



PROJECT MUSE®

Special Editor's Introduction: World War II in Film and History

Robert W. Matson

Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies, Volume 27, Numbers 1-4, 1997, pp. 1-3 (Article)

Published by Center for the Study of Film and History



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/395894/summary>

Robert W. Matson

University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown

Special Editor's Introduction: World War II in Film and History

Frank Capra, a director whose impact on filmgoers of the Second World War era was as strong as any, reportedly said: "I never cease to thrill at an audience seeing a picture. For two hours you've got 'em. Hitler can't keep 'em that long. You eventually reach even more people than Roosevelt does on radio. Imagine what Shakespeare would have given for an audience like that!"¹ In a somewhat different sense than he intended, Capra's remarks are apropos a half-century later. The films of World War II have indeed reached an audience far larger than those of FDR's fireside chats and they continue to claim the attention of viewers over whom the propaganda of wartime itself holds no sway. But the staying power of these films, like that of the visual record in general, poses a challenge to subsequent generations of viewers, especially those who want to treat the movies as a primary source for the study of the era itself. History, we must remember, is the study of the debris of the past. With us here in today's world is a vast, chaotic, and usually inert body of data created by people of earlier times for their own purposes, and from which we attempt to draw meaning. Amid this dusty trove, some of the pieces shine with especially attractive brilliance. Thus it is with these films that appear to live beyond their time. "When image becomes substance," Paul Gilster warns, "and the picture too often substitutes for the thousand words that would more accurately describe an event or an idea, the audience is in the danger of being misled."² It is to that danger that this special issue of *Film & History* is directed. Here we hope to unite the strengths of word and picture.

In the first essay, Michael Todd Bennett anchors his discussion of prewar and early wartime films in a solid analysis of the international scene and provides a firm foundation for the specific studies that follow. The change from neutrality to belligerent status was awkward for many Americans, an awkwardness Bennett finds, among

other examples, in the reluctant hero Alvin York. The next two essays move immediately into this emotional terrain, first as Michael Birdwell scrutinizes the two Sergeants York—movie and real life—then as Heather Frazer and John O'Sullivan use the experience of actor Lew Ayres to examine Hollywood and the dilemma for both the individual and society of conscientious objection to war.

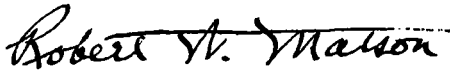
Then, two articles address the onset of hostilities for the United States and explore the intertwined ramifications of that great event in the land and in its movie theaters. Ralph Donald delves into the Pearl Harbor attack itself in "Awakening a Sleeping Giant," and Michael Paris explicates a fictionalized account of an air crew involved in the attack and its aftermath in "Democracy Goes to War."

Next comes the world of battle, observed through two quite different filters. Dan Cabaniss elucidates military life as it was reflected in show musicals in *This Is the Army*, while Suzanne Broderick seeks an authentic understanding of a soldier's experience by combining the skills of film study and oral history in her essay "Tough 'Ombres."

Three articles then address particular themes: captivity, individual commitment, and propaganda. In the first two of these studies, Elliott Gruner and Daniel Shaw draw their analyses from individual films in which these themes receive notable development. By contrast, Professors Gustainis and DeSilva focus on the work of a noteworthy director, Alfred Hitchcock. They also reintroduce the topic of Anglo-American relations with which the series of articles began. Fittingly, John Nichols's essay "The Atomic Agincourt" extends this consideration into the postwar era. The appetites for further reading and study that will no doubt be whetted by this collection of insightful and creative scholarship will find satisfaction in the annotated booklist that follows, created by *Film & History's* Editor-in-Chief, Peter Rollins."

It has been a privilege to work with Editor Rollins and the authors in the preparation of this volume. The University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown has generously supported this special issue by contributing some of my time as editor and offering various other kinds of help and encouragement. I want to thank especially James R. Alexander, Sharon Wilson, and the members of my Film and History Seminar. Thanks are also in order to the scholars, both here and elsewhere, who served as the referees for submissions. Although they must remain anonymous for the present, their efforts were essential for the making of this volume. Finally, I must express my

appreciation to my wife, Lisa Dallape Matson, who gave gracefully of her expertise as an Informationalist and Bibliotherapist (a modern profession whose ancient predecessor was known as "librarian").



Robert W. Matson,
Senior Associate Editor

Notes

¹Joseph McBride, *Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success* (New York, 1992), 432.

²Paul Gilster, *Digital Literacy* (John Wiley & Sons, 1997), 987.

Robert W. Matson is Associate Professor of History at the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Oregon and is the author of *William Mulholland: A Forgotten Forefather* (University of the Pacific, 1976) and *Neutrality and Navicerts: Britain, the United States and Economic Warfare, 1939-1940* (Garland, 1994). He is Senior Associate Editor of *Film & History*.

Film & History at the American Historical Association

Seattle, Washington—January 10, 1998: 5:30-7:30 p.m.

Last year it was Oliver Stone—this year it's Ken Burns!

Film & History will host a session devoted to the work of **Ken Burns**, with special focus on his **Jefferson** series for PBS.

The series "pushed the envelope" for documentary, summoning up for discussion a number of fundamental issues about a genre of perennial interest to our readers.

As he did last year, **Robert Toplin** of our Editorial Board will Chair the session, providing a rich and balanced introduction.

Next, **Ken Burns** will discuss his goals for the series and attempt to provide his own assessment of the successes and failures of **Jefferson**.

Two respondents will then provide additional perspective.

Barbara G. Carson is a television producer associated with the College of William and Mary. She will provide a practitioner's perspective. **Gary Edgerton**, a member of our Editorial Board, will provide a scholarly perspective by someone who is currently conducting research on a book-length work about Burns as documentarian and artist.

The audience will have twenty minutes to pose questions and to make statements.

We are hoping for C-SPAN coverage again this year for another exciting event from The Historians Film Committee and its publication, *Film & History*.

*See you at the AHA
meeting in Seattle!*