

Enacting/Encoding the American World War II Agenda-War Propaganda in Hollywood movies of WWII Years

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Movies read or interpret the cultures in which they exist, just a beat behind the present tense of events.

- Helene Keyssar (1991)

Abstract

Cinema as a tool of propaganda assumed significance during WWI and continued to remain an important tool in the arsenal in the ensuing years. Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia and Vichy regimes used cinema to further their political agenda. This research analyses the manner in which the art and craft of cinema reconstructed or deconstructed the World War II to further the American political agenda among its citizens and soldiers, against the backdrop of instructions issued by the government. It will examine the manner in which political connotations were ingested into the films, how it was used to distinguish between enemies and allies of the US and to explain why US were contributing in a significant manner to the war effort. This research attempts to study feature films based wholly on war as well as soft core 'seemingly apolitical feature films of escape and diversion'. The research finds that cinema through its entertaining form has been used to show not only how WWII was fought but how America fought it- bravely and without bowing to its enemies. All three movies emphasize why America found it imperative to fight the war, depicts the enemies of the Allies and explains why they had to be vanquished.

Keywords: Political agenda, American World War films, Propaganda films.

Introduction

Films must be read as complex texts littered with cinematic codes and symbols, structured within the relevant socio-political context. They represent events and realities of the time or era or the creative imagination of the filmmaker. "Films have

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the ability to evoke the mood and tone of a society in a particular era” (Quart & Auster, 2002)

“By films one means not merely documentaries, which obviously directly captures something of the reality of people’s lives and feelings, but also mainstream Hollywood commercial films. It is not only that these films sometimes convey and imitate the surfaces of day-to-day life...But, more importantly, fictional films reveal something of the dreams, desires, displacements and, in some cases, the social and political issues confronting ...society.”(Quart & Auster, 2002)

Rarely are films disconnected from the political or attitudinal bias of the maker and the studio that finances the film. “...films, both the explicitly political and the nonpolitical, were and are often bound by institutional forces like the power of the studios or producers to make the final cut...collective screenwriting and rewriting, censorship” (Quart & Auster, 2002) In this sense, a film is a creation set within and reflecting the social and political mores and agenda of the group that gives it its structure. At a much wider level the representation of reality maybe ‘manipulated’ by the more powerful demands of a country’s government. That is to say that cinema may and does reflect the socio-political agenda of the government that acts as a gatekeeper or agenda setter in a country with a totalitarian regime, or during times of social, political and economic upheaval. Cinema, then, is a tool or carrier of propaganda for the government.

Propaganda is, simply put, persuasion via mass communication that keys on two important goals: first, forming new or adjusted attitudes in the minds of audiences, and second, urging them to action, to do something about these newly acquired attitudes (Donald, 2017). Taylor (1998) remarks on propaganda “in the politics of the 20th century”, and the role that cinema can play in a propagandistic mission has been overlooked. He points that the reason for this could be because it is looked upon as a “dirty word” and describes something that is to be found only in dictatorial regimes and not in “liberal democracies” . Additionally, “It is a major premise that propaganda need not only comprise blatant political messages, but may also constitute more subtle statements (‘softcore’) of social integration, arguably all the more powerful because of their very indirectness” (Short, 1983).

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The republic of the United States of America, which enjoyed an elected government too were not opposed to the idea of propagating the US war effort through films, during the period of World War II. The film industry of the US (henceforth referred to as Hollywood) was one of the few industries allowed by the war-time President Roosevelt to continue its commercial operations without heavy interference from Washington. While major industries like steel, auto manufacturing and construction

were subject to ‘war conversion’, Hollywood continued to bring out films without any hindrance. Roosevelt was of the opinion that the “American motion picture is one of the most effective mediums in informing and entertaining... citizens. The motion picture must remain free in so far as national security will permit. I want no censorship of the motion picture” (as cited in Schatz, 1999).

The government recognised the importance of films as a form of diversion for civilians and soldiers and that the most effective propaganda often took the form of *mere* entertainment. Officials of the Office of War Information, the government's propaganda agency, issued a “constantly updated manual instructing the studios in how to assist the war effort... reviewed the screenplays... pressured the movie makers to changes scripts...and sometimes wrote dialogue for key speeches” (Koppes & Black, 1990).

The fact that Hollywood was willing to produce training films, war related shorts and newsreels did not hurt. That its feature films supported the FDR’s unofficial interventional policies was a bonus.

The President appointed Lowell Mellett, the former editor of *Scripps-Howard Washington Daily* and Presidential aide, as the Coordinator of Government Films and Liaison between the government and Hollywood to endorse and advise the industry in its support of the war effort. Mellett proposed that Hollywood films should try to feature six war-related subjects that the government wished to see in films- issues (why US was fighting), the enemies (why they have to be defeated), the allies (why they deserve support), the home front, the production front (how each American could contribute) and the US Armed Forces.

The persistence of the cues, the stories, the myths of World War II is a sign of the astounding success with which the pop-cultural media...(especially movies)—articulated and disseminated narratives that would explain the war: why we were fighting it, why our enemies had to be defeated, why our allies deserved our support, how each American could contribute to the eventual victory ... Of these various pop-cultural media, Hollywood films played the most important role in promulgating mythmaking narratives about the war, for two main reasons...because of their status as fiction, films were able to offer completed narratives about the war... The second reason for films’ dominant role in transmitting mythmaking narratives about the war is their greater popularity—popularity to the point of ubiquity—compared with other fictionalizing media, radio, theater, comic strips, and comic books, as popular as these genres were (McLaughlin & Parry, 2010)

"...Hollywood and the armed services, working from different perspectives and with different goals, cooperated to create stories about the U.S. military in war and peace. ...movies became the source of most people's knowledge of the American fighting men and women and the wars in which they fought to protect the nation from any external threat.” (Suid, 2015)

This research analyses the manner in which the art and craft of cinema reconstructed or deconstructed the World War II to further the American political agenda among its citizens and soldiers, against the backdrop of instructions issued by the government. It will examine the manner in which political connotations were ingested into the films, how it was used to distinguish between enemies and allies of the US and to explain why US were contributing in a significant manner to the war effort. This research attempts to study feature films based wholly on war as well as soft core 'seemingly apolitical feature films of escape and diversion' (Short, 1983).

The films that have been chosen for this study includes *Casablanca*, a soft core film set against the WWII backdrop and hailed as one of the most romantic movies ever, *Objective Burma* and *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*, both war movies focusing on tactical maneuvers of the US Forces, the resources and technology at the disposal of the US, the cruelty of the enemies, as well as the bravery and sacrifice of American troops.

Analysis

Casablanca

Casablanca is a 1942 Warner Bros. production which won the Academy Award in 3 categories in 1943. Set in French Morocco during the time of WWII, Richard Blaine (Humphrey Bogart), called Rick, the protagonist is portrayed as an American expatriate who runs *Rick's Café Américain*, an upscale nightclub and gambling establishment. He professes to be neutral and apolitical even though it is revealed during the course of the movie that like any typical Hollywood American hero he champions the underdog- as is evident from his support of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War and his gun running to Ethiopia to combat the 1935 invasion of Italy. "I stick my neck out for nobody" is a constant refrain of Rick's during the initial part of the film, though his actions contradict his words. Two of the other important characters include Victor Lazlo (Paul Henreid), the Czech Resistant Leader who has escaped from a German concentration camp to Morocco and is hunted by the Third Reich, and Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman), Lazlo's wife, Rick's ex-lover and the reason for his bitterness. The Prefect of the Police in Morocco, Captain Louis Renault (Claude Rains), is shown as a corrupt officer and an opportunist, and serves the dictates of the Vichy government. He adds though "I have no convictions...I blow with the wind, the prevailing wind happens to be from Vichy," in an honest and diplomatic assessment of his own character. The true antagonist of the film though is the German Major Heinrich Strasser (Conrad Veidt) who has been directed by the Nazi government to 'persuade' Lazlo to return. The Germans have clearly been marked as the enemies and every attempt is made to point out their violent, greedy and overbearing nature. Strasser is the personification of Nazis and he is shown as a bully, someone drunk on his own power but indecisive when it comes to decisions related to Lazlo.

The political and social fabric of Morocco of the time has been portrayed. Morocco is under the control of France, and Germany does not have any direct power. It has assumed much strategic and geographical significance due to the fact that it is a port of escape for fugitives and others who wish to leave war-torn Europe behind, for, from here, they can make their escape by air to neutral Lisbon and from there onwards to America. It is repeatedly mentioned that most of those who arrive at Morocco hope to be lucky enough to get exit visas (controlled by the local police, specifically Captain Renault) and make their way across to Lisbon and onwards to the promised America, the land of the free. Many arrive, but few make it out of Morocco and most spend their time “waiting, waiting” for escape. There is also the underlying message that humans are a mere commodity here. The film stresses that the direness of the situation in Morocco cannot be ignored and that one of the reasons that America is fighting the war is because it cannot, in good conscience, turn its back on those people who need American help and intervention. Renault points out to Rick “Isolationism is no longer a practical policy” (Up until the Pearl Harbour Attack, the popular sentiment in the country has been one of isolationism).

At this time, two German couriers carrying letters of Transit that allow the carrier free movement across German-controlled territories, are attacked and killed and the letters go missing. Ugarte, a regular at Rick’s who runs an underground business selling exit visas at exorbitant rates, is behind the theft and murder. He shows no remorse in the murder of the Germans and neither does Rick, when Ugarte (Peter Lorre) furtively owns up to possessing the letters. In fact, the murder appears to be incidental. Ugarte entrusts Rick with the letters and dies in police custody without revealing the location. Renault suspects that Rick may have the letters. Strasser, however, initially believes that an American is not capable of that level of guile, remarking that they are nothing but “blundering” fools. Renault slyly reminds him that they had, however, “blundered into Berlin in 1918” thereby telling him not to underestimate the resourceful Americans and implying that the Nazis were not as powerful or omnipotent as they would like the world to believe. A search is conducted at the café and Rick remarks that Renault’s officers had really thrashed the place to which Renault says “I told my men to be especially destructive. You know how that impresses the Germans.”

These are the letters that are vital to Lazlo’s and Lund’s escape to Lisbon, and ultimately to America. The situation is urgent given the fact that Strasser is determined that the couple would never leave Morocco. Upon their arrival in Morocco, the Gestapo liaison had offered to facilitate Lazlo’s escape, provided he hands over the names of the leaders of the Underground Movement in Europe, warning him that if he fails to do so his life will be forfeit. “From every corner of Europe, hundreds, thousands would rise to take places,” he bravely asserts and continues with the taunt, “Even Nazis can’t kill that fast.” The filmmakers point out that Nazis are not infallible and that the path to their defeat lies in people rising up and fighting as one. So, it is the welfare of the common man that America seeks to protect.

The narrative leading up to and including the *La Marseillaise* scene at the café is interesting because it brings into play several characters that represent nations involved in the war or occupied by Germany. There is Yvonne, the French girl; Sasha, the Russian bartender; Berger, the Norwegian who is part of the Resistance movement; Lazlo, himself, a Czech; and of course, the many French nationals gathered there. The guitarist is Spanish and Ugarte and Ferrari (the owner of Blue Parrot, another gin-joint, and a profiteer) are Italians, and belong to countries controlled by fascists (McLaughlin & Parry, 2010). While Rick seems to live true to the American isolationist policy, he can't help being affected by the plight of the young and newly married Bulgarian couple (the young lady remarks about the state of affairs in their land and says "The devil has the people by the throat"), and at his loss, ensures that the husband wins enough for an exit visa to Lisbon. Again, it must be noted that *Café Américain* seems to be a safe place where all can gather for a good time, under the watchful eye of an American.

In the '*La Marseillaise*' scene all the key players are gathered at Rick's. Yvonne walks in with a German officer. It is evident that Sasha disapproves but it a French soldier who vocalizes his feelings (implying that the Vichy government may be allies of the Nazis but popular sentiment in France was not pro-German) and insults Yvonne for cozying up to the German. The German officer takes umbrage and things almost turns violent before Rick breaks it up. While the Germans use might and physical force to defeat their enemies, the *others* take to violence to defend themselves and their sensibilities. Therein lies the first German-*others* differentiation.

Immediately following this, Lazlo and Rick repair to Rick's upstairs office where Lazlo requests his help as a fellow revolutionary. Rick declines and says that he is no longer a part of any movement, though he admits to having the letters in his possession. He refuses Lazlo's offers and refuses to give a reason for rejecting it other than to say: "Ask your wife". This is a moment of antagonism but these differences are cast aside by what happens next. The viewer's attention is drawn to the loud signing from the café proper. The camera is so positioned to give a clear view of the Germans seated in an alcove, cut off and shunned by the rest of the crowd. This separation of the Germans is deliberate and serves to remind the viewer that, essentially, they stand alone, surrounded and outnumbered by the *others*. The song that the Germans are loudly signing, with one of them pounding away on Sam's (Dooley Wilson in the role of Rick's Black singer) piano, is a military anthem 'Watch on the Rhine'.

The bird's eye view offered by the camera shows Renault looking up at Rick, who is standing on the balcony, with a meaningful glance. However, it is not Rick who reacts, but Lazlo. He bravely marches down and up to the orchestra and orders them to play *La Marseillaise*. Lazlo himself leads them in the rendering, with the Spanish guitarist adding her strong voice to his, and soon the whole room, irrespective of nationality, joins them in an attempt to gain this victory over the Germans. Their unified voice drowns out the voices of the German minority and the Germans are

forced to give up when the crowd sings on powered by a sense of oneness. Yvonne, who is sitting with the German officer, sings passionately with tears in her eyes while her companion appears dejected. The song ends with enthused shouts of ‘Vive la France.’

In the climax, Rick tells Ilsa that she is to escape with Lazlo as she is Lazlo’s strength and his reason for fighting. When Ilsa protests he tells her that when one thinks about it, given the dire straits, “it doesn’t take much to see that the problems of three little people don’t amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world.” He is unsure of his future; he may face life in a concentration camp. The viewer is reminded that personal sacrifices are called for when fighting for a great cause, and that what one *wants* to do, and what one *has* to do, differs. America too has to make sacrifices. The war must be fought and American soldiers are needed, if only to set the world to rights.

The movie ends on an unexpected note with Renault finally taking a stand and deciding to turn Nationalist. He goes so far as to propose that he not only provide Rick with safe passage from Morocco but also leave along with him. The film closes with Rick saying, “I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship” might refer to an absolute end to American isolationist policy, its proposal to cement ties with allies and pro-American nations, and its entry as a powerful, interventionist country into the world scenario.

Casablanca with its narrative and characterization serves America’s and Roosevelt’s war propaganda effectively. It points out the Germans as enemies while implying that they are responsible for the deplorable state of affairs with their power-hungry nature but thrusts home the idea that Germans are bullies. America does not stand bullies. Nor can it turn its back on the suffering millions. Hence its participation in the war is not only necessary but justified. Similarly, vis-à-vis the *La Marseillaise* scene, Lazlo’s action and the crowd’s reaction, the film tells the viewer how the bullies can be defeated, by standing up to them and fighting as a unified force. The need of the hour was leadership and action, which Lazlo provides (which America can provide). Rick is a symbol of America. He is idealistic and fights for other countries’ freedom (Italy and Spain). Though he may have stepped away and adopted an isolationist policy, he finally reverts to his true nature, in providing transit visas to Lazlo and Ilsa, knowing the heavy price he may have to pay. He steps up and in much the same way America with its true love for liberty, freedom and justice, has been called to step up and accept the mantle of a leader.

Objective, Burma!

Objective, Burma!, the Oscar-nominated 1945 Warner Bros war movie, focuses on the heroic efforts of a group of US Army Paratroopers who land in Burma and destroy a strategic camouflaged Japanese radar station and communications centre. While stranded in Burma and fighting for their very lives, they lead the Japanese troops away from the point of invasion. Burma is described as the “toughest battleground in the world” and it is into this place that Capt. Nelson (Errol Flynn) leads his team and

Mark Williams (Henry Hull) a war correspondent out of Washington. They are the first men to enter Burma after the forced retreat by the Allied Forces and Williams wishes to go along because he says "I wanted to do what I [can] so that people back home would know a little better what the war is about".

Williams is used effectively to make the process and difficulty of waging a war easily understood by the viewers. Williams is a civilian and in the guise of explaining to him, the explanations are made to the viewer. He makes the viewing a personal experience for the viewer and by proxy, brings the war closer.

Unlike in *Casablanca* and *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*, *Objective, Burma!* is blatant in its hate propaganda against the enemy- in this case, the Japanese. From derogatory terms to descriptions of how one group (half of their 36-man team) of paratroopers, except for two who are allowed to escape, were gunned down after the mission at the radar station ("It was a slaughterhouse"), the scenes are inciting. But it is the scene at the abandoned village, where the tortured and mutilated bodies of the members of the second group are shown, that really underscores the savageness of the enemies. Lt. Sid Jacobs (William Prince), who had dreamt of returning to his job as a High School teacher, is found tortured beyond bearing and near death. He recounts, in pain, how they were tortured for information and how each man died, loyally, without giving away their comrades. The scene in which he begs Nelson to kill him and end the pain, is powerful and serves to remind the American public of the depravity of the Japs. The expression on the faces of those who see the cut-up bodies, drives home the horror of the situation. They can barely recognize their team mates. It is Williams who breaks down and it is through Williams that the message is driven home "This was done in cold blood... They're degenerate, immoral idiots. Stinking little savages. Wipe them out, I say. Wipe them out! Wipe them off the face of the earth."

The local Burmese villagers are also shown to hate and fear the Japanese, who indiscriminately kill or enslave the locals (unlike the Americans).

The US allies are mentioned in the opening credits in a dedication to the "heroic men of the...British, Chinese and Indian armies." The film contains a few scenes where British personnel are shown training and marshalling resources, but it is, at its core, an American show. While it deviates from reality and re-writes history, the film concentrates only on 'American factors', choosing to gloss over or completely neglecting other countries' efforts. Except for 2 *gurkhas* who act as guides and one Chinese Army personnel, the crew is American and only Americans survive.

The film also focuses on the camaraderie and sense of family that the fighting forces have. Everyone seems to know everyone else. They tease each other and poke fun at the other's expense, but they are a unit. While going away on the mission, the men are shown to be praying, sleeping, reading, smoking, thinking or agonizing, giving the impression that while courageous, they are human. When Nelson overhears one of his men agonizing over his fear of jumping and his likelihood of freezing before the jump, he steps in to reassure him. Nelson is shown as the All-American hero-

commanding, worthy of respect and admiration, a natural leader of men, kind, compassionate (who will not leave the sick behind even though he owns up “I should leave him...But I can’t do it”). Nelson is able to snap them out of their despair, when they become disheartened. One of his men says of him, “I’d follow him down the barrel of a cannon.”

The men themselves are extraordinary and bolster each other’s flagging spirits. They move through unfamiliar, dangerous and difficult terrains, without complaints. They carry their sick and Williams, mourn their dead and give them a decent burial, collect their tags even in the face of danger so that their families have a little something to hang onto, and constantly look out for each other. Their morale and their strength of will are strong. When a plane spots them after several days and they are informed that rescue is not forthcoming, one of the men quips, “Tell my girl that I won’t be back for dinner.” They are ordered to move north, away from the Base without being given a reason. This discourages some of them until, one points out “If they order us North, they’ve a good reason for ordering us North”. They face numerous dangers and follow orders because of their faith in their superior officers and belief in the cause that sacrificing their lives for. The group represents the American armed forces and is symbolic of the superior fighting troops of the US. When they are finally rescued the viewer is forcefully reminded of the price that had to be paid when Nelson, while handing over the tags of his dead teammates, says “Here’s what it cost. Not much to send home, is it? A handful of Americans.”

The film also alludes to the concept of ‘good’ mothers who send their sons off to the war with their blessings- a reminder to all mothers back home that they too should do their duty to the country.

Thirty Seconds over Tokyo

Thirty Seconds over Tokyo, the 1945 MGM movie that won the Academy Award in one category, like *Objective, Burma* is a war movie. It focuses on the aerial bombing, under Lt. Col. Jimmy Doolittle, of Tokyo (and other major cities of Japan), 131 days after the Pearl Harbour attack. Woven into the war story is the ‘soft core’ element in the form of the romance and love between Army Major Ted Lawson (Van Johnson) and his wife of 6 months, Ellen (Phyllis Thaxter).

Lawson, a pilot, volunteers to be part of a secret mission that calls for the team members to spend about 3 months abroad. They are extensively trained, among other things, in taxiing and taking off at 500 feet (to fly off a warship). In the midst of the training Lawson learns that Ellen is pregnant. Ellen is a strong and supportive army man’s wife, with American values, as is evident from her comment, “You’re worried because you’ve got a wife. That’s wrong, Ted.” She wishes things were different and that the war wasn’t a necessity but she wholeheartedly believes that the cause her country is fighting for and her husband is involved in, is important. When the training is complete and Lawson leaves at a moment’s notice, she lets him go with her blessings.

Lawson is the hero who puts his country's demands before his own. He is eager to play any small role he can in the fight. The other airmen are just as enthusiastic to be part of the mission. They are aware of the grave dangers but none take up Doolittle's offer to drop out if they don't feel up to it. The life onboard the ship that transports them to "within 400 miles of Japan" portrays the camaraderie between the Army and Navy personnel. The fact that they are together in fighting this war is emphasized and the normal rivalries seem to have no place in the film.

This film too identifies the Japanese as the enemy but the vitriolic hatred of *Objective, Burma* is absent. During his briefing on Japan and its people, Lt. Commander Stephen Jurika (Leon Ames) warns them pointedly of the dangers of falling into Japanese hands. The Captain of the warship says over the loudspeaker, that the mission "is a chance for all of us to give Japs a taste of their own medicine." Lawson, who dreamt of being an aeronautical engineer tells his friend Lt. Bob Gray (Robert Mitchum) on the ship, "I don't hate the Japs. Yet. Funny thing! I don't like them but I don't hate them...It's a case of drop a bomb on them or pretty soon they'll be dropping one on Ellen." This points to the fact that it is the Japanese who are responsible for America's reaction and that all actions undertaken are defensive in nature. America is not the aggressor or the initiator of this course of actions. They have been forced to act by the Japanese. America's sentiments are echoed by Bob Gray who says, "I'll be glad when this war ends."

China is depicted as a strong ally as the Chinese villagers actively search for and rescue downed airmen along the China coast where they land/crash after running out of fuel. They help the Americans at great personal cost (the village that sheltered Lawson's team, most of them gravely wounded, is searched and torched) and provide the little they can. A Chinese father-son doctor duo, help nurse them back to health, though they are forced to amputate Lawson's leg. The Chinese are shown to be grateful and in awe of the Americans for their attacks on Japan and consider it an honour to provide help. A Chinese grandmother is moved to tears by the pain that Lawson and his men are in. The American heroes are honoured by a group of children who sing the 'Star Spangled Banner' in Chinese. Lawson says "You're our kind of people" acknowledging the Chinese and painting a picture of how they should be seen by the viewers. Yet care is taken not to emphasize too strongly the help that China rendered in assisting the men out of the country. This was done according to directions from the War Department which felt that it would be damaging. Also, efforts were taken not to turn it into a one-man movie but to acknowledge that it was a team effort (Lawson and Doolittle are important but so are the others).

The three films push the American agenda in its unique ways, subtle and blatant. Yet, it is evident that Mellett's dictates have been obeyed and that cinema through its entertaining form has been used to show not only how WWII was fought but how America fought it- bravely and without bowing to its enemies. All three movies emphasize why America found it imperative to fight the war, depicts the enemies of the Allies and explains why they had to be vanquished.

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