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Recommended Citation

Martin, Natassja (2020) "Film Review: Midway," History in the Making: Vol. 13 , Article 19. Available at: https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol13/iss1/19

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Film Review: *Midway*

By Natassja Martin

The Battle of Midway is considered to be one of the most important battles of World War II. The movie *Midway* is an account of the events leading up to that battle and the battle itself, providing all the content you could want from a classic war action film. The movie was released in late 2019 and had some popular actors in the leading roles such as Patrick Wilson, Woody Harrelson, and Nick Jonas.¹ Roland Emmerich directed the film, and since he is known for his classics such as *Independence Day* and *The Day After Tomorrow*, there was a lot of excitement leading up to the film release.² Unfortunately, the end result was underwhelming and instead offered the classic action movie a combination of forced relationships, bad dialogue, and awe-inspiring action scenes. Despite its faults, it was fairly accurate for a film about historical events and it did put great effort into making the atmosphere of the movie correct, adding a heart-warming touch by dedicating it to all who fought in the battle.

The Battle of Midway took place in early June of 1942, just a half year after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The battle was between the United States and the Japanese imperial forces and led to about 300 dead on the U.S. side and over 3,000 Japanese dead. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto believed it was necessary to strike down the U.S. early in the war before they had the opportunity to grow stronger and reach their full potential.³ Although Yamamoto’s plan to strike Hawaii again had the potential to deal a crippling blow to

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the U.S., the Japanese were unsuccessful because the U.S. had been placing much of their effort on detecting possible Japanese attack plans. The U.S. naval forces were waiting and held the element of surprise at Midway. The battle was crippling for the Japanese naval forces and a blow they never recovered from. Not only was it the first big victory the U.S. saw in the war, but it also gave the U.S. the opportunity to gain the upper hand in the war. The Battle of Midway holds huge significance when looking at WWII but, unfortunately, the film failed to capture that.

The film’s heart was in the right place as it set out to make a film that renewed warmth and gratitude towards the WWII soldiers. The general reception of the movie was negative amongst critics and almost as negative amongst fans with a 6.7/10 on IMDB (Internet Movie Database) and a disappointing 42 percent on Rotten Tomatoes. The critics almost unanimously commented on the weak storytelling in the film, with the only redeeming quality in the criticism being that some mentioned the realistic battle scenes and amazing effects, which unfortunately could not carry the movie. Most of the major characters in the movie were historically accurate and adhered to the correct line of events involved in the battle. That said, the filmmakers also carried on the problematic “good war” narrative found quite often in WWII memory. The characters all seemed overly heroic, with multiple scenes of the tough-guy character explaining to their younger counterpart that sometimes “you just gotta stand up and be brave,” or something to that effect. Although there were many heroes in the war, the idea that everyone had such a nonchalant attitude to the whole concept of self-sacrifice is incorrect and promotes an

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idealized image of war and what the soldiers experienced in WWII. This is problematic to the memory of the war as it creates the misconception that at least WWII was a good war, and those who participated in it never suffered from mental health problems during or afterward. This in turn has an effect on what the public expects from war and its veterans.

While sets and costumes were accurate to the time period and the experiences of soldiers in their positions, this sometimes seemed forced. It seemed like the movie, on the whole, was so concerned with stuffing every possible authentic detail into the film that they forgot to correlate it to the story line. One instance of this was the unnecessary scene of the U.S.O. dance after the Pearl Harbor attack where the character of Dick Best’s wife makes an abrasive comment to his superior officer, questioning why her husband is not the commander of their unit yet. He later gets promoted, but this conversation gave nothing to the plot of the movie. It seems as though the only explanation for its appearance in the film is for it to showcase the U.S.O. Pride.

On the same note, much of the film’s dialogue seems to have been written with the same mindset. Most of the words spoken in the film are useless utterances or explanations of things any active viewers can infer through the actions of the characters. This leads to cringe-worthy sentences that appear as narrations of a scene’s events by the character in the scene. This tacks on more than a few minutes which leads to the film’s unnecessary length. As it runs over two hours long, it leaves plenty of time for the viewer to notice its shortcomings.

Many critics commented on the film’s use of CGI (computer-generated imagery), but it is the standard approach for special effects that are required for a convincing war scene of such immense scale. Most of it provided a realistic portrayal of the scenes and added to the experience of the viewer alongside the characters. While film critics generally look down on the use of CGI, when viewing the film for its worth as a historical film there is no place for it. The cast provided a wide range of ability that should have played out very well if it had not been for the previous
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mentioned downfalls in writing. Still, they held up the larger than life narratives of the WWII characters they played.

The film’s shortcomings can be attributed to poorly written dialogue and poor direction. Its actors were chosen well, and its historical accuracy was accurate enough for the everyday viewer. As with any historical film, there were liberties taken to make it more dramatic and suspenseful, but this reviewer felt that it compromised the historical integrity of the film. While it may not be appropriate for a college classroom, any film that draws the public’s attention towards an event while being somewhat historically accurate holds value, as it may at least inspire more study and work towards making the event more well known.

Viewers may choose to continue the conversation and do more research into what happened. This blockbuster is not perfect, but it may spark a viewer’s interest in history, and that alone has value.

Bibliography


Author Bio

Natassja Martin will be graduating with her bachelor’s degree in history in December 2020, after which she is looking to pursue a career in education. As an undergraduate she has been a part of the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship, in which she researched veterans in the WWII and Vietnam eras. This has allowed her to gain knowledge surrounding both time periods in regard to the war and the U.S. The interactions between war and society is what piqued her interest in the field. As she moves forward she would like to continue studying war’s impacts on society in a few ways, such as the impact it has on the family unit, women’s role in society, and different avenues of veteran studies. This perspective provides a more accurate view of war and its effects and she would like to continue this narrative through further research. She hopes to pursue these research interests through graduate school and eventually, a career in higher education.