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Steven Jay Rubin. *Combat Films: American Realism, 1945-2010.* Second edition. Jefferson: McFarland, 2011. 312 pp. $45.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-5892-9.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

Steven Jay Rubin's *Combat Films* is the second edition of a book first published in 1981. It is an overview of fifteen Hollywood war films, from *A Walk in the Sun* (1946) to the 2009 Oscar winner for best picture, *The Hurt Locker*. Also included in his discussion are classics, like *Twelve O'clock High* (1949), *Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), *The Longest Day* (1962), and *The Great Escape* (1963), along with lesser-known films like *Hell Is for Heroes* (1962) and *Gettysburg* (1993). The common theme of these films, and the book itself, is their attempt to realistically portray the combat experience of American servicemen. Rubin's excellent narrative of each film's production is mostly based on his access to Hollywood filmmakers, actors, and producers (he is a film producer). He uses interviews with filmmakers and actors, like John Sturges, Richard Attenborough, Oliver Stone, John C. McGinley, Ronald F. Maxwell, Dale Dye, Tom Sizemore, and Jason Isaacs, to great effect, blending the broader production narrative with unique, insightful, and sometimes humorous anecdotes. These interviews provide minute details on the production of each film, from the earliest conception, script writing, casting, filming, and postproduction. The result is a unique insider's perspective into the rigorous care and attention to detail put into war film production. This is undoubtedly the book's strength and its key attraction.

Personal interviews also highlight that many of these films were written or produced by men who had served in the military and in some cases those who were directly involved in the conflicts (or even the battles) they have chosen to put on the screen; examples include such filmmakers as Darryl F. Zanuck, who produced *The Longest Day*; Robert Pirosh who wrote *Battleground* (1949); and Sy Bartlett who helped write *Twelve O'clock High*. In other cases, men like Joe Clemons, in *Pork Chop Hill* (1959), or Lord Lovat, in *The Longest Day*, served as technical advisors for films in which they were actually portrayed. Rubin should be commended for drawing these direct and often forgotten connections between combat veterans and Hollywood war films. More important, Rubin points to a camaraderie between the war veteran technical advisors, writers, and directors, and the actors. On the one hand, veterans who worked on films were sincerely interested in the success of the actors they were advising or directing. On the other hand, actors were very respectful of veterans and aspired to stay as true to the real stories and characters as they possibly could. This cooperative relationship was especially clear in Rubin's discussion of the production of *Blackhawk Down* (2001). The relative recency of the film's events (the 1993 Battle of Mogadishu) motivated the actors to respect and faithfully tell the stories of the soldiers who had died in action.

Rubin also narrates the more recent use of boot camps to prepare actors for their roles as soldiers. Rubin goes into great detail in explaining how this tactic was effectively used in such films as *Platoon* (1986), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), and *Blackhawk Down*. There is no doubt that each of these films has a grittiness and a realism that can be attributed to the drilling of principle actors. Regarding *Saving Private Ryan*, Rubin's discussion of the film's memorable opening sequence (the D-Day landing) is particularly interesting because it provides a solid explanation of how (arguably) the most realistic portrayal combat in cinema history was put on the screen.

However, what the book possesses in primary source utilization, it lacks in engagement with other secondary sources dealing with either military history or film studies. This creates problems with Rubin's claims about the realism of these pictures. Surely, Stone's take on the Vietnam War, *Platoon*, was highly realistic vis-à-vis his own experience, but would it be considered realistic to those who experienced the war differently? Without an in-depth analysis of what actually happened in each of the engagements or units depicted in the films the reader has no opportunity to compare and confirm Rubin's claims regarding realism. Ultimately, this leaves the book only

arguing that the filmmakers endeavored to realistically portray their war, without actually proving that they did. *Combat Films* certainly would have benefited from more primary source research or interviews with actual combatants. At the same time, each of the subjects broached by these films has generated vast historical writing (both in and out of the academy) that could have been consulted to loan credibility to Rubin's claims that these films are realistic. Still, engagement with historiographic issues is not the book's objective and academics are clearly not the intended audience. Rubin is primarily concerned with telling the stories of how these films were made to film buffs within the general public. In this regard, the book succeeds.

Another concern is the selection of films and what qualifies as realistic combat pictures. The parameters of what qualifies as a realistic combat picture are not outlined, beyond the involvement and dedication of servicemen. Surely, Edward Zwick's *Glory* (1989) could have warranted treatment. Conversely, *The Great Escape* may be a realistic portrayal of the 1944 escape from Stalag Luft III, but it has little to do with combat. Rubin is also quick to dismiss more surreal pictures, like *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), or *The Thin Red Line* (1998), without truly paying credit to the effective ways those films examine the horrors of war, the deeper effects of war on the human psyche, and the unique existential challenges to serving in wartime. Those emotional effects surely feel just as real to veterans as their combat experiences.

Though the book lacks any engagement with current historiographic issues surrounding military history or film history, it can still be recommended to those interested in military history or war films. It provides a readable, well-illustrated, and interesting take on the process and dedication required to put war films on the screen.

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