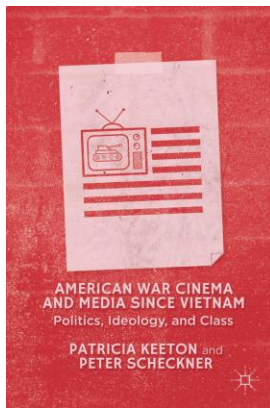Patricia Keeton & Peter Scheckner, **American War Cinema and Media Since Vietnam: Politics, Ideology, and Class,** New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, 264 pp., $95.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by
Cortland Rankin
New York University, USA

Look past the duty to God and country that clothes the U.S. military in an air of mythic heroism and a simple truth emerges: "[S]oldiers are, by and large, workers with weapons and always have been" (Keeton & Scheckner, 2013, p. 6). This truism is the point of departure for Patricia Keeton and Peter Scheckner's **American War Cinema and Media Since Vietnam: Politics, Ideology, and Class**, which explores how contemporary American war cinema and media function ideologically, particularly with regard to the representation of social class. For Keeton and Scheckner, war cinema represents a privileged arena for understanding class inequality in American society. As a perennially taboo topic, class is rarely given center stage in popular representations of American wars. Yet class remains a pivotal factor in war, determining "who fights, who is disposable . . . who comes home wounded in body and spirit, and whose profits are guaranteed no matter what the official outcome on the battlefield" (ibid., p. 9). Keeton and Scheckner explore a range of political considerations governing American war cinema and media, but their primary contribution comes in their analysis of how such works negotiate the issue of class.

Keeton and Scheckner consider war cinema and media in concert with other elements of what President Dwight Eisenhower termed the country's "military-industrial complex" (Eisenhower, 1961). The military and the entertainment industry have long enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship. For example, a film like *Top Gun* (Simpson, Bruckheimer, & Scott, 1986) could not have been made without the military hardware and advisors supplied by the U.S. Department of Defense. In return, the film served as a wildly successful recruitment vehicle for the Navy. This symbiotic relationship produces a brand of "militainment" characterized by whitewashed representations of war that make it palatable—and even desirable—to mainstream audiences (see Roger Stahl's *Militainment, Inc.: War, Media, and Popular Culture* for a more thorough treatment of the "militainment" phenomenon). Serious engagement with class is one such issue that is often ignored in these films. Drawing on a diverse array of mainstream and independent feature films and documentaries as well as TV dramas, series, and video games, Keeton and Scheckner highlight works that directly confront issues of social class in wartime, while reading many more against the grain to ascertain what they mask about class and why.

The book is divided into two parts, each consisting of five chapters. The first part contextualizes American war cinema and media in relation to significant political, social, and economic events of the past four decades and examines how changing modes of production and new media technologies have impacted war's representation onscreen.

The authors begin their analysis by looking to literary works that have dealt substantially with class in relation to war. They open with a consideration of Homer's *Iliad*, finding evidence of class strife in

the figure of Thersites, who publicly denounces Agamemnon's willingness to sacrifice his soldiers for war booty (Homer, 1990, lines 262–275). The descendants of Thersites, the authors argue, can be found in works ranging from Shakespeare's historical plays to Joseph Heller's absurdist World War II novel, *Catch-22* (1961). Literature is less capital-intensive than film and therefore often enjoys more leeway to be openly critical. Even so, it is remarkable how disparate the great works of war literature and war cinema can be with respect to their willingness to address class inequality.

In the first part of their book, Keeton and Scheckner devote significant attention to the political motivations for and ideological implications of recent developments in the genre conventions of American war cinema and media. While Vietnam punctured the myth of the "good war," it has since been resurrected and transformed to suit America's recent discretionary wars. As Keeton and Scheckner point out, today's "good war" narratives often sidestep the reasons for military intervention in favor of promoting the proficiency and fraternal bonds of America's soldiers, particularly elite Special Forces operators. The authors cite Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* (Bruckheimer & Scott, 2001) and Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* (Bigelow, Boal, & Ellison, 2012) as prominent examples of this tendency. In such films we are made to marvel at the lethality of Special Forces who are cast as fearless supermen capable of overcoming any obstacle. While our sense of patriotism may be stirred by the soldiers' admirable promise to "leave no man behind," the films themselves rarely encourage us to question why that man was there in the first place.

Keeton and Scheckner also consider how gender and race have been represented in contemporary war cinema and media. In doing so, however, the authors overextend themselves and end up paying lip service to issues that warrant more substantial treatments. At times in Part I the authors seem to stray from their thesis and embark on tangents. At one point, for example, a subsection on Hollywood films' depictions of class inequality from the 1970s through the 1990s distracts from their primary focus on political ideologies and class in war films.

The second part of *American War Cinema and Media Since Vietnam*, which focuses on the representation of "warriors as workers" (Keeton & Scheckner, 2013, p. 21) in contemporary war cinema and media, is the heart of Keeton and Scheckner's argument. Particularly illuminating is their discussion of developments in the combat film subgenre. Combat films have always privileged the experience of the soldier above all else. The widespread availability and unobtrusiveness of small digital cameras have given the soldiers of recent wars the ability to create ostensibly "unmediated" perspectives on life in combat zones. This lack of mediation is an illusion, however, and Keeton and Scheckner remind us that the problem with such soldier-produced works lies in the fact that by privileging the soldier's perspective as the authentic experience of war they "imply that those who have not participated in war have no right to question or criticize 'the troops,' whatever they may be doing" (ibid., p. 129). Despite their claims to authenticity, films like *The War Tapes* (May, James, & Scranton, 2006) only provide access to the soldier's perspective on war and, ultimately, deny us the historical contextualization needed to make our own decisions about the legitimacy of the soldier's actions.

For Keeton and Scheckner any representation of war is marked by a central paradox: "the more realistic, 'gritty,' and high tech the combat scenes are re-created, the less the viewer even thinks that the issues of politics, ideology, or social class are elements in all wars" (Keeton & Scheckner, 2013, p. 105). Nowhere is this anesthetizing power of media more potent than in war-themed video games. While films

about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have had limited box office success, video games such as the *Call of Duty* (Activision, 2003) and *Medal of Honor* (Electronic Arts, 1999) franchises have proved far more profitable. Like movies, these games often have military advisors and strive to offer gamers more "realistic" interactive combat experiences. However, as with the "boots on the ground" perspective promised by soldier-produced videos, these games limit critical engagement with the political, social, and economic implications of war. One reason for their popularity is the fact that games, more so than films, tend to omit the unsavory aspects of conflict. The inherent danger in this is that gamers might "have no knowledge of, as Eisenhower had said so eloquently in his 1961 farewell address to the nation, the 'lingering sadness of war' and the 'certain agony of the battlefield'" (Keeton & Scheckner, 2013, pp. 108–109).

In addition to openly criticizing the lack of class consciousness apparent in most war films and video games, the authors single out works that do confront class tensions and challenge the hegemonic ideologies of the American war film. The authors point to the rare Hollywood films like *Syriana* (Fox, Nozik, Kacandes, & Gaghan, 2005), *Lord of War* (Niccol, Roberts, & Cage, 2005), and *Green Zone* (Bevan, Fellner, Levin, & Greengrass, 2010) that emphasize economic motivations for war above all else. The task of raising awareness of class inequality within the American military, however, has been taken up primarily by documentary filmmakers. As such, Keeton and Scheckner devote much of their attention in their closing chapters to documentaries like Eugene Jarecki's *Why We Fight* (Shipman & Jarecki, 2005) and Robert Greenwald's *Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers* (Greenwald, Feeley, Gilliam, & Smith, 2006) that expose the ways in which much of the American economy is predicated on the business of war.

American War Cinema and Media Since Vietnam is readable, jargon-free, and accessible to a broad audience. Those with a specific interest in war cinema and media or cultures of militarism will find it particularly elucidating. The book is not without its faults, however. The post-Vietnam periodization is inadequately justified and seems arbitrary. In addition, the book is repetitive at points since Keeton and Scheckner spread their discussion of particular films over several chapters and recycle some of the material. Furthermore, much of the book's first part simply updates work done by Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard in *The Hollywood War Machine* (2007). However, Keeton and Scheckner are to be commended for their focus on social class, which, as in many films, has largely been neglected in scholarly literature on American war cinema. Furthermore, the manner in which they draw connections between war-themed films and video games is likewise innovative, although the discussion of games is done in broad strokes, leaving close analysis of specific games wanting. Overall, the book represents a valuable first step in a new direction in war cinema studies. Keeton and Scheckner's work begs to be expanded. Applying their class-based analytical prism to a wider historical and geographic range of war films and media will undoubtedly prove fruitful.

References

Activision.. (2003). *Call of duty* [software]. United States.

Bevan, T., Fellner, E., Levin, L., & Greengrass, P. (Producers), & Greengrass, P. (Director). (2010). *Green zone*. United States/United Kingdom/France: Universal Studios.

Bigelow, K., Boal, M., & Ellison, M. (Producers) & Bigelow, K. (Director). (2012). *Zero dark thirty*. United States: Columbia Pictures.

Boggs, C., & Pollard, T. (2007). *The Hollywood war machine*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

Bruckheimer, J. & Scott, R. (Producers) & Scott, R. (Director) (2001). *Black hawk down*. United States/United Kingdom: Columbia Pictures.

Electronic Arts. *Medal of honor.* (1999). [software]. United States.

Eisenhower, D. D. (1961, January 17). Farewell address of President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. Retrieved from http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=12086

Fox, J., Nozik, M., & Kacandes, G. (Producers), & Gaghan, S. (Director). (2005). *Syriana*. United States: Warner Bros.

Greenwald, R., Feeley, S., Gilliam, J., & Smith, D. (Producers), & Greenwald, R. (Director). (2006). *Iraq for sale: The war profiteers*. United States: Brave New Films.

Heller, J. (1961). *Catch-22*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

Homer. (1990). *The Iliad*. Translated by Robert Fagles. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

Keeton, P., & Scheckner, P. (2013). *American war cinema and media since Vietnam: Politics, ideology, and class*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

May R., & James, S. (Producers), & Scranton, D. (Director). (2006). *The war tapes*. United States: SenArt Films/Scranton-Lacy Films.

Niccol, A., Roberts, C., & Cage, N. (Producers), & Niccol, A. (Director). (2005). *Lord of war*. United States: Entertainment Manufacturing Company/Ascendant Pictures/Saturn Films.

Shipman, S. (Producer), & Jarecki, E. (Director). (2005). *Why we fight*. United States: Arte/BBC Storyville/Canadian Broadcasting Corporation/Charlotte Street Films/TV2 Danmark.

Simpson, D., & Bruckheimer, J. (Producers), & Scott, T. (Director). (1986). *Top gun*. United States: Paramount Pictures.

Stahl, R. (2009). *Militainment, Inc.: War, Media, and Popular Culture*. New York: Routledge.