

***Overlord*, dir. by Julius Avery** (Paramount Pictures, 2018)

Hollywood is fascinated by the D-Day landings. From the lauded spectacle of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), offering the boots-on-the-ground thrill of fighting through Omaha Beach, to *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014), which situates the invasion of Normandy via Britain within the context of a future war against an alien enemy, this battle provides a premise that seems consistently to draw in audiences, and a narrative structure that easily rewards the good and punishes the bad. 1944 was a successful year for the Allies. Russia pushed forward through Eastern Europe, re-conquering territory and forcing the Nazis to commit troops and resources to an inevitable defeat; British and Indian long-range reconnaissance forces (the Chindits) harassed the Japanese in Burma; the Battle for North Africa won, the Americans liberated Italy from Nazi occupation; and, most famously, from the point of view of cinematic representations, Operation ‘Overlord’ saw the invasion of Northern France by American, Canadian, and British forces. While *Overlord* is inherently cinematic – its combined operations (land, sea, and air) give varied scale to the proceedings – aspects of its planning are often missing from such depictions. There was initial uncertainty over where the landings would happen. Long months waiting in the UK meant tense soldiers, as diversionary tactics attempted to persuade the Nazis that the fighting would happen elsewhere. On the German side, disagreement between Hitler and Gerd von Rundstedt (and between Rundstedt and General Rommel, who oversaw many of the preparations in the Atlantic) meant a fractured defensive strategy, resulting in success for the Allies. That said, recent films about D-Day, like the aforementioned *Saving Private Ryan* and *Edge of Tomorrow*, prefer to launch right into the action, and Julius Avery’s *Overlord* does precisely this, but with a twist.

The opening section of the film plays like a variation on *Saving Private Ryan*, and adheres closely to Jeanine Basinger’s notion of the squad-based combat film.¹ After an exciting pep talk aboard their aircraft, in which a squad of the 101st Airborne is told that their mission is to infiltrate the area behind German lines and blow up a key radio tower housed in a church, the plane is shot down by anti-aircraft fire, with significant casualties. We follow protagonist PFC Edward Boyce (Jovan Adepo) as he recovers, witnesses the death of his superior officer, Sgt Rensin (Bokeem Woodbine), at the hands of Nazis, and is reunited with the remnants of his squad, including explosives expert and now nominal leader Corporal Lewis Ford (Wyatt Russell). The group cautiously advances to their destination, in the

¹ See Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003).

process capturing (and then assisting) a French woman, Chloe (Mathilde Olivier) who comes from the target village, and who also detests the Nazis. So far, the classic World-War-II combat tropes are in evidence. The squad members are ethnically and geographically diverse (Boyce and Rensin are both Black American soldiers; given the Nazi sadism and racism in the film's subtext, a clever tagline might be 'Get Out (of Normandy)'). There is initial bickering in the ranks, which must be overcome in order for the mission to succeed. Finally, and, most importantly, the film implies that the Americans' greatest strength is their solemn willingness to unite around a just cause, in the process overcoming the aforementioned interpersonal squabbles. All this is, in and of itself, enough for a movie, and if that were it, this would be something like a lightweight riff on Spike Lee's *Miracle at St Anna* (2008), which shows US Buffalo soldiers fighting back against Nazi atrocities in Italy. But, this being a Bad Robot film produced and developed by J. J. Abrams, there is more to come.

That twist is that the Nazi atrocities in the region are not simply the war crimes familiar from history books (such as the shooting of innocent civilians, which we do see onscreen); instead, their horrific science experiments are aligned with the 'mad science' of the horror genre. This is a supernatural war film, and as such, it joins a motley lineage that includes everything from *The Frozen Dead* (1966: frozen Nazis revived to reconquer the world), through *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981: Nazis unearth and misuse the Ark of the Covenant), *The Keep* (1983: occult happenings in a creepy castle), *Marching Out of Time* (1983: time-travelling Nazis); and *Zone Troopers* (1985: Nazis discover and are harassed by aliens), to *BloodRayne: The Third Reich* (2011: eponymous videogame anti-hero BloodRayne battles Nazis). In addition to being very generically a war film, *Overlord* is, like these earlier examples, a Nazisploitation film that focuses, not on sexual perversion, but on the mad-science side on war atrocities.² Like a reversed *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), the issue here is a super-soldier serum of a sort, a brackish liquid found beneath the occupied French church that is first tested on dead bodies, so as to allow the reanimated corpses to fight on. Later, however, in a moment of desperation, Captain Wafner (Pilou Asbaek) also injects it into himself, demonstrating that the liquid can grotesquely enhance the strength and endurance of the living.

One of *Overlord*'s great virtues as a film is that it does not get too caught up in expositions of the pseudo-science. Boyce's initial run through the Nazi lab provides the

² For a varied overview of Nazisploitation cycles since the 1960s, see *Nazisploitation!: The Nazi Image in Low-Brow Cinema and Culture*, ed. by Daniel H. Magilow, Elizabeth Bridges, and Kristin T. Vander Lugt (New York: Continuum, 2011).

audience with glimpses of the varied experiments being conducted by the classically creepy Dr Schmidt (Erich Redman); we see, for example, a woman whose head has been removed from her body. This being popular American genre cinema, Boyce's quickly formed impressions of the Nazi operation are made clear: they are doing Very Bad Things. As a result, the heroes' new mission isn't just to destroy the radio tower, but also, having stumbled across the lab in the space underneath the tower, to end the experimentation and suppress the secret liquid weapon before it becomes a threat to the rest of the invading army. Once the mad-science elements are introduced, *Overlord* ceases to be a straightforward war film. The squad-combat aspect remains, exemplified by the group undertaking a multi-location infiltration of the lab in an attempt at blowing it up, with the group finally working in unison and playing off each other's strengths. However, this is also balanced by the horror elements; a stand-out scene comes with the mutated Wafner squares off with a mutated Ford, who sacrifices himself so that the explosions can bury the secrets where they belong. There are some jump scares, as well as memorable images (a mutated soldier set alight by Chloe's flamethrower; a triumphant but shell-shocked Boyce walking through the now-liberated village covered in rubble). By and large, though, the film jettisons style in favour of a swift narrative and its genre allegiances.

Like *Dunkirk* (2017), part of the fun is in the 'thrill-ride' aesthetic, in following soldiers through chase scenes, dangerous streets, and uncertain, hostile locales. Also like *Dunkirk*, *Overlord*'s connection to historical minutiae is vague, foregrounding action and spectacle over contextualising discussions and a full view of the event. We are witnessing a fictional, supernatural story that takes place alongside a specific battle, and while some general factual parameters are adhered to (there were paratroopers in Operation Overlord, for instance), the fun is in the genre conceits.

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