From Pearl Harbor (1941) to *Pearl Harbor* (2001): On the Emancipatory Potential of Nursing During Wartime and its Representation in Hollywood Film

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ABSTRACT: This essay examines the representation of the nursing profession in the Hollywood movie *Pearl Harbor* (2001). As cultural products of their time, films tell us about the social and political conditions in which they were created. In the late 1990s and early 2000s a conservative feminist backlash, which Susan Faludi described as early as 1991 was still impacting the emancipation of women. In its often reactionary portrayal of the women nurses of World War II, *Pearl Harbor* seems to reflect more the situation of women in the 1990s than doing justice to the role of nurses during the attack on Pearl Harbor. Thus, through a cultural studies-informed analysis of the movie and its protagonist Evelyn Johnson, expectations of nurses during World War II will be examined and challenged.

KEYWORDS: Pearl Harbor (film); World War II; Nursing; Emancipation; Gender; Feminism

Introduction

For decades, the discourse on the feminist movement before, during, and after World War II, was dominated by the notion that the war resulted in a backlash which "crippled the appeal and effect of feminism for almost half a century" (LeGates 288). While the war years had a considerable effect on emancipation due to the large incorporation of women into the work force, this development was also not without problems and did not mean that women achieved unequivocal equality. Particularly the years following the war are considered to have had an ebbing effect on women's emancipation and thus on the achievement of social equality for women (LeGates 374). Yet, the general movement is one of gradual progress; despite several drawbacks and renewed conservative backlashes in almost every decade since World War II, women have kept on demanding their equal position in society.

Michael Bay's Hollywood movie *Pearl Harbor* (2001) demonstrates the notion of women's inspirational contribution to the workforce during wartime and portrays the nurse Evelyn

Johnson (Kate Beckinsale) as one of its main protagonists. Contrary to what one might expect of Evelyn, who faces a male-dominated society during World War II, her character partially succeeds to prove her strength and capability through her work as professional nurse. In the following, I will argue that this character represents the experiences of professional women in the United States during World War II. Women were proving their responsibility and capabilities in work life and becoming aware of their potential both in the medical field and as pillars of (war) society (Boyer 783). The form of emancipation women achieved in the medical field during the war, for example, was a limited one, due to the extraordinary circumstances of war and its temporary nature. Even though shorthandedness in the workforce during World War II might have opened up opportunities for US-American women, emancipation still was constrained by social conventions and prejudices during and after the war. In this regard, particularly the idea of nursing as an opportunity for female independence and mobility comes into play.

Such experiences, be it through their jobs as nurses or their professions as workers during World War II, provided women with "a new sense of their potential" (Boyer 785). While the number of nurses during the attack on Pearl Harbor was estimated at fewer than 1,000, by the end of the war this number had risen by the factor 170, so that the Army Nurse Corps then comprised around 170,000 nurses (Cook 441). Furthermore, the professional status of nurses was proven established by the fact that from 1943 on, nurses completed a four-week training program in military life before being deployed. However, as supportive as the measures in the military might have been for emancipation, military nurses did not only benefit from them. Despite the depiction of nursing as an opportunity for emancipation and empowerment for women in the movie *Pearl Harbor* and the aggressive wartime recruitment of women that seem to assert this notion, the day-to-day reality for female nurses was far more complex and involved deprivation as well. As Frances L. Hoffmann points out, the job of a nurse often entailed an exclusion from decision-making processes and budget control as well as inadequate pay and limited opportunities for professional advancement (56). Furthermore, the fact that nursing had had a longer tradition as female occupation before the war, puts this notion of nursing as means of emancipation into perspective (Meyer). The extraordinary status of professional women was often limited to wartime moments of crisis, and it was rather in male-dominated professions, such as

industrial work, where existing gender hierarchies were challenged: Rosie the Riveter became an icon of emancipation. Jobs like these, however, were only held by about 16 percent of American women (Norton, *A People and a Nation* 744). Moreover, the emancipation experience was rather exclusive. Access to the nursing profession, for example, was strictly limited by class and race; many African American women were denied pursuing this occupation, the liberating experience of military nurses was primarily reserved to middle and upper class white women (Cook 441; Norton, *Major Problems* 371).

In the movie, audiences are first introduced to Evelyn Johnson as professionally superior to her later boyfriend and partner Rafe. It is up to her to medically and scientifically determine whether Rafe is physically fit enough to become a fighter pilot. Later she even assumes the power to decide who should live and who will die during the excruciating events of the attack on Pearl Harbor. The portrayal of these actions might support the common assumption that nursing served the cause of emancipation during World War II. Yet, liberation and mobility proved to be only temporary. This is as true for the actual historical circumstances during World War II as it is for the movie's representation of a still very much intact separate spheres logic. It can be seen in the movie's conventional portrayal of the division of home zone and war front, the fear of women's 'invasion' into the 'male sphere', and regressive trends following the war. What should also be taken into account is the fact that this film was produced during a time of a neo-conservative backlash (cf. Faludi). Mainstream Hollywood cinema is an ideologically charged vehicle. It takes up cultural and ideological notions as much as it feeds back into those notions. This does not mean that the experience of women in the late 1990s is just the same as that of women in the 1940s, but it suggests that there is still a prevalent tendency to tie women to 'their' respective sphere.

The Nursing Profession as Opportunity for (Limited) Emancipation

The film first introduces Evelyn and her friends as the young women are on a train to New York and share their fantasies about the job as a nurse for the U.S. military. Betty, a seventeen-year old country girl, points out her enthusiasm: "Saturday night, in New York City. Do you know what they are doing, where I come from? Nothing. Cow tipping," while a fellow nurse replies to this: "That's why you joined the Navy, hun, to get out of this dusty little town and see the world" (*Pearl Harbor*). This dialogue emphasizes one of the major

opportunities the job as a nurse promised for women during World War II. Instead of having to stay with their parents, they could now 'move about' and enjoy the advantages of a job and geographical mobility (Miller 53). "Seeing the world"—as military nurses did during wartime—arguably only allowed for a limited and often cruel perspective on the violence of war and possibly entailed dangerous and even life-threatening situations. Still, the newly gained freedom of women volunteering as nurses could certainly contribute to their emancipation. As this scene on the train further conveys, women were finally able to bond outside of the domestic sphere and obtain more control over their own lives, even with regard to men. Former nurse Harriet Moore Holmes, who was stationed in Pearl Harbor, recalls for example that she enjoyed her freedom and "dated a lot" (Warren). Besides sexual freedom, which is also portrayed in the movie, the motives of earning money and being able to provide for and decide about your own living as well as a patriotic contribution to the nation's war efforts are stressed. Along these lines, nurse Sandra reminds her friends that they "are Navy nurses, not tourists" (*Pearl Harbor*). There seemed to have been a longing for independence, self-respect, and appreciation, which motivated women to pursue the profession (Miller 60). Along with this rather vague idea of gaining independence, *Pearl Harbor*'s train scene also conveys the idea of work as a form of empowerment. On the train, Evelyn tells her fellow nurses how she met Rafe McCawley (Ben Affleck) during a medical check, in which she had to test his eyesight. Rafe turns out to be dyslexic and thus likely to fail the test. In this precarious situation, Rafe realizes that his future as pilot is at the mercy of Evelyn's medical determination, and he begs her not to "take [his] wings" (*Pearl Harbor*). Evelyn's power over Rafe and thus the obviousness for her emancipation become fully visible when gender roles are temporarily inverted and Rafe is even turned into a sexual object. Not only does she mention that the "cocky pilot" did "have a very cute butt," but she also draws attention to the fact that she poked him several times with injections, thereby clearly alluding to the idea of sexual penetration (*Pearl Harbor*). Evelyn obviously enjoys this act of penetration and the empowerment this very (male) act has for her as a woman. Eventually, Evelyn lets Rafe pass the medical check but only after demonstrating her superiority in this particular encounter. Her job empowers Evelyn and enables her to emancipate herself from the subjection to men—at least for the duration of the medical examination and the injection she administers. However, she remains a nurse in the military.

With regard to her professional field, medicine, she is not in the more powerful position of a medical doctor. Additionally, the patriarchal structure of the military even further undermines her position as a woman in that system. In this sense, military nurses are doubly subordinated: They stand on a comparably low level of a hierarchy within the field of medicine, which is embedded in another hierarchy, the military. Paradoxically, during a "state of exception" (Agamben), namely war, this might lead to a position of power.

The extent of Evelyn's empowerment through her work as a Navy nurse seems to reach its zenith with the climax of the storyline: after Pearl Harbor is attacked by the Japanese, the hospital is overrun with casualties and even the doctors in charge are too overwhelmed to control the situation (*Pearl Harbor*). Evelyn, however, literally takes matters into her own hands, for example by pressing her finger down a general's artery to stop the bleeding and ordering the doctor to "focus" (*Pearl Harbor*). This event marks yet another empowering act of penetration and thus empowerment for Evelyn Johnson. Again, she is the one in control (White-Stanley 229) proving her responsibility, professionalism, and potential and even exceeding her role as a mere nurse by showing calm and initiative in moments of crisis. This becomes obvious when the hospital is running out of morphine and Evelyn uses her red lipstick for the triage. She sorts out the casualties at the entrance of the hospital by marking critical patients with a 'c', and fatal ones with an 'f' (*Pearl Harbor*). In this scene, the red lipstick, generally considered the epitome of femininity and seduction, is turned into a phallic symbol of power over life and death. Evelyn's profession and professionality allow her to transgress traditional social boundaries and prove her capability of exerting control over existential matters in this moment of utmost crisis.

Unfortunately, as critic Debra White-Stanley also points out, these moments of apparent female empowerment and transgression are stalemated because the dominant portrayal of Navy nurses in *Pearl Harbor* remains that of a "central pop image" (441). They are depicted either as 'easy women' or as serving in the military with the aim to become involved with men and secure their future husbands, to whom they would be subordinate in marriage. Ultimately, the film turns these women into shallow sexualized objects of male desire, thereby impairing the very female empowerment it also occasionally conveys. The profession of nursing as a means of emancipation, as portrayed in the beginning of the

movie, therefore presents only one side of the coin. For many women, military nursing came with a new sense of independence and power, but ultimately the heteronormative order was not overthrown, neither during the war, nor after. The movie depicts a female experience of temporary emancipation and limited freedom, yet also symbolically brings the women back into the domestic realm in the end. In a way, this reflects social reality both at the end of World War II and for women in the late 1990s, suggesting backlash rather than progress.

Constraints to Emancipation During and After War

Despite Evelyn Johnson's elevated position and emancipated role in the beginning and during the climax of the film, this status is not held up when she engages in relationships with men. When enjoying a night out with their friends, Evelyn's role as Navy nurse and with it her contribution to the war effort is downplayed by Rafe, as he congratulates her to being deployed to Pearl Harbor, a place "as far away from the fighting as you can get" (*Pearl Harbor*). In a similar vein, he suggests to "get a sun tan," while the men are fighting (*Pearl Harbor*). His insistence on and reinforcing of separate roles and separate spheres becomes even more obvious when he confesses to her that he has volunteered for the Royal Air Force. Although Evelyn expresses her concern for the mission and asks him to stay, Rafe clarifies that this is "not [her] choice" (*Pearl Harbor*). Both in her roles as nurse and woman, Evelyn first is portrayed as strong and self-reliant, yet soon appears to be pushed into the domestic sphere by Rafe and her job, where she lives a protected life (White-Stanley 228). This impression is even further underscored by the portrayal of the arrival of the Navy nurses on Oahu, when Betty refers to Pearl Harbor as "paradise" and the nurse in charge of the newcomers is dealing with sunburned soldiers (*Pearl Harbor*). The paradisiacal depiction of the Hawaiian island and the relative carefreeness of its inhabitants, of course, also serves the purpose to enhance the contrast to what is to come. During the attack on Pearl Harbor, paradise is turned into hell and the carefree nurses become troubled angels of death as they have to sort casualties into doomed men and survivors.

The idea of a gradual reinforcement of separate spheres in the film is eventually solidified in terms of actual space. Evelyn approaches the general she saved after the attack by the Japanese, in order to allow her access into the command post as Rafe and his friend Danny

are involved in the Doolittle mission and to receive notice whether "they've lived or died" (*Pearl Harbor*). Initially, the general wants to decline her request, but Evelyn manages to persuade him by reminding him that she saved him by "keeping her fingers plugged in [his] artery" (*Pearl Harbor*). Her act of penetration proves to be empowering one last time, albeit in a very limited sense: Evelyn's presence in the command post is tolerated, but she is not allowed to enter the command center. As White-Stanley argues, Evelyn is "seen but not heard" (229) and thus excluded from the male sphere. This actual assignment of male and female territory—of home zone and war front—symbolizes the tacit order of male-dominated war. Women are tolerated for their caretaking and healing qualities, yet any involvement in the dealings of war remain forbidden. Or, as General Robert H. Barrow expressed it at the end of the twentieth century, "war is a man's work" (qtd. in John 23) and consequently does not tolerate female presence.

Evelyn's Betrayal of Rafe with Danny

Apart from Evelyn being pushed into the domestic sphere, or home zone, her chance to emancipate herself through her job as a Navy nurse is corrupted by her depiction as traitor. After Rafe's alleged death, Evelyn visits Rafe's best friend Danny Walker (Josh Hartnett) on the airfield in a red, Asian dress and seduces him (*Pearl Harbor* 2001). They have sex in a hangar wrapped in the white fabric of parachute silk, in which Evelyn's red dress looks like the red sun of the Japanese national flag. As a consequence of their fling, Evelyn gets pregnant and the unborn child—a proof of Evelyn's infidelity and Danny's disloyalty towards Rafe—becomes the wedge that divides the two 'brothers in arms.' Evelyn's seducing Danny and their act of adultery can be interpreted as metaphor for the betrayal by the Japanese on the U.S. (Landy 89) and not only supports the notion of women corrupting the military but even places women on the side of the enemy (White-Stanley 230). They figure as 'Other' in a double sense. During World War II, the notion of women corrupting the male sphere through their military service, for example as nurses, was a commonly held belief spread by a 'slander campaign,' according to which women showed immoral behavior and even prostituted themselves during their military service (White-Stanley 227). Incorporating these prejudices in Evelyn's character, questioning her respectability, and marginalizing her influence by effectively tying her to the home zone undermine her and any attempt at

emancipation her job might entail. This reactionary portrayal of women's role in society corresponds as much to the context of production of the Hollywood movie and the neo-conservative backlash of American society at the time as it does to the lived realities of World War II and its aftermath—a notion which is further emphasized by the end of the film.

After Danny has died a martyr in the Doolittle Raid (Landy 88), the movie ends with a scene of Rafe, Evelyn, and Danny's son reunited at Rafe's childhood home (*Pearl Harbor*). Evelyn is no longer a nurse, but a caring mother and embraces Rafe from behind, suggesting that she literally and symbolically stands behind her husband. Rafe then goes on to fly with Danny junior into the sunset, while Evelyn stays behind (*Pearl Harbor*). This scene clearly embraces the notion of a postwar America, which experienced a yearning for "emotional security," "material success" and the nuclear family as a "bastion of stability," "celebrating the ideal couple" (Boyer 836). In the context of production of *Pearl Harbor* in the late 1990s, this normalization and essentialization of 'traditional' gender roles also echoes and feeds back into a neo-conservative agenda. The movie depicts a late 1990s idea of and nostalgia for what the 1950s were supposedly like: traditional gender roles were still intact, men earned enough to provide for their families and prosperity was unquestioned. Yet, both the movie and reality diverge from this 'fiction.' Compared to 1940, twice as many American women were employed in 1960, 39 percent of these women being mothers (Norton et al. 815-16). Furthermore, in order to fight the still existing inequalities, for example with regard to salaries (Norton et al. 815-16), women actively engaged in politics and pushed for reforms (Norton and Alexander 435). According to these circumstances, neither all women might have challenged the ideal of marriage or motherhood directly, nor were they necessarily forced to stay at home (Norton and Alexander 435). Undeniably, the end of war imposed a certain limitation to the experiences gained by women, for example in their jobs as nurses. However, it would be inaccurate to claim that all achievements were entirely in vein. Without the experiences during war, many women would have never entered the labor force at all (Miller 61) and thereby gained a sense of their potential, independence, and dignity.

Conclusion

During World War II, the nursing profession offered chances for women's liberation in terms of a new sense of mobility and independence and in terms of an affirmation of their professional capabilities, even in difficult situations. The strong separation of spheres and a fear of women 'invading' and corrupting 'male territory' might have limited these chances; nevertheless, even though one might argue that little changed ideologically, at least the temporary change of circumstances (Miller 61) allowed women to become aware of their potential. And solely measuring women's liberation in the wake of World War II by their wartime contributions or their voice in society would neglect many women's experiences towards their liberation since it ignores attitudes, such as an awareness of their qualities, self-respect and autonomy, which elude measurement.

As far as the movie *Pearl Harbor* is concerned, the portrayal of Navy nurses appears unhistorical (Rosenberg 166) since it rather portrays a longed-for fantasy and 'lost ideal' which was supposedly still intact during World War II and the postwar years. To this end, the story of Evelyn and her friends simplifies, reduces, and even exploits female experiences based on prejudices about women's sexuality fuelled by a fear of their transcending of social conventions. Regarding these findings, it remains questionable why a movie, launched in 2001, neglects the obvious chances of enriching the story through more complex female characters and instead takes on such a reactionary stand. This might be explained with a prevalent conservative feminist backlash in the 1990s and a general longing for a simpler social reality with seemingly intact 1950s-style gender roles, which, of course, is merely a fiction. Maybe, the simplified and reduced depiction of women in *Pearl Harbor* even serves as proof that Hollywood does not necessarily create, but rather respond to social realities and trends (Landy 96). From this perspective, it appears that even today the issue of emancipation is not at all resolved and that women's role is still being negotiated between the celebration of female self-determination and the reduction to a sexual object.

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