

AMERICAN WAR MOVIES: 1943

So Proudly We Fail

by James Agee

WE SUFFER—we vaguely realize—a unique and constantly intensifying schizophrenia which threatens no other nation involved in this war. Geography is the core of the disease. Those Americans who are doing the fighting are doing it in parts of the world which seem irrelevant to them; those who are not, remain untouched, virginal, prenatal, while every other considerable population on earth comes of age. In every bit of information you can gather about breakdowns of American troops in combat, overseas, even in the camps, a sense of unutterable dislocation, dereliction, absence of contact, trust, wholeness, and reference, in a kind and force which no other soldiers have to suffer, clearly works at the root of the disaster. Moreover, while this chasm widens and deepens daily between our fighting and civilian populations and within each mind, another—much deeper and wider than any which geography alone could impose—forms and increases between this nation and the other key nations of the world. Their experience of war is unprecedented in immediacy and unanimity. Ours, even in the fraction which has the experience at all, is essentially specialized, lonely, bitter, and sterile; our great majority will emerge from the war almost as if it had never taken place; and not all the lip-service in the world about internationalism will make that different. This, and more and worse, is all so obvious, so horrifying, and so apparently unalterable that, being a peculiarly neurotic people, we are the more liable to nod and pay it the least possible attention. That is unfortunate. Our predicament is bad enough as it stands; the civil and international prospect is unimaginably sinister.

Since it is beyond our power to involve ourselves as deeply in experience as the people of Russia, England, China, Germany, Japan, we have to make up the difference as well as we

can at second hand. Granting that knowledge at second hand, taken at a comfortable distance, is of itself choked with new and terrible liabilities, I believe nevertheless that much could be done to combat and reduce those liabilities; and that second-hand knowledge is at least less dangerous than no knowledge at all. And I think it is obvious that in imparting it, moving pictures could be matchlessly useful. How we might use them, and how gruesomely we have failed to, I lack room to say; but a good bit is suggested by a few films I want to speak of now.

Even the Army Orientation films, through no fault intrinsic to them, carry their load of poison, of failure. You can hear from every sort of soldier from the simplest to the most intricate what a valuable job they are doing. But because they are doing it only for service men they serve inadvertently to widen the abyss between fighters and the civilians who need just as urgently to see them. Civilians, however, get very little chance to learn anything from moving pictures. We are not presumed to be brave enough. And the tragic thing is that after a couple of decades of Hollywood and radio, we are used to accepting such deprivations and insults quite docilely; often, indeed, we resent anyone who has the daring to try to treat us as if we were human beings.

Just now it is a fought question whether numbers four and five of the Orientation Series, "The Battle of Britain" and "The Battle of Russia," will get public distribution. Whether they do depends on what is laughingly called the Office of War Information and on what is uproariously called the War Activities Committee. The OWI's poor little pictures, blue-born with timidity from the start, have finally been sabotaged out of existence; and judging by the performance to date of the WAC, it is not very likely that we shall see these films. And if we do see them, it is more than likely that we shall see them with roast albatrosses like "The Keeper of the Flame" hung around their necks.

I can only urge you to write your Congressman, if he can read. For these films are responsible, irreplaceable pieces of teaching. "Britain," one hour's calculated hammering of the eye and ear, can tell you more about that battle than you are ever likely otherwise to suspect, short of having been there.

"Russia," though it is a lucid piece of exposition, is cut neither for fact nor for political needlepoint but purely, resourcefully, and with immensely powerful effect, for emotion. It is by no means an ultimate handling of its material, but it is better than the Russian records from which it was drawn, and next to the tearful magnificence of "The Birth of a Nation" is, I believe, the best and most important war film ever assembled in this country.

Beside it Samuel Goldwyn's "The North Star" is something to be seen more in sorrow than in anger and more in the attitude of the diagnostician than in any emotion at all. It represents to perfection some crucially symptomatic characteristics of Hollywood and of the American people in so far as Hollywood reflects, or is accepted by, the people. Hollywood's noble, exciting, all but unprecedented intention here is to show the conduct of the inhabitants of a Russian border village during the first days of their war; to show real people, involved in realities, encumbered by a minimum of star-spotlighting or story. The carrying out of that intention implies in every detail the hopeless mistrust in which Hollywood holds its public. To call this "commercial" and to talk about lack of intelligence and taste is, I think, wide of the main mark. The attitude is more nearly that of the fatally misguided parent toward the already all but fatally spoiled child. The result is one long orgy of meeching, sugaring, propitiation, which, as a matter of fact, enlists, develops, and infallibly corrupts a good deal of intelligence, taste, courage, and disinterestedness. I am sorry not to talk at length and in detail about this film. I can only urge you to watch what happens in it: how every attempt to use a reality brings the romantic juice and the annihilation of any possible reality pouring from every gland. In its basic design Lillian Hellman's script could have become a fine picture: but the characters are stock, their lines are tinny-literary, their appearance and that of their village is scrubbed behind the ears and "beautified"; the camera work is nearly all glossy and overcomposed; the proudly complicated action sequences are stale from overtraining; even the best of Aaron Copland's score has no business ornamenting a film drowned in ornament: every resourcefulness appropriate to some kinds of screen romance, in short, is used to make

palatable what is by no remote stretch of the mind romantic. I think the picture represents the utmost Hollywood can do, within its present decaying tradition, with a major theme. I am afraid the general public will swallow it whole. I insist, however, that that public must and can be trusted and reached with a kind of honesty difficult, in so mental-hospital a situation, to contrive; impossible, perhaps, among the complicated pressures and self-defensive virtuosités of the great studios.

The thing that so impresses me about the non-fiction films which keep coming over from England is the abounding evidence of just such a universal adulthood, intelligence, and trust as we lack. I lack space to mention them in detail (the new titles are "I Was a Fireman," "Before the Raid," and, even better, "ABCA" and the bleak, beautiful, and heart-rending "Psychiatry in Action"), but I urge you to see every one that comes your way. They are free, as not even our Orientation films are entirely, of salesmanship; they are utterly innocent of our rampant disease of masked contempt and propitiation. It comes about simply enough: everyone, on and off screen and in the audience, clearly trusts and respects himself and others.

There is a lot of talk here about the need for "escape" pictures. To those who want to spend a few minutes in a decently ventilated and healthful world, where, if only for the duration, human beings are worthy of themselves and of each other, I recommend these British films almost with reverence as the finest "escapes" available.

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