moments later, Blake is stabbed in the gut by the ungrateful recipient of his kindness.

Schofield shoots the German pilot over and over again, enraged at his perfidy, but Blake is mortally wounded. Schofield holds him as he dies, promising to write to his family back in Britain. "Don't tell them I was scared," Blake says, as he dies in agony.

From now on the story is Schofield's. In service both to his comrades in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and his fallen companion, he will not be denied in his obsessive focus on the completion of The Quest.

The frenetic pace increases. Schofield manages to catch a ride further into German territory from a group of British soldiers on their way into the battle zone. Among them is a Sikh, a figure common in the British soldiery, but one whose presence in this film inspired ridiculous accusations of "forced diversity" by racist English actor [Laurence Fox](#). To briefly address Fox's "concerns": one in every six British soldiers who served in WWI originated from the Indian subcontinent. Sikhs, Malays, Sepoys and others served proudly in many capacities during the War. In fact, there is a famous photograph of Indian lancers proceeding into the now-abandoned No Man's Land during the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line:





Later, Schofield is shot at by a German sniper while making a perilous crossing over the blasted-out girders of a destroyed bridge. He survives and kills his opponent, only to be knocked out by a ricocheting bullet. When he awakens, he is forced to flee through a bombed-out cityscape of arches and dark passageways lit only by flares and the roaring fires from bombing, which scene makes clear reference to the disturbing cityscapes of De Chirico.



“Melancholy and the mystery of the street” – Painting by George de Chirico, 1914.

The existential horror of solitude. The dread and horror of war, The War, any war. All are displayed here, experienced by the viewer in real time as the protagonist experiences them. As Schofield continues on his journey, the color palette changes again and again and again, from yellow to orange to blue.

At one point, Schofield falls into a river, ending up floating in a pool laden with cherry blossoms, creating a scene that is clearly a sort of genderswapped *Lady of Shalott* or Ophelia:



John Everett Millais, "Ophelia," 1851-2.

At long last, Schofield finds the 2<sup>nd</sup>, only to realize that they are already in the process of going over the top. In his efforts to reach Colonel MacKenzie with his letter calling off the attack, Schofield, gripped with the madness of obsession, runs across No Man's Land as the shells fall around him, perpendicular to the line of battle, knocking over his comrades and nearly getting killed over and over again. He reaches his goal, delivers his message, and while he is too late to save the first wave of men cut down by German machine guns, he does manage to convince Mackenzie (played by an particularly intense and mustachioed Benedict Cumberbatch) to call off the attack. In the aftermath, he locates Blake's brother, played by none other than *Game of Thrones*' Richard Madden (the irony of a Stark playing the brother of a Baratheon will not be lost on fans of the series) and delivers the news of Blake's death. "I am so glad you were with him," Madden says, as he shakes Schofield's hand and tries and fails



to prevent the tears from falling.

At the end, we discover that Schofield has a wife and child at home, whose picture he regards lovingly as he finally gets a few moments of rest beneath a twisted tree, still standing despite the bombardment and destruction all around.

In a last response to the critics, I have this to say. Yes, it was technically perfect. But this movie also had *soul*. This was a film that portrayed the horrors and the despair of the Great War realistically, that depicted soldiers who were anything but gung-ho, soldiers who questioned where they were and what they were doing. It could not have been set at any other time than 1917, when the German “retreat” freed up more land than the Allies had been able to recapture since August of 1914. The date displayed at the beginning of the movie is no coincidence either: April 6, 1917 is the day the United States entered the war. In its last moments, the film depicts a figure at rest, able to finally hope, to consider a future. This reflects the actual attitudes and emotions felt by the beleaguered British and French who had fought themselves into exhaustion and madness in the three years prior.

*1917* is a masterpiece. It is the Great War movie that everyone can love. If the theater we viewed it in was any indication—it was so crowded I couldn’t even sit with my family—it is reaching people. *1917* has accomplished what so many other films and television series produced over the last six years could not: it has engaged the general public with WWI. Mendes’ triumph is thus not just one of aesthetics or skill or “polish”; it is a triumph of thought. If only we could have a film like this every year, the world might well reconsider its addiction to war.

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# Film Review: JOKER, by Adrian Bonenberger and Andria Williams

**Andria Williams:** Hey there, Adrian.

**Adrian Bonenberger:** Hi, Andria.

**Williams:** So, I heard you recently saw “Joker” in the theater, as did I. It’s gotten a lot of buzz. I’ve seen various reviews call it everything from “disappointing” to “an ace turn from Joaquin Phoenix” to “not interesting enough to argue about,” but I get the sense that you and I both liked it, and I would much rather talk about things I do like than things I don’t. So I’m glad you wanted to talk about it a little here with me.

Should we start with the styling? I’ve always enjoyed the various iterations of Gotham. In the Christopher Nolan trilogy (2005-12), for example, the sleek, crime-ridden city contains visual elements of Hong Kong, Tokyo, Chicago, and New York City. Todd Phillip’s vision seems much more an early-eighties, pre-gentrification city in the midst of a garbage strike, apparently circa 1981 (if we’re to believe the film marquee advertising *Zorro: The Gay Blade*, which played in theaters that year—an over-the-top comedy about a hero who consistently evades capture), without much of the warmth or can-do grit NYC often elicits.



<https://www.ibc.org/create-and-produce/behind-the-scenes-joker/5012.article>

**Bonenberger:** Yes, that's true; and the Gotham of the 90s Batman—Tim Burton's version—was much more stylized (no surprise there), simultaneously futuristic and antiquated, set in the America of the 1930s. Monumental, bleak, massive. I thought *Joker* did an excellent job of capturing the look and feel of the 1980s New York I remembered as a child; dirty, *on edge*, menacing at night. The parts that were beautiful, to which I was fortunate enough to have had some access, were cordoned off from the rest of the city, but even there things were dingy. If the setting for Todd Phillips' Gotham in *The Joker* is NYC circa the early or mid 1980s, he nailed it.

**Williams:** I never knew that version of New York, and I can't even claim to know the current one, so I think that's fascinating.

I did recently learn that a city of "Gotham" first entered the popular American lexicon through Washington Irving, who

described it in his early-19th-century collection *Salmagundi*. In its British iteration, it's a town King John hopes to pass through on a tour of England, but the residents, not wanting him there, decide to feign insanity so that he will take another route (and he does!). I thought that was kind of fun. Do you see any hints of this early Gotham in *Joker*?

**Bonenberger:** That's amazing, I had no idea... how delightful! It's an excellent and appropriate comparison... in *Joker*'s Gotham, that allegory or metaphor is inverted, though; the residents who *are* mad, or driven to mad action by impoverishment and disillusionment, do want a king. When the man who wants to be king, Thomas Wayne, is murdered, the "king" who's selected instead for adulation is The Joker, a madman himself.



Photo, TIFF.  
<https://nypost.com/2019/09/10/toronto-film-festival-2019-gritty-joker-is-no-superhero-movie/>

**Williams:** With all I'd heard about its bleakness, I suspected I was not going to "enjoy" the afternoon I spent watching the



film, and I was right—I didn't, not exactly. Watching someone be humiliated is physically awful, almost intolerable. The worst parts for me, for some reason, were when Arthur Fleck would be terrified and running, in his Joker suit and makeup. It was horribly sad. He has this awful potential to kill but in those moments he's fearing for his own life the way anyone would, almost the way a child would. There was something really pitiable about it and I found that harder to watch than the violence.

Arthur Fleck is a man writhing in torment for almost the entirety of the film. On more than one occasion he says, very clearly and deliberately, "I only have negative thoughts." He lost considerable weight for his Joker role, and on several occasions pulls out a loaded gun, places it under his chin, and seems to prepare or at least pretend to shoot himself. I thought of Kierkegaard's "the torment of despair is the inability to die," his claim that despair is "always the present tense," is "self-consuming." "He cannot consume himself, cannot get rid of himself, cannot reduce himself to nothing." (It should be noted that I am bringing Kierkegaard into this discussion almost solely to make our editor Matthew Hefti roll his eyes and stare into the middle-distance, and to make another editor, Mike Carson, laugh.)

What, if anything, does an audience gain from sitting with Arthur Fleck through two hours of his torment, his self-consuming, his inability to die? Is it morbid curiosity, a failure of the "darker-is-deeper" direction of DC comics, an exercise in empathy, a joke?



photo, Warner Bros.  
<https://www.insider.com/the-joker-movie-new-trailer-video-2019>  
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**Bonenberger:** If we're talking about viewing *Joker* in terms of Phoenix's acting, I think his performance is suitably magnificent and compelling to argue that the movie is worth watching simply because of his presence. He does transform himself, and his body is so weird, his charisma so powerful, that simply to watch the film because of a virtuoso performance is not to lose one's money (I paid \$18 for a matinee show with me and my son).

**Williams:** His body is very unusual, and played up to be even more so in *Joker*. He's got that congenital shoulder deformity—you can't help but notice it because in the film he's shirtless half the time with his shoulder bones jutting out—and you have to kind of admire Joaquin Phoenix for not

having it fixed, in a world where a person with enough money can pay to have anything fixed.

I read an interesting and kind of wild [\*Vanity Fair\*](#) interview where Joaquin Phoenix, who comes across as rather sweetly self-deprecating, relates almost proudly that the director described him as looking like “one of those birds from the Gulf of Mexico that they’re rinsing the tar off.” And I mean, he really does. You should read that interview, it’s bananas: he has two dogs that he raises vegan, and he cooks sweet potatoes for them, and one of them can’t go into direct sunlight so he had a special suit made for her. It’s fascinating. I mean, sometimes I brush my dog’s teeth and I feel like I deserve a medal.

But I digress. So your eighteen dollars were well-spent—it was worth it to spend two hours watching Joaquin Phoenix as Arthur Fleck?

**Bonenberger:** Is Arthur Fleck’s struggle worth watching in and of itself—is his torment and suffering worth two hours of one’s time? As someone who doesn’t spend much time thinking about the disabled or discarded of society, even as caricatures (this is not a documentary, it is fiction), I thought Phoenix’s quintessentially *human* performance was, in fact, worth watching; in me it inspired a deep empathy for my fellow humans, and for the difficulty of their interior lives. Again, that is not true of everyone, and a movie ought not to be taken literally, but if this is a tragedy, of sorts, then yes, I think it’s worth it.

Like yourself, I’ve always been skeptical that darkness equaled depth; one can easily imagine superficial movies that are dark; many “jump-scare” horror movies fall into this genre, as do gorier horror or war films that end up disgusting audiences rather than bringing them into a deep emotional moment. I would say that any dramatic movie that is deep will be dark, by definition—and any comedy that is deep will flirt

with darkness only to emerge into the light. *Joker* is dark, and I also believe that it is deep.

**Williams:** I was struck by the primacy of Arthur Fleck's imagination in the film. He frequently envisions himself doing things which are impossible, but interestingly—other than pretending multiple times to shoot himself—none of them are violent. Instead, he visualizes various yearnings: for the approval of his idol, talk-show host Murray Franklin (Arthur imagines himself being called from the audience, his weird laugh suddenly not a freakish tic but the mode that directs Franklin's attention to him, and even brings forth a fatherly sort of love); or when he invents an entire relationship with a neighbor; or when, reading his mother's diagnostic reports from Arkham Asylum, he imagines himself in the room with her as she's questioned decades before.

It's not Arthur's imagination that leads him to commit violent crimes, it's his knee-jerk reactions to the rejection or betrayal of these fantasies.

How do you see the role of imagination in the film? Is the fantastic dangerous; can the imagination volatilize?

**Bonenberger:** You've hit on what I think is the key to the film's effectiveness as a human drama—the energy that makes *Joker* viable as a super-villain, the ante that makes the movie so moving. Phoenix portrays the story of a man with beautiful dreams, and we tend to think that such people are incapable of evil. That *The Joker* is a criminal, instead—this is a truth well-known to all—is the source of criticism that frets about *The Joker* inspiring copycat criminals or mass shooters or incels or any of the other dangerous real-world villains people are worried about right now.

Arthur Fleck fantasizes about a world where he's loved. He fantasizes about community, and kindness, and respect, and dignity. Alas, the world he lives in and has lived in his



entire life has been one of solitude, lies, and exploitation, adjudicated by violence. If this were a superhero movie, Fleck would discover in himself some hidden reserve of power, a la Captain America (a similar story in many respects), and learn to overcome the circumstances of his life and universe. Instead, he is ugly, and poor, and weird, and damaged, and the system does its best to target him for elimination. Rather than escape and hide, Arthur fights back.

It seems clear that in the world of the movie—a world where many poor and disaffected people view the police, the government, and the wealthy with overt hostility—Arthur's conditions are not unique, or even particularly unusual. Hence the widespread rioting and looting that takes place at the movie's end. He is simply the catalyst for change.

Because this is a super-villain origin story, not a superhero movie, the role of imagination and dreaming is a kind of joke (appropriately given the movie's title); it is a cheat, something to deceive one into inaction. In The Joker's world, violence against one's powerful oppressor is the only realistic choice, the only truth. This is what a nihilist ends up believing, this is the truth that makes fascism work (a country surrounded by enemies like Nazi Germany, beset by the potential for destruction). Secret optimism is what makes Arthur Fleck a character one cares about, and explains why anyone would follow him in the first place. Actual pessimism—nihilism, really is what makes The Joker a criminal.

**Williams:** I think you're really right that Arthur's disaffection is not unique in the film. He's only the most fantastic iteration of it.

That brings me back to the big, scary "copycat question." In his *Critique of Violence*, Walter Benjamin notes that "the figure of the 'great' criminal, however repellent his ends may have been, [can arouse] the secret admiration of the public." And in *Joker*, it's definitely not secret: Arthur Fleck's

actions spark not just the imaginations of hundreds or thousands of Gotham city residents, but their imitation, as they don his clown mask and gang up on a pair of cops in a subway. How do you read their enthusiasm for the killer of three young, male Wayne Industries employees (the leader of whom, my husband [who, for the record, found *Joker* slightly boring] noted, looks like Eric Trump, although it's hard to imagine Eric Trump being a leader of anything)? If Slavoj Zizek sees Bane as a modern-day Che Guevara fighting "structural injustice," how do you think Arthur Fleck compares to or continues that role?

**Bonenberger:** I had always wondered why people followed The Joker. In the original Batman series, where The Joker is a costumed criminal who tries to steal jewels and defeat Batman (who is attempting to prevent the taking of jewels), the motive is clear: greed. In more recent films and comics, though, The Joker ends up being a figure of anarchy and mischief, violence directed against the powerful. With the recent Jokers in mind, and in this movie in particular, one discovers that people follow The Joker because he is a deeply sympathetic character in which many exploited and downtrodden individuals perceive deliverance from their own injustices. Then, it turns out, as in the end of *The Dark Knight Rises* when Heath Ledger's character sets a pile of money ablaze, that The Joker is crazy, and not really interested in "justice" at all; he's interested in destruction and violence for its own sake. This movie explains The Joker's fascination with The Batman, and the Wayne family, and also demonstrates that his schemes and plans attract people because he lives in a world that produces many people capable of being attracted by someone like The Joker.

To get back to the last question briefly, the world of Fleck's fantasies, in which people think he's funny, and he's loved, and treated respectfully—kids actually seem to respond very positively to him in reality, he is child-like—there are no

Joker riots, there are no savage beat-downs in alleys. The movie requires that viewers decide, then, if the utopia of Arthur Fleck's drug-induced reveries is more ridiculous and implausible than the reality, where The Joker somehow inspires unfathomable violence, murder, and unrest. As with most great art, what one believes is true depends on the viewer. Some will think that The Joker is the problem, and if he is removed, Gotham's problems will go away. Others will think that the system is the problem, and that destroying the wealthy and powerful will lead to a better world. Others still will see in Fleck's dream a call to build a world based on love and respect, in which violence is unnecessary save as a last resort.

**Williams:** In your Facebook post about the film, which first gave me the idea for this chat, you mentioned the "pathos and bathos" that *Joker* provides. I, personally, loved its increasing outrageousness in its final minutes, the grisly humor of Arthur Fleck leaving bloody footprints down the hallway and then, in the final frames, being chased back and forth, back and forth by hospital orderlies. It seemed like the film was announcing its transition from origin story to comic-book piece. It felt, to me, like it was saying, "Relax a little. This is a comic now."

How did you read the ending?

**Bonenberger:** Same, exactly. We've gone entirely into The Joker's world, now, and it's a world of whimsical jokes, murder, and chaos. Perfect ending to the movie. We're all in the madhouse now.

**Williams:** So, you can only choose one or the other: DC or Marvel?

**Bonenberger:** If we're talking about movies: DC. If we're talking about comic books, Marvel.

**Williams:** Who's your favorite DC villain?

**Bonenberger:** At this point, The Joker.

**Williams:** Mine's not really a villain: It's Anne Hathaway's Selina Kyle in *The Dark Knight Rises*.

**Bonenberger:** Yeah, you're cheating there.

**Williams:** I know! But what's not to love? She's like six feet tall (jealous!), she's smart, she's got a relatively articulate working-class consciousness. She's feminine (the pearls!). She plays on female stereotypes to get what she wants. Although I'll admit that the way she rides that Big Wheel thing is utterly ridiculous and actually a little embarrassing.

She's also got some good one-liners. My favorite is when one of her dweeby male-bureaucrat-victims sees her four-inch pleather heels and asks, "Don't those make it hard to walk?" And she gives him a sharp kick and says, breezily, "I don't know....do they?"

**Bonenberger:** That is an amazing one-liner; I suppose it's hard for me to see anyone but Michelle Pfeiffer as Catwoman after she dispatched Christopher Walken's villainous character by kissing him to death. Powerful.

**Williams:** I guess there are worse ways to go out.

**Bonenberger:** My favorite villain is actually from Marvel, from the comic books; it's Dr. Doom. He will do anything for supreme power—he is in his own way an excellent archetype of greed. I love his boasts. I love how he embodies his persona so naturally, and is so comprehensively incapable of overcoming his weaknesses and flaws...he is a tragic character. Doom is nearly heroic—he has his moments—but his great flaw overwhelms his capacity for good. Isn't that what separates the bad from the good?

**Williams:** That sounds like a very Wrath-Bearing Tree kind of

question to  
end on.

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# Mr. Tolkien's War: A Review of Peter Jackson's 'They Shall Not Grow Old,' by Rob Bokkon

Anyone who knows me at all well can tell you that I don't really have a personality, per se: what I have instead is a gigantic amalgamation of obsessions. Fandoms. Things like the life and work of Prince Rogers Nelson. Hungarian cuisine. The history of Jim Jones and Peoples Temple. The films of Peter Jackson. The Great War.

So, obviously, when word came through that those last two things were colliding, in the form of a documentary commissioned by the Imperial War Museums, I was nearly beside myself. If anyone could capture the horror and the bravery of the Great War, it's the guy who gave us the Pellenor Fields and the Battle of Five Armies on the big screen. I counted the days until the release date. I jabbered about it to all three people I know who love WWI as much as I do. I was, to put it mildly, stoked.

Which remained my default state right up until I sat down in the theater to absorb what I truly hoped would be a modern masterpiece. The truth, as always, was rather more complicated.

The version we saw was bookended by both an introduction, and making-of featurette, from Mr Jackson himself. It is my

current understanding that the greater theatrical release of the film will not include these, which is a pity, as the film loses much of its impact when one is unaware of the sheer labor of love involved in the restoration of the old footage. And, of course, consider yourselves warned that SPOILERS ABOUND, both for the film and for the works of J.R.R. Tolkien.

The theater was almost three-quarters full, which surprised us; the crowd was fairly diverse, but included a high proportion of fit middle-aged guys in outdoor-pursuits gear, who by their conversation seemed mostly to be veterans. We live in a university town, so the history dorks (us) were also well-represented. The former dean of the college of arts and letters was there. Enthusiasm was high.

And then we fucking sat there for thirty solid minutes. Not thirty minutes of previews, mind you, but some “edutainment” compiled by Fathom Features that consisted of an “interactive” quiz, six multiple-choice questions about the Great War—“Did the Great War take place in A: 1914-1918, B: 1861-1865, C: Never, D: Last Week” and “Was Baron Von Richtoven, aka the ‘Red Baron’, a A: toilet cleaner in Bournemouth, B: your mom, C: a famous WWI flying ace with 80 confirmed kills or D: the inventor of owls?”—designed for people who have never heard of the Great War.

But when the film finally began, and the rowdy high-schoolers three rows back finally shut up, absolutely everyone in the room was transfixed.

Because this movie is *stunning*.

It begins and ends with images of the war with which we are familiar, in shades of silver and black and white, complete with the sound effect of an antique projector. The voice-overs are the voices of old men, disconnected from their source, joined to past time and image only by association. Jackson’s decision to jettison traditional narration in favor of

archival recordings from Great War veterans is meant to grant immediacy to the film by immersing the viewer in direct experience rather than received history.

The question that must be asked is, "Does this work?" And the answer is, yes and no. While my socialist soul champions the decision to represent the War exclusively from the perspective of the people who actually fought the damn thing, the narrative feels tailored nonetheless. Blame it perhaps on the source material, as the archival audio was taken from something like 600 hours of interviews done in the '50s and '60s by the Imperial War Museums, who clearly have their own version of the War they wish to promote. A version of the war where the sun still has not set on the British Empire, George V regards us all favorably from the wall of every post office, the tea is hot and everyone knows their place.



Still from Peter Jackson's 'They Shall Not Grow Old.'

There are moments—a few—in the voice-overs where a note of fatalism or horror or even protest will arise. Mild moments, expressed with little fervor, which seem to be included only

to evoke veracity. At the end, we get a series of voices reminding us that war is useless, pointless, a waste. A series of voices that feels tacked-on, as though we as an audience of modern sensibilities expect to hear this condemnation. Overall, throughout the film we hear the stories of Tommies who were happy to be there, who'd "go over again," who missed it when they left, who saw it as "a job of work that had to be done." Is this the overarching experience of the average British soldier in the war?

My reading has told me otherwise. Robert Graves' *Good-Bye to All That* certainly seems to indicate otherwise. Siegfried Sassoon would undoubtedly curl his lovely aristocratic lip at the very notion. Is it worthwhile to hear these voices, these stories? Absolutely. Is it honest? This I cannot answer, but I have doubts.

But never mind that. You'll forget all your criticism, all your doubt, if just for a moment, when that color footage hits the screen.

Jackson has always directed with a cinematographer's eye, and this film is no exception. The first few shots of Tommies arriving in France, clad in khaki (a very authentic shade of khaki, as it turns out; Jackson spent weeks getting the color exactly right from uniforms *in his private collection*, since Peter Jackson is the world's biggest World War I geek), baring their very British smiles for the camera: these are enough to make you forget that this footage ever existed in another form. The color used is not the bright and hyper-real shading of a modern film. The tones are very much those of a color photograph from 1914, which just serves to make the images seem more immediate and real.

The soundtrack at this point becomes a thing of pure artifice, but what artifice—Jackson's otaku devotion to detail has never been showcased to greater effect. As revealed in the making-of featurette at the end, lip-readers were employed to pore over



the footage and to reconstruct all possible dialogue. Then, by identifying uniforms or cap-badges, Jackson was able to place the regiments, and based on their origins (Royal Welch, Lancashire, &c.) actually found actors from the appropriate locales and hired them to do the voice-overs. Further, every boot hitting the mud, every rustle of a rucksack, every clank of a helmet being thrown to the ground is there.

My jaw stayed on the floor for a long while. It is beautiful, there's no denying that. It is a labor of love. And in true Peter Jackson style, the camaraderie of camp life, the minor inconveniences and sanitary arrangements, or rather the lack thereof, the cheerful bitching about the cheap beer and wretched cigarettes lasts only a little while, to be replaced by the screaming terror of battle and its stomach-turning consequences. Jackson has never pulled his punches when it comes to revolting images (if you've ever seen [Dead Alive](#) or [Meet the Feebles](#) you'll know what I'm talking about) and this film is no exception. Popcorn went untouched when the images of trench foot, bloated corpses, maggots and rats swarm across the screen.

And yet, it is here that the film reaches its greatest artistic heights. Again and again I was reminded of the works of Otto Dix. For those who don't know him, Dix was an enthusiastic volunteer for the German army in 1914, whose drawings from the front remain a poignant and disturbing testament to the aesthetic impact of conflict. His true fame came during Weimar Berlin, which earned him the enmity of the Nazis, who denounced him as a "degenerate artist."

In *They Shall Not Grow Old*, a shot of a disemboweled cavalry horse strongly recalled Dix's *Horse Cadaver*, the animal's ruined body a testament to the service of all the animals who aided in the war effort.



Otto Dix, "Horse Cadaver from the War."

Many times Jackson shows bodies dangling, untended and ignored, from barbed wire, akin to those from the *War Triptych* or the obviously named but no less striking *Corpse on Barbed Wire*.





Otto Dix, "Near Langemarck (February 1918)."





Otto Dix, "Corpse on Barbed Wire."

A group of Tommies, exhausted, huddled together in their trench, are positioned almost exactly like Dix's *Resting Company*, the only difference their uniforms. The parallels were too obvious to ignore; Jackson, in his years of searching through the footage provided by the War Museums, had clearly



searched for and found footage that matched the works of Dix. Otto Dix, perhaps more than any other artist, truly captured the soul-killing dread and visceral, bleak reality of this war. Jackson, in his deep and thorough understanding of his subject, chose images echoic of Dix's in order to evoke in the viewer that same sense of despair, of resignation, of trauma. This conscious homage is my favorite takeaway from Jackson's film.

Whether conscious or not, however, Jackson's most prominent homage, and ultimately the film's downfall, lies in its obvious parallels to his most famous subject matter: the works of Tolkien.

J.R.R. Tolkien served in the Lancashire Fusilliers, as a signal-officer. He saw action at the Somme and lost two of his closest school friends to the War.

The narrative structure of *They Shall Not Grow Old* is, almost exactly, that of *Lord of the Rings*. A group of brave, innocent Englishmen/hobbits, inadvertently forced away from the comforts of hearth and home, reluctantly but bravely sally forth to do their duty in the face of certain destruction. Along the way, their innocence is lost. They confront unimaginable evil and emerge scarred, only to return home to a land unwelcoming, hostile, entirely changed from the one they left.

Of course, Jackson cannot be blamed for telling the truths of the War; this narrative, though romanticized and muddled, parallels the experience of many Englishmen during the War. It was certainly Tolkien's narrative. It is the very Englishness of the narrative that presents us with the film's biggest problem, one Andria Williams (of the Military Spouse Book Review, and a Wrath-Bearing Tree editor) also covered extensively in [her review](#), which is that of representation.

To the casual viewer, seeing *They Shall Not Grow Old* leaves

one with the clear impression that the entire Great War was fought by the British infantry and artillery, more or less single-handed. The French of course are mentioned, and even seen in a few shots, but overall the collection of images on the screen is of British, Welsh, Scots and Irish troops, every face a white face. The British West Indies Reserves are never seen. The film is innocent of a single Sepoy, there are no Gurkhas, no Malays.

In the featurette at the end of the film, Jackson addresses these concerns with a literal wave of the hand and a dismissive remark about the focus of the picture and the material available to him, while the screen actually shows unused footage of black troops, giving the lie to his explanation even as he offers it. What really pissed off your humble reviewer was the sentence Jackson used to cap this segment of the featurette: "This is a film by a non-scholar, for non-scholars."

Wow. OK. Certainly it's not an academic film, but to suggest that giving representation only to white British troops on-screen is in some way justifiable because the film is "by a non-scholar" rubbed me the wrong way. Mr Jackson, you're going to tell us that you, the man who owns a closetful of original WWI uniforms—the man who literally minutes before was showing off his collection of *actual Great War artillery pieces*—the man who admitted to owning every issue of *The War Illustrated* magazine—you, of all people, would offer this lame excuse?

I think the issue here is not an actual dishonesty on Jackson's part, however. I believe that his inability to see his own biases stems from a long association with the works of Tolkien, in which the War of the Ring is fought and won by the Men of the West, the people of Gondor and Rohan. (Although as noted by other viewers of this film, even Tolkien's coalition was more diverse than the one shown in *They Shall Not Grow Old*—at least the Fellowship included elves and dwarves).

The issue of Tolkien's source material, and whether or not it is actively or casually racist, is one that encompasses far too great a scope for this review. Certainly Tolkien did not think himself a racist, and was a vocal opponent of Nazi racialist theories, even going so far as to send a series of nasty letters to a German publisher who wanted to reprint *The Hobbit* in the late '30s but only after confirming if Tolkien was "arisch"—that is, Aryan. He also hated apartheid, having been born in South Africa, and was similarly vocal in his condemnation of the practice.



J.R.R. Tolkien in  
WWI uniform.

Yet there are Tolkien's own works, which reflect the unthinking cultural biases of a man born in the Victorian era who came of age in the Edwardian. The nations of the East (Rhun, Harad, &c.) are all populated by dark-skinned Men who are under the thrall of Sauron. Tolkien's own remarks about the appearance of Orcs (found in his letters) include a distressing description of them as like "the unlovliest of the Mongol-types," and he explicitly stated that the gold-loving Dwarves were based on the Jewish people, for whom he nurtured a public admiration his whole life, but the association is an uncomfortable one to modern thought.

In conclusion: should you see this film? Absolutely. Should you see it with caveats and reservations? Clearly. Beautiful

but flawed, *They Shall Not Grow Old* is a necessary film, but an incomplete one.

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## In Defense of Writing Modern Epic

At some point during my education, I developed a powerful sense of skepticism toward the Epic. Every literary or cinematic attempt to tell the story of a nation on behalf of the nation ended up oversimplifying distinctions, privileged the powerful over the weak, and trivialized or marginalized individual stories outside the mainstream. I don't remember whether it was high school or college when this idea metastasized in my consciousness as a kind of intellectual given, but somewhere between having to read Virgil's *Aeneid* and watching *Saving Private Ryan* it occurred to me that big H History did more harm than good.

Timing may have had something to do with it. What was probably unthinkable to someone living in, say 1870s Great Britain was much more logical to a young man in 1990s USA. After the WWII and the Cold War, it felt like stories creating national frameworks were just so much exploitative triumphalism—not worth the effort it had taken to write them.

In the years since then, I've seen the U.S. begin its first "post-modern" wars—wars without any particular meaning or significance on a political or individual level beyond whatever an individual decides to ascribe to it. The world has watched as Russia invaded Ukraine, a war that continues to this day, actively affecting millions of displaced civilians and hundreds of thousands on or near the front lines of



fighting. The United Kingdom has voted itself out of Europe, while Germany and France have forged an increasingly humane and just path forward for the EU, working together. America, under Donald Trump, threatens to spin away from the rest of the world, or maybe even spin itself apart.

If the world is stable and secure, there is more space for individual storytelling, and individual stories take on a greater significance. But as the center collapses through a combination of inattention, greed, political nihilism and pressure from the extremities, it becomes more urgent to ask the question: if individuals are owed stories, allowed privileged place as the focus of modern novels or cinematic works, should some nations (those without Epics) be allowed to develop stories in order to help justify their existence, too?

## The Argument Against Modern Epic

Epic is the purest intellectual form of nationalism—a powerful piece of literary or cinematic art that, in its execution, delivers an aesthetic, emotional justification for a nation's existence. It always begins with a hero who is struggling to build something from little (or sometimes nothing). Nationhood, and nationality, begin from a position of weakness. The arc of a television series or epic poem or novel moves from weakness to strength—often through war against some specific enemy. *The Iliad* describes Greek city-states struggles against the Trojans. *The Aeneid* explains the animosity between Rome and Carthage, as well as its struggles against various other nearby Latin tribes, and the Greeks. An Epic story is therefore an imperial story, whether or not the nation in question achieves empire, or (in the case of civilizations before the modern nation-state) nationhood. Hypothetically, this is not necessarily the case—many tribal societies describe their origins in terms of celestial or supernatural birth.

Anything that founds its argument on the necessity of violent struggle against an enemy should be viewed with extreme skepticism. Violence on an individual and collective level can only be argued in the context of self-defense, and even then, moral purists might argue that peaceful non-resistance is a *better* way of conducting one's personal and professional affairs.

Even people who support “pre-emptive strikes” still couch the necessity of attacking another country or civilization in defensive terms—Germany of The Great War, Nazi Germany of World War II, Imperial Japan's sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, George W. Bush's U.S. invasion of Iraq and Vladimir Putin's Russian invasion of Ukraine all required that a significant portion of their country viewed their attacks in defensive terms. No modern nation state wages war purely for territorial expansion—most people instinctively recoil from the idea that violence is to an individual or community's long-term advantage.

Epic and national storytelling depend on heroes and villains, in-groups and out-groups, appropriate and inappropriate behavior. They create hierarchy, and ways of describing actions that exclude certain types of behavior. They are conservative, [nativist](#), reactionary, and tend to privilege heteronormativity. They can give rise to fascism or national socialism, and taken to extremes, work to oppress individual rights.

## Generation War

In 2013, Germany finally got around to making its own modern WWII mini-series. Inspired by *Band of Brothers* down to the last name of the two army protagonists (Winter), “Generation War” follows a group of typical Germans during WWII. Its original title in German translates loosely to “Our Fathers, Our Mothers.” It came in for [a good deal of criticism](#) by

anyone with a hand in WWII who wasn't fighting for or alongside Germany.



Germany's "Band of Brothers" is a dark anti-Epic that follows the birth of modern Germany through the struggle of those citizens who were of fighting age during WWII

When the series came out, those criticisms felt universal in a way that they don't today. While there was always something to be said for German children and grandchildren getting a say in how they remembered their dying grandparents (caveated by the requirement that they face their crimes in daylight, without flinching). The makers of *Generation War* did not avoid the worst parts of WWII. the extermination of Jewish people, the extrajudicial murders of civilians and combatants, the basis of modern German *guilt*.

They did tell the story of WWII from the German perspective. This necessarily grants viewers a feeling that the protagonists deserve to live, a chance to make decent lives

for themselves after the war. From this perspective, given that Nazi Germany is defeated, *Generation War* functions as an Epic, by forging a unified identity through loss.

As already noted, when one encounters this German story from the outside, either in terms of time, or space, or identity, the story quickly becomes problematic, even offensive. I noticed that the U.S. and the U.K. were left out of the story, save throw-away lines about the U.S. having entered the war, the destruction of Germany's North African Army, and then about 150,000 Allied soldiers having landed in France. So much for my version of WWII! *Generation War* occurs almost entirely in or near Russia, on the Eastern Front. So it was for most German soldiers, whose experience of WWII was something that involved fighting Bolsheviks and/or Central and Eastern European partisans.

Meanwhile, the war represents Germany allies very unsympathetically. The two times Ukrainians are seen or mentioned are first as savage auxiliary police who horrify the protagonists by murdering Jewish women and children, and then later as "camp guards." But this isn't a Ukrainian version of WWII—it's *German*. Didn't Germans employ many locals to carry out reprisal killing against groups the Nazis saw as undesirable? Of course.



In German and Russian versions of WWII, there's always a savage auxiliary policeman beating helpless Jewish women and children,

and that policeman is  
always Ukrainian

The Polish government brought a similar criticism to bear against the series. Watching *Generation War* it's not difficult to see why—Polish partisans play a major role when they shelter a major character, who is Jewish. This is important for the purposes of the plot because the Jewish character, Viktor, must keep his identity secret from the partisans, who are *far* more overtly anti-Semitic than even the creepy SS major (there's always a creepy SS major hunting and killing Jewish children in WWII stories). Whereas the SS major seems fairly dispassionate about the killing of Jewish people—it's either his job, or he's a psychopath, or both—the Poles clearly harbor a personal hatred that transcends professional duty. Were the Poles all serious anti-Semites, moreso than the Germans? Surely not, surely not in *any* imagining or remembering. Then again, their hands weren't clean, either, regardless of Poland's experience of the war as a victim of German and Soviet aggression.

## Why Defend Modern Epic

The point of this piece is not just to maintain that Germany has the right to tell WWII (caveated, as stated earlier) from its own perspective. German filmmakers succeeded in making *Generation War* into an Epic of their defeat, dignifying the characters who reject war and punishing those that don't. More broadly, the point of this piece is to argue that we live in an era when smaller nations like Poland and Ukraine should also seek to create national Epics that tell their stories, in as expansive a way as possible.

Let's focus on Ukraine. Portions of Ukraine's history have been told by Germany, Russia, Poland, and Austria-Hungary. This isn't sufficient for Ukrainians, and leads to a dangerous sense of national inferiority. Rather than having a central

story to which all citizens can look, citizens interested in identifying themselves with nations look outside Ukraine. There is enough history to furnish an epoch-spanning story about the country—yet none exists.

What would such a project look like? A Ukrainian Epic would need to accomplish the following objectives. Firstly, there should be likable (which is to say heroic) characters from different national and historical backgrounds. Jewish, Polish, German, Hungarian, Romanian, Russian, Ukrainian and other groups all helped build modern Ukraine. Second, the story should be written to accomplish the difficult task of giving people from different backgrounds a place to inhabit—something to call their own. Third, the series should begin at some suitable point in pre-history—maybe with the Scyth, or the Hittites—and, over the course of progressive seasons, follow history through to the present time. One way of diminishing the effect of casting certain people as groups or villains would be to use the *Cloud Atlas* approach. A character who is heroic as a Jewish Ukrainian resisting a Cossack pogrom in the 18<sup>th</sup> century might return as a Russian during the season that deals with WWI and the capitulation of Kiev to the Bolsheviks. As the seasons approach the present, time would condense, and people would have to be stuck into the roles that they inhabit the season before—until the final season, which would likely detail Euromaidan, and the current conflict with Russia.

All of the more dangerous elements of Epic would be difficulties that filmmakers or writer would need to overcome. But I think that it's possible to do so, to write or film a great work about and for Ukraine without relying on villainous enemies. To give Ukrainian children in the East and in the West an idea into which they can fit themselves—the idea of people loving and living under difficult conditions, in a vibrant crossroads that often finds itself in defensive wars against more powerful neighbors.