The Role and Impact of the Environment in Saving Private Ryan

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Abstract

Although certain films may not be explicitly labeled as environmental film, we approach Saving Private Ryan through an ecocritical analysis. We evaluate how the film not only displays the physical and mental tolls of war in several bloody battles, but we also explore the environmental costs. By examining the genre of historical realism, we demonstrate how the film outlines the unique role of the environment in war but also enables the viewers to consider the impacts of war on the surrounding environment. To understand the environmental message in Saving Private Ryan, we used a concept called the "Three Ecologies" by the ecocinema scholar, Adrian J. Ivakhiv. By considering the perceptual and social environments on-screen in Saving Private Ryan, it allows us to think about the material impact of war on real settings. Therefore, the unique role of the environment in war is seen through the portrayal and highlighted importance of weather, geography, and resources. The marine environment was also found to be disturbed due to the numerous vessels and equipment lost at sea, and along the beaches of Normandy. The certain stylistic elements used in this Hollywood Blockbuster are used to depict the film's various settings and action to help us understand the role of the environment in how viewers engage with the film. Overall, this study evaluates how Saving Private Ryan provides an invaluable commentary on the environmental aspect of an iconic battle in world history.

Keywords

Ecocritical analysis, Saving Private Ryan, Ecocinema, Three Ecologies, environment

Disciplines

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In the Hollywood blockbuster film *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), directed by Steven Spielberg, the audience is immersed in the gruesome acts of war. This movie is set during the invasion of Normandy in France during World War II. The film follows the main character John H. Miller, played by Tom Hanks, and his squadron as they search for a paratrooper, Private First-Class James Francis Ryan. They were ordered to return him home to his mother after his three brothers were killed in action. This film is extremely well-known for its graphic detail and intense war scenes. Approaching the film through an ecocritical analysis, we argue that not only are the physical and mental tolls of war on people observable in several bloody battles throughout the country, but we also explore the environmental costs. While *Saving Private Ryan* may not be designated as a stereotypical environmental film, by examining its genre of historical realism, we demonstrate how it not only outlines the unique role of the environment in war but also enables viewers to consider the unfortunate impacts of war on the surrounding environment.

I.   Historical Context of the Film: D-Day

Since *Saving Private Ryan* is in the genre of realist fiction and loosely based on a true story, its historical context is crucial to understand as it sets the tensions of the different sides involved and how much the war had escalated. During World War II, the Battle of Normandy began on June 6, 1944 and ended in August of the same year. This battle is also referred to as D-Day. During this attack, the American, British, and Canadian forces landed on 5 beaches along a 50 mile stretch of the coast of France (Kelly, 2019). In *Saving Private Ryan*, the objective of this D-day invasion was to liberate France from Nazi control along with 156,000 other troops (Kelly, 2019). However, the mission of Captain John H. Miller was changed soon after the first couple days of the invasion to locate a missing paratrooper. A few weeks after the initial invasion, the beaches along the coast of France were fully secured by the Allied troops. This allowed

equipment, more troops, and vehicles to land at Normandy beaches (Kelly, 2019). By overviewing the battle and location, the reader can fully comprehend the stress of Captain Miller and his squad during their change of mission to find a single man, who very well could have died. The film intensely and gruesomely displays this battle in the beginning of the film (starting at 5:30 minutes). By having this movie display the great details of the event, it was a way to honor the past and the courage of the participants as well as remember the specific acts of war. While wars can be comprehended politically, economically, or militarily, they can also be looked at environmentally.

II.   Ecocritical Analysis through the Three Ecologies

In order to understand the environmental message in *Saving Private Ryan*, we must first determine what aspects of ecocritical analysis are relevant to this film. The ecocinema scholar Adrian J. Ivakhiv, provides a framework for such analysis through a concept named the Three Ecologies. This idea includes three aspects: the perceptual, material, and social ecologies. The idea of perceptual ecologies can be described as how what is represented onscreen can expand viewers' perceptions of the environment. For example, viewers gain an awareness of the environmental relations as they are portrayed onscreen. In contrast, the idea of material ecologies explains the off-screen relationship with the environment, or a sense of ecological footprints. This includes how environments are affected even when these impacts are not necessarily portrayed onscreen. The idea of social ecologies is how the filmmakers narrate the characters' relationships with their surrounding environment (O'Brien 2018, 9-10). By considering the perceptual and social environments portrayed on-screen in *Saving Private Ryan,* it allows us to think about the material impact of war on real environments.

In this film, the environment was utilized in numerous ways. First, the environment was shown to be a factor in the military strategy. Next, it was used to encode certain themes and tones and even applied as a plot element later in the film. Lastly, the detrimental impacts of war on the environment are clearly seen in the film through land and marine deterioration.

III.   The Importance of Weather, Geography and Resources

 The environment plays a unique role in war and does so in the way the film portrays this battle. Weather conditions, or more importantly the geography, could influence the outcome. For example, on June 5, 1944, there was a terrible weather delay, and General Dwight D. Eisenhower decided to push back the time of the invasion by 24 hours. However, the "one or two days of continuously overcast skies could bring the entire undertaking to a halt" (Wills, 2019). The weather in the beginning of the film was still clearly dreary, which also mirrored the tone and events to follow. As we learned from the film, it is important to understand the geographical importance of Normandy. It was relatively close to England, thus providing a short supply line whose importance can be seen by the end of the film, with the influx of troops and equipment that fueled victory. Normandy was vital since the "coast and beaches were located directly opposite the Isle of Wight, and the port and rail facilities in southern England, away from the dense concentration of people and traffic in the London metropolitan area, were available for the movement of troops and supplies. In the many sheltered estuaries and creeks of the English southern coast the invasion armada of 4,000- 5,000 vessels could be hidden and defended from air attack" (Berman, 1994, 471). This flow of troops and supplies can be seen in the film after Allied forces took the beach (41:00 minutes). This scene utilizes a low wide angle to capture the massive number of ships and air support coming through the beach in the background. It is evident that the troops used the geography of the area to their benefit.

The geography of the beach, while a huge obstacle initially, became an advantage after securing the same ground. In the D-Day scene at the beginning of the film, the audience can clearly see how the positioning of the German outposts on the cliff gave them a massive advantage in holding back the allies. The lack of cover that existed as a result of storming the beach was also a challenge and resulted in a number of casualties (7:20 minutes). Even though what we find on screen (perceptual ecologies) helps the viewers understand how the environment affected the physical conditions of war (the material ecologies), we also see instances of a sense of social ecologies. For example, there was one soldier, after conquering the cliffs of Normandy, who knelt down and places dirt from the top into a can labeled 'France' (26:30 minutes). This scene gives the environment meaning beyond simply dirt under the foot and how certain characters interact and feel towards the environment.

Saving Private Ryan helps viewers recognize these material and social relations with the environment through its onscreen portrayals. For example, every time Captain John Miller needed to move to another location, he explained the type of terrain that they were covering and what precautions to take on the way. For instance, one day Captain Miller and his squad reached a German observatory that was located on higher grounds. However, Miller ordered an attack on this bunker to minimize the danger for the troops that would come after them. Although the Germans at this site were defeated, this event did result in a death of one of the squad members (1:20:00 minutes). The distinction of high and low ground, in terms of geography, was vital for the troops in order to carry forward. The high ground was seen to have the advantage since troops were able to scan the landscape more effectively, while the low ground was more vulnerable to ambushes and had a lack of vision. On the other hand, when Miller found Private Ryan, in a deserted and destroyed town in the countryside of France, he refused to back out of

his duty since he needed to prevent German advancement. At the ending sequence of the film, the environment is specifically used as a plot element. In this sequence, the men find Private Ryan with his company defending a bridge that would give the Germans access to the rest of France to counterattack. This bridge provided a way over a river that would otherwise block the German advance, bringing special attention to the potential strategic advantage of the American troops as a result of the environment (1:51:00 minutes).

In *Saving Private Ryan,* representations on-screen demonstrated the reality of the material environment during the battle of Normandy. At the same time, Ivakhiv's material ecological analysis helps us understand how these real-world environmental relations extend beyond what we see during the battle. For instance, there were detrimental impacts on the landscape through pure destruction, extraction, transport, or pollution of the terrain, during and after the war. There are at least three general categories that are associated with the environmental disturbances from war. These include the "environmental disturbances and destruction from weaponry, the direct consumption of resources such as timber, water, and food to support armies, and the indirect consumption of resources by military industrial complexes that supply the war effort" (Hupy, 2008, 406). There are various examples of each of these categories within *Saving Private Ryan*. In order to exemplify an environmental disturbance, after the initial attack, the water was dyed a dark red from the blood of many casualties. Dead fish were scattered among the dead bodies that were also washing up on the beach (27:00 minutes). In other words, the vast number of weapons not only hit the men who contaminated the ocean with blood but also killed the fish. Moreover, during any of the battle scenes there was the complete alteration of land due to explosives, trenches, and bunkers. Not only was this seen in the film, but during war there were "whole villages [that] were blown up, woods disappeared, and the courses of streams were changed"

(Hupy, 2008, 413). Tanks were also utilized to intimidate and close-in on the enemy and impacted the landscape by deteriorating the vegetation and eroding the surrounding environment (1:45:00 minutes). Such impacts have the ability to alter the surrounding ecosystem of Omaha Beach in Normandy in both the short and long-term, as we will discuss with attention to the marine environment in the next section.

War is often a time when many resources are scarce. As it was seen when Captain Miller arrived in town to find Private Ryan and his company, the water containers were completely dry (2:00:00 minutes). Although there were not many people in this company, resources were used up quickly and due to the contamination of water sources from war, there were not necessarily any clean supplies. However, after Omaha beach was won over by the allies, this allowed for the inflow of supplies to support those that were lacking necessities out in the countryside (41:00 minutes). Geography that is difficult to traverse, either due to natural obstacles or strategic placement of enemy troops, can play a role in slow resupply. Overall, war can be seen to have a variety of effects on the environment during and after the war such as the complete destruction of land and villages, the lack of adequate resources, and altered or devastated ecosystems.

IV. Altering the Marine Environment

During the Second World War, shipwrecks and material dispersion had a drastic impact on the marine environment. Rean Monfils, who is an employee at Sea Australia, an organization that is dedicated to protection of the marine environment, offers attention to this issue (2005). In his article, Monfils explored the concern that numerous vessels were lost at sea during World War II as well as other wars. The potential for oil pollution comes from the decomposition of these metal ships that may lead to severe public safety risks in future years. This issue has only been addressed in recent years with the rise of the environmental revolution (Monfils, 2005). This

problem was addressed in 2004 with the creation of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the Oil Pollution Preparedness, Response and Cooperation (OPRC). The technical group created between the two organizations stated that their main goal was to "encourage regional centers and secretariats... to assess the situation regarding WWII wrecks that may cause oil pollution on their respective sea areas" (Monfils, 2005, 1049). Research reveals that more than 3,800 vessels were lost during the war, which equates to "over 13 million tons of sunken vessels in the Pacific alone ranging from aircraft carriers to battleships and including over 330 tankers and oilers" (Monfils, 2005, 1049). Another aspect to address was the equipment on these vessels that included the large amount of ammunition and explosives that could have added to the pollution and environmental problems but also other casualties. As seen in *Saving Private Ryan,* especially in the opening scenes, there were many vessels that sank into the water and planes were shot down. Overall, the vessels, equipment, and planes lost at sea, in reality, were on a much larger scale than what was shown in *Saving Private Ryan*.

V.   Additional Eco-Interpretations of the Film

Lastly, it is important to address how stylistic elements used to depict the film's various settings and action can help us understand the role of the environment in how viewers engage with the film. As a Hollywood Blockbuster, by being highly popular and financially successful at drawing the attention of a variety of audiences, *Saving Private Ryan* can be considered an epic war movie that included numerous battle scenes. These scenes were extremely graphic and stunning, explicitly displaying the injuries of soldiers as well as the screams to have the audience comprehend the pain during the war. Many of the scenes tended to be darker and included three dominant colors. The colors of the surrounding environments and scenes can definitely evoke distinct reactions in the audience. For example, dominant colors in the film included black, red,

and white, which are directly correlated to evoke particular emotions of hatred, mourning, sorrow, grief, and life (Wei, 2004, 832). This can be observed in the opening scene in which an old Private Ryan is revisiting his fallen comrades at Arlington National Cemetery. In this scene, there is a black overcast sky that can be used as an important backdrop to create a somber tone to match the sadness of the content of the film (2:03 minutes). The environment can also set the stage for a scene through the use of natural audio. At the very beginning of the D-Day sequence, a low camera angle is used to portray the length of the beach and the audio captures the harsh noise of the waves crashing against the ground (7:26 minutes). This harsh audio prepares the audience for the brutal upcoming scenes.

In spotlighting these stylistic elements, we consider ecocritic David Ingram's discussions of 'the associative model.' This model is a framework that helps "account for how different aesthetic registers work together to construct a film's meaning in terms for the viewer, a process that involves cognitive, emotional and affective aspects," that all play a role in a viewer's understanding of the film's environment. (2013, 44). Throughout this film, there are different reactions for individuals in terms of their gut, brain, and emotion. The filmmakers shape the perceptual ecologies by using onscreen devices to encode dark and emotional tones for the film since most of it is spend in conflict. In scenes that are absent of conflict, the surrounding environment appears to be sunny and mild. The filmmakers encode perceptual on-screen devices, which influence the discussion and interpretation of the film by the audience, including their sense of what environments are understood as safe and which are harmful or damaged.

VI.   Conclusion: *Saving Private Ryan* is Ecocinema

In conclusion, although this film may not be explicitly considered environmental, our analysis supports the claim that almost any film can be understood as ecocinema. By retraining our

perspective to an ecocritical analysis, we demonstrate how an audience has the ability to interpret this Hollywood blockbuster from an environmental point of view. As it was seen in *Saving Private Ryan,* wars can be analyzed politically, economically, or militarily, but also looked at in terms of the environment. Since the film is in the genre of historical realism, Adrian Ivakhiv's three ecologies enabled us to understand how what we see unfolding in terms of action onscreen can relate to real-world off-screen environmental impacts (material and social ecologies). At the same time, David Ingram's associative model helped us focus on how the stylistic elements employed can also generate important emotions, which help viewers understand environmental relations. By referring to various ecocritical perspectives of *Saving Private Ryan*, the unique role of the environment and the unfortunate impacts of war are difficult to miss. The film provides an invaluable commentary on the environmental aspects of an iconic battle in world history.

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