Saving Private Ryan: Review

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Saving Private Ryan:

Review

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published in Bahá'í Studies Review8

London: Association for Bahá'í Studies English-Speaking Europe, 1998

Film: Saving Private Ryan

Director: Steven Spielberg

Distributors: Paramount Pictures and DreamWorks Pictures, 1998

Reviewer: Milan Voykovic

Commentary: Shamim Razavi

Review, by Milan Voykovic

Benjamin Franklin wrote that "there never was a good war, or a bad peace." With his two most profound war films, Schindler's List and Saving Private Ryan, Steven Spielberg suggests that the Second World War was an exception. It may not have been a "good war," but it would have been a "bad peace" if Nazism, Fascism and, Japanese militarism hadn't been defeated.

These banal observations (Franklin's excepted) on good and evil may seem a strange place to begin a review of Saving Private Ryan, but in many ways the film is about the righteousness of killing and dying, or as Spielberg has claimed, the "morality of sacrifice." This is all well and good, but sadly Spielberg's sentimentality, overweening patriotism and didacticism buries the film's questions beneath heroic music and gratuitous flag waving (literal and figurative), particularly in the prologue and epilogue.

What saves this film from being more like the adventure/war movies that Spielberg watched as a boy (such as William Wellman's Battleground [1950], for example), is the way in which he handles the Allied invasion of France in June 1944. More specifically, the image of war he creates using the landing of the first wave of American troops on Omaha beach, the area between Pointe de la Percee and St Honorine in Normandy. This, the film's first battle sequence, is an exceptional piece of cinema. Here the audience is not spared any of the horror of war. As the Americans struggle out of their landing crafts and up the beach to the German positions, they are met by constant machine gun and artillery fire. Rather than the "good guys" being killed quickly and cleanly as in many war movies, the troops on Omaha Beach bleed to death. They are ripped open by machine-gun fire; they are dismembered by explosions; they drown; they burn. Moreover, Spielberg demonstrates the chaos and carnage of battle in poignant ways. In one sequence a soldier with one arm is looking at a pile of dead bodies. He bends down, picks up his severed arm, and stumbles off after his comrades. Spielberg also uses sharp handheld camera movements and sound, or rather the noise of battle, punctuated only by Captain John Miller's (Tom Hanks) momentary lapses into a silent state of shock, to make this scene truly terrifying.

From here, the film moves to the discovery by an administrator in Washington that three of the Ryan family's four sons are dead, and the determination by the US Army's Chief of Staff General George Marshall that Mrs Ryan's remaining son will be found and sent home. The eponymous Ryan (Matt Damon) is, however, a private in the 101st Airborne Division that was dropped behind enemy lines to secure objectives as a part of the D-Day invasion. Thus it falls upon Captain Miller and what remains of his company's best men to find Ryan, and it is this odyssey that takes up the bulk of the film. As they trudge into France the enlisted men complain about and question the nature of their mission: Are all our lives worth risking for one life? In terms of philosophising, that is about as far as Spielberg goes. Naturally Ryan is eventually found, but this in itself does not end the dramatic tension as Miller's men, Ryan, and assorted paratroopers then engage in another battle.

The characters of Miller's squad are drawn from the stable of stock war-film stereotypes. These are Tom Hanks as the solid Captain Miller, a brave man who cannot conceal the stress of battle and leadership all of the time; the reliable, courageous friend-of-the-Captain Sergeant Horvath (Tom Sizemore); Private Reiben (Edward Burns), the working-class grumbler who questions everything; Private Jackson (Barry Pepper), the quirky sniper from the South who repeats verses from the Bible while he shoots; Wade (Giovanni Ribisi), the slightly neurotic medical orderly; Private Mellish (Adam Goldberg), the wise-cracking Jewish boy; Private Caparzo (Vin Diesel) the big guy with a heart of gold, and Corporal Upham (Jeremy Davis), the over-sensitive wimp who may not have what it takes. As with other aspects of this film, what makes this well-worn ensemble work is the skill of those involved, especially Tom Hanks and Tom Sizemore.

Saving Private Ryan demonstrates two things: firstly, that Spielberg is a true master of the craft of film in terms of cinematography and story-telling, and secondly, that he reveals a striking intellectual simpleness when he moves away from technique. Indeed, the whole moral centrepiece of the film, that eight might die in the rescue of one, is something of a contrived non-issue. For if Miller and his men were not risking their lives trying to rescue Ryan, then surely they'd be risking their lives doing something else at the Normandy beachhead. Yes, there is something of a lesson in the way that Ryan's rescuers come to see a mission that they believed was nothing more than a potentially fatal public-relations exercise as a noble act, but is this all that Spielberg's "morality of sacrifice" means? This film seems to confine itself to asking the age-old question: have we, the "survivors" of that and subsequent generations, "lived up" to the standard bequeathed to us by those who sacrificed so much? To underline this point, much of the movie is accompanied by John Williams's score that can best be described as Generic Heroic American, the minimalist kind of music that sounds like Copland's "Fanfare for the Common Man" that seems to find its way into any movie in which Americans undertake an epic enterprise. If this wasn't enough, Spielberg guarantees that the audience is not baffled by equivocation by ensuring that all the Germans are bad and all the Americans are good, although to be fair the film does show that the Allies were just as capable of cruelty as anyone else.

Despite its acting, technical effects, and extraordinary battle scenes, Saving Private Ryan is a conventional Hollywood film with a conventional Hollywood philosophy. That is, if the characters that the audience is encouraged to associate with the most are safe at the end of the film, then all is redeemed. All the other victims fade into the background, as they did in Spielberg's other war epic, Schindler's List.

Saving Private Ryan is not an anti-war film as such, nor did it try to be. Spielberg does not question the morality of war because this might question the morality of the Second World War. One could sympathise with this view, but really few, with the exception of some right-wing loonies and the odd revisionist historian, would seriously claim that the war against Hitler et al was an enterprise that should not have been undertaken. Perhaps by displaying a greater sense of his audience's ability to see things for themselves without unambiguous moralising, simplistic patriotism, and crass sentimentality, Spielberg might have shown that he can handle content as well as form.

Still, the film does raise some issues that Bahá'ís may wish to ponder: Is there such a thing as a "just war"? What forms of "sacrifice" can be justified? When should collective ethics override individual conscience? In the case illustrated in Saving Private Ryan, the issues were clear. It was a "just war," American sacrifice was legitimate, and the individuals' morals were submerged in the collective ethos. As the film points out, this is what war does, and in wars there are no passengers or bystanders, as the character of Corporal Upham shows. Once involved, the individual does not get the chance, or indeed have the right as far as the authorities are concerned, to circumscribe the degree to which he or she is committed to "the cause." It could be argued, however, that this is indeed what Bahá'ís should try to do, as perhaps sacrifice for Bahá'ís does not mean dying for an ideology, nation, or group of comrades, but sacrificing the "self" to the will of God.

Does this mean, however, serving a just cause by doing evil things, i.e. killing? The guidance on the subject says that Bahá'ís cannot voluntarily enlist in any branch of the armed forces where they would be subject to orders to take human life. But what if, like Corporal Upham, one is involuntarily placed in such a branch? As far as armies are concerned, anyone in uniform, be they a cook, nurse, doctor, or clerk is a soldier subordinate to military discipline and the lawful orders of senior officers, including those to kill, and could, in theory be sent to fight in the front line if the need arose. So we are left with the questions, what is the will of God, and how do I serve it?

Commentary, by Shamim Razavi

In the foregoing review, Milan Voykovic correctly implies that Spielberg's take on the war movie genre is fairly mundane in all but one respect: that opening scene. More than enough has already been written on the technicalities and visceral qualities of the scene, but from a Bahá'í point of view it is worth noting the emotions it evokes. The opening battle puts across the fear and stomach churning horror of war like no other silver screen depiction. From the soldiers praying and trembling as their Mulberry Harbours head toward the beach, to the sight of dozens mowed down in a single barrage of gunfire, to the numbed emotions of the protagonists after the tumult has died down, nothing in Hollywood history has as effectively portrayed as this scene what it is to fear death, to feel the dread and horror of battle. It is this emotion that speaks to the heart of the viewer, that cuts through the human tendency to intellectualise ourselves away from the scene of battle and atrocities, to place an emotional distance between ourselves and the reality of suffering in a society inoculated against brutality. Only the hardest of hearts could fail to be moved by what passes before the eyes in the opening battle sequence.

All of this speaks directly to any Bahá'í, or indeed any humanitarian, as a reminder of one of the main reasons to strive to improve the world: to end suffering on this horrific scale, to assuage the violence of a tempest described by Shoghi Effendi as "sweeping the face of the earth...invading the remotest and fairest regions of the earth...wasting its cities...dimming its light and harrowing the soul of its inhabitants."(4) Hollywood has rarely produced anything quite so harrowing.

Few Bahá'ís can watch Saving Private Ryan and not be reminded of the sacrifice played out in Iran both in the initial wave of persecutions of the Bábí community and more recently under the Islamic Republic. Reading

Gobineau and Nabil's ghoulish descriptions of the events of Zanjan and Nayriz brings an entirely new angle on both the opening battle sequence of this film and otherwise-twee message of future generations having to "earn" the sacrifice of those gone before. Is this latter message not reminiscent of the call of the Bahá'ís of Iran to their brethren in the west to carry forward the Bahá'í project while their hands are tied?

The opening battle sequence is worthy of the epithet "epic" but it is perhaps an over-exaggeration to so describe the meandering and plodding anticlimax which is the rest of the film. Having shown its audience the reality of war, and hopefully instilled in them an understanding of its horrors and an aversion to the concept of militarism, the film takes, in the words of Captain Miller, "a turn for the surreal," exploring a modern America that, much like the film's screenwriters, has lost the plot. If the "mission is a man" as the film's advertising posters claimed, then who or what is the mission of society today? A review of this film would do well to explore this part of what is effectively a portmanteau plotline.

Voykovic makes passing reference to the imagery of the Bible-quoting sniper but it may be worth questioning, in what is after all an analysis from a religious point of view, why Spielberg employs the religious motifs of the sniper and the night time refuge provided by a countryside church. The church scene in particular is worthy of further exploration, with the central characters engaging in a form of cathartic group confession.

Voykovic is accurate in his reference to the "good guys" versus "bad guys" depiction of the warring sides in this film. It is disappointing to see such a reductionist and outdated perspective in such a film. Far from humanising Germans along the lines of Sam Peckinpah's Cross of Iron, Spielberg does not even attempt to blur the edges of an outdated cowboys and Indians mentality. All of which might lead us to question Spielberg's motives in making this "epic." How much of it is truly about the "morality of sacrifice" and how much is it produced with the goal of pulling off his new studio's first big box office hit?

The reviewer was left with the question "what is the will of God and how do I serve it?" It is submitted, however, that a more pertinent issue is the nature of war and whether humankind will ever learn to resolve its conflicts before they bloody the battlefield. It is true that Spielberg does "unambiguously moralise" in the opening battle sequence, but is there any ambiguity, from a Bahá'í point of view, over whether war is horrific? For Omaha beach read Srebrenica, Kigali, Eritrea, Grozny... the list is endless. The key scene in this film does not seek to deal with the minutiae of the political background to conflict, nor should it: it is nothing more than a brilliant exposition of, and polemic against, the suffering and human toll of warfare.

End Notes

Bahá'í scripture states that music is holy, "a ladder for…souls, a means whereby they may be lifted up unto the realm on high," a means by which people can attain measureless spiritual sovereignty; "They who recite the verses of the All-Merciful in the most melodious of tones will perceive in them that with which the sovereignty of earth and heaven can never be compared." It is a vehicle for spiritual edification, for education, for proclamation. "Whoever hath been transported by the rapture born of adoration for My Name, the Most Compassionate, will recite the verses of God in such wise as to captivate the hearts of those yet wrapped in slumber" (Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas [Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1992] 38, 61, 74). In addition to the emotional sway of music, it is a force with great moral and affective power (Aqdas 74, 75). The notion that music is endowed with moral power precedes the Bahá'í Faith: it is found in Plato and Boethius, in medieval music theory (see Oliver Strunk, Source Readings in Music History [New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1998] 9-149), and in Islam (The Islamic theologian al-Ghazzali, in his Ihya 'ulum al-din provides a selection of uses for music, some of which are permitted while others are forbidden. For example, music is forbidden when the "song's contents are not compatible with…religion" and "[i]f one listens to music for its own sake." See A. Shiloah, Music in the World of Islam [Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1995] 44). However, it is a teaching that has been largely forgotten. The belief that music does indeed influence our spiritual and moral condition will no doubt have great influence on the music produced by Bahá'ís in the centuries to come. Hence, the music journalism presented in this review is influenced by the Bahá'í concept of music, as well as some recent musicological ideas. I have accepted the notion that music can signify beyond itself, that it can be deconstructed in a multitude of ways, read as a social (rather than autonomous) text, and exist as a discourse of signs. Because criticism is read as a form of subjective journalism, I have made little effort to hide personal and ego-derived responses. It seems more honest. Criticism is like the polar opposite of theory. It is an art form in itself which is simultaneously distant from theory, while deriving much of its technique from it. My premise is that criticism gains strength from its journalistic ephemerality. In such a discourse mistakes are bound to occur. The critic is writing to a deadline, skimming through a few sources as a substitute for painstaking academic research. Criticism welcomes refutation and for this reason it must be vigorous. It must draw attention to itself and demands that the issues it raises be considered. Criticism is vital to the health and development of an art. As the Bahá'í Faith grows, more and more fields of human endeavour will be subject to re-definition in terms of their relationship to the Faith. The issue is of utmost importance to Bahá'ís who wish to practise criticism. As questioned above, is the function of criticism merely to denigrate what is considered rubbish, and to praise only the rare examples of mastery? Or is criticism to assume a didactic function, a means of edifying those who consume cultural objects as well as those who produce them? It is possible, and perhaps vital, to view criticism as an integral part of music (or any art form), which means that criticism itself should be a "ladder for the soul." If this is to be the case, care and respect are needed. It seems difficult to justify full-scale diatribes against works which irritate, but at

the same time critics must be fearless in demonstrating the flaws which hinder most of the work that artists produce. They must become teachers, and through criticism, advance civilisation. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, "…it is necessary that the schools teach it [the art of music] in order that the souls and the hearts of the pupils may become vivified and exhilarated and their lives brightened with enjoyment" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in The Compilation of Complilations 76). It is an issue that Bahá'ís are only beginning to explore.
In true review style, I have given each album a star rating ranging from ***** (masterpiece) to * (poor).
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Shoghi Effendi, The Promised Day is Come (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980) 3.

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