British Journal for Military History

Volume 10, Issue 3, November 2024

What the Sea Remembers; What the Films of Midway Forget

Debra Ramsay

ISSN: 2057-0422

Date of Publication: 8 November 2024

Citation: Debra Ramsay, 'What the Sea Remembers; What the Films of Midway Forget', *British Journal for Military History*, 10.3 (2024), pp. 134-153.

www.bjmh.org.uk

The BJMH is produced with the support of Goldsmiths UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

What the Sea Remembers; What the Films of Midway Forget

DEBRA RAMSAY*
University of Exeter, UK
Email: d.ramsay@exeter.ac.uk

ABSTRACT
This article investigates how three films about the 1942 Battle of Midway (mis)represent the environmental impact of industrial warfare. It exposes a long history in the American war film genre of practices that obscure the relationship between warfare and the environments in which it is waged and argues that by doing so, the films themselves enact a form of structural violence upon these spaces and their inhabitants, other-than-huma). As conflict and climate change converge, it calls for a more critical interrogation of the representational strategies of past conflicts, so that we might recognise and challenge those of current and future wars.

Introduction

Roland Emmerich's 2019 film, *Midway*, ends with a dedication to both the Japanese and American soldiers who fought at Midway and the line: 'The sea remembers its own.' The dedication provoked controversy, with some objecting to the inclusion of the Japanese.[1] There is, however, another issue at stake here. The dedication is no doubt intended as a poignant evocation of a perceived special relationship between the sea and those who fight and die in this environment, but it is an anthropomorphism that obscures the reality of the relationship between humans and the spaces in which they wage war. For the Pacific Ocean and the species, of any kind other than human, who inhabit it and the islands scattered across it, the war is not a matter of memory, but an aggregation of responses and reactions to the impacts of human violence that continues to this day. The environmental impact and consequences of industrial warfare have only recently become a topic of focussed interest in disciplines from

*Dr Ramsay is Senior Lecturer in Film and Media at the University of Exeter.
DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.bjmh.v10i3.1833
[1]See, for example, Jon Simkins, 'Blockbuster "Midway" Sinks Faster than Japanese Carriers at ... Midway.' *Military Times,* 9 November 2019, https://www.militarytimes.com/off-duty/military-culture/2019/11/09/everything-about-blockbuster-midway-sinks-faster-than-japanese-carriers-at-midway/. Accessed 5 August 2024.

ecology through to economics, law and history, but there is an even greater dearth of investigations into how films and other forms of media have (mis)represented the complex and sometimes unpredictable impact of industrial warfare on the world.[2] Thus, while the Second World War in American cinema has received a great deal of academic attention as genre, history and memory, there are few, if any, investigations into how, or even if, warmaking as environmental disaster has been communicated through the American war film.[3] This is a critical lacuna, because as Jason Moore points out, 'how we tell stories of our past, and how we respond to the challenges of the present, are intimately connected.'[4] While care should be taken about invoking a universal 'we' when it comes to narratives of war, American films are of particular importance because of their disproportionate global reach, and their concomitant potential to inflect the memory and the understanding of conflict.

This article tracks the representation of the Battle of Midway (June 1942) through three American films – John Ford's 1942 *The Battle of Midway*, Jack Smight's 1976 *Midway,* and Roland Emmerich's 2019 *Midway*. According to Christopher Tilley and Kate Cameron-Daum, representations of landscapes from maps to textual descriptions have come to stand in for these spaces themselves, to the extent that they have 'stripped [landscape] of its materiality.'[5] Such representations are 'selective

[2]See Arther H. Westing, *Arthur H. Westing: Pioneer on the Environmental Impact of War,* SpringerBriefs on Pioneers in Science and Practice, (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2013). Historians considering the impact of the two World Wars include Richard P. Tucker, Tait Keller, J. R. McNeill, and Martin Schmid, eds., *Environmental Histories of the First World War,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2018) and Simo Laakkonen, Richard Tucker, and Timo Vuorisalo, eds., *The Long Shadows: A Global Environmental History of the Second World War,* (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 2017). For perspectives on more recent conflicts, see Jay E. Austin, and Carl E. Bruch, eds., *The Environmental Consequences of War: Legal, Economic, and Scientific Perspectives,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[3]See, for example, Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1986); John Whiteclay Chambers and David Culbert, eds., *World War II, Film and History,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); and the author's own work, Debra Ramsay, *American Media and the Memory of World War II,* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

[4]Jason Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital,* (London: Verso, 2015), p. 11.

[5]Christopher Tilley and Kate Cameron-Daum, 'The Anthropology of Landscape: Materiality, Embodiment, Contestation and Emotion,' in *Anthropology of Landscape: The Extraordinary in the Ordinary*, eds. Christopher Tilley and Kate Cameron-Daum, (London: UCL Press, 2017), p. 4.

and partial, and often highly ideological, ways of seeing and knowing.'[6] This article extends Tilley and Cameron-Daum's argument to the representation of landscapes in conflict in film, and investigates how the spaces of the Pacific, both land and sea, are configured in all three films. By analysing strategies of representation, including the use of maps, this article will reveal how the films delineate the nature and extent of the impact of war, and define who its casualties are. But it also argues for an understanding of these films that moves beyond the ideological to a recognition that they inflict another form of violence, over and above the events of the war, on these spaces and the life that inhabits them. It argues that by stripping Midway and its living beings of materiality and identity, both past and present, the films enact what Johan Galtung calls 'structural violence' – a form of violence generated via unequal structures of power that results in 'unequal life chances' for its subjects. [7]

The battle of Midway, 4-7 June 1942, is widely acknowledged as a pivotal moment in the Second World War in the Pacific in which the Japanese lost their naval superiority, and the Americans gained their first real victory in that arena.[8] Midway is one of the largest and oldest coral atolls in the world. Consisting of an emergent and a submerged reef, as well as three islands, Sand, Eastern and Spit, Midway is home to abundant aquatic and avian life, particularly species of albatross. If any creature other than aquatic can be considered as the sea's 'own', it is the albatross, which spends most of its life on the ocean, and only returns to land to breed. In fact, birdlife was so abundant on the atoll that the Hawai'ians call Midway 'Pihemanu', meaning the loud din of birds.[9] After Pearl Harbour, Japanese strategy included a plan to occupy Midway and use it as an air base for an invasion of Hawai'i.[10] For the U.S., Midway had been identified as early as 1938 as 'second only to Pearl Harbor' in strategic importance, and work on an air base started in 1940.[11] For both the Japanese and the Allies, the damage to the inhabitants, human and otherwise. and to the ecosystems of the Pacific was regarded

[6]Tilley and Cameron-Daum, 'Anthropology', p. 4.
[7]Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research,' *Journal of Peace Research,* Vol. 6, no.3 (September, 1969), p. 171. https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336900600301.
[8] Jonathan Parshall, Anthony Tully and John B. Lundstrom, *Shattered Sword: The Untold Story of the Battle of Midway,* (Lincoln: Potomac Books, Inc. 2005), p. xx.
[9]Department of the Interior Office of Environmental Policy and Compliance, 'Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge (NWR),' ArcGIS StoryMaps, 19 October 2022, https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/2ed172eda34f4feb87fa9d1f99c53f43. Accessed 25 April 2023.
[10]Gordon W. Prange, *Miracle at Midway*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982), p. 16.
[11]Joshua Fogle, 'Advanced Base Defense Doctrine, War Plan Orange, and Preparation at Midway: Were the Marines Ready?' *Open Military Studies,* Vol.2, no.1 (January 2022): pp. 66–83. https://doi.org/10.1515/openms-2022-0128.

as unfortunate but unavoidable, if it was considered at all.[12] Since the conflict, Midway has featured prominently in histories of naval battles of the Second World War.[13] But like other forms of history, military history frequently 'formulates experience outside of nature and tends to reduce place to only a stage upon which the human drama is enacted.'[14] The scale of the impact of war on the Pacific and its environs has consequently taken time to register, and in many instances is only recently coming to light.[15]

With its sparse history of human settlement, Midway was considered an 'empty' space of no real cultural or historical significance, which could be occupied and used with impunity. Midway, as both geographic location and battle, thus offers insight into how spaces like these might be reconstructed through practices of recording and representation as utilitarian arenas significant only because of human presence and activities. What happened and is still happening to Midway is a synecdoche of a much larger issue in modern warfare. Jason Moore points out that 'everything humans do, in our everyday lives, and in the major political, economic, and cultural events of our times, is bound up with the earth.'[16] What humans 'do' during conflict is bound up with the environmental ecologies in which war is waged. These environments are never simply backgrounds to events in war but are always critical actors in how combat unfolds. Conflict in turn impacts environments in complex ways, ranging from the 'direct and indirect, immediate and long term, enduring and ephemeral, harmful and beneficial, and local and regional.'[17] While it might be understandable that the focus of most representations of warfare falls on human experiences and suffering, in the process, the effects of conflict on the 'natural world', which is often conceptualised as separate from, and less important than human society, has been obscured, or completely erased.[18] The result is part of what Fritjof Capra identified as a 'crisis of

[12]Judith Bennett, *Natives and Exotics: World War II and Environment in the Southern Pacific*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), p. 198.

[13]According to Parshall et al, 'more books have been written about Midway than any other single naval battle of the Second World War.' Parshall, Tully and Lundstrom, *Shattered Sword*, p. xviii.

[14]Paul Shepard, *Nature and Madness,* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1982), p. 47

[15]While this is true of much of the environmental damage of the Second World War in general, for a specific account of its impact on the Pacific, see Bennett, *Natives and Exotics.*

[16]Moore, *Capitalism,* p. 19.

[17]Richard P. Tucker and Edmund Russell, eds., *Natural Enemy, Natural Ally: Toward an Environmental History of War,* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2004), p. 4.

[18]For examples of interrogations of, and challenges to, the Society/Nature binary, see João Aldeia and Fátima Alves, 'Against the Environment. Problems in Society/Nature Relations,' *Frontiers in Sociology,* Vol.4 (2019).

perception', in which societies and institutions 'subscribe to the concepts of an outdated worldview' that disregards the fundamentally interconnected realities of life on earth.[19]

This article tackles that 'crisis of perception' in the American war film and reveals a long history of fostering an outmoded and flawed perceptual binary between human activity in war, and the natural environment.[20] This article argues that both the immediate and long-term effects of the war on Midway and the Pacific are erased as the same story is told and retold in these films across almost 80 years, in a process that begins with the transformation of Midway to nationalised, domestic territory in Ford's film, and in the increasing emphasis on spectacle and the experience of the soldier across all three. Finally, by placing this story in contrast with the real-world consequences for the islands and the non-human life of Midway, this article promotes a new perspective on war films, highlighting not what they ask us to remember, but what they have caused us to forget – that industrial warfare is never waged without profound consequences for the natural, non-human world, which is itself a casualty of war.

Midway as America's Front Yard

When the U.S. joined the Second World War in December 1941, Hollywood director John Ford was already a Navy Reservist, and he began active duty by heading up a special Naval photographic unit.[21] Ford was sent to Midway at the request of Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet.[22] When the battle broke out, Ford was in position on a power station, and together with cameraman Jack Mackenzie Jr., filmed the attack on the island on 16mm cameras. Both were injured by shrapnel but continued filming. The resulting film, which Ford took pains to ensure did not fall into the hands of Navy censors, was widely circulated in American cinemas. It is, as the author has noted elsewhere, a film that domesticates the chaos and brutality of a war that Americans were still attempting to assimilate, by

https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fsoc.2019.00029. Accessed 5 August 2024; and Moore, *Capitalism,* pp. 10-12.

[19]Fritjof Capra, *The Web of Life : A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems* (New York : Anchor Books, 1996) http://archive.org/details/weboflifenewscie00capr, Accessed 5 August 2024, p. 4.

[20]Capra, *The Web of Life*, p. 4.

[21]Joseph McBride, *Searching for John Ford,* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), pp. 336-337.

[22]Naval History and Heritage Command, 'John Ford Remembers Filming Battle of Midway,' 9 February 2001 https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/oral-histories/wwii/battle-of-midway/john-ford-remembers-filming-battle-of-midway.html. Accessed 9 May 2023.

transforming it into narrative and aesthetic forms familiar from Ford's oeuvre and from Hollywood film in general.[23] It constructs a reassuring narrative of the battle, the first real victory for the American forces in the Pacific, with familiar voiceovers from well-known actors such as Henry Fonda and Jane Darwell, overlaid by a score featuring popular hymns and patriotic American anthems. *The Battle of Midway* was a success, winning Best Documentary at the 1943 Academy Awards. Joseph McBride, one of Ford's biographers, describes the film as 'an extraordinarily vivid and eloquent meditation on war, one of the rare pieces of propaganda that is also a timeless work of art.'[24] It is thus considered an important film in Ford's career, and a significant example of poetic war documentary.

The film focuses on those dimensions of the experience of warfare that seemed most important to Ford – the actions and responses of the men on the island with him. It has been described as 'quintessentially Fordian', and it simultaneously identifies and circumscribes aspects of American (specifically masculine) identity in its representation of the tanned, resolute young men holding their ground against the Japanese.[25] But what is generally overlooked in the discussions of Ford's talent for illuminating the everyday 'Americanness' of the soldiers, is that *The Battle of Midway* also appropriates and circumscribes the spaces in which they fight. After an intertitle informing the audience that the film is an 'actual photographic record' of the 'greatest naval victory of the world to date', the documentary opens with a map showing Midway's location. Maps feature significantly in all three films. As explained in the introduction, maps, like other representations of landscape, involve a reduction of space that serves ideological purposes. The map that opens Ford's documentary reconstructs the Pacific arena for its American audience in the simplest detail, see Figure 1. Midway is positioned in the centre, next to the American flag, emphasising its status as American territory and as a stepping-stone on the route to Tokyo, which is also on the map. The only other named places are Pearl Harbour, Hawai'i, San Francisco, Seattle, Dutch Harbor, Alaska and Wake Island, a location which, along with Pearl Harbour, would have been familiar to most of the audience because of the defeat of American forces there on the 23 December 1941.

[23]Ramsay, *American Media*, p. 69.
[24]McBride, *Searching for John Ford*, p. 364.
[25]Richard Franklin, 'John Ford,' *Senses of Cinema*, Great Directors, 4 April 2010. https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2002/great-directors/ford/. Accessed 4 July 2023.

Figure 1: *Battle of Midway*, 1942, screenshot.

'A map,' Alfred Korzybski famously noted, '*is not* the territory.'[26] While Korzybski's statement is useful in identifying mapping as a cultural practice of mediated representation, it implies that 'territory' has a stable existence independent of the map. Gearóid Tuathail, however, argues that territory 'should never be conceptualised in isolation for it is part of a complex of state power, geography and identity. Put somewhat differently, territory is a regime of practices triangulated between institutionalisations of power, materialisations of place and idealisations of 'the people'.[27] The map in this film reconstructs Midway and the Pacific as a territory defined by dynamics of power, notions of place and of idealised national identity. Most Americans would not have heard of Midway, so the map is the first step the film takes

[26]Alfred Korzybski, 'A Non-Aristotelian System and Its Necessity for Rigour in Mathematics and Physics,' in *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics,* Alfred Korzybski, 5th ed., (Lakeville, CT: International Non-Aristotelian Library Publishing Company, 1994), p. 750.

[27]Gearóid Ó Tuathail, 'Borderless Worlds? Problematising Discourses of Deterritorialisation,' *Geopolitics,* Vol. 4, no. 2 (September 1999), p.140. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650049908407644.

to identify the atoll as American territory. The map downplays the strategic difficulties of reaching the Japanese mainland by reducing the scale of the Pacific Ocean and eliminating other islands and territories from the space. The ocean itself is a dead and empty space between territories, devoid of meaning except as a distance to be traversed, and even that has been considerably reduced. The ocean is thus relegated to the background, and Midway is an in-between territory, significant not for *what* it is, but for *where* it is. The reduction of spaces in official maps is a process described by Rob Nixon as 'pitilessly instrumental' in its utilitarianism, and the film adopts a similarly functional process of repurposing and reconfiguring Midway and the Pacific.[28]

The opening sequences of the film, which introduce Midway first by air and then by sea, followed by scenes of men unloading aircraft and Marines marching, are accompanied by a mix of three songs: *Anchors Aweigh,* the unofficial anthem of the U.S. Navy; *Yankee Doodle Dandy*; and *From the Halls of Montezuma,* the anthem of the U.S. Marine Corps. The identity of the atoll as American territory, initially established visually through the map, is now sonically reinforced through these rousing patriotic anthems. According to Tuathail, the concept of territory is also defined by idealised representations of its people.[29] In this case, the only people on Midway are the fit and often smiling American 'boys', as the voiceover refers to them, connecting American national identity to a version of masculinity that emphasises youth, individuality, and positivity through both the visuals and the anthems. These young soldiers are at work in what the voice-over describes as 'our outpost, your front yard.' The front yard is a distinctly American concept – a feature of 'domestic landscape design that makes a place recognizably 'American'.'[30] Generally an unfenced lawn, the front yard, is a domestic territory in which nature is controlled and managed, mostly, as Virginia Jenkins notes, by men, because it was men who more usually mowed the lawn.[31] The flora and fauna of Midway, like that of other Pacific atolls, evolved in sometimes unique ways to survive climates particular to the islands. The Pacific and its environs were deeply unfamiliar and unsettling spaces for both the Americans and the Japanese, as Judith Bennett points out.[32] By identifying Midway not just as an outpost, but as America's 'front yard', the film transforms the atoll into a knowable, controllable and masculine domestic arena, inhabited by the same boys who would often mow the

[28]Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (New York: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 11.
[29]Tuathail, 'Borderless Worlds?', p. 140.
[30]Fred E. H. Schroeder, *Front Yard America : The Evolution and Meanings of a Vernacular Domestic Landscape* (Bowling Green, OH : Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993), p. 2.
[31]Virginia S. Jenkins, 'A Green Velvety Carpet: The Front Lawn in America,' *Journal of American Culture*, Vol.17, no. 3 (1994), p. 43.
[32]Bennett, *Natives and Exotics,* pp. 11-14.

lawns of their homes in the U.S. Midway's wild and complex ecosystem is thus overwritten by the cultural practices deployed by the film to identify and demarcate American territory. The erasure of Midway's wild identity involves a violence that is simultaneously impersonal and instrumental, in that it demarcates the space as significant only because it 'belongs' to human beings in general, and to Americans in particular.

Freedom for the Birds

Almost nothing is seen of the Pacific's wild inhabitants, either in the ocean or on land, with the notable exception of birds on the atoll. The images of the flags and marching Marines in the introductory sequence dissolve into close-ups of 'gooney birds', the Laysan albatrosses for which Midway is an important breeding site, waddling on the beaches, with the accompaniment of an instrumental track reminiscent of music usually heard in cartoons. The birds are identified in Donald Crisp's voiceover as 'the natives of Midway.' Crisp goes on to claim wryly that 'Tojo has sworn to liberate them.' The albatross serves as a kind of comic counterpoint for the more serious scenes of battle that follow, but the birds are also used to make a subtle ideological point that further delineates the space. Following the dramatic scenes of battle, the film returns to close-ups of the birds. Some are still on the beaches but now appear against a background of billowing black smoke, others are on or near the wreckage of buildings and aircraft. These birds seem, the voiceover muses 'just free as they ever were', despite 'Tojo's' attempts to 'liberate' them.

Freedom, as Eric Foner points out, was the 'rallying cry' for American involvement in the Second World War.[33] Foner describes how the concept of freedom 'permeated wartime America', from Roosevelt's 'four freedoms' to posters, adverts, and Norman Rockwell's famous artwork.[34] According to the film, the birds are kept 'free' by American actions, protected by them, and left unscathed by the conflict. Ford uses the birds as a subtle reminder of what the U.S. was fighting for, but in doing so, exploits them by reducing them to symbols that only have meaning in relation to human concerns.[35] Violence in its most basic form involves the denial of needs, which include the need to survive, the need for wellness, freedom and the need for identity.[36] By denying the birdlife on Midway their identity and autonomy as wild creatures, and erasing evidence of the impact of war on their survival and ongoing wellbeing, the film

[33]Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom,* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1980), p. 221.
[34]Foner, *The Story of American Freedom,* p. 225.
[35]The author is indebted to Dr Benedict Morrison for this insight.
[36]Johan Galtung and Dietrich Fischer, 'Violence: Direct, Structural and Cultural,' in *Johan Galtung: Pioneer of Peace Research*, edited by Johan Galtung and Dietrich Fischer, SpringerBriefs on Pioneers in Science and Practice, (Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer, 2013), p. 35.

subjects them to the indirect effects of structural violence, over and above the direct impacts of conflict.

Besides the two sequences of close-ups mentioned above, birds feature in the background of many of the shots in *The Battle of Midway*. However, they were not in the background in the day-to-day life on the atoll but were subject to routine, direct acts of violence. Even before the battle, birdlife was under extreme pressure from the sudden massive influx of American military personnel onto the small bands of land on Eastern and Sand islands. Judith Bennett describes how the construction of air strips, roads and buildings flattened much of Sand Island's surface, destroyed nests and eggs, and disturbed birdlife both day and night.[37] Birdstrikes presented a danger to planes, and so birds were killed by ground crew and bored Marines, who would club them out of the air, kill them with flamethrowers, trample and raid nests or drive jeeps over them.[38] The birds that survived remained under pressure from 'the fifteen thousand humans crowded on an atoll of two square miles.'[39] The notion of the sea 'owning' anything is anthropomorphic, but the albatrosses and much of the other wildlife of Midway were part of the atoll's ecosystem. The Marines, however, can be considered an invasive species that entered into an ongoing, combative relationship with the birds and other life on and around the atoll long before the first Japanese bomb dropped.

Just as the birds, a significant part of daily life on Midway, are relegated to the background, the fundamental integration of conflict and environment is only hinted at in this film. Clouds hide the enemy, the birds 'seem nervous', and there is 'something in the air, something behind that sunset', according to the voiceover of a short sequence of soldiers in silhouette against the background of a Pacific sunset in the prelude to the battle. The environments in which war is waged are never background to events but are always intrinsically part of conflict. The significance of knowing and understanding the nature of the terrain, its inhabitants (both human and otherwise) and its weather patterns are all fundamental to waging war, yet the representational practices deployed throughout the film situate the ecological environment primarily as a stage for human presence and activity. Of course, Ford is not the only filmmaker to take this kind of approach, and as noted in the introduction, considering the ecological environment as nothing more than a set for the action is frequently a feature of written histories too. Such representational practices reflect and reinforce the long history of perceptual boundaries in Western thinking and epistemology between man-as-subject/nature-as-object, and conceptual boundaries between Society/Nature. Yet in

[37]Bennett, *Natives and Exotics*, p. 199.
[38]Roy MacLeod, '"Strictly for the Birds": Science, the Military and the Smithsonian's Pacific Ocean Biological Survey Program, 1963-1970,' *Journal of the History of Biology*, Vol.34, no. 2 (2001), p. 324.
[39]Bennett, *Natives and Exotics*, p. 199.

war films, particularly in a documentary that claims to be an 'actual photographic report' of the battle, the perpetuation of the idea that the actions of 'Society' are independent from 'Nature' is particularly egregious because it minimises or erases the complexity of the ecosystems in which war is waged, and consequently undermines even the possibility of acknowledging the effect of armed conflict on anything other than human.

The Battle of Midway includes some of the most dramatic, and unusual, footage of actual combat involving U.S. forces to be shown in American theatres up until that point. Filmed in colour, which at the time was associated primarily with fiction rather than documentary or news footage, the scenes of combat are a mix of footage shot on Midway by Ford and Mckenzie and that of U.S. Navy cameramen on the American fleet. The central battle sequence on Midway has no musical accompaniment, distinguishing it from combat sequences in Hollywood war films and even in newsreels, but is overlaid by a carefully crafted post-dubbed soundscape consisting of the sounds of airplane engines, artillery fire and explosions. Most dramatically, Ford includes the moment when a bomb exploded near him, with flying shrapnel captured by a wildly destabilised camera. There are also times when the film comes loose from its sprockets or appears damaged by heat. The inclusion of this material was a sharp stylistic contrast to that of most Hollywood films of the time, which minimised the techniques involved in their production. The result is a chaotic and impressionistic few minutes of guns firing, airplanes swooping across the sky, men's faces, explosions, fire and smoke, all generating a sense of urgency and immediacy. The voiceover to a scene in which the American flag is lifted against a backdrop of black smoke billowing into blue Pacific skies confirms the film's claims to authenticity. 'Yes,' intones Irving Pichel, 'this really happened.'

Most critiques of the film's version of what 'really happened' focus on the sentimentality of its voice-over or on its ideological overtones as propaganda.[40] In the process, the way the film constructs a particular perspective of what really happened, and what is still happening, to Midway and the Pacific because of the war, is overlooked. Having established the space as domestic American territory, and as a backdrop rather than a vital component of warfare, the film depicts combat as something that impacts only men, machines, and human-built structures. Even the violence done to the camera and the film reinforces the notion that the primary actors and victims of war are men

[40]For a good overview of some of the objections to the film's narrative structure see Lea Jacobs, 'December 7th, The Battle of Midway, and John Ford's Career in the OSS,' *Film History,* Vol.32, no. 1 (2020), p. 1. https://doi.org/10.2979/filmhistory.32.1.01. For an example of a critique of the film as propaganda, see William T. Murphy, 'John Ford and the Wartime Documentary,' *Film and History*, Vol.6, no. 1 (February 1 1976), pp. 3-4.

and machines. The film ends with a triumphant tally of the 32 Japanese vessels and 300 aircraft destroyed in the battle, most of which ended up in the Pacific Ocean but it registers no damage done to the Pacific, the atoll and to oceanic wildlife in the process of that destruction.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to gauge the immediate impact of the battle on Midway and on the Pacific because none of this kind of damage registered in any real way in the records or representations of the conflict, including in this film. Certainly, vegetation, avian and aquatic life would have been injured or destroyed by the direct violence of explosions, artillery fire, downed aircraft and sinking ships. But all forms of violence on anything other than human on Midway and the Pacific, whether direct or through the indirect impact of human habitation, are erased in *The Battle of Midway*. Perhaps even more crucially, the film goes so far as to suggest that American actions are in fact *preserving* wildlife on the atoll. Made in the heat of combat itself, and by a director whose work explored American values, ideas of service, sacrifice and male comradeship, and who had great respect for the military, it is unsurprising that *The Battle of Midway* focuses on the Marines, sailors, and airmen on Midway and the American Pacific fleet.[41] But the film's representation of Midway and the Pacific as utilitarian spaces, its separation of human from environment, and the immediacy of its battle sequences combine to create the impression that it is possible to wage industrial warfare with little to no consequence for the natural world.

According to Johan Galtung and Dietrich Fisher, 'cultural violence' involves those aspects of culture, which would include filmmaking, 'that can be used to justify, legitimize direct or structural violence.'[42] But this film goes beyond the justification or legitimisation of the violence of warfare. Instead, *The Battle of Midway* completely erases any trace of violence on the spaces and life of Midway and the Pacific. By removing the possibility of even acknowledging the difference between 'the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is' for Midway and the Pacific during and after the war, Ford's film enacts a form of structural violence on these spaces and the lives they support.[43] The effects of war are rendered invisible, and therefore any need to respond to such effects, either in the present or the future, becomes unnecessary. By overwriting Midway's identity and transforming it into an American territory, significant only as the location of a battle, Ford's film begins a process that situates Midway into a moment in the past, a process that is perpetuated and intensified in the two Midway blockbusters.

[41]Jeffrey Richards, *The Lost Worlds of John Ford Beyond the Western* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), p. 321.
[42]Galtung and Fischer, 'Violence', p. 38
[43]Galtung, 'Violence, Peace,' p. 170.

Midway as Blockbuster

Released over forty years apart, both Jack Smight's and Roland Emmerich's *Midway* films claim in their opening intertitles to tell the story 'the way it was', but neither are documentaries. Smight's *Midway* is one of a spate of blockbusters based on events in the Second World War produced in Hollywood during the 1960s and 70s, including *The Longest Day* (Ken Annakin, Andrew Marton, and Bernhard Wicki, 1960), *The Battle of the Bulge* (Ken Annakin, 1965), and *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (Richard Fleischer, 1970). While all these films made claims to standards of authenticity, including incorporating actual combat footage, they also capitalised on the capacities of widescreen technologies such as CinemaScope and Panavision, and in *Midway*'s case, a new sound technology called Sensurround that emphasised rumbling base notes perfect for disaster films, in showcasing the spectacle of industrialised warfare. By the time Roland Emmerich's version of Midway was released in 2019, digital technologies were facilitating different ways of representing war, allowing for improbable sequences shot from the cockpits of fighter planes, and computer-generated images of vast fleets and spectacular battles. Both films received mixed reviews in the popular press. Well-known critic Roger Ebert wrote that Smight's film 'could be experienced as pure spectacle …. Bombs explode and planes crash and the theatre shakes with the magic of Sensurround.'[44] Emmerich's *Midway* was described in turn in one review as 'a frustratingly empty spectacle'.[45] As popular blockbusters relying on thrilling audio-visual effects in their representation of war, both films can be considered the products of what Rob Nixon refers to as 'spectacle-driven corporate media'.[46] Such representations, according to Nixon, are responsible for generating the impression that violence is immediate and instantaneous. The emphasis on violence as a phenomenon of 'spectacular time' masks what Nixon calls 'slow violence' – 'the long dyings – the staggered and staggeringly discounted casualties, both human and ecological that result from war's toxic aftermaths'.[47] This section examines how the long legacies of industrial conflict are erased in the two *Midway* blockbusters, but it additionally reveals something that Nixon's concept of spectacular time does not include – how the emphasis on spectacular time also erases the immediate impact of war on anything other-than-human.

---

[44]Roger Ebert, '*Midway* Movie Review & Film Summary,' rogerebert.com. 22 June, 1976. https://web.archive.org/web/20190522112029/https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/midway-1976. Accessed 17 August 2023.

[45]Bibbiani, William. "'Midway" Film Review: Impressive Visuals Go to War With Spotty Writing,' *The Wrap,* 6 November, 2019. https://www.thewrap.com/midway-film-review-2019-roland-emmerich/. Accessed 5 August 2024.

[46]Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence*, p. 6.

[47]Nixon, *Slow Violence*, p.6; p. 3.

Ford shot in the moment and on location, but both *Midway* films must recreate the times and spaces of the war, despite the use of actual footage in Emmerich's film. In the process, Midway and the Pacific are stripped of spatial and temporal identity and locked into a spectacular moment in the past. From the outset, both films signal a sense of nostalgia for the spaces and times they recreate by using sepia tones. In Smight's *Midway*, opening footage of the bombing of Japanese cities is sepia-toned, and in Emmerich's film sepia colours most of the opening company idents. According to Paul Grainge, tones like sepia constitute a 'style code' that conveys a 'general, geographically indeterminate sense of temporality.'[48] What follows in both films is thus coded as belonging to a general 'pastness' more closely associated with conventions of photography and film than it is with any actual historical temporality or geographic location. The Pacific and its environs are thus removed from the present and reconstructed in a mediated past, where they can be fragmented, rearranged and repurposed for anthropocentric purposes. As in Ford's film, this process is most obvious in maps.

Figure 2: *Midway*,1976, screenshot.

[48]Paul Grainge, *Monochrome Memories : Nostalgia and Style in Retro America,* (Westport, Conn. : Praeger, 2002), p. 71.

Maps in both blockbusters reconfigure the spaces of the Pacific and of Midway according to the utilitarian logics of conflict as spaces to be traversed, conquered and utilised. In their analysis of the maps in Smight's *Midway*, Paul Ryder and Daniel Binns point out that the battle map involves a reduction of space according to the 'perception of logistics'.[49] In the offices and war-rooms of Smight's film, Japanese and American commanders gather around situation maps of the Pacific laid out on tables with models of ships to indicate the distribution of the fleets, while charts and maps often cover the walls (see Figure 2).

In all table maps, the plotting tools, lines and markers demarcate zones of strategic importance. There is more of a sense of the scale of the Pacific arena in the maps in Smight's *Midway* than in Ford's film, but the ocean and its islands are stripped of life and complexity through the urgent requirements of the logistics of warfare, and also (following Ryder and Binns' argument) through the film's need to communicate the complex strategic planning that led up to the battle. While Emmerich's *Midway* does not engage so deeply with the complexities of strategizing, the profusion of gridlines, markers, counters, notes and vectors covering the table maps used by both Japanese and American commanders in this film render the spaces of the Pacific and Midway almost invisible (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: *Midway*, 2019, screenshot.

[49]Ryder, Paul, and Daniel Binns, 'The Semiotics of Strategy: A Preliminary Structuralist Assessment of the Battle-Map in *Patton* (1970) and *Midway* (1976),' *M/C Journal*, Vol.20, no. 4 (16 August 2017), para 2, https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.1256.

In Ford's film, the purpose of the map is to render unfamiliar space into recognisable territory for an American audience. In these two films, the maps overwrite the Pacific Ocean and its islands with the symbolic markers of machines and military objectives. In a similar way, the films themselves overwrite space and relegate it to the background of all human activities, including warfighting.

Spaces and Erasures

In contrast to Ford's film, which features only the Pacific Ocean and Midway, the two blockbusters introduce spaces other than those in which war is fought. In both the 1976 and the 2019 films, all exterior sequences set outside of combat zones occur in manicured, organised, landscaped spaces. In Smight's *Midway*, these include the lush gardens of the residence of Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto in Hiroshima, and the Pacific Fleet Headquarters in Hawai'i, which forms backgrounds of neat lawns along with the palm trees and blue skies so often present in Hollywood representations of Pacific islands.[50] Emmerich's *Midway* opens with a scene of a Japanese duck hunt set in the Kiyosumi Garden in Tokyo before the outbreak of war. A British officer, accompanied by an American, is struggling with the traditional net, while the Japanese officers catch their duck with ease. On the surface the scene is about cultural differences – the slow, careful approach of the Japanese contrasted with the aggression of the British officer, who complains that the technique is 'bloody ridiculous' and looks forward to seeing the Japanese through the sights of his gun, while the American remains carefully neutral – but it also reveals that these spaces and the lives they contain are conceived as nothing more than arenas for the expression of culturally-specific masculine identities. Like the front yard, these are all spaces shaped by and subject to human, particularly male, principles and needs, and in which – bar a few exceptions – male characters interact.

In contrast to these organised, controlled spaces, which are nevertheless filled with life, the spaces in which combat occurs in both films are largely devoid of anything except men and machines. Scenes shot on the atoll in Ford's film are at the very least filled with birds, but the Midway of the two blockbusters is scrubbed of any life other than human. Point Mugu, a naval station on the coast of California, was the location used for Midway in Smight's film. Point Mugu is an important area for birdlife, but there is no life at all to be seen in this representation of the atoll, apart from a few scrappy plants on the dunes. The 2019 *Midway* features Ford as a character. As he arrives on the atoll, a soldier asks him, 'what kind of film are you planning to make in a God-forsaken place like this?'. Ford's film erased the impact of violence on Midway's wild

[50]These kinds of Hollywood aesthetics for the Pacific were so pervasive that during the war, American soldiers sent to the islands were disconcerted by the extreme diversity of the environments they encountered. Bennett, *Natives and Exotics,* p. 11.

inhabitants, but these two films go a step further to erase the inhabitants themselves, reconstructing Midway as an empty space that not even God cares about. A violent structure, according to Galtung and Fischer, involves a form of 'unequal exchange', in which those who dominate the structure exploit everything else within it.[51] Ford's film provides an example of such an 'unequal exchange' in its exploitation of the birds for ideological purposes. The two *Midway*s, however, take structural violence one step further by not simply exploiting the non-human life on Midway, but by utterly eliminating it.

Midway in both films is reduced to one small location in the larger battle. But all other spaces of combat are similarly devoid of anything except men and machines. In Smight's film, battle sequences incorporate actual footage from the Pacific war, alongside those shot in studio and on location. The result is an odd melange that fragments the Pacific Ocean into aesthetically distinct and disjointed pieces that resist temporal and spatial coherence. By 2019, these spaces could be digitally recreated, allowing for an expanded scope and scale. An impressive plethora of aircraft and ships dominate the sky and the sea in Emmerich's film, obscuring the spaces of Pacific as effectively as the symbolic markers on the maps. The awkward juxtaposition of actual combat footage and studio footage in Smight's *Midway*, and the digital reconstructions in Emmerich's, render the Pacific Ocean as an artificial and oddly immaterial setting for the spectacular destruction of machines and men. Aircraft crash into the sea, plumes of black smoke rise from sinking ships, but the sea absorbs it all, and there is little to no evidence in either film of debris or contaminants left behind on the surface of the ocean, or of marine life that might have been destroyed in the process. As in Ford's film, men and machines bear the brunt of industrial warfare. The spaces of the Pacific Ocean in both films are artificial and sterile sets in which men engage in war, and warfighting leaves that setting relatively undamaged.

Emmerich's film ends by detailing the futures of some of the men involved in the battle, dissolving from images of the actors to photographs of the actual men they play. These soldiers go on from the battle, but the spaces of Midway and the Pacific remain locked in a spectacular moment in the past in both Midway blockbusters. Ford's film erased the impact of war from the life on Midway, but these two films erase any life other than human from the spaces of war and in the process, reduce Midway from place to battle. There is a political dimension to acts of erasure that, according to Arthur Bradly, goes beyond the power over life and death to 'the more originary and fundamental power to decide upon the living and the non-living, upon what *counts* as being alive and what does not, upon which lives are 'bearable, in every sense of that word, from the metaphysical through the juridico-political to the biological, and which

[51] Galtung and Fischer, 'Violence', p. 37.

are 'unbearable.'[52] While the politics of erasure are generally applied to erasures of humankind from aspects of socio-political life, they are just as relevant to the erasure of all other forms of life. In the case of these two films, the erasure of all life other than that of men on Midway and the Pacific determines what might be considered alive in the spaces of war, and therefore which lives are impacted, either directly or indirectly, by warfare.

Conclusion: What the Sea Remembers

Midway remained under U.S. military control until 1996. In 1973, it was identified by the Pacific Ocean Biological Survey Program (POBSP) as 'the most altered' of all the atolls and islands in the Northwestern Hawai'ian Chain.[53] Sand Island was made an official bird sanctuary, and the 'gooneys' were now supposedly a protected species, but in an example of the complex relationship between the military and natural environments, the paving over of three runways on Sand involved the 'destruction by asphyxiation of 18,000 incubating albatrosses, 13 percent of Midway's and about 5 percent of the world's population', and all active nests on Sand Island's golf course were destroyed to preserve this recreational space.[54] Meanwhile on Eastern Island, the Sooty Tern, which had been deliberately driven off Sand, was subject to extreme harassment by Naval personnel, including so-called 'chick-stamps,' being clubbed from the air, and hunted by dogs brought to the island for specifically that purpose.[55] Far from being freed by American actions, the birds of Midway continued to be under extreme duress for decades after the battle, the victims of what Rob Nixon terms 'slow violence'.

Today, Midway is part of the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument (PMNM), protected and managed as both a National Wildlife Refuge and a war memorial. But even after the U.S. Navy had withdrawn, birdlife remained under stress because of the lead-based paint used on most of the structures built on the islands. Lead leached into the soil, and chips of paint were picked up by albatrosses for their nests, resulting in the deaths of approximately 130,000 chicks.[56] From 2010-2017, however, measures were taken to clean up the site, and deaths from lead poisoning have ended. According to the Papahānaumokuākea Marine Monument website, nearly

[52]Arthur Bradley, *Unbearable Life: A Genealogy of Political Erasure,* (Columbia University Press, 2019), p. 4

[53]Warren, B King, 'Conservation Status of the Birds of Central Pacific Islands,' *The Wilson Bulletin* 85, no.1 (1973), p. 93.

[54]King, 'Conservation Status', p. 93.

[55]King, 'Conservation Status', p. 93.

[56]American Bird Conservancy, 'Lead Paint Kills Thousands of Rare Seabirds on Midway,' 17 June 2010. https://abcbirds.org/article/lead-paint-kills-thousands-of-rare-seabirds-on-midway/. Accessed 17 August 2023.

two million birds of 19 species can be found today on Midway. They are more recently facing a new threat in the form of mice, an invasive species which, for unknown reasons, started attacking birds in 2015.[57] The mice are not the only invasive species on the atoll. Not all invasive species are due to the military occupation, but around 90 percent of Midway's flora are considered non-native, and extensive efforts have been made to remove the more damaging of these species.[58]

The reefs around Midway are rich with life, but as a recent expedition conducted by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) noted, 'paradoxically, while a cultural and military invasion was successfully fended off by U.S. forces in 1942, the same military infrastructure that made that possible may have also fostered a moderately successful biological invasion' of alien marine invertebrate life in and around the atoll.[59] As NOAA's study demonstrates, aircraft and ships do not simply vanish between the waves, but linger under the ocean, sometimes leaching contaminants, biological and otherwise, into the Pacific. The Pacific Ocean and Midway thus do not 'remember' the war. They continue to struggle with the ongoing slow violence of the impact of war and human habitation on those species that, unlike humans, might really be considered the sea's 'own'.

On one level, an argument can be made that the atoll is recovering, and that what happened, and continues to happen on Midway, is part of the inevitable and acceptable 'collateral' damage of war. However, that argument encourages us to forget, or overlook, not only the immediate impact of the conflict on Midway and in the Pacific, but also the long, slow violence of the impact of invasive species on land and sea, and the terrible careless cruelty that characterised the use of Midway as a military base. The three films of Midway in this article actively foster the erasure and forgetting of both the immediate and long-term impact of industrial warfare on the spaces of the Pacific and reinforce this perspective through their repeated claims that the story that focusses only on men and machines is the one that is authentic, and the one that

[57]Hob Osterlund, 'Of Mice and Mōlī: Protecting Seabirds on Midway Atoll,' The Safina Center, 1 November, 2021. https://www.safinacenter.org/blog/of-mice-and-ml-protecting-seabirds-on-midway-atoll. Accessed 17 August 2023.
[58]Friends of Midway Atoll, 'Plants,' 14 September 2015. https://friendsofmidway.org/explore/wildlife-plants/plants/. Accessed 17 August 2023.
[59]Kelly Keogh, 'Exploring the Sunken Heritage of Midway Atoll: Honoring the Legacy of the 75th Anniversary of the Battle of Midway: Background: Non-Native Creatures: NOAA Office of Ocean Exploration and Research,' US Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 16 May 2017. https://oceanexplorer.noaa.gov/explorations/17midway/background/invasive-species/invasive-species.html. Accessed 25 April 2023.

matters. This article is not suggesting that human casualties should not be remembered, but it is arguing that it is vital that we recognise that warfare is not an activity that takes place only between soldiers, and that it is not only soldiers and machines that are damaged by conflict. The American war film has evolved to focus on the intensity and extremities of combat, but at best, these films relegate the natural world to the background; at worst, they erase the complexities of the impact of war on the ecologies in which it is waged and eliminate any evidence of any form of life other than human in the spaces of war.

It has never been more vital, as conflict and climate change converge, that we recognise and challenge representational practices such as these, in order to acknowledge that war, like all human activities, is inextricably connected to the environmental ecologies in which it occurs, the ecologies, which climate change is making clear, upon which humans depend as much as all other forms of life.