*Fury*. Dir. David Ayer. Perf. Brad Pitt, Logan Lerman, Freddy Rodriguez, Shia LaBeouf. Columbia, 2014. Film.

It is a cliché for war films to express the idea that war is hell. Some portray this truism repeatedly, such as *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) and *Platoon* (1986), and some do so to the point of tedium, like *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006). Other films combine this perspective within wider considerations of life, humanity and civilization, such as *The Thin Red Line* (1998) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979). And there is a more ambiguous treatment of war, most explicitly depicted in *The Hurt Locker* (2009), which opens with the quote "war is a drug." David Ayer's *Fury* (2014) does present war as hell, but also demonstrates the attitude that enables one to survive in this hell, including a certain type of pleasure.

Ayer's war film features the most prominent trope of his previous work: homosocial male groups in high-intensity situations. From his screenplays for *Training Day* (2001), *U-571* (2000), *The Fast and the Furious* (2001) and *Dark Blue* (2002) to his previous directorial efforts *Harsh Times* (2005) and *End of Watch* (2012), Ayer portrays male camaraderie that is bombastic and aggressive but also committed and deeply felt. Thus we see the close bond between Jim Davis (Christian Bale) and Mike Alonzo (Freddy Rodriguez) in *Harsh Times*, and the brotherhood between Brian Taylor (Jake Gyllenhaal) and Mike Zavala (Michael Peña) in *End of Watch*. *Fury* centers upon its eponymous tank with a five-man crew during the final Allied advance through Germany in 1945. The crew is commanded by Sergeant Don "Wardaddy" Collier (Brad Pitt) and includes Boyd "Bible" Swan (Shia LaBeouf), Trini "Gordo" Garcia (Pena) and Grady "Coon-Ass" Travis (Jon Bernthal). The men have been fighting together for years but recently suffered a loss, so new recruit Norman Ellison (Logan Lerman) is assigned to them. Norman is a cliché of the war film - naïve and inexperienced, much like Chris (Charlie Sheen) in *Platoon* and Corporal Upham (Jeremy Davies) in *Saving Private Ryan*. *Fury* features other clichés including monstrous Nazis, Collier the scarred veteran (physically and mentally), Swan the bible basher, and an Alamo-style final battle as the film's climax.

Ayer combines these clichés, however, with unexpected developments and unflinching realism. The standard for war film realism was set with *Saving Private Ryan*, but *Fury's* aesthetic is quite distinctive. The cin-

ematography is largely steady rather than adopting an unsteady handheld aesthetic or long lingering takes. The realism comes from *Fury's mise-en-scene* of the physical and psychical impact of combat: heads and bodies are blown apart in graphic detail; corpses are crushed by tank treads; soldiers are burnt alive; civilians including children are killed arbitrarily; battles are messy and discordant, and the people involved are in equal parts determined and frightened. Heart-stopping set pieces involve the crew of Fury fighting anti-tank guns and German Tiger tanks, war machines more advanced than the American Sherman tanks. These fights are shot with an intimacy that is gripping and terrifying, not least because they are agonizingly long. Rather than a sudden build-up followed by a quick resolution, the clashes are drawn-out battles of attrition. Collier and his men need to fire multiple shells that frequently miss and, even when their shot is successful, one hit is never enough. Fast editing between close-ups of the different members of the tank crew heighten the tension: Collier giving orders, Swan aiming and firing, Travis reloading, Garcia driving and Norman fighting his rising panic, which mirrors the anxiety of the viewer. After early combat sequences end with Collier giving the order "Cease fire, target destroyed," later battles become nerve-shredding experiences as the viewer is desperate to hear that order, because those words mean both the fight and the unbearable tension are over. Battles in *Fury* are not won by courage, righteousness or even superior skill - the victor is simply the last tank standing.

Amidst all this carnage, the film takes time to explore the humanity and inhumanity of the soldiers. Norman has no combat experience and initially expresses shock and revulsion at what he encounters. After his first (disastrous) attempt at combat, Collier forces the new recruit to participate in the savagery despite Norman's protestations. As the film progresses, Norman becomes less resistant and eventually takes satisfaction in killing "fuckin' Nazis". Disturbingly, this change in his perspective is completely understandable. The violence these men encounter and inflict makes them brutish and cruel, but not totally inhuman. This is highlighted in the film's centerpiece, an extraordinary long sequence involving the tank crew and two German women (in a perfect world, this scene would be shot in a continuous long take, à la Alfonso Cuarón). Collier creates and enforces a peculiar domesticity in the German apartment, as much for his own sake as for Norman's, and defends this domesticity against the barbarity of his

men. The sequence suggests a kind of redemption for these men made brutish by their continued violence. But while this sequence is unusually long, it is all too soon that the men are back to work, with an especially grim reminder.

The juxtaposition between the calm center of this domestic scene and the combat that brackets it helps to provide a snapshot perspective on war. Humanity among civilians exists alongside unmitigated brutality between opposing soldiers. Collier demonstrates resigned cynicism as well as compassion, while Norman's growing bloodlust does not replace his humanist sympathy; rather it exists alongside it. The brutishness of the crew is explicitly presented as a coping mechanism for the horrors they have encountered, but in quieter moments the men's deeply wounded souls are apparent. That is the overall mood and impression of *Fury* - war is hell, but those within it are neither demons nor angels, just people who are deeply, irrevocably affected by it.

## Works Cited

*Apocalypse Now*. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. Perf. Martin Sheen, Marlon Brando, Robert Duvall, Laurence Fishburne. United Artists, 1979. Film.

*Dark Blue*. Dir. Ron Shelton. Perf. Kurt Russell, Scott Speedman, Ving Rhames, Brendan Gleeson. United Artists, 2002. Film.

*End of Watch*. Dir. David Ayer. Perf. Jake Gyllenhaal, Michael Peña, Anna Kendrick, Natalie Martinez. Open Road Films (II), 2012. Film.

*The Fast and the Furious*. Dir. Rob Cohen. Perf. Vin Diesel, Paul Walker, Michelle Rodriguez, Jordana Brewster. Universal Pictures, 2001. Film.

*Flags of Our Fathers*. Dir. Clint Eastwood. Perf. Ryan Phillippe, Barry Pepper, Jesse Bradford, Adam Beach. Warner Bros., 2006. Film.

*Harsh Times*. Dir. David Ayer. Perf. Christian Bale, Freddy Rodriguez, Eva Longoria, Samantha Esteban. Bauer Martinez Studios, 2005. Film.

*The Hurt Locker*. Dir. Kathryn Bigelow. Perf. Jeremy Renner, Anthony Mackie, Brian Geraghty, Christian Camargo. Summit Entertainment, 2009. Film.

*Platoon*. Dir. Oliver Stone. Perf. Charlie Sheen, Tom Berenger, Willem Dafoe Forest Whitaker. Orion Pictures, 1986. Film.

*Saving Private Ryan*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Perf. Tom Hanks, Tom Sizemore, Jeremy Davies, Matt Damon. Paramount/Dreamworks SKG, 1998. Film.

*The Thin Red Line*. Dir. Terrence Malick. Perf. Jim Caviezel, Adrien Brody, Sean Penn, Nick Nolte. Twentieth Century Fox, 1998. Film.

*Training Day*. Dir. Antoine Fuqua. Perf. Denzel Washington, Ethan Hawke, Scott Glenn, Tom Berenger. Warner Bros., 2001. Film.

*U-571*. Dir. Jonathan Mostow. Perf. Matthew McConaughey, Bill Paxton, Harvey Keitel, Jon Bon Jovi. Universal Pictures, 2000. Film.

Vincent M. Gaine
Independent Scholar