Entertainment or Propaganda?

by Leo Braudy

For a long time, and still in many quarters today, any attempt to put a film into its historical context and to try to see how it responds to events outside itself has been criticized as over-reading, especially when the film is a genre film, a western, a crime drama, a historical drama or a swashbuckler. Such films are pure escapism, the argument goes, and to ascribe to them ulterior motives is foolish. All they were meant to do was entertain. Even though current films are often ruthlessly interpreted as reflections of any number of political and cultural issues, somehow the films of the past were more innocent.

Intriguingly enough, however, when we look at the films of the 1930s, we might remember that "escapism" is itself a word that first comes in use in that period and arrives fully freighted with its own prejudices. In the writings about the movies, whether by newspaper critics or Hollywood insiders, an invariable distinction is often made between "entertainment" and "propaganda." [1]

Until 1953, movies were not considered protected speech under the Constitution, and a case in the 1920s had even implied the opposite—that they were commercial entertainments that could be freely censored by local and state boards for whatever reason. To try to fend off this problem, Will Hays, the studio-appointed head of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, had in 1930 proposed the notorious Production Code, which was put into effect in 1934 under the supervision of Joseph Breen. The point of the Code was to protect Hollywood from government interference by policing those producers and studios whose films threatened to corrupt the morals of the film audience in a variety of ways, often sexual, frequently racial, but also political.

As the 30s wore on and fascism spread across Europe, to that list of potentially offendable groups were added foreign governments, especially when they might be moved to ban Hollywood films, making, as Breen pointed out, the whole industry suffer for the indiscretions of a few. Especially worrisome for the Production Code Office were films that attacked anti-Semitism because, according to Breen, they could easily make it worse for the Jews by awakening latent prejudice. In such an atmosphere, some explicitly anti-Nazi projects, like MGM's *It Can't Happen Here*, based on Sinclair Lewis' 1935 novel, were shelved entirely after Breen's objections. [2]

In this controversy, Warner Bros. as a company took a distinct position. In 1927, after being low on the totem pole of Hollywood prestige, the studio had taken a quantum leap forward due to its promotion of the new sound technology at a time when some of the old-line studios were taking a more wait-and-see attitude. On the political front, Warner Bros. was also much more active than any other studio in pushing the limits of what could be shown and said in films. In 1934, a year after Hitler became chancellor, they closed offices in Germany, while other studios stayed under increasingly difficult conditions until

◄ 23. Gang leader Gloves Donahue (Humphrey Bogart) and his henchman Sunshine (William Demarest) infiltrate a Nazi cell meeting in *All Through the Night* (1942).

they were forcibly ejected in the prelude to war. Meanwhile in the United States, Warner's films continued to take up touchy topics, sometimes dressed in historical costumes, later, as in *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (1939), with a documentary explicitness. Finally, in 1941, Harry Warner was summoned to testify before the Senate Interstate Commerce Committee, chaired by isolationists Gerald Nye and Bennett Clark, to answer charges of breaching the Neutrality Acts—i.e., of making "propaganda" rather than "entertainment."

Looking back on the 1930s through the distorting perspective of the House Un-American Activities Committee attacks on Hollywood after World War II tends to define propaganda as somehow a subversive act—a sneaking in of material to influence the audience subliminally, as in the famous, and ludicrous, example of Lionel Stander in one film waiting for an elevator and whistling "The Internationale." But in fact, at the time, most critics and a good portion of the audience were totally aware of the other meanings.

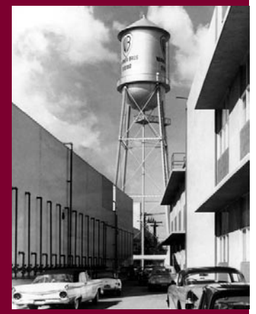
Entertainment as "escapism" implies a retreat from the realities of daily life into the dream world of film, a submergence in films that obliterates any critical capacity to step back from them and see their processes. But the viewers of the 1930s were also well steeped in genre forms and conventions of story and character. They were the bread and butter the studios fed them, the recognizable product, with recognizable actors, and enough variation to make it interesting. Already in silent film, in the two-reelers of child stars like Baby Peggy, one of the most common story-forms was a parody of the "serious" film hits of the day, that often were shown immediately after the full-length versions themselves. It was a tradition of self-consciousness and self-parody carried on by the Warner Bros. cartoons of the 1930s and 1940s, which often featured Porky Pig, Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd in situations audiences had previously found Cagney, Bogart and Edward G. Robinson.[3]

So the social practice of watching films was hardly so ignorant of the way films were made and the fictions that made them possible. Both critics and audiences took films not as self-enclosed worlds but as in some way connected to their daily lives. The March of Time newsreels, to take another contemporary example, mingled documentary footage with fictionalized scenes, just as feature films like *Captain Blood*, *Juarez* and *The Sea Hawk* began with full-screen titles that anchored their stories in historical places, personages and dates. Movies weren't a space totally different from the world outside the theater, but one adjacent to it, an extension of it, in which outside events might be seen as shadows reflected in a distorting (or clarifying) mirror.[4]

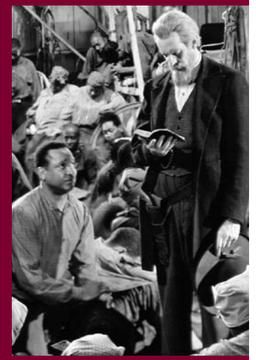
In the 1930s, with the gathering storms of war in Europe, Warner Bros. movies in particular begin to mediate between the actual life of their audiences and the more general public life of politics and world events. Instead of escapism, the films, both prestige and genre varieties, were more like special lenses through which to read otherwise excessively complex events. Like the lens of political science or economics for an academic observer, they offered an interpretive matrix. Different studios over time developed their own attitudes toward this outside world. For a variety of reasons, Warner Bros. was the most explicit in its attitudes and its effort to take on the cultural role of amalgamating "entertainment" and "propaganda" to present a point of view on current events, using fictional stories and characters as well as a recognizably factual "history."

To focus on a studio as having a particular identity implies the possibility that all the works of the studio, like those of a single *auteur* director, might be seen as one mega-work, with flourishes and nuances, but telling essentially the same story, both visually and verbally. At Warner Bros. in the 1930s, directors such as Michael Curtiz, Raoul Walsh and William Dieterle guided tightly scripted narratives peopled by a rotating array of stars and character actors. In contrast to the opulence of MGM, say, with its lavish productions, Warner's films often focused on a gritty urban setting. Their basic aesthetic seemed to be a kind of urban realism, featuring characters more working class than those in the films of the other studios. Their heroes were also often marked by their ethnicity, as in, say, the films of Paul Muni, who played characters that were Italian (*Scarface*, 1932), Mexican-American (*Bordertown*, 1935), Hungarian (*Black Fury*, 1935), French (*The Story of Louis Pasteur*, 1936; *The Life of Emile Zola*, 1936), Chinese (*The Good Earth*, 1937) and Mexican-Indian (*Juarez*, 1939). But even when the setting was the glamorous past, and the hero a clean-cut seeming Englishman (actually Australian) like Errol Flynn, the plot similarly turned on the resistance of a single man to illegitimate or ignorant authority (*Captain Blood*, 1935; *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, 1936; *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, 1938; *The Sea Hawk*, 1940). Such a figure was also, as played by Flynn in *Captain Blood* and *Robin Hood*, a leader who shared loyalty and loot with his men, and didn't take his own dignity very seriously.[5]

24. *The Dawn Patrol* (1938): Phipps (Donald Crisp) intervenes between the rumpled flier Scott (David Niven) and his former friend Courtney (Errol Flynn) who, after being a flier himself, has been put in command of sending others on virtual suicide missions.



25. The Warner Bros. water tower.



26. John Brown (Raymond Massey) tells the black slaves he rescued that they are now free in *Santa Fe Trail* (1940).

27. In *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937), Zola (Paul Muni) takes notes on the exploitation of coal miners for his novel *Germinal*.

The *Warners' War* exhibit amply documents the engagement of both Harry and Jack Warner in the effort to combat the Nazi threat. What I would like to do here is look at several films, sometimes made years before *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, which more explicitly named the enemy, and show how films that might otherwise seem to be "escapism" and "entertainment" similarly laid down a groundwork of ideas and attitudes that not only prepared the way for films like *Nazi Spy*, but even may have been more successful because they were less overt. These are what I would call "displaced" political films, guised in a mixture of fiction and history, anchored in a particular time and place but speaking to the present.

Although the term "propaganda" derives from the name of the Catholic Church office founded in the 17th century to propagate the faith in foreign countries, its modern meaning is more a product of World War I, when the warring powers widely tried to influence public opinion through books, posters and magazine articles. Even then, there was a distinction between its use in the United States and in Europe. As George Seldes points out in *You Can't Print That!* (1929), "The term propaganda has not the sinister meaning in Europe which it has acquired in America…in European business offices the word means advertising or boosting generally."[6] One factor in this more negative view was the tradition of American innocence. Propaganda, in the eyes of congressional committees and other critics of Hollywood, may have been opposed to entertainment on the one hand, but it was also opposed to a certain conception of American democracy on the other. We don't have to sell ourselves the way the totalitarians do, went the implicit argument, and if we do, we have fatally undermined the purity of our ideals and the natural rightness of our view of the world. As the isolationist side of public opinion grew stronger and organizations like the America First Committee were formed, such views became more militant. To use the movies as interventionist propaganda against Hitler and in favor of war, in their view, was to drag us into war in the name of special interests (particularly Jewish, but also Anglophile). Similarly, from the other point of view, isolationism was a mere mask for anti-Semitism and love of fascism.

Historically, the conflict between innocence and knowingness was a staple of the American relation to Europe since the beginnings of the country, and occupied a privileged place in the heart of American novelists like Henry James. But in a variety of ways, many Warner Bros. films in the period from 1935 to 1941 aimed to foster a different sense of knowingness in the audience: knowingness about the promise and problems of American democracy both in the present and through the mirror of history. The analogies between Renaissance England fighting off Spain's plans for world domination (in *The Sea Hawk*) and what was happening in the present between England and Germany were clear to most of the audience, even without the ringing speech by Queen Elizabeth added to the British release print. The anti-Semitic prejudice and military cover-up exposed in *Zola* was as much an ingredient of the review as comments on the specific story, the production and the acting.

In part, the displacement I describe was a result of the Production Code and the realities of movie economics. Only small companies like Malvina Pictures could afford to make a film explicitly called *I Was a Captive of Nazi Germany* (1936), and even that was protested by the German Consul in Los Angeles as well as censored in Chicago for fear of demonstrations by offended Germans. The Warners may have ceased doing business in Germany after 1934, but back in the United States, they fought continual battles with the Breen office over elements in their films that might cause offense to foreign governments. A veiled story was a practical solution, and obviously preferable to no story at all.

But rather than see such a strategy as an evasion, it should be considered for what it is rather than for what it isn't. We should look, in other words, not at what the Warner scriptwriters and directors failed to do, but what it was they actually did. *Zola*, for example, has been faulted innumerable times because its script never speaks the word "Jew" despite its central concern with the Dreyfus case. Dreyfus' religion appears only at one point, when a French Army officer looks through the list of the General Staff to see who might be the traitor selling secrets, points to Dreyfus' name, with "Religion: Jew" next to it, and says, "I wonder how he ever became a member of the General Staff?"

To liberal critics, this is an unforgivable muting of the basic anti-Semitic theme. But, by touching so lightly on Dreyfus' Jewishness, the film in effect becomes about injustice generally, especially injustice perpetuated by a military establishment against one of its own who happens to come from a minority group. Similarly, the word "Georgia" is never mentioned in *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (1932). Does that make the indictment of the prison system less or more effective by not saying or implying it's the problem only of one state?[7]

As the 1930s wear on and the threat of fascism in Europe becomes more palpable with events like the Spanish Civil War, the style of displacement changes. Roughly assorted, the films in the earlier part of the period stress the battle with fascist violence and racial prejudice on native grounds. Muni films such as *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, *Bordertown* and *Black Fury*—as well as the remarkable *Black Legion* (1937), which stars Humphrey Bogart as a disgruntled worker who joins a nativist group, murders a fellow worker and later testifies against the group—emphasize the corruption and incipient fascism within America itself.[8] When the films deal with the European setting, as in the tremendously popular series of biopics, once again the target is prejudice, whether it is Zola defending Dreyfus, or Louis Pasteur and Paul Ehrlich pushing forward their great discoveries despite the hostility of the medical and scientific establishments.

Such plot turns were of course in their way stereotypes, genre motifs of character and incident, which had long been familiar on the stage and in films. The very idea of the hero involves a combat of some sort, with the gods, with other people or with the hidebound conventions of his time. But what so many of the Warner films of the 1930s manage to do is turn these otherwise general formulas into specific rituals of Americanness. Such films are a rededication to what are presented as basic American values—against prejudice and for diversity, against totalitarian authority and for democracy, against repression and for freedom of speech. Like the many patriotic shorts that Warner Bros. made beginning in 1936, which included such live-action heroes as the Jewish patriot Haym Salomon, played by Raines, lending money to the American Revolutionaries and the cartoon Porky Pig learning about the Pledge of Allegiance, these films called upon history and myth to inspire a rededication to the essence of America.[9]

In the process of presenting these American values, American history might itself be distorted, turned into useable myth rather than complicated history. Thus, the 1930s was also the period that established the post-Civil War period in the West as the reservoir of a group of mythic paradigms for national history, and westerns particularly were remade into ideological tools that set the stage for war by asking what are the basic American virtues and how can we replenish them from their 19th century roots.

Many historians of Warner Bros. and the 1930s refer to such films as "allegories." But allegory is a wide terminological net to use here.

In the strict sense, allegory refers to meanings outside a narrative, as, say, Dante's *Inferno* and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* refer to different versions of Christian theology. Within the work, Dante's Pilgrim or Bunyan's Christian has concrete individual adventures, but that realistic specificity is also meant to be seen through and its abstract and universal religious meaning revealed. Used without such specificity, allegory is just a high flown term for "has other meanings." It could refer to virtually any film that has a symbolic atmosphere or asks the audience to make analogies between its story and events outside the theater. In the case of the historical dramas, for example, any sequence of events not contemporary is in a general sense allegorical because all fictional narrative art reflects its own time in some way.[10]

It is then hardly very useful, and even may be trivializing, to say a film like *The Adventures of Robin Hood* is an allegory because it can be shown to be making some claims about isolationism and interventionism that resonate in the context of the late 1930s. The Normans in the film oppress the Saxons in the film like an occupying foreign power, and Robin Hood's band resembles a guerrilla resistance. When the disguised Richard the Lion-Hearted, after discovering that Robin is one of his loyal supporters against the tyrannical King John, asks Robin what he would say to Richard if he were in front of him, Robin replies in effect that he would tell him not to meddle in foreign wars, but stay home and protect his country and his loyal countrymen. Whether you decide that is an isolationist or an interventionist sentiment, it certainly reflects the controversies of the 20th rather than the 12th century.

Perhaps we need a new word for the way movies make such comments and include such reflections even while they are ostensibly telling a story about the past. The paranoid view of allegory—"X is really about Y"—assumes a secret agenda and asserts that the literal level of the film, whether *The Life of Emile Zola* or *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, is less meaningful than the secret agenda.

But what happens when the literal level and the allegorical are equally coherent? And what happens when they collide? Orson Welles in 1937 can stage *Julius Caesar* with a cast in blackshirt and the response is praise for a thought-provoking theatrical update of a classic. But film is a more interesting test of the dangers of one-to-one allegorization because its literal level is so powerful: A movie can be as detailed a representation of medieval England or late 19th century Paris as the studio technicians can create. The literal world we see before us therefore does not vanish into its "allegorical" meanings. It anchors them, and remains long after those controversies have faded. Intriguingly enough, these works, with their multiple meanings, are the ones that have tended to last, as well as the ones that most evaded the scrutiny of the congressional watchdogs. In 1941 the committee chaired by Nye and Clark cited eight films—*Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, *The Great Dictator*, *Dive Bomber*, *Flight Command*, *That Hamilton Woman*, *Escape*, *Underground* and *Sergeant York*—as potential violations of the Neutrality Acts. Of these only *That Hamilton Woman* was a historical drama and *Sergeant York* was set during World War I. The others, whether realistic or comic, were explicitly set in the present.

Calling such films—and others like them—propaganda avoids some basic issues. If they are propaganda, why aren't they more explicit about it? Propaganda tends to paint the world in black and white, and argues a particular take on specific issues and events. But in the displaced films, the allusion to contemporary events is often more a question of atmosphere than overt didacticism. Should a work be called propaganda when it requires a subtle reader/viewer who can see beneath the surface meaning to some hidden depths?

Such films certainly have a point of view, but are they propaganda? Often the literary technique more in evidence is not allegory or symbolization so much as it is irony, another form that depends on the knowingness of the audience. Here that knowingness is specifically historical. Warner Bros. historical dramas and biopics, like those of other studios, may distort history, but they also depend upon it to give authenticity to their stories and to lend irony to the course of events.

These historical ironies resemble an interpretation of history more than they do an allegory of the present. Like the history-writing pioneered by Thucydides, they emphasize the importance of historical parallels rather than the uniqueness of events. In several of the displaced films, the story drives toward a basic historical fact that the audience might be expected to know, and then stops before dramatizing or even referring to it overtly. *Virginia City* (1940), for example, is a sequel of sorts to *Dodge City* (1939). Both are directed by Michael Curtiz, star Errol Flynn and are set in the West. In *Dodge City*, Flynn is an Irish soldier of fortune who cleans up a western town corrupted by crooked cattle dealers. In *Virginia City*, one of the earliest films in which Flynn plays an American, he is a Union officer in the last days of the Civil War. His job is to administer even-handed justice in the conflicts between Confederate and Yankee sympathizers in Nevada, while trying to prevent the theft of gold by Randolph Scott, a Confederate officer, to aid the cause. At the end of the film, Flynn is about to be executed for hiding the gold as part of a promise to the dying Scott to use to rebuild the war-torn South. His sweetheart Miriam Hopkins, previously a southern sympathizer and the fiancée of Scott, goes all the way to Abraham Lincoln to plead her case and manages to get a satisfactory answer on April 8, 1865 (tight shot on the calendar). In the plot, she has won her case a day before Flynn's execution, but of course *we* are also invited to remember that in less than a week Lincoln himself will be dead.

The Sea Hawk (1940), like *Virginia City*, gives some clues to how these attempts to enlist the audience in the meaning of the film work. Flynn here is a privateer loyal to Queen Elizabeth (as Robin Hood was to Richard I), who robs Spanish ships to gather wealth for the British military. Meanwhile, on the public stage, Elizabeth is torn between two of her courtiers, one who says that England needs to build a great defensive fleet, the other who says that Spain represents no threat. Secretly sent to Panama to find more gold, Flynn and his men are captured due to the pro-Spanish courtier's treachery and become galley slaves. Flynn leads a mutiny of the galley slaves and arrives back in England, propelled, as it's pointed out, by wind and not by the arms of men, in time to warn Elizabeth to be vigilant against Spanish expansion. The phrase "Spanish Armada" is never mentioned, but that is of course what is in the offing, and the wind in the Englishmen's sails is the wind that will destroy the Armada.[11]

Such dramatic ironies bind the audience to history, or at least to movie-made history, in intriguing ways. Because we know what is left out and what is unsaid, we finish the story of the film, and are made complicit in its telling. Instead of an allegory that gives human representation to abstract concepts, these stories depend on mingling people who actually existed with fictional characters who thereby have a borrowed ring of truth. The historical film thus becomes a genre that is an odd amalgam of faithfulness to facts and a commandeering of the meaning of the past to make it relevant to the present.

In *Santa Fe Trail* (1940), the audience's knowingness is invoked even more subtly. After Jeb Stuart (Flynn) has defeated John Brown's attack on Harper's Ferry and seen Brown hung, he says in effect to his fellow West Pointer George Armstrong Custer (Ronald Reagan), "That will end that," while Custer is not so sure. Neither *knows* the Civil War is coming, but we do, and the views of Stuart the southerner are delicately undermined in favor of the uncertainty of Custer the northerner. No professional historian, say, would countenance the way *Santa Fe Trail* puts Stuart and Custer in the same West Point class (Custer graduated seven years later), but for its ability to focus the conflicts before the Civil War through two familiar names, the distortion is perfect.

In taking the audience up to historical moments that are then left undramatized or even omitted, these pseudo-historical films imply that history itself is not fixed if we look at it prospectively rather than retrospectively. The past may be inevitable, but the meaning of the past isn't. *Santa Fe Trail*, for instance, is often looked upon as either a general mess or a meretricious one. The capsule account in Leonard Maltin's *Movie and Video Guide* goes like this, "Lopsided picture that can't make up its mind about anything: what side it's taking, what it wants to focus on, etc. Worthless as history, but among the rubble are some good action scenes."[12] Edward Buscombe in his *BFI Companion to the Western* is even more decided, "An astonishingly partisan account of events in Kansas leading up to the Civil War, and a film which must go a long way towards undermining Warners reputation as the most liberal studio of the New Deal era" (295). The most egregious detail, writes Buscombe, echoing many other critics, is the characterization of John Brown, "Here a bloodthirsty agitator [who] keeps stirring up trouble by rescuing from slavery blacks who ought to be perfectly happy as they are."[13]

Lopsided or prejudiced? If that's the only choice, I would have to argue for the first. But it would be more accurate to say that *Santa Fe Trail* is a film trying to do many things at once, a film that can be sorted out only by looking at the interchanges between political attitudes and narrative resources characteristic of Warner films in the 1930s and early 1940s. As a start, Robert Buckner, the scriptwriter, also wrote *Virginia City* and *Dodge City*, and would go on to write *Dive Bomber* (one of the films cited by the Nye-Clark Committee) as well as *Yankee Doodle Dandy*. Then, the characterization of Brown comes directly out of a popular 1932 biography called *God's Angry Man*, hardly an anti-Brown work. Central to the film is a common Warner's theme of this period—reconciliation—which unites the Civil War period westerns with the anti-prejudice films. Just as Americans should realize that they are a country built on minority group energy and knowledge, and that prejudice of any sort is un-American, so too, the kinds of divisions symbolized by the Civil War need to be put aside for the goal of one America united

against our real enemies. As one of the characters in *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* remarks, the enemy regime uses "its favorite device of stirring up racial prejudice and national hatreds" so that, as the Goebbels figure chortles, "in the ensuing chaos we will be able to take control."

In this configuration, John Brown is not an enemy. He is a religious extremist who truly cares for the black slaves he is rescuing, and others in the film realize it. Custer and Stuart again pose the possible interpretations:

Custer: Jeb, there's a purpose behind that madness—one that can't be easily dismissed.
Stuart: It isn't our job to decide who's right and who's wrong about slavery, anymore than it is John Brown's.
Or later
Custer: Nothing will ever break the force of John Brown, not even death.
Stuart: Oh, you're wrong, George. He's finished. His force is broken forever.[14]

Brown's problem, so far as the film is concerned, is not his ideals but his personal effort to force the meaning of history. Removing his demonic presence doesn't cure the real wrongs. The Civil War still has to happen. So the northerner Custer is more right than the southerner Stuart. As Brown is hung, Robert E. Lee, the commander of the Union Army at Harper's Ferry, says, "So perish all such enemies of the Union." But for the audience the irony should be clear: History moves on and soon Lee and Stuart will be enemies of the Union as well.

But for the moment at least, the other overriding goal of the film's story has been met. While history remains unresolved, the romantic plot is resolved, although once again irony overshadows the resolution. While "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" plays on the soundtrack ("John Brown's body lies a-moldering in his grave"), Stuart and Kit are married on the train that her railroad-building father has brought to Santa Fe, the same railroads that will be instrumental in defeating the South in the Civil War.

The ease with which critics dismiss *Santa Fe Trail* and films like it from this period arises, I believe, from their effort to deal with several political and ideological issues at once, all collected in the name of history—the history of the past and the current history in which that past is contemplated. Films end but history does not. The closure of the romantic plot seems to resolve questions that in the rest of the film are left open, especially questions of reconciliation. The northerner and the southerner can be friends, or they can marry, forsaking knee-jerk politics for personal affinity. Thus isolationist and interventionist elements can co-exist in the same film, as can an ambivalence (embodied in the character of Brown) about violence in the name of justice, in particular a violent crusade against prejudice that mirrors other Warner films.

In Harry Warner's letters and speeches, as well as in the publications of the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League, the prime charge was similarly that fascism sought to divide and conquer by turning groups against each other. So the overriding message of these films is unity: We are all in this together, and racial and religious and sectional prejudice, like class antagonism, is a perilous sapping of national strength. As the late 30s approach, the tendency to associate uniforms with repression and fascism, in films otherwise as disparate as *Black Fury* (the jack-booted army of the mine owners) and *Zola* (the anti-Semitic conspiring military authorities), gives way to a more hesitant perspective, in which the Army, as in *They Died with Their Boots On* (1941), becomes the only place where Custer, the adventurous individualist, can truly be at home after being a bored failure at civilian life.[15]

Custer at Little Big Horn resembles Brown in his doomed effort to force history to bow to his meaning. But just as the northern Flynn in *Virginia City* promises the southern Scott to save the gold to help the South after the war, so the white Flynn as Custer in *Boots* writes his last letter supporting the rights of the Indian tribes to their lands. The prime issue is not historical accuracy but the message of unity and reconciliation.[16]

Trying to sort out the politics of these Warner Bros. films as World War II gets steadily nearer becomes a confusing exercise if they are considered only as a species of policy statement. It is exactly the retailoring of traditional plots and genres and star images to respond to the new realities that makes them intriguing. As in all films, there is a tremendous pressure on the importance of the individual and individual will, a thematic focus only underlined by the use of close-ups and the whole paraphernalia of the star system. Individuals count, say these films: Individuals fight prejudice, individuals make mistakes, individuals defeat enemies, individuals go too far.

28. A bow and arrow specialist shoots off the hat of Gen. Custer (Errol Flynn) in *They Died with Their Boots On* (1942).

29. General Custer is featured as a "Great American Hero" in the *Sergeant York* (1941) ad campaign.

In any given film, the implications of that individual will might be interventionist or isolationist. But it is really in the invocation of the will to change oneself and make history change as well that the optimism of these films resides. Evils exist in the world, says their constant message, but something can be done about them.

This brings me to a final issue in the pre-war Warner Bros. films: casting. The prime male stars of the period are Muni, Cagney, Flynn, Robinson and Bogart. Of these, Muni, Cagney and Robinson often play urban ethnics, while Flynn, until the war looms, is the all-purpose Brit. Bogart appears on the scene a little later, not as an ethnic but as an American type with an indefinable background, an odd mixture of the tough and the society kid.[17]

With the cautiousness of the 1930s giving way to the more explicit anti-fascist films of the 1940s, Bogart, more than any of the other Warner stars of the period, is cast as the doppelganger for the male audience member's attitude toward the war. His only rival is Gary Cooper, who though nominally under contract to Paramount, stars in Warner's *Meet John Doe* (produced by Frank Capra but shot on the Warner lot) and *Sergeant York* (Howard Hawks), for which he won an Oscar. These two films neatly encapsulate the twin Warner preoccupations of the 1930s: In *Meet John Doe*, Cooper is a down and out former baseball player who almost becomes the figurehead for an American fascist movement; in *Sergeant York*, he is an Appalachian pacifist who realizes that his patriotic duty is to fight in World War I and wins the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Alongside Cooper's embodiment of the clean-cut All-American (two years later he plays Lou Gehrig in *The Pride of the Yankees*), Bogart's version of the national hero shows somewhat darker colors. Frequently a villain in his Warner films of the 30s, Bogart particularly embodies the good bad man, like his signature role of Duke Mantee in *The Petrified Forest* (1936) and his even more sympathetic Roy Earle in *High Sierra* (1941). These men may be criminals, but they are individualists rather than gang members. In *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), although now a detective, the Bogart character similarly walks a line between the law and the outlaw. This image will be transformed into the reluctant fighter—like York, a man who has to be persuaded that war against his country's enemies is worthwhile. But unlike York, who has to go against his religious belief in pacifism, the Bogart characters must change from individualist cynicism to political engagement.[18]

A literary forerunner of this character is Hemingway's Harry Morgan in *To Have and Have Not* (1937), where the disillusionment that followed World War I has to be discarded to face the new evils of the world ("A man alone ain't got no bloody fucking chance"). *Casablanca*, of course, is the quintessential example of this metamorphosis for Bogart, and Bogart will also play Harry Morgan in 1945. But *Casablanca* is only the endpoint of a few immediately preceding films in which the Bogart character follows a trajectory that brings him closer and closer to engagement. In *All Through the Night*, shot in late summer and early fall of 1941 (before Pearl Harbor) and released in January 1942, he is a Damon Runyonesque gangster who couldn't care less about the German attack on England, "That's Washington's racket.

Let them handle it." But through a series of circumstances, he realizes that there is a Nazi fifth columnist group at work whose strategy is divide and conquer, "Already we have split them into angry little groups, flying at each other, unconscious they are doing our work." Persuading an equally oblivious ("It makes no difference to me who runs the country") rival gang leader that the threat is real, Bogart first infiltrates the underground cell meeting and then defeats them in an all-out mêlée.

In Bogart's next film, *Across the Pacific*, which was shot in 1942 immediately before *Casablanca*, he plays a slightly different role as a cashiered army officer, presciently named Rick, who willingly sells military secrets to an American agent for the Japanese. Bogart, naturally, is not a traitor but an undercover agent. He discovers that Greenstreet has imported airplane parts to be assembled in a plot to bomb the Canal Zone locks. The plan is thwarted and the American patrol planes go on their regular missions, although, in one of those historical ironies, looking ominously like the planes that attacked Pearl Harbor. In the shorthand of studio casting, the Nazi killer in *All Through the Night* is played by Peter Lorre and the Japanese agent in *Across the Pacific* by Sydney Greenstreet—Bogart's nemeses in *The Maltese Falcon*, just as Conrad Veidt, the head Nazi in *All Through the Night* will reappear as Major Strasser in *Casablanca*.[19]

Confessions of a Nazi Spy in 1939 was the first film to explicitly name the enemy and attack Nazi expansionism and sabotage. But, aside from a few Warner programmers, the rest of Hollywood did not follow suit, and the passage of new Neutrality Acts didn't help matters. The Nye-Clark Committee held its hearings in the fall of 1941. Then came Pearl Harbor and Hitler's declaration of war. Further hearings were announced for 1942 but never happened. With 1942 and 1943, the war was in full swing and the need to veil anti-fascist themes was no longer necessary. The Production Code had been superseded by the Office of War Information. Films such as *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (1942) wore their patriotism on their sleeves, and previously reluctant studios like MGM jumped into the conversion narrative story feet first with films like *For Me and My Gal* (1942), with Gene Kelly as the reluctant hero. Charges of premature anti-fascism would be leveled against Hollywood after World War II was over. But for the moment the country was united, in the way that Warner's displaced narratives had always so zealously and idealistically encouraged.

Final Note: The Other Faces of Fascism

Spanish Civil War films seemed easier to make than anti-Nazi or anti-fascist films, perhaps because the Breen office could not use its usual caveat of not offending a foreign government. Franco, after all, was leading the army in a "nationalist" rebellion against the legitimate civilian government. Another reason might be that Breen, like other prominent Hollywood Catholics such as John Ford and Louella Parsons, for a time supported the government against the rebels. Ford even had a nephew in the American-organized Abraham Lincoln Brigade. In this earlier, more open political atmosphere, Paramount's *The Last Train from Madrid* came out in 1936, and Joris Ivens' *Spanish Earth*, with a script and narration by Ernest Hemingway, was widely shown in 1937.

In 1936, Walter Wanger, an independent producer who had previously worked at Paramount, hired Clifford Odets to write a script called *Castles in the Air* about Spaniards in Paris who want to go fight for the Loyalists. Lewis Milestone was to direct and there would also be jobs for Harold Clurman, Elia Kazan and other members of the Group Theatre. The film was postponed in March 1937 supposedly because Wanger didn't want to offend Mussolini and had another film he wanted to shoot in Italy. In the meantime Odets had done the script for Milestone's *The General Dies at Dawn* (1936).

The story, or at least the premise, of *Castles in the Air* reemerged in *Blockade* (1938), with a script by John Howard Lawson. Produced by Wanger and directed by William Dieterle, the film starred Henry Fonda as a Spanish peasant defending his farm. The opening title says "Spain, 1936" but no further direct reference is made to the war or to the opposing sides. Wendy Smith, in her book on the Group Theatre, says that *Blockade* is a rewrite of *Castles in the Sky*, but the American Film Institute catalogue cites reports at the time saying that Odets' script was dropped.[20]

When the Republican government was accused of accepting military aid from Stalin, much of the Hollywood Catholic support began to dry up, and Franco's final conquest of Madrid in March 1939 shifted the balance of political power decisively. But the residual romance about the Republican cause still appears in *Casablanca*, where Rick is characterized as having fought for the Loyalists, no doubt in one of the international brigades. Finally, when Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) was filmed by Paramount in 1943, according to some sources, the word "nationalist" was substituted for "fascist" in the film's script at the insistence of the State Department, since Franco was now the Spanish chief of state.

NOTES

1. The first reference to "escapism" cited in the OED appears in 1933, from the *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, which would imply at least its academic usage somewhat earlier. "Escapist" appears in Webster in 1934, although the OED cites an earlier usage by John Crowe Ransome in 1930.
2. For a multitude of examples of such thwarted projects, see especially Christine Ann Colgan, "Warner Brothers' Crusade against the Third Reich: A Study of Anti-Nazi Activism and Film Production, 1933 to 1941," 2 vols. diss., University of Southern California, 1985 and also Michael E. Birdwell, *Celluloid Soldiers: The Warner Bros. Campaign against Nazism* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).
3. In *What Price Porky?* (1938), which parodies the 1926 film *What Price Glory?*, the word "ducktator" is used along with comic images of goose-stepping soldiers, some time before anything so explicit appears in mainstream Hollywood films.
4. In literature, the practice begins with Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814), in which the fictional hero meets such real people as Bonnie Prince Charlie. In early film, the historical is approached more gingerly, as in *The Birth of a Nation*, where the scenes of Lincoln and his cabinet are virtually footnoted. The whole question of dates and place designations at beginnings of films is intriguing. It was still in use in the 1950s and later. Now, however, it has been supplanted by "based on a true story," although the practice is still popular in prose fiction, following the model of such works as E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975; film, 1981).
5. To emphasize the story pattern even further, Flynn's antagonist was often played by the same person. Thus Claude Rains is the hero-thwarting despot in *Juarez* (Napoleon III), *Robin Hood* (King John) and *The Sea Hawk* (Don Jose Alvarez de Cordoba), with time off to be the benevolent Haym Salomon in the patriotic two-reeler *Sons of Liberty* (1939).
6. George Seldes, *You Can't Print That!: The Truth Behind the News, 1915-1928* (New York: Payson and Clark, 1929, 427).
7. Jack Warner specifically ordered all references to Jews and anti-Semitism to be removed from the *Zola* script. See Colgan, I, 195, letter of 2/11/37. Nevertheless, the film was banned in France, Italy, Hungary, Japan, Quebec, Poland and Ecuador, primarily for slandering the army. Because of Breen's directives, "syphilis" is barely mentioned in *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet* (1940). The question of universality versus specificity in speaking of prejudice becomes an issue again after World War II with the controversy over Anne Frank's diary and the subsequent stage play by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett.
8. Columbia a few months before had released *Legion of Terror*, also based on the case of the Michigan Black Legion. The real name could be used because it was a matter of public record—the same rationale Warners used when arguing for *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* two years later.
9. In our own time, this would be called the construction of an ideology, but "ideology" then was a word only associated with the totalitarian systems—another bow to American innocence.
10. See Angus Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1964). Fletcher makes wide claims for the pervasiveness of allegory as a basic narrative structure, although he stresses the importance of its religious and stylized sides. Also see Paul DeMan, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979). DeMan argues in a deconstructive way that the basic allegory in most literature is the dramatization of the problem of reading and interpretation itself.
11. In Philip Dunne's early script, the Armada plays a much larger part. See Rudy Behlmer, ed., *The Sea Hawk* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982).
12. Leonard Maltin, *Movie and Video Guide 2002* (New York: Signet, 2001), 1155.
13. Edward Buscombe, ed. *VBFI Companion to The Western* (New York: Antheneom, 1990), 296.
14. In a similar conundrum, Kit, Olivia de Havilland's character, the daughter of a railroad entrepreneur, says to Brown's son, Jason, "His reasons may be right, Jason. They may even be great and good reasons. But what your father is doing is wrong, terribly wrong."
15. On the Anti-Nazi League, see Colgan, 766.
16. Alvin M. Josephy, Jr. calls this "an egregious final scene" in which the sentiments expressed are "incongruous and shamelessly fraudulent" (Mico et al., 149). There are, however, some precedents for the attitudes in Custer's own writings, see especially George Custer, *My Life on the Plains: Or Personal Experiences with the Indians* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977).
17. Bogart's father was a society doctor and his upbringing was a mixture of outsider and insider. As a young actor, he frequently played upper-class characters. Robinson was first considered for the lead in *Black Legion*, but Bogart was substituted because the producer wanted a more American type.
18. The stress on the individualist criminal nicely complements the tendency in later films to characterize gangsters as metaphoric fascists. In Howard Hawks' *Ball of Fire* (1942), Dan Duryea chortles as he fires a machine gun at a world globe. *The Hitler Gang* (Paramount, 1944) works the other side of the equation.
19. *Across the Pacific*, like *Maltese Falcon*, was directed by John Huston, and a few lines of dialogue are lifted from the earlier picture, along with Mary Astor as the heroine. Flynn follows Bogart's lead in *Northern Pursuit* (1943), where he plays a Mountie named Wagner fired for being a Nazi sympathizer ("He's of German descent and we're at war") but who is actually an undercover agent who discovers that two Nazi officers have landed in northern Canada, where they plan to put together an airplane from parts cached there and bomb the Canada-U.S. Canal.
20. Wendy Smith, *Real Life Drama: The Group Theatre and America, 1931-1940* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1990).