

Generational Memory and Affect in *Letters from Iwo Jima*

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One of the oldest and most celebrated cinematic genres, the war film has often served as an index of generational change, marking the outlines and the key elements of a collective rethinking of the past. Recent films such as *Downfall*, *Letters from Iwo Jima*, and *Inglourious Basterds* provide a case in point, depicting subjects and themes that had been regarded as off limits by previous generations, and reshaping what had become a rather static set of conventions. The stylistic tone of these films, their striking forms of emotional address, and their controversial subject matter can all be seen as a distinct generational response to the codes of representation that have dominated war cinema.

In this chapter I sketch the outlines of a new approach to the war film, an approach based on the concept of generational memory, foregrounding questions of memory, cinematic affect, and the changing meaning of the past for the present in the recent film *Letters from Iwo Jima*. The concept of generational memory, I suggest, provides a way of framing the positive aspects of the emotional engagement with the past – an engagement afforded by specific patterns of images and sounds – while allowing us to recognize the orchestration of affect in the genre as inherently political. The war film is conceived of here as a flexible form, responsive to the pressure of historical events and cultural needs – a genre that, like memory itself, is rewritten and reshaped by changing perspectives of the present. My use of this concept is thus set in explicit contrast to Fredric Jameson’s recent argument that all war narratives are essentially alike; as Jameson writes, “one often has the feeling that all war novels (and war films) are pretty much the same and have few enough surprises for us, even though their situations may vary” (Jameson 2009: 1533). By foregrounding the idea of generational memory I highlight the fact that each generation finds new objects of value in the past and reads the past differently, discovering events that had been ignored or repressed in earlier accounts.

As a major source of what Paul Virilio calls the “image bank” of twentieth and twenty-first century culture, the war film plays a particular role in the formation of generational cultures of memory, organizing affect around certain conflicts and figures, conferring emotional value on certain historic events and scenes and marking distinct shifts in the ways the past is apprehended from one generation to another (Virilio 1989). A film such as *Apocalypse Now*, for example, can now be seen as a key generational signifier that defined an emotional relationship with the past for the Vietnam generation, creating a shared emotional flashpoint that crystallized a generational narrative about history and the Vietnam War. The film’s charged somatic imagery, its concentrated focus on the faces and bodies of the soldiers, and its powerful subject matter changed the war film’s mode of address, offering a new vocabulary of sounds and images. Shot in vivid color and highlighted by a rock soundtrack filled with counter-culture anthems delivered in Dolby 5.1, *Apocalypse Now* produced a new visual and acoustic landscape of war, one attuned to the sensibilities of a generation steeped in anti-war feeling.

The changing styles of cinematic address that mark the history of the genre also provide an illustration of the way the past is constructed differently, with a changed historical valence, from one generation to another. In works such as *Letters from Iwo Jima*, *Flags of Our Fathers*, or *The Thin Red Line*, as well as in the Home Box Office (HBO) series *The Pacific* (2010), for example, the war in the Pacific is represented in a manner that is dramatically different from that of earlier accounts, most of which were fueled by stereotype and prejudice. A notorious example is *Guadalcanal Diary*, in which Japanese soldiers are portrayed as inferior racial others and referred to as apes and monkeys. As Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black write, “They were ‘things’ to be killed – driven from the earth [. . .] The racism was unchallenged because few people dissented from it in 1943” (Koppes and Black 2000: 261). This style of racist imagery was carried forward in several other films and expressed with even greater violence in media such as the comics and posters of the period, which were virulently racist (Murray 2011). In the current period, however, the war in the Pacific has become the subject of an intensive cinematic recovery, now free of the disfiguring stereotypes of the past.

I am borrowing the concept of “generational memory” from recent critical work on German wartime memory that focuses on the reawakening of “a feeling for history” in contemporary German culture. As Johannes von Moltke writes:

The new forms of emotional address in films about German history index not only an ongoing transformation of German cinema after unification but also a profound generational shift. As the history of the Holocaust and the Third Reich recedes from collective memory into cultural memory and the witness generation dies out, the period’s historical valence changes – as do the politics of representation. (Moltke 2007: 20)

Perhaps the best known example of this narrative and historical work is the film *Downfall*, a film that centers on Hitler's last weeks in the bunker in Berlin. And here I will offer a short description of *Downfall* as a way of framing my treatment of *Letters from Iwo Jima*. In *Downfall*, the film's invitation to think and feel our way into the past, to engage in a feeling for history, unfolds as a kind of recovered memory. With its principal character – the young female secretary to Hitler during his last months in the bunker – cast in the role of an innocent witness to the past, the film appears to crystallize a new generational–genealogical discourse of the war years in Germany, one in which agency and guilt are centered on the first generation, while the younger generations are cast as sympathetic victims who nonetheless possess a unique degree of historical knowledge. Roundly condemned for its humanizing of Hitler, for its sympathetic treatment of a figure who had been cast out of the field of cultural representation, the film has also been celebrated as a breakthrough, precisely for allowing the emotional archaeology of the past to emerge. The long denied and heavily veiled subject of Germany's love for the Führer, the widespread German emotional investment in Hitler and in the Third Reich during the Nazi period, which were simply shut away from view, are crystallized in the film, held up for scrutiny, and acknowledged (perhaps absolved?), in what can be understood as the recovery of a barred emotional history, an emotional history that is now accessible to the present.

As Hitler's secretary, Traudl Humpf acts as a relay or a mirror for the contemporary generation, a witness who is without guilt, a character without responsibility for the acts of the Nazis and of the German military, but a figure who nonetheless has a deep connection to historical events. Her youth, her beauty, even her loyalty to Hitler come to be seen as positive traits. The privileged position of witness without responsibility emblemizes, for Sigrid Weigel, the redefinition of historical memory in Germany in the post-unification years, which is characterized by an emotional relation to the past appropriate for a new historical beginning, one unfettered by the long-standing demand that responsibility and guilt be set in the foreground of all remembrance (Weigel 2002).

Letters from Iwo Jima has catalyzed a similar generational recovery of the past in Japan, and has fostered an empathetic response in American audiences as well for whom the "otherness" of Japanese wartime practices had long prevented a sympathetic representation. The film creates a sense of empathy specifically through the emotional logics of cinematic form, producing a vivid sense of emotional arousal by centering on the character of Saigo, a young conscript whose handsome youthfulness immediately defines him as sympathetic figure, an innocent witness to actions that carry a pronounced historical taint (see Figure 17.1). Like *Downfall*, the film crosses over into contested terrain, giving emotional expression to actions that had been considered "off limits" for cinematic representation. Focusing on the act of suicide in war – so-called "honor suicide" – *Letters from Iwo Jima* provides a nuanced treatment of the social, psychological, and historical meanings that are condensed



Figure 17.1 Saigo as sympathetic innocent. *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006). Producer: Dreamworks SKG, Warner Bros. Pictures, Malpaso Productions. Director: Clint Eastwood

in the act of self-sacrifice. The three scenes of honor suicide, seen in the most positive light, map the act of self-sacrifice onto a new discourse of cultural memory, one that is accessible to later generations and is open to cross-cultural identification.

At the same time, however, the film's depiction of honor suicide, with its privileging of the face of the soldier, can be seen in terms of what Hermann Kappelhoff has called a "formula for pathos." The insistent focus on the face in the war film, he argues, especially the "shell-shocked face," is part of an organized discourse of affective signals designed to create mirror experiences of fear, anxiety, and loss (Kappelhoff 2011). Employing well-known audiovisual conventions, the war film, in Kappelhoff's view, is geared to producing emotions that can be readily mapped onto larger messages about nation and sacrifice. Framing the discourse of emotion within an elaborate apparatus of authenticity, the war film defines the face and the body of the soldier – the body at risk – as the locus of messages of national cohesion. Molded to the expressive gestures of the soldier, the sense of pathos and the meaning of national sacrifice may be naturalized, communicated to the spectator as feelings, and experienced as forms of affective identification – a way of creating a new culture of commemoration that serves political needs in the present (Kappelhoff 2011).

In *Letters from Iwo Jima* the practice of honor suicide is the core device through which Eastwood humanizes the characters and is the key to the film's complex tone. Extraordinarily intense, the three dramatized suicide scenes can be seen as exemplary studies in what Béla Balázs (1970) has called the micro-dramas of the human face and body in film. Ranging from an almost convulsive physical struggle – the agony of the self fighting against the self – to what seems like a serene sense of acceptance, the film uses suicide as an internal frame to bring issues of history, ideology, and cultural tradition into close, microscopic view. Focalizing these scenes through the perceptions of Saigo, the film renders the charged act of self-sacrifice through the eyes of a wide-eyed conscript whose only goal is to survive, filtering the grim events of war through the prism of a character whose main function is to serve as the film's "avatar of innocent feeling" (Moltke 2007: 26).

The film's reception in Japan suggests that its impact on cultural memory was pronounced, generating an emotional reawakening, as if a missing part of the national story had been rescued from oblivion. The concept of generational memory – the discovery of new objects of memory by each generation – is crystallized in the Japanese response to the film. Almost entirely unknown in Japan, the story of Iwo Jima had been eclipsed in Japanese war history by the firebombing of Tokyo and by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In contrast to the United States, where commemorations of the battle of Iwo Jima – and of the “good war” in general – enjoy extreme familiarity, the memory of Iwo Jima in Japan, and of World War II in the main, was cloaked in oblivion – a shutting down of memory that acknowledged neither the depredations of the imperial military nor the sacrifices of ordinary soldiers and citizens. The opening up of a past that had been buried and remained unknown – like the letters of the film's title – provoked an intensely emotional response in Japan, a process stimulated by the cast members who played the principal roles. Several of them, for example, spoke of the emotional arousal they felt when acting in the film and described their sense of being able to access the past through identification with the characters and their conviction that they were actually living the story of the soldiers in the process of making the film. In a striking example of somatic empathy, the actors, as Debra Ramsay points out, described their commitment to the film in terms that implied an imaginative equivalence with the soldiers stationed on Iwo Jima; one, Ken Watanabe, who played the lead role of General Kuribayashi, stated that “we felt as if we could give up our own lives to make this film” (Ramsay 2012).

In Ramsay's reading, Eastwood's pointed attempt to demystify the mythology of the soldier as hero, to deconsecrate the war myths that have developed around World War II in his paired films, *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*, appears to have been reinterpreted and repurposed by the cast of *Letters from Iwo Jima*. The film became a kind of touchstone to cultural memories that had been silenced for decades. The political implications of historical films as a medium of affect, a machinery for emotions, are here placed in relief, as the cast members identified with the Japanese “heroes” of Iwo Jima to an extent that they felt they had been “carried back in time.” As Ramsay writes, “[d]espite the lack of concrete historical evidence, the suggestion is that film has the ability to capture and record the essential spirit of a moment lost to time” (Ramsay 2012).

From another angle, however, the sense of emotional archaeology the film recovers, its rendering of what Paul Ricoeur calls the “inside” of historical events, can be seen in a very different way: rather than a reliving of the past – “carried back in time” – the film's imaginative reenactment can be seen as a rethinking. As Ricoeur writes, “re-enacting does not consist in reliving but in rethinking, and rethinking already contains the critical moment that forces us to take the detour by way of the historical imagination” (Ricoeur 1984: 8). Understood as an implicit rejection of an older generation's sense of shame or denial, the response of the

cast of *Letters from Iwo Jima* might be seen as a rethinking that is both critical and imaginative, distanced and empathetic. Here, it seems to me, we find the crux of the concept of generational memory. In reenacting the past in a way that mimics historical participation, *Letters from Iwo Jima* – and perhaps the war film in general – provides a particularly intense form of engagement which also has, I argue, a critical dimension. What Weigel (2002: 5), in a negative evaluation, calls a “paradoxical construction of knowledge without guilt” in the context of the contemporary German recovery of the wartime past is complexly articulated here in a way that I feel conveys the potential for a new perspective on historical events. Both the critical rethinking that Ricoeur foregrounds and the pathos of identification with the past are foregrounded in the film’s reenactment of three sequences of honor suicide – scenes that isolate the face and body of the soldier in moments of concentrated somatic imagery.

The Cinema of Self-Sacrifice

Recent scholarship on the Japanese practice of self-sacrifice in World War II highlights the complex emotions concentrated in the act of honor suicide. As one commentator writes: “The Japanese military tradition had a distinctive, almost unique element. Where German soldiers were told to *kill*, Japanese soldiers were told to *die*” (Ohnuki-Tierney 2006: 4). This tradition, however, was not blindly followed or fanatically observed: in many cases, soldiers were opposed to the practice but seemed to reproduce it in their actions. As Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney writes about kamikaze pilots, “At some point these young men became patriotic, but what was their *patria*? Was it their homeland, Japan? [. . .] Was it the emperor for whom they sacrificed their lives? Or was it their family, lovers, friends? [. . .] some defied outright the emperor-centered ideology. Others tried to accept it without success” (Ohnuki-Tierney 2004: 16).

Ohnuki-Tierney’s research on kamikaze, based on close study of their extensive letter and diary writing, foregrounds the question of generation – the kamikaze were young students, drawn from elite universities. Far from confirming the stereotypes of the past, her study reveals the emotional tension, the explicit conflict between patriotic codes and the humanistic love of “family, lovers, and friends” that was subsumed in the act of self-sacrifice. The nuanced, self-aware reflections of the kamikaze pilots in their diaries and letters present a layered picture of a past that has largely been misread.

The three suicide scenes in *Letters from Iwo Jima* are portrayed along a scale of motivations similar to what Ohnuki-Tierney found among kamikaze pilots, ranging from a kind of abject self-violence to a sympathetic form of self-authorship. In two of the three sequences depicted here the camera emphasizes Saigo as a witness, focalizing the event through the scrim of his emotions, shifting

the affective signals to a character who serves as a mirror for the spectator's own emotion.

The ritual style of the first suicide scene conveys the deep cultural pathology that permeated the Japanese military, a pathology that was crystallized in its doctrine of emperor worship. The officer in charge in this scene, a man poorly equipped to lead, decides to disobey Kuribayashi's orders to retreat and his explicit orders for his men not to sacrifice themselves, and orders them to "die with honor." "Men, we are honorable soldiers of the emperor. Don't ever forget that. To die with honor, this is our fate, to find our place at Yasukuni Shrine." Each soldier draws a grenade, struggles to fight an overwhelming sense of sorrow and fear, and then blows himself up. The cave, shown previously in the monochrome colors of pewter and charcoal, suddenly erupts into a sickening orange-red as the bodies of the soldiers burst open. The gestures, posture, and movements of the characters, the micro-dramas played out on their faces in expressive close-ups, reveal their competing emotions with extraordinary power. As the camera observes each man's internal agony, the sense of sympathy that the collective suicides elicit is conjoined with an equally strong sense of revulsion, of suicide as transgression, as moral outrage, as senseless loss.

The primal violence of honor suicide is conveyed as much through the facial expression of the characters as through the act itself. Weeping, torn by ambivalence, the soldiers physically struggle to pull the pins on the grenades, to activate the explosive, and then to hold the grenades to their stomachs (see Figure 17.2). The scene creates the powerful impression that there is an external being moving the limbs of the characters, controlling their arms and hands, forcing them to activate the grenades, overpowering their will to survive. The desperate struggle that the soldiers wage as they attempt to resist the invisible "double" who directs



Figure 17.2 The primal violence of honor suicide. *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006). Producer: Dreamworks SKG, Warner Bros. Pictures, Malpaso Productions. Director: Clint Eastwood

their limbs and insists on their self-destruction is palpable and explicit: each character seems to wage combat, a battle of wills, against an opponent who forces their arms and moves them according to his own desires.

Perhaps the most moving of the suicides is that of Saigo's friend. As the officer intones the words of sacrifice – "To die with honor. This is our fate. To find our place at Yasukuni Shrine" – the camera cuts to a close-up of the man holding family photographs, clutching them as if they were a talisman. As the scene unfolds, the camera details his emotional agony, moving slowly forward, isolating him in close-up. His body seemingly unable to complete the act, he is barely able to pull the pin, activate the trigger, and force the grenade against his body. Finally he slumps against the cave wall, in a visible gesture of surrender, as the grenade explodes against his chest. The camera pans along a wisp of smoke to a close-up of his bloodied hand holding the spattered photographs of his wife and children.

The physical contiguity between family photographs and grenade – one hand holds a symbol of life, the other an instrument of death – conveys a complex, seemingly paradoxical message that resonates throughout the film. Eastwood documents in chilling detail the ritual behavior and rhetoric that frames the act of self-sacrifice – the trebled chants of "*Banzai!*," the evocation of the cherry blossoms of the Yasukuni shrine, the verbal salute to the emperor – offering an anatomy of the way traditional, familial, and ancestral symbols are converted into emblems of heroic sacrifice for nation. Cutting against the usual treatment of mass suicide as collective dementia or robotic behavior, however, Eastwood focuses on the resistance of the body itself; we "read" the bodies of the soldiers as sites of protest – a message reinforced by the visual and acoustic design of the scene. The eerie single note sounded on the piano, the echo effect of the cave interior as the voice of the officer intones his scripted words, the slowly moving camera and the chiaroscuro that paints the frightened faces of the characters – the cave scene forces the spectator to bear witness to a history that extends beyond the film. The historical past and present seem to communicate here, as we recognize the history of our present moment as it flashes up, in a striking recall of the long and continuing history of suicide for a set of beliefs.

Despite the sense of "otherness" in the gestures of self-sacrifice, Saigo's open face, returned to again and again in this sequence, provides an affective center and focal point for mimetic identification, as the visual and acoustic organization of the scene is anchored through repeated reaction shots to his face. The shot patterning emphasizes his youth, his innocence, and a kind of reflective astonishment. Saigo is clearly coded by lighting, camera angle, and close-up as the focal prism through which we read the scene, establishing a critical counterpoint to the body imagery of self-sacrifice. Distant from the codes of honorable death and far removed from the deformations of ideology and emperor worship that gave Japanese wartime culture such an unrecognizable "otherness," Saigo provides a crucial figure of sympathetic identification, his face and body offering a mirror reflection of the spectator's own emotions.

In a recent essay on the American war film, Kappelhoff defines one of the principal tropes of the genre as the “shell-shocked face,” calling it a “fundamental idea of the imagination of war” (Kappelhoff 2011). A key part of the iconography of war photography and cinema, the face of the soldier suddenly confronted by imminent annihilation – the frozen moment of transition between life and death – crystallizes the role that the body and the face of the soldier play in the war film. Condensed in the image of the soldier’s “blinding horror” are two competing messages concerning sacrifice in war: like a hologram viewed from two different angles, the soldier appears both as victim, a youth about to be subjected to a meaningless death, and as a figure of national sacrifice, an emblem of national manhood whose death serves a meaningful purpose. As Kappelhoff writes, the poetics of the American war film depend on the orchestration of these two emotions, in which loss, the sacrifice of the nation’s youth, can be folded into a sense of “devotional remembrance.” The image of the soldier’s face becomes here an evocative icon, a “symbolically laden image of sacrifice” (Kappelhoff 2011). Regardless of whether films take a critical or a confirming stance, whether they seek to accuse or to renew the bond with the nation at war, the genre employs the specific device of the close-up of the soldier to produce the affective connective tissue that ties the spectator to a particular aesthetic version of history.

Letters from Iwo Jima presents a striking variant of this central motif of war representation, with Saigo serving as an evocative figure whose youth, innocence, and physical style can be mapped onto larger structures of generational memory and collective identification. Sprayed with blood during the collective suicide scene, his face offers a carnal, visceral reminder of the tactile connection between the soldier who survives and the soldier who sacrifices, between the individual and the multitude, between the face as a medium of identification and the face as a conduit to a larger collective history. The body and face of the soldier can be seen here as a figural text on which the bad history of the past is written – and then erased – as each of the suicide scenes also functions as a drama of renewal (see Figure 17.3). Selected three times for death, Saigo is spared three times – a sacrificial figure who escapes sacrifice, a character whose youth and innocence symbolize the promise of generations to come. Recalling and reinforcing the iconography of youth in the war film, the character provides an affective connection to a postwar generation removed from the codes of honor that dominated wartime Japan.

Suicide as Symbolic Expression

The second suicide, that of a cavalry officer, Colonel “Baron” Nishi, is filmed in a style that directly contrasts with the gruesome collective suicide described above. Saigo is present at the beginning of the scene, but his role as affective center is somewhat reduced, distributed among several different characters, including the sympathetic Nishi and an American captive named Sam. The scene begins when



Figure 17.3 The face of the soldier. *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006). Producer: Dreamworks SKG, Warner Bros. Pictures, Malpaso Productions. Director: Clint Eastwood

Nishi tries to save the life of the wounded American soldier, treating his wounds, drawing him into conversation, essentially making him “visible” to the Japanese soldiers under his command. Nishi’s compassionate act reveals the humanity of one side to the other. In the course of this face-to-face encounter, the soldiers, on both sides, hear what the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas describes as the “call of the Other” (Gjelsvik 2008).¹

Sam dies the next morning, and Nishi reads aloud the letter he had been holding in his hand. The letter from Sam’s mother contains the advice “do what is right because it is right.” Soon after, Nishi’s headquarters are attacked. He is severely wounded, his eyes burned by explosives. Blinded, he tells his medic to “go help the others. I’m useless now.” He removes a silk scarf from his neck and ties it around his eyes.

His suicide takes place in private. In his farewell address, Nishi tells his soldiers to “[d]o what is right, because it is right,” quoting Sam’s mother. Missing from the speech is any reference to the emperor, to honor, or to duty. As the soldiers file outside, the camera cuts back to the interior of the cave and we see Nishi’s bare foot moving slowly up the stock of the rifle to locate the trigger. The camera continues tracking upward, as he grasps the charm on his necklace and then removes the scarf. Moving vertically, in a restrained, continuous motion, the camera looks into his damaged eyes and continues tracking upward to the blue mouth of the cave.

Here the film’s generational address, its construction of a past for the memory of the present, is placed in relief. Foregrounding the body and the face of the character in a deliberate, almost ritualized performance, the film invites the spectators to “feel” their way into the past, both haptically, in the scene’s pointed use of tactile images – the bare foot on the stock of the rifle, the soft scarf, the palpable

impression that the light seems to make as it illuminates Nishi's blinded eyes – and, more importantly, at the level of imaginative address. Invoking the bad history of the imperial past – suicide with a rifle was one of the first lessons Japanese soldiers learned during training – the sequence nevertheless cues and solicits a deep emotional connection to the character, almost as if the “style” of the past, the sense of gravity and consequence that flows from the actions of the featured character could somehow be detached from its historical referent and converted to the expression of a different message.²

The sequence highlights the way an emotional engagement with the past, the sense of somatic empathy that allows the spectator access to the inside of historical events, also conveys a political charge that may or may not be immediately visible. The emotional current that connects Nishi to the spectator, for example, appears to depend on the isolation of that character, his detachment from any collective responsibility, his removal, in a sense, from history. Although the film bases the character of Nishi on a historical figure and draws the method of self-sacrifice from the historical record, Nishi here nonetheless floats free of the collective historical past. What Jameson describes as the dilemma of war representation – the incapacity of narrative form to represent both the collective experience of war and the individual, existential perception of it – comes into frame here in another way (Jameson 2009). Mediating between East and West, old and young, traditional and modern, Nishi becomes a figure of affective engagement precisely through the elevation of individual death extracted from collective identity, where the politics of the past has been stripped clean and the act unfolds as a deterritorialized event. The intensity of emotion that had been attached to nation, to blood nationalism, is here converted into the expression of another message. In the figure of Nishi, generational memory appears to be organized around a constellation of masculinity, victimhood, and sacrifice, with the past serving as a kind of imaginative mirror of the present, one that has been largely emptied of nationalistic content.³

If we consider the scene from another angle, however, we might understand Nishi as a character who, as in Jacques Rancière's description of the western hero, “knows the gestures and the codes, but can no longer share the dreams and the illusions” (2006: 87). The poignancy of Nishi's self-sacrifice, the deep sadness it conveys, communicates and expresses another kind of emotional history; his gestures, like the gestures of the western hero, express the history of a nation – of a national ideology – in ruins (see Figure 17.4). Rancière writes about the western hero as a figure who traverses a landscape of ruins, a landscape not vacant and gleaming with promise but cross-hatched by tragedy, by the ruins of nations – Mexican, Indian, and settler. Here, in the desert landscape of Iwo Jima, Nishi confronts and embodies a similar prospect: a nation whose fatality is now its most poignant and meaningful form of symbolic expression.



Figure 17.4 Nishi, who “knows the gestures and the codes, but can no longer share in the dreams and illusions.” *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006). Producer: Dreamworks SKG, Warner Bros. Pictures, Malpaso Productions. Director: Clint Eastwood

Iconographies of East and West

The third suicide scene in *Letters from Iwo Jima*, the self-sacrifice of the commanding officer, General Kuribayashi, also conveys a complex double message. Kuribayashi has been portrayed as an exceptionally sympathetic figure, a general officer who leads his men through humane example. He is also portrayed in flashbacks that depict his stint as a military attaché in the United States. In one flashback, the young, dashing Kuribayashi is seen in the company of several American officers and their wives, who honor him with the gift of a Colt 45 pistol. Historically accurate in its general outline, the portrayal of Kuribayashi speaks to a seasoned, intellectual leader familiar with American culture, whose military philosophy is pragmatic rather than driven by ideology.

In his cave headquarters, as the siege of the island is coming to an end, Kuribayashi tells Saigo: “I promised to fight to the death for my family, but the thought of my family makes it difficult to keep that promise.” Just after he says these words, a radio broadcast comes over the air – a broadcast featuring the children of Nagano, Kuribayashi’s home town, singing a song of thanks to him and his soldiers. Lyrics such as “imperial country, imperial land” and “pride, honor at any price” stand out as motifs, along with the refrain “Iwo Jima.” Despite these explicitly propagandistic words, the beauty of the children’s voices and the lilting melody carry a powerful emotional charge. The film cuts from Kuribayashi to Saigo and to Fujita, adjutant to Kuribayashi, as each is almost overcome by emotion.

Kuribayashi immediately sets about ordering a general attack. He asks Saigo to do him the favor of staying behind, to burn his military chest and all his documents. Kuribayashi addresses his soldiers for the last time, telling them “to be proud to die for your country. I will always be in front of you.” He then draws his sword out of its scabbard and leads the men in a night-time attack on American lines.⁴ Cross-cut with the final attack are scenes of Saigo burning Kuribayashi’s military

documents and burying the pouch containing the thousands of letters written by the soldiers and never delivered to the Japanese homeland.

Leading the final, all-out attack against the American forces, Kuribayashi is severely wounded, and is pulled away from the battle by his lieutenant, Fujita. As night gives way to day, Fujita drags him down a dark volcanic hill, with white dust pluming up behind. The desert landscape, featureless except for the dark sand and empty sky, has an abstract, Zen-like quality, unmarked by craters, trenches, or corpses, in sharp contrast to the panorama of ruins seen in the immediately preceding shots. Kuribayashi orders his lieutenant to stop, saying: “No more, Fujita. No more”, and commands Fujita to use the general’s samurai sword to behead him in ritual Japanese fashion.

Just before he administers the blow, Fujita is shot from behind by a lone GI up on the ridge. Blood spatters Kuribayashi’s face. A few moments later Saigo, who had been ordered to stay behind to bury the general’s letters and documents, reappears shovel in hand. Kuribayashi asks Saigo for one final favor: to bury him where he cannot be found. Looking out to sea, he then asks if this is still Japanese soil. Saigo assures him it is. A flashback of a young Kuribayashi driving through an American desert fades into the scene, with the general in subjective voice-over telling his son how happy he is to be coming home, but how sad to be leaving his American friends behind (see Figure 17.5). Cutting away from the memory sequence back to the present, Kuribayashi takes his antique Colt .45 from his holster, cocks it quickly, and shoots himself in the chest.

Kuribayashi’s suicide is framed in a way that is abstract and almost bloodless.⁵ Against the traditional conventions of *seppuku* (disembowelment), with its dramatic staging and expressive, ritual visibility, Kuribayashi simply “disappears” from the film, erased from the camera’s view as it focuses mainly on Saigo’s face. With none of the ritual suffering, self-abnegation, or dismemberment of the traditional samurai suicide, Kuribayashi’s death is nevertheless articulated within a



Figure 17.5 The young Kuribayashi, driving through the American desert. *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006). Producer: Dreamworks SKG, Warner Bros. Pictures, Malpasio Productions. Director: Clint Eastwood

recognizable Japanese idiom. The visual and acoustic design of the scene – with its abstract, poetic landscapes of black sand and empty sky, sharply angled close-ups, and ground-level camera placements – recalls the pictorial style of Japanese art cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, a modernist style most often associated with Kurosawa, Ozu, and Teshigahara. Several removes from the sound and fury of the war film, the scene recalls the modernist abstraction and the haunted emptiness of films such as *Ikiru*, *High and Low*, and *Woman in the Dunes*.⁶ And, like the male protagonist of *Woman in the Dunes*, who is first trapped and then willingly absorbed into the sand pit, Kuribayashi disappears into the black sand of Iwo Jima, becoming part of the island itself (see Figure 17.6).

The film also overlays another set of motifs, however – including memory scenes of Kuribayashi driving through the American desert with the commemorative Colt .45 (which he received as a gift) on the car seat beside him, and the acoustic memory motif of a single trumpet playing notes over the dead body of the general. What I would like to emphasize here is the layered construction of memory images, which takes on an explicitly cross-cultural and cross-generational character. The film references both American and Japanese frames of cultural memory in a kind of collage, in which the samurai sword and the Colt .45, the landscapes of island and western desert, the visual design and the musical score become equally resonant as signifiers of national emotion.

The generational narrative of memory, history, and emotion that emerges here thus consists of a combination of war film motifs, Japanese pictorial idioms, and the iconography of youth, emphasized in the foregrounding of Saigo. As several writers have argued, generations define themselves through shared emotional flashpoints that are often rendered as audiovisual images that provide “generational containers of feeling” (Knoch 2005: 300–301). *Letters from Iwo Jima*, however, marks something new in the long history of the war film – surely one of the dominant forms for the shaping of generational feeling – namely a text that articulates empathy for both



Figure 17.6 Kuribayashi disappears into the black sand and empty sky of Iwo Jima. *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006). Producer: Dreamworks SKG, Warner Bros. Pictures, Malpaso Productions. Director: Clint Eastwood

sides of the conflict. Informed by its powerful sense of recovering a historical past that had been buried and forgotten, the film uses the emotional keys of memory to explore a new way of imagining one of the bloodiest and most implacable of conflicts, a rethinking distinguished by a supple and inventive use of generational messages that transcend strictly national affiliations.

Notes

- 1 Gjelsvik makes an illuminating reference to the work of Emmanuel Levinas in the context of Eastwood's two war films, a connection I draw on here in reading the scene of Nishi's encounter with the American soldier, Sam, and Nishi's subsequent suicide.
- 2 "Each new conscript was trained to use his toe to pull the trigger while pointing the gun precisely at a certain point under his chin so that the bullet would kill him instantly. He was supposed to use this technique if he was captured in a cave or in a trench surrounded by the enemy [...] one must never be captured by the enemy" (Ohnuki-Tierney 2006: 5).
- 3 Jane Sillars made this point in response to an early presentation of this chapter, and subsequently she wrote to me with further thoughts. Her insights have been very helpful for me in thinking through this scene.
- 4 Here Kuribayashi broke significantly with convention. One writer suggests that he held off committing his troops to a final *banzai* charge, so as not to dignify the senseless loss of life. Instead, the final all-out attack on Iwo Jima was a well-organized, stealthy operation that caused panic on the American side over three hours of intense fighting. Kuribayashi's attack "was not a *banzai* charge, but an excellent plan aiming to cause maximum confusion and destruction" (Kakehashi 2007: 195). Also, Kuribayashi was in the lead: "There is no other example in the history of the Japanese army where a division commander led the charge himself. This all-out attack is highly unusual." Customarily, the commanding officer would send his men on a *banzai* charge and commit *hari-kari* behind the lines. See Kakehashi (2007: 48, 157–158) and Wheeler (1994: 30–43).
- 5 According to Richard Wheeler, the historical Kuribayashi did commit suicide in the traditional *hara-kiri* fashion, while Nishi, in the view of his widow, probably committed suicide with a pistol while facing out to sea. On the death of Kuribayashi, Wheeler writes: "He went to the mouth of the cave and faced north toward the Imperial Palace. Kneeling down, he bowed three times, then plunged a knife into his abdomen. Colonel Kaneji Nakane was standing over him with a sword and brought it down hard on the back of his neck" (Wheeler 1994: 233). Wheeler describes the suicide of Baron Nishi, on the other hand, in ways that are closely similar to the film's treatment of Kuribayashi's self-extinction: "She [Nishi's widow] [...] concluded that he had killed himself with his pistol while facing the sea. He had once told her that *hari-kari* with a knife was slow and uncertain, and that the best way to kill oneself was by means of a bullet in the ear. Since the body was never found amid Iwo's rubble, the baroness chose to believe it had been claimed by the clean surf" (225).
- 6 For an interesting analysis of the themes of disappearance and invisibility in postwar Japanese films, see Lippit (2005).

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