THE PROPAGANDA OF VIOLENCE: EARLY HOLLYWOOD WAR FILMS

A PROPAGANDA DA VIOLÊNCIA: FILMES DE GUERRA DE HOLLYWOOD

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RESUMO: O presente artigo examina o cinema americano sobre a Segunda Guerra Mundial, espaço exemplar para representações de violência que, no entanto, foram sujeitas a diversas restrições de cunho político: por parte de agências governamentais, que queriam projetar uma imagem positiva da nação e dos aliados; e por parte dos próprios estúdios, que queriam explorar as possibilidades dramáticas do cinema de guerra, mas, ao mesmo tempo, sofriam pressão do governo para não mostrar representações "realistas" que pudessem causar perturbações na frente interna.
PALAVRAS-CHAVES: linguagem de violência; censura; cinema de guerra.

ABSTRACT: This article examines the Hollywood film about the Second World War, an exemplary site for representations of violence, which were, however subject to a number of political restraints: from the government agencies, which wanted to project a positive image of the nation and the Allies; and from the studios themselves, which wanted to exploit the dramatic possibilities of the war film but at the same time were under pressure from the government not to show "realistic" representations that might cause disturbances on the home front.
KEYWORDS: language of violence; censorship; war cinema.

After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 brought the United States into the Second World War, a media-wise president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, was anxious to make the cinema an important part of government propaganda in the war effort. To this end, a number of different governmental agencies were formed, but their uncoordinated efforts resulted in a perceived need for a single agency to supervise the insertion of war propaganda into film. With the creation of the Office of War Information (OWI) in June 1942, the government declared its intention to actively intervene in the filmmaking process at virtually every level.

The heads of the Hollywood studios, however, remained fearful of government interference in their profitable business, which turned out to be an unjustified fear, because, as Lowell Mellet, Coordinator of Government Films, assured them: the Hollywood product was "one of our most effective mediums in informing and entertaining our citizens and therefore must remain free of censorship". He told the studios "to use [their] own judgment" in deciding the content of films (Blum 1976: 24-25). Nevertheless, conflict arose, as there was an often unbridgeable gap between the OWI's propagandistic need for what they perceived as a more positive presentation of war issues in film, including attempts to modify scripts and repress images, and the studios' need for an entertaining product that would continue to make a large profit.

In addition to civilian agencies, the military, which had its own sources of information and means of exerting pressure, also had some clout in determining the content of war films. It is not surprising therefore that most war films gave a favorable

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treatment to the military, since the expense in making such a film was often considerable, and the loan of expensive equipment — even units of soldiers on active duty to serve as film extras — could mean significant savings. It is noteworthy that in almost every war movie the credits feature explicit thanks to one or the other military arm.

To set down government guidelines, the OWI published a pamphlet titled "Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry", which suggested that the studios make movies under five general headings, which may be summarized as follows: the first section, "Why We Fight," called for films that would present the positive war aims of the nation and its allies, based on the President Roosevelt's Four Freedoms — freedom of speech and religion, freedom from want and fear. In the second section, "The Enemy", the OWI expressed its wish to avoid demonizing entire nations but was still concerned with impressing on the public the ubiquity of the enemy and the danger of giving him aid and comfort through passivity and cynicism. The third section, "The United Nations", which concerned the Allied countries, proposed making films that would in effect whitewash the repressive or undemocratic regimes among the Allied countries and show that the war was being won by a unified effort. In accordance with the need for national unity in the war effort, the fourth section, "The Home Front", stressed the need for downplaying ethnic, class, and gender conflicts in presenting a united civilian front. The fifth section, "The Fighting Forces", encouraged making films about non-combat services in addition to the combat arms, as well as emphasizing the multi-ethnic makeup of the fighting men in the more dramatic combat films (Koppes & Black 1990: 67-69).

If the OWI manual be taken as a ready-made classification scheme for the type of war films produced, rather than (as it was actually intended) a political guide for the filmmakers, it becomes apparent that nearly any given film may be described by more than one category. Most combat films made during the war, for example, are classifiable under other categories besides the "Fighting Forces", since the characters, in order to carry out their basic work of killing enemy soldiers, often have to justify it by ideological speeches ("Why We Fight") or because of racial and national stereotypes ("the Enemy"). Nor does such a scheme suggest that all of the five categories will be represented to evoke the intended reception. Despite market research and extensive script rewrites, Hollywood did not know what film would be a hit, or why, although its old formulae of action and sentimentality tended to have their usual broad appeal.

The films about Allied peoples were intended to arouse sympathy for foreign nationals whose countries were invaded by the Nazis — like the underground Norwegian fighter (Paul Muni) in *Commandos Strike at Dawn* (1942), and the plucky barmaid (Michele Morgan) in *Joan of Paris* (1942), who helps downed Allied fliers elude Nazi-occupied France, or even the wimpy schoolteacher (Charles Laughton) who is roused by events to resist the occupation of the unnamed country of Jean Renoir's *This Land is Mine* (1943). Patriotic sentiment could be aroused at home by these films through the American audience's "naturalized" identification, both historical and mythical, with its own past of resistance to British domination. These are films that added "sentimental internationalism" to sentimental nationalism (Alexander 1980: 229).

Films about the Allies inevitably had to include the Russians, who bore most of the brunt of German aggression. In the postwar years, however, the Russians would be

seen far less sympathetically than the gentle British of *Mrs. Miniver*. The heroic Russian villagers of *North Star* (1943), directed by Lewis Milestone — a film reportedly seen as a joke in Russia to the surprise of leftist screenwriter Lillian Hellman — as well as the determined Soviet leaders of *Mission to Moscow* were shown in a highly favorable propagandistic light, with the latter film going so far as to gloss over Stalin's purge trials of the Thirties. It is, of course, ironic that anti-Communist Hollywood would make an important pro-Soviet propaganda film, and even more so when one learns that the Roosevelt administration, needing a boost for the American-Russian alliance, was involved in the film's production (Koppes & Black 1990: 105, 200, 215). Interestingly, this film was attacked by both the right (House Un-American Activities Committee in postwar hearings) and left (in a letter by prominent leftist intellectuals protesting the glorification of dictatorship).

The alliance against Fascism was invoked in other films as well: *Action in the North Atlantic* (1943) featured a US merchant-marine tanker, commanded by Humphrey Bogart, which carried gasoline to Murmansk. In one scene, the American sailors are greeted by friendly Russians calling them *tovarich!* (comrade), a scene that would prove embarrassing to Warner Brothers during the Cold War (Koppes & Black 1990: 119). Ernst Lubitsch's wartime comedy, *To Be or Not To Be* (1942), would also have to be included in this category, even though the portrait of a bungling Polish couple (played by comedians Jack Benny and Carole Lombard) outwitting the Germans in spite of themselves was seen at the time as being in extremely bad taste — even, incredibly, as satirical propaganda for the German minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels (Schindler 1975: 45-46).

Censorship included not only modifying politically unacceptable film scripts but also repressing possibly contradictory images. The control or excision of undesirable images was thought to be more reliable than attempting to "sell" pro-war images, even though these were being abundantly produced. The result of this kind of censorship was, as Roeder, a student of such images, claims that "[t]hings unseen had at last as great an influence on American understanding of World War II as things seen" (Roeder 1996: 47). Newsreels shown in movie theaters, for example, were also controlled: "pictures of unsavory aspects of American life — gangsters, slums, hopeless poverty" — were prohibited (Koppes & Black 1995: 125). No picture of a dead American soldier could be published in newspapers or filmed in newsreels, it being thought that such images would shock a public still staggering under the continuous barrage of bad news from abroad during the early years of the war, when it was thought that the Germans and the Japanese might win.

Only in August 1943, or nearly two years after the American entry into the war, was the OWI instructed to publish such photos. By that time, the government thought that it had to counter complacency at home once the news from abroad had improved, with the reasoning that more openness to the war's realities would work against public skepticism because of what had been perceived as excessive pro-war propaganda by George Creel's repressive censorship during the First World War.

Nevertheless, government censors took an active role in repressing certain visual images that were felt to be disruptive: (a) visible atrocities could be committed only by the enemy, so that pictures of old women and children being killed by friendly fire were accordingly censored; (b) propaganda showed whites and blacks working together in the

common war effort, while pictures showing "race mixing" at a social level (e.g. black GIs dancing with white European women), as well as incidents depicting racial conflicts at home, were censored; c) images of extreme bodily violence (decapitation, dismemberment, etc) were censored because of propriety, the need to spare family feelings, and the pragmatic purpose of not discouraging new recruits; (d) any images that suggested that the war and individual soldiers within it were not under control — such as pictures of organizational disorder, sexuality, traumatized soldiers — were prohibited (May 1996: 61-62).

The foregoing list makes it comprehensible how the reputed "realism" of war films, at least those actually made during the war, was radically compromised by such strictures. It was, of course, impossible to make a fictional combat film without portraying Americans dying in battle, but *how* these images were portrayed might be manipulated. What may be called "the Hollywood battle-death" was, as a result, remarkably clean and free of suffering: no blood, dismemberment or gaping wounds. On the screen, screaming in agony gave way to brave last words. Nor could any film made during the war show a soldier emotionally falling apart under the stress of battle, although more than a million American soldiers — or more than three times the number of men killed in combat — suffered psychiatric problems that debilitated them for some time. In a secret study of the Surgeon-General, the average infantryman "cracked up" after two hundred days of combat (Gilbert 1989: 145), but John Huston's film *Let There Be Light* was suppressed for more than thirty years because it dared to depict "shell-shocked" veterans (Roeder 1996: 63).

Roeder (1996:48) makes the important point that the selection and control of what could be seen by the American public and what was withheld from its gaze — with the result of a potentially less complex response to the war — may have had serious postwar consequences, such as the public's dissociation from the mass deaths of the Holocaust (in published images or films, the dead bodies of American soldiers could not be seen piled up like cordwood), and an excessive (and, as it turned out, unjustified) confidence in the moral rectitude of Americans' behavior in Vietnam, since all images of atrocities committed by American soldiers in World War II was suppressed (Roeder 1996: 63-64).

With the exception of service-comedies, the films made about the Fighting Forces, as mentioned above, tend generically to be combat-action dramas, which represent the greatest number of movies about the war that were actually produced. This is easily explained. Films about combat are inherently dramatic, as they are filled with action and deal with questions of life and death, courage and cowardice, killing and survival. Structurally, the combat film, as well as the other kinds mentioned above, conforms to the pattern of what has been described as the Classical Hollywood Style (Bordwell, Staiger e Thompson 1985), which has a linear narrative and definitive closure, with the narrative impelled by the goal-oriented desire of a single protagonist. This structure tends to hold true even when the protagonist is (as he invariably is) part of a small collective unit like an infantry squad or platoon, since these units typically involve intra-group conflicts controlled by a strong individual (the tough sergeant, the sympathetic commanding officer) for the purpose of pursuing a collective goal, which nay include arriving safely at an objective, rescuing other soldiers or civilians, defending a position, winning a battle, evading capture, or some combination of these.

It will be noted that this general formula still holds true in recent combat films like Stephen Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), which shows the essential conservatism of the genre. Although Spielberg's film begins with images of extreme violence (Omaha Beach on the D-Day Normandy landings) like disemboweling and mutilation, which would not have been allowed to appear on the wartime screen, its plot follows very similar lines: the small unit (a truncated squad) led by a conscientious officer (Tom Hanks) arrives at an objective, where it is given a mission to rescue another soldier. It accomplishes this mission after obstacles and setbacks (first, a comic miss-identity, then an enemy sniper and machine-gun, which cause the deaths of two of the squad members). The man is eventually found on the vast battlefield, but the squad must finally help defend a position against the counter-attacking Germans (second major action sequence), during which the officer heroically dies, in effect, sacrificing his life for the other man's.

As seen in this contemporary example, the collective goal of the combat film implies unity of effort against determined resistance. Representing front-line soldiers as pursuing the common good through the attainment of an objective was therefore important, even if that meant, in the postwar combat film, underplaying the ideological or moralistic messages of the wartime film for a commitment to duty and to one's fellow soldiers, which were also important motivations for characters in the wartime films. The widespread presence of the diverse "ethnic platoon" in the combat film was intended, in this structural sense, to show the need for transcending difference in favor of a commitment to a common objective. It can also be seen as a way of including the ideological aspects implied in the film categories of "Why We Fight" and "Home Front" to that of the "Fighting Services" to serve the desired content of the government propagandists. The mere presence of men of different national and ethnic origins united in a common effort — especially when it was difficult to imagine in what other circumstances they might be so united — was an eloquent expression of the sociological notion of the "melting-pot," so dear to the myth of America as "land of the free", and yet so far from the realities of wartime racial and ethnic conflict on the nation's streets, such as the "zoot-suit riots" in Los Angeles, for example, and even within its armed forces (Otley 1995: 434-452).

In contrast to the wartime dramatic film, the violence of war cannot be kept off-screen. It may even be said that the violence is an important part of its vicarious appeal. In genres like the western and gangster film, which also feature violent action at their center, the violence had to be accounted for or justified thematically: social disorder, lack of control, individual greed, the desire for revenge, to name a few of these justifications (Warshow 1992: 465-466). By contrast, the combat film is the cinematic space where violence can be gratuitous, even excessive, because violence is not a byproduct of war but its very purpose, and violence in war is all the more deadly because it is organized on a vast scale. While violence in war may be justified at the national or international level, it may also be "excessive" (i.e. in escaping its expected limits) at the local level, because of the chaotic and disruptive circumstances arising during battles being waged among civilian populations. Men's emotions, as the war-theorist Carl Von Clausewitz recognized, tend to get out of hand in combat, and the violence may be turned against others like themselves who had nothing to do with its instigation:

Even when there is no national hatred and no animosity to start with, the fighting itself will stir up hostile feelings: violence committed on superior orders will stir up the desire for revenge and retaliation against the perpetrator rather than against the powers that ordered the action…Theorists are apt to look on fighting in the abstract as a trial of strength without emotion entering into it (Clausewitz 1976: 138).

Despite these real possibilities, the violence represented in the combat films made during the war tends to be muted. The reason for this, as suggested above, is political. These films were not so much vehicles for action and spaces for violence as propaganda vehicles for portraying the patriotism and fighting spirit of the "boys" overseas. The violence in the wartime combat film, as a necessary part of showing that spirit of patriotism and native enterprise, could not be allowed to be as gratuitous as it actually was, or even shown to be in postwar cinematic versions. As Walsh has observed (1982: 1), films and other media do not "render the actualities of war but tend normally to generate instead a new breed of inauthentic and obfuscating myths".

One such myth is that of war as the formative experience of manhood, which is new to neither fiction nor film but is often resuscitated in the combat film and continues to exercise a baleful influence on the minds of boys and young men. In the circumstances of modern technological war, this myth has become so suspect that a counter-narrative has arisen: the young man, originally idealistic, now becomes disillusioned. This is in fact the most common theme of the fiction and film narratives of the First World War and the Vietnam War, both unpopular wars that were fought on dubious ideological grounds. The pattern also holds true in the fiction and memoirs of the Second World War as well, but both through the ideological pressures on cinematic representations of the war and the actual perceived difference of *this* war as one that was fought against Fascism, the pattern is often reversed: the protagonists of the Second World War film tend to gain rather than lose their idealism in the course of their experience. Often the young soldier, indifferent to the causes of the war, becomes aware of the importance of his participation, a kind of coming-to-maturity as a citizen of a democratic nation.

For these ideological questions to emerge in the wartime film, the violence actually had to be underplayed. One result of under-representing the extreme violence of combat, however, is that wartime films sacrificed "realism" (i.e. wounds, blood, mutilation, death) to propaganda, since the representation of extreme violence, especially that done to or by American soldiers, was considered counter-productive. Even the presumably "factual" newsreels that used to be shown in movie theaters in the intervals between the feature films, which reached their high-point during the war (and discontinued only in the 1960s, when they were unable to compete with television coverage), were heavily censored so as to suppress the more horrible aspects of the war. Quite as much as fictional films, the censored newsreels, which were supposedly factual, helped to maintain the heroic myths.

Related to the combat-film-as-propaganda, was a specifically historical problem: in the early years of the war, filmmakers had to acknowledge that events did not favor the American forces in their struggle against the Japanese (nor had they yet discovered

the resort to a total revision of historical reality, as in so many movies made about the Vietnam War). Elmer Davis, OWI Director, thought that the American people could accept the truth about the casualties and losses, but the military disagreed and its view prevailed. The studios, aware that the public does not fantasize about losing and yet also aware that they could not completely ignore the truth of the bad news, compromised with a formula of putting victory-on-hold, as seen in films like *Wake Island* (1942) or *Bataan* (1943). Both of these actions historically were military defeats. In the movies made about them, however, the Americans are represented as fighting a withholding action ending in a defeat that is not resounding but only temporary. This narrative procedure of the war-affirming film Polan has called "a determined logic of the future", which depends upon a distinction between an unpredictable narrative of contingency (i.e. the volatile events of the war itself) and "an organized, *preordained* narrative in which the force of a logic governs events" (Polan 1986: 51, his italics).

If *Wake Island* begins by making a connection with the past, an allusion to General Custer's supposedly heroic defeat at the Little Big Horn (perhaps with the implication of a racial equation of a massacre of white Americans by a racial other [Indians/Japanese]), its ending looks to the future. The sacrifice of the men's lives is even said in the film to have made possible later American victories in the Pacific (where the voice-over narrator promises "a just and terrible vengeance" soon to come). The historical event is therefore seen in retrospect, projected from a brighter, knowing future toward a darker past whose dire threat will not be fulfilled. As Polan puts it: "[n]arrative becomes the privileged site of a meaningful closure; the beginning presupposes and even determines the end" (Polan 1986: 47).

Curiously, both *Wake Island* and *Bataan* were touted at the time as bringing a new "realism" to their combat scenes, which turns out to be the least true thing that can be said about them. *Wake Island* depicts the historical action of fewer than four-hundred marines who held off a much larger enemy force before being annihilated (the initial landing on December 11, 1941, was repulsed but the island was taken on December 23). The battle scenes, despite the Hun-like hordes of advancing Japanese troops, have been aptly described having a "sanitized quality that made war seem more like a big football game than a mortal encounter" (Koppes & Black 1990: 256). *Bataan* recalls the American and Filipino troops captured in April 1942, on the Bataan peninsula of the Philippines, who underwent the infamous "death march" to a prison camp. In the film, the death march is not even shown: given the reality of defeat — and its negative propaganda value — what is offered in *Bataan*, as in later films about the Alamo in Texas, is a heroic last-stand meant to illustrate the "determined logic of the future".

Sergeant Bill Dane (Robert Taylor) takes men from diverse units, mostly non-combat specialists (this is the familiar theme of the tough, seasoned NCO dealing with inexperienced men), to fight a withholding action against the advancing Japanese army. The small squad-sized unit digs in on the far side of a river, blows up the bridge, and waits for the enemy, intending to prevent it from rebuilding the bridge to move troops and heavy equipment forward. Although snipers whittle down both their numbers and morale, they hold off what looks to be a battalion-sized unit, as the "yellow swarm" shows no sign of stopping. The hand-to-hand combat is ludicrous and there is even an interval of violin music in the background while the sergeant takes time off to dictate a letter affirming the value of dying for "freedom", since his men have performed well

but died in action (one from malaria). Some of the men are for pulling out before they are completely overrun, sensible enough in the circumstances, but Sgt. Dane refuses to abandon his post. In the last scene, he fires his Thompson sub-machinegun at the advancing enemy, inviting them to "come and get it". The film fades out before he is killed, which is symbolically a denial of the massacre that actually occurred.

The "last-stand" pattern holds true in a later example, *Sahara* (1943), but once General Montgomery's British troops had beaten the Germans in North Africa, it became possible for the enemy to be shown as definitively stopped. In this film, a detachment of US tanks joins the British 8th Army in North Africa. Sergeant Gunn (Humphrey Bogart) is cut off with his M-3 tank and crew and surrounded on three sides, the tough loner with no family but the Army, who talks to his tank as if it were a woman but can still show compassion (for example, he saves an Italian POW from death in the desert). National stereotypes are represented by the characters: the soulful Italian, arrogant German, cynical Frenchman, obedient Negro (a Sudanese attached to the British, who, however, in a reversal of the Aryan myth kills the escaping German in a hand-to-hand struggle), and a few cordial Anglophones: an Irishman, Englishman, South African — an international version, in other words, of the ethnic platoon.

In a replay of *Bataan*, this microcosm of the Allied forces, after a stirring speech by Sgt. Gunn, digs in at a desert oasis and by courage and ruse holds off a 500-man battalion of attacking Germans. Their inevitable deaths are not shown on the screen but justified as a necessary sacrifice to hold back the enemy advance. Perhaps to counter an audience's skepticism about the numerical odds, an ideological explanation is given: "We're stronger; they've never had the dignity of freedom", but in a rather campy finale, the helmets of the dead men nod when Gunn's voice says "We stopped 'em at El Alamein". It may be a sign of the perpetuation of cinematic myth that the remake of *Sahara* (with James Belushi as Sgt. Gunn) is merely a faithful reproduction of the older film, as if not only the battle but also the war-film-about-the-battle had to be celebrated.

Guadalcanal Diary (1943), based on war correspondent Richard Tregaskis' 1943 best-selling book, is another example of how poorly the wartime combat film served historical reality. The documentary "This is Guadalcanal" (1942) shows the battle to have been a six months sea, air, land campaign, with nighttime hand-to-hand combat, malaria, and 7000 US and 25,000 Japanese casualties. Although victory was eventually won, the long, dirty, costly jungle campaign of the First Marine Division is barely suggested in *Guadalcanal Diary*, where the sufferings and losses of men are often simply referred to in a voice-over narration by the correspondent (Preston Foster), whose portentous words contrast undramatically with the wisecracking soldiers. The Japanese offer only slight resistance to the American advance (an insult to the historical combatants on both sides) and there is virtually no blood: men who are hit merely roll over or fall down, although Japanese snipers make dramatic falls out of trees, which at least gave employment to stunt-men. The film is notable, however, for introducing some cliché characters of the combat film: the caring CO (Richard Conte) and the tough sergeant (Lloyd Nolan) who hold up the men's morale; the comical working-class character from Brooklyn (William Bendix) who wields a blackjack as if jungle-fighting were simply an extension of big-city brawling; the amorous Latin (Anthony Quinn); and the beardless youth (Richard Jaeckel) growing up in combat into manhood.

Another, much more harmful cliché can be seen in *Guadalcanal Diary* and most

films where the Japanese are the enemy. The formidable Japanese soldier, whom only the narrator seems to respect as a jungle-fighter, is referred to with racially contemptuous epithets ("monkeys", "slant-eyes"). In one notable scene, the youth expresses anxiety about the moral problem of having to kill people in war, to which the sergeant offers the simple rationalization: "those ain't people". Similarly, in *Objective Burma* (1945), the men come upon a unit of their fellow soldiers who have been killed and mutilated by the Japanese. A newspaper correspondent present delivers a speech on the degenerate nature of the enemy: "Stinking little savages. Wipe them out… wipe them off the face of the earth", which uncomfortably recalls the note that Mr. Kurtz, in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1901) ironically scrawls at the end of his report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs: "Exterminate all the brutes!".

This rationalization for killing — the enemy as sub-human — is one often resorted to in the Hollywood wartime combat film, where the Japanese is the racial Other, while the German is recognizably "like us", even though motivated by an evil ideology. In both cases, the enemy is demonized to remove any psychological obstacles to killing him, a solution that must work for the film audience, as well, if it is to watch and approve of such actions. *The Purple Heart* (1944), for example, about captured American pilots who are tortured and executed by evil interrogators, "was intended to strengthen public hatred of the Japanese at a time when it appeared as if the war in Europe was stealing all the headlines" (Schindler 1975: 82). It is worth noting here that even in earlier films like *Bataan* and *Wake Island*, it is the Americans who show themselves willing to "fight to the last man", which in these pictures is represented as a heroic holding-action, an updated example of the Spartans making their stand at Thermopylae. In other combat films, however, such tenacity is labeled as suicidal and attributed to a "fanatic" race like the Japanese.

However necessary it may seem to demonize the enemy in the psychological preparation of combat soldiers, since men raised as civilians with moral scruples against killing must somehow be taught to do so, drawing one-dimensional caricatures to arouse negative emotions in civilians against the enemy, which was so often done in the wartime film and visual propaganda, is another matter. In propaganda posters of various epochs, for example, the enemy is represented as stranger, aggressor, torturer, rapist, beast, insect, and Death itself (Keen 1998:1-81). Moral objections aside, such negative stereotyping may be politically and aesthetically counter-productive, as shown in a pertinent comment in *The Observer* (November 1, 1942) by a wartime British film reviewer, Caroline Lejeune:

> After *Went the Day Well?* I went home rather sadly, turning over some reflections on war films in general. One is that a film praising the British spirit, as most British films at this time should and will, is obviously the more effective if it presents our enemies with a fair measure of continence. It is a dangerous thing to show your opponents as clowns or bullies, who only get results by treachery, brute force, or the long arm of coincidence. A director who does this merely cheapens his own countrymen, since victory over such people seems empty and meager (Lejeune *apud* Algate & Richards 1994: 134-135).

The same holds true, *mutatis mutandis*, for the Hollywood film about the American military effort, as well as a number of popular wartime novels by authors such as John Steinbeck, Helen McInnes, Glenway Wescott, Upton Sinclair, and the English writer Nevil Shute, all of which played on the morally oversimplified dichotomy of the Hollywood war movie (Blum 1976: 48-52). The dangers implied by the reviewer's remarks — a loss in dramatic effectiveness and the resulting loss of credibility in the story — also suggest a corresponding reduction in the effectiveness of the propaganda message: only a victory over a truly formidable enemy can be a worthy victory. Yet, one of the attractions for Hollywood of demonizing the enemy was precisely the simple dramatic possibility of a scenario of Good vs. Evil. Modern technological war can hardly be humanized, which makes it more difficult to be dramatized. Only a documentary could attempt to show the impersonality or disturbing complexity that combat veterans and the serious war novelists perceived as the nature of war, and even these types of works often have to try to find a personal, dramatic angle.

CONCLUSION

For its part, the OWI tried to minimize racism in portraying the Japanese by insisting to the studios on the concept of "fascism" to explain the Japanese as a noxious enemy, even though the concept is not historically or conceptually applicable to the Japanese government (Payne 1995: 328-337). Besides its liberal, anti-racist ideology, the OWI had a less noble and more political concern over identifications of the Japanese by race in movies, since some black people in the US and a great many people in colonized Asian countries identified with the Japanese "as fellow people of color who were throwing off white rule" (Koppes & Black 1990: 250). A more politicized view of the Asian enemy as militaristic, emperor worshipping, even fascist would presumably offset such dangerous identifications, and yet Hollywood could not resist the hate-inspiring image of the bloodthirsty, buck-toothed, bandy-legged "Jap". Presumably, movies were simply reflecting public opinion: one opinion poll made in 1942 revealed that Americans perceived the Japanese as "treacherous, sly, cruel, and warlike" (Blum 1976: 46).

The racial aspect of this perception, on the other hand, may be exaggerated. The same poll showed that the Chinese, i.e. members of an Allied nation, were seen as "diligent, honest, brave, and religious", or rather like the way Americans probably perceived themselves. That Americans could distinguish a "good" oriental nation from an "evil" one suggests that pro-Allied political propaganda as well as anti-Japanese racist propaganda was effective in creating these perceptions. In any case, racism was judged by Hollywood to have its appeal over the political representation, as can be seen in the lack of any Japanese equivalent of the "Good German" in war films. Although the Germans were the enemy propagating a racist ideology and carrying it out in the death camps, the GI saw the German as someone who looked like himself, the American public at the time remaining generally unaware of, or indifferent to, the Nazi program for the Final Solution.

Probably the only effective way to overcome this lack of any realistic representation of the enemy

was simply to present him as unseen, and to concentrate on the men fighting him, a strategy that William Wellman employed in *The Story of G.I. Joe* (1945), widely regarded as the best combat film made in Hollywood during the war. The film was an adaptation of the non-fictional *Here Is Your War*, by Ernie Pyle, the American war correspondent beloved by infantry soldiers for his sharing in their hardships. The film pays homage to Pyle, who is in the film as both character (played by Burgess Meredith) and the voice-over narrator, and to his soldier subjects, by eschewing the usual lame comedy, empty heroics, and patriotic rhetoric for a more naturalistic representation of the American infantryman's life. With images showing Pyle slogging up the Italian peninsula to Rome with the "dogfaces" of C Company of the 18th Infantry, his simple statement — "The G.I. lives so miserably and he dies so miserably" — becomes movingly evident by the images The living is shown — the men stupid from fatigue marching in the rain, night shelling, house to house fighting, even in the "dramatic" episode of a sergeant who in the attempt to hear his infant son's voice on a record eventually cracks up — but the dying, at least in the form of "Hollywood deaths", is absent. Laconic reports are given of the losses. By its restraint in action-scenes (a notable example is the understated sequence of the German sniper in the church tower), the film paradoxically achieves more power. There is no triumphalism. The body of Captain Walker (Robert Mitchum) is brought back to the camp slung across a pack-mule after an off-screen battle, the inglorious end of a decent officer who cared about his men. This particular message — that in war good men often meet distinctly unheroic deaths — is no longer propaganda and was perhaps only possible in a combat film produced in the last year of the war.

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