

# **HOLLYWOOD GOES TO WAR**

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Films and American Society 1939-1952

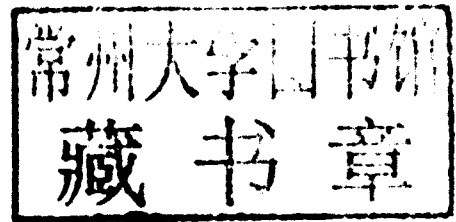
Colin Shindler

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Films and American Society 1939-1952

COLIN SHINDLER



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Colin Shindler

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For Nancy Lynn White  
from Boys Town to Maine Road



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'A trip through Hollywood is like taking a trip  
through a sewer in a glass bottom boat.'

Wilson Mizner





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# General Editor's Preface

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The pre-eminent popular art form of the first half of the twentieth century has been the cinema. Both in Europe and America from the turn of the century to the 1950s cinema-going has been a regular habit and film-making a major industry. The cinema combined all the other art forms — painting, sculpture, music, the word, the dance — and added a new dimension — an illusion of life. Living, breathing people enacted dramas before the gaze of the audience and not, as in the theatre, bounded by the stage, but with the world as their backdrop. Success at the box office was to be obtained by giving the people something to which they could relate and which therefore reflected themselves. Like the other popular art forms, the cinema has much to tell us about people and their beliefs, their assumptions and their attitudes, their hopes and fears and dreams.

This series of books will examine the connection between films and the societies which produced them. Film as straight historical evidence; film as an unconscious reflection of national preoccupations; film as escapist entertainment; film as a weapon of propaganda — these are the aspects of the question that will concern us. We shall seek to examine and delineate individual film *genres*, the cinematic images of particular nations and the work of key directors who have mirrored national concerns and ideals. For we believe that the rich and multifarious products of the cinema constitute a still largely untapped source of knowledge about the ways in which our world and the people in it have changed since the first flickering images were projected on to the silver screen.

Jeffrey Richards

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# Preface

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First of all I feel compelled to issue a word of warning. This book does not pretend to be a complete history of Hollywood during the period under review. I acknowledge willingly that I have wilfully ignored serials, shorts, nearly all 'B' pictures and most documentaries. Fans of Val Lewton will read this book and shake their heads disapprovingly. Those among us fortunate enough to appreciate the finer qualities of *Snuffy Smith* and *Joe Palooka* will note with a resignation bordering on despair the marked absence of their heroes.

The *auteur* fetishists and the *genre* freaks and the students of arcane film theory will find this book a dreadful *mélange* of films that simply happen to be interesting to me. As a working producer in the current British television industry I am only too

aware of the sort of imperatives that shape the plays and films that are 'pre-sold' to a cinema or transmission slot. It has been of some pleasure to discover that Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s was but ATV Network writ large.

Films were not created in an artistic vacuum. Their makers were shaped by and responded to various social, political and ideological stimuli and in their work they helped to intensify those feelings which were transmitted to their audience. This book then is basically a different way of approaching the social history of the time.

Historians are still dubious of the value of works of the imagination. I hope this book will help to dispel some of those doubts.

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# Acknowledgments

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My greatest debt is to Frank Capra whose films rescued me from one of my darkest moments and who, in person and in his work, has given shape to my life. I should like to extend my thanks to Brenda Davies and her admirable assistants in the British Film Institute's Information Department and to Mildred Simpson and Bonnie Rothbart at the Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Beverly Hills.

I am particularly grateful to Ron Haver at the Los Angeles County Museum and to the American Film Institute for screening many vital films for me. My thanks also go to Henry Fonda, Philip Dunne, Mark Robson, the late John Howard Lawson and above all to the late Robert Lord for supplying oral

testimony unavailable in any other form.

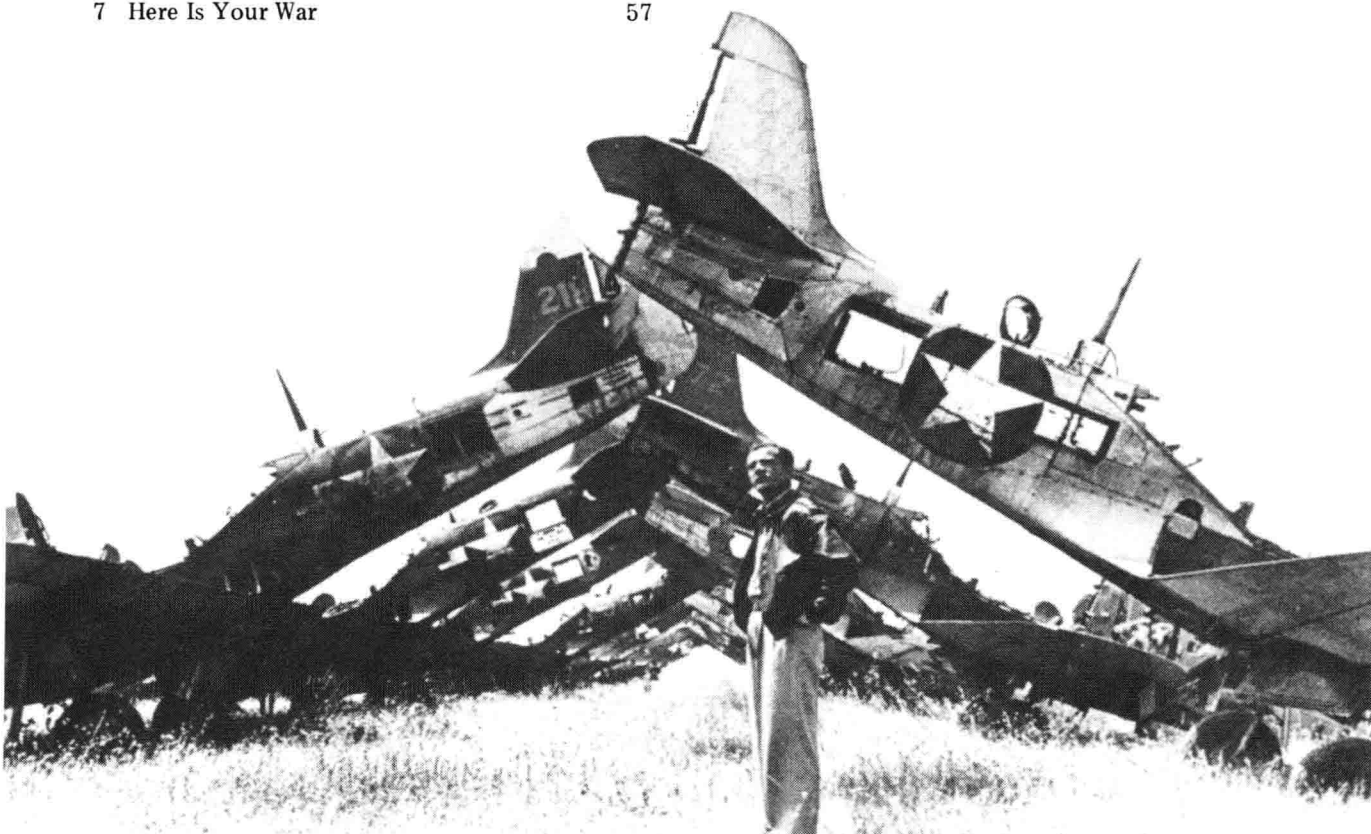
The stills reproduced in this book first appeared in films distributed by the following companies, to whom thanks are due: Warner Bros, Republic Pictures, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Paramount, Twentieth Century-Fox, United Artists, Columbia and Universal. For additional help in this area I am grateful to John Baxter and Al Reuter. I am particularly happy to acknowledge a great debt to John Baxter in that he taught me to write about films. Dr J.R. Pole of St Catherine's College, Oxford taught me to write about American history and Neil McKendrick of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, taught me to write properly.

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# Alarums and Excursions

(Events leading up to September 1939)

With war in Spain having butchered a million people in the last year, it is becoming increasingly difficult to get romance into musicals with a war setting.

*Variety*  
28 July 1937

By the mid 1930s the Hollywood studio system had reached the apogee of its glory. The American film industry had established a pattern of production which enabled it not only to weather the worst of the Depression but to thrive during those difficult years. Executives were fired and stars changed partners with frenetic abandon; writers wondered why none of their dialogue was ever spoken in the pictures they were working on and directors bemoaned the witless idiocies of the scripts that the studio's delivery vans tossed on their front doorsteps. Through it all movies were written, produced, directed, edited, distributed and exhibited to the satisfaction of the film companies, their shareholders and their customers.

It was a devastatingly effective form of imperialism. Trade might have followed the flag in classic nineteenth-century imperialism but in the 1930s American influence spread abroad in the wake of Gable's rough grin and Garbo's mirthless laugh. Coca-Cola, at a later date was just as economically aggressive but it left no imprint on the mind or soul as did Shirley Temple and Gary Cooper. American manners, American aspirations and, less fortunately, American speech patterns and syntax became comfortably familiar to the countless millions of moviegoers.

The huge overseas market was, in the normal course of events, the area where the film companies picked up their profits as production costs were traditionally recovered by the North American rentals. High studio overheads, however, which, in the case of MGM, Paramount and Fox included the maintenance of large numbers of cinemas as well as

the huge salaries of stars, producers and top executives, meant that European sales were particularly crucial to the continuing financial success of the studio system. Garbo's sound films were nearly all financial liabilities in the domestic market and, by the mid 1930s the profitability of her films rested almost entirely on their performance in Europe.

At the same time foreign countries were developing a sensitivity to Hollywood caricature that forced the studios unwillingly into the uncertain world of international diplomacy. When Josef von Sternberg's *The Devil is a Woman* (1935) depicted a member of the Spanish Civil Guard as being drunk, the Spanish government instantly demanded an apology. The Hays Office, which was ceremonially wheeled out for such occasions, offered to mediate between the Spanish authorities and the offending company (Paramount) but the former insisted that the matter was a political one and could only be dealt with by a fully accredited representative of the State Department. The *Hollywood Reporter* revealed

It is admitted that today, due to the political situation throughout Europe, censorship on pictures touching on topics considered dangerous to those in power is tougher than ever. The picture companies are through with their former stand, 'We'll make it anyway'. They will now listen to foreign departments whose business it is to keep closely in touch with problems confronting the sales departments abroad.<sup>1</sup>

It has long been accepted in Hollywood that certain countries had particular quirks. Japan slashed every scene in which there was kissing and in 1937 informed the American film industry that the country took great exception to a movie which explicitly showed a policeman unashamedly eating a banana in full view of the public. England disliked the use of the word 'bum' to mean 'tramp' and the British Government thoughtfully provided RKO

with a 'technical adviser' to ensure that *Gunga Din* (1939) did not run contrary to official colonial policy. *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* was one of the few films Frank Capra ever made which was not a commercial success — a fact that can be attributed almost entirely to its being banned in the British Empire because of its treatment of the delicate subject of miscegenation. Egypt once deleted a sequence showing an escape from an orphanage on the grounds that 'it set a bad example for school-girls'. These oddities, however, were all tolerated with reasonable good humour because they did not trouble the studios too greatly.

The uncertain political situation in Europe in the late 1930s was quite another story. Mussolini's motion picture bureau banned *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, *Lives of a Bengal Lancer*, *Lloyds of London* and *Clive of India* on the grounds that they contained 'British propaganda'. Ironically, Hollywood producers, dedicated as they were to the unalloyed pursuit of 'entertainment', had succeeded in driving out of the movies almost any considered political thought whatsoever. To have their escapist fantasies criticised as propaganda was most upsetting simply because the charges, even if untrue, were impossible to challenge. The fascist dictatorships simply refused to judge the Hollywood pictures on the same basis as their producers.

As the territory under the jurisdiction of the dictators grew ever larger, the financial profitability of Hollywood movies lessened proportionately. After the Anschluss, Nazi-occupied Austria impounded the money still remaining there from the proceeds of American film rentals. Hollywood studios had learned very quickly that the masters of the New Germany found their product to be infinitely resistable. Fox's picture *My Weakness* (1933) was banned because the censor, appropriately enough, thought the lace panties on the girls would contaminate the national morality. *Country Doctor* (1936), the epic Twentieth Century-Fox dramatisation of the birth of the Dionne quins, bit the dust when Jean Hersholt was denied Aryan status. The studio produced every shred of evidence it could find to prove that Jean Hersholt was not then, nor had he ever been, a member of the Chosen People, but it was to no avail and the ban remained in force. The ultimate idiocy came in 1936 when, on the explicit orders of Hitler, the films of Mae West, Johnny Weissmuller, Francis Lederer, Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Warner Oland and George Arliss

were prohibited from exhibition in Germany. Weissmuller was Jewish, Lederer was Czech, Arliss had specialised in the portrayal of historical characters with Jewish overtones (Rothschild, Shylock and Disraeli) and Warner Oland had been responsible for that fiendish Oriental *untermensch* Charlie Chan, but the connection of Mae West, and more particularly, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, with anything remotely kosher was never revealed. The only remaining conclusion is that a man who so revered Wagner was incapable of appreciating the finer delights of *Top Hat* and *Swing Time* and rather than risk admitting his own cultural philistinism, he simply decreed that no German worthy of the name should have the chance of sampling those aesthetic delights so cruelly denied to him.

However reluctantly, Hollywood was dragged by force of circumstances into the murky realms of American foreign policy. The mood of the film industry throughout the 1930s, like the mood of the country in general and that of Congress in particular, was overwhelmingly isolationist. The division between 'isolationists' and 'internationalists' cut across traditional political groupings, although the internationalists were normally Democrats who lived in the larger cities. The centre of isolationism was, as ever, in the rural Mid-West.

The cause of the internationalists had been struck a violent blow in 1919 when the Senate refused to ratify the Treaty of Versailles which called for the establishment of the League of Nations. The isolationism of successive Republican administrations in the 1920s was succeeded by Roosevelt's early leaning towards economic nationalism. Roosevelt knew perfectly well that co-operation with the decadent powers of Europe was not going to be a sound basis for a popular foreign policy in the 1930s. Everybody was aware that most of the European countries had defaulted on their war loans and popular mythology also held them responsible for nurturing the germs of the economic contagion which swept over the New World after the Wall Street crash.

Additionally, the pro-European internationalist cause was handicapped by the much publicised findings of a Congressional investigation into the profits and influence of the munitions industry. The chairman, Gerald P. Nye, one of the leaders of the isolationist movement, concluded that the munitions makers, in an unholy alliance with international bankers and businessmen, had been



responsible for the entry of the United States into the First World War. His demand, fortified by popular support, that profit be somehow removed from the propagation of war, resulted in Congress passing the Pittman Neutrality Resolution in August 1935, by which the export of munitions from the United States was prohibited, as was the shipment of arms on American vessels to foreign belligerents. There was no doubt that the isolationists had reduced the risk of America becoming involved in an international war. They had also, unfortunately, given palpable encouragement to the aggressor nations of the world to become increasingly more aggressive.

Specific acts of aggression served only to strengthen isolationist tendencies. When Italy invaded Abyssinia Roosevelt, with one eye on the 1936 Presidential election, asked only for a moral embargo of shipments to Mussolini's forces. In fact, after the invasion American trade with Italian Africa increased nearly twentyfold. A public opinion poll taken in November 1935 which examined the desirability of the United States becoming involved in a foreign war for whatever idealistic purposes found that 67 per cent wanted no part of it and only 28 per cent were in favour of taking a positive stand against aggressor nations. Even then two thirds of the latter preferred economic sanctions to any form of military participation.

The invasion of Abyssinia, morally shocking though it undoubtedly was, had no very lasting effect on the conduct of Americans either in Washington or Hollywood. After all, film rentals from Abyssinia were low and the size of the Abyssinian vote in American politics was negligible. The treatment by the Nazis of the Jewish population under their control was a very different matter. Pressure was exerted on Washington by the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress and the B'nai Brith, while the Jewish vote was just starting to make its presence felt within the Roosevelt coalition of ethnic groups. When the Germans demanded apologies for all anti-Nazi statements made by Jews and pro-Jewish sympathisers in America, the US government tried desperately to ensure that all such comments were unofficial. If, as A.J.P. Taylor suggests, appeasement in Britain was the result of a morally justifiable, carefully conceived policy, in America it was a mixture of wanton disregard of human suffering and spineless submission to the political strength of the isolationists.

The advent of the Spanish Civil War persuaded Hollywood to dip its little toe into the icy waters of foreign affairs. After all, it could hardly be avoided, even in darkest Peoria, Illinois. The faces of homeless refugees and helpless orphans stared out from the pages of the daily newspapers, the weekly news magazines and the newsreel screens. Documentaries made by Loyalist sympathisers such as Ernest Hemingway, Lilian Hellman and Joris Ivens were the first motion picture representations. *The Spanish ABC*, *The Spanish Earth* and *Spain in Flames* quickly fell foul of official wrath. *Spain in Flames* was banned in Ohio and Pennsylvania and was denounced by the Governor of the latter as 'pure Communistic propaganda dressed up as a plea for democracy'. Obviously they couldn't fool him that easily.<sup>2</sup>

In the ranks of the feature film Paramount's *The Last Train from Madrid* (1937) had the dubious distinction of being the first Hollywood production to grapple with the complex moral and political issues of the war. Just so that nobody could accuse them of being political propagandists the studio savants took care to add certain 'entertainment' values which involved turning the film into a sort of *Grand Hotel* on wheels. The *New York Times* pointed out that Paramount's *Spain*, racked though it was by a civil war of unparalleled horror, bore a strong resemblance to MGM's *Ruritania* and Selznick's *Zenda*.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps it was not surprising that *The Last Train from Madrid* should have been the first film whose story had satisfied the Hays Office. Anything slightly more adventurous got short shrift from the industry's self-censorship body whose fear of public displeasure approached raging paranoia. Twentieth Century-Fox halted preparation on another Spanish Civil War story called *Alcazar* because of 'protests' and Universal's *Delay in the Sun* was postponed indefinitely.

In 1937 Walter Wanger was an independent producer who, as a graduate of Dartmouth College, prided himself on being an intellectual cut above the stereotype of the boorish Hollywood producer. When he first broached the idea of a Spanish Civil War picture to the Hays Office, Joe Breen, the head of the Production Code Authority in Hollywood replied baldly, that any material 'involved with or played against' such a background was, in his opinion, 'highly dangerous'.

Nevertheless, the intrepid Wanger set out to chart