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The Grand Illusion: Hollywood And World War II, 1930-1945

Peter A. Soderbergh

“Why can’t real life be more like the movies? A movie is a series of climaxes . . . and in the end there is the great climax, and the darkness, and no concern for the years of dying embers and the utter monotony ahead.”

Ernie Pyle, *The Home Country*

For the better part of the 1930’s Hollywood paid only peripheral attention to the combat aspects of The Great War, as if to say that *All Quiet On the Western Front* (1930) was “the final word” on the subject.¹

This is not to suggest that the war was eliminated altogether. Its presence was very much in evidence, running contrapuntally and often ominously through sentimental melodramas (e.g., *Tom Brown at Culver*, 1932), musicals (*Gold Diggers of 1933*; *Alexander’s Ragtime Band*, 1938), and gangster films (*The Roaring Twenties*, 1939). And there were intermittent combat pictures about the French (*The Road to Glory*, 1936), the British (*The Lost Patrol*, 1934, and a re-make of *The Dawn Patrol*, 1938), and the Germans (*The Road Back*, 1937). But on the whole these latter pictures were antique pieces, vapid exercises in the romantic tradition which bore decreasing relevance to the tensions of the 1930’s.² In this sense, they were ahistorical. Even as purported reminders of something we “ought not to let happen again” they tended to glorify the late war, ignored the handwriting on the international wall, and successfully avoided any confrontation with the question of war as a concept.³ That they did not often portray Americans in World War I combat was not an oversight. Hollywood’s antennae were up, and the vibrations said: suspend hostilities in tender areas. Fighting and dying for an America which was a bitter blend of breadlines, apple-vending, rail-riding, bonus-marching, and impending “revolution,” was not something people were clamoring to do – in a movie house or in fact.

The deepening of the Depression in 1932 was accompanied by extensive popular disaffection, then. To quote Dewey Grantham, Jr.: “The nation had reached rock bottom, and a mood of despair, of futility and apathy, spread like a deadly disease from one end of the country to the other.” Perhaps so, but motion picture people, although affected, did not have to bear “the incredible marks of their experience.” Attendance figures were irregular in the 1930’s, but the “star” system flourished, and the studios remained in operation. Faced with the necessity of feeding a movie-hungry but basically ill-tempered public, Hollywood launched into a cycle of films meant to distract audiences from their woes. If there was a moratorium on films about World War I in general and

American participation in particular, there was none on pre-1914 war, American or otherwise. In addition to our own colonial and Civil wars, audiences went into combat with the Foreign Legion (*Under Two Flags*, 1936; and a re-make of *Beau Geste*, 1939), and the British in India (*Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, 1935, which earned an “Oscar” for two assistant directors; *Charge of the Light Brigade*, 1936, an academy award-winning India-Crimea story; and *Gunga Din*, 1939).⁴ Uncomplicated, basically non-controversial, old wars whose causes and short-range results could be said to be a matter of final record (as World War One’s were not, yet) were both safe and remunerative. In the nine years since *All Quiet On the Western Front* Hollywood had taken no steps toward a more penetrating analysis of modern war.

I.

As Dexter Perkins and Glyndon Van Deusen pointed out, by 1938 “Events in Europe were preparing what would in due course produce a reaction against the prevailing gospel of the thirties.” The “interpretation” of these events — Ethiopia’s demise, the Sino-Japanese conflict, Austria’s annexation by Germany, and the territorial cessions forced upon Czechoslovakia — was relegated by Hollywood to the frigid eye of the newsreel. In 1939, as the world moved inexorably toward war, Hollywood belatedly shook off its catatonia and addressed itself to those developments which only the sightless could legitimately refuse to recognize. Still, the pressing questions which plagued the moviemakers was not “How shall we make our tardy observations as telling as possible?” but rather: “How shall we capitalize upon a ‘hot’ theme without destroying our foreign markets?” The studios’ answer, in 1939 as it had been in 1917, was to move gradually into the *schrecklichkeit* film. Gradually because, as Arthur Knight stated, they were “conscious that any overt declaration of partiality in their pictures could lead to economic reprisals on the part of the offended nation and outright bans in those countries anxious to maintain their neutral status.”⁵ Gradually also because opinion at home was divided as to the role the United States should play in the European struggle.

But gradually, nonetheless, and with increasing frequency as foreign market control passed into alien hands, through vehicles such as Warner’s *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939), RKO’s *Nurse Edith Cavell* (1939), Twentieth Century-Fox’s *Four Sons* (1940), and M-G-M’s *The Mortal Storm* (1940), *Escape* (1940), and *Man Hunt* (1941), the specter of the bestial Hun — smoother but no less lethal — began to emerge again. Fifty such films were released between 1939 and Pearl Harbor. Even the venerable *All Quiet On the Western Front*, embellished by a commentary and “a number of stock shots and newsreel items of pre-war and post-war Germany” was re-released in November 1939 as a “strongly anti-Nazi” (but pro-German people) contribution to the trend. Apparently the message conveyed by the original 1930 version was too subtle to be grasped by the moviegoing public without some assistance from Hollywood. Once more, then, the motion picture was being employed as a “medium for stirring emotions for or against something.” John Grierson, film analyst and sire of the documentary, was visiting in Hollywood when war broke out on September 1, 1939, and noted some anxiety and confusion among the

“magnates” — except on one issue. “Everyone in this particular modernist group was for going into propaganda of some kind,” Grierson recalled, “but everyone I noticed was for avoiding hatred.”⁶

Accompanying the “propaganda” films, a sign that portrayals of direct American participation in total war might be *de rigueur* once again came with the release in January 1940 of “a valiant, spirited film of patriotic fervor to stir the eye of the beholder,” Warner’s *The Fighting 69th*, the first of its kind since the 1920’s. Unashamedly sentimental and painfully contrived, this World War I film picked up the gauntlet cast down by its romantic predecessors and carried it (Father Duffy, Joyce Kilmer, “Wild Bill” Donovan and all) to an apostolic penultimate. The critical reception was generally impolite but “The public . . . confounded the press by establishing the film as one of the big money-makers of the year,” Jerry Wald and Richard Macaulay noted as they reviewed the “best” pictures of 1939-1940. The colorless but influential *National Board of Review Magazine* thought the film struck a powerful blow for “true patriotism” and was suitable for “schools, libraries, church use.” More significantly, and less verbosely, the Hollywood edition of *Variety* for January 4, 1940 cited *The Fighting 69th*’s “timeliness.”

One year later Warner Brothers struck again with *Sergeant York* (1941), based on the exploits of Congressional Medal of Honor winner Alvin C. York. In less inflammatory times *Sergeant York* might well have been one of the few genuinely thoughtful commentaries on the meaning of mass war. One-half of the film was devoted to a tasteful description of York’s backwoods environment and his discovery of religion. The latter portion, although routine is its depiction of combat, clearly and simply sustained York’s rejection of killing as a solution to man’s problems. That York’s “convictions” remained the central theme of the picture and resisted seduction by the Hollywood “touch” was due largely to Gary Cooper’s portrayal of the famous soldier. Accidentally, certainly, since Cooper was, above all, a boxoffice attraction ranked seventh in the top ten, Warner Brothers cast a man in the role of York whose ingratiating inability to express intense emotion protected the contents of the film from hyperglamorization. Done in the early or mid-1930’s, *Sergeant York* might well have been the touchstone from which those who chose to make war films could have derived strong instruction. But in 1941, caught in the van between Nazi victories and Japanese threats, the potentialities of the film were lost in a miasma of war fever. Instead, it became a “timely” study in how a reluctant dragon must sometimes subvert its spiritual composure and neutral preferences to a righteous (if bloody) cause. In March 1942 *Sergeant York* was awarded two “Oscars,” one for Cooper — presented by a man in uniform, James Stewart — and one for film editing. Just two years earlier, in March 1940, movie czar Will Hays had reported confidently to producers and distributors that “. . . those who write the history of our times are not likely to ignore the contribution of the film in exposing the tragedy of war to the youth of our country.” “The romance of war,” he said, “has been punctured.”⁷

II.

The observation William de Mille made on a Hollywood of another time and another

war rang remarkably true in 1942. "Hollywood in 1917," he wrote, "was far too wrought up emotionally to indulge in any flights of philosophical thought."⁸ Seldom composed except in business matters, the movie colony clutched the high drama of Pearl Harbor to its bosom and embarked on a four-year war film spree which dwarfed 1917-1918 in both scope and intensity. Viewing Hollywood as a voluntarily independent subculture with its own peculiar mores, some commentary on its behavioral response to the war may help to fashion a context in which future discussions of war films might be more meaningful. Allowing for individual exceptions, it would not be unfair to say that Hollywood's initial anger and surprise – the sincerity of which paralleled the national reaction – soon gave way to monetary aggrandizement, cynicism, defensiveness, and egocentrism.

Financially, the two years before Pearl Harbor had been distressing. Attendance had dropped off from 85 million per week in 1937 to 55 million, and the net profits of the seven major companies in 1940 slumped to the lowest net since 1935, 19.3 million dollars.⁹ That by 1946 the profits had escalated to 119.4 million lends support to Ezra Goodman's assertion that the arrival of the war in 1941 was a welcome boon to Hollywood's dwindling fortunes. As Griffith and Mayer put it: "War, like crime, may not pay, but it helps the boxoffice." As soon as Hollywood discovered that *any* picture would make money, considerations of quality and content – such as they were – were cast aside for the duration along with refrigerators, vulcanized tires, and night baseball games.

In the realm of contributions to the "war effort," a common quest in 1942, Hollywood was neither indecisive nor reticent. Quickly and loudly, the industry proclaimed that its goals were two: war-aims instruction and morale building. These intertwined purposes were summed up rather representatively (and unilaterally) by director Ernst Lubitsch in May 1942. "In the present crisis the leaders of the motion picture industry have to take into consideration not only what the public wants to see," Lubitsch said, "but also what an audience should see . . ." "Our only aim can be – winning the war," he continued, "and our motion picture policy must be dictated accordingly."¹⁰ Lubitsch's pronouncement should sound familiar, for it paraphrases the mission prescribed by the U.S. government for the Creel Committee on Public Information in 1917. Hollywood, as if according to a musty, prepared script, was pre-empting those Federal prerogatives it was certain would be exercised. Less naive than in 1917 and possessed of keen retentive powers in matters of old wounds, the film industry was bent on resisting governmental controls in the only way it knew how: a publicity campaign.

Much was made of those male "stars" who rushed to enlist and the sacrifices (valuable careers, yachts, sweethearts, etc.) their heroic decisions entailed. In her piece for the March 1942 *Photoplay-Movie Mirror*, "Hollywood Meets the War Challenge," Louella Parsons spoke glowingly of the Hollywood figure who had given up his female "conquests" and gone to war, regretting only that "he bought so many vegetables from Japanese gardeners."¹¹ Actress Carole Lombard's death in an airline crash – as she was in transit to Hollywood from a war bond tour – was widely and rhapsodically described by the fan magazines as the industry's first "war casualty." Capitol Hill criticism of

Hollywood's possible categorization as a war industry brought petulant cries of "foul" from the movie colony and suggestions that they were being harrassed because they had been "so faithful and devoted" to the Roosevelt administration during the 1930's. Duncan Underhill, in the March 1942 issue of *Hollywood*, thought the critics should recall that "the movie industry is the only one that *gives* free of charge anything to the government." In an article for a fan magazine, "Keep 'Em Rolling Hollywood," Walter Winchell defended the film colony at some length and ordered skeptics to remember that "... Hollywood values an Academy Award but it thinks even more of the Congressional Medal of Honor!" *Film News* was less subtle about the industry's motivations. In February 1942 it made the terse announcement that "Hollywood, through voluntary organization in the War Activities Committee, has escaped government regulation."¹²

The establishment of the Office of War Information by executive order (9182) on June 13, 1942 was a futile move, then, insofar as its effect on the motion picture industry was concerned. Neither O.W.I. head, former CBS news analyst Elmer Davis, nor the chief of his Motion Picture Bureau, Lowell Mellett, enjoyed any more success than George Creel a quarter-century before. Davis' first policy, "keeping the American public fully informed on vital aspects of the war," and Mellett's 1942 speeches on the sustaining of "national morale" were merely echoes of a platform Hollywood had already espoused publicly and vowed it could fulfill "unaided." The government had lost the second round of this main event with Hollywood. In 1942-1943 the Motion Picture Bureau had a staff of 142 and an allotment of 1.3 million dollars for operations. In 1943, not unresponsive to lobbyists, Congress cut the Bureau budget to \$50,000 and, for all practical purposes, rendered it as impotent as Creel's Division of Films had been in 1919. The threat of censorship thus removed, the film industry was free to operate as it saw fit.¹³

But if it feared being governed, Hollywood behaved like government in one respect: it kept exhaustive records. Contributions to the "war effort" between 1942 and 1946 were well publicized both within and without the industry. In an extended exercise of image-polishing, through the various media and in house organs such as The Public Information Committee of the Motion Picture Industry's *Motion Picture Letter* and the War Activities Committee's annual *Movies At War*, statistics flowed which "proved" Hollywood's personal commitment to The Cause.¹⁴ It was noted, for example, that "stars" had traveled 5 million miles to "keep the boys happy"; theatre audiences had contributed "\$35,582,826.33" to charity drives; 630,000 soldiers overseas saw Hollywood releases at 1,269 separate shows every night of 1944; and that in the same year, 240 million men saw movies at the 1,218 domestic theatres run by the Army Motion Picture Service. Even in tabulating its "contribution" to the greatest war in history, the measuring devices used were numerical. In October 1945 the *Motion Picture Letter* estimated the film industry's total "gift" to the U.S. government at 45 million dollars for: 204 weeks of service, 1042 different features, and 1051 short subjects.

III.

Once war was declared, whatever reservations the film industry may have felt

previously about how (not if) war should be portrayed were hurriedly dropped.

The outcome was a steady series of battle epics which, among other things, caricatured the Nazis, Japanese, and Italians more garishly than the filmmakers of 1917-1918 would have thought possible. As William K. Everson observed, “. . . understanding of and respect for the ‘enemy’ became a thing of the past.” “If the bad guys of World War One had seemed stereotypes,” he continued, “they had nothing on the scoundrels who represented the Axis powers!” Hollywood, in fact, had blended the *shrecklichkeit* approach with the romantic formula exemplified by *The Big Parade* school into a war film package until then unknown. Here and there, as in a *National Board of Review Magazine* editorial in January 1942, “Movies and the War,” voices of moderation were raised urging that the film industry not employ movies as the “enemy” (meaning the Nazis, primarily) had done a few years earlier. Critic James Agee, although inconsistent in his position on war films, expressed concern in 1944 that, conditioned by the “semi-information” of such films, we might “do things to defeated enemies” which might injure the victors spiritually.¹⁵ But such warnings, valid or not, were swallowed up in the rush to dramatize the conflict on film. “The war thundered savagely and impersonally in the ears of the people,” Paul Michael recalled, “and Hollywood was quick to respond to the temper of the times with a series of films — dramas on a grand scale, showing heroism, bombings, flaming cities, and invading armies.”¹⁶

In the period 1942-1946, of the 1400-odd films released by Hollywood studios, an average of 25 per cent were combat pictures. Few phases of the war were ignored. In many more films than need be listed Hollywood re-created combat actions involving the U.S. Army (e.g., *Sahara*, 1943); the Air Force (*A Guy Named Joe*, 1943); the Navy (*Destroyer*, 1943); the Marines (*Wake Island*, 1942); the Merchant Marine (*Action in the North Atlantic*, 1943); the medical (*So Proudly We Hail*, 1943 and *The Story of Dr. Wassell*, 1944); the British (in the air in *Eagle Squadron*, 1942 and on land in *The Immortal Sergeant*, 1943); the Russians (*Counter-Attack*, 1945); and the Norwegians (*The Edge of Darkness*, 1943). But for an obvious improvement in technical virtuosity on the part of moviemakers — and a bigger war to portray — the character delineations, storylines, and dialogue of these films departed little from the pattern set by *The Big Parade* in 1925. Hollywood’s handling of the new military techniques, Bosley Crowther noticed, was “usually altered to suit the convenience of the plot.”¹⁷ In 1945 Dorothy Jones, reviewing these types of pictures, pointed out that “films about our fighting units were played strictly as melodrama — blood-and-thunder stuff usually without one glimpse of understanding about the meaning of the war itself.”¹⁸ Such was the civilian fare.

It is interesting to note, however, that beyond the seas the formula war film was less palatable. When Warner Brothers’ *Objective Burma* (1945) was shown in London, the critical response can only be described as “outraged.” As the leading man in the paratroop-oriented saga, Errol Flynn, commented, the film “might have been good for American morale at the time, but it sure made the English mad to see the U.S. win the war single-handed.”¹⁹ Noteworthy, too, was the agreement between belligerents that no “newsreel and war films” would be distributed for viewing by Allied prisoners in

European camps. And in 1945 one American sailor spoke for our troops overseas in general when he stated: "As for fictional war pictures, they don't want them at sea. Documentaries of actual battle, yes, but not imaginary heroics of Army, Navy, Coast Guard, Marines, and Air Force. Those are for civilians."

As the war drew to a close in 1945 signs of a shift in Hollywood's faith in the war film as a staple became evident, reflecting not only the increasing national interest in another return to "normalcy" but also the industry's suspicion that "normalcy" would be accompanied by another change in taste. "Perceiving as the war ended that uniforms were 'box-office poison'," Oliver Jensen wrote in 1946, "the movies beat all other industries to reconversion."²⁰ There was a kind of searching for "new popular subjects" à la 1918 and some reflecting on the behavior of the industry during the war which bordered on a veiled act of contrition. In 1945 Spyros Skouras, then president of Twentieth Century-Fox, thought the movies had "come of age" during the war and would begin to make realistic, contributory films (in addition to films-for-profit).²¹ Arthur Rosenheimer, Jr., then a staff member of the Museum of Modern Art, wondered in 1946 why, "since the issues in this war were so clear-cut," Hollywood expended so much energy on beating a proverbial dead horse and so little on "demonstrating democracy in action." Better pictures were called for and promised by Nathan Golden of the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, Barney Balaban of Paramount Pictures, and O.W.I.'s Robert Riskin. President of the Motion Picture Association Eric Johnston challenged the industry in March 1946 to "utilize films of various kinds . . . for various audiences," and the fast-fading "rajah" of M-G-M, Louis Mayer, expressed the belief that films "should not only afford entertainment but be of educational value."²² Amidst this sudden flush of self-analysis the war film was quietly re-interred, intact, ready for exhumation when the public mood seemed receptive. In October 1945, writing for the first issue of the *Hollywood Quarterly*, Dudley Nichols spoke an epitaph for the war film's temporary headstone. "A hundred and twenty million people in America," Nichols said, "know whatever they know of the reality of war only through films."²³

Twenty-three years and several wars later, two hundred million Americans know of the reality of war only through films. The wars have become ideological and agonizingly complex. The films teach us only to relive the halcyon years of World War II, when Hollywood thought it understood the simple nature of our crusade.²⁴

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¹ A survey of the evolution of the Hollywood war movie may be found in Peter A. Soderbergh, "Aux Armes! The Rise of the Hollywood War Film, 1916-1930," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, LXV (Autumn 1966), 509-522. For the purposes of this paper a "war film" is defined as one in which combat action plays a significant role, as distinguished from a film which may have a wartime setting but does not depict "blood and thunder" battlefield heroics to any measurable extent.

² *The Big Parade* (1925) was re-issued in sound in 1931 because, M-G-M thought, "There's a new generation for it . . ." Nationally it did not do well, but this was not through any lack of imagination on the parts of the promotional staffs. In San Jose, California, the film did "three times average business," due perhaps to "premiere" promotion stunts such as: war trophy and flag displays; encapsulating the theatre (Fox Mission) box office in "compo board bombshell smoke";

putting tire covers on all taxis and 8,000 napkins in the public schools, both items inscribed with words about *The Big Parade*. See the *Motion Picture Herald*, CV (November 28, 1931), 18-19.

³ For a moment in the mid-1930's Paramount Pictures had plans to put Humphrey Cobb's book *Paths of Glory* on film but quickly retreated when the French Government objected and threatened to boycott all Paramount films. As André Sennwald of the *New York Times* observed, the moviemakers were "unwilling to entrust a flaming anti-war drama to a world market which (was) seething with the spirit of aggressive nationalism." *Paths of Glory* was eventually made in 1957, often appears on lists of "anti-war" films, and has been chosen by "an advertiser who likes mixing his sales pitches with social messages" as a "prime time" television program in May 1968. See Rose Terlin, *You and I and the Movies* (New York, 1936), 36. Views of what may or may not constitute an "anti-war" film are assessed in Peter A. Soderbergh, "On War . . . and the Movies: A Reappraisal," *The Centennial Review*, XI (Summer 1967), 405-418.

⁴ As Margaret Thorp noted, "Some historian of the future may one day be surprised to discover that in the late 1930's the American motion picture industry made a large group of films glorifying every aspect of British virtue . . ." From London, Leslie Wood reported that "Neutral America . . . began to make films with a war background. There was no mistaking with which her sympathies rested. Her films were couched in terms which made the British the heroes of the hour." A *National Board of Review Magazine* poll of boys, age nine to thirteen, showed that seven of their "top ten films of 1939" had British themes and four of the seven were war movies. Margaret Thorp, *America at the Movies* (New Haven, 1939), 189; Leslie Wood, *The Miracle of the Movies* (London, 1947), 311; *National Board of Review Magazine*, XV (January, 1940), 18.

⁵ Arthur Knight, *The Liveliest Art* (New York, 1957), 243-44.

⁶ Forsyth Hardy (ed.), *Grierson on Documentary* (New York, 1947), 188.

⁷ Will H. Hays, *The Motion Picture in a Changing World* (New York, 1940), 4.

⁸ William C. de Mille, *Hollywood Saga* (New York, 1939), 191-92.

⁹ Anthony Dawson, "Motion Picture Economics," *Hollywood Quarterly*, III (Spring, 1948), 236.

¹⁰ *National Board of Review Magazine*, XVII (May, 1942), 20.

¹¹ Louella Parsons, "Hollywood Meets the War Challenge," *Photoplay-Movie Mirror*, XX (March, 1942), 100.

¹² *Film News*, III (February, 1942), 1.

¹³ On this issue see Walter Wanger, "The O.W.I. and Motion Pictures," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, VII (1943), 100-107; Cedric Larson, "Domestic Motion Picture Work of the O.W.I.," *Hollywood Quarterly*, III (no season, 1948), 434-43.

¹⁴ The Public Information Committee of the Motion Picture Industry, *Motion Picture Letter*, III-IV (January, 1944 – October 1945); War Activities Committee, *Movies At War*, II-III (1943-1944).

¹⁵ James Agee, *Agee on Film* (New York, 1964), 80.

¹⁶ Paul Michael, *The Academy Awards: A Pictorial History* (New York, 1964), 129.

¹⁷ Bosley Crowther, "The Movies Follow the Flag," *New York Times Magazine*, August 13, 1944, 18.

¹⁸ Dorothy B. Jones, "The Hollywood War Film," *Hollywood Quarterly*, I (October, 1945), 12.

Soderburgh: The Grand Illusion: Hollywood and World War II, 1930-1945

- ¹⁹ Errol Flynn, *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* (New York, 1959), 292.
- ²⁰ Oliver Jensen, "Too Much Success: Movies Made More Money Than Progress," *Life*, XXI (November 25, 1946), 70.
- ²¹ Editors of *Look*, *Movie Lot to Beachhead* (New York, 1945), preface by Spyros P. Skouras.
- ²² Leo Rosten, "Movies and Propaganda," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, CCLIV (November, 1947), 123.
- ²³ Dudley Nichols, "Men in Battle: A Review of Three Current Pictures," *Hollywood Quarterly*, I (October, 1945), 34. Nichols wrote the screenplay for *Air Force* (1942).
- ²⁴ For a brief analysis of the relationship between Hollywood war films and the realities of ideological conflict (1950-1968) see Peter A. Soderbergh, "The War Films," *Discourse: A Review of the Liberal Arts* (Winter, 1968), 87-91.

