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AMERICAN WAR MOVIES. DAVID AYER'S *FURY* AS MYTHOLOGISATION OF WAR AND SOLDIERS

Abstract. Both pop culture and modern Hollywood cinema are mainly intended for entertainment. American war films are not free from this vice. A researcher of culture should shun attempts to find hidden symbols, myths and flashes of meanings from distant traditional culture in such films. Contemporary popular mythologies do not represent the same mythical pattern that Eliade wrote about. Popular culture consists of ideas on various topics, borrowings, quotations and fragments of meanings, all patched together. In my view, however, *Fury* goes beyond pop culture and entertainment. After all, there is also good American war cinema and films that are not mindless borrowings or calques of carelessly patchworked pieces of pop culture. One can look at them and find certain cultural tropes and motifs known to specialists in humanities, such as an initiation journey, the symbolic language of eternal myths or archetypal figures of cultural heroes, all in a version transformed by popular culture, of course. The aim of my article is therefore to analyse David Ayer's film from the perspective of a culture researcher who seeks cultural tropes and sources of the war hero myth in this cinematic work.

Keywords: war, myth, popular culture, film protagonist.

War, culture and myths in films

War is a cultural category and a phenomenon that has accompanied mankind since the dawn of time, transforming and changing its own canon. No one can remain indifferent to war: "Even if you have never driven into a remotely controlled landmine and have not been blown to bits by an explosion or punctured by a machine gun, you probably cannot remain indifferent to war". We all have an opinion on this topic, usually quite an emotional one. While most of us agree that a lost war is a bad thing, we cannot even agree on a definition of war. War has received a variety of labels, from a "great adventure" to "hell". The Prussian military genius Carl von Clausewitz claimed that "War is a mere continuation of policy by other means". In turn, Colonel David H. Hackworth, an American veteran of the Korea

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and Vietnam wars and holder of the highest number of decorations, asked: “What is war anyway but one big, raging atrocity?” (Ghiglieri 2001: 253–254, quote for <https://www.twocentsforcharity.org/about-face>).

Since war is a part of culture, culture tries to give it the illusion of being civilised, to impose certain legal norms and, above all, to describe and understand war in order to warn of its consequences. War has accompanied mankind since the dawn of time, and culture does not protect people against the barbaric atrocities of war. On the contrary, thanks to technological progress, it makes them worse and more widespread. They do not seem to burden the consciences of perpetrators, hidden behind computers and the screens of modern killing machines. Although many centuries have passed and the warfare habits have (allegedly) softened, and although international organisations have been established to guard the global peace, war has not ceased to be present in everyday life, in human memory, the media, literature and the movies.

Roger Caillois was perhaps closest to the truth in his interpretations of war, which he saw as a primordial feast, a cyclical ritual of purification that society simply has to undergo in order to continue its existence without falling apart because of anomie. In modern societies, war plays a role equivalent to that of a traditional festival, with a strong connection to myths. War is a social solstice, a culmination of history, excluding individuals from their privacy and putting them under complete control of the community.

The primordial festival and war have many things in common. Stocks that were saved up over the years are being squandered, the laws of the old order cease to apply, and the new ones become binding: “yesterday’s crime is now prescribed, and in place of customary rules, new taboos and disciplines are established, the purpose of which is not to avoid or soothe intense emotions, but rather to excite and bring them to climax [...] This fervor is also the time for sacrifices, even the time for the sacred, a time outside of time that recreates, purifies, and rejuvenates society. Next take place ceremonies that fertilize the soil and promote the adolescent generation to the grade of men and warriors” (Caillois 1959: 164). Although the festival and war are opposites, Caillois claims that they have the same social function. War corresponds to a festival in its momentum, spontaneity and reversal of the existing order. If the function of the festival in primeval society has indeed been replaced by war in modern civilisation, as Caillois posits, then it is a festival of macabre and cruel madness, all too familiar to Europeans. After all, “the origins of Europe were hammered out on the anvil of war” (Howard 2007: 7), and armed violence has always been an institutionalised force used in relations between nations and states, with the 20th century being no exception. David Ayer’s film is devoted to precisely such a conflict, coupled with the timeless myth of good fighting against evil. However, it only seems to be yet another Hollywood war film. The director’s reflection goes beyond the pop cultural clichés to present the audience with a tale containing mythological motifs and themes known from ancient texts of culture,

referring to wandering, initiation, father-son relationships, transgression and, finally, the fight between good and evil. I do not claim that *Fury* is close to philosophical treatises, a new version of *Aeneid* or Dante's description of the inferno (although, admittedly, it is closest to the latter). However, the vision of war contained in *Fury* is interesting enough to be explored in more detail. Of course, the war in the film is like chaos which destroys the order established by culture, ruining the fragile layer of culture that envelops the human world. The anti-order of war reverses cultural patterns and values, and establishes ones of its own: "The greatest loss that war brings in the sphere of the human spirit is the spread of anti-values, the destruction of good, and the promotion and praise of evil" (Zwoliński 2003: 282). Thus, we are dealing with an eternal conflict which is superimposed on the rivalry between two different cultures: American and German. It is expressed in the struggle between different ideas, ideologies, cardinal norms, styles of military life and warfare. The human being remains its victim, despite being the creator of both material and symbolic forms of culture, which are distorted and degraded by war.

Ayer's *Fury* is an example of a fierce American war movie. Already the first scenes introduce the viewer into the hell of war. We can see a battlefield, still burning, with burnt-out wrecks of tanks, guns and the corpses of soldiers. Death, dirt and mud reign in the cold and gloomy wilderness, and we almost feel the stench of burnt bodies and machinery. Subsequent scenes get only worse. The director stuns viewers with images from gore horror films. Piles of corpses thrown into the pit by a bulldozer, shrapnel shells tearing heads and legs off bodies, bodies being torn to shreds, burnt with phosphorus bullets, pierced with knives, soldiers getting burnt alive, crushed with tank tracks, shattered to pieces with the deadly tools of modern warfare. German civilians, children and women, punished by the Nazi commanders for cowardice, are hanged on telegraph poles by the road leading to the town liberated by the Americans. The director's realism, and sometimes even naturalism in showing the horrors of war, is one of the film's merits. The war itself is presented as pure chaos, the opposite of orderly culture and the reverse of its norms (Caillois 1959). Ayer's war is an insatiable, cruel monster, the biblical Leviathan demanding ever new victims. By stunning viewers with the cruelty of war, the director gets dangerously close to overemphasising its cinematic image, or even to pop cultural kitsch. We should not forget, however, that Ayer's *Fury* does belong to pop culture.

Piotr Kowalski writes about the dangers of defining the subject of research, legitimising research procedures and the over-interpretation of popular culture products (including this type of literature and films): "A researcher of contemporary culture, immersed in it and defined by it, must deal with the complications of this culture and the need to diagnose its new paradigm, and must also maintain an ironic cognitive distance from it. Only then will the researcher be able to build a subtle equilibrium between the tales told by that culture and the researcher's own story, embedded in its narratives" (Kowalski 2004: 26). Kowalski, a literary scholar

and ethnographer, reminds pop culture researchers about the necessity of distinguishing between popular, mass literature (*fantasy* is an example of interpretive *problems with popular literature*), written for the widest possible audience with fairly unsophisticated aesthetic preferences, characterised by simple plot patterns, unsophisticated language, providing strong emotions, and belles-lettres literature, subdivided into lyric, epic and drama since the times of Aristotle. An unjustified search for (non-existent) mythical threads and deeper meanings which ennoble (often shallow) literary forms of popular culture stems from the absence of an appropriate methodological background: “These are the premises of dubious interpretative decisions: first of all, one disregards the individual text, its inaptitude or shallowness; secondly, the serial existence of such texts, in mass reception, is supposed to entitle researchers to seek analogies with how texts existed in old cultures, e.g. in folklore, where different variants are considered only to be »actualisations« of fictional motifs or structures” (Kowalski 2004: 213). Fairy-tale motifs, in-depth values or myths are not the proper subject matter of fantasy and adventure novels, science fiction movies or stories about Rambo and Batman. Interpretative abuses committed by researchers of popular literature (including fantasy) stem from their belief that there is no need to place traditional forms of culture only in their context, without referring them to the present day: “Thus, opinions concerning primitive societies with their specific, and presumably homogeneous culture are easily transferred to produce a diagnosis on the forms and functions of popular literature” (Kowalski 2004: 221). Mass cultural texts by no means play the same role as those existing in the context of magic culture. Banalities will remain banalities, even if we try hard to prove the opposite. One must agree with Kowalski, who argues that contemporary popular mythologies (especially in film-making) do not represent the same mythical pattern as those described by Eliade. An important conclusion that emerges from *Popkultura i humaniści* [*Pop Culture and the Humanities*] for researchers of culture and film is as follows: “Cultural intertextuality imposes high intellectual obligations and necessitates an ironic distance to what is being explored. In popular literature, such distance cannot be maintained and is not even intended by its producers” (Kowalski 2004: 224).

The cinematic world of the terrible war

Fury was shot in England in late autumn, which pretended to be the German spring, adding even more sadness to the already grim film. The costumes and set design faithfully reproduced the conditions of the spring of 1945, at the end of World War II. The uniforms for the film characters were specially prepared, as were the equipment and weapons. The actors underwent special military training and the director forced the tank crew from the film to live inside a real armoured beast for some time. The meticulous accuracy and fidelity to historical reality only

intensifies the impression that we are witnessing real history. Frames from the film show the inhuman cruelty of war, corpses of people and animals, wounds and blood, ruins, bomb sites, destroyed American and German armoured vehicles. Even the landscape in the film is gloomy; the sky is cloudy and the greenery is greyish. Soldiers in the film are dirty and unshaven, and their uniforms are torn and darned, covered in blood from wounds, stains of tank oil, gunpowder and soot. We can almost smell their stench, and the omnipresent mud seems to stick to our shoes as well.¹ This was certainly a deliberate effort on part of the film director, similar to those used in previous American productions about World War II: *Saving Private Ryan* and *Band of Brothers*.

In an interview for the BFI London Film Festival, Ayer said that both his grandfathers and an uncle had served in the U.S. Army during World War II, and that his film was a tribute to them and to other U.S. soldiers. He also wanted to try to understand the feelings of ordinary people who fought in that war. He reviewed hundreds of photos documenting soldiers' participation in the fighting, which served as a point of departure for creating visual archetypes of the characters that Ayer wanted to portray in his movie.² In the most gripping scene, showing the fight of three American Sherman tanks against one German Tiger, real-life machines were used. The world's only operational Panzerkampfwagen VI, or Tiger, rented from a museum in England, perfectly played the role of a steel German monster from the abyss, destroying three Shermans one by one. It was a terrifying symbol of the technical perfection of the German war machine, with U.S. tanks looking like children's toys next to it. The scene was very close to reality. Historians of WWII's Western Front presume that it took as many as five Shermans to defeat one German Tiger. Tigers, the invincible mechanical death tools, were superior to the Allied forces' tanks in terms of armour and firepower, and their crews were the elite of the Wehrmacht and Waffen SS armoured divisions.³

The features of the filmed war landscape that we watch in the film bring to mind *orbis exterior* – a foreign, dangerous area that signified “the world beyond” in the senses known to traditional culture: “Beyond the area under human rule and defined by man, filled with meanings, i.e. the area of culture, there is a world devoid of senses, amorphous, undefined and dangerous” (Kowalski 1998: 489). This distant reflection of traditional culture, visible in Ayer's film, accompanies the viewer throughout almost the entire film. In particular, we will notice it in battle scenes, full of death, violence, destruction and blood, in the scenes of fighting in the town and in the earlier journey to the town. What leaves a particularly gloomy, almost turpist impression are the images of the American camp, a field hospital

¹ Of course, as an inseparable part of the war landscape, wounds, dirt, blood and mud are also part of the cultural reflections of *orbis exterior*, i.e. the world beyond. See Kowalski 1998: 104.

² See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qT8YL1kflag> (accessed 25.08.2019).

³ For more details on the best German heavy tank in World War II see Anderson 2017.

full of wounded soldiers, a bulldozer pushing the bodies of the fallen soldiers into a huge pit and corpses being transported on a truck that serves as a hearse.

In traditional culture, *orbis exterior* contained reversed features of the familiar and safe space. *Orbis exterior* was also a necessary condition for an initiation journey, and *Fury* can be interpreted exactly in the light of initiation. It is an eternal tale of a journey where protagonists gain the knowledge of the world and of themselves, at the cost of sacrifices, violence and suffering. However, in this case, the tale is clad in the costume of a contemporary war movie.⁴ When entering the gate that leads to another, foreign world, one takes the greatest risk and consents to paying even the highest price: after all, not everyone manages to return from there (Kowalski 2002: 136–137).

Don Collier/Wardaddy. The film character, archetypes, genres and cultural tropes

From the first scene, which takes place on the battlefield, up to the final sequence, the main character of the film is Staff Sergeant Don “Wardaddy” Collier. The character’s name is a kind of game played by the director with the viewers. In fact, Don Collier was a popular American actor who starred in westerns in the 1960s. Also, Wardaddy seems to be a western-style gunslinger. In the holster under his arm, he wears a large colt decorated with an image of a beautiful woman. In the opening scene, Don sets a white horse free, showing fondness, gently stroking its neck, right after brutally killing its rider – a German officer. We can guess how much Don loves horses, also from the tales told by other soldiers in *Fury*. However, this cruel and brutal man hides some gentleness and compassion. His wartime nickname (again, an element of initiation) contains, not by accident, an element of the cultural character of the Father/Guide in initiation rituals, and his relationship with the other main character in the film, a young man joining the tank crew, is based on teaching survival skills. One of the most important skills involves the efficient killing of enemies. The archetype of a warrior, an American cowboy, travels on his faithful steel horse around the hostile prairie, full of dangerous ambushes. Like a sheriff from western movies, he brings justice and kills thugs/Germans in the name of the law so that the good may prevail.

Both Wardaddy and the crew of his tank take part in heavy fighting on the Western Front in Nazi Germany. The battle scenes are very convincing, fully reflecting the cruelty of killing in war, the chaos and the destructive impact on the human psyche. The defeated enemy soldiers are wiped out, since the U.S. soldiers take no POWs. The mutilated bodies of the killed enemies are robbed of cigarettes,

⁴ The topics of wandering and the initiation journey are addressed by Piotr Kowalski (2002: 23, 32, 134).

watches, decorations and valuables, and the winners search the battlefield for alcohol, which they immediately drink. The only crew member of "Fury" who has preserved some human feelings in this hell is Boyd Swan, a preacher who knows the Bible by heart. He is the one who administers extreme unction to a soldier dying on the battlefield and prays with him. Boyd Swan does not succumb to the mortal pleasures in the conquered German town, and he does not even drink alcohol. In his free time, he reads the pocket edition of the Bible which he carries with him at all times, engaging in theological and ethical disputes with Wardaddy about evil, war and God.

Don "Wardaddy" Collier is not merely a protagonist, a belligerent embodiment of masculinity, a powerful killing tool and a great commander. He is also an archetypal figure: a warrior who knows no mercy or fear, who kills without hesitation and triumphs where others have perished. Almost immortal, he is completely devoted to his cause which he considers righteous. He has a code of honour. He can be merciful towards German civilians who are at his mercy, but will kill a defenceless captive soldier. Wardaddy is a complicated, mysterious and cruel character. He is a wartime father to Norman, the youngest member of the tank crew, who is a boyish, gentle and innocent young man. Brad Pitt plays the role Don Collier with great effectiveness. He is athletic, efficient, courageous, handsome and masculine in a stereotypically exaggerated way. Both physical fitness and good looks helped him fit perfectly into the cinematic illusion. Wardaddy has many secrets. He knows the reality of war, the enemy's country and language perfectly well. He speaks German to the civilians and soldiers he meets. He has excellent skills in using the best automatic weapon of World War II, the German selective-fire assault rifle Sturmgewehr 44. He seems to have a good grasp of the German psyche, habits and mentality – he could almost be one of the Germans. When Collier washes himself in a German house, Norman notices that the commander's back is covered with terrible burn scars. The young man quickly turns away when he realises that Wardaddy has noticed his astonished and frightened look, but they both say nothing about the sergeant's wartime branding.

The brutality and killing efficiency represented by Wardaddy can be observed immediately, in the opening scene, which takes place on a battlefield full of wrecks. The viewer witnesses pure, brutal violence. The protagonist's dagger plunges into a German soldier's chest several times and finally takes his life with a blow straight into the eyeball. We hear the knife blade grind against the skull bones. The winner takes the officer's gun and map holder, and then climbs on his tank. This is how we meet one of the two main characters: the commander of the Sherman bearing a graceful name of "Fury". Wardaddy is an important character in the film: a madly brave warrior, a true master in inflicting death on enemies, whom he kills without hesitation or mercy. This character is also the director's tribute to Don Collier, a well-known actor of TV series in the 1960s. Don Collier played the role of a righteous sheriff, the vanquisher of rogues and Indians. He starred in

over 70 westerns alongside John Wayne, Robert Mitchum, Dean Martin or Tom Selleck. Like a cowboy from westerns, Wardaddy fights the bad Indians/Germans believing that “a good German is a dead German”. Incidentally, the character played by Brad Pitt is modelled on authentic tank combat veterans, soldiers of the U.S. Army. The best known of them was Staff Sergeant Lafayette G. Pool, a Sherman commander-in-chief, nicknamed “Wardaddy”, a Texas-born tank ace fighting for the Allied powers, who was decorated with the highest medals of the United States, Belgium and France for bravery.⁵

Perhaps both the archetypal portrait of the main belligerent protagonist, as well as the play around the western genre, were consciously applied by the director. However, even if this was not the case, a viewer who is knowledgeable in film analysis and looks for cultural patterns in the cinema can quite easily track them. In Ayer’s film, war is a men’s world of fear, violence and cruelty. It is the world of death inflicted on others and suffering readily accepted as a sacrifice for good in the fight with evil. The male warriors, aptly described by Klaus Theweleit in his *Male Fantasies*, live in constant anticipation of death, under the constant pressure of war and overwhelming evil (Theweleit 2015; see also Littell 2009). They must kill other men, their enemies, because that is what war is all about. War is about killing another man before he kills you – this is how Wardaddy explains it to the young man joining the crew. After winning a skirmish, he forces Norman, still an innocent kid, to kill the captured German prisoner. He treats the pleas for life, uttered in German, with contempt: he throws down and tramples on the photos of the prisoner’s wife and children. He takes no pity on the defeated enemy, not seeing him as a human being. What matters is efficient killing: this is what soldiers are praised for and what the society rewards. This kind of reversal of cultural and social norms during war leads us to the aforementioned reflections that Roger Caillois wrote in his essay *Man and the Sacred*. War excludes every individual from their privacy and puts them under complete control of the community and its institutions, such as the army. What was a crime yesterday becomes a glorious deed in the sacred world of war. War is similar to the traditional dimension of a festival in its momentum, the vibrant chaos and the reversed normative order. Through sanctioned violence, sacrifices of life and destruction of material goods, the young generation is promoted to the rank of adult warriors. During war, murder becomes nearly a religious act. The same law stipulates that the fighter should sacrifice his life and annihilate the opponent. This is the lesson that Wardaddy wants to teach to the young soldier, turning a kid into a tough warrior. Of course, an important relationship in *Fury* is the one between the Father and the Son, between the sergeant and the private, the tank commander and Norman – a novice in the craft of war. The rest of the crew, although also important for the plot, remain somewhat on the sidelines.

⁵ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lafayette_G._Pool; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fury_\(2014_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fury_(2014_film)) (accessed: 26.08.2019).

Thanks to van Gennep's classic rites of passage (Gennep 2006), but also Propp's theory of the wondertale (Propp 1976, 2003), we know that in narratives of growing up in difficult times the protagonist must set out on a journey. Being away, being thrown into an adventure, into a journey that he does not want to undertake are the characteristics of the phase of liminal suspension and the marginal area. In order to gain a new status and return to his community, the protagonist must go through extremely demanding initiation tests, including death, chaos and destruction. This is also the journey undertaken by Norman, the only crew member of "Fury" who goes through the hell of a war almost unscathed and manages to survive. Naturally, Wardaddy is his guide into initiation, and an assistant in the hardship of trials. He teaches Norman how to fight and survive in a cruel world. It is a process of accelerated education which takes a heavy toll on the young man's psyche as he is forced to fight for his life, accepting the chaos of death and destruction. In the end, death meets all the tank crew, taking even the fearless warrior, the wartime father, Sergeant Don Collier. The orphaned son must come to terms with his loss and fight on. He was prepared for this by his guide, who had explained the meaning of war to him. Killing can be a glorious act as long as we resist evil and are ready to sacrifice our lives. Justification of lawlessness in the name of good is somewhat reminiscent of the just war theory formulated in the Middle Ages in order to justify violence. According to Sergeant Don Collier, "ideals are peaceful, history is violent". After all, the history of mankind is a history of wars waged in the name of ideals.⁶

"Fury" and its crew

The tank named "Fury", with its crew of armoured brothers, deserves special attention. Much like the tank itself, each crew member has his own wartime nickname. In the final sequence, also Norman receives a new name. The armoured family of "Fury" is made up of specialists in their trade: veterans who are able to control fear in critical moments and react so as to survive the fight. They know that any mistake by any crew member may be the last one for them all. They live in constant tension, waiting for death, which they have managed to escape for a long time anyway. They have been together in combat since the battles fought by the American army against the Germans in Africa. They went through mortal danger on the battlefield, killing enemies together and fighting for survival – all this has turned them into efficient wartime instruments.⁷ On the outside, "Fury" is adorned with its name and a gas mask, amusingly placed on the armour in a German helmet resembling a skull. Inside, it is decorated with the tankers' photos from civilian

⁶ A similar idea is expressed both by Michael Howard (2007) and rev. Andrzej Zwoliński (2003).

⁷ Friendship of tank crew members who risk their lives together is a topic raised by Catherine Merridale (2007: 235–236).

life, photos of nude women and war trophies: military decorations of the German army. “Fury” has some room for a portable stove, a coffee jug, a locker for the best alcohol trophies, and even a Bible (two tankers, Wardaddy and Boyd Swan, know the Bible almost by heart). The tank is a special place. With a female name, it is treated by the crew as a home, offering a substitute of peace and security in the chaos of war.

Death in a tank was the most horrible kind of death that could happen to soldiers during war: „Even the most optimistic troops knew what would happen when a tank was shelled. The white-hot flash of the explosion would almost certainly ignite the tank crew’s fuel and ammunition. At best, the crew – or those at least who had not been decapitated or dismembered by the shell itself – would have no more than ninety seconds to climb out of their cabin. Much of that time would be swallowed up as they struggled to open the heavy, sometimes red-hot, hatch, which might have jammed after the impact anyway. The battlefield was no haven, but it was safer than the armored coffin that would now begin to blaze, its metal components to melt. This was not simply »boiling up«. The tank would also torch the atmosphere around it. By then, there could be no hope for the men inside. Not unusually, their bodies were so badly burned that the remains were inseparable” (Merridale 2007: 236, quote for <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/81633-ivan-s-war-life-and-death-in-the-red-army-1939-1945>). Those who had not been torn to pieces by the exploding ammunition and armour shrapnel when the tank was hit, would burn alive. We can see this very graphically depicted in several scenes of the film. How long the crew would survive on the battlefield depended on how efficient and close-knit they were. All this turned the tank crews into tight teams, understanding each other without words, united by the ties of war and blood in the family of warriors. They treated their tanks not as ordinary machines but gave them names (usually feminine ones). They decorated the tanks, added inscriptions and drawings, and took care of them as if for closest relatives. They knew that their lives depended on the reliable operation of tank mechanisms. We know that in a folk epic and a traditional heroic fairy tale, giving a name was a special magical procedure, connected with totemic practices. It was both a spell and a wish, as well as a cultural “taming” of an object or an animal. In the traditional worldview, the word and the object marked with that word were the same and constituted a magical whole. The very act of naming was a creative act, enabling the owner to impart a unique trait and protective properties to it (Sulima 1985: 317; Kowalski 1998: 340–341). All the tanks from the platoon in *Fury* have their names, given by the crews: Lucy Sue, Murder Incorporated (the armed arm of the American Mafia), or Old Phyllis. All of them also have their own unique, albeit similar, teams of scruffy tank crews in torn clothes. The crew of the “Fury” turns out to be the best and most efficient one, which is why it wins an uneven duel with the Tiger – a steel German monster, and cruel, demonic SS men.

“What’s done cannot be undone,” or playing home at war

One of the scenes in Ayer’s film seems particularly important for understanding the vision of war proposed by the American director: the war as non-reality, pure chaos and destruction, devouring people and their safe, structured world. After winning a skirmish with German anti-tank troops and infantry, “Fury” and its crew of armoured brothers enter a German town which surrenders to the Americans after a short but drastic fight (again: corpses, torn off limbs of American soldiers, bodies burned by phosphorus bullets, an SS officer shot dead). Then comes a short break in the warfare and the conquerors fall into a whirlwind of a bizarre carnival. The soldiers drink alcohol, intoxicated by the joy of surviving yet another day of war and yet another massacre; they entertain themselves by wreaking havoc in apartments, destroying furniture and getting close with German women. The German town is filled with joyous turmoil. It seems that war and death forget about their victims for a while. In the chaos of war, Wardaddy and Norman accidentally find an apartment occupied by two women. This is a typical German house owned by fairly affluent bourgeoisie, with stylish heavy furniture and a piano. Both German women are scared to death, especially the younger one, who is afraid of being raped by hostile men with guns. Wardaddy calms them both down, telling them to prepare a traditional meal he used to eat in his American home: poached eggs on bacon and coffee. He also asks for hot water, as he wants to wash and shave. He also tells Norman to take the younger German woman to the bedroom, otherwise he will do it himself. Shy and gentle, Norman does not want to force himself on the woman against her will. The other woman wants to halt this warfare courtship, but Wardaddy stops her by saying: “They’re young and alive”. Sergeant Don Collier sits down at an elegantly set table with a cup of coffee, a cigarette and a newspaper, almost like in his American home on a Sunday afternoon. Any soldier at war, even in the most hopeless circumstances, constantly facing death and captivity, dreamt of a home he would return to one day. I believe that in borderline situations, filled with chaos and death, such as war, humans who are forced to fight, to wander, to transgress into evil, dream of their own family home. In such moments, the idealised image is closest to the image of home in traditional culture, where it symbolises a good, familiar, safe, orderly and beautiful environment. Similar nostalgic images of the home (longing caused by a loss) accompany emigration, the compulsion of the trajectory of collective fate and war. This motif can be found in the memories of WWII veterans, literature and movies. It is also exploited in popular culture (Kepiński 2006: 166–170, 178–186, see also Kowalski 1998; Forstner 1990). Norman notices a piano and a score, and starts playing. Emma joins him, singing a song, obviously in German. The young man is a member of the American middle class: he is educated, intelligent and gentle. He is not fit to be a soldier at all: he cannot and does not want to kill. He feels more comfortable in a world with a piano, music and high culture than at war. For a while, everyone looks like

a happy family spending their free time together. They are safe. The war remains far away, outside the house, behind the door. The fragile, almost unreal impression of a peaceful and prosperous home, an *orbis interior* rejoicing in peace in times of a terrible slaughter, is suddenly interrupted. The other members of the “Fury” crew rush into the apartment, looking for Norman. They offer him alcohol and fun with a woman of easy virtue that they have just spent some nice moments with in the tank. Outraged, they discover that Don and Norman had not invited them to a shared meal, apparently because both feel superior to the rest of the crew. They decide to spoil the fun arranged by Wardaddy at this home to forget about the war. Wardaddy announces that he will knock the teeth out of anyone who touches the woman. The scruffiest, ugliest and most cynical of them all, Coon-Ass, scares Emma so much that she starts crying. He also behaves in the most disgusting and obscene way. He pounds the piano keys senselessly, sits on them creating a cacophony of sounds, spills alcohol, throws pieces of food, ridicules Norman, and even licks the egg that Emma got served on her plate. His behaviour, deviating from the accepted norms sanctioned by culture, is born from the chaotic reality of *orbis exterior*, breaking the cultural and social rules of a shared meal and hospitality, and is intended to destroy the illusion of a home created by Don Collier. Coon-Ass (his nickname was aptly translated into Polish as “Caveman”) does all this for a reason. He wants to remind the commander where they are and what they are doing. For the same purpose, the tank driver Gordo, a Mexican, tells Norman about his earlier war experience inside “Fury” in France. He recalls the Battle of the Falaise Pocket, where the Allied Powers, the Americans and the British, jointly destroyed two German armoured armies retreating to Germany. He talks about days and nights spent on the chase, looking at the kilometres of battlefield, wrecks of burnt tanks, corpses of people and horses. Flocks of flies hovering over decaying bodies. Injured horses finished off by gunshots. “Your eyes see it but your head can’t make no sense of it”, Gordo says in a quiet voice (quote for: https://furymovie.fandom.com/wiki/Fury_Script). Moved by the memories of the horrors they had survived together, Boyd “Bible” Swan starts crying. The crew of “Fury” had spent months and years in the cramped space of the tank, an armoured coffin that was their home but could become a common grave at any time. The horrors they lived through, and the constant stress changed them irreversibly. They know what they did to other people. They are also aware that death is coming. One of the armoured brothers, Coon-Ass, the most cynical of all, says: “It’s what happened. And what happened, happened. And what’s gonna happen is gonna happen. And playing house with a couple bitch Krauts won’t change much, will it?” (quote for: https://furymovie.fandom.com/wiki/Fury_Script). The illusion of home is finally shattered when an orderly arrives, calling the commander of “Fury” to a briefing before the next combat mission. Both German women die quite by accident during the artillery shelling of the town. Norman does not even manage to say goodbye to his wartime love: he only sees her body, sticking out from the rubble that had been a house a few minutes earlier.

War once again, or repetition and popular culture

As we know, popular culture often “sins” with the excess of unsophisticated entertainment it is supposed to offer to audiences. It is a culture of oversimplified and homogenised content, borrowings and repetitions (Strinati 1998: 16; Kłoskowska 1980: 274; Lasch 2015). These accusations are especially true of its American version: “American popular culture is seen to embody all that is wrong with mass culture. Mass culture is thought to arise from the mass production and consumption of culture. Since it is the capitalist society most closely associated with these processes, it is relatively easy to identify America as the home of mass culture” (Strinati 1998: 30).

Thus, *Fury* is not free of certain imperfections. It relies on a bivalent image of the world: good Americans, bad Germans, as well as the typical portrayal of a war hero (a flawless warrior, and the ultimate sacrifice of life in the name of a good cause) and the schematism of the father/son relationship intertwined with the war plot (Wardaddy/Norman). The director himself admitted that he had relied on history books about fighting in Normandy, the Siegfried Line, France and Germany. He also drew a lot of inspiration from diaries and biographies of WWII veterans, as well as photographs and documents. The final scene of the film, showing the heroic struggle between “Fury” crew and an SS battalion (where everyone but Norman dies), comes from the memories of Belton Y. Cooper (1998). The author described a lone tank getting into a skirmish with a German infantry unit at a crossroads. Someone knowledgeable about American war movies will notice similarities between the story filmed by Ayer and *Sahara* with Humphrey Bogart, released in 1943, showing the fight of a lone U.S. M3 Lee tank, in the desert with an Afrika Korps unit. Interestingly, the 1943 film had a remake in 1995, with James Belushi playing the lead role. American war cinema (just like the Soviet cinema in the past) still responds to considerable demand from audiences who expect film narratives about the extraordinary heroism of their soldiers, bravely performing miracles, even at the expense of their own lives.

Don “Wardaddy” Collier, the protagonist of *Fury*, co-created by David Ayer and Brad Pitt, is an example of how a film director can freely source ideas from popular culture and genres such as war films and adventure films (westerns). At first glance, this seems like a rather strange combination. However, “The characters in a western are largely unchangeable. The plot based on the Manichaean scheme, the struggle between good and evil, is unchangeable as well [...]” (Żygulski 1973: 109). A sheriff, a lone cowboy, wanders through the prairie to do justice: “He kills an evil man because he had long declared war on all evil, and because a murderer who has killed several people should finally get the well-deserved punishment so that essential justice can be done” (Żygulski 1973: 109). The hero wants not only to punish the murderer with his deed, but also to protect other people from evil. A similar motif is clearly noticeable in the scene of *Fury* where Wardaddy orders

his soldiers to shoot a captured SS officer, guilty of the deaths of children who had been hanged by the SS. According to Kazimierz Żygulski, the western (much like war films) satisfies the need for a historical legend which is “understandably, much desired by a nation with a history spanning just a few generations” (Żygulski 1973: 110). Both film genres can be seen as a kind of modern-day heroic myth. War films are also a response to the need for myths and the “mythisation” of history. Żygulski writes, “the army needs tradition, history, personal models of valour, sacrifice, heroism. These needs drive a visible social demand towards art, including film, and often offer direct inspiration. [...] There are repeated, stereotypical ways of approaching the subject of war, whether in literature, fine arts and film; these stereotypes influence the protagonists, giving them a distinct profile. Among the several ways of treating the war theme, one should highlight the idealisation and heroisation of war, mostly as a just war [...] in this case the hero, i.e. a soldier who is active during the war and performs unique heroic deeds and achieves spectacular victories, is almost an ideal type of hero in general” (Żygulski 1973: 85–87). He thus manifests bravery and courage, sacrifices himself for the good of the community, laying down his life. He works in a group, following the rules of male friendship that emerged in difficult wartime conditions. Of course, he could not exist or act without his antithesis, i.e. a negative protagonist, represented by the enemy (enemies). They are the opposites and they represent the evil in the film: “These villains create, above all, the image of the enemy, linked with all possible negative features: cruelty, falsehood, violation of the laws of war, ambitions to conquer and a false ideology” (Żygulski 1973: 88). Of course, Germans epitomise such an enemy in Ayer’s film. They also display many features that used to be associated with the image of the Stranger/the Other in traditional cultures, situating him outside the space of oekumene (see Kępiński 2012).

Ayer’s film was quite highly acclaimed by film critics, although some accused him of using a clichéd plot and simplified narratives coupled with excessively graphic cruelty. In their opinion, the film was nothing more than a creation of a skilled craftsman, devoid of any deeper meaning or ambition to show war other than in a brutal way. *Fury* was likened with *Saving Private Ryan*, of course with such comparisons favouring Steven Spielberg’s work. Both pop culture and contemporary Hollywood-style cinema are mainly intended for entertainment. American war films are not free from this vice. A cultural anthropologist should shy away from any attempts to find hidden symbols, myths and reflections of senses from distant traditional culture. Contemporary popular mythologies do not represent the same mythical pattern that Eliade wrote about. Popular culture is based on ideas about various topics, coupled with borrowings, quotations and fragments of meanings, all patched together. However, in my opinion, *Fury* is more than just pop cultural entertainment. Good American war cinema does exist: by this I mean films that are not thoughtless borrowings and calques of carelessly concocted pieces. Examples include Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*, Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*, Malick’s *The*

Thin Red Line or Stone's *Platoon*. I think we should include David Ayer's *Fury* in this noble group. It contains some tropes known to culture researchers (a journey as an initiation, the symbolic language of primordial myths or the archetypical figures of culture heroes). Of course, they are all provided in a version transformed by contemporary culture, only reminiscent of the existence of distant reflections on traditional cultures studied by Eliade. This Nobel Prize candidate and author of the *Treatise on the History of Religions* used to say that literature is the daughter of mythology, dealing with the same eternal mythological motifs. After all, what is cinema and what are outstanding film narratives, if not distant relatives of mythical narratives, sagas and tales told by shamans in a sanctified way, so as to evoke strong emotions and reveal the meaning of the world and human existence to the audience?

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AMERYKAŃSKIE FILMY WOJENNE. *FURIA* DAVIDA AYERA JAKO MITOLOGIZACJA WOJNY I ŻOŁNIERZY

Abstrakt. Zarówno popkultura, jak i nowoczesne kino hollywoodzkie są przeznaczone głównie do rozrywki. Amerykańskie filmy wojenne nie są wolne od tego imadła. Badacz kultury powinien unikać w takich filmach prób odnajdywania ukrytych symboli, mitów i przeblisków znaczeń z odległej kultury tradycyjnej. Współczesne popularne mitologie nie reprezentują tego samego mitycznego wzorca, o którym pisał Eliade. Kultura popularna składa się z idei na różne tematy, zapożyczeń, cytatów i fragmentów znaczeń, wszystko to splecione razem. Jednak, moim zdaniem, *Furia* wykracza poza popkulturę i rozrywkę. Istnieją dobre amerykańskie filmy wojenne, które nie są bezmyślnymi zapożyczeniami ani kalkami niedbale sklejonych kawałków popkultury. Można na nie spojrzeć i znaleźć pewne kulturowe tropy i motywy znane specjalistom od nauk humanistycznych, takie jak podróż inicjacyjna, symboliczny język odwiecznych mitów czy archetypowe postacie bohaterów kultury, oczywiście w wersji przekształconej przez kulturę popularną. Celem mojego artykułu jest zatem analiza filmu Davida Ayera z perspektywy badacza kultury, który w tym filmowym dziele poszukuje kulturowych tropów i źródeł mitu bohatera wojennego.

Słowa kluczowe: wojna, mit, kultura popularna, bohater filmu.