2016

Between patriotism and pacifism: Jacob Lawrence, John Huston, Bill Mauldin, and Walt Disney during World War Two

https://hdl.handle.net/2144/20712
Boston University
BOSTON UNIVERSITY
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Dissertation

BETWEEN PATRIOTISM AND PACIFISM: JACOB LAWRENCE, JOHN HUSTON, BILL MAULDIN, AND WALT DISNEY DURING WORLD WAR TWO

by

ROBERT DOUGLAS RIBERA

B.A., St. John’s University, 2005
M.A., St. John’s University, 2006
M.F.A., Boston University, 2008

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2016
Approved by

First Reader
Roy Grundmann, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Film Studies

Second Reader
Patricia Hills, Ph.D.
Professor Emerita of History of Art & Architecture
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the American and New England Studies Program at Boston University for their support throughout my time here, which has made this project possible. I would like to thank my first reader and advisor, Roy Grundmann, who has been working with me since I first came to Boston. His guidance has helped shape my time in both the Film Studies department and AMNESP program. His guidance on this project has been rigorous, pushing me toward the finish line. I would also like to thank my second reader, Professor Patricia Hills, who gave a talk years ago on Jacob Lawrence and helped initiate my own interest in his art. Thanks also to my other committee members. Bruce Schulman, whose ability to blend history and pop culture in the classroom has served as an inspiration. Kevin Stoehr has been a thoughtful commentator on the project long before signing on to be a committee member. And Gerald Peary has been a friend and mentor for many years.

I would also like to thank my fellow AMNESP graduate students. In particular, I would like to thank Sam Shupe, whose conversations about life as a grad student were a welcome distraction. I would especially like to thank Colin Root for his guidance and encouragement throughout my years in graduate school as well as for his friendship, which has helped me through this process.

Finally, I thank my family. Kelly, you have been my source of comfort and guidance throughout these years, and I could not have done this without your love. Sam, I cannot wait to see the young man you grow up to be. You have been a great source of joy since the moment you were born. I love you both.
BETWEEN PATRIOTISM AND PACIFISM: JACOB LAWRENCE, JOHN HUSTON, BILL MAULDIN, AND WALT DISNEY DURING WORLD WAR TWO

ROBERT DOUGLAS RIBERA

Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2016

Major Professor: Roy Grundmann, Associate Professor of Film Studies

ABSTRACT

During World War II, four artists—filmmakers Walt Disney and John Huston, painter Jacob Lawrence, and cartoonist Bill Mauldin—were among the soldiers fighting on the front lines, and the officers and staff who supported them at home and abroad. I argue that the art they created during the war and in their themes, overt and covert resonates beyond the rhetoric of patriotism. Their work reveals the tension between an artist’s desire to support the soldiers and the cause, while questioning the purpose of the war and its destructiveness. The works discussed in this dissertation all operate on these two levels. Created within the historical context of patriotism and anti-fascism, they present a product aimed at support, designed to inform and persuade the American public about the threat of fascism, the realities of war, the strength and reserve of the soldiers fighting it, and the ultimate righteousness of the task ahead. At the same time, these works also reveal a skepticism about the war. Chapter 1 examines Jacob Lawrence’s paintings from his time in the Coast Guard, as well as his War and Hiroshima series. I explore the ways Lawrence’s experience shaped the form and the content of his war
paintings. Chapter 2 looks at the wartime documentaries of John Huston: *Report from the Aleutians* (1943), *San Pietro* (1945), and *Let There Be Light* (1946) as well as Huston’s adaptation of *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951). This chapter shows Huston’s increasingly ambivalent attitude and skepticism about the war. Chapter 3 analyzes Bill Mauldin’s cartoons for *Stars and Stripes*, as well as his political cartoons printed after the war and his 1956 congressional campaign. I relate Mauldin’s own skepticism towards the war through my analysis of his main characters Willie and Joe, common soldiers frequently overwhelmed by the tedium of war and military bureaucracy. Chapter 4 explores the propaganda cartoons of the Walt Disney Studios, particularly *Chicken Little, Education for Death, Der Fuehrer’s Face*, and *Reason and Emotion*, situating them as precursors to Disney’s future works as an educator.
# Table of Contents

Title Page..............................................................................................................i

Reader’s Approval Page.........................................................................................ii

Acknowledgments.................................................................................................iv

Abstract...............................................................................................................v

List of Figures......................................................................................................vii

Introduction.........................................................................................................1

Chapter 1............................................................................................................27
   Jacob Lawrence:
   The Best Democracy I’ve Ever Known

Chapter 2............................................................................................................79
   John Huston:
   A Slaughter of Uncertain Value

Chapter 3............................................................................................................145
   Bill Mauldin:
   A Fugitive from the Law of Averages

Chapter 4............................................................................................................188
   Walt Disney:
   An Education for Death

Conclusion.........................................................................................................253

Works Cited......................................................................................................257

Curriculum Vitae...............................................................................................267
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>A soldier plays the guitar in <em>Report from the Aleutians</em></td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>The view from inside a bomber in <em>Report from the Aleutians</em></td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>General Mark Clark introduces John Huston’s <em>San Pietro</em></td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>Soldiers moving through the olive trees in <em>San Pietro</em></td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>Soldiers seen as shadows in <em>Let There Be Light</em></td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>A soldier running around the baseball diamond in <em>Let There Be Light</em></td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>Trailer for <em>The Red Badge of Courage</em> featuring Audie Murphy</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>Trailer for <em>The Red Badge of Courage</em> featuring Bill Mauldin</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>“The Youth” confronts his fears in <em>The Red Badge of Courage</em></td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>Henry Fleming’s final assault in <em>The Red Badge of Courage</em></td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>The Big Bad Wolf as a Nazi in <em>The Thrifty Pig</em> (1941)</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>An article on <em>Education for Death</em>, appearing in <em>Life</em>, February 1, 1943</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>A United States Treasury bond featuring Disney characters</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>A fox uses a psychology book in <em>Chicken Little</em> (1943)</td>
<td>249</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>The view inside a human brain in <em>Reason and Emotion</em> (1943)</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>Donald Duck embracing the Statue of Liberty in <em>Der Fuehrer’s Face</em> (1943)</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>German children pledge their allegiance in <em>Education for Death</em> (1943)</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

When one thinks about war, one tends to think about soldiers. During World War II, however, among the soldiers fighting on the front lines, and the officers and staff who supported them at home and abroad, were many artists. Using pen and paint, canvas and film, these artists documented and interpreted many aspects of the war. In doing so, they not only proved to be a vital source of information, but also significantly helped boost morale for the soldiers overseas and citizens back home. Among their ranks were four men— animator Walt Disney, filmmaker John Huston, painter Jacob Lawrence, and cartoonist Bill Mauldin. Each of these four artists worked for a branch of the armed forces, either serving the military in uniform or working as contractors for the government. But whether they produced paintings or cartoons, animated or live action films, their art evinces notable similarities. It explained the maneuvers of the army and celebrated the individual foot soldier. And it provided moments of comfort and lauded the resilience of the troops, as they endured all the horrors, dangerous hardships, and banal tedium that war brings.

The question at the heart of any artistic endeavor that aims to capture the realities of war or ease the impact and pains of its destruction is how to depict that devastation. War, by definition, produces casualties. Soldiers die and innocent lives are lost. Long distances separate families. Beginning with images from World War I, the "Great War," art that interprets war has done so by providing images of those immense losses and struggles, and the work that Disney, Huston, Lawrence, and Mauldin created throughout the war is no exception.
But these artists also had something else in common: each arguably qualified and, in some cases, undermined the mandate to wholeheartedly support the war effort. At their most critical, they not only showed the devastating effects of combat, but questioned war altogether, even the supposedly “good” war against fascism. What emerges in their art is a notable ambivalence or downright skepticism toward war in general and a sobering view of American forces’ involvement in World War II in particular. In more than one case, this ambivalence was further accompanied by rather unorthodox assessments of U.S. relations to the enemy and of the enemy’s strategies.

This project examines the layer below the surface of these images, the themes that resonate beyond the rhetoric of patriotism, revealing the tension between an artist’s willingness to support the soldiers and the cause, and his impulse to question the purpose of the war and its destructiveness. The tensions that emerge in each artist’s work reveal broader conflicts that speak to the contradictions of a highly industrialized capitalist nation such as the U.S. in the middle of the 20th century: the conflict between the individual soldier and the larger, impersonal, bureaucratically organized collective of the military, and the conflict, too, between the individual and his role as soldier and citizen during and after the war. I contend that these conceptual tensions or, rather, contradictions, though not always visible at first glance, help to set these four artists apart from the many other artists working alongside them during the war. Lawrence’s work from the Coast Guard displays the harmony between black and white seamen. Yet, a tension remains between the highly isolated experience of integration while on active duty and the keenly felt sense of a pervasive lack of rights at home. In Huston’s case,
beneath the patriotic narrative about the soldiers and their cause there is a growing pacifism, latent and perhaps inadvertent in his first war documentary, but, as my analysis aims to show, impossible to ignore by the time he films his final film commissioned by the government. In Mauldin’s case, I relate the artist’s skepticism towards the war through my discussion of his main characters, Willie and Joe, common soldiers frequently overwhelmed by the tedium of war and military bureaucracy. In Disney’s case, the internal contradictions take a different form. Disney’s war cartoons were fueled by the conviction that education was a form of indoctrination, which dangerously influenced the characters in his cartoons. Yet, as my analysis of several of these cartoons shows, Disney then couches these criticisms in the studio’s very own use of propaganda.

None of these four artists experienced war in the same way. The privileged status of Walt Disney, who spent the war years travelling back and forth between Washington D.C. and his studio in California differs in key aspects from the experience of Jacob Lawrence, who went through boot camp in the South before spending his time on a troop transport and weather ship crisscrossing the Atlantic. Even Bill Mauldin and John Huston, whose experiences overseas evince the closest similarities, took radically different paths through war—one as an officer, the other as an enlisted soldier--and produced different results, respectively. That their varied backgrounds, experiences, and roles within the hierarchy of war nonetheless produced similar ambiguities about the war—which, in turn, led them to articulate similar criticisms—is a central concern of this project, as is the surprising fact that each artist was able to embed their ambiguities in official projects.
Some of the artists discussed here experienced blowback for their work more than others, as they confronted the bureaucracy of the armed forces, particularly if they were explicit in their criticism. In turn, they were met with judgment or outright censorship, particularly in the cases of Huston and Mauldin. The majority of Huston’s work was delayed throughout the war, with one film, *Let There Be Light* (1946) censored until nearly forty years later. Mauldin, similar to Huston, presented an image of the soldier that, while realistic, was not always appreciated by the officers. Censorship rarely affected his work, although he was, at one point, threatened with imprisonment—at the (rather hollow) request of General George Patton. Certainly, the Jim Crow South yielded a different experience for Jacob Lawrence than the plush offices of the Hyperion Studios yielded for Disney. Needless to say, some of these artists risked more and confronted more personal challenges than others to make their points known.

Jacob Lawrence, whose art is rooted in the exploration of black history through narrative thematized African-Americans’ past and ongoing struggles for freedom and equality. The tension between this history of struggle and the role of the black community called to fight in the war is at the forefront of the work he created. Beginning, at the very latest, with U.S. mobilization after Pearl Harbor, black as well as white Americans were confronted with a central hypocrisy: the call to arms for spreading democracy abroad painfully contradicted a history of denying rights at home, specifically when it came to the de facto denial of basic civil rights to African-Americans. What does it mean for a black artist to confront the historically white-dominated and non-integrated armed services? More broadly, what does it mean for a member of the black community
to fight for America? In the face of human rights abuses, political and economic inequality, and systematic government degradation, African Americans were asked to still join the fight. The vast majority of those soldiers were placed into segregated units. In contrast, Lawrence served on the first racially integrated vessel, the USS Sea Cloud. Lawrence sets out by way of canvas to educate the public about the possibilities of a desegregated military. I read his art as a mediation between the past and the future, celebrating the integrated Sea Cloud, while not ignoring the situation of other black soldiers who served in segregated units. During the war years, Lawrence navigates the line between his different, and only partially overlapping identities as a soldier, an artist, and a black citizen. His images draw directly on the tension between his individuality and the discourses of black identity politics as well as citizenship that was defined in white terms.

The tensions in John Huston’s work arise throughout his time in the Signal Corps, as he increasingly displays the damaging effects of war. I argue that the stark realities of military service—the death and destruction as well as the monumental stretches of time between battles—provides the director with a wide range of points of critique, all while ostensibly producing films that were aimed at educating the public about the goals and victories of the war. That Huston produces films more visceral and realistic than many of his contemporaries is also of interest here, for it is this realism that triggers increasing military opposition to his films, including the complete censorship of *Let There Be Light*. The tension between patriotism and pacifism in Huston’s work becomes clear by war’s end, as he documents the rehabilitation of the soldiers whose minds have been brought to
the brink of psychological collapse. In his task to create morale-inducing propaganda for the Signal Corps, Huston confronts moments of banality and destruction alike. As Huston’s war documentaries show an increasing familiarity with the struggles of the soldier, another tension reveals itself, but now within the government. On the one hand, the government purports to educate the public. On the other hand, it censors the realistic images Huston produces. Years later, Huston would have a similar experience with his adaptation of *The Red Badge of Courage*, using World War II veterans Audie Murphy and Bill Mauldin to show the hardships of the soldier. The rejection of the movie by audiences indicates another dimension of America’s unwillingness to acknowledge the war’s absurdities.

Of the diverse kinds of art discussed in this dissertation, Bill Mauldin’s work is the most overtly critical of war. There is no mistaking the criticisms he is making about the officers in the army who took their jobs to absurd levels, punishing soldiers whose uniforms were dirty or whose posture was not straight at all times, all in the name of soldierly decorum. What we learn from Mauldin’s cartoons is that war is not beautiful and glorious. It is tedious and grim. As such, Mauldin’s mundane snapshot-like sketches of the war belie the official cant of the U.S. government about “why we fight.” While a soldier might appreciate medals pinned on his uniform, he much prefers a trip back home as reward. Added to this, Mauldin shows the isolation of the individual soldier, revealing a tension between the dangerous job of an infantryman and the sense of insignificance he might have in the grand scheme of the war.
These conceptual tensions made Mauldin’s professional arc riddled with challenges and setbacks. Mauldin’s space in the history of cartooning is complicated, as the fate of his initial readership, the actual soldiers fighting on the front, changed dramatically after the war. Mauldin was not an overtly political cartoonist until later in his career, as the war faded from his canvas, yet these tensions continue as soldiers become veterans. After the war, Mauldin criticizes the treatment of the veteran as well as the nation’s slide into McCarthyism.

Walt Disney, who frequently denied the political nature of his animated cartoons, entered into the overt production of educational and propaganda cartoons during the war. The work he and his animators created particularly in the wartime cartoons that thematize enemy propaganda display a tension between the image of education as a force for indoctrination and the very use of education and persuasion in the cartoon itself. I uncover this internal contradiction, by analyzing both Disney’s warnings against propaganda (particularly Nazi Germany’s attempts to brainwash children) and Disney’s own use of propaganda. In these cartoons, the tensions between a supposedly innocuous mass cultural product and how it may be informed by ideology is not so hidden. Even as his cartoons warn of the possible damage that education might inflict on an impressionable viewer, Disney himself accepts the role of public educator wholeheartedly. His move was fueled by economic reasoning, as his studio struggled throughout the war years to stay afloat. Government contracts helped alleviate this problem, while Disney accepted the role of educator as a patriotic duty. Closely tracking
this process in my historical analysis, I contend that already in the war years, Disney laid the groundwork for future enterprises in the arts of persuasion.

Each of the artists analyzed in this dissertation uses a different medium and approaches his art from a different perspective, but I argue that each of these texts is open to multiple readings. In the face of war, these works are celebratory and subversive, propagandistic and skeptical, their submerged meanings offering a criticism of the war while appearing, on the surface, to fulfill the requirements of patriotic government products.

**Literature Review**

Scholars have long recognized Jacob Lawrence’s importance to the black community and artistic tradition, seeing him as a storyteller and historian and arguing that his use of both daily life and historical narratives of black struggle set him apart from his contemporaries. James Porter’s *Modern Negro Art* from 1943 argued that Lawrence was “unspoiled” as an artist, again meaning that his work was naïve or primitive. Some scholars linked Lawrence to a primitive form of art, a common fate for black artists at this time, whether that connection was intentional or not. These scholars saw in his work an uneducated, child-like quality. Charles Alston, Lawrence’s mentor and friend identified in its stead a kind of universalism. He wrote of Lawrence’s sensitivity to “the joy, the suffering, the weakness, the strength of the people,” in the first monograph of his work in 1938.¹ And Alain Locke, who opened doors for the young painter in the New

---

York art world, praised him for his contribution to national and racial pride as early as 1939. These early assessments, and reviews of Lawrence’s early shows, worked to both praise his connection to a racial and primitive art, which was cause for celebration, but also limited the readings of his methodology and artistic trajectory. As John Ott writes later, “This branding would have given Lawrence some cachet as an art world outsider, to be sure, but over time it increasingly misrepresented his rapidly developing talents.”

Critical realignments came in the form of multiple exhibition catalogs throughout the artist’s career, which rejected this view of Lawrence. Acknowledging his background in the Harlem Workshops of the 1930s as well as the Utopia House, under the tutelage of Alston, and others, scholars, moved their interpretation toward a richer reading of Lawrence’s art. Richard Powell, for example embraces the social realism of Lawrence’s work, writing that the painter hoped to “clarify” historical events through his depictions of black struggle.

Lawrence scholar Patricia Hills synthesizes these arguments en route to formulating her own contention that the artist was another in a long line of African American narrative historians, or a “pictorial griot.” Hills argues that his narrative series provide a new perspective on contemporary events as well as a link to the past. Elsewhere, Hills has contributed to nearly every major publication on Lawrence, examining his use of both pictures and text in the Migration series, his work in the "protest years" of the 1960s, providing context for his work in print, and successfully

---

arguing for Lawrence's contribution to Modern art as an "Expressive Cubist." Her work looms large over my own interpretations of Lawrence's career.

In the late 1990s, the Jacob Lawrence Catalogue Raisonné Project aimed to collect all of Lawrence’s prints, sketches, and paintings, the result of which spread over three volumes, including a collection of essays, *Over the Line: The Art and Life of Jacob Lawrence*, with contributions from leading Lawrence scholars, who argued not just for Lawrence’s value as a social painter, but of a Modern artist, whose style evoked Cubism and Social Realism simultaneously. Patricia Hills’ *Making Harlem Modern: The Art of Jacob Lawrence* and Ellen Harkins Wheat’s *Jacob Lawrence, American Painter* remain the only single author monographs to provide an extensive and comprehensive overview of Lawrence’s career. Both also include a discussion of Lawrence’s wartime work, finding in his images of war an extension of both his dedication to social issues and racial equality.

Aline Saarinen in an earlier monograph, concurred, writing that “Lawrence’s mood throughout is compassionate rather than protesting. He paints neither sermons nor pamphlets.” And Ellen Harkins Wheat wrote of the *Migration* paintings that they, “are propaganda paintings in the best sense.” Ott’s article “Battle Station MoMA: Jacob Lawrence and the Desegregation of the Armed Forces and the Art World,” published in

---

late 2015, argues that Lawrence’s wartime and postwar work was more of an active protest, continuing his “sustained social commentary on racial integration.” Comparing Lawrence’s paintings with anti-discrimination literature from The Office of War Information and other official publications, Ott argues that Lawrence’s work pushed further, for full integration, as he depicted the everyday as heroic and showed how successful integration could be, based on his experiences in the Coast Guard. I take this argument further with my discussion of the Hiroshima series, arguing that it continues the tensions of Lawrence’s wartime work, while expanding it to a broader discussion of human power and frailty.

Scholarship on John Huston has long wrestled with the fact that his films seemingly do not have a clear thematic thread that binds them together, often giving credit to the authors of Huston’s adaptations rather than the director. For most critical scholars, Huston’s career, put simply, does not provide enough artistic value to warrant assessment as a body of work. That said, certain films, such as The Maltese Falcon, The Treasure of the Sierra Madre, and The Asphalt Jungle have received scholarly attention. It should not go unmentioned, however, that Huston’s relationship with critics began on a more laudatory note. James Agee’s early essay on the director and future filmmaking partner, “John Huston: Undirectable Director” argues stridently for the value of his films, placing him in the highest pantheon of working directors. “To put it conservatively,” Agee writes, “there is nobody under fifty at work in movies, here or abroad, who can excel Huston in talent, inventiveness, intransigence, achievement or

promise.”

Yet a generation later, Andrew Sarris, applying the French Politique des Auteurs in an Americanized version, as “auteur theory,” to create his own hierarchy of American film directors, found little to no thematic tendencies in Huston’s work. This perceived lack of coherence thus disqualified Huston from Sarris’s pantheon, which is why he begins his essay with a refutation of Agee’s coronation, which Sarris perceived as premature.

Admittedly, several scholars who have assessed Huston’s work preface their analyses by noting the wide range of his films. Richard Combs argues that in Huston’s career “[n]othing like a clear landscape comes into view, just the track of individual projects.” On the eve of a critical appreciation of Huston leading up to his American Film Institute Lifetime Achievement Award in the 1980s, Richard T. Jameson similarly argues that Huston’s many characters “describe their oblique trajectories across some of the most diverse terrain ever to come under a single directorial gaze.” Noting that Huston worked in nearly every genre, Gaylyn Studlar calls Huston’s body of work a “perplexing oeuvre.”

A scholarly reassessment of Huston was first taken up by Studlar and David Desser, in 1993 with their essay collection *Reflections in a Male Eye: John Huston and the American Experience*. In the opening pages to the book, the authors lament that “The ironies regarding the critical reception of Huston’s work persist, for in spite of the

---

12 Ibid.
ultimate rehabilitation of Huston’s reputation in the popular press, his films continue to suffer from scholarly neglect.” Characteristic of a post-auteurist methodology influenced by post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, and gender studies—which, in their combination, dominated much of film studies in the late 1980s and 1990s, Studlar and Desser’s approach shifts to identifying masculinity as a critical focus applicable across a large variety of works, thereby giving these films as well as Huston’s artistic biography a new kind of coherence. This approach is not unwarranted, as the biographies that have been written tend to depict Huston as a Hemingway-like character, with his own brand of vulnerable machismo, his sexual exploits, and his expansive travels around the world taking the focus, while relegating the director’s films to mere extensions of these adventures. David Desser’s article, “The Wartime Films of John Huston: Film Noir and the Emergence of the Therapeutic,” discusses masculinity and Huston’s nascent interest in psychology to analyze Huston’s films during the war years. Desser, reads in Huston’s films an examination of the group dynamic, which can form in families, as well as, in the case of the war films, the military. In his wartime experiences, he argues, “Huston experienced the group in all its glory, although it was a glory tinged by injury and death.”

This critical assessment expanded with Lesley Brill’s John Huston’s Filmmaking in 1997. The most recent scholarly book written about the director, Brill’s study still feels compelled to acknowledge Huston as a “chameleon.” Brill finds in Huston a determination to depict his characters’ quest for home and belonging, despite the

---

16 Studlar, 3.
17 Desser, 21.
pessimistic perspective of his films, and the ultimate fate of death that seems to linger over much of his work. Brill’s analysis of Huston’s narrative and documentary work intersects with my own. Bringing focus to his wartime films, I agree with Brill’s argument that the soldiers’ longing for home and community, so profoundly expressed at the end of *Let There Be Light*, when the patients are told that love and self-knowledge remain the keys to their recovery. I also expand on Desser’s range of wartime films, bringing a discussion of *The Red Badge of Courage* into my analysis, which seeks to position the film as a logical extension of the themes found in Huston’s wartime documentaries.

While Bill Mauldin is consistently mentioned in cartoon histories, scholarship specifically focused on his work is limited. Nevertheless, my research on Mauldin is indebted to several broader histories of comic books and editorial cartoons, as these explain the evolution of the craft and the genre. Scholarship on comic strips and editorial cartooning has long recognized the rhetorical power of a single image to persuade the public about a political issue, to bring to light corruption, or provide a new perspective on a social issue through humor or biting satire. Simplicity in form has long been evidenced, as has an appreciation for the uses of humor and satire. Thomas Craven’s *Cartoon Cavalcade*, which makes the above arguments, was published in 1943, just as Bill Mauldin gains acclaim in the war years, and so his work is not included in his text. Stephen Becker’s *Comic Art in America*, published in 1959, is an overview of both comics and editorial cartoons, providing a history of the craft. Arguing that beyond the

---

clichéd view that a picture is worth a thousand words, editorial cartoons casually affected readers, not by competing with the written editorial, but by prodding the reader for a visceral reaction. David Kunzle’s two volume *The History of the Comic Strip* examines the “childish art” from 1450 through to the 19th Century, providing a history of the German, French, and British masters, and how the form evolved from a more “sober” form of moral, political, and religious expression on broadsheets to the entertaining use of caricature and humor common to this day. However, his overview concludes as American comic art reaches a pinnacle with Thomas Nast, and the birth of cinema ushers in a new form of entertainment. Nast’s withering criticism of Tammany Hall often provides the entry point into a discussion of American political cartoons. William “Boss” Tweed’s response to his work, “I don't care a straw for your newspaper articles; my constituents don’t know how to read, but they can't help seeing them damned pictures!” is repeated in nearly every text on American political cartoons. The quote succinctly recognizes the power of a single image to provoke a response, particularly in light of an American readership that relies on visual messages.

E.H. Gombrich, in his essay, “The Cartoonist’s Arsenal,” examines cartoons as well as prints and broadsheets in terms of psychology. We should examine them not, he writes, “for what they can tell us about historical events as for what they may reveal about our own minds.” When discussing Mauldin, contrasts, he argues, are key, as he “deflates” the cliché of glorious soldiers and displays, instead, the weary machinations of war. Contemporary texts, such as Donald Dewey’s *The Art of Ill Will*, or Stephen Hess’

---
multiple works, including *The American Political Cartoons: The Evolution of a National Identity, 1754-2010*, similarly argue that American politics have found both powerful allies and critics in the pens of political cartoonists, while making the broader argument that American identity itself has been transformed by the power of cartoons.

Other than magazine articles celebrating Bill Mauldin’s work during the war, the earliest scholarly essay to appear on the artist, “Bill Mauldin as Moral Philosopher,” published in the philosophy journal *Ethics*, positions Mauldin as a harbinger of a biblical morality using his cartoons as vehicles for a message of community in the face of death. Stephen E. Kercher’s “Cartoons as ‘Weapons of Wit’: Bill Mauldin and Herbert Block Take on America’s Postwar Anti-Communist Crusade,” argues that Mauldin draws cartoons “capable of puncturing pomposity, deflating pretension, and exposing hypocrisy.”²⁰ This attributes a power to the cartoon to attack McCarthyism in a unique way, using caricature and humor rather than editorials. Kercher’s essay forms the basis for his chapter on Mauldin in *Revel with a Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America*, in which he argues that the cartoonist, committed to social issues and a progressive, liberal politics, used satire as an important weapon against bigotry and red-baiting. In “The Battles of Herbie, Willie and Joe: The Depiction of the Allied Soldier in World War II through Comic Illustration,” Cord Scott offers a broad overview of British, Canadian, and American soldier cartoonists, arguing that the comics served three purposes; information through training, propaganda, and entertainment. George Baker, creator of *Sad Sack* and David Breger, who created *Private Breger* are presented alongside Mauldin and their

---

Allied counterparts, offers brief biographical notes as well as presenting some common themes (the use of alcohol and the desire for sex, for example).21

For my own analysis, Mauldin’s own work, his articles and books, as well as hundreds of cartoons, remain the most valuable resource. Two collected volumes of his work, *Willie & Joe: The WWII Years* and *Willie & Joe: Back Home*, edited by Mauldin biographer Todd DePastino, are invaluable for their reproductions. Similarly, DePastino’s biography, *A Life Up Front*, provides a valuable background to Mauldin’s life and work. These scholars have given me valuable insight into the art and social impact of political cartoons. My own entry into the discussion focuses on the tensions that remain in Mauldin’s wartime work and his postwar criticism of the treatment of veterans and the shift of American politics into the Cold War.

Scholarship on Walt Disney and Walt Disney Productions is as wide-ranging as the output of the studio. From the early cartoons created by Disney and by Ub Iwerks to the corporate entity that reaches nearly every aspect of life today, the cultural reach and influence of the Disney product has been analyzed from multiple critical vantage points that, in turn, have been supplemented by biographies of Disney. While it seems necessary to discuss Disney the individual in conjunction with the corporate entity and empire he helped create, conflating him with that entity and using “Disney” as shorthand for a conservative, secretive, even corrupting force of nostalgia and powerful marketing has its own methodological problems. These conflations did not always shape critical work on Disney. Robert D. Feild's *The Art of Walt Disney*, published in 1944, was the first full-

---

length text on the studio’s work and provides insight into the processes of production, ultimately praising Disney for his new wartime efforts, which were just beginning as Feild’s study comes to a close. The first critical assessment of the studio is Richard Schickel’s, *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art and Commerce of Walt Disney*, published 1968, two years after Walt Disney’s death. Since then, there have been multiple biographies, including Neal Gabler’s *Walt Disney: The Triumph of the American Imagination* and Steven Watts’, *The Magic Kingdom: Walt Disney and the American Way of Life*. These books and others wrestle with Walt’s life much in the same way that scholars have with his films, attempting to balance the clear evidence of his influence over the American cultural landscape, particularly in the realm of childhood entertainment, with an investigation into how he attained such a dominant position.

During the 1990s, Cultural Studies scholars took a renewed interest in Disney and analyzed the films for their ideological content, as well as their treatment of race, sex, violence, and historical representations. *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom*, edited by Eric Smoodin, collects a wide range of contemporary responses to Disney’s work while he was alive, expanded throughout the course of the company’s existence, offering essays on how that image changed over time as well. Edited by Elizabeth Bell, Lynda Haas, and Laura Sells, *From Mouse to Mermaid: The Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*, aimed to interrogate Disney in ways not yet accomplished by film scholars, due, in part, to a sense that the films were not worthy of interpretation. “The high theories of film as art not only ignore the Disney canon,” the authors argue,
“but render suspect and expose the biases of their critical intervention.”22 The collection includes essays about, among other topics, matricide, and cultural appropriation, in Disney films as well as the construction of female identity in *The Little Mermaid* (1989). Henry Giroux, who has an earlier essay on the political implications of Disney films included in *From Mouse to Mermaid*, greatly expands his view in *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*. In his expanded text, Giroux examines how Disney constructs the ideological worldview of children, from the company’s purchase of Baby Einstein to their depiction of the Post-911 worldview of Pixar’s *The Incredibles*.

After the validity of academic scholarship was established through this series of collections, scholars responded to this new critical analysis of Disney’s work. In Karal Ann Marling’s collection *Designing Disney's Theme Parks: The Architecture of Reassurance*, Greil Marcus’ essay, “Forty Years of Overstatement” attempts to provide a critical counterpoint to the at times alarmist reactions to Disney’s attractions, arguing that a discussion about Disney’s art and architecture should lie somewhere between condemnation and celebration. Douglas Brode published a pair of books that read Disney against the established view that the products are inherently conservative. In *From Walt to Woodstock* and *Multiculturalism and the Mouse*, he argues that, in fact, the animated films and live-action movies from the 1950s and beyond helped plant the foundations for the counterculture of the 1960s as well as the rise of multiculturalism in the 1990s. Brode’s work reveals that Disney cannot be reduced to being a conservative gatekeeper.

---

Arguing that Disney’s role is far more complicated than scholars have been willing to suggest, Brode asserts that Disney films, in fact, celebrate diversity and difference. While Brode’s scholarship does not overlap with my own historical moment, the spirit of open-mindedness about Disney does.

The Disney Company itself has added to the field of publications with dozens of books published through its Hyperion and Disney Editions imprints. These books provide a glimpse from the Disney archives with behind-the-scenes stories about the production of their titles. Their own *Disney During World War II: How the Walt Disney Studio Contributed to Victory in the War*, published in 2014, provides an overview of the company’s World War II output, supplemented with a wealth of images. It should be noted, however, that this book is not a scholarly work, and that it relies on a company-friendly view of the war. The standard text on Disney’s wartime work is Richard Shale’s *Donald Duck Joins Up*, a dissertation published by UMI Press in 1982. Using the Disney Archives, Shale gives an historical overview of the studio’s output during the war, including the educational and propaganda shorts. Shale’s book remains a valuable overview of the company in these years; in particular, his description of production and government interaction is a guide for any scholar who analyzes these films. Similarly, Michael S. Shull and David E. Wilt’s *Doing Their Bit: Wartime American Animated Short Films, 1939-1945* provides another overview of animated cartoons during the war, including those of Warner Brothers and Fleischer, providing an index of titles and a concise look at thematic similarities. Bowdoin Van Riper’s *Learning from Mickey, Donald, and Walt* collects essays on what Disney called his “edutainment” cartoons,
ranging from the war work through the nature documentaries and the televised history films airing in the 1950s. Van Riper argues that Disney’s use of “whimsical narrative elements even in the most serious of documentaries,” sets him apart from other documentary filmmakers.23 Essays on the training films early on in the war, and the recycled use of cartoons in the Canadian shorts prove that humor could be found in the dry task of educating as well as the morale-building task of selling war bonds. These scholars have begun to show the value of Disney's wartime work. My addition to the discussion is an analysis of Disney's use of education as subject matter in his propaganda shorts, which reveals a tension between his use of propaganda and his later embrace of education as an extension of his company’s product.

My analysis of Lawrence, Huston, Mauldin, and Disney builds on the critical literature about these artists. But as I began to gain a critical understanding of the scholarship on each artist, I also understood that it was imperative to re-assess these artists through close formal analysis of their individual works. Because each of these texts is more complex than it appears at first glance, close formal attention is necessary to tease out the tensions and contradictions embedded in the images. In some cases, the evolution of the artist’s attitude about the war is evidenced by the increasingly skeptical tenor of their work, as in Huston’s documentaries. In other cases, I examine how these tensions follow the artist after the war, as seen in the work of Lawrence, whose War series, painted after the war, provides a rich comparison to his official work for the Coast Guard. With Mauldin, a close reading of his images of isolation and the soldiers’

struggles with authority provides the foundation for an exploration of his political cartooning after the war. With Disney, I argue, a closer look at his animated propaganda cartoons reveals that his contradictory notion of education, far from constituting an ideological dead end during the war, did, in fact, constitute the foundation for his educational goals in the postwar era.

Chapter 1 focuses on the work of Jacob Lawrence, an African American painter from Harlem who was inducted into the Coast Guard in 1942, serving on the USS Sea Cloud, the first racially integrated vessel in the armed forces. Given publicity ranking in order to continue painting while aboard the ship and document his experiences, Lawrence spent his time sketching and painting the men who ran the ship with distinction. His experiences, radically different from the segregated armed services experienced by the vast majority of servicemen, gave him a perspective as an African American that was rare during the war. In his Coast Guard paintings and War series, Lawrence is able to celebrate the integration he experiences, while also exploring the tension between his life as an African American citizen and his involvements in a war for democracy.

He created art that depicted the everyday, just as Mauldin did for the Army. With Lawrence’s brush trained on the experiences of war as an African American, we get one of the most unique visions of the military for the time. Painting images of black and white men together, reflecting his experiences on the Sea Cloud, Lawrence’s celebration is also a reminder that while fighting for democracy abroad, citizens were suffering from discrimination at home. His images of the Coast Guard, elaborated in his War series, is a meditation on the reconciliation and integration that was possible between the soldiers at
war, and that was now possible among the civilians at home. Lawrence’s *Hiroshima* series, painted forty years later, brings his notion of shared human suffering full circle, as he depicts the victims of the bombing in Hiroshima as flesh and bone, acknowledging their suffering while showing the overall destructive power of human beings.

Chapter 2 will examine John Huston’s documentaries for the Signal Corps and Army Pictorial Services, *Report from the Aleutians* (1943), *San Pietro* (1945), and *Let There Be Light* (1946), while also extending the analysis to his adaptation of Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951). Huston’s ambivalence toward the war and his status as a patriotic pacifist grows with each film he makes during the war, each documentary revealing more of his view of the war as absurd and the costs as perhaps too great. While death remains the ultimate cost of war, which Huston documents to grim effect, the lingering psychological scars prove to be destructive as well. Huston, a Hollywood screenwriter and director, traveled to Alaska to document the defense of the Aleutian Islands in the early months of the war, to the Liri Valley in order to film a battle that could stand in as an example of the Allied advances in Italy, and to a psychiatric hospital in Long Island to cover the treatment of the traumas that soldiers endured. Huston, similarly to Bill Mauldin, is able to capture the struggles of the soldiers on the front as well as the lingering scars after the war. I argue that in his wartime documentaries and *The Red Badge of Courage*, Huston captures the horrific costs of war—the death and destruction, the shattering effects of trauma, the isolation and crippling banality of the time in between each battle.
I argue that these issues carry over into Huston’s postwar work, in particular his adaptation of *The Red Badge of Courage*. Using the artist Bill Mauldin and war hero Audie Murphy as his main characters, Huston brings their past as soldiers to the Civil War, in effect showing that the pointlessness of war is not isolated to any particular conflict. Huston, asked to document both battles and trauma, produced films that accomplished their task, all while walking a thin line between his patriotic duty of informing the American public about the war, and remaining true to his larger conviction of questioning the value of war altogether.

Chapter 3 focuses on the animated shorts of Walt Disney, particularly the four shorts he produced in 1943: *Chicken Little*, *Education for Death*, *Reason and Emotion*, and *Der Fuehrer’s Face*. Though he would create other educational and entertainment cartoons during the war years, what makes these particular cartoons fascinating for study is their simultaneous reliance on and rejection of authority, usually in the form of critique of an educating entity or space. In *Education for Death*, the most obvious site of education is used—the schoolroom. In *Reason and Emotion*, the audience is literally brought into the space of the mind, where dueling characters fight for control of the brain. In *Der Fuehrer’s Face*, Donald Duck is repeatedly berated and controlled by an unseen authorial voice, and in *Chicken Little*, the power of a single psychology book translates into a scene of death. These cartoons, aimed at showing the American public how education could be perverted in order to control the minds of the enemy, simultaneously depicts education as powerful and corrupting. Here, Disney uses propaganda techniques to critique propaganda.
Disney is different from the other subjects here. He is more than a single artist. As is well known, his work was brought to life by a studio filled with employees—yet the products reveal similar tensions that are discussed in the work of the individual artists in this project. My focus seeks to position the war years as a time when Disney not only helped shape minds, he took a very different lesson from his wartime work. I contend that while other artists carried their examination of the war into the postwar world, Disney and his artists pivoted toward a newfound opportunity for future educational endeavors. Discovering a new outlet for his animated cartoons during the war may well be the most important shift in the company before his death.

My final chapter will analyze the work of cartoonist Bill Mauldin. Entering the army at 18, Mauldin drew hundreds of cartoons about the infantry, beginning with his time at boot camp with the 45th Division News. After three years with his division’s newspaper, he was hired on as a staff cartoonist for Stars and Stripes. His Up Front series, bringing humor and relief to the millions of infantrymen who saw themselves reflected in the struggles of his two “dogfaces” Willie and Joe, spread beyond the European theater of war and was published in newspapers back home, bringing a realistic image of the GI to the American public. Capturing the stories and complaints of the riflemen who were on the front lines of battle, Mauldin depicted their isolation and frustration, and much of his work deals with the daily struggles of the soldier, from the weather and mud to the loneliness of the foxhole. Cartoons, particularly editorial cartoons are quickly summed up as work that is easily understood, but I contend that Mauldin’s entire corpus of material from the war can be examined as a sustained attack on military
hierarchy and a vital source of a realistic impression of life on the front lines for infantrymen.

The sardonic cartoons are more than humorous, however; in many cases, Mauldin displays a direct challenge to the officers and their expectations. The isolating dread of the soldier in the face of war allows for some levity, but overall it is subdued by the lingering sense of death. Again, working within the system, the artist is able to push at the boundaries of authority while celebrating the sacrifices of the soldiers who work within the system. This tension, between the work of the infantrymen and the officers in the army provided relief for the soldier while capturing a realistic portrait of life up front.

I will then examine Mauldin’s work as a syndicated cartoonist upon his return to the United States, and how his critiques of authority nearly ended his career. Finally, Mauldin’s use of Willie and Joe as he entered politics for a brief time, first, by backing Adlai Stevenson in his bid for the presidency in 1952 and then by running for Congress in Rockland County, New York in 1956 will close out the chapter. In each instance, Mauldin uses the image of Willie and Joe as symbolic shorthand for sacrifice and struggle, aligning his campaign with the legacy of the veteran.

The work of Jacob Lawrence, John Huston, Walt Disney, and Bill Mauldin presented a very different picture from other artists who interpreted World War II. Working under the auspices of the government—aboard a Coast Guard vessel, on the outskirts of the Alaskan frontier, in an office in Hollywood., or from a foxhole in the Italian countryside—they provided images that, under the surface, presented a more ambiguous picture of the war.
Chapter 1
Jacob Lawrence:
The Best Democracy I’ve Ever Known

On August 1, 1943, as the night gave way to the early morning hours, and while
rumors spread of violence against an African American soldier, Robert Bandy, by James
Collins, a white New York City police officer, the streets of Harlem began filling with
rioters. By the end of the following day, hundreds of thousands of dollars in damages
had left businesses shuttered, windows destroyed, hundreds of residents injured, and
seven dead. The riots on the streets of Harlem (and Detroit earlier in the year) exposed
the anger of a population that was still considered racially and culturally inferior by much
of white America. Indignation appeared to be further fueled by the fact that the victim
was a veteran of the U.S. Army, and by the rumor that Bandy had been killed by a police
officer. If a man in uniform was not protected from police violence, then who was? Even
if the rumor turned out to be false, it painfully foregrounded the fact that an army
uniform, if worn by an African American soldier, commanded much less respect and
protection than it did for a white G.I. The incident also made clear that the efforts of
organizers, journalists, and politicians to force the issues of the “Double V” campaign
into a reality would only find modest gains before the eventual integration of the armed
forces.

Into this maelstrom of events stepped Jacob Lawrence. The young artist had been
documenting his neighborhood throughout 1942-43 and had created nearly 60 paintings

---
24 For a detailed account on the events leading up to the Harlem riots, see Nat Brandt, Harlem at War: the
Black Experience in WWII (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996).
of Harlem over the course of the year. Now he was about to be inducted in the United States Coast Guard, donning a uniform himself and stepping into, as John Ott describes it, “A remarkable accident of history.” My contention is that his experiences in the war and his personal connection to the material is a meaningful departure from his earlier work, setting him apart as an artist who experienced the earliest effort of integration first hand. This chapter will examine the War series, as well as the works painted while Lawrence was in the Coast Guard, and his return to World War II material with his Hiroshima series forty years later. The chapter will detail how Lawrence transformed these experiences into what I would ultimately call optimistic images, images that seek to create understanding and healing after so many African American servicemen, laborers, and citizens did not receive such treatment. If we are to read Jacob Lawrence as a painter of history and of struggle, then what are the narratives that he hopes to tell about the war? What are the lessons to be learned about heroism, about the ordinary individuals who contributed to the war effort and to the perception of black servicemen who yet again sacrificed their lives abroad for the ever-elusive measure of democracy at home? As Patricia Hills notes, “Lawrence offered his public a countenance of peace and wisdom behind which he merged passionate feelings for the humanity and dignity of ordinary people.” And as Elizabeth McCausland writes in an essay focusing on Lawrence at the end of the war, “That Lawrence paints hopefully is hopeful.”

27 Elizabeth McCausland, "Jacob Lawrence," Magazine of Art, 38, no. 7 (November 1945): 250-254.
While Lawrence would not address the Harlem riots directly until years after the war ended, by 1943 he had already completed some of his most mature work and had been lauded as one of the most important African American artists of his or any generation. From 1938 to 1942, he painted a group of historical series, *The Life of Toussaint L’Ouverture* (1938), *The Life of Frederick Douglass* (1939), *The Life of Harriet Tubman* (1940), *The Migration of the Negro* (1941), and *The Life of John Brown* (1941). Each of these series used meticulous research to create a narrative of African-American struggle that brought Lawrence to the forefront of the American art scene. Pairing flat, expressionistic imagery with lengthy captions, Lawrence was able to create expansive narratives over a series of panels, elaborating on moments of history that rarely were told to African American children in schools.

One might assume that Lawrence’s painting might focus on the pervasive racism in civilian society and the U.S. military. But this was not the case. Unremarked upon are the indignities suffered by black servicemen—the verbal abuse, the beatings, and the lynchings. There is no series of paintings on the planned march on Washington, the riots in Detroit and Harlem, or the infamous Port Chicago explosion in L.A. in July of 1944, which left over 300 black sailors dead, hundreds injured and 50 men facing a court-martial for refusing to return to the hazardous duty to which mostly dark skinned rank

---

28 Lawrence eventually confronted the riot with his illustration *Margie Polite* for Langston Hughes’ *One Way Ticket* (1949).

were relegated. These stories, which were readily available in both the black and mainstream press, were not remarked upon in Lawrence’s work. Nor does Lawrence focus on images of black war heroes.

This does not mean that the artist abandoned his efforts to depict the struggles of his community. Rather, Lawrence takes a different approach to the material. While visual hints about the war were not in the frame, the atmosphere of dread could be felt. On the group of Harlem images created in the year before Lawrence entered the Coast Guard, Elton Fax writes that the evidence of a change was at hand, that "the paintings were taking on a richness now, though the stark simplicity and power that were his trademark were as yet unchanged.” The “happy paintings,” Fax continues, were gone, replaced by a different set of characters. “They were the poor, the hungry, the demoralized.” Images like “Tombstones” or “Most of the People are Very Poor Rent Is High Food is High” or “They Live in Fire Traps” tell us, just in their titles, of the demoralizing conditions that existed in Harlem at the time. Certainly, a different type of conflict played out in the streets of Lawrence’s neighborhood, which he addressed directly. While the war in Europe raged for nearly the entirety of his young career, it was not until 1943 that Lawrence painted his first picture that hinted at the war.

*Sidewalk Drawings*, in which two African American children can be seen covering the sidewalks of Harlem with chalk, combines images of African American life with that of national pride. It directly addresses the current struggle of the community to

---


come to terms with their own quest for the full rights of citizenship and the economic opportunities denied them while also being asked to fight for democracy abroad. If the prominent statement of support for war was “Why We Fight,” the black community was more inclined to ask, “Why Should We Fight?” Lawrence, having spent his young career creating a series of paintings on black heroes in the fight for citizenship, now confronted the latest test of America’s commitment to his community—a community that yet again was being asked to fight for democracy abroad while lacking basic democratic rights at home.

In *Sidewalk Drawings* Lawrence uses an aerial view of the children, who are positioned on the grid of the sidewalk. What at first glance appears to be a scene of innocent children naively drawing the world around them serves Lawrence to construct a mosaic alluding to the dual nature of its subjects’ lives as blacks and Americans. In the top left corner there is a drawing of two men boxing. This could very well be, as Lawrence scholar Patricia Hills points out, a depiction of Joe Louis\(^{32}\), who in 1937 became World Heavyweight Champion of the World, and who spent the next few years successfully defending his title, including rematches with the German boxer Max Schmeling, on the eve of the outbreak of war in 1939. The depiction of a violent blow one boxer deals the other inevitably takes on broader connotations, in which black vs. white overlaps with America vs. Nazi Germany and freedom vs. tyranny.

Elsewhere in the painting, the war literally invades the frame. One little girl is about to complete a drawing of a structure topped with an American flag. This building

---

\(^{32}\) Patricia Hills, *Painting Harlem Modern: the Art of Jacob Lawrence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 146.
with a crenulated roof may be an armory, as Patricia Hills claims. Might we even read it as a nod to the military legacy of brave Harlemites who risked their lives for democracy during World War I? Renovated only a decade earlier, the 369th Infantry’s armory was located in the heart of Harlem, a reminder of the “Harlem Hellfighters” who brought a sense of pride to the community after their service in WWI. Lawrence’s depiction of the building in *Sidewalk Drawings* may well have reminded black viewers of a father or brother who was a part of the regiment. Or perhaps a family member now struggled with the question of whether or not to enlist after the sacrifices of the black servicemen during WWI did not provide the equal treatment they so longed for when they returned. The flag waving proudly at the top of the building offers no hint of weariness or hesitation. This does not mean, however, that Lawrence stops short of inscribing ambiguity into the painting. This ambiguity is arguably found in the relation between the different visual figures and icons.

For example, at the top of the picture is a mule-driven carriage, a reference to the prominent role African-Americans had in America’s rural past ranging from the Antebellum era to Civil War and Reconstruction. Here Lawrence provides a glimpse at what precious little has been given to African Americans. In an adjacent part of the painting, a United States Navy battleship is seen waving an American flag and firing projectiles as an unseen enemy looms off in the distance. While readable as an expression of patriotism, the impression hardly escapes one that the guns appear to be pointed directly at the little girl herself. In another corner a plane drops bombs from the sky. It

---

33 Ibid.
gives viewers the opportunity to recall the role of black servicemen, such as the Tuskegee airmen, or Dorie Miller, the cook who successfully shot down five Japanese airplanes during the attack on Pearl Harbor the previous December.34

Lawrence successfully creates a picture fraught with tension. These children are at the precipice of a great change in their community, surrounding themselves with images of cultural pride, with the gateways to American success in the form of sports and education paired with the historical struggles of labor and war. For the children of Harlem, the war was already an invasion on their innocence. Who will these children become? Will their fathers be able to serve their country? Will another fight for democracy abroad lead to a push toward civil rights at home? For the innocent artists depicted in Sidewalk Drawings, the future is uncertain. And yet patriotism is not absent from the frame of reference. These children are American and African American. They’ve drawn multiple American flags, celebrating the vessels of war, while also celebrating and recognizing African American achievement and struggle. This blend of serious themes, which masterfully shows the “two-ness” that W.E.B. Du Bois wrote about in “The Souls of Black Folk” a generation earlier, would guide the panels Lawrence would eventually create for the military.35 Double consciousness would pervade the quest

34 Doris Miller became a hero for the African American community when his identity was finally revealed weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor. While his image and story were used to bolster the war effort, Miller would not survive the war, dying when the Liscombe Bay sunk in 1944. Foner, Jack D. Foner, Blacks and the Military in American History; a New Perspective (New York: Praeger, 1974), 173.

35 W. E. B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk, etc. (Archibald Constable & Co: London: Cambridge, U.S.A., 1905). Du Bois describes double-consciousness as the need for African Americans to mediate between the multiple divisions of their identity, as well as the perception of that identity by others, due to their history in the United States and connections to Europe and Africa.
for Double Victory, and Jacob Lawrence’s wartime work reflects precisely that struggle, if perhaps showing it in a hopeful light.

*Sidewalk Drawings* was the first explicit image Lawrence completed about World War II, and one of the last completed before he was inducted into the United States Coast Guard in October of 1943. While the picture hints at the destructive qualities of war through the eyes of children, it leaves the destruction of Harlem itself outside the frame. Perhaps the riot was too close to him, as the artist prepared to go to war himself. For the next two years, Lawrence would find himself painting not the imagined naval vessels of the Harlem sidewalks, but the actual ships on which he was stationed. While the intellectual, public, political, and social conversations in black communities focused on the hope for equality, Lawrence showed it was possible to live such equality at least in a specific setting such as a military ship.

Lawrence’s work completed during his time in the Coast Guard rejects any assumption that the black serviceman is in any way less of a soldier, less of a man. Gaining employment in the defense industries, the placement of African Americans in previously barred leadership roles, and the integration of the regular army were seemingly insurmountable goals. These symbolic, but also incredibly concrete steps toward ending segregation and promoting equality, were early steps toward the full enjoyment of the rights of citizenship African Americans fought for in the Civil Rights era. Lawrence embodied the possibilities of that struggle, and transformed it into his art.

Scholars have looked at Lawrence’s work as a visual autobiography, with the artist confirming that he takes an autobiographical view of the content of his work. And
so we must think of these paintings at the crossroads of the historical and the personal. The Harlem community and the history he researched in the library influenced his early work; now, however, Lawrence depicted a history of which he himself was an organic part. Stories circulating in his family and his community may have helped shape his series on the Great Migration of African Americans from the south to the northern industrial cities. But his series on WWII placed him in the very midst of a historical event. As John Ott argues, however, Lawrence’s work during the year is not simply an autobiographical exercise, but rather a “sustained commentary on racial integration.”36 As an African American man he was positioned at a moment that was unique in the history of the Armed Forces of the United States, and he used that opportunity to fight for racial equality.

**Storyteller, Historian, Artist: A Framework for Interpretation**

Early critical assessments of Jacob Lawrence’s work defined him as a storyteller and historian who used his art to bring lost narratives to life and transform the struggles of the people around him into meaningful documents of daily life as a black American. In the spring of 1939, none other than Alain Locke, champion of black art and artists, described Lawrence as having provided such stories to the public that it was impossible to overstate his accomplishments. Writing about Lawrence’s new series on the Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L’Ouverture in his article, “Advance on the Art Front” from the May issue of *Opportunity*, Locke raved:

---

36 Ott, 59.
It would be hard to decide which cause owed the greater debt to Jacob Lawrence’s talents, Haitian national history, Negro historical pride, expressionism as an appropriate idiom for interpreting tropical atmosphere and peasant action and emotion, or contemporary Negro art. As a matter of fact, all scored simultaneously when this brilliant series of sketches was exhibited in a special gallery at the Baltimore Museum of Art’s recent showing of Negro artists.37

This was high praise coming from Locke, whose criticism and tireless work throughout his career helped elevate the cause of black art in the United States. It would also help to solidify Lawrence’s connection to the New York art world, as Locke would subsequently introduce the young artist to Elizabeth Halpert at the Downtown Gallery, who would represent him for many years to come. But what is most important about this early praise from a leading figure in the black community is how it deftly touches on all the qualities of Lawrence’s art that would help define the rest of his career.

Richard Powell asks us to examine the “documentary and humanistic focus” of the work as an attempt at social realism. Like Locke before him, Powell claims that social realism in Lawrence is not, “the antiquated sense of proselytizing or propagandizing a particular political stance or belief.” Lawrence focuses on struggles, both personal and historical, in an attempt to “clarify” historical events.38 He was concerned primarily with capturing history both past and present, and created images that examined the struggles and hopes of his community, oftentimes by creating a narrative structure through which

he could examine his subject. His work consistently reflects these social issues, beginning in the 1930s with Lawrence’s membership in the first generation of black artists to emerge after the Harlem Renaissance of the post WWI era, a generation grounded in the social politics of the time. Images of education, labor, segregation, and struggle form the foundation at every juncture of Lawrence’s career.

Locke may have been one of the first to call Lawrence a historian, but he certainly would not be the last. Critics and scholars made Lawrence’s work as a narrative historian a central aspect of future interpretation. Charles Alston, who guided Lawrence’s early career wrote of his sensitivity to struggle in the first monograph of his work in 1938:

He is particularly sensitive to the life about him; the joy, the suffering, the weakness, the strength of the people he sees every day.... Still a very young painter, Lawrence symbolizes more than anyone I know, the vitality, the seriousness and promise of a new and socially conscious generation of Negro artists.39

Cedric Dover, shifting the power to the artists as documentarians, writes in American Negro Art that “History is no longer chronicled in verse, but peoples still speak through their poets. And, as artists are poets too, an anthology of the art of a people is a reflection, in poetic images, of their total experience.”40 This description of the artist as historian fits the career of Jacob Lawrence well. Although couched in an assessment of the artist as naive, James Porter's 1943 book, Modern Negro Art put it more simply, "His art is

40 Cedric Dover, American Negro Art (New York: Graphic Society, 1972), 11.
founded in reality.⁴¹ Porter’s seminal text celebrated Lawrence’s ability not just to capture the reality around him, but to help the audience see it with new eyes, claiming that "Freshness of vision is the most charming quality in this artist's work. He sees the world anew for us. He has retained, from his age of innocence, that wholesomeness of comment that marks the effort of an unspoiled artist." By “unspoiled”, Porter meant naïve or primitive, an assessment that proved false, both in the sense of Lawrence’s training as a painter as well as his development at a thinker, as Lawrence received training from Charles Alston, guidance from Augusta Savage, spent time at the Utopia House in Harlem as well as the American Artists School, the Harlem Workshops of the 1930s, and the vibrant lecture circuit that brought communists, Garvey-ites, and other socially conscious speakers through Harlem.

That his art could be provocative while aiming to educate is a quality noted by reviewers and critics in their description of the thin line between social commentary and propaganda, the method that will frame Lawrence’s work, particularly in the war years. Alain Locke offers an early example of the critical assessment of Lawrence’s use of personal experience to paint with an eye toward social themes without preaching. In his recommendation for Lawrence’s application for the 1940 Rosenwald Fund grant, Locke wrote that the painter was able to use his research and experiences to create social art with, “little or no hint of social propaganda in his pictures,” while his painting still

provides “a stirring social and racial appeal.” On reflection decades later, Aline Saarinen concurred, writing, “Lawrence’s mood throughout is compassionate rather than protesting. He paints neither sermons nor pamphlets.” And Ellen Harkins Wheat wrote of the Migration paintings as “propaganda paintings in the best sense.”

Lawrence scholar Patricia Hills synthesizes these arguments en route to formulating her own contention that the artist was another in a long line of African American narrative historians, or a “pictorial griot”. Engaging in a long tradition of African storytellers and oral historians, Lawrence was also dedicated to depicting the contemporary struggles around him. The griot was an oral historian, saving the stories of the tribes so that they did not get lost to history. This tradition is carried on with Lawrence who uses his paint to immortalize important moments in the black experience. Hills links the artist’s own education and interest in the lecture circuit to his continued reliance on research to give a deeper meaning to his narratives. Transforming these narratives into images keeps the stories fresh and memorable.

Lawrence hoped that his work, whether based on an event from history or the streets of Harlem, would have some resonance with the contemporary viewer. When asked about his work, he claimed it was not about the past, as the same issues continued on in his own time. “We don’t have a physical slavery,” he remarked, “But an economic

42 Alain Locke to Julius Rosenwald Fund, "Confidential Report on Candidate for Fellowship," re Jacob Armstead Lawrence, January 23, 1940, Rosenwald Fund Collection, Special Collections, Fisk University, Nashville, Tenn.
slavery. If these people, who were so much worse off than the people today, could conquer their slavery, we certainly can do the same thing.” 46 And so he uses heroes of the past to inspire the men and women of his time to rise above their own challenges. “The tales from history are full of blood and violence and oppression as well as courage and hope.” 47

Lawrence and his family were a part of this history of blood and violence, of courage and hope. Born in Atlantic City in 1917, his family became a part of the Great Migration of African American families that moved to urban centers of the North. In Lawrence’s case, this journey brought them first to Philadelphia, and then to Harlem. Only a teenager in the depths of the Great Depression, he worked in a CCC camp in 1936, and in the Works Progress Administration easel program, which laid the foundation for his style and social subject matter. Though initially claimed by some to be self-taught, verging on primitive (as Horace Pippin was before him), Lawrence in fact spent time under the tutelage of Charles Alston and received guidance from Augusta Savage. 48

Influenced by Cubism as well as the murals of the Mexican masters who visited the United States in the 1930s, Lawrence developed an expressionistic modernist-cubist style that continued throughout his career. 49

46 Jacob Lawrence, as quoted in Ellen Harkins Wheat, Lawrence, Jacob, and Hampton University Museum, Jacob Lawrence: The Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman Series of 1938-40, (Hampton, Va.: Hampton University Museum in Association with University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1991), 14.
47 Saarinen, 9.
Perhaps his greatest teacher was the library and the vibrant lecture circuit that reached Harlem during his formative years. As Lawrence later noted, "The atmosphere of that area of Harlem was most exciting and wholesome for a young fellow like me. While I didn't realize it at the time, I was greatly inspired and influenced because of my closeness to such personalities." Excited by the historical narratives and the personalities he encountered in his quest for education, from the most vocal Garvey Black Nationalists to the librarians behind the desks of the local library, he eventually decided to tell his own histories in paint. On West 135th St. in the heart of Harlem, the Arthur Schomburg collection at the Harlem Branch of the New York Public Library served as an important center for research and community building. For a young student interested in telling the story of the heroes of black America from his own narrative perspective, the vast collection of books, artifacts, and other material in the Schomburg archive was invaluable; throughout the course of his early career, Lawrence pored through the various texts and manuscripts to help construct his narrative series, finding inspiration, and supplying the resulting paintings with lengthy titles lifted directly from historical accounts and scholarly work.

And so while it is no surprise that Lawrence’s art deals primarily with African American struggle, as informed by his life and his research, the variety of influences allowed for a well-informed distance from the material. In an exchange during an interview with Henry Louis Gates Jr., Lawrence elaborates on the fluidity of African American identity, claiming Du Bois’ original conception of double-consciousness did

50 Fax, 152.
not connect with him in the usual way. When asked if he had a conflict with an African and an American identity, Lawrence responded, “It's like a symbiotic kind of thing. Each is different, but on the other hand, each is dependent, for its existence, on the other.”

And so Lawrence’s art is not a simple reflection of Du Bois’ concept of double-consciousness, nor as radical as Marcus Garvey’s call for African Americans to return to Africa. His brush tells more than one story, and has more than one interpretation. “I paint as I see,” he once wrote, and his role as a storyteller and documentarian of struggle and contemporary life in Harlem is oftentimes blunt while remaining at a distance. His work is about black history and struggles as well as black citizenship in the United States. Lawrence depicts anger with his brushstrokes, but not simply a rebellion.

A fine example of Lawrence’s ability to portray multiple viewpoints comes from very early in his career. In Street Orator’s Audience (1936), Lawrence depicts a common site from the streets of Harlem, an occurrence that formed him as a politically conscious young man and artist. A group of people gather in front of a speaker, who has mounted a ladder to deliver a soap box speech. Moving from one pair of eyes to the next, we see that not everyone is interested in what the faceless orator has to say. There is indifference, and perhaps contempt as well. Perhaps this is directed at the speaker, or perhaps it is an inner rage directed at the unheard injustices. We also see sadness on the face of the woman in the bottom right corner. Is she saddened by the speaker’s words, or at the sight of another person compelled to rail against the ills of the government or the treatment of the citizens of Harlem? We do not know the answer.

And we also have no idea what the orator is saying. Is he a communist or an anarchist? Is he preaching the gospel or reading a treatise against the government? Is he challenging his audience or finding common ground with them? At the height of the Great Depression, when citizens of all shades and backgrounds were looking for direction—social, economic, and otherwise—the possibilities are endless. What is also notable here is the cubist version of the audience. While the vast majority of subjects in Lawrence’s work throughout his career are depicted with a solid shade of color, here we see seven people of Harlem, each with multiple shades of black, brown, and tan. At once an acknowledgement of the multi-ethnic surroundings, it also shows that identity, politics, and race are not so easy to pin down. Harlem is not simply a sea of brown faces. There are myriad identities, bound together by geography and community. Lawrence documents this with paint, these intangibles of day-to-day politics, and the different masks we wear. While allowing for ambiguities, the artists acknowledges more than a double consciousness. Here, there are multiple possibilities of identity.

As Saarinen notes in her early exhibition monograph, Lawrence “sees the Negroes’ struggle for liberty and freedom as part of the struggle of all men to achieve human dignity.”52 This is certainly not to take away from the struggles of his mostly African American subjects, but to stress that those struggles, while historically linked to the United States, find universal meanings in their statements on humanity. In a 1946 artist’s statement, Lawrence confirms these claims, arguing that for him, work is

52 Saarinen. 9.
autobiographical as well as universal, that even though his images may be
expressionistic, they contain more than simple designs:

For me a painting should have three things: universality, clarity and
strength. Universality so that it may be understood by all men. Clarity and
strength so that it may be aesthetically good. It is necessary in creating a
painting to find out as much as possible about one’s subject, thereby
freeing oneself of having to strive for a superficial depth. […] One’s
pictures should be about things most familiar to him.\footnote{Quoted in Ellen Harkins Wheat, \textit{Jacob Lawrence, American Painter} (Seattle: University of Washington Press in association with the Seattle Art Museum, 1994), 192.}

In just this brief excerpt, Lawrence provides guidance for reading not only his historical
series, but his Coast Guard paintings, \textit{War} and \textit{Hiroshima} series as well. While the earlier
series work, such as \textit{Harriet Tubman} and \textit{Frederick Douglass} focused on the struggles of
African Americans throughout American history, I argue that the WWII-related work
focuses on a more universal theme, fully embracing Lawrence’s quest for images that
connect with all of humanity. Having experienced the rare opportunity to serve on a
racially integrated vessel, his wartime work exhibits a hopefulness that is rare in his other
paintings. Likewise, his images of suffering, despair, and death in the \textit{Hiroshima} prints
can be read not just as expressions of empathy for Japanese citizens, but for humanity as
well. Through the lens of war, Jacob Lawrence was able to create his most humanist
images, connecting his subjects on a broader plane. While Lawrence unquestionably
focuses his work on the African American community—its struggles as well as its joys—he also sees his role as an artist to be one that breaks down barriers.
In his Coast Guard sketches and paintings, he presents his personal impressions and experiences. In his War series, done nearly two years after his discharge from the service, he once again creates more of a shared vision than a personal one. By the time Lawrence paints his Hiroshima series, the work is grounded in John Hersey’s text, but has no literal connection to the stories within. Instead, Lawrence paints his most abstract vision of the war, getting to the core of humanity’s experience of suffering.

**Americans Too: Struggles on the Home Front and Abroad**

The fundamental questions of African American involvement in WWII stemmed from a long history of sacrifice without a return on the investment of young black lives. Most recently, African American men and women served during World War I, earning some measure of respect within the Armed Services, but were treated as inferior soldiers both during the war, and in assessments afterwards. In the 1930s, as Italian forces invaded Ethiopia, African Americans were confronted with the dangers of Fascism abroad as it directly linked to a shared past in Africa. As Nell Irvin Painter writes in *Creating Black Americans*, "African Americans questioned their place in the war that was taking shape in Europe. They repeatedly equated Nazi racism, American white supremacy, and European imperialism."54 Yet as WWII approached, the assumption of involvement was not a certainty. In the black press and beyond, the question of black involvement filled pages of editorials and essays, along with news that, yet again, African American workers were passed over for jobs, or segregated in whatever roles they could

---

get in the Armed Forces. Painter continues, “Everyone's ideas about the past reflect the concerns of the present.” And that past for the black community was not very encouraging. Looking to the future, and their possible involvement overseas, “Black draftees joked about the wording that would go on their tombstones: Here lies a black man killed fighting a yellow man for the protection of a white man.”

A dramatic approach to gaining equality came in the summer of 1940. A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, helped change the tide, albeit slowly, toward some equality at home on the eve of struggles abroad. His threatened March on Washington was not the initial attempt at change, however. President Roosevelt, along with Eleanor Roosevelt, had created an informal “Black Cabinet” to begin to address concerns of the African American community, though much of their discussions ended in a stalemate. And so in the summer of 1940, Randolph called for a march on the capital. On July 1, 1941, Randolph asked the community to join him in a show of political force in Washington:

But if American Democracy will not defend its defenders; if American democracy will not protect its protectors; if American Democracy will not give jobs to its toilers because of race or color; if American democracy will not insure equality of opportunity, freedom of justice to its citizens,

———
55 Painter, 1.
56 Painter, 223.
black and white, it is hollow mockery and belies the principles for which it is supposed to stand.\textsuperscript{57}

Comprised only of black citizens, the march was to be a spectacular publicity stunt. Originally slated for 10,000 people, it was expanded to 100,000. President Roosevelt again tried to assuage Randolph, calling him to another meeting at the White House along with Fiorello LaGuardia. At the meeting, Randolph refused to capitulate, and on June 25, 1941, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, which mandated fair employment in the defense industries. This alleviated some of the tensions, allowing for desegregated transportation in the Armed Forces and other concessions. Roosevelt also elevated Benjamin O. Davis to the position of general, a first. What he did not do, however, was desegregate the Armed forces.

In January of 1942, prompted by a letter to the editor from James G. Thompson, in which he asked a series of questions about the outcome of the war, the \textit{Pittsburgh Courier} inaugurated its “Double V” campaign, calling for a “two-pronged” victory against both those who would enslave them abroad and the enslavers right at home in America. Thompson, a 26-year-old African American, asked the following questions of the community:

Should I sacrifice my life to live half American? Will things be better for the next generation in the peace to follow? Would it be demanding too much to demand full citizenship rights in exchange for the sacrificing of

my life. Is the kind of America I know worth defending? Will America be a true and pure democracy after this war? Will colored Americans suffer still the indignities that have been heaped upon them in the past? Only a few short weeks after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and the United States’ official entry into the war, Thompson was quick to put into words the issues that had long plagued the African American community through the first decades of the 20th Century, as seen particularly through the lens of war. He concluded by noting his willingness, “to die for the America I know will someday become a reality.” With these words, the Double ‘V’ campaign was born, and the Courier threw its weight behind the idea of a victory abroad as well as one at home. “We, as colored Americans are determined to protect our country, our form of government, and the freedoms which we cherish for ourselves and the rest of the world,” a February 14, 1942 article, “The Courier’s Double “V” for a Double Victory Campaign gets country-wide support” stated. With a national call for sacrifice, both of material comforts and young men as soldiers, the Black community had every right to give pause, as it was barely a generation removed from when they had been called upon to fight for democracy abroad with little hope of receiving it when they returned.

And so as another war for democracy approached, leaders in the community gave pause and asked if this conflict merited their involvement. Outside of the racial issues at home, a powerful force that swayed public opinion, other than the desire for equality and the blatant hypocrisy in the United States, was the specter of Adolf Hitler himself, whose

---

actions and words aimed toward the black race around the world reminded them that, perhaps, this fight was a little different. In a pamphlet distributed by the Office of War Information in 1942, *Negroes and the War*, Chandler Owen recalls Hitler’s passage in *Mein Kampf*, translated into English in 1933, in which he wrote of the African as a mongrel race:

> From time to time it is demonstrated…that for the first time here or there a Negro has become a lawyer, teacher, even clergyman, or even a leading opera tenor or something of that kind…It does not dawn upon this depraved bourgeois world that here one has actually to do with a sin against all reason; that it is a criminal absurdity to train a born half-ape until one believes a lawyer has been made of him…for it is training exactly as that of a poodle, and not a scientific ‘education.’ The same trouble and care, applied to intelligent races, would fit each individual a thousand times better for the same achievements.  

59

In a September 1936 editorial in *The Crisis*, “Fascism Now Means Something” the author, writing about the reported refusal of Hitler to meet with Olympic gold medal winner Jesse Owens, writes that the meaning of fascism is becoming “clearer and clearer” to a previously unbothered population.  

60 Although the Olympics was not a battleground, the dangers of fascism hit closer to home. “That’s as bad as Mississippi,” the editorial continues, in effect linking the struggles of blacks at home with the dangers of Hitler

59 Chandler Owen, *Negroes and the War* (Washington, D.C.: United States Office of War Information, 1942). This quote, used to promote black activism in the war effort, as in Owen’s pamphlet for the OWI, is also used in Bill Mauldin’s speech to the New York Herald forum, discussed in chapter 3.  

abroad. Sterling A. Brown, in a collection of essays entitled *What the Negro Wants*, wrote of the simple desire to belong. “Negroes want to be counted in,” he wrote. “They want to belong. They want what other men have wanted deeply enough to fight and suffer for it. They want democracy.”61 Complete participation in democracy was a generation away, and the fight turned next to the war overseas.

A Jim Crow Army Fighting for Democracy

In “The Negro’s War” by the editors of *Fortune*, the authors stress that in the end, the chance to fight would be the most powerful way to welcome the black community into the effort and give them a larger stake in the outcome. “What individuals or groups are aware of contributing to the collective endeavor determines their feelings more deeply than job, income, housing,” they argued. “Accordingly, the biggest single factor in shaping the American Negro’s mind about this war and his part in it is his place in the United States Armed Forces.”62 Certainly after adding to the “collective endeavor” of winning the war, one would hope that job opportunities, voting rights, and improved housing conditions would be forthcoming. But first, the black community needed a chance to fight.

African American servicemen remained segregated throughout World War II, with few notable exceptions. Beginning with the buildup to war, in every branch of service, black soldiers, seamen, pilots, infantrymen, and cooks struggled to find equal

---

footing in Uncle Sam’s army. Oftentimes relegated to service positions, the majority of them spent the war years with a mop or kitchen utensil in their hand rather than a gun out on the front. Struggle and fear touched every single aspect of the process, from securing commissions, training in the hostile South, leadership from white officers, separate facilities, and to a lack of opportunity for advancement.

Violent disturbances and selective weeding out of otherwise qualified men resulted in a resentful, segregated force of African American servicemen. And so by 1940, only a minute percentage of soldiers in the US Armed Services were black, some 5,000 men. The Navy and Coast Guard fared little better. Blacks were prohibited from service in the Marines and Air Force. When African Americans finally did make it overseas, they were mostly relegated to stevedore status. There were a handful of divisions that saw battle. Racially mixed groups of soldiers, however, only happened in extremely rare cases, oftentimes under duress. One of these events was during the Battle of the Bulge.

While the majority of African American soldiers served in a servant capacity, and if not, in segregated battalions led by white officers, Jacob Lawrence and a few dozen fellow Coast Guardsmen were given the opportunity to participate in the first great experiment in racial integration during World War II. His experiences would forever alter his perspective on the war.

The Greatest Democracy: The Coast Guard Paintings

---

Lawrence spent much of 1943 finishing up his Harlem series courtesy of the Rosenwald fund. "My draft board deferred me twice so that I could take the fullest advantage of my fellowship grants,” he recalled later. “When I did have to go I entered the Coast Guard service. Most black Navy men at the time were steward’s mates and that's what I was.” Leaving Harlem behind and entering the U.S. Coast Guard as a steward’s mate in the fall of 1943, Lawrence traveled from Brooklyn to boot camp in Maryland, and was initially stationed in St. Augustine, Florida. The following year he was assigned to the USS Sea Cloud in Boston, which, under the guidance of Carlton Skinner, was given the leeway to experiment as the very first racially integrated ship in U.S. Naval history. Given public relations status, which set him apart from the stevedore or mess attendant service that awaited most African Americans in uniform, Lawrence was allowed to paint full time. The resulting wartime paintings integrate the image of the African American male into the world of the still nearly all-white Armed Forces.

The relatively peaceful world that Jacob Lawrence knew for most of his time in uniform shaped the images he would create. However, his initial reactions to his experiences were uninspiring at best, and worrisome in terms of the treatment of black soldiers. Stationed for a time in St. Augustine, he wrote to Elizabeth Halpert who represented him at the Downtown Gallery in New York City of the conditions for black servicemen in the south as deadening. “There is nothing beautiful here everything is ugly

---

64 Fax, 159.
65 Hills, 150.
66 During wartime, the Coast Guard was considered part of the Navy.
67 Ott, 60.
and the people are without feeling,” he wrote to her in January of 1944. In the South, Lawrence experienced the “very southern” treatment of African Americans firsthand. “In the North, one hears much talk of Democracy and the Four Freedoms, down here you realize that there are a very small percentage of people who try to practice democracy. Negroes need not be told what Fascism is like, because in the south they know nothing else.” He did send some sketches back to Halpert in New York City, though few survive and it is unknown how many were mailed to her at the Downtown Gallery. However, Lawrence’s luck was about to change.

In St. Augustine, Lawrence’s commanding officer was Captain J.S. Rosenthal, who went out of his way to help the young painter. Even offering Lawrence his own quarters as a studio, Rosenthal encouraged him to continue painting. When the Sea Cloud began its racial experiment, Lawrence was upgraded to Public Relations (PR3), and asked to continue to document his life on the new vessel.

In the spring of 1942, Carlton Skinner, in a memo that is now lost, suggested the Coast Guard man a completely integrated crew. His suggestion was not heeded—at least not immediately. When the Sea Cloud, the yacht of former U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union Joseph E. Davies was given over to the government for use in the war, it offered a chance for Skinner’s proposal to come to fruition. For the short time that it operated, the Sea Cloud was the first racially integrated vessel in the United States Armed Forces—an historic shift that received little publicity at the time and a fact that

---

68 Letter from Jacob Lawrence to Edith Halpert, January 1944, Downtown Gallery Records, reel 5549, frames 426-29, Archives of American Art.
69 Ibid.
70 Wheat, 69.
71 Wheat, 70.
has not received much attention since, even though the ship repeatedly received the highest marks for their operation by Naval standards.

The Sea Cloud, or IX99, operated out of Boston Harbor. It served mostly as a weather patrol vessel, although it did see some action in the Atlantic. The yacht was stripped of its mast, outfitted with gun turrets, and otherwise converted for use as a weather boat all with the stipulation that it would be returned to its previous condition at the end of the war. Because of its German build, the Sea Cloud would actually only serve for a brief year before it was deemed unfit for use. The relative scarcity of German parts during the war made its operations untenable. It served for a short amount of time, being decommissioned in November of 1944 after a lengthy time docked in the Boston Harbor, a process commemorated by Lawrence before he moved over to the USS General Richardson.

The bulk of Jacob Lawrence’s work done during his time in the United States Coast Guard focuses on dispelling the image of African American men as lesser soldiers than their white counterparts. Lawrence accomplishes this in a few different ways. Through images of integrated labor, harmonious recreation, and dignified moments of learning or mastery of Coast Guard tasks, Lawrence’s images show African American men not just surviving, but thriving. In Lawrence’s images of labor, the dignity of work is used as a way to further the cause for civility, respect, and integration. As his commanding officer, Carlton Skinner later argued, if the work could be done, it did not matter the color of their skin.
And so discord is replaced by images of harmony; each panel shows not only that integration can be peaceful, but that black soldiers (and by extension, black men), could be productive, educated, and resourceful. Cleaning the deck, taking a turn at the lookout, preparing a meal, painting the ship, or signal practice. On one hand, these images normalize the black experience on an integrated vessel by proving that these are simple tasks. On the other hand, they attribute no sense of glory or heraldry. These are not images of heroic deeds, they are simply images of honest labor.

As many of the issues with African American soldiers stemmed from a false perception of their intellectual inferiority, lack of training aptitude, and various other racist biases, Jacob Lawrence’s Coast Guard paintings, and later War series, undoubtedly were an attempt to right these wrongs visually. Filled with images of African American soldiers engaged in the same instructional moments as could be seen with any white counterpart; for example, African American men wielding instruments as they kept a ship in tight working order, even alongside other mechanics; and in a different but just as important way, showing black and white men together simply sharing a beer or playing checkers to pass the time. Lawrence’s subjects must be regarded as agents of change—radical in their depiction of an otherwise still widely disavowed normality of an integrated society.

After years spent painting the history that defined the African American struggles toward democracy, Lawrence would get the chance to go through an upheaval himself. But a curious thing happened during Lawrence’s traversing of basic training, camps in the south and north, and deployment overseas. While images of struggle, violence, and
terror infused his earlier series, his Coast Guard paintings and War series contain almost no hint of such discord. One could argue that after years of creating historical series based on the struggles of African Americans through slavery and war, the painter might have focused on the very same images in his WWII era work. But we see no lynching of soldiers, no captions that read, “Dorie Miller shot down six Japanese airplanes at Pearl Harbor without having been trained how to use the machine gun.” Or “A March on Washington forced the President to allow for equal hiring practices in federal occupations.” With such a rich history around him, Lawrence turned color blind. He focused on the everyday heroics, the universality of soldiery, no matter what race they belonged to. These images would never have been possible without his experience of equality on the decks of the Sea Cloud.

Many of the Coast Guard images depict moments of learning. This was a favorite subject of Lawrence’s, as images of books and libraries show up repeatedly over the years. His own process as a painter is also embedded in the work, as it reflects his own research trips to the Schomburg collection in Harlem. With titles like Nerve Center, Memory Training, and Signal Training, these images are perfect responses to the claims that African American soldiers could not perform the tasks required of them because of an inferior intellect. In “Nerve Center”, Lawrence quite literally places an African American serviceman at the center of importance. Standing before dozens of buttons, knobs, gauges, and other instruments, this man is in charge. It is not an image of worry and incompetence, but rather one of confidence in the face of a challenge. It is a great responsibility before any individual. What’s more is the fact that the ship was of German
design—the large “AEG” at the center of the controls represents Aus Erfahrung Gut, and ultimately led to the decommissioning of the vessel when German parts could no longer be found to keep her seaworthy. Here we can read Lawrence’s imagery as a direct challenge to Hitler and his theories of racial superiority. If Germany is the leader in technology and science, if their racial superiority allows for the domination of the “inferior” people of the world, then what can we read into the image of an African American not just working on a German-designed system at the nerve center of the Sea Cloud, but handling it with mastery and skill? If training black-skinned individuals was, as Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf*, “a criminal absurdity,” then here we see Lawrence directly disproving his claims.

The man standing at the controls could be confident or perhaps frozen with fear at the aspect of holding this responsibility. It is the ambiguity of the image that is fascinating, leaving the work up for interpretation. I read it as confidence—a moment to prove this sailor’s worth to the rest of the men aboard the vessel. He stands alone, arms akimbo, confidently assessing the controls, ready to use the lessons learned to keep the ship moving. We may also link this image to that of *Sidewalk Drawings*, discussed earlier. Again we are presented with a grid, yet in *Nerve Center* the man hovering over the images is no child on the cusp of war, drawing innocent images of bombs and planes—he is on a vessel of war, with decisions possibly meaning life or death. Standing confidently before *this* grid, this visual marker of science, structure, and intelligence, is a man who may defy the racial stereotypes of inferiority and ignorance.
Memory Training (1944), now lost, is another painting that focuses on the abilities of black servicemen to accomplish the daily tasks of working on a ship, while acknowledging the struggles of training and the monotony as well. The image is dominated by the poster of insignia hanging on the wall behind the subject. With his hand raised to his head, a pose known well by all who have sat before a difficult task to study, the man elicits both empathy as well as respect. The image also recalls the many different pictures of education Lawrence painted throughout his career. From The Libraries are Appreciated to The Children Go to School, Lawrence repeatedly depicted black subjects as people thirsty for knowledge, as was his own experience.

Dynamic images of labor also fill the Coast Guard pictures. Painting the Bilges, sadly one of the only paintings still known for certain to exist, exemplifies Lawrence’s use of movement to show the vitality and strength of the men around him. Put simply, these men do not stand still. Across the canvas, they engage in physical activity, all of it necessary to keep a vessel seaworthy. Due to the limited missions of the Sea Cloud, much of these images depict relatively mundane tasks, yet the effort displayed is undeniable. In Chipping the Mast for example, three men are hoisted dangerously up the mast for repairs, their arms bent back as they swing their hammers at the debris to be cleared. Further mundane tasks, such as Holystoning the Deck and Painting the Bilges still present a work ethic vital to showing that black servicemen could be important members of a crew. Lawrence also acknowledges the lower status of some of his fellow seamen, as in Officer’s Steward, where two black servicemen prepare a meal for the officers, but still the images display a sense of pride in the work being done. It also displays a sense of
rhythm, to the work they are doing as well as the effort they are putting forth together. John Ott argues that beyond the depiction of integration, Lawrence uses a visual rhythm to show the harmony that can be achieved between black and white servicemen. Arguing that Lawrence “orchestrated black and white figures as a rhythmic pattern of visual harmonies,” Lawrence was able to show just how seamless integration could be.⁷²

A comparison can be made with an earlier image of African American labor from Lawrence’s series on Frederick Douglass. The fourteenth panel of the series depicts Douglass as a young man, caulking the inside of a ship. As the caption notes, Douglass, “had become a master of his trade, that of chip caulkker. Seeing no reason why at the end of each week he should give his complete earnings to a man he owed nothing, again he planned to escape.” In this early painting of labor, Lawrence recounts Douglass’ understanding of his worth through the work he has mastered. His resolve to escape stems from his enslavement, but also from this recognition of his worth as a laborer. In *Painting the Bilges*, Lawrence depicts two men, one black and one white, working side by side, their bodies connected by the flatness of the image. But they are, of course, connected in a different way—by the equality of the value they are providing the ship.

In a series of letters written back and forth between Jacob Lawrence and his former commanding officer, Carlton Skinner, nearly fifty years after their shared time on the Sea Cloud, the two men reminisced about the social empowerment that was the converted yacht. “It seems to me,” Skinner confides, “that you understood what I was trying to do with the Sea Cloud better than anyone else involved […] Your paintings

⁷² Ott, 65.
showed that.”

Lawrence responds in kind, thanking him for giving him the opportunity to serve, and telling Skinner that his time on the weather ship was “one of the high points of [his] life.”

What Carlton Skinner was trying to do with his new post was to force the issue of racial integration by going far beyond the Naval regulations of the time and allowing the Sea Cloud to be fully integrated. In so doing, he helped create an image of the Black soldier as a legitimate addition to the body of the Armed Services. Together, the two men would use Lawrence’s role as publicist to show the world that racial solidarity could exist. The experiences of African American Coast Guardsmen on the Sea Cloud would become the basis for Lawrence’s images of war, reflecting the hopeful experiences of his fellow soldiers that integration could be achieved.

Carlton Skinner was the subject of one of Lawrence’s portraits during the war, *Captain Skinner*, a distinct honor if placed within the context of all of Lawrence’s work. Only a select handful of subjects ever were depicted as isolated portraits besides his own self-portraits—the faces of Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglas, John Brown, and L’Ouverture as well as a pair of commissions for *Time* magazine in the 1970s. And of all the portraits, very few are of white subjects. John Brown’s portrait holds a special place in Lawrence’s career as a painting of a hero to the African American community. Skinner, then, because of his trust in Lawrence and his fellow seamen, is placed on the same level of Brown. The L’Ouverture portrait connects to Skinner’s as well, as it shows

---

the leader in full military regalia. In the Skinner portrait, the lieutenant’s face floats in the vast blue space of the sea, surrounded by a dozen ships and the insignia.

Placed in the midst of all of these vessels, Skinner’s identity floats among a sea of responsibility, the Sea Cloud chief among them. The portrait reflects that it is Skinner’s intellect and generosity that gives him power. Though he looks anxiously off frame, the weight of his responsibilities, and perhaps the worry over attempting such a radical experiment on his vessel, the sheer scale of his head among the sea of ships denotes a reliance on the mind rather than any weapon. As he hovers over the Sea Cloud, the other vessels shine their beacons in support. Lawrence places him as a benevolent, yet weary leader, disembodied, the Sea Cloud forming the rest of his body, the insignia disconnected, as if his honors were shared by the entirety of the fleet rather than pinned on his individual achievements.

In the middle of Lawrence’s time on the Sea Cloud, he was given leave to attend a show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. The press release for the show and concurrent bulletin for museum members seems to go out of its way to deny that Lawrence’s work is propaganda, instead focusing on the universal themes of war and the placement of black soldiers next to white. “Death and injury play no favorites,” the press release states, as “both races face the same fundamental problem—the war.” These reassurances appear repeatedly throughout the pamphlet. “Lawrence paints facts not propaganda.” And “his pictorial statements are quiet, even-tempered, non-inflammatory. His pictures do not mount a soapbox or preach a sermon.”75 The press notes also allude to

75 Jacob Lawrence, “Jacob Lawrence,” The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art, 12(2), 11.
a meeting at the Portland Museum of Art at which a near race riot was quelled through the use of Lawrence’s Migration of the Negro images. “Yet almost imperceptibly his Coast Guard paintings suggest the gradual beginnings of a solution to the problem so movingly portrayed in the Migration series.” Unfortunately many of them are now lost.

Reflecting the realities of a racially integrated vessel, Lawrence places black and white soldiers together, in battle, as well as in moments of work and relaxation; this forces the viewer to see them as the same and as equals. Tasked to create public relations images while also showing the realities of his experiences, Lawrence focused almost entirely on images of positive reinforcement—of black servicemen in moments of labor, education, and integrated with white soldiers without detriment to the task at hand or the social fabric. These images are hopeful because they emphasize the possibilities of the future at the dawn of a new civil rights era. Depicting African American men in service to their country, whether painting a ship, studying for a Naval exam, firing a gun, or standing lookout on the Atlantic, is a powerful shift in the assumed place of black men in combat. In Lawrence’s Coast Guard pictures, he shows that all men could be equal. If these men could fight for democracy, then perhaps they could be a part of the peaceful return home.

If Lawrence’s work for the Coast Guard suggested the beginnings of a solution, then his 1947-8 series, War, transformed that suggestion into a lyrical narrative of shared loss, eschewing his usual form of storytelling for one that highlighted similarities rather than a reflection of black struggle.
After the War: A Sermon in Paint

Lawrence received a Guggenheim fellowship directly after he left the Coast Guard, and he used it to paint his War series, which debuted in 1947. If the paintings he did during his time in the Coast Guard represent an attempt to depict the everyday experiences of African American soldiers in order to normalize their involvement in the war, his War series served as further proof that the horrors of combat were universal to all involved. The War series is a meditation on the experiences of loss, displacement, and horror that come as a result of the experiences of war as well as those of the families left behind. The series is bracketed by solemn images of prayer, marking the war in terms of grief. If the Coast Guard paintings depict the elevation of the African American soldier through education and work, the War series is more of a narrative of pain and stasis.

Lawrence scholar Ellen Harkins Wheat has commented on the War series use of “harmonies of somber color.” This is particularly evident when comparing the work to the Coast Guard paintings. If the vibrancy of the blues of the open sea exhibited in Captain Skinner denotes hope, then the warmer colors of How Long? and Purple Hearts show us the more tragic side of the story. Lawrence, who would remark later that he would, “always remember the psychological damage,” of the war, was able to transform those traumas into a well-balanced meditation of loss.

---

76 Hills, 152.
77 Wheat, 74.
78 Ibid.
In a statement for Downtown galleries in 1947, Lawrence remarked on the sense of hopelessness and dread that servicemen might feel, the isolation when confronted with the vast scope of it all:

In approaching this subject, I tried to capture the essence of war. To do this I attempted to portray the feeling and emotions that are felt by the individual, both fighter and civilian. A wife or mother receiving a letter from overseas; the next of kin receiving a notice of a casualty; the futility men feel when at sea or down in a foxhole just waiting, not knowing what part they are playing in a much broader and gigantic plan.79

He continued on to say that he hoped to “convey and portray a part of the feeling war creates.” Here we see that these are not just snapshots of incidents that he witnessed, or necessarily historically accurate depictions of battles. Rather, they are a group of images designed specifically to evoke a feeling, a mood. Lawrence also alludes here to the specific struggle of African Americans to find their place not just in a vast plan of war, but in a system of democracy back home that did not include them. With full citizenship still unattainable, insignificance on the battlefield could be expanded to exclusion in the United States. This mood wavers between hope and skepticism, as John Ott argues, Lawrence’s “cautious and tentative approach” during the war, translates into more strident work upon his return. Lawrence, then, “simultaneously expressed skepticism about and dissatisfaction with progress to date.”80 It is hopeful due to his experiences in

80 Ott, 66.
the Coast Guard, but also confronts the reality that the war would not necessarily enact immediate change.

The starkest image of the *War series is Reported Missing*. Surrounded by a barbed wire fence, gaunt faces peek out at their robbed freedom. In the image, the universality of suffering is most clear. The picture shows a group of people bandaged and broken, held captive behind barbed wire fence. These lost souls stare back at the viewer with sunken eyes. Their gaunt bodies a reminder two years after the war’s end of what was sacrificed and what was lost. By the time Lawrence began painting the series, the atrocities at concentration camps were well documented. Margaret Bourke-White photographed her own series of images at the camps, *Buchenwald Prisoners*, and Lawrence’s own painting mirrors her pictures. An all-too-familiar image after the war ended, the suffering of the men, women, and children would give the world a glimpse of the terrible power of the Nazi’s while also showing us the power of the will to survive. In Lawrence’s work, black and white faces are mixed together, showing the audience that their suffering is on equal footing. These are not concentration camp prisoners, but prisoners nonetheless, and their sacrifice and suffering is palpable.

Near the center of the frame, two men stand side by side. They are joined by their imprisonment, but what also binds them is their eyes. Using the same two colors to paint the skins and eyes of the two men helps to link them as well. The outline of the light skinned men is black, as would be expected. But the detail of the dark skinned man in the center of the frame uses the same pigment as the skin of the white subject. A limited palette might help to explain this choice, but I see it as an attempt to further show that the
vision and experience of these men is intertwined, as if the events they have shared has
created a bond that can only be known in battle. The war may have been able to give
them this opportunity, to see how people can be treated like caged animals—if only that
lesson could be brought back home.

Two images from the series that seem to be conversing with each other are The
Letter and Casualty - The Secretary of War Regrets. Another image of ambiguity is The
Letter. In a stark room, a figure is bent over a table, their arms perhaps holding up their
unsteady body. We do not see their face, do not know their race or sex, nor, even, the
contents of the letter before the figure. On that blank canvas, the viewer is left to read
their own story, at once uniting them with the millions who received notice that a loved
one went missing or was killed in action, as well as with those fortunate to hear from a
son, brother, or father letting them know they were doing just fine. It is again this shared
humanity of loss and joy, which simultaneously honors both the living and the dead,
recognizing not the heroics of battle but the quiet moments of reflection.

Even with Casualty - The Secretary of War Regrets there is an air of ambiguity, at
least in the identity of the bereaved. With the figure turned away from us, we cannot tell
their sex or race. Lawrence includes a fascinating photograph beside the hunched-over
frame of the figure, who we assume is crying. Upon close inspection, the face in the
photograph appears to have both black and white skin. The simplicity of Lawrence’s
forms notwithstanding, this symbolic portrayal of the shared grief over the loss of a loved
one is further proof of his desire to create a unifying image of the war years. The stooped
figure again stands in for the audience, sharing the pain, yet allowing for their own grief to become a part of the work.

*Shipping Out* displays the terrible claustrophobia of leaving for war, not knowing if you will return. Lawrence spent time on a troop transport vessel toward the end of his time in the service, bringing thousands of people across the seas, some of whom did not return. Others were brought back wounded, both physically and psychologically. Each of the subjects in *Shipping Out* deals with their confinement in a different way. On top, the soldier, with his eyes close to a slit and his hands resting folded on his chest, might be trying to sleep. Or perhaps he is praying, asking for a safe journey and trip home. Or he is simply looking off into space. Another man holds a piece of paper close to his face. This may be a letter from a loved one at home, giving him hope and keeping him company on the long journey across the sea. Two men converse from one bunk to another, passing the time as best they can. And in the bottom bunk, a soldier lies quietly, perhaps unable to sleep from the noises around him, or from the fears of what is to come. In the top right corner of the picture, we see a pile of supplies—a helmet, gun, and shovel—draped over a rucksack. This pile looks lifelike, or perhaps, lifeless, hinting at the possible outcome for these men.

It is also possible that Lawrence was thinking about images of African slaves as they were transported across the Atlantic Ocean. The image of black men in tight quarters, although identical to images of white men being transported across the ocean to fight the war, also conjures up rather different images. The arrangement of space, the nod to a more devastating journey through the Middle Passage, gives the audience pause. It
connects these two moments in space and time, a palimpsest, writing a new history of struggle over the memories that still linger.

On the latter side of the series, the men of Shipping Out find their mirror images. In Going Home, the figures are evenly split, with four men having dark skin and four with light complexions. One figure in the background shows no skin color at all, as their entire head is covered with bandages. With different limbs covered or broken, there is a somber mood to the scene. We do not see joyous heroes returning from battle, nor even a hint of happiness. At what point did these men realize that although they may have served together overseas, they may not remain even acquaintances once their feet touch American soil? Are they immobilized by a fear of re-integration into civilian life without a re-integration into the democracy for which they’ve just risked their lives? Notably, while segregated in Shipping Out these men are coming home as a group of de-segregated victims of the conflict. Here, Lawrence notes that to shy away from democracy and integration after yet another shared conflict would be to deny these men the rights for which they paid so dearly overseas.

We can see similarities here with John Huston’s Let There Be Light (1946). In the opening moments of Huston’s banned documentary, as images of soldiers disembarking from a troop transport flash across the screen, Walter Huston narrates their hidden troubles, “Some wear the badges of their pain. The crutches. The bandages. The splints. Others show no outward sign, but they too are wounded.” Although Lawrence would never have seen the film at that time, as it was banned from viewing until the

---

81 Huston’s final film for the government will be discussed in Chapter 2.
1980s, they both share the same sentiment. Some of the scars are visible, some not. Some of these bonds may remain; others will fade away or be violently upended upon their return home.

The series ends with an ambiguous image titled *Victory*. A soldier bows his head, his face hidden from view. It is a somber victory at best, thoughtful and immersed in loss. It could be another prayer, or simply collapse. The interlaced fingers could also connote a sense of unity. John Ott argues that the lighter skin tone of one of the soldier’s hands could be read as a victorious image of racial unity.\(^82\) Interestingly, Lawrence’s study for the panel, also entitled *Victory*, depicts the interlaced hands with a uniform shade of brown, while the background is much brighter than the final product. Perhaps upon reflection, Lawrence altered the image to hint at harmony with the soldier surrounded by more somber tones. Here, Lawrence finds no simple peace, only the effects of war and the challenges ahead. It is a reflection of the lives lost rather than the victories on the battlefield. Upon closer inspection, a tear can be seen upon his cheek. This is not a victorious image for a “Good War.” Instead, it is a contemplative, exhausted soldier who marks the end of belligerency with a moment of silence. It is an image to which we—or rather, the audience of 1947--are invited to bring our own experiences. In the aftermath of the victories in Europe and the Pacific, would the “greatest democracy” that Lawrence experienced overseas take root on the home front? With the stirrings of the Civil Rights movement finding another foundation in the battles of World War II, Lawrence’s work

---

\(^{82}\) Ott, 70.
asks the audience if they can find victory in the face of a black soldier, returning home to be a citizen.

**Skin and Bone: The Hiroshima Prints**

In the aftermath of the dropping of the atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of 1945, the world was given a new symbol for annihilation: the mushroom cloud. The image found its way into countless works of art in the postwar era, from the surrealist images of Peter Blume, to B Science Fiction films like *Them!* Given such a potent image to express the horrors of war, as Greta Berman and Jeffrey Wechsler note in *Realism and Realities: The Other Side of American Painting 1940-1960*, the bomb “became a fixed image burned into the minds of the “generation of the bomb,” and a new iconographic motif was born.”83 While its overuse or misuse could be “overkill” on a canvas, the artist who used it with the right intentions could make a powerful statement. For artists, an era of social realism segued into a time of doubt and horror.

John Hersey attempted to capture the human side of the horror in *Hiroshima*. Originally intended as a series of articles spread over the pages of the *New Yorker* during the summer months of 1946, William Shawn decided to combine them into one issue of the magazine.84 The resulting issue, chronicling the lives of six survivors after the “noiseless flash” on the morning of August 6, 1945 was then published as a complete

---

text. In an interview in the *Paris Review*, Hersey remembered that he wanted to describe something different than what was being covered in the media at the time, which focused mostly on the destruction of the cities. While the rubble was devastating, proving to be a potent image to caution against future use of the bomb, Hersey wanted to focus on the people of Hiroshima, to allow their stories of survival to paint their own pictures of destruction.85

Thirty-five years later, Jacob Lawrence used Hersey’s text as a way to return to the subject of World War II. Approached by Limited Editions Club, a publisher specializing in small run, high-end books containing original prints, Lawrence was given his own choice of volumes to illustrate. Of all the possibilities available, Lawrence was drawn to Hersey’s story of survival. After all, the original articles appeared in the *New Yorker* not long before Lawrence’s original *War* series was completed. Here, Lawrence embraces a shared humanity in a way never before envisioned in his work. As Patricia Hills has written, these images of human beings in the blinding flash of destruction detail, “the quiet courage of a community in moments of shared trauma.”86 Universalized images of bodies, with their flesh peeled away from their bones, display in the grimmest possible way our shared humanity; race, gender, nationality, none of this matters. What matters is a shared experience of horror, an opportunity for Lawrence to “transcend racial and nationalist consciousness,” and remind us that human potential is both great and terrible. Elizabeth Hutton Turner once wrote that Jacob Lawrence’s art was so concise and powerful that it “strips his material to the bone.” The innocent phrase becomes a

85 Ibid.
86 Jacob Lawrence, Peter T. Nesbett, and Patricia Hills, *Jacob Lawrence: the Complete Prints*, 18.
grisly metaphor here, but an apt one, as Lawrence uses the terrible subject matter to get to the core of what it is that makes us human.

Containing eight screen prints, the book was also given a new introduction in the form of a Robert Penn Warren poem, which also appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1985, in a slightly altered form, that same year. In it, Warren collapses time, linking major cities of the world as the bomb falls on the unsuspecting city. It is a device that not only links time and space, but humanity as well.

If Jacob Lawrence’s reactions to war have dealt mostly with the idea of racial identity, and his attempts to discuss the war on a level of shared humanity, then his prints for *Hiroshima* eschew a discussion of race altogether. In Hiroshima, skin takes on a whole other meaning, as Hersey describes the body’s reaction to radiation in heartbreaking terms:

> He was the only person making his way into the city; he met hundreds and hundreds who were fleeing, and everyone of them seemed to be hurt in some way. The eyebrows of some were burned off and skin hung from their faces and hands. Others, because of pain, held their arms up as if carrying something in both hands. Some were vomiting as they walked. Many were naked or in shreds of clothing. On some undressed bodies, the burns had made patterns—of undershirt straps and suspenders and, on the skin of some women (since white repelled the heat from the bomb and dark clothes absorbed it and conducted it to the skin), the shapes of flowers they had had on their kimonos. Many, although injured
themselves, supported relatives who were worse off. Almost all had their heads bowed, looked straight ahead, were silent, and showed no expression whatever.87

As he wrote later, Lawrence selected Hersey’s text “because of its power, insight, scope, and sensitivity as well as for its overall content.” The horrifying effects of the bomb are depicted as peeling back the flesh of the victims. Lawrence claimed his goal was, again, to universalize these images, painting, “Not a particular country, not a particular city, and not a particular people.” In so doing, Lawrence exposes the skeletal frames of Hersey’s subjects, at once distressing the viewer while making it clear that under our skin we are all the same. However, the skin we see here is still red and brown. The shared humanity of the bones beneath the flesh can only express so much. The bombings did destroy the lives of a particular country, city, and people. And while the quest for universality is clear, we can find a deep connection to the historical experience of brutality of African Americans in the United States.

In the series, Lawrence continues to paint scenes of everyday life, though these are surrounded with death. People at the market, children at a playground, a family at the table—these are moments not of war and combat, but of the citizens who were forced to endure the most horrific of events. Again, Lawrence’s quest for universality extends to the people of Hiroshima. In an interview with Ellen Harkins Wheat, he explained his intention to frame it as another universal narrative, even if he or the viewer were not present for the dropping of the bomb. “I wanted it to be in terms of man’s inhumanity to

man—a universal kind of statement.” Here, the horrific effects of the bomb are more than reminders of WWII, but of the power of humanity for destruction.

At the heart of the Hiroshima series is an acknowledgement of the cruelties of war and the devastating attack that killed hundreds of thousands of innocent people. Out of the frame of view, but a lingering presence in each picture are the responsible parties. Again, as with the War series before it, this lack of specificity allows for a more universal reading of the images, even while focusing on a specific event. Notably, geography and space are pulled away. There are no markers of distinguishable landscape, no noticeable structures, only human beings. Patricia Hills, acknowledging the universality of these images, writes that they ask the viewer to turn inward as well, as “we pity the victims and fear such an apocalyptic fate for ourselves.” And so within the generic scenes we are able to place ourselves.

The Hiroshima prints are effective just as much for what they do not show as much as what they depict in the frame. In each of the prints, we are asked to imagine the moment right before the one we see. But just as importantly, Lawrence shows us that there are no moments to follow for these victims. And so we imagine a future that does not, cannot exist. How many family trees cut down in a flash of light and flame? How many victims even heard their impending death? The inclusion of children in many of these stories speaks to this fact, that each print carries the weight of the unseen future precisely because they involve the loss of so many young lives. Again, echoing the

---

89 Jacob Lawrence, Peter T. Nesbett, and Patricia Hills, *Jacob Lawrence: the Complete Prints*, 17.
political implications that stem all the way back to *The Street Orator’s Audience*, here we are presented with a highly politically charged moment without the artist tipping his hand. If at the heart of propaganda is to change the audience’s mind, it is difficult to imagine a viewer who could not see the horrors of war here and hope it never occurs again.

These moments range in intensity. *Family* depicts four people seated at the table for a morning meal. The mother and father have their faces turned skyward, and their hands are outstretched toward their children. Here we imagine a simple moment of breaking bread at the beginning of a new day, yet we focus not just on the bone revealed beneath the flesh, but of the immeasurable distance now between these family members. With hands outstretched, parents are denied one last moment to embrace their children as their lives are wiped away from the earth. It is also notable that we have made a shift from the Armed Forces to the civilian side of the conflict. Here, the family meal is a daily act, a gathering of people with no set time limits, no pressure or conflict. The war invades this space, transforming it into an eternal moment.

In a flash each scene is transformed from the commonplace, perhaps even mundane daily occurrences, into the horrific. And as Lawrence parts flesh to expose bare skulls, he exposes the shared humanity of us all, removed from surface colors and characteristics. If each step of Lawrence’s war-themed work is a step toward universalism, *Hiroshima* is the final step.

One of the more devastating aspects of Lawrence’s *Hiroshima* prints is the sheer repetitive nature of their execution and design. If the Coast Guard images attempted to
highlight the many ways that black servicemen could prove as useful members of an integrated community, and the War series opened up to a more humanistic response to shared loss, the eight Hiroshima prints show that one moment of devastation is nearly indistinguishable from the next. The formal qualities of the work, veering on abstraction, also give this work a sense of universality. And so the fact that Market looks similar to Street Scene and Playground is both horrifying and numbing. Our job as a viewer is to keep looking, to keep these memories alive. That the images are so devastating—perhaps the most violent of Lawrence’s career—ensures that they linger on in the viewer’s mind.

What makes these images powerful as well is the complete collapse of time and narrative. As Robert Penn Warren attempted in his own poem, the minutes become hours, the seconds can last a lifetime. And in Lawrence’s prints, a flash second must stand in for an entire life, the narrative of each of the victims told in that small expanse of time. And so the choice to show all the different locations of the destruction is a further indication of their universality. We must read into these images with our own stories, our own moments at the dinner table, or at play as a child. Race is meaningless here; it is the shared experiences of humanity that cause the most heartbreak.

Conclusion

Jacob Lawrence confronted war just as he confronted peace. By focusing mainly on the day-to-day existence of his fellow soldiers, he was able to create documents of their struggle, bridging the gap between white and black. While a series of images depicting the injustices and horrors faced by black servicemen during the war years could
easily have been executed, Lawrence chose a more hopeful depiction, of an integrated Armed Service that was only a few years away.

In the fall of 1945, nearing the end of his time in the Coast Guard, Lawrence reflected on a year of creation that was directly influenced by his time on the first racially integrated vessel in the United States Armed Forces. In an interview published in *Magazine of Art*, Lawrence spoke plainly about his work during World War II, “It’s the little things that are big.”90 For an artist dedicated to bringing history to light, the war was an opportunity to experience change firsthand, and he seized on the chance to create hopeful, yet complex images that told the stories not of the heroes of the war, but of the everyday servicemen who helped keep the machinery of war going. Lawrence’s work channels that history, seizing the contemporary narrative of the African American community through war, a powerful shift from his previous images of daily life in Harlem and the struggles of black leaders of the past. Painting African American soldiers as they studied for exams, labored on ships, and performed the same duties as white soldiers illuminated the fact that they could accomplish these tasks just as well as their white counterparts. These were the “small things” that he spoke of, the daily experiences of black men engaged in war as infantrymen, cooks, laborers, mechanics, and stevedores. Given the opportunity as a public servant and public relations member to help shape the possibilities of an African American identity not just during war, but also for the eventual peace, the artist’s visual and narrative style became meditations on hope rather than on the darker side of the African American experiences during the war. If the black

90 McCausland, 251.
community was offered popular heroes like Joe Louis and Dorie Miller, Lawrence gave them quiet, everyday ones. In the same interview with Elizabeth McCausland from 1944, the artist claimed, “the cooks may not like my art, but they appreciate that I am painting cooks.”\footnote{Ibid.} It would not be until after the war ended that Lawrence would tackle the larger issues at hand, in his War series. This delicate balance, of history and allegory, of hope and struggle, form the foundation of Lawrence work in these years.
Chapter 2
John Huston:
A Slaughter of Uncertain Value

On the morning of December 7th, 1941, John Huston was at William Wyler’s home in Bel Air, playing tennis. The son of actor Walter Huston, after years of writing and polishing scripts for Warner Brothers, had recently begun to claim the director’s chair with The Maltese Falcon, (1941) In This Our Life, (1942) and Across the Pacific (1942). He was now in between projects, but the events of that morning would profoundly change the course of his career. By the following spring, Huston would report to Washington D.C. as part of the Signal Corps, tasked with directing multiple documentaries for the United States government. He would spend three years in that capacity, travelling around the globe to capture footage in Alaska, Italy, and a small Army hospital in Long Island, New York. World War II, by his own admission, profoundly affected the filmmaker. “My whole time in the Army was,” he later claimed, “the most compelling experience of my life.” This chapter will focus on Huston’s work from that time—his extraordinary Army Signal Corps documentaries: Report from the Aleutians (1943), The Battle of San Pietro (1945), and Let There Be Light (1946), as well as his adaptation of Stephen Crane’s The Red Badge of Courage (1951). Crane’s original novel used the setting of the war to write about his own time thirty years later, and I include Huston’s adaptation not only because he uses WWII veterans as his soldiers, but also because it elaborates on the experiences of his wartime documentaries.

Rather than produce bombastic propaganda for the soldiers and civilians on the home front, Huston produced three documentaries that, under closer inspection, revealed the troubling aspects of battle. Huston first shows that the reality of war can be mundane in the Aleutian Islands. The victory in San Pietro, I argue, is less about the final destruction and overtaking of the town than the long slog up the hillside through the Liri Valley and the unexpected withdrawal from the town by the enemy. In Let There Be Light, Huston addresses the psychoanalytic treatment of post-traumatic stress, capturing the process of psychiatric recuperation, and the reality of the psychological damages of war. The images were so stark that the film was suppressed.

I argue that in his wartime documentaries and The Red Badge of Courage, Huston depicts the realities of conflict—its horrific, dehumanizing nature, its immense and ultimately questionable cost, and its absurd tedium and crippling psychological effects even in phases when there was a lull in combat activities—in more visceral detail than any other filmmaker of his time. As these films depict “the foot soldier’s experience of battle and awareness of his expendability, in a slaughter of uncertain value,”94 they raise questions about how this filmmaker tried to walk a fine line between doing his patriotic duty of informing the American public about the war, and remaining true to his larger conviction of questioning the value of war altogether. This chapter explores these questions, focusing on the central ambiguity that defines Huston’s representation of the war: his status as an anti-war patriot.

Huston experienced both external and internal conflicts in realizing his visions,

94 Erik Barnouw, Documentary: a History of the Non-fiction Film (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 162
which would make it increasingly difficult for him to get his films in front of an audience. Although there is bravery depicted and the soldier lauded there is a decided lack of heraldry and bombast in each film; Huston’s matter-of-fact style questions the usual vision of soldiers as heroes and battlefield victories as uplifting. Also at issue in these films is the construction of reality, both by the director and the government officials who altered or banned his work. The Signal Corps’ desire to provide the American public with a truthful depiction of the war while simultaneously censoring or editing some of Huston’s most shocking images, complicates any notion of documentary as an unmediated relay of reality. Add to this, Huston’s own claim that San Pietro was a document of battle when it was, in fact, a recreation of one, and one is presented with a clear challenge to the notion of documentary filmmaking as a straightforward endeavor.

Huston began his work as war finally reached the United States after the attack on Pearl Harbor and Hollywood was drafted into the war effort. Thousands of individuals in the filmmaking community went into military service, including established directors of some of Hollywood’s most popular feature films of the previous decade, including John Ford, Frank Capra, William Wyler, and George Stevens. Films were seen not just as morale boosters, but as educational tools for soldiers and a valid new source for training in various industrial fields. As Roger Manvell has argued, all sides were quick to understand the power of film and its possible uses during the war:

Military and civilian strategists on both sides of the conflict realized, from the beginning, the important role which motion pictures could play in modern warfare. Films could train soldiers and industrial workers; they
could build opinion, strengthen attitudes, and stimulate emotions; they could be invaluable in reconnaissance and later in combat.\footnote{Roger Manvell, \textit{Films and the Second World War} (South Brunswick: A.S. Barnes, 1974), 161.}

With the advent of war, the United States government was eager to tap into the power of fiction and non-fiction films to boost morale and help explain the war to the masses. Moving image coverage became an activity multiple offices and government bodies had a stake in, including The Office of War Information’s Motion Picture Division, along with The Signal Corps, the Treasury, and other divisions such as the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs.\footnote{David A. Cook, \textit{A History of Narrative Film} (New York: Norton, 1981), 394.}

Taking into consideration the “instinctive American aversion to propaganda” which surfaced after World War I, the government changed its approach to propaganda production during WWII. In contrast to the overt propaganda efforts of the Creel Committee, which helped consolidate industry and media efforts to sell the Great War to the American public through government control and operation, the OWI, for example, presented their products as information and education, rather than propaganda, and was a voluntary enterprise.\footnote{Richard Polenberg, \textit{War and Society: the United States, 1941-1945} (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1972), 52.} Hollywood filmmakers obliged, with producers and directors adjusting the rhetoric of each film to fit the targeted audience. The resulting differences, combined with the personal style of the directors involved, made for a vast variety of approaches to documentary and propaganda production.

Hollywood directors in many cases turned their war projects into personal statements, bringing to their work their own ideological views; there was no standard,
unified approach. Frank Capra, for example, at the helm of the* Why We Fight Series*,
geared his films toward the uneducated soldier in order to explain complex political affairs in a vivid, engaging rhetoric that strongly reflected the ideological nature of populism. John Ford, too, presented a populist vision that was infused with elegy, in his film on the attack on Pearl Harbor,* December 7th* (1943), which reminded the viewers that they were “all Americans.” William Wyler, by contrast, took a more self-effacing approach to covering the war. The patriotic thrust of his work, particularly in* The Memphis Belle: A Story of a Flying Fortress* (1944), was constituted by the realist detail with which it documented the war activities.

Saverio Giovacchini sees Huston’s documentaries as evidence of the 1930s progressives in Hollywood finding their voice in war. Huston’s “democratic realism” is just one way that filmmakers were able to “fight fascism with their real bodies, or, at the very least, through their films.” Putting their bodies on the line to capture footage was, for many of the filmmakers and cameramen, a reality. John Ford memorably captured footage at the Battle of Midway by himself as planes flew overhead. William Wyler received permanent hearing loss during his flights in the Memphis Belle. Huston encountered shelling in the Liri Valley and was horrified by the death he saw on the battlefield. Giovacchini argues that the documentaries of the Hollywood directors became

---

99 Frank Capra produced this series of films to help educate both the soldier abroad and the American public about the historical circumstances leading up to the war as well as the current conflicts.
101 Basinger, 117.
not just personal statements, but self-portraits of them as soldiers.\textsuperscript{103} While this seems to me to be a step too far, as they did not directly insert themselves into the documentaries, it is true that these men did relish the opportunity to experience war and consider themselves an active part of the war effort as they lent their personal touch to each film.

Huston entered the army with a concise, but already significant body of work behind him. Warner Brothers, where John Huston wrote and directed, was the most forward-thinking, Anti-Nazi of the studios, having produced various films from \textit{Confessions of a Nazi Spy} (1939) to \textit{Sergeant York} (1941), co-written by Huston.\textsuperscript{104} He was the screenwriter for a string of hits in the late 1930s and early 1940s, including \textit{Jezebel} (1938), \textit{Juarez} (1939), \textit{High Sierra} (1941), and \textit{Sergeant York} (1941). Warner Brothers, where Huston would remain through the 1940s, gradually evolved from its Depression era focus on gritty realist films about “losers in a lost world” to telling stories that more broadly dramatized how individuals fought against the adverse forces of society through an “assertion of individualism.”\textsuperscript{105} The studio practiced this approach successfully in the late 30s and 40s with some of the biopics that Huston helped author, like \textit{Juarez} and \textit{Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet}. After their success, Huston was given the opportunity to pick a project to direct. Convincing Warner Brothers to allow him to direct his first feature, Huston picked \textit{The Maltese Falcon} (1941), and produced an early example of the dark, brooding detective picture that would become part of the formula.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[103] Ibid.
\item[105] Nick Roddick, \textit{A New Deal in Entertainment: Warner Brothers in the 1930s} (London: British Film Institute, 1983), 65.
\end{footnotes}
that French critics after the war would term Film Noir—a formula not without a certain despair exemplified by Huston’s directorial debut, as well as his screenplay for the gritty, quasi-existentialist gangster film *High Sierra* (1941).106

Much of the early scholarship on John Huston limits itself to discussing the director’s biography. A prominent view was that Huston not only overshadowed the films he made, but that the stories behind the films are oftentimes better than the films themselves.107 Another reason for what has been characterized as the “dearth of sophisticated commentary”108 on Huston is that he is seen as a director without consistent themes. Nearly all of Huston’s films are adaptations of books or plays, though the diversity of the source material and the wide-ranging products they have produced has made it difficult for critics to form a coherent body of scholarship. *The Man Who Would Be King* (1975), about two British soldiers who convince a tribe of people that they are deities, *The Misfits* (1961), about a group of outcast cowboys whose lives are upended by the arrival of a divorcée in Reno, *Annie* (1982), based on the Broadway musical about an orphan in search of a family, or *The Bible* (1966), which dramatizes the book of *Genesis*. Even the director’s adventure films, such as *The African Queen* (1952), *Moby Dick* (1956), or *The Kremlin Letter* (1970), use diverse locations and protagonists, allowing for Huston to explore the genre and a broad range of interests, such as the destructive power

106 Ibid.
107 Consider Axel Madsen’s assessment: “Huston has had a wonderful time making a lot of wonderful movies and the circumstances of their making are often more memorable than the movies themselves.” Madsen, 3. “The memory is a large part of the problem.” Writes Stephen Cooper in “The Critical Coming of Age of Huston” about how the entertaining life of the man dominated critical discourse of his films. Yet, Huston’s life, “is no more simple or unified than the films that are associated with it,” he writes, hopeful for a new wave of critical interpretations of the wide range of Huston’s output.
of obsession, the individual’s struggle against society, or the corruptibility of human nature.\textsuperscript{109}

Critics’ and scholars’ relative neglect of Huston can also, in part, be attributed to a negative assessment of him, within the framework of auteurism that swept the American academy and film criticism in the late 60s and 70s. As Richard Jameson argues in a 1980 profile for \textit{Film Comment}, “Auteurist commentators have been particularly unhelpful in wantonly refusing to engage precisely what goes on in Huston’s films.”\textsuperscript{110} Jameson further laments that Huston’s “sour” outlook on life dissuaded critics from engaging in the material, if only because it “makes them feel bad.”\textsuperscript{111} After Huston’s death, Andrew Sarris, who had originally rejected Huston’s successes as “casting coups rather than to directorial acumen”\textsuperscript{112} would adjust his assessment, writing that he underestimated “how deep in his guts he could feel the universal experience of pointlessness and failure.”\textsuperscript{113} While the films Huston directed during WWII do not focus on failure, they do point toward a pointlessness, an underlying anti-war sentiment that complicates the vision of the “good war.”

\textsuperscript{109} See Hans Jurgen Wulff, “Landscapes of Fantasy, Gardens of Deceit: The Adventure Film Between Colonialism and Tourism” in Cynthia Lucia, Grundmann, Roy, and Simon, Art, ed., \textit{American Film Volume II: 1929 to 1945} (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2012), 202-225. In Wulff’s analysis of the adventure film, he argues that the genre is one of the most “expansive and heterogeneous” allowing interplay with various other genres as well.


\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.


Critical attitudes toward Huston seemed to be changing, when, in the 1990s several books were published on the director’s work. Lesley Brill’s 1997 collection of essays argued that there were signs that Huston’s academic stock would move “from penny stocks to the more expensive lists.” More recent scholarship argues that the male characters in Huston’s films take on the impossible, oftentimes revealing the darkest sides of humanity in their quests. One scholar describes his films, as depicting “singular men shaking their fists at destiny.” Martin Rubin argues in “Heroic, Antihero, Aheroic: John Huston and the Problematic Protagonist” that perhaps one of the only ways to connect Huston’s films is by their treatment of the protagonist as an ambivalent hero, one in which the audience acknowledges a more complex construction of the hero and their hesitation to root for their success, a significant innovation in the depiction of the heroic in Hollywood films.

Lesley Brill argues that the characters in Huston’s films are often searching for identity. That quest takes shape by exploring the bonds of love and friendship, and the connections to a community. In Huston’s films, a sense of “selfhood, happiness, and love are intimately connected to the idea of home,” Brill argues, “a congenial place among other people and in the world.” Brill’s assessment is compelling here, as it steers clear of a more traditional approach to Huston as a figure who obsesses about macho codes in his work. Viewing Huston in such a way becomes “wholly inadequate to the emphasis on love, self-knowledge, and community that underlies virtually all the thirty-seven feature

115 Madsen, 12.
116 Madsen, 137.
117 Brill, 7.
films that Huston directed." Brill’s critical emphasis is also relevant to a discussion of Huston’s wartime work, as the soldiers, from their isolation in *Aleutians* to their need for the recuperative power of love and self-awareness in *Let There Be Light*, are in constant search for community and a sense of self.

I thus regard masculinity as an area that enables the director, particularly in his documentaries, to examine the opposite poles of patriotism and pacifism in their contiguity, their tension building over the course of Huston’s coverage of the war. If it is true that, as Gaylyn Studlar argues, Huston’s films are ripe for an inquiry into American film’s often troubled—even anxious—construction of masculinity, how do questions of masculinity, along with other issues, influence Huston’s depictions of larger socio-cultural, psychological, and moral-philosophical questions related to war, such as the tedium and horror of combat, the deep conflict between fear and responsibility, and the challenge of reintegrating into civilian life? As I shall argue in this chapter, Huston’s treatment of these questions is unique in that it marks the site of a larger conflict in his work (and within himself): the tension between patriotism and pacifism.

Huston spent the war years exploring this tension without a previously published work, such as a source novel, to guide him. Huston’s depiction of common soldiers shows courage under fire as well as a desire to create or return to an image of home, but in the very suffering that this courage entails we catch glimpses of Huston’s unique anti-war message. Increasingly skeptical about the war, yet remaining dedicated to the men who fought in the battles, his documentaries offer a glimpse into an altogether different

---

118 Brill, 119.
119 Studlar, 10
depiction of national identity and masculinity. The mixture in Huston’s work of skepticism and the urge to effect transformation and change will eventually coalesce with his adaptation of *The Red Badge of Courage*.

The tragic irony of Huston’s documentary work is that the closer he came to capturing certain realities of war, the more the distance between him and his audiences grew. While *Report from the Aleutians* was not tampered with, its release was delayed. *San Pietro* was already re-edited and likewise delayed until the very end of the war. *Let There Be Light* was shelved altogether, viewed only by a handful of critics and Army personnel in 1946 before being taken out of circulation by the government. Starting from the observation that Huston’s films apparently became increasingly threatening to the military and to officials, my main points of interest here are the truths that Huston helped to construct with his films that made the commissioners so uncomfortable and that apparently were at such intolerable variance with the war effort. Arguably, these truths revolved around more than the graphic details of combat. In their visceral depiction of traumatized masculinity, they implied highly sensitive questions about national identity—questions that would prove too harsh for the military to share with a broader public. Made during the McCarthy era, *The Red Badge of Courage* continues Huston’s thematic concerns, even though it is not set during World War II, with the bulk of the film depicting not battle scenes, but discussions of courage and fear, of the long wait between the fighting. Audience reaction to this Stephen Crane adaptation prompted the studio to perform a radical cut of his film. As it turned out, it was rejected by the public even in an abbreviated form.
At the height of the war, filmmakers sent over 200,000 feet of film to the Signal Corps offices in Astoria each week.\textsuperscript{120} Huston would later write that the studio in New York was filled with a “colorful” yet dedicated group of filmmakers, ready to do their patriotic duty.\textsuperscript{121} There, as well as in Washington D.C. and overseas, “The factual needs of Washington and the dramatic experience of Hollywood met and mingled and found reason for mutual respect.”\textsuperscript{122} Years later, Huston sought to explain his patriotism by linking it to the soldiers rather than the fighting, explaining that \textit{San Pietro}, “was anything but done out of hatred of the war on my part. It was done out of profound admiration for the courage of the men who were involved in this ghastly thing.”\textsuperscript{123} In the films discussed here, we see the evolution of this admiration in the face of growing skepticism fueled by despair and death.

\textbf{Rolling Home: Report from the Aleutians}

Huston arrived in Washington D.C. in April 1942, and in typical “hurry up and wait” Army fashion, spent “weeks and weeks doing nothing.”\textsuperscript{124} Later that summer, he received his first assignment.\textsuperscript{125} Sent to the farthest reach of the continental United States, “Nearer to the enemy than any other American territory anyplace in the world,” he wrote later,\textsuperscript{126} Huston was tasked with documenting the forces in the Pacific front, located on a

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{122} MacCann, 152.
\bibitem{124} Huston, 88.
\bibitem{125} Madsen, 61.
\bibitem{126} Huston, 3.
\end{thebibliography}
stretch of islands at the tip of Alaska. Arriving for a planned few weeks in Alaska, the
director spent months there, flying along on over a dozen bombing missions. Report
from the Aleutians is the result, a film that combined Huston’s vision of the war as
oftentimes soberingly mundane, verging on the absurd in its uneventfulness. This latent
sense of absurdity was certainly eclipsed by the morale boosting rhetoric of patriotism
aiming to assure the audience of the value of the combat in the North Pacific, but it is
implicit and, at certain moments, comes close to being made explicit.

The only one of Huston’s war documentaries to not incur major edits imposed by
the government, Aleutians is, on the surface, the least critical of the processes of war,
 focusing on the bombing runs across the Aleutian Islands and the men on the ground who
made them possible. At the same time, the film already reveals Huston’s hesitancy to
share in a simplistically celebratory version of the war. The men in this unforgiving
landscape may be celebrated for the casual attitude with which they face the day-to-day
tedium of war and for their abilities to create a temporary home for the armed forces, but
the film’s emphasis is on the minimal action. The film thereby makes palpable the
tension created by the mere possibility of conflict. The very fact, however, that Huston
felt compelled to combine the months of footage he captured of bombing missions into
what seems to the viewer as one final battle, indicate Huston’s unease with the material
and his mandate to shape it into a morale boosting dispatch from the front. If, by the end
of the film, the absurdities of modern warfare at least inadvertently shine through the
film’s patriotic rhetoric, this is only partially because of Huston’s alert and, ultimately,

127 Madsen, 61.
skeptical lens. The very nature of American military investment in this area already presented a challenge for military propaganda.

In the summer of 1942 American and Canadian forces set their sights on the Aleutians, a 1,000-mile stretch of islands in the North Pacific. The only combat to take place on the North American continent at what was not yet the state of Alaska, these islands were the first line of defense against the Japanese. With Allied forces dedicating their equipment and manpower mostly to the European and North African operations, any effort to establish a sufficient defense on the islands and the Pacific, however, “appeared alarmingly doubtful.” With their forces spread thin, the Americans made their way to defend the islands after code breakers discovered the Japanese intentions of occupying both Midway and the Aleutians. On June 2nd, 1942, the Japanese seized the island of Attu on the farthestmost tip of the islands and began an occupation that lasted 15 months. In the end, over 35,000 American and Canadian soldiers led a final assault on Kiska Island, where Japanese forces were thought to be making their last stand. They found an island evacuated of Japanese forces, giving an anticlimactic end to the campaign in which 500 American soldiers had died.

The film presents this land as a frontier landscape, wild and untamed. Certainly there is truth to such a depiction. As one historian noted, “Rain or snow falls more than 200 days a year, dense fog and thick mists are all too common, and severe gale-force

---

129 Ibid.
130 Ibid.
132 Harris, 223.
winds, known locally as “williways,” occur frequently.”133 The remote location, cold, unforgiving, and nearly uninhabitable, form the “most brutal thousand miles in the Pacific Ocean.”134 Dashiell Hammett, also stationed on the islands during his time in the army, wrote a summary of the battles on Kiska, Adak, and beyond in The Battle of the Aleutians, confirming Huston’s impressions of the string of islands as inhospitable, but also of uncharted territories where the men were forced to look to themselves to define community as well as how to proceed protecting the islands:

We had come to the Aleutians—to a chain of islands where modern armies had never fought before. Modern armies had never fought before on any field that was like the Aleutians. We could borrow no knowledge from the past. We would have to learn as we went along, how to live and fight and win in this new land, the least known part of our America.135

Huston first establishes the Aleutian Islands as a distant land, with the first images we see of a model globe, spinning away from the continental United States toward the outskirts of the Pacific and the stretch of islands that dot the Bering Sea. This area, “remote as the moon and hardly more fertile” is not important for the greenery or lack thereof. “Adak is next to worthless in terms of human existence,” Huston narrates, “Its sole value strategically, Adak is one of the most important locations in the world.” These islands, covered in a “gray blind hell” of storms and fog in an icy sea, give cover to “our enemy”

133 Perras, ix.
134 Garfield, vii.
the Japanese, yet toughens our men, who are “turned into” soldiers by the months of difficult conditions.

Huston’s film, then, presents the islands as a frontier, but one very much unlike the frontier of the American myth, for it cannot be transformed into fecund land. If the occupation is legitimized by the need for wartime defense, for Huston to depict this project through traditional codes of representation, which at least implicitly participate in the rhetoric of the frontier and manifest destiny, would prove tricky. Films of this kind concern themselves with depictions of war; but this film is concerned primarily with images of men preparing for war. On the one hand, the film presents its location as a frontier, participating in historical and mythological discourses of transformation, cultivation, and settlement. On the other hand, the film cannot help but note the barrenness and irredeemability of the place. To reinforce the frontier aspect, the film, like other war documentaries, depicts the combat unit as a microcosm of the American landscape, turning itself into a “near impressionistic collage of man and machines.”

Thus, while the film is a documentary, its rhetorical devices are borrowed from fiction film and, more specifically, from Hollywood. It builds on the usual Hollywood tropes of what it means to be a soldier, by engaging a cast of characters from around the country who all find their peace by imagining different versions of home. This approach aims to demonstrate unity not just within the group of soldiers, but for the expectations of the civilians back home. Huston uses his skill as a screenwriter to create a narrative to tie his images together and create a story. “By seeing that real soldiers at the front actually did

136 Madsen, 62.
the things their fictional counterparts did in war films, Jeanine Basinger argues, “audiences had their movie-story experiences verified.”137

Huston’s images of soldiers in an untamed American frontier begin to reveal an unspoken skepticism about the war. While creating his first documentary for the government, his patriotic discourse does not always fully succeed in masking the banality of this particular battle. After Aleutians, Huston built on this theme, celebrating the soldier and the objectives of the war while presenting an underlying vision of pain and pointlessness.

None of this is to say that the sacrifices of the men depicted in Aleutians were not real, nor Huston’s own experiences of danger. Huston watched one soldier fall dead at his feet while filming one B-24 mission and was asked to man the gun rather than a camera.138 Later, his cameraman Rey Scott would become a patient at one of the hospitals Huston would consider as a subject in Let There Be Light. Terrified after being thrust into an initially drab and boring experience, Huston nevertheless focuses mostly on the mundane, the livelier combat footage added to the last part of the film in some ways mirroring Huston’s own experience of the situation presented in the first half hour.

The resulting film was also a victim of timing, as the final battle for the islands happened after Huston finished filming. So little military “action” happens throughout the course of the film that Huston includes a title card at the beginning to assure audiences that the area is still strategically important, even if the reality was that the islands were more symbolically important than strategically so. “Since the filming of this picture,” it

137 Basinger, 114.
138 Huston, 90.
reads, “American troops have taken and are holding additional island objectives in their
march out along the bridge toward Asia.” On the one hand, Huston’s film emphasizes
that the events it presents are significant for the course of the war. Its main way of doing
so, however, is by presenting its events as but preamble. Letting us know that the story
continues once the film ends is an approach Huston also takes in both *San Pietro* and *Let
There Be Light*. In the former, Huston takes pains to point out that there will be
“thousands more” battles after the one he documents in the Liri Valley of Italy. The latter
film by definition focuses on war’s damaging aftermath by showing the lingering effects
of war that can be seen in the psychiatric hospital of Mason General. The three films

If Huston’s first war documentary already evinces a (however submerged) tension
between patriotism and pacifism, it is Huston’s felt sense of duty to establish the
importance of the mission as such that displays his patriotic side. He establishes the
importance of the mission by linking the front to the home front, first by a lengthy
examination of the landscape and the soldiers who defend it, but second by asking the
audience to appreciate their own safety at home. In a simple gesture, Huston
acknowledges the soldiers’ selflessness, while soliciting the audiences’ appreciation and
understanding of the home front. In the opening minutes of the film, over images of men
who died in earlier battles at Dutch Harbor, Huston narrates, “If you wish to see their
monument, you Americans at home, look around you.” Here, Huston comments on a
decided lack of heraldry, but also transforms the home front into a vast living memorial, a safe United States as a remembrance of those who have died.

After setting about to describe Adak and Kiska as remote, unforgiving landscapes, Huston then begins to actually incorporate it into the American body. And yet this constitutes another attempt at mobilizing the frontier myth, and this narrative once again fails at projecting completion. These men attempt to tame a land that can only remain barren. What they do, then, is attempt to survive by bringing a piece of themselves to the landscape. The film depicts “Home” as already being with these men, forming the songs they sing and the letters they receive, identifying it in their varied religions and accents, as well as their shared purpose. Huston links democracy with the body politic, and soldiering with defending that body. The film also describes the islands in corporeal terms. The bay is a “hungry mouth,” the Army Service Forces are “the blood stream” aiding “every organ and muscle.” The food and fuel shipped in to sustain life at the outskirts of the country are needed for “men and motors.”

This “body,” of course, extends to the corpus of the American soldier. Huston introduces the soldiers from around the country as a mixture of accents and occupations, where, “down eastern accents mix with Texas drawls and Midwestern twangs and Brooklynese.” While soldiers find their former lives transformed into the life of a soldier, as Huston narrates their identities, “Bookkeepers, grocery clerks, college men, and dirt farmers. That is, of course, ex-dirt farmers, ex-bookkeepers, ex college men. Soldiers now, as if all their lives they’ve been nothing but.” This is very similar to Roger Manvell’s assessment of the filmmakers who, similar to the “barbers, lawyers, and
insurance men” needed to adjust to life as a soldier, and “although none of them had been
preparing for war, they were ready for it when it came.”\textsuperscript{140} This will be repeated in
Huston’s \textit{Red Badge of Courage}, when Southern and Northern soldiers meet, comparing
landscapes and accents as they realize they are more connected than at first glance. The
point is to identify soldiers as frontiersmen. In \textit{Report from the Aleutians}, a soldier is seen
carrying around a guitar case as a prized possession in the wintry landscape of the
Alaskan islands; these men are depicted as modern cowboys, even sitting down to sing
songs around a campfire as a way to relax, to bring the group together, and to honor the
living and the dead. (Figure 2.1)

Stripped of one identity and given another to incorporate them into the group, the
men in \textit{Aleutians} are depicted as one force. Identifiable by their shared dreams of home
and their toughened status as soldiers, the soldiers are defined by what they sacrifice and
the comforts they’ve left behind. Furthermore, soldiers and officers are depicted as
sacrificing without complaining. “You never hear any belly aching,” Huston intones after
listing some of the various comforts of home left behind. “No girls, pretty or otherwise.
Nothing to drink, not even a Coke. Candy bars and cigarettes are rationed.” After months
on Adak, soldiers “think in terms of the present,” while “that faraway place from which
he came begins to seem like a dream to him.”

Soldiers and officers are set on equal footing by a disintegration of “customary
military formality,” as salutes and separation of the mess are limited only to “rare
occasions.” All without any apparent loss of discipline, Huston remarks, the group of

\textsuperscript{140} Manvell, 161.
soldiers are able to act as one unit without all the pomp and circumstance, even disdaining the “$12 word: logistics.” Huston depicts strong bonds of the military unit, brought together at the edge of the continent to be as close to the enemy as possible. This danger brings them even closer, as Huston notes, “The extraordinary fact is that morale gets stronger the closer you get to the enemy,” adding that on the island, “morale is first rate.”

In the final minutes of the film, Huston shows an effective bombing mission. He speaks of the soldiers as actors upon a stage, having prepared for the realities of war—perhaps just as Huston himself has prepared to capture images of the war. “The stage is set. Rehearsals are over. The actors are ready. The curtain is going up. But this is no make believe drama. They will be playing for keeps.” After reels of anticipation, the job these soldiers have traveled to Alaska to perform is upon them. Huston creates his finale by stitching together footage of all his earlier bombing raids and lets the images of the bombing mission speak for itself. The shaky camera movement and the bombs exploding on the ground below only hint at the objectives and dangers of the mission.

Later in the film, as the men return to home base, the soldiers all sing the British Morale song, “Sixpence” with the repeating chorus, “When we go rolling home.” It becomes a song of unity and relief as the bombers make their way back from a successful bombing raid unscathed. Here, the landscape, cruel and unforgiving, seen through a missing chunk of the ship after a near fatal hit, is transformed into a reminder of how beautiful the world can be. (Figure 2.2) Certainly, “home” means more to the men than a safe return to the base on Adak. As Huston narrates, “It doesn’t matter if there’s a big
piece of daylight pouring through your wing—there’s just something about the scenery…” Home is that elusive place, where they hope to eventually return after the war. Even a glimpse of a tranquil landscape is a reminder of what awaits them.

As for the ensuing battles, a final title card ensures the audience that, “Since the filming of this picture, American troops have taken and are holding additional island objectives in their march out along the bridge toward Asia.”\(^{141}\) By August 1943, the Allied forces had landed on and occupied Kiska, after the Japanese evacuated the last of their forces, ceding the area to the Americans and Canadians. Only a few weeks after Huston returned home to Hollywood, a large force of American troops landed at Kiska, only to find it abandoned by the Japanese.\(^ {142}\) According to one historian, the final assault was a “ridiculous anti-climax.”\(^{143}\) This is similar to the end of \textit{San Pietro}, during which the American forces find an empty hillside town, left by the German forces as they fled to higher ground on their way to Rome. With an acknowledgement of the individual while stressing the value of the team, as well as an open-ended finale that both celebrated the work of the soldiers, and looked toward the future conflicts, the director produced his most straightforward document of the war.

Fearing that the length of the final film was too long and overdrawn, Lowell Mellett, held the film’s distribution up while he hoped to trim the length down to two manageable reels. Instead, it spent months languishing in the offices of the Signal Corps

\(^{141}\) According to Perras, in the first six months of 1943, 3,000,000 pounds of bombs dropped on the island. 900,000 were dropped in July alone. In May of 1943 the final battle for the island begins, as the United States forces destroy the Japanese garrison at the end of the chain of islands. By August 15\(^{th}\), when the forces return to Kiska to finish the job, 30,000 men strong, they find that the Japanese had left weeks earlier, ceding victory to the Allied Forces. Perras, ix.

\(^{142}\) Hammett, \textit{The Battle of the Aleutians}.

\(^{143}\) Perras, x.
and the OWI after completion. It was released in August 1943, only when the campaign was over. After the final battles of Kiska had been fought and written about in the newspapers, the film version failed to interest theatergoers. Appearing on a double bill of the “B” film Bombers Moon, it was mostly ignored by the public.

**Reconstructed Realities: San Pietro**

In a May 26, 1945 review of John Huston’s film San Pietro written for The Nation, James Agee praises the film as a great advance in World War II documentaries, able to combine the multi-faceted horrors and challenges of war with a personal vision. By depicting each yard of earth gained or lost as a struggle, the necessary organization of the military, the impact on the small Italian village, and the toll on the men, Agee argues, the director is able to capture “human existence and hope.” Huston is able to reach a measure of maturity as an artist, as a soldier, and as a man. Whatever Huston’s film may be, it is also a fabrication—a series of reenactments intended to tell the truth of a battle, or a series of lies that tell a factual tale. The fidelity of San Pietro, unchallenged by the critics and audiences who managed to see it upon release or by the scholars and directors who used it to help define the battle film, turned out to be complicated.

The idea for a film like San Pietro was Frank Capra’s. In October of 1943, while Capra and Huston were in London, he pitched the idea of filming something that would represent the Allied Forces retaking Italy from the Germans, about “Civilian Italy under

---

144 Harris, 224.
145 Garfield, 182.
its new conquerors.”147 The film depicts a group of these foot soldiers painstakingly moving toward an objective, inch by inch, confronted by danger at each turn. San Pietro relies on Huston’s narration to create this cohesive narrative, following the battle chronologically with periodic pauses to assess the damage. At key points, the film lingers on the dirt-smeared, yet smiling faces of the foot soldiers. Just as in Aleutians, these men are depicted as suffused by the hope to return home. However, unlike Aleutians, San Pietro produces ample evidence of the Italian campaign’s devastating toll on the soldier’s ranks. Huston, having carefully framed the narrative by explaining both the terrain of the land and the objective at hand, then shows the men moving closer and closer to their final destination, the rubble that is San Pietro.

Talking about the film years later, Huston claimed that his shadowing of the 143rd Texas infantry followed them, “all the way through the fighting.”148 Witnessing these soldiers fight was different from anything he had ever seen. “The courage of these men was fantastic,” he claimed, “I’ve never seen anything to match it.”149 Huston did witness fighting, as he had in the Aleutians, arriving in the Liri Valley in early December to film a battle to overtake a small town—one that could stand in for similar battles taking place in the Italian campaign.

Novelist Eric Ambler, who journeyed with Huston and crew to Italy in late 1943, recalled their initial hopes to still make a documentary about the front lines “without

---

148 Madsen, 64.
149 Ibid.
“reconstruction”, “re-enactment” or other essential falsification.” They quickly learned, however, “nothing but falsification would be of any use, or even possible.” By December, Huston, Ambler, and cameraman Jules Buck made their way to San Pietro after being assured by command in Naples that the town was safe. The opening battle for the Liri Valley took place from December 8-17. Huston arrived on the final day. When they arrived, however, they encountered mortar fire and overhead bombing. After making their way to the town’s center and hiding with a group of Italians in a cave, they made their way out of the town quickly. On the way out of Liri Valley, they again encountered death and destruction, Ambler describing a man whose head was “Sheared away the whole of one side of his head.” At the end of this first attempt, Ambler left, finding his time with the brash Hollywood director “not only distasteful, but pointless.” Huston, in his first attempt, was not able to capture images of the original battle, but when he returned in mid-December, he restaged the entire battle, working off a confidential report given to him by the 143rd Infantry. Using the report as a blueprint for his script, Huston shot over the course of six weeks a recreated version of the battle.

150 Ambler considered himself the “token Britisher” after it had been decided by the OWI that psychological warfare films made in occupied territories were to be Anglo-American productions. See Ambler, 198.
151 Ibid.
152 Harris, 267.
153 Special thanks to Jeremy Murray Brown for sharing his unpublished conference paper, Some Notes on San Pietro, which meticulously describes the edits and recreations in the film.
154 Harris, 268.
155 Ambler, 202.
156 Harris, 270.
157 Harris, 280.
He used two battalions, recently relieved from the same field of battle, to recreate the assault on San Pietro.\footnote{Harris, 281.}

Gary Edgerton points out, some of the footage was shot as late as January 22\textsuperscript{nd}, a full month after the battle ended,\footnote{Murray Brown, 5.} yet he argues for the “poetic truth” of the film; the importance of San Pietro, hailed as one of the finest documentaries of the war, lay in the power of its images to convince the audience of their reality. Jeanine Basinger, writing on the film in her seminal text, \textit{The World War II Combat Film}, claims that the film “shows the hard fighting that took place in Italy.”\footnote{Gary Edgerton, “Revisiting the Recordings of Wars Past: Remembering the Documentary Trilogy of John Huston,” in Gaylyn Studlar, Desser, David, and Huston, John, \textit{Reflections in a Male Eye: John Huston and the American Experience} (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 33-61.} Arguing that the realities of war were grim rather than joyous, the very realities that were staged could give the public an accurate view of what was going on overseas:

The horror of war is real—dead bodies, devastated towns, shocked civilians and war-weary soldiers. In watching it, viewers could see that war was not a glorious thing, and they could also form an accurate sense of what it looked like. Narrative movies were put to the test by the reality of \textit{Battle of San Pietro}.\footnote{Basinger, 115.}

However, what exactly is the status of the reality of San Pietro? As the end title card of the film reads, hinting at the much larger undertaking of Huston’s crew, “All scenes in this picture were photographed within range of enemy small arms or artillery fire. For purposes of continuity a few of these scenes were shot before and after the battle of San

\footnote{Ibid. 162}
Pietro.’

Huston never admitted to the full extent of the recreations, and so any claims for his reasons are only conjecture, though we do know that he was involved in the recreations of the landings in North Africa after the American footage shot by Anatole Litvak was lost. He called that footage, eventually transformed into *Tunisian Victory*, “the worst kind of fabrication.”

During the editing process, Frank Capra suggested a new opening that could help situate the audience. General Mark Clark, commander of the 5th Army, worked off a Huston-penned introduction, framing the film as a tribute to the men lost in the battle. (Figure 2.3) “By its very nature,” he reads, “this success worked bitter hardships upon each individual soldier, calling for the full measure of his courage and devotion.” Clark speaks about the nature of war as struggle and hardship, giving the film a feeling of authenticity and creating a framework for the film that prepares the audience not only for the grisly depictions ahead, but also preparing them to accept it as fact. Similar to *Report from the Aleutians*, Huston’s narrative goes further than what we see on screen, while transforming his own fabrication of war into an openly skeptical vision of the conflict.

Like *Report from the Aleutians*, *San Pietro* begins by situating the audience in the space of battle, describing the area and its surroundings. Over images of the Liri Valley in Central Italy, Walter Huston narrates, “Liri Valley lies in the Italian midlands, some sixty miles northwest of Naples. Some forty miles east of Rome. A wide, flat corridor

---

163 *San Pietro*
164 Huston, 102.
166 *San Pietro*
enclosed within four walls of mountains.” A gateway for “700 years,” San Pietro is surrounded by “ancient vines” and green fields in “normal times.” As he did in *Aleutians*, Huston makes clear here that this space is strategically important, a stepping-stone in the Italian campaign. However, in contrast to the clear description of the Aleutian Islands as uninhabitable now and into the future, the Liri Valley is described as a land gone sour through the ravages of combat, its population destroyed by warfare. Like Adak and Kiska, the Liri Valley must be protected by the men at the bottom of the ranks, whose sacrifice the film depicts in direct relation to the liberation of the population and the freeing of the land. “It was up to the foot soldier,” Huston intones over images of the common infantryman, readying himself to take back the town.

That the soldiers, critics, and public understood *The Battle of San Pietro* as a presentation of facts, a portrayal of men facing death and reacting to live ammunition, is fascinating not only because the majority of footage was staged, but because Huston was so successful at his task. Their belief in the fidelity of the footage is understandable. As Mark Harris notes, reviewers of the film were given a publicity packet that touted Huston’s involvement with the battle, even claiming that he went into no-man’s-land. As James Agree wrote, it seemed clear that Huston both “understood what he was recording, and how to record it.” Agee, perhaps not aware of Huston’s staging of much of the film, attributes the power of the film to the director’s ability to synthesize his experiences. For Agee, Huston is capable, like a general on the field of battle, of quickly

---

167 This and all subsequent quotes come from Huston’s voiceover in the film.
168 Harris, 383.
169 Agee, 163.
assessing the situation and knowing how to proceed. Filmmakers in the immediate
postwar period knew how to film the realities of war because of Huston’s skill at
restaging battle.

Housed at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, the unused reels of
footage John Huston shot of and alongside the campaign in central Italy provides insight
into not only what may have been included in a longer version of San Pietro, but also into
Huston’s creative process. The footage, at least indirectly, illustrates the conflict
emerging within himself between patriotic support for and deep skepticism of the war.
Following regulations regarding shot lists and descriptions, the cameraman added notes,
such as “Portions of the above are re-enacted,” “Reenacted in part,” “All scenes are re-
enacted.”170 In the unused footage we see multiple takes, Huston off screen, likely asking
for a particular action to be repeated, such as the readying of bayonets, or soldiers
climbing hillsides while pretending an unseen enemy lurked above. There are even reels
dedicated to a USO show’s standup routine, Huston capturing close-ups of soldiers
laughing and smiling. Huston also captured more footage of women and children in the
town now turned to rubble.171

John Ford, famously attempting to capture the Battle at Midway, had been rocked
so hard by a nearby explosion that the film had jumped out of its sprockets, an effect that
Ford left in the final film. Huston reproduces this as best he can, reportedly knocking the

---

170 Murray Brown, 5.
171 These descriptions are from my own viewing at the National Archives in College Park, MD, which
houses the original unedited footage from Huston’s time in Italy.
camera to simulate the quakes of mortar fire hitting nearby. The results are that in *San Pietro*, many of the shots are well composed while instances of battle recreate a sense of instability. Huston walks the line of artistic compositions, (and, hence, elaborately set up) close-ups and wide shots of men making their way through the olive trees or ducking down in foxholes. (Figure 2.4) Whenever Huston narrates about incoming German fire, the image shakes. Much of the footage shot, however, “would have required a cameraman to be standing upright in a firefight, when men are diving into foxholes and scrambling for their lives in ditches, or to be ahead of advancing troops.” As one Signal Corps cameraman later complained, “I admired him for what he did, but I resented the fact that I would get critiques from New York, ‘Major Huston’s crew was able to do this, why can’t yours?’”

The film continues to describe the movements of the battalion, Huston adopting a matter of fact narration that is extremely somber, markedly undermining the kind of patriotic tone one might expect in a wartime documentary. Over images of the smiling faces of soldiers, Huston’s voice-over recounts earlier battles at Salerno and elsewhere and suspects near-certain future losses. “The task ahead promised no less bloodshed, yet was undertaken in good spirit and high confidence.” It is in this statement that we find the core of Huston’s ambivalence towards warfare—his patriotism and optimism mixed in with skepticism and foreboding, perhaps even resignation. At this stage of the war, Huston’s ambivalence towards war was so advanced that he had the conviction to

---

173 Murray Brown, 6.
174 Schickel, *Shooting War.*
literally fabricate the film according to this sentiment, restaging the battle scenes not as victorious rampages but as highly costly sacrifices. Nobody forced him to do so—it was his own decision to depict heroism not in the form of bravado but as tragic sacrifice.

Little of this mentality is overtly evident in Huston’s earlier Report from the Aleutians. We fleetingly glimpse it in the faces of the common soldiers, some of whom will not survive future battles. Looking at these faces, the audience may feel a debt of gratitude, vaguely sensing the heartbreaking futility in the loss of life.

As for San Pietro, it was the combination of camera work, editing, and narrative that created an effective synthesis of documented reality and personal ideology, a synergy so strong it overwhelmed everyone who saw it, not least the military itself. Eric Barnouw writes that the military hierarchy was “horrified” by Huston’s first version and “cuts were ordered.” Jeremy Murray Brown, examining footage and transcripts, claims that, with the addition of Clark’s introduction, the longer version of the film corresponds to roughly seven minutes cut. Nevertheless, the effect of the film was “so vivid, its depiction of war so bitter, that it was classified as secret by the War Department.”

According to Huston’s explanation, the film caused the brass to recoil with horror at what they clearly perceived as an anti-war film. Huston’s version of events is worth quoting at length here:

The reaction was very strongly against the picture being shown, and I was called in to General Surrold’s office. There were two or three others there,

---

175 Barnouw, 163.
176 Murray Brown, 8.
177 Madsen, 152.
high-ranking officers, and this conversation ensued: one of them said, “Well, this could be interpreted as an anti-war film.” I couldn’t repress myself, and I said, “Gentlemen, if I ever make anything other than an anti-war film, I hope you take me out and shoot me, because I’ll very well deserve it.” This didn’t go down well, either. The next thing was that the picture was not to be shown. Then General Marshall saw the picture and said, “Every soldier who knows he is going into combat must see this picture, and the country should see it in order that they know what a soldier is going through in battle.”

Reminding us that the army called for the suppression of the film not despite of but because it admired the film as a quality reflection of actuality, Huston deftly makes the censorship he suffered stand as evidence for his successful “coup” of having translated his own radical anti-war vision into a patriotic war documentary commissioned by the government.

After his time in Alaska and Italy, Huston was determined to realistically portray the effects of war on the men, and his self-righteous remarks about anti-war filmmaking reveals his ambivalence toward the entire enterprise of documenting the war. Though it was shown to soldiers, it was not released to the general audience until shortly before the war’s end. The reason for the ban, wrote Eric Ambler, was simple, “it was not, they said, the business of the War Department to make anti-war movies.”

---

178 Pratley, 55.
179 Ambler, 211.
Even in its shortened form released near the end of the war, the effect was still palpable on both the critics and the soldiers who viewed it. The film was deemed close enough to reality that it was also used as a training tool for current and future soldiers, with one soldier commenting later on that the film was used as an academic lesson, even in the final months of the war as he was “itching to be dropped behind the German lines.” In this sense, the film’s reception and utilization by the army powerfully supports the argument espoused by critics that documentary, by virtue of its creative restaging of reality, has indeed the capacity for achieving a greater truth.

In the final minutes of San Pietro, Huston hopes to replace death with life. “It was a costly battle,” he narrates over images of the soldiers preparing fresh crosses and burying their friends in the Italian soil. As the camera pans from one soldier to the next, the audience is told that some of the men who did survive the battle will soon join their fellow soldiers in the ranks of the dead. Again, music plays an integral part, as this discussion of death gives way to a wordless montage of the life that remains. As anticlimactic as the final journey into the town may be, with the German army having abandoned their position, the emergence of the Italian townspeople is still a welcome sight to the foot soldiers. As the Mormon Tabernacle Choir sings over images of children and the elderly emerging from their hiding places, we are reminded that no matter how anticlimactic the battle may have ended, its impact was immeasurable for the surviving members of the town.

---

James Agee, describing Huston’s work with his characteristic poetic flourishes, writes of the images in *San Pietro* as “radiant with illimitable suggestions of meaning and mystery.” The power of death, the stark images of soldiers as they lay in freshly dug graves, paired with the smiling faces of the children who are left to tell the story of how their town was destroyed and then liberated give the audience more than just a film, they offer up possibilities of interpretation, the “first great passage of war poetry that has got on the screen.” The facts of *San Pietro*, recreated or not, give way to the mysteries of war and to the power of film. “Things to look at,” Agee writes, images on which the audience can ascribe their own interpretation.\(^{181}\)

That the American soldiers find the city of San Pietro empty of the enemy other than the destruction and death left behind reminds the audience that their victory is muted. It is, as Richard Dyer McCann writes, a “peculiarly inconclusive” end to the grisly film.\(^{182}\) War finds no flourish of patriotism, just the acknowledgment that there are many more towns like San Pietro, “thousands more,” as Huston narrates over the faces of men who will die in those unnamed battles. Later, Huston will use this same idea in the final moments of *The Red Badge of Courage*, as the soldiers, whose dedication to the battle seemed the most important action of their lives, are told that a more significant battle was fought elsewhere.

---

\(^{181}\) Agee, 164.

Because it was so grim, “later pictures were not permitted to be so outspoken nor so “anti-war”.183 Agee, naming the film the best of 1945 lamented, “The war is over now; I doubt that we shall see many more American factual films of anywhere near the quality of San Pietro.”184 Huston found in his next and final project a film that, although envisioned as a document to help aid veterans and their quest for employment, was deemed even more disturbing for public consumption.

**Beneath the Surface: Let There Be Light**

If John Huston’s wartime films, albeit partially staged and dramatized, spoke to an unflinching and raw truth of the horrors of battle, in *Let There Be Light*, we see the lingering scars of war. Upon his return to the United States, Huston was also affected by what he saw and the dangers he faced. In his autobiography, he writes about living in a dead man’s world, even walking around with a .45 pistol in his pocket, looking for a fight. “We don’t really know what goes on beneath the surface,” he wrote, alluding to his own hidden scars, and hinting at the fascination he would have with psychology in the years that followed.185 Unable to even name the depression and anger he felt upon his return, “his interest in the treatment of mentally ill soldiers was personal.”186 One of his cameramen from *Aleutians*, Rey Scott, had been hospitalized after shooting his gun off at the Astoria studios.187 Perhaps Huston reflected on his own desires to shoot off his .45 as

---

183 Ibid.
184 Agee, 186.
185 Huston, 120.
186 Harris, 385.
187 Ibid.
well as he began his final project for the government. This time, he would need no embellishment to portray reality.

If the staged realities of San Pietro were nearly enough to have that film banned, the physical conditions of battle and the images of dead soldiers proved, perhaps, less problematic than images of the psychological trauma inflicted on American soldiers during the war. Let There Be Light, produced in order to show employers that these men could hold a job after the war, that their conditions would not be a risk, did not reach its intended audience. It tackled the unspeakable problem of trauma, attempting to destigmatize it for the benefit of the veterans. But the images proved too powerful. Whereas Huston needed to restage battle in San Pietro, he needed no such fabrication in Let There Be Light. As the close-up images of veterans’ faces attest, the horror of war needs no image other than the anxious look of fear, or a tear shed over a loved one lost. The power of the film, even upon viewing today, is palpable. That is was not released bespeaks a social inadequacy—indeed, an injustice—whose scope and implications exceed discussion in this academic context. Suffice it to say that it is a shame that more veterans were not able to benefit and the public at large unable to view it. For, as Richard Dyer McCann writes, “its spirit of compassion is such as to leave almost any audience chastened and changed.”¹⁸⁸ The film’s depiction of veterans and their “torn memories” is difficult to watch, their unseen wounds made real through the tics and spasms of the men.

Let There Be Light remains the lasting document of the vulnerability and ultimate resilience of the human body, mind, and spirit after the trauma of the war. In the opening

¹⁸⁸ Jacobs, 221.
moments of the film, the narration tells us about the psychological traumas that afflicted the returning soldiers, “Others show no outward sign, but they too are wounded.” The film captures the veterans as they break down and hope for rehabilitation. Filmed over the course of two months at Mason General Hospital in Long Island, New York, the film follows the rehabilitation of a group of returning soldiers as they go through group therapy sessions, counseling, hypnosis, and other treatments. The men pulled from the battlefield not because of the physical wounds, but because their minds could not handle the horrors of the war, are nevertheless, physically affected. “These are the casualties of the spirit,” Walter Huston narrates in the film, “the troubled in mind.” Some have a facial tic while others develop strong stutters. Some have lost the ability to walk, while others have lost the memory of their own names. They break down in tears, or startle at the slightest sound, awaiting an incoming bomb that never comes. Here the ambiguity of purpose that began to crystallize in *San Pietro* and that the army already perceived as a conflict of interest, becomes the film’s defining and uncontainable feature. *Let There Be Light* was quickly shelved by the military in 1946.

If the landscapes of Adak in *Aleutians* and the Liri Valley in *San Pietro* function to situate Huston’s subjects in foreign places, *Let There Be Light* offers no such introduction. The film opens with a shot of a troop transport ship coming into harbor. A generic sky hangs over a generic sea, the ship notable only because it is returning from “over there.” The ship is given meaning through the opening titles, “About 20% of all the battle casualties in the American Army during World War II were of a neuropsychiatric nature.” As the soldiers begin to disembark, the narration by Walter Huston explains that,
though they may seem fine, these men harbor an inner pain from their time in battle. 

(Figure 2.5)

*Let There Be Light* is about illumination, about the return to sanity after the horror of war. After introducing the hospital and the situation of the soldiers, the film moves into a long sequence of therapy sessions. Walter Huston, assuming the duties of narrator in his son’s final wartime documentary, explains that for these men and their doctors, physical wounds are not necessarily different from the ones of the mind. “Modern psychiatry makes no sharp division between the mind,” he informs the viewer, as the film aims to answer the question of causality between the shock of war and the debilitating conditions we see onscreen. Because “physical ills often have psychic causes, just as emotional ills might have a physical basis,” the psychiatrists in the film will probe the mind of the soldiers just as “a surgeon probes for a bullet.”

The younger Huston was, by all accounts, terribly moved by the strength of these men to face down the challenges of their own minds. It was, as he claimed on multiple occasions, a religious experience. “I felt there what some people feel in church. These men came in from the boats in batches of seventy-five and 100, mute, shaking, with amnesia, blind, with paralysis, as a result of warfare. Many were healed.189 “This was the most joyous, hopeful thing I ever had a hand in,” he would say years later. “We traced the slow rising of the spirit. A wounded psyche is hard to watch, almost too personal. Making that film was like having a religious experience.”190

---

189 Pratley, 54.  
190 Madsen, 69.
In *Let There Be Light*, as the title card claims, “No scenes were staged. The cameras merely recorded what took place in an Army Hospital.” In the opening moments of the film we see one of the army doctors telling the patients not to worry about the cameras, as they are only there to capture their recovery. Smooth dolly shots reveal that the men were certainly aware they were being filmed, and in the initial therapy scenes, filming was done automatically, after the cameras were set up to record the interviews, as the cramped office spaces were not large enough for a crew.\(^{191}\) Huston, at long last, did not need to recreate images, only capture what was in front of him. But in this case, the realities proved too shocking.

Although Huston focuses on the seemingly miraculous aspects of the therapy, the recovery rate among the men Huston filmed was the highest recorded at the hospital.\(^{192}\) Huston allowed for the drama of the soldier to play out right in front of the camera, the miraculous recoveries only possible after lengthy therapy sessions, during which the men slowly began to unburden their minds. In the group therapy sessions, the men are told something surprisingly different—that the bonds of love and family, and knowledge of oneself, are the keys to their future. Moreover, as Richard Barsam argues, these scenes show that “happiness results from human relationships and from love, both of which give safety and security.”\(^{193}\) After first learning to confront their past and the traumas that affected them so deeply as to strike down their ability to walk or talk, the men are told that they cannot fully heal by themselves. It is the community, the family, and the very

---

\(^{191}\) Harris, 398.
\(^{192}\) Huston, 399.
homes that many of them longed for while overseas that could help them shift back into
civilian life. “It made me begin to realize,” Huston later claimed, “that the primary
ingredient in psychological health is love: the ability to give love and to receive it.”194 In
line with the purpose of the film, to assuage the fears of employers that these men could
hold down a job and were not permanently damaged beyond repair, the doctors
nevertheless stress the importance of the long road ahead. The theme of family, and the
quest to return home continues in Huston’s final film as it did in both Report from the
Aleutians and San Pietro. As Lesley Brill notes, “the road home leads through the
foundations of the self.” 195 Here, Huston’s preoccupation with the home, the individual,
and the group, comes full circle. Each of these thematic elements combines in the climax
of Let There Be Light.

In the final moments, while gathered together for one last formation, they are told,
“On your shoulders falls much of the responsibility of the postwar world.” This was a
heavy burden to explore just as the film ends, but again a long road ahead was implied.
As with other films of the era, depicting the rehabilitation of “crippled men and their
sympathetic but anxious women,” there would be no promise of finality, but rather an
ongoing effort to come to terms with the loss of their body.196 The same can be said for
the psychological issues of the war. Though the men of Mason General go through some
miraculous transitions, the road ahead is paved with an “ongoing drama”.

194 Huston, 125.
195 Brill, 117.
196 Doherty, 201.
Yet *Let There Be Light* ends on a hopeful note. On a baseball diamond, the former patients meet to play a friendly game. The images of their afflictions are intercut with moments of revelatory change. The man who cannot walk can do so again, running freely around the bases. (Figure 2.6) The man once stricken silent with stutters talks freely. Through hypnosis, group therapy, and other means, these soldiers are put on the path to recuperation and recovery. In an interesting reversal of what was edited out of *San Pietro*, in *Let There Be Light*, Huston “revived and reversed” the technique that the Army censored; over the images of the men, Huston narrates not about their eventual deaths, but of their promising new lives.¹⁹⁷

As tender as these moments are, the film was summarily shelved, though not before reaching a few critics. On the restriction, James Agee, ever Huston’s ally, wrote, “I don’t know what is necessary to reverse this disgraceful decision, but if dynamite is required, then dynamite is indicated.”¹⁹⁸ A planned screening at the Museum of Modern Art in New York was also cancelled after military police confiscated the print from MoMA.¹⁹⁹

The reasons behind the decision to shelve the film are unclear. The Army claimed that the film was held back to protect the privacy of the soldiers onscreen, owing to a snafu with paperwork and signed releases. The film was released in 1981 only after an appeal by Vice President Walter Mondale. Huston assesses the decision quite differently, claiming that the results of the film both shocked and embarrassed the authorities, and

¹⁹⁷ Harris, 400.
¹⁹⁸ Agee, 200.
¹⁹⁹ Huston, 127.
that the signed releases for the film “mysteriously disappeared.” The true reason, he argued, was about saving face and sustaining the “hero myth” of the war. Writing in his autobiography years later,

I think it boils down to the fact that they wanted to maintain the “warrior” myth, which said that our American soldiers went to war and came back all the stronger for the experience, standing tall and proud for having served their country well. Only a few weaklings fell by the wayside. Everyone was a hero, and had medals and ribbons to prove it. They might die, or they might be wounded, but their spirit remained unbroken.

Huston’s succinct criticism of the veil of secrecy is consistent with his films. For they not only celebrate the foot soldiers, but honor the seriousness of their wounds, both physical and psychological. “The authorities considered it to be more shocking, embarrassing perhaps, to them, for a man to suffer emotional distress than to lose a leg, or part of his body,” Huston explained later. “Hardly masculine, I suppose they would say.” It is fascinating that the director would couch his criticism of the decision in terms of masculinity, as Huston himself is known for creating films that are very much about issues of masculinity. On the banning, and reasons given, Agee was even more critical, writing, “the glaring obvious reason has not been mentioned: that any sane human being

---

200 Huston, 126.
201 Ibid.
202 Pratley, 56.
who saw the film would join the armed services, if at all, with a straight face and a painfully maturing mind.”  

Huston’s wartime work solidified the foundation of his thematic material for much of the rest of his career. *Let There Be Light*, particularly because of its explicit dealings with psychology, “amounts to nothing less than the discovery of the sources of neurotic complication in Huston’s worldview, and in the compositional style that will dominate his work for the next decade.” Huston’s *Freud*, for example, continues his explorations of the psychological that first fascinated him at Mason General. But the director would have his opportunity to rediscover the battlefield only a few years later with his adaptation of *The Red Badge of Courage*.

**Adapting War: The Red Badge of Courage**

In 1951 MGM released John Huston’s adaptation of Stephen Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*. After months of delays, multiple edits, and a seeming abandonment by its director, the film wound up not as a Hollywood achievement in realism, but as a double bill on an Esther Williams musical. As the United States turned its attention away from WWII and toward the Cold War, exemplified by a conflict in Korea, it seems that the public was not ready for a realistic drama about war, even if it was adapted from a classic work of American literature. While we may never see the original intentions of Huston onscreen, we do have a good idea of what they were. Through the lens of Crane’s text, and Huston’s own experience with soldiers during the war, the director hoped to

---

203 Agee, 236.
204 Jameson, 50.
create a psychological examination of the thin line between bravery and cowardice, which, in light of contemporary historical events, could stand in for any number of conflicts. That he used as actors two of the most famous individuals to emerge as public figures after WWII, Audie Murphy and Bill Mauldin, suggests a link to the “Good War” as well as a warning for the next one happening on the Korean peninsula. What I am most interested in is not necessarily the fidelity to the source material—as the film is relatively true to the text, even in its abbreviated form—but in the intentions of the film.

*The Red Badge of Courage*, Stephen Crane’s novella loosely based on the battle of Chancellorsville, describes the internal struggle of “The Youth,” Henry Fleming, as he faces the threat of battle, flees from the front line, regains his courage, and returns to the line. Crane did not write the book from his own experiences, but the novel was praised upon publication in 1895 for its realism, becoming an example of a new form of American literature at the turn of the century. Crane fills his story with descriptions of the land, his naturalistic prose matched by the psychological examination of Fleming’s battle.

Huston wanted to retain this in his adaptation. Much of the film takes place inside Henry Fleming’s head. Huston’s hope that Audie Murphy could pull of the internal struggles of the soldier is evidenced onscreen in dramatic moments where the camera lingers in close-up on Murphy’s furrowed brow. Once the film went through a series of negative test screenings, voiceover narration was added to help clarify the narrative and steer the audience. Provided by actor James Whitmore, “the mid-American voice we
needed,” the voice over left little to the imagination while giving the events a sensation of neutrality to history.

If, as Jim Cullen has claimed, the Civil War is a “usable past” rich with sustained meanings long after the final battles have been fought, the 1951 film version of the Red Badge of Courage reaches back just a few years to a conflict fresh in the minds of the audience. The film is not merely a cookie cutter replacement of one war onto another. Not simply an adaptation of Crane’s work, the film is in many ways an adaptation of war itself, Huston’s continued statement about the futility of belligerency and the pitfalls of established norms of masculinity. In many ways, The Red Badge of Courage is an amalgamation of all three of his wartime documentaries. In the adaptation of Crane’s novel, Huston is able to combine the elements of boredom and waiting from Aleutians, the psychological damage of Let There Be Light, and the issues of strategy and possible futility from San Pietro. Crane’s text allows for the ambiguities of war—of courage and cowardice, of heroism and sacrifice—to play out without any final authoritative statement on war.

Filmed on location at Huston’s own property in California, the film had a troubled production history both before and after the cameras rolled. Louis B. Mayer, in his last months before stepping down at MGM, repeatedly voiced his reluctance about the project, and after the film was cut together, preview screenings proved problematic at best. Though it was widely reported that Huston abandoned the film to go shoot The

---

African Queen (1951), the director obliged several re-edits before finally heading to the Congo with James Agee to begin filming. “Sad to state,” wrote producer Dore Schary, as the audience did not want to see a hero of the war made to be a coward, “the preview was disastrous.” Even after “bowing to economic interests and conservative cultural tastes” to cut the film down and add voiceover narration to better explain the struggles of the Youth, the film was not a success. As Guerric DeBona argues, while the original intent of the film, “exemplifies the liberal, communal attitudes of the thirties and forties, while also offering a strong indictment of war and an ironic treatment of martial heroism,” the edited version adapts more to the culture of the 1950s, giving way to the audience’s desires rather than the director’s. And so the film remains an imperfect document of Huston’s original intentions.

Evidenced in his early screenplays and films, Huston’s filmography is grounded in adaptations of literature, and the fictional American identities he chooses to depict illuminate his own thoughts on American history and the range of images America constructed of itself. Culling the passionate, obsessed, cunning, yet thoughtful characters from the pages of Dashiell Hammett, Herman Melville, Stephen Crane and others, Huston’s films challenge the vision of the noble American protagonist. He probes the problematic side of these American dreams of success—whether they manifest themselves in the greed of Bogart in The Treasure of the Sierra Madre (1948), or Gregory Peck’s portrayal of Captain Ahab’s unending quest for vengeance in Moby Dick

207 Schary, 225.
During his time in the Armed Services, Huston needed to, in a sense, adapt reality, conforming the events around him to render the experience of war palatable, as it were, for the audience.

In *Red Badge*, however, Huston does not focus on the obsessed; he focuses on the foot soldier, as he did in his WWII documentaries. He focuses on a man who struggles to be heroic, choosing self-preservation over the cause, which soon after fills him with regret, shame, and guilt. Furthermore, *The Red Badge of Courage*, for Huston, is not about the Civil War, or picking a side, it is about the devastating effects of war itself. Again we see an ambiguous message, one that can be read as a celebration of heroism and one of somber realization of the destructiveness and overwhelming inhumanity of war.

In an interview from the set of his adaptation of *The Bible* (1966) many years after *Red Badge* premiered, Huston related his process for finding suitable material as one of maturation, perhaps a bit of nostalgia, but mostly the lasting power of the word. Speaking about his future adaptation of Kipling’s *The Man Who Would Be King* (1975), Huston talks about the story as “something that lives in me from long ago.” For Huston, the importance of a lasting impression of a story is what sparks an idea and binds him to the material. One could argue that, only a few years removed from his time making documentaries for the government, the questions of war brought up in *The Red Badge of Courage* certainly “lived in him” from years ago.

Sometimes Huston’s adaptations were quite literal. His screenplay and resulting film of *The Maltese Falcon*, for example, relied heavily on the original Hammett source
material. It needed only to be “trimmed” as he would later say. Other times, like with his adaptation of the “unfilmable” Malcolm Lowry novel *Under the Volcano*, entire passages would be distilled into a moment, or drawn out in melancholy silences, such as the lengthy opening sequence where the Consul, alone and drunk, walks among the celebrants of the Day of the Dead, himself a figurative dead man. As Albert Finney remarked during the filming of *Under the Volcano* (1984), a line of Lowry’s lingered in his mind, “*Somewhere a butterfly was flying out to sea: lost.*” The line never appears in the finished film, but it is everywhere onscreen. There are countless moments like this in a Huston film; direct adaptations from the page, and other moments that are complex interpretations of symbols condensed into a simple moment of reflection. As James Agee, who co-wrote Huston’s *The African Queen*, said about Huston’s films, “On paper all you can do is say something happened, and if you say it well enough the reader believes you. In pictures, if you do it right, *the thing happens, right there on the screen.*” Huston’s original version of *The Red Badge of Courage* attempted to accomplish this, distilling the text into a film that relies on the pained faces of the actors rather than a crystal-clear narrative.

After the war, Huston returned to Hollywood, but the battlefields of army camps of Italy and Alaska, and the hospital he documented for *Let There Be Light* filtered into many of his films. But his adaptation of Crane’s *Red Badge of Courage* is about as direct a link to WWII as Huston would get after the war years, informed by the experiences of the director and his stars. Along with Huston, Audie Murphy the most decorated soldier of WWII (Figure 2.7), and Bill Mauldin, the Pulitzer-prize winning
cartoonist for *Stars and Stripes* (Figure 2.8), were three of the most recognizable public faces to emerge from the war. Their experiences documenting and fighting during World War II helped to create a back-story for their characters, adding depth to a film that was purposefully vague on its own heraldry of war. As will be discussed in the following chapter, Mauldin’s own reactions to war aligned neatly with Huston’s, as his cartoons kept declarations of heroism to a minimum and the absurdity of war at the fore of his work.

In Huston’s own recollection, he wanted to make the film to, “show a little bit about what he learned during the war.” His documentaries showed that psychological trauma could occur in the long pauses between the fighting, and that these absurdities of war, in the midst of moments when soldiers could face life and death, could be just as damaging as the battle. Huston showed that there may not be heroes after all, and that the psychological trauma does not remain on the battlefield. These are precisely some of the lessons to be culled from Crane’s novel. What Huston wanted to do was transform *The Red Badge of Courage* into a more universal statement about combat, understanding that the internal struggle of the soldiers on the front lines was the most lasting attribute of the text. In his film there is little mention of North and South—at least not the reasons for the fighting. Instead “Yanks” and “Rebs” yell at each other across a moonlit river, deciding not to exchange bullets because it would be a waste of time. And in the final minutes of the film, soldiers talk about where they are from without mention of the reasons behind their conflict. With much of the historical reasons absent from the film, Huston is free to focus on the soldiers’ experience, reflected in the psychological pressures of combat,
namely the quest to be courageous in the face of battle and possible death. (Figure 2.9)

Other times, World War II inserted itself directly into the production, even in darkly comic ways. During a large-scale scene of men crossing the Sacramento River, for example, one of the cameramen shouted at the assembled cast and crew, “Everybody ready for D Day?”

Perhaps the most important link to The Red Badge of Courage is Let There Be Light. In a way, the film already alludes to Huston’s future adaptation. As images of soldiers disembarking from a troop transport flash across the screen in the first minutes of the film, Walter Huston narrates their hidden troubles, “Some wear the badges of their pain. The crutches. The bandages. The splints. Others show no outward sign, but they too are wounded.” Here, in succinct terms, Huston lays the groundwork for a humbling hour of soldiers’ stories. Some tick uncontrollably, others speak of nightmares, or the way a photograph from a girl back home made them break down. Overtaken by their fears and their own struggles with cowardice or victory, these men are shattered by their experiences. What Huston attempted to do with his film was to let these experiences shine through, even if it took place generations before.

What they lacked was the usual structure for a narrative Hollywood film. When the producer complained that the novel relied extensively on the interior thoughts of the youth, Huston explained that his star Audie Murphy would be able to show the audience with his eyes, bringing the depth of the character to life without the need for dialogue or explanation. Showing the same confidence in the power of images that had turned his war

209 Lillian Ross, Picture (New York: Rinehart, 1952), 95.
documentaries into nearly unassimilable statements against the war, Huston believed the audience would implicitly feel Murphy’s pain, knowing that he had struggled with the duties of a soldier in reality, making his struggles in celluloid believable.

Huston had good reason to trust this instinct. As he said, Murphy was a “good little killer.” The most decorated soldier of WWII, Murphy had over the course of his Army career been responsible for nearly 250 confirmed enemy kills, an astounding number. His soldiering earned him nearly every commendation and badge available. The toll of that kind of experience is hard to quantify, yet Huston had already attempted to show the damage inflicted on soldiers with his film *Let There Be Light*. Murphy’s own experience would add another level to this story, transplanted to the Civil War. The effect on the film is clear. What does it mean to put a soldier who has killed so many people, who seemingly never shied from his duties as a soldier, in a film about being afraid to run from battle, doing so, and then regaining his sense of bravery?

Audie Murphy’s anger and frustration came through not just in celluloid, but during the production as well. One morning Murphy pulled Huston aside to let him know during a drive he had assaulted two teenagers for taunting him. Murphy also had altercations with the crew at various points during the production, screaming at the assistant director and stuntmen. Perhaps the most telling of Murphy’s altercations came during a scene later in the film. In Mauldin’s obituary for Audie Murphy, he recounts the troubles they had filming one of the final moments of the film, when Fleming admits to the Loud Soldier that he was afraid during the battle. The hero of the war seemed incapable or unwilling to admit cowardice, even in this fictional scene. As Bill Mauldin
wrote in his obituary for Murphy twenty years later, “Audie Murphy was never able to stop proving himself.”210 At the heart of Murphy’s troubles was an inability to admit cowardice—his own history overshadowing the struggle of “The Youth.” Unfortunately, the audiences agreed, and the film was eventually a box office disappointment.

Another parallel can be found in Murphy’s actions and Huston’s, Let There Be Light. At one point in Huston’s documentary, a soldier is asked about how he might have changed after the war. The soldier responds that he’s “jumpy” and cannot have fun anymore. He claims that he “just got tired of living.” These very same sentiments are expressed by Audie Murphy in Lillian Ross’s account of the making of Red Badge of Courage. “Seems as though nothing can get me excited any more—you know, enthused?” Murphy told Huston one day before filming began. “Before the war,” he continued, “I’d get excited and enthused about a lot of things, but not anymore.” Huston responded, “I feel the same way, kid.”211 As they prepared the shoot, producer Gottfried Reinhardt worried about the ability to capture the struggles of their protagonist onscreen. “The book is about the thoughts of the Youth. Will we show what really goes on inside the boy?” he asked Huston. “Audie Murphy will show it, Gottfried,” Huston said.212 And while it would be foolish to retroactively claim that Murphy suffered from PTSD as the soldiers in Huston’s Let There Be Light did, it is clear that he was troubled by the experience.

211 Ross, 32.
212 Ross, 59.
In the final pages of *To Hell and Back*, Murphy’s autobiography, he writes about clutching a gun as the celebrations for V-E Day happen outside, so he can “admire the cold, blue glint of its steel,” echoing Huston’s own experience with his weapon after returning from war. “It is more beautiful than a flower; more faithful than most friends,” Murphy continues, writing “There is VE-Day without, but no peace within.” That he was able to channel his trauma into his performance, brings a haunting layer of reality to his role as the youth, even if the film focuses on issues of cowardice.

Bill Mauldin, famous cartoonist from the Army’s *Stars and Stripes*, and winner of the Pulitzer Prize, added another sense of reality to the production. One need only look at the cartoon that won him his Pulitzer prize in 1945, discussed in a later chapter, to understand what Mauldin’s presence brings to the film as the Loud Soldier, “Fresh, spirited American troops, flushed with victory, are bringing in thousands of hungry, ragged, battle-weary prisoners . . .” (news item). The endless preparation and then the endless fighting, waiting, arguing over wet socks and worrying about the next battle creates a soldier who is just as worn as the enemy. Here we can see where *The Red Badge of Courage* begins and ends, with the eternal game of waiting, with the victory of battle revealed to only be a minor part of a much larger war. It’s enough to make a soldier disenchanted, his ruminations on courage and bravery perhaps meaningless in the face of it all. Perhaps not entirely getting the point of Mauldin’s cartoons, producers in MGM’s New York City boardroom originally hoped to add his cartoons to the film’s credit sequence. An “Up Front in the Civil War.” The plan never went through.
Even with the presence of Audie Murphy and Bill Mauldin, paired with the experience of Huston as a wartime filmmaker, the preview audiences for the film rejected the lack of story and the realistic issues facing the soldiers, even with the distance of a few generations. The final version of the film hoped to change this by framing the story with narration pulled directly from Crane’s text. The fear of the film’s so-called lack of story compelled producers to add the device in order to ensure the audience understood they were watching a masterpiece of American literature onscreen. “We must tell them, ‘Here is a masterpiece.’ You’ve got to tell it to them.” Reinhardt told Huston after the previews showed the audience’s disinterest.213 The result is misguided at best.

What is notable is that the youth does not display courage by running into battle with a gun, killing hundreds of Rebels, but rather, with the infantry flag. (Figure 2.10) When he arrives at the end of the battle, clutching both the infantry flag and the Confederate flag, it is a moment not of triumph (though it may be interpreted that way by the generals) but of sadness and a crushing realization that the men around him are perishing.

Yet in the end, the film is not about a civil war, or a world war, or even Stephen Crane’s work, but the general pointlessness of war. As the battle of Chancellorsville ends, another one is on the horizon, or the efforts of the youth and his fellow soldiers is looked at as only a small fraction of the larger conflict. In the final moments, as Henry Fleming is praised for his actions in battle, as he is held up as a hero, he can only think of his

---
213 Ross, 179.
cowardice. His red badge is a mix of pride and shame, his heroism on the battlefield both extraordinary and seemingly worthless in the larger picture of war.

To this end, Huston drove the message home with an additional scene not in Crane’s text. Talking with Harold Rosson on set, Huston said that the Youth’s war was more universal, that “his war in the movie must not appear to be a North vs. South war but a war showing the pointlessness of the Youth’s courage in helping to capture, near the end of the picture, a fragment of a wall.”214 As the film closes, Huston again challenges the very notion that this individual action holds any meaning and shows another battalion marching by, claiming that Fleming and his platoon were only a small part of the larger conflict, perhaps even an insignificant one. The real battle, one solider tells them, was in the distance. This is a final mockery of the soldier’s ideas of courage and the battalion’s righteous cause.

Nevertheless, Fleming does finally “rid himself of the red sickness of battle.” The wounds, both psychological and physical, will fade, as he looks toward “green peace.” Conflating Fleming and Audie Murphy’s own life, we know that his “peace” will perhaps not be so green and wonderful. The realities of war will haunt him for the rest of his life.

Across three documentaries, John Huston established a consistent vision of soldiers as human beings rather than heroic figures. Their faces told their stories, and those stories were oftentimes of boredom and futility rather than the thrill of battle. Yet these men found a community in the face of such challenges. These images were so close to reality that they were problematic for leaders in the Signal Corps—so problematic that

214 Ross, 107.
Huston’s films barely reached his audience, and were repeatedly censored. Carrying this reality into *The Red Badge of Courage*, Huston again did not depict war as glorious, and his audience treated the film similarly to the Army brass—it was rejected.
Figure 2.1 A soldier plays the guitar in *Report from the Aleutians*
Figure 2.2 The view from inside a bomber in *Report from the Aleutians*
Figure 2.3 General Mark Clark introduces John Huston’s *San Pietro*
Figure 2.4 Soldiers moving through olive trees in San Pietro
Figure 2.5 Soldiers seen as shadows in *Let There Be Light*
Figure 2.6 A soldier running around the baseball diamond in *Let There Be Light*
Figure 2.7 The trailer for *The Red Badge of Courage* reminds the audience of Audie Murphy’s war service.
Figure 2.8 The trailer for *The Red Badge of Courage* reminds audiences of Bill Mauldin’s work for *Stars and Stripes*
Figure 2.9 “The Youth” confronts his fears in *The Red Badge of Courage*
Figure 2.10 In Henry Fleming’s final assault, tattered flags merge
Chapter 3
Bill Mauldin:
A Fugitive from The Law of Averages

In 1940, at the age of 18, Bill Mauldin enlisted in the United States National Guard. Broke, unable to make much of his dreams of becoming a professional cartoonist, he had nowhere else to turn. Five years later, after his reserve unit was pulled into the war and he made his way with the 45th Infantry Division and Stars and Stripes through Italy, he was a household name. His cartoons, published originally for the “dogfaces” of the infantry, the members of the armed services who would appreciate his humor most, were later syndicated back home. A collection of his work, Up Front, became a bestseller and he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize before the war was over. Insightful, irreverent, challenging, and able to depict the mundane and the frustrating in the simplest of images, his work gave those who struggled through the war a bit of relief as they slogged through the mud, waited for hours upon hours before another long march, or endured the dire consequences of war. His best known characters, Willie and Joe, were two privates who helped millions of actual flesh and blood American soldiers get through their years overseas, and they made Bill Mauldin famous. What he created, however, were more than mere sketches for the funny papers, although they were indeed humorous. His art remains a testament to the sacrifices of the low-ranking citizen soldiers, and the memories of those whose only relief was to laugh despite it all.

Mauldin was able to distill the experiences of the army into palatable, if darkly comic messages. General George S. Patton famously disliked the depiction of his soldiers as dirty and unshaven, and repeatedly called for Mauldin’s job. Mauldin only kicked
back, taking jabs at the officers whenever he could. As Stephen Becker writes in his history of the comics, *Comic Art in America*, Maulin’s cartoons are a “swift, uncompromising refutation of all the hymns of glory ever raised to war.”215 War is not beautiful and glorious. It is tedious and grim. Medals are nice, but a trip back home is the only reward a soldier needs. Here the narrative of the war is shifted from national glory and the threat of European destruction to that lone foxhole. As novelist James Jones, veteran of the Pacific Theatre of war and author of *From Here to Eternity* and *The Thin Red Line*, remarks on Mauldin in his book on the visual and graphic arts of the war, *WWII*, “no book on World War II graphics could go out without a special place in it reserved for him.”216 In part, this is because he was able to show repeatedly that it was not always the dangers of battle that frayed men’s souls, but rather, as Jones puts it, “that long haul of day after day of monotony and discomfort and living in perpetual dirt in the field…”217 The daily existence of the soldier became unlimited fodder for Mauldin, who examined through everyday experiences some of the untold horrors of war—the rain and mud, the waiting and the isolation. At war’s end, Bill Mauldin was the most celebrated of the four men examined in this dissertation. He was also the youngest.

My first goal is to discuss how the wartime work of Mauldin goes beyond the function of entertainment for the troops and presents a set of broader socio-cultural observations about the conflictual relationship between the soldier and the army, the individual and society, the call to embrace military mission and the irreducible realities of

217 Ibid.
that mission (including not only treacherous warfare but the tedium of military bureaucracy). After the war, these tensions in Mauldin’s work translate into a related set of tensions about the veteran and the society in which he is being asked to reintegrate.

Mauldin’s work on the front lines in Europe combines the wit of Thomas Nast’s Tammany cartoons and the horror of Francisco Goya’s *The Disasters of War* etchings—all with a dose of dark humor. He accomplished all of this while working for *Stars and Stripes*, which, although it offered him mostly free reign, put him in direct conflict with his superiors. After situating Mauldin as a voice of incisive critique against the abuses of power by officers, this chapter turns to analyzing Mauldin’s contributions after the war. Shifting from a portrayal of life at the front to tracking the travails of the returning soldier, Mauldin examines the related tensions of the veteran in the postwar period. Exchanging the army bureaucracy for a civilian one, the veteran is confronted with integration and reunion, confronting yet again an image of himself that does not necessarily conform to the harsh reality.

My own argument builds on an observation made by Victor Navasky, who argues that Mauldin’s work was a form of “resocializing” the infantrymen, who, through their identification with Willie and Joe were able to know “they were individuals once again, soiled uniform or no uniform.” Part of this “resocialization” consisted of providing an authentic depiction of the day-to-day life of the common soldier. These cartoons, without resorting to graphic portrayals, provide, as David Halberstam argues, a “worm’s-eye view

---

of how ugly war is, far from all the fine speeches about patriotism.219 This view was not always dignified and pretty. It was dangerous and isolating, filthy and oftentimes demoralizing. “He gave them mud, rain, boredom, filth, cold, and above all fatigue, unimaginable, bone crushing fatigue which, with hunger, constitutes the main fabric of war as the common soldier sees it.”220 These were the images and experiences that the soldier knew all too well, and although he only spent a limited amount of time at the front, Mauldin still “spoke the language of persisting discomfort but the language also of men displaced from home.”221 On this level, then, as one author wrote, Mauldin gave the infantryman “a sympathetic interpreter of themselves.”222 More broadly, however, Mauldin’s act of “resocializing” the common soldier may be regarded as a fight against a larger enemy—the alienating and dehumanizing forces of society itself, exemplified by war, military and civilian bureaucracy, as well as mass media, whose representations of the war, while reaching all the way into foxholes, were not necessarily for common soldiers, not even about them.

Mauldin’s work, exemplified in his Up Front series, displays similar tensions as the other visual artists discussed in previous chapters. Here the central conflict is between the infantry soldier and his officers, and how to relieve that tension through humor and satire. Mauldin contrasts the expectations of the soldier’s appearance and the realities of the mud on his boots, or his unshaven face. He eschews the image of the hero,

---

focusing rather on the isolation of the men and their daily struggle against the elements, their commanders, and a mostly unseen enemy. His work presents an element of realism however, one that bothered some of the officers even while they understood its purpose. To entertain the soldiers, while at the same time acknowledging the goals of the war, was a delicate task. Mauldin’s work displays empathy for the “dogface” as well as an understanding of army bureaucracy, while openly criticizing the hierarchy that holds it in place.

The scholarship on cartoon strips—and on Bill Mauldin in particular—is limited. Although there are valuable sources about the history of political cartoons and comic strips, which will be addressed here, there is no book-length treatment of Bill Mauldin’s work other than a biography by Todd DePastino. DePastino’s book serves as a fine source for historical and biographical background, and his edited collections of both Mauldin’s wartime work and immediate postwar cartoons are invaluable sources for the original cartoons. But this work does not offer a sustained discussion of Mauldin’s cartoons. Consulting DePastino and the literature that exists on American comics, this chapter seeks to enhance our historical understanding of Mauldin’s work by closely analyzing a cross-section of his cartoons.

In Theodore K. Rabb’s book, The Artist and the Warrior: Military History through the Eyes of the Masters, Rabb claims that we can “hardly imagine two human

---

223 Todd DePastino, Bill Mauldin: A Life up Front (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008). There are scant scholarly essays on Mauldin as well.
undertakings less alike than war and the visual arts.”224 He describes warriors as accustomed to brute force, having little reflection, and a harsh disregard for human life. But with Mauldin we have an artist who indeed lived as a soldier, and whose portraits of soldiers directly contradicts the one evoked by Rabb. As a caption for one cartoon neatly summarizes: “Th’hell this ain’t th’most important hole in the’world. I’m in it.” In this image, Willie and Joe are confronted by the media analysis of their situation from afar. In the article, the soldier might remain anonymous. Mauldin reveals the tension between the individual soldier and society here, and one might imagine them looking to Mauldin’s cartoons in their own copy of *Stars and Stripes* for a more honest depiction of the foxhole.

Though significant in the United States in limited examples from as far back as the revolution, with Benjamin Franklin providing one of the more powerful arguments for unity between the colonies with his “Join or Die” woodcut in 1754, editorial cartoons became more prominent in American newspapers of the late 1800s. Using a simplicity of form that should not be mistaken for a lack of power, cartoonists used “immediately graspable terms” to convey their point, bringing to light the concerns of the masses in a new way.225 The isolated image, as Becker notes, was “a thousand times more immediate than the impact of a thousand words,” and could call attention to an issue in a way that the editorial could not.226 Thomas Nast and Joseph Keppler provided some of the earliest examples of the form, transformed from simply artists into journalists, able to tackle

---

226 Becker, 1.
issues of the day with precision and wit.\textsuperscript{227} Publications such as \textit{Puck}, \textit{Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper}, \textit{Judge}, and \textit{Harper's Weekly} provided the forum. Popular comics are usually attributed to the first of the “Yellow Kid” comics published in the mid-1890s, although there are, again, earlier iterations. With this new form, Americans were “prodded to a reaction” by an economy of wit and wisdom.\textsuperscript{228}

These quickly digestible products are most often linked to historical moments that provide a baseline of information; this makes contemporary viewings easier to understand, with future analysis oftentimes reliant on both historical and stylistic interpretations of symbols and style. Mauldin’s art, however, is slightly different. If a political cartoon has the goal of influencing its audience with a glimpse of reason and insight, what Gombrich calls “momentary focus,”\textsuperscript{229} Mauldin’s work aimed for something different, as his audience needed no convincing about their situation. This is a small but significant difference for a few reasons. In terms of his format, the “long slog” of the war transforms each cartoon into just one in a long line of collective absurdity. If each panel provided a moment of recognition and relief, then the sum of their parts became as important for its continual depiction of life for the infantryman.

Confronting the risk of death that each soldier faced was rich fodder for cartoonists during both the Great War and World War II and produced some of the most damning challenges to War. Consider just a few images produced by Mauldin’s

\textsuperscript{227} Johnson, 13.
\textsuperscript{228} Becker, 5.
precursors, the artists who drew during WWI. In James Montgomery Flagg’s “The Cartoonist Makes People See Things!” from 1919, the artist makes a simple gesture, reminding the audience that the cartoonist is able to put in stark and simple images the complex issues of the time. There is no need to know the history of the contemporary moment, as the message is clear—in this case, a military leader is shown the death that lay before him. In another powerful example, “Physically Fit” by Henry Glintencamp, printed in The Masses in the fall of 1917, a skeleton sizes up a naked man, a recent recruit for war. With coffins in the background, there is little need to extrapolate the implications any further. Death lingers, and a soldier is only a future corpse.

Mauldin is most closely linked to the British cartoonist Bruce Bairnsfather, whose “Old Bill” cartoons revealed the absurdities of war a generation earlier. Bairnsfather was an officer, who used his knowledge of the front to produce similarly humorous cartoons for the soldiers, and he became one of the most popular cartoonists on the Western Front.230 His work was seen as both subversive and as morale-building, similarly to Mauldin’s a generation later. In one of his best-known cartoons, two soldiers in a foxhole are surrounded by trails of bullets, trapped. Turning to his fellow soldier, one yells, “Well, if you knows of a better ‘ole, go to it!” Their isolation is as frustrating and isolating as Willie and Joe would experience nearly thirty years later, and they would react in much the same way—with humor and sardonic acceptance. In fact, when confronted by the press about Mauldin, a Life article quoted Patton as saying, “He’s the

Bairnsfather of this war, and I don’t like either of them.”

Mauldin did not mean to topple kings or lead insurrections against corruption; his art was aimed at relieving the soldiers’ tension while providing a realistic depiction of the war.

Reacting to War: Cartoons at Home and Abroad

By the mid-1940s, mainstream newspaper circulation reached 45 million households per day. On the editorial pages and in comic strips, artists took on a new responsibility once the war came, with a need to explain the new complex realities of the world. Newspapers employed as many as four cartoonists on top of their syndicated counterparts, and they were more than happy to join in the fight. Cartoonists lent their art to government agencies and incorporated wartime morale-boosting into their work. Although comic books and superheroes were relatively new in the 1940s, they became part of the effort. Some comic strips incorporated the war directly into the narrative, making their protagonists head off to battle, while other entirely new “adventure strips” were born, tackling more serious themes alongside heroic deeds. “Enlisted for the duration,” syndicates dedicated themselves to boosting morale both abroad and at home. Mauldin’s work is a part of this wave of material, which dominated Home front papers, although his maturation as a comic artist was on public view as the war continued. Without ever landing a job as a syndicated or even part-time cartoonist with

231 DePastino 107.
233 Becker, 2.
234 Bernard, 16.
236 Ibid.
dedicated column space, Mauldin argued his way into cartooning work, even accepting a transfer to an infantry division.\footnote{Bill Mauldin, \textit{The Brass Ring: A Sort of Memoir} (New York: Norton, 1971), 93.}

His work does not comfortably rest in popular cartooning, the comic strip, or the art of the political or editorial cartoon. His lineage is part Thomas Nast, Honoré Daumier, and Al Capp, political and comic artists who provided a history of caricature and comedy. Mauldin spent his career shifting back and forth between the different art forms. Mauldin made cartoons specifically for the members of the army—more specifically, his own division and then for the larger viewership of the \textit{Stars and Stripes} in Europe. That his cartoons were syndicated by newspapers and serious editorial commentary sections back home, as well as in the pages of \textit{Life} and \textit{Time} during the war, only helped to expand his readership to the home front as well. This had consequences, both positive and negative. It brought Mauldin economic prosperity, but, it also set him adrift in the immediate postwar years as he struggled to find his voice in a society that was eager to leave the war behind and to reorganize itself for peace both economically and socio-culturally.

Ironically Mauldin’s time at the 45\textsuperscript{th} Division News and \textit{Stars and Stripes} was mostly free of censorship. After the war, the politics behind his satire offended many in his audience, and his editors resorted to censoring his cartoons.

The media’s double mandate during the war was to “maintain the maximum of honesty and credibility while avoiding the immediate revelation of information that might have proved fatal to the military effort.”\footnote{Frederick Voss, \textit{Reporting the War: the Journalistic Coverage of World War II} (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press for the National Portrait Gallery, 1994), x.} There were over 300 bases with their own
weekly newspapers. Overseas, the Army produced the daily *Stars and Stripes* and a weekly magazine, *Yank*. In these publications, military artists and journalists combined morale-building entertainment with news, with cartoons given, “a laboratory to test whether they could be more than just a means of entertainment.” Mauldin understood the limits of what he could and could not depict. His only brush with censorship occurred because he drew military equipment. “A soldier’s newspaper,” he wrote, “should recognize two restrictions—military security and common sense.” Otherwise, it should “provide the soldiers with good news coverage and a safety valve to blow off their feelings about things.” Mauldin excelled at the latter.

Mauldin started his cartooning career for the Army at one such camp paper, drawing for the 45th *Division News* in Oklahoma in the months before the war. He joined the ranks of cartoonists, editors, and reporters, who did their best to keep the men entertained and informed. Daver Breger’s *Private Breger* helped coin the term G.I. Joe, and George Baker’s *Sad Sack* appeared in *Yank*. Both featured characters that were more of a “comic counterpart” to Mauldin’s Willie and Joe, the characters Mauldin would eventually come to focus on.

Don Robinson, editor of the 45th lauded his staff as “good newspaper men, full of life, a little skeptical of officers’ ideas of what is news, and as resourceful as frontiersmen.” Mauldin was certainly resourceful, as he snuck up to the front in order to find material and make sketches. He’d then retreat to camp to the 45th *Division News*

---

239 Bernard, 208.
240 Mauldin, *Up Front*, 32
241 Becker, 268.
offices, or later *The Stars and Stripes* offices, both in Naples, to produce the images for publication. According to Robinson, as generals study maps for strategy, the members of the press look for towns big enough to have a printing press—preferably one not destroyed by bombing and hooked up to electricity.\(^{243}\) When Robinson and his staff reached the shores of Sicily, they printed the first edition of the 45th Division News by hand when they discovered the machinery was cut off from electricity.\(^{244}\)

*Stars and Stripes*, the ranks of which Mauldin would join after Christmas 1943, had been reestablished the previous spring.\(^{245}\) On the same day as “Doolittle’s Raid” on the shores of Japan, the paper was designed to be a similarly audacious move, an infiltration into territories where free speech had been silenced, showing how the government intended to “fight a diversified global war in the modern manner.”\(^{246}\) In the inaugural issue of April 18, 1942, General George C. Marshall gave an interview in which he lauded the American ideals of a free press, while expressing his hope that the paper would serve as a source of morale-boosting, “A soldier’s newspaper, in these grave times, is more than a morale venture. It is a symbol of the things we are fighting to preserve and spread in this threatened world. It represents the free thought and free expression of a free people.”\(^{247}\)

This “sprightly tabloid,” as Omar Bradley would later call the publication, “Frequently combined a degree of dignity and authority worthy of *The New York Times* 

---

\(^{243}\) Ibid.

\(^{244}\) DePastino, 96.


\(^{247}\) Meyer, v.
with the insouciance of *The New York Daily News*. 248 The offices were, as two former staffers later described it, “bedlam.” 249 A collection of all ranks, the paper “took on the whole blasted army, at one time or another, and came close to winning.” 250 This combative attitude, the newspaper acting as a “refuge for eccentrics” in the face of the orderliness of the army proved to be the right fit for Mauldin.

**Up Front: The War Years**

Mauldin’s comics engaged in the daily lives of infantrymen, focusing on, as he titled one of his Army publications, *Mud, Mules, and Mountains*. Shadowing the Italian campaign, Mauldin would make his way up the spine of Italy just as the men did—slowly. He had a simply methodology, making his way to the front, spending a few days with the men, sketching his ideas, then retreating back to turn his rough sketches into polished cartoons. He asked simple questions that had no simple answers. How should men be expected to act in between fighting or as they sit shivering in foxholes? How should they deal with the horrors of war?

Bill Mauldin’s characters Willie and Joe were, for him, a true reflection of men at the front. Stripped away from the panels was a larger context of the war, isolating his characters to their particular moment—whether they be in a foxhole or resting on the side of the road. Mauldin was able to depict “up front” both the existential and the absurd

---

248 Meyer, vi.
250 Ibid.
moments of a soldier’s life. Mauldin’s depiction of these two characters, whom he made nearly indistinguishable save for the size of their noses, created a sustained narrative of loneliness, steadfast resolve, and irreverence. Mauldin rarely felt the need to depict the enemy or the American soldiers firing their weapons; the dashed lines of incoming fire and the slanted lines of pelting rain were enough to allude to both war’s tedium and danger. His soldiers were dragged through mud and told to stay polished and clean. They were bored and lonely, and oftentimes resented any privileges afforded their officers. The cartoons, despite the larger context were, as Ernie Pyle argued, about war.

They were surrounded by the dirt walls of their fox hole, the crumbling pile of a blasted-out wall, or whatever structure they happened to find shelter in for the night—from barns and caves to proper tents. This serves to frame them as a small part of a much larger conflict, in effect heightening their immediate importance while showing that they are just a fragment of the story, cut off from the world. It is in these moments that Willie and Joe lash out at the world, share a moment of true bonding, or make a joke to relieve the tension. Some cartoons were simply humorous. In one, a soldier lashes out at the man he’s sitting next to. “Why th’hell couldn’t you have been born a beautiful woman?” he barks, venting all the frustrations and loneliness of the life of a soldier in one yelled complaint. “Humor,” as James Jones remarked, “was the civilian soldier’s catharsis and saving grace.”251 In a cartoon like “Didn’t we meet at Cassino?” Mauldin is able to deflate a moment of possible hand-to-hand combat with a joke. The cartoon can be read in a multitude of ways. Perhaps Joe is remarking on the repetitive nature of the battles,

251 Jones, 31
that he meets similar soldiers at every turn and over every hill. Alternatively, he may actually have met this same soldier before, in which case the audience may read this moment not just as repetitive to the point of dry wit, but as a horrifying recognition that they’ve been in this exact same situation with no change. This is a far darker reading, as the war is repetitive without even victory, as soldiers keep meeting.

In the cartoon “I feel like a fugitive from th’ law of averages.” Mauldin perfectly captures the tensions I wish to discuss in the chapter. A fine example of Mauldin’s style and theme, the cartoon shows a soldier, his head sticking out of a foxhole, sardonically commenting on his likely future death. Framed by the ominous darkness of a battlefield’s lightless landscape, lit only by the streaks of bullets flying overhead, he is alone in the world, surrounded by death and destruction. It is death that lingers just outside the frame of every Mauldin cartoon, and this concurrent fear and acceptance of a likely demise further highlights the absurdity of a commander demanding shined shoes or a perfect posture. As Israel Knox notes, “whether Mauldin intended it or not,” there is “great subtlety.”

The stability of certainty and law is all but shattered in this and many of Mauldin’s cartoons. The soldiers, fugitives from order and reason, are subject to the chaos of war. But there is also humor here, as the soldier is able to fully comprehend his doom, turning it into a sarcastic comment rather than cowering in fear. As Jay Casey explains, it is the “gallows humor” that helps keep the men from dwelling too long on their actual mortality, “affecting a disconnect with their immediate circumstances.”

This is the tension that defines every panel; the men accept that death lingers outside every frame, and that officers and infantry need each other to win the war.

Authority, particularly the abuse of it, is a central complaint of Willie and Joe. As Mauldin writes in *Up Front*, “It’s an accepted fact that you must be totalitarian in any army. The guys know that, but sometimes it chafes a little.”\(^{254}\) And so Mauldin walks the line of criticism and acceptance—criticism when there are abuses of power and rank within the military, and acceptance when there is nothing to be done about it, which is most of the time. “I never worry about hurting the feelings of the good officers when I draw officer cartoons,” he claimed. “I build a shoe, and if somebody wants to put it on and loudly announce that it fits, that’s his own affair.”\(^{255}\)

In another cartoon lampooning the officers, a neatly dressed officer stands with his hands on his waist, leaning backward to shout up at an infantryman. “Straighten those shoulders! How long you been in the army?” he asks. The answer to his question is seen in the stooped shoulders of the man in front of him, weighed down by untold months or years of fighting and the gear he carries in his arms. Visible on every muddy fold of his uniform, which contrasts strongly with the immaculately pressed uniform of the officer, is the hardship of battle, of friends lost and nights spent in a freezing foxhole. Mauldin does not need to add a soldier’s witty retort; though the dogface’s posture is not to military standards, he looms over the clueless officer, in a position of power.

Moments like these, in which the realities of war directly contrast with the textbook image of the soldier are spread throughout the wartime cartoons. In another,

\(^{254}\) Mauldin, *Up Front*, 32.

Willie and Joe sit propped against a wall, while a rear-echelon corporal stands beside them, a bemused look on his face. Through we are not privy to the moments before, it is clear that the soldiers have been criticized, as Willie turns to Joe, sarcastically remarking, “He’s right, Joe. When we ain’t fightin’ we should act like sojers.” Again, the cartoon can be read in different ways. In what way should a soldier act when not directly in combat? Are Willie and Joe un-soldierly because they are taking a well-deserved break? At what point does a petty insistence on decorum undermine morale? The officer demands that Willie and Joe act like soldiers, and they are, reflecting the true conditions of the battle weary rather than the spit and polish demanded of them. There is no retort from the soldier. The audience is able to laugh at the officer and recognize himself in the haggard infantryman. This ambiguous—and perhaps also nearsighted—view of how a soldier should act and appear—was sometimes lost on the military viewer of Mauldin’s cartoons, particularly if they were an officer.

After the cartoon was published, a colonel, misunderstanding the intention of the cartoon, visited the Stars and Strips office in order to obtain a copy of the work. He wanted to disseminate it as a poster that would remind soldiers to act with propriety whether in battle or not. Mauldin could not bring himself to explain the joke to the officer.256 That the colonel missed Mauldin’s joke indicates the subtle nature of Mauldin’s work. A cursory reading of the cartoon leads the officer to criticize the soldier, while the infantryman understands that the officer’s criticism is an abuse of power. Even

256 Mauldin, Up Front, 83.
when it was satirical, it never failed to boost the morale of the infantrymen who, 
exhausted from battle, might find some respite in between fighting.

Other cartoons are touching in their simplicity. Huddled amongst the mud and 
reeds of some unknown hideaway, Willie turns to his buddy and says, “Joe, yestiddy ya 
saved my life an’ I swore I’d pay ya back. Here’s my last pair of dry socks.” In both the 
*Up Front* cartoons that appeared in newspapers and the text that accompanied them in 
book form later in the war, Mauldin writes repeatedly about the bonds of friendship that 
provided relief between battles. He describes men willing to walk miles to visit their 
friend in the hospital, or who will sneak back some cognac from a six day pass. He 
mourns the lives lost, and of men who simply wanted to raise a family or go back home 
to their jobs.

Yet some of the power of Mauldin’s images are in what is unseen, what words are 
not said. The action of battle usually takes place beyond the frame of the image, its 
menace expressed by the pitch black invading the edges of the frame. While bombs may 
burst in the distance, the tedium caused by rain and mud is among Mauldin’s preferred 
topics. “We don’t have to be indoctrinated or told there is a war on over here,” he wrote 
later about the absence of more overt references to the war in his work. “We know there 
is a war on because we see it. We don’t like it a darned bit, but you don’t see many 
soldiers quitting, so fancy propaganda would be a bit superfluous.”

---

“Look at an infantryman’s eyes,” Mauldin writes in *Up Front*, “and you can tell how much war he has seen." Fresh soldiers, new to the front, are usually the only ones Mauldin depicts in clean uniforms and eager for war. In one cartoon, a pair of fresh faced young men eagerly ask for “war stories” as if Willie, Joe, or any other soldier in combat would readily volunteer such information, or that those stories of their friends dying might be an entertaining tale. In another, an angry soldier, his chest puffed out in front of him, stalks about the premises, causing Willie to remark in one caption, “Look out, he must not have seen battle, he’s looking for a fight.” Mauldin later wrote that what distinguished Willie and Joe was their acceptance that death could happen at any moment—they did not need to look for it.

While the gentle mocking of new soldiers, untested by battle, could be funny, it was in Mauldin’s cartoons about officers that he gave soldiers a way to let off steam. In one cartoon, soldiers take advantage of a parade through a liberated town in France to take aim at their leader. Willie and Joe gleefully pelt an unsuspecting officer with fruit. “My, sir—what an enthusiastic welcome!” the officer’s aide yells in his ear. Mauldin here moved beyond simply venting frustration by imagining an act of aggression toward the brass. These more critical cartoons caught the attention of the officers, and eventually made their way to the desk of General George S. Patton, who, finding them unacceptable, threatened to throw Mauldin in jail.

Another cartoon Mauldin drew to get Patton’s attention takes aim at the welter of rules imposed on the soldiers. Willie and Joe, driving a dirty, clunky jeep to a new area,
come across a large sign on the side of the road welcoming them to Patton’s jurisdiction. “You Are Entering the 3rd Army!” reads an exclamation headlining a detailed list of various penalties and fines. No helmet will cost the soldier $50, no shampoo $25. Trousers down will cost $50 as well. With “enforced!” underlined at the bottom, it is signed, “By Order: Ol’ Blood and Guts,” a moniker that no soldier would mistake. The spit and polish demanded of Patton’s 5th Army troops was both infuriating and highly unrealistic to some. “Radio th’ ol’ man,” Willie yells out, “we’ll be late on account of a thousand-mile detour.”

Patton’s gripes were commonly referred to as “chickenshit” by many of the enlisted men, named as such for their seemingly miniscule importance in light of much larger issues, and defined as “behavior that makes military life worse that it need be.”259 Stephen Ambrose has a more blunt assessment of Patton’s policies—it was he who hurt the war effort, not Mauldin. Writing that, “it was no joke. Patton’s spit-and-polish obsession sometimes cost dearly. It not only had nothing to do with winning the war, it hurt the war effort.”260

Yet it was easy to see why Mauldin and his cartoons rankled Patton. If his strict adherences to proper military decorum and his insistence that the men of the 3rd Army follow guidelines to keep orderly, Willie and Joe seemed to represent the opposite. Not only that, but Mauldin repeatedly challenged the officers. Patton interpreted these

---


260 Ambrose, 335.
cartoons as diminishing the authority of the leadership as well as diminishing morale. Thinking Mauldin a bad influence, Patton threatened to throw him in jail for thirty days.

Mauldin and Patton eventually met in March of 1945. The meeting was arranged by General Dwight D. Eisenhower’s aide, Harry C. Butcher, who argued that both men had a common goal: trying to win the war.\(^{261}\) Patton’s letter complained of Mauldin’s images of Willie and Joe as unkempt, and the men as poor examples of soldiers. Patton wanted Mauldin’s cartoons removed from the paper, or he threatened to halt distribution to the 3\(^{rd}\) Army. Butcher recorded in his diary that Mauldin, “who had been wounded in combat, thought his characters faithfully represented GIs in the front line,” adding a caveat, “although his experience has been largely in Sicily and Italy.”\(^{262}\) Butcher’s analysis of Mauldin’s experience as consisting only of the campaign in Sicily and Italy, is perhaps a slight of the 5\(^{th}\) Army and its cleanliness as compared to the 3\(^{rd}\) Army.

Before the meeting Butcher advised Mauldin to make himself presentable for the general, in effect asking him to display the spit and polish he actively mocked. Butcher exemplified what could be a typical response of the officers when describing Mauldin’s arrival at Patton’s office. In his diary for March 16\(^{th}\), 1945, Butcher writes that Mauldin “quaked” upon arrival, leaving to steady himself before meeting Patton. Returning later, having “mustered up his courage,” he met with “old blood and guts himself.”\(^{263}\)

Though initially Mauldin perceived that the meeting would go well, Patton quickly began his attack. “Now then, sergeant, about those pictures you draw of those

---


\(^{262}\) Ibid.

\(^{263}\) Ibid.
god-awful things you call soldiers,” Patton began. Pressing him further, and challenging him, “Where did you ever see soldiers like that? You know goddamn well you’re not drawing an accurate representation of the American soldier.” According to Mauldin, Patton then gave a lengthy explanation about troop morale and respect for officers, asking Mauldin’s intentions for a few cartoons, holding one up by the corner as if it was tainted with disease. After asking if he was trying to incite a mutiny, according to Mauldin, the general then lectured him for nearly thirty minutes about the history of warfare as it pertained to keeping order, rank, and file.

Mauldin’s defense was simple—his cartoons replaced the voice of the soldiers, who might openly complain about what was wrong, in their view, if they didn’t already see those complaints in his cartoons. “My point is,” he told Patton, while “the soldier is back in his foxhole stewing,” he could develop more than a sense of irritation, and in fact the lack of a release might be more dangerous than his cartoons. “Whether it makes sense or not, the fact is that he feels there’s been an injustice, and if he stews long enough about this, or about any of the other things soldiers stew about, he’s not going to be thinking about his job.” Mauldin worried about Patton’s dog biting his hand, and Patton cut the meeting off with an inconsequential, “I guess we understand each other now.”

While the meeting didn’t yield any concrete results, it was memorable for Mauldin and fodder for the newspapers and magazines. Of the meeting, Butcher wrote “that Mauldin was convinced he had not changed General Patton’s mind and he was

264 Mauldin, The Brass Ring, 259.
265 Mauldin, The Brass Ring, 263.
266 Mauldin, The Brass Ring, 264
certain Patton hadn’t changed his.”267 The famous general’s dog, coincidentally also named Willie, apparently jumped right back into Mauldin’s seat when he left. Mauldin, packing up his jeep and “returned to Italy where he had a little more freedom to draw what he saw.”268 He was free once again to cover it, and his uniform, in mud, along with whichever fictional characters he liked.

A few weeks later, when an article appeared by Will Lang in Time, assessing the meeting as basically a wash, Patton repeated his threat to jail the cartoonist.269 But another voice stepped into the conversation, effectively ending the debate. Eisenhower, having “taken an intense personal interest in seeing that the staff of Stars and Stripes is not pestered by the brass,” wrote a letter to the commanders, complaining of the “great deal of pressure” to abolish Mauldin’s cartoons, but that the responsible officers should “not interfere in matters of this kind.” Butcher, assessing the situation on April 11th, the day the letter was released, and the day before Franklin Delano Roosevelt died, wrote in his diary, “It looks to me as if General Patton may now admit he has lost the battle of Mauldin.”270 Two months later, Mauldin won the Pulitzer Prize.

The cartoon that made him the youngest recipient of the prize exemplifies Mauldin’s satirical approach. In the panel, a group of men, practically indistinguishable from one another, slog through the rain and mud. We read that these are American soldiers, “flush with victory” but we see no joy here. We know that there are prisoners being transported, but at first glance it is not clear who is who. On closer inspection, one

267 Butcher, 774.
268 Zumwalt, 58.
269 Butcher, 796.
270 Butcher, 801.
of the prisoners gives a sideways glance toward his American captor. In his face we can almost read pity, as if the struggles for the G.I. are so apparent, the weary figure guarding the prisoner is perhaps worse off than the man in his charge. The captor becomes the prisoner—of the mud around him, the officers above him, the homesickness that dominates his thoughts, and the war itself.

Mauldin’s Pulitzer Prize winning cartoon is a powerful statement about the war, as it shows the leveling effect of battle on all soldiers, not just the Americans. Mauldin did not draw with a pacifist bent, nor do many of his panels even include the enemy. Instead, he focused primarily on the hardships of the soldiers. The Germans had their own “dog faces,” and the American infantrymen, Mauldin argued, fought against “krauts” not Nazis. This acknowledgement of both the German soldiers’ own struggles and the exhaustion of the Americans comes together in the cartoon, which blurs the viewer’s image of both, leading to an appreciation of the struggles while showing the overall pall of war.

Though the editors of the *Stars and Stripes* would write of their surprise at the award, writing that “It was not his favorite cartoon, nor was it that of the editors,” the panel has remained a lasting image of the sacrifices of the army’s infantrymen. As Johnson argues, “By no stretch of the definition could his work be called political cartooning. However, it was pictorial satire and it was too powerful to be ignored.”

---

271 Introduction, Bill Mauldin, *This Damn Tree Leaks, a Collection of War Cartoons* (Italy: Stars and Stripes, Mediterranean, 1945).
272 Johnson, 145.
The notion that the cartoons could serve as a unifying force rather than one that caused disruption or mutiny is seen in the copies of Mauldin’s work left behind from the war. Personal copies of his army-published books—*This Damn Tree Leaks, Mud, Mules, and Mountains, Sicily Sketchbook*—are oftentimes used as yearbooks, with fond memories inscribed on favorite images, along with addresses for soldiers to stay in touch with each other. These shared moments were what connected the men, and these connections were, as he put it in *Up Front*, “the closest to home we can ever get.”²⁷³ As the men returned from Europe, these cartoons served as yet another reminder of the bonds they once shared on the battlefield. Their messages to each other form an adhesive in a highly alienated and alienating world that makes the individual invisible and insignificant.

Though he feared being kept in the Army, or sent to do “Willie and Joe in the Pacific” in June of 1945, after two years overseas, Bill Mauldin was on his way home.²⁷⁴ Before leaving Europe, he approached Robert Neville, editor of *Stars and Stripes*, about ending his career at the paper, and ending the lives of his two most famous characters. “An atrocity like that would never get printed in any paper of mine.” Neville reportedly told him, as he summarily rejected Mauldin’s idea to kill off the beloved dogfaces.²⁷⁵ “So Bill took Willie and Joe home with him. It was a decision he would always regret.”²⁷⁶

²⁷⁶ Ibid.
We’ve Only Won the Battles: Postwar Political Cartoons

On August 14, 1945, President Harry S. Truman declared the Second World War over. At the end of the conflict, over 40,000 military personnel were dead, nearly 700,000 were wounded, and twelve million soldiers were on their way home. Those millions of men and women serving overseas and stateside were about to reintegrate into civilian life, and among their ranks was the country’s most famous Army cartoonist. Bill Mauldin came home to the United States in June of 1945 and was discharged from the Army. With a bestselling book at the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list and his cartoon syndicated throughout the country, he was a celebrity of the war. Editors did not have enough paper to meet the demand for *Up Front*, and the young cartoonist was being entreated with a $50,000 deal from Hollywood to transform Willie and Joe into flesh and blood celluloid versions.277 A large press event was planned for his arrival, but Mauldin was able to evade the authorities and wind up in Fort Dix.278 When the clerk inspecting his discharge paperwork noticed Mauldin was designated an artist and remarked that the base needed some signs painted, for a brief moment, he thought he was stuck. But the man behind some of the most tired characters of the war, himself exhausted, was suddenly set free.279

In an article on Mauldin, which helped introduce him to millions of readers back home, Ernie Pyle wrote in hopeful terms that, “when peace comes the men will be in

277 Ibid.
civilians clothes and living as they should be.” But those new clothes proved more difficult to adjust to both for Mauldin and his characters. “Something was missing,” writes Becker, of the work, “perhaps it was the war itself.” As the soldiers fought their way through Europe and the Pacific, they were constructing in their minds the new American future while reconstructing a nostalgic version of the past. The soldier overseas “derived from the hard experience of war, of fear and deprivation and nostalgia, many of the hopes they harbored for peace.” In the face of an unfamiliar territory, and with memories of apple pie, Main Street, and the women they left behind, these soldiers helped redefine the landscape when they returned. For some, however, their return was not marked with the stereotypical dreams of a brighter future.

Over the next few years, Mauldin would experience many of the same hopes and fears as his fellow servicemen, and he transformed his personal issues into the lives of Willie and Joe, who followed him home for a while. “I might have gone in as an average citizen,” he said later, “but I came out as something else.” The same went for Willie and Joe. Years later, Mauldin claimed that his characters “are not social reformers. They’re much more reactive. They’re not social scientists and I’m not a social scientist. We’re moral people who do not belong to the moral majority.” When Mauldin returned home, he quickly began using his column space to be more proactive.

281 Becker, 268.
282 Blum, 64.
284 Turkel, 361.
His new strip, initially titled “Sweatin’ it Out,” forced him to immediately “start worrying about cartoon material,” as the syndicate reminded him that he still had a “taskmaster.” It did not take long for Mauldin to attempt to get out of his contract with United Press Syndicate once he realized he perhaps needed time to recharge, but his contract was not set to expire until 1949. With money to be made off of Mauldin’s name and work, “the wily syndicate manager was not about to let him just slip away.”

Willie and Joe’s struggles took on a different form, their anonymity continuing for altogether different reasons. With freshly shaved faces and new suits, they set about trying to adjust to civilian life among the many other million veterans attempting to do the same. Just as he did overseas, Mauldin would tackle the issues of the day with ferocity and humor. Again, his attacks would focus on the conflict between the individual and larger forces—or more accurately, the organized collective of post-war society which harbored its own dehumanizing impact through social inequality, the imposition of solitude, loneliness and helplessness on the individual, and through its own concealed social hierarchization, which entailed abuses of power. More concretely, Mauldin’s focus shifted away from commenting on the structure of the armed forces and towards the transformation of the American vision of citizenship, the role of the veteran, and the stain of McCarthyism and fear-mongering of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, which transformed into the Cold War in the years that followed. With his pen

---

286 Walker, 290.
287 DePastino, ix.
and brush, and without a threat of imprisonment from Patton, Mauldin kept up his attacks.

Mauldin criticized the publicity machine that spoke for veterans as they returned home. In one cartoon a soldier sits silently, a dejected look on his face, while an officer speaks for him. “He thinks the food over there was swell. He’s glad to be home, but he misses the thrill and excitement of battle. You may quote him.” In another cartoon, Mauldin depicts a soldier who, moments earlier, may have dared to share his opinion. “Shut up, kid,” an older man yells up at him, “You got no business discussin’ serious matters.” And while Mauldin writes in *Back Home* that he is “not qualified to speak with authority on political matters,” these cartoons read as his defense of the soldiers’ opinions and, ultimately, his own.\(^{288}\) By bringing Willie and Joe home, Mauldin uses them as a way to be an effective mouthpiece for the struggling veteran.

The images of the uniform and suit become important in reading Mauldin’s cartoons here. The stripes upon their lapels once confirmed status, while their new civilian clothes have them blending into the crowd. The first hint of Willie and Joe’s troubles is in Mauldin’s first cartoon after the war. A large car drives by the freshly-shaved pair, complete with new suits and drums. “I don’t pick up civilians, bud,” the man behind the wheel yells out at them, “I’m a member of the armed forces.” It was not the first time that their lack of uniform would be the central focus of Mauldin’s commentary.

Upon his return home, Mauldin’s own experience adjusting to his civilian life as a husband, made its way into his work. Willie, now stateside, returned to his role as both a

husband and father but discovers that his relationship with his wife was not as solid as he
previously thought. In her first appearance, the family is out for a walk, Willie holding
onto his son as they stroll the neighborhood. “I was hopin’ you’d wear your soldier suit,
so I could be proud of you,” she tells him. As it is with many of Mauldin’s cartoons it is
just as much about what is not said as what is. Her cutting remark is disappointing for
Willie, who stands in disbelief. His silence, the silence of a man who has seen the despair
of war and is merely trying to reintegrate into society, is devastating. This is a dark
humor, one where the laughs emerge alongside sadness.

In another such cartoon, we see Willie and his wife in their bedroom, though they
are not happy. Her wedding ring is conspicuously displayed, likely to identify her as his
wife rather than a mistress. But we see no wedding bliss. Instead, the two glare at each
other, her downturned eyebrows matched by his angry expression and open mouth.
“Don’t git so huffy—you talked in your sleep too…” he snaps. Perhaps in this moment
Willie has startled her awake with a nightmare, or perhaps he also “talked” in his sleep
about a dalliance abroad. In this moment, the two characters must confront their past.

The relationship sours from there. In one cartoon, Joe walks in to see Willie’s
wife standing over him with a broken lamp. “Come in, Joe…,” Willie jokes, “I’m bein’
rehabilitated.” In reality, Bill Mauldin’s own family life was crumbling. Only a few
months after he returned, after airing his suspicions about his own wife Jean through his
depiction of Willie’s home life, Mauldin discovered she was in fact having an affair.289

289 A similar situation plays out in William Wyler’s The Best Years of Our Lives (1946). In it, Dana
Andrews plays Fred Derry, a returning veteran who might as well be named Willie or Joe. Arriving at
home to find an ungrateful wife, Fred finds it difficult to adjust. He tries to find work, he is told that his
Using a private investigator, Mauldin’s fears, familiar fears of many returning veterans, were confirmed. By October of 1945, Willie’s wife disappears from the comics, and Mauldin files for divorce from his own. His return home was marked by a difficult transition, as his biographer DePastino notes, “Our collective memory and history books emphasize the national unity of the time, a patriotic and unquestioned support for the cause and those who fought for it. But the everyday reality was far more complicated.”

For his part, Mauldin understood both sides of the reunion, reflected not only in his own story, but also in the readjustment of millions of other soldiers. “Not only was she deprived of the pleasure of strutting with his medals,” Mauldin wrote about the wartime wives, “but she suddenly realized that she had never seen him in civvies before, and he did look a little baggy and undistinguished.” Mauldin received angry letters about the series of cartoons about Willie and his wife, the cartoonist later admitting that his own “domestic difficulties” had “provided the inspiration” for the narrative of some of these cartoons. “When my suit for divorce hit the papers,” he wrote later on, the responses in some of his letters from women criticized him: “Aha, you sorehead. You’re taking out your own troubles on us.”

Veteran poverty and the housing crisis helped create some of Mauldin’s most poignant cartoons in the months after the war ended, even if they are infused with humor. In one, a soldier makes his bed on a park bench, a banner from a recent parade draped uniform will make his wife proud, he’s criticized for not bringing back fine things from Europe, or for fighting in the war at all. Finally, he is confronted with the fact that his wife is cheating on him with a well-dressed, fast-talking man.

290 Bill Mauldin and Todd DePastino, Willie & Joe, xii.
291 Mauldin Back Home, 45.
292 Mauldin, Back Home, 47.
over his torso, which reads, in part, “Welcome Home” and “Our Hero.” The veteran’s feet poke out one side, the gesture of the warm greeting translating into a warm blanket rather than a more useful long-term solution for the war’s homeless veterans. In another, a veteran displays his own fortitude in the face of this same adversity. On a winter’s night, he lay on a park bench. Approached by a police officer, the homeless veteran remarks, “You shoulda seen where I spent my nights last winter.” This is a funnier take on the same idea.

In “The Unknown Soldier—1946” Mauldin, returns to the theme yet again. In this version, he subdues much of the humor and links the problem to a longer history of veteran’s issues. This faceless man, stretched out on a park bench, wears his new uniform of a business suit, his briefcase tucked below his public sleeping quarters. Etched into the edifice of this monument is a darkly humorous reminder of the seriousness of veteran homelessness. Mauldin replaces the military slogan, Semper Fi—always faithful—with the satirical phrase—“Semper Sans Cot.” For a more lighthearted touch, he adds a “keep of the grass” sign as well. The veteran is anonymous this time, and his namelessness is magnified ever more so, as he lay upon the tomb of the Unknown Soldier. In this image, Mauldin calls on the public to honor both the living and the dead, showing that anonymity is a dangerous prospect for all involved. This man needs to be known—he deserves it. Of course this would not be a Mauldin cartoon without a touch of humor, in this case a “keep off the lawn” sign.

Beyond his comments on the military and the veterans, Mauldin increasingly drew explicitly political cartoons, as he left Willie and Joe behind. These were harsh and
condemning political cartoons, so much so that they threatened the future of his career. He particularly attacked McCarthyism, racism, and the political uses of these issues to distort reality and to intimidate the public. His work, according to Stephen Becker, “necessary when we were fighting for our lives, was less desirable and less appreciated when hostilities ceased and the public wanted simply peace and quiet.” Being reassured by his syndicate manager that, while many agreed with his views on red-baiting and race issues, they were nevertheless “very worried with the path [he] seemed to be treading.” Syndicated cartooning was a business, they argued, and “businessmen can’t be politicians.” Another editor, according to Mauldin, was more blunt about his political turn, suggesting that he should quit syndicated work and publish in the *New Masses* or the *Daily Worker*. Instead, the cartoonist dug in deeper.

Mauldin, writing later in *Back Home* that his childhood was “luckily devoid of extensive indoctrination in the glories of being a white Protestant,” the army was able to wipe away any of the prejudices he had before enlisting and experiencing the soldiers’ camaraderie during the war. “The behavior of the soldiers I saw was good or bad in accordance with their upbringing and their character, rather than with their faith or ancestry.” Mauldin wrote about the hypocritical use of African American soldiers in the war, as they were not afforded the same forms of democracy for which they fought abroad, nor were they treated as equals in the armed forces. “If the American army fought

---

293 Becker, 327.
Germany to protect minorities from persecution,” he wrote, “it is one of the bitterest laughs in history, because our army seldom relaxed its strict Jim Crow policies,” he lamented.299 On the Japanese soldiers, he recalled, “A few of us who were in Italy used to scratch our heads and wonder how we would feel if we were wearing the uniform of a country that mistreated our families.” But the men Mauldin encountered were proud to be wearing the same uniform.”300

In a speech delivered at the New York Herald Tribune forum on October 31, 1945, Mauldin railed against inequality, racism, and McCarthyism, which, he claimed, mocked the sacrifices of the soldiers who fought in the war.301 In the speech, which outlined much of his criticism for the years to follow, Mauldin, unburdened by his role as a soldier, reveled in his ability to level criticism on those he felt deserved it. “I am a civilian now,” he told the audience. “I am not bound by the soldier’s oath, which forbids criticism of members of congress.”

Mauldin attacked the racism inflicted on both black and Japanese-American soldiers. Quoting from Hitler during his speech, using the very same lines used to urge African Americans to join the war effort302, Mauldin read from Mein Kampf, “It is a sin against the will of the eternal Creator to let his most talented beings degenerate while Hottentots and Zulus are trained for intellectual vocations.” Warning his audience, “That is the kind of stuff that caused untold suffering and cost untold lives. It is the kind of thing that caused concentration camps and persecution.” He urged them to reevaluate the

299 Mauldin, Back Home, 176.
300 Mauldin, Back Home, 166.
301 Bill Mauldin, Bill Mauldin Says (New York, N.Y.: Distributed by the Writers' Board, 1945).
302 This same quote is used in Negroes and the War, as discussed in my chapter on Jacob Lawrence.
meanings of the war. “Remember,” he told the assembled crowd, the power they wielded was used to “build the armies of aggression we had to go overseas to fight.” If, as Mauldin explained in his speech, the real reason he and millions of other soldiers were sent to Europe and the Pacific was to rid the Earth of “the beliefs and evils” of tyrants like Hitler and Mussolini, then “we have only won the battles.”

Mauldin’s arguments also appeared in his cartoons, as he continually attacked Jim Crow and the “unspeakable raw deal,” of the returning Japanese-American veteran. In one, a Japanese-American soldier, his uniform pinned with medals of service and his body held up by his crutch, is accosted by a bartender at the “Victory Bar.” “Can’t ya read signs.” The caption reads. Along with patriotic signs encouraging war bond purchases and “Welcome to the West Coast,” are less benign messages. “America for Americans,” reads one, with the more direct, “No Japs Allowed” taped to the bar mirror. This subtle escalation in the language draws Mauldin’s audience in, arousing them with patriotism before confronting them with their hypocrisy. In another cartoon, depicting two white men inside a market, one casually remarks to the other, “Naw—we don’t hafta worry about th’ ownder comin’ back. He was killed in Italy.” The name Hitoshi Mitsuki is scratched off on the store’s sign, with “Under New Management” written below it.

In another cartoon, Mauldin confronts the racism and Jim Crow legacy of the armed forces as well. In one cartoon from October of 1945, a man stands in front of an army recruitment sign that reads, “It’s Your Country, Keep it Safe!” while a white officer straddles the doorway. Blocking the figure before him, a man dressed in a suit, with

---

“Negroes” written on his back, the decorated officer in effect discourages him from joining the military. Atop his shoulders, along with all the regalia, sit two black birds, the caption below reads, “Them old eagles sure spoil that new uniform, Colonel.”

Knowing that he was wading into troublesome political waters, Mauldin felt the need in the final moments of his speech to assure the audience that he was not a Communist. “I am a gentile and a Christian. My skin is white,” he told the audience. “I was a solider and I am an American citizen.” He closed his speech, “and I would be very curious to see what sort of criticism I am going to get from this.” He would soon find that the public was less forgiving than his editors at Stars and Stripes. By 1946, Mauldin was losing “a newspaper a day.” In Back Home he writes that he’d lost his way and been confused, drawing cartoons “without humor or perspective.” And while critics later wrote that his personal life had been of some consequence here, I argue that despite a loss of his audience and the censorship of his editors, Mauldin merely blurred the editorial and the editorial cartoon.

While Mauldin found massive postwar success, pressure to entertain conflicted with his newfound political voice, and the artist struggled with maintaining the quality of his work. While some later interpretations of his quick decline in 1945-46 attribute it to his “immaturity and his struggles to adjust to his sudden celebrity,” Mauldin was also under an undue amount of political pressure.304 Yet, in retrospect, Mauldin has been entirely vindicated on the political front. McCarthyism, racism, the treatment of veterans—these issues may have made for shocking or “bad” political cartoons, lacking

subtlety or nuance, but it does not make them incorrect in their assessment of the situation. Similar to John Huston being forced to adjust artistically after making wartime documentaries, which were deemed too shocking for the public, Mauldin, too, found it necessary to adjust. The economic realities of newspaper syndication, in which an artist needed to please a general audience rather than a smaller population as he did in *Stars and Stripes* ultimately forced Mauldin to reassess his column space. By 1949, he abandoned cartooning for nearly a decade, submitting only random cartoons when he felt like it.

**A Cartoonist Goes Campaigning**

Mauldin entered politics in an overt way in 1952, campaigning for Adlai Stevenson’s presidential bid, and helping to create “Veterans for Stevenson” with Alvin York. Upset when Eisenhower asked Richard Nixon to be his vice president, whom Mauldin considered a dangerous red-baiter, the cartoonist lent his voice and art to Stevenson.\(^{305}\) For my purposes in discussing Mauldin’s support for Stevenson and later his bid for office, I am most interested in his uses of Willie and Joe. For the Stevenson campaign materials included not just endorsements from the likes of Mauldin and York, but of his familiar dogfaces, who had fought during World War II. This is important, because Stevenson’s opponent had previously helped protect Mauldin from Patton.

In a pamphlet distributed by the group, a Mauldin sketch of Willie adorns the front cover. Mauldin’s weary soldier, cigarette hanging out of his mouth, responds to the

\(^{305}\) DePastino, 261.
lively campaign slogan of Dwight D. Eisenhower, “I Like Ike.” With a more subdued, “I Like Stevenson.” On the back, Mauldin provides a quote of support, accompanied by a drawing of a soldier. The infantryman, defiantly standing with his hand in his pocket, which is against army regulations, holds up a picket sign. The text reads, “Stevenson the choice of the PFC.”

Eisenhower was a great general in the war, but no general is better than his troops. Not only are the people in this self-styled “crusade” he’s leading today, a motley-looking bunch, but they aren’t even good soldiers—they’ve all promoted themselves to general and are beginning to lead Eisenhower. Now that the Republicans have got all the rank on their side, I want to throw in with Stevenson, who has most of the PFC’s.”

Here, Mauldin continues his view of the armed services as a large organization whose lifeblood is the group of soldiers who do the brunt of the work. “No general is better than his troops,” is a message of defiance as well as solidarity. Mauldin’s criticism of Eisenhower stemmed mostly from a dislike of his choice of running mate, Richard Nixon. In an article written in 1954, after campaigning against Ike by providing Stevenson with his “I like Stevenson” images, Mauldin wrote with high regard for the former Supreme Commander. He acknowledged that it was Eisenhower who silenced military critics like Patton, and allowed *Stars and Stripes* to print free of censorship and with a sense of freedom to print what they liked, “short of sedition.” Eisenhower’s positive intrusion “endeared him to me so much that not even his recent venture into

---

politics has lessened my regard for him,” he wrote later. And even after campaigning against him and criticizing his leadership, Mauldin at least respected him. “When I feel outraged because he lets fools run wild, I take heart in his consistency, remembering that once long ago he let us fools run wild too.”

Four years later, Mauldin made a bid for office of his own. Again, he enlisted Willie and Joe. The political implications of Mauldin’s art can also be examined in his failed bid for Congress in Rockland County, New York in 1956. With his cartooning career still in limbo, Mauldin was able to find a new outlet for his strong political views. After a “whisky-fueled” meeting with Democratic Party officials in March of 1956, he decided to run for congress against Katherine Price Collier St. George, a distant cousin of Franklin D. Roosevelt, in a heavily Republican district in New York State.

Mauldin campaigned tirelessly, making speeches and meeting his would-be voters one on one throughout the campaign. His career as a cartoonist and his status as a veteran was used throughout the campaign to bolster his image as a man who would fight for his neighbors. One advertisement for the Democratic ticket shows a “Trio of Fighting Men!” who “pledged to fight your battles, which are also theirs.” Touting their experience in the Navy, Infantry, and Artillery-Armor, the candidates aligned themselves with the sacrifices of World War II in order to prove their worth. “These men proved themselves before,” the ad reads, “and they will do it again.”

---

308 DePastino, 260.
309 DePastino, 264.
Mauldin’s own campaign button aimed to visually align the upstart politician with his two most famous creations. Flanked by Willie and Joe on either side of his smirking face, the image equates Mauldin’s campaign and politics with that of the soldier, the man on the front lines who will do the fighting; the person who has no voice, the person who wants a little respect and equality. Just as he’d done with his Stevenson image, these simple drawings spoke volumes about the baggage behind such an endorsement.

He backed these up with his campaign rhetoric. Mauldin made farming a major issue of the campaign, again aligning himself with the underrepresented. He framed his campaign as a bid for true representation. “As most of you know,” he wrote in his platform, “I think a Representative in Congress should work for what his constituents want, not for what he thinks they ought to want.” Claiming that while campaigning he’d done more listening than talking, he provided eight points in his platform: Equality for our Farmers, Survival for Small Business, A Tough Foreign Policy to Safeguard American Interests, Aid to Education—NOW!, Justice for Veterans, Defensive Arms to Israel, Postal Employees and Postal Service, and A Fair Shake for Minority Groups.310

The red-baiting and hypocrisy he attacked in the years leading up to his run for congress were transformed into speeches and his platform. Unfortunately, “his strident criticism of anti-communism and what he called the “era of the Cop,” coupled with his past political affiliations, came back to haunt him.”311 By the end of the campaign, Mauldin was accused of being a Communist himself, or at least, a “tool for un-American

311 Kercher, 23.
The upstart politician attempted to defend himself with the same vigor he displayed in his cartoons. Printed in the Middletown daily Record on October 29th, 1956, a political advertisement “An Open Letter…To our Republican Congresswoman,” Mauldin wrote, “I’m not going to war with you. I’ve already got one Purple Heart and I don’t want to add an Oak Leaf Cluster from fighting with an angry woman.” He finishes, “We’ll leave it up to the voters to decide for themselves what it takes to make an all-American Congress.”

Although he had a strong showing of Democratic voters in a historically Republican area, Katherine Price Collier St. George defended her seat handily. Mauldin, dejected, remarked that the red-baiting St. George “wears mink but throws mud.” In the end, perhaps it was his past “discretions” working for civil rights and rallying against the notions of Un-American activities that doomed his chances at winning his campaign. In a heavily Republican district, Mauldin did survive the accusations that he was a communist pawn to receive the highest amount of Democratic votes in the district, but his political career was over.

**Conclusion: Simple Soldier Jokes**

After a decade away from a drafting table, during which time he focused on writing, tried his hand at acting, and made a brief foray into politics, Bill Mauldin returned to his craft full time. Joining the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* in 1958, Mauldin replaced Daniel Fitzpatrick as the political cartoonist, and quickly regained prominence,

---

312 DePastino, 267.
313 Kercher, 23.
winning another Pulitzer Prize in 1959. He spent the following decades fighting injustice, racial inequality, and plain old ineptitude with his brand of wit. The war years had shaped him, the postwar years nearly broke him, and an election campaign of his own transformed him. Using his art, he was able to humorously poke fun at the establishment while providing images of dignity with his two dogfaces.

A generation after the first appearance of Willie and Joe, after the end of both World War II, the Korean conflict, and on the advent of yet another conflict brewing in Southeast Asia, Bill Mauldin took up his pen again. In the introduction to his fourth book, *What’s Got Your Back Up?*, the cartoonist, now at the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* after a few years of semi-retirement after his politics became too much for his readers and his political career stalled, looked back on his time with his two unshaven dogfaces. A friend, having recently remarked on his new work, claimed his career as a political cartoonist was, “a long jump from drawing beards on Willie and Joe in their foxhole to commenting on world-shaking events and personalities.”

Mauldin disagreed, saying that those cartoons were “loaded with politics from the beginning,” stretching back even to his days as a cartoonist for his high school paper. In fact, Mauldin claimed, General Patton was perhaps one of the only men in the war to “have the perspicacity to see what [he] was really up to,” which was, “inciting mutiny under the guise of simple soldier jokes.”

During the war, Patton had accused him of sedition, of working for the Germans; at home in later years, Mauldin’s brushwork would lampoon Democrats and Republicans

---

315 Ibid.
alike. “If it’s big, hit it,” he claimed was a fine credo for a cartoonist. “We are not pontificators, or molders of thought,” he said of cartoonists, “or at least we shouldn’t try to be.” And yet, simple soldier drawings or editorial cartoons could be purposeful tools for bringing attention to the right subjects, for shedding light in the darkness of a foxhole or onto the hypocrisy of an elected leader. Sometimes that was enough. “Our particular society was founded on the idea that if enough people get interested in an issue, Mauldin argued, “the majority will come up with the right answer most of the time.” In a hopeful tone perhaps not reserved for his images, he continued. “I like to think that’s true.” As an artist and a veteran, Mauldin provided thousands of cartoons to start those conversations.

---

316 Ibid.
317 Ibid.
On the evening of December 7th, 1941, mere hours after the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor by Japanese aircraft, Walt Disney received a call from his new Hyperion studio in Burbank, California. The manager was on the line and he had news: the Army was moving in. “Go ahead and call him—we’re moving in anyway,” an Army official reportedly told the manager when the confused Disney employee asked to inform his boss about the plans.318 The following morning, an anti-aircraft division of the United States Armed Forces commandeered the studio space. “Without so much as a by-your-leave,” comments Richard Schickel in his history of the company, The Disney Version, “they moved in, took over Disney’s only sound stage to use as a repair shop.”319 The sound stage, with its ability to be converted into a sound and lightproof space, was a valuable asset for the soldiers charged with guarding the area war plants.320 As Neil Gabler explains, “In short order army trucks pulled onto the lot, camouflage was draped across buildings, parking garages and storage sheds were converted into ammunition depots, and a mess kitchen was established.”321 The soldiers remained nearly a year, converting it into a secure Army campus, complete with new government-issued identification cards, drills, and bustling offices. As Jack Kinney, director of Der

---

318 Bob Thomas, Walt Disney: An American Original (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 176. Accounts differ on the timing of this call, but it was clear on the morning of the 8th that the Army was there to stay.
Fuehrer’s Face put it years later, “It was a jittery time—a scary time, really—especially for everyone along the coast.” Artist Bill Peet, working on the now postponed feature length adaptation of Peter Pan, explained that “when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor we were jolted out of Never-Never Land into the horrifying reality of World War II.”

Walt Disney’s state of the art studio space was not the only asset the government appreciated. Animators, with their ability to visualize with precise detail the inner workings of both machine and man, the government realized, had great potential. The studio in the war years changed dramatically; the new “serious work” of government contracts and military advisors took over the campus as production shifted to a focus on training and educational films. This shift in production was immediate and swift, with a navy contract for twenty films issued to Disney the day after Pearl Harbor. It was not the first order for educational films, and it would not be the last. Various branches of the Armed Services would enlist Disney’s artists to help them teach soldiers how to use their weapons or avoid malaria, just as the Treasury Department called upon Disney to help inform civilians about the new income taxes imposed on the public in order to help fund the war. “Within a single year [Disney] turned out four hundred thousand feet of government films.”

At the height of their wartime production, the studio churned out
more footage than it ever had. As Disney biographer Neil Gabler notes, “In the first four months of 1943, [the Disney Studio] shipped fifty thousand feet of film—almost as much as in 1941 and 1942 combined.” The brief yet prolific career of Walt Disney as an educator and propagandist for the United States government is the focus of this chapter. I will argue that as the figurehead of the studio, Walt was able to transform his image into that of an educator, using the war as a way to insinuate the studio into the public consciousness in a whole new way.

To understand how Disney was offered and then embraced his role as an educator and propagandist, it is important to first understand Disney’s rise to prominence in the 1930s as both a critically lauded and popular figure in American culture. Looking first at the studio’s rise to critical acclaim through his Silly Symphony shorts as well as his first animated feature, Snow White (1937), I argue the Disney studio was, by 1940, a cultural fixture. I will then examine the public’s quick acceptance of Walt Disney as an educator and the work produced during this time. But first, Disney needed to shore up the fortunes and future of the company.

Seeing the efforts of his studio in the early 1940s challenged by a striking union, lackluster returns on the investments of his feature length animated films, and given the opportunity to buoy the standing of his company in the eyes of the American public, Walt Disney turned to the government, the Treasury Department, and the Armed Services in order to keep afloat through the war years. His animators produced dozens of

---

328 Gabler, 372.
329 For a detailed look at the union strikes, see Tom Sito, Drawing the Line: The Untold Story of the Animation Unions from Bosko to Bart Simpson, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006).
training films and entertainment shorts. This chapter will focus on a small but 
representative sample of this output, in which we see propaganda both presented and 
critiqued. The ambiguous nature of education is shown to the audience through cartoons 
about how their minds are manipulated—through the classroom, the influence of others, 
our emotions, or a book on the shelf. This tension between the desire to educate and the 
essence of propaganda, to influence, is what frames my readings of each cartoon.

Only a few weeks after the Army moved in, on January 5th, 1942, the lead 
headline in The Hollywood Reporter declared in bold letters, Disney Shelves Four 
Pictures. “In order to clear the deck for virtual full time effort on government and 
military cartoons,” the article begins, “Walt Disney has postponed for the duration of the 
war all work on four full length features which his animators had been preparing.”330 The 
Disney Studios, facing financial strain due to crumbling overseas markets, had proved 
adept at creating morale-building cartoon shorts such as The Thrifty Pig (1941) and All 
Together (1942) that would help the war bond effort in Canada331, and educational 
training films, such as Four Methods for Flush Riveting (1942) for their neighbor 
Lockheed to stay afloat. The revenue from these films was badly needed, and so the 
studio spent the bulk of the war years engaged in some form of government or corporate 
training work.332 In fact, the studio would not produce a feature-length animated cartoon 
for nearly a decade after the release of Bambi in 1942.

331 Some of the earliest training and informational films made by Disney were for John Grierson and the 
Canadian Film Board, including The Thrifty Pig, a repurposed version of The Three Little Pigs.
Hill, 1980), 63.
This was a tenuous period for Walt Disney and his company for domestic reasons as well. Both *Fantasia* (1940) and *Dumbo* (1941) failed to return a significant profit, a costly new production studio, Hyperion was built at the same time a strike nearly crippled production inside the new state of the art facility.\footnote{Shale, 20.} While estimates and boasts differ on the amount of animation Disney created for the various branches of the armed services and the United States government, it is safe to say that nearly all the work done by the animators during the war years was connected to an educational or propaganda effort.

To his credit, Disney saw what was coming. Continuing to find ways to innovate and adapt to the changing economic and artistic climates, the studio head helped now to initiate the shift to training films.\footnote{Thornton Delehanty, “The Disney Studio at War,” *Theatre Arts* (Jan. 1943): 38.} Taking advantage of a connection to the proximity of his neighbor, the Lockheed Aircraft Corporation, currently working as a war production plant itself, Disney invited top officials in the company to visit the studio to see what the artists might offer in the way of a training cartoon. By March of 1941, animators were at work at what would become their first educational film made during wartime, *Four Methods of Flush Riveting*, used to help explain the use of a new riveting technique to help aircraft be more aerodynamic.\footnote{Shale, 16.} The cartoon helped the workers in the plant, and that same month, Robert Carr of the new Disney Training Film Unit, proposed a meeting with officials from the aircraft community and government officials. The memo, designed to solicit business and claim how easy it was to transform their mode of educating their workers read, in part, “An engineer or other representative of the client
merely sits down at a conference table in the Disney studio and tells his story to a group of highly-trained mechanical draftsmen and artists.”

The solicitation worked. On April 3, 1942, Disney met with leaders in the aircraft industry and government officials to discuss the possibility of creating training films. As animation scholar Michael Barrier relates, a new letter was sent out shortly thereafter to solicit business. Disney claimed he would produce these films “for national defense industries at cost, and without profit.” “In making this offer,” Disney goes on to explain, “I am motivated solely by a desire to help as best I can in the present emergency.”

Disney’s motives were not entirely altruistic, as he was compensated for his work. In an account given by the Disney company in a recent publication, Disney During World War II, the author, John Baxter, compares the studio to other war plants such as U.S. Steel and Ford, claiming that Disney was not “handsomely rewarded.” Instead, he “was determined not to profit from the war in any way. It was a gratifying opportunity to help his country in a time of crisis utilizing the unique resources that he had positioned the studio to provide.” Yet the fact was the studio very well may have gone under if not for the contracts; the films were made at-cost or even at a loss to the studio, and it needed to pay at least the overhead for the staff. As Michael S. Shull and David E. Wilt

---

337 Shale, 16.
341 Barrier, 383.
bluntly put it, “no one was forcing him to make these films.” Disney, unencumbered by a studio chief other than his brother Roy, who ran the business side of the studio, was able to transform his ideas directly into his products. Unlike a studio producer, the control over his own company allowed Disney to shepherd his forward-thinking idea that cartoons could provide both entertainment and have educational value into a reality. Taking this a step further, Schickel acknowledges that the move could have also been in part a way to keep Disney in the public eye. With no feature films to distribute, the documentaries, training films, and propaganda shorts would allow Disney to “keep his name before the public at a moment when it was entirely possible that, without this subsidy, he might have been forced to shut up shop entirely.”

And so Disney assumed the dual role of propagandist and profiteer, keeping his studio afloat while experimenting with new forms of animation that, ultimately, would transform the studio and, arguably, Disney himself in the postwar years. Disney’s wartime shorts and educational films take many forms, and rely on the ability of the medium to visualize training material that simply could not be accomplished by other means. In the article “Disney: Our Secret Weapon”, published in *Esquire* in March, 1943, the ability for Disney and his artists to show the world the impossible becomes the appeal of using animation for educational means.

He [Disney] can make anything act—a screw, a bolt, a broom, a waffle. He can personify anything, imbue anything with arms and legs and a silly

---

342 Shull and Wilt, 46.
343 Ibid.
344 Schickel, 268.
smile and give it a meaning it never had before[ . . . ] And all to teach, all to supply the administration, the Army, the Navy with the short-cuts to education they have needed so desperately ever since the bombs at Pearl Harbor blew their leisure time to pieces.\textsuperscript{345}

And so films about guns were produced, the camera traveling inside the chamber where no human eye could travel to explain how they worked. Cartoons on the dangers of malaria portrayed cross sections of germs and mosquitoes. Maps were illustrated for Frank Capra’s \textit{Why We Fight} (1942) series, allowing soldiers to visualize the world and the conflict in a clear manner. Humor was used as well, with Goofy cutting down on gas by using a pogo stick to commute in \textit{Victory Vehicles} (1943), or Donald Duck preparing to parachute into enemy territory in \textit{Commando Duck} (1944). The purchase of war bonds was encouraged, as was the saving of cooking grease. In \textit{Out of the Frying Pan Into the Front Lines} (1942), Disney’s animators accomplished the impossible, visualizing a drop of grease transforming into a bomb.

Disney’s work did not go unappreciated. At the 14\textsuperscript{th} Annual Academy Awards banquet in 1942, John Grierson, celebrated Canadian documentarian, praised those gathered for their continued work in war-time production. “At this time we are all, in one way or another, concerned in the high duty of creating and maintaining the morale which is necessary for a hard and absolute war,” Grierson called these efforts to come “humble” and “deeply ordinary”—the tasks of providing both information and morale to the

American people in the face of such adversity. Only a few months after the United States entered the war, after the attack on Pearl Harbor in December, it was not only a recognition of the work already done, but a cinematic call to arms for all that was left to accomplish.

Many other American filmmakers had already begun preparation for documentaries, propaganda, training, and morale-boosting films. John Ford would soon ship off to the Pacific Ocean with the Navy to capture the Battle of Midway; William Wyler would fly in the Memphis Belle and lose his hearing while capturing the exploits of the famous bomber. Frank Capra, a major in the Signal Corps, would apply his patriotic fervor to the found-footage *Why We Fight Series*, and John Huston would travel the Aleutians in Alaska and the Italian countryside with the Army. In the case of Disney, assessing the war effort means looking at both the man and his company, and for that company the work of wartime production would become a nearly all-consuming task. Walt Disney and his animators would at times spend over 90% of their time and resources producing content for the United States Government. “Mr. Disney has already given his great talent to such routine affairs as the teaching of gunnery and the encouragement of war savings,” Grierson said that night, whether or not such topics could actually be deemed “routine.” He would know—as head of the Canadian film board, Grierson had already ordered savings bonds and morale films from the Disney Studios for his home country, recognizing the particular power animation had to both

---


347 *Report from the Aleutians and The Battle of San Pietro are discussed in Chapter 2.*
inform and entertain. Soon, Disney and his animators would be inundated with requests to help educate both servicemen and citizens alike. One Gallup poll suggested that nearly 40% of respondents paid their taxes after seeing Donald Duck do so in *The New Spirit* (1942).348

What is also notable about this public declaration is Grierson’s suggestion that the name Disney stood in for an entire studio. Other than the business affairs of the studio, which were mostly handled by his brother Roy, Walt Disney was intimately involved in nearly all aspects of production. And so a discussion of Walt Disney alongside John Huston, Bill Mauldin, and Jacob Lawrence as artists is not as farfetched as it may seem at first. I argue that Walt Disney, like no other studio head or producer of the era, embodied not just the creative spirit of his studio’s output, but also the day-to-day organization. Certainly, a similar argument has been made about the Warner Brothers during the war years. Michael Birdwell’s *Celluloid Soldiers*, contains a lengthy history of the family’s use of film as a weapon against Nazism. My approach is inspired by theirs.

As nearly all biographies and critical readings of Walt Disney the man and Walt Disney Productions mention, the cartoons that came out of the company, particularly while Disney was alive, are marked by his control on all levels. As Neal Gabler writes in *Walt Disney: The Triumph of The American Imagination*, Walt Disney was not the artist, writer, or director of the majority of his work after the first years of the company’s existence. However, “he was the undisputed power at the studio, not only in the sense that he was the boss but also in the more important sense that his sensibility governed

---

348 Shale, 32.
everything the studio produced.”\textsuperscript{349} In America’s Corporate Art, Jerome Christensen argues that the studio is the auteur, rather than the screenwriters, directors, or producers, as the overarching purpose of a studio is advancing the “particular interests” of their corporation, which in turn leads to profits. In this case, even the accepted notion that each studio had a “house style” can be examined better as a strategy—for production and profit.\textsuperscript{350} Even in this model, however, Disney stands apart, as he was involved in the studio as owner and producer, while involving himself intimately with nearly every aspect of production. From the germination of story ideas and the choice of which literary properties to adapt, to dominating story meetings and providing his own ideas for gags in each cartoon, this image of Walt as the leader on all levels is repeatedly confirmed by the artists at the studio as well as Disney’s biographers. One of the more famous phrases that was levied on Disney was that of “benevolent dictator”, of course borrowing the terms of the day as a moniker for their boss. Disney was known for working his artists for long hours, favoring some over others, and taking credit. As Jack Kinney wrote about the Academy Award win for Der Fuehrer’s Face, “Walt, of course, picked up the award.”\textsuperscript{351}

Stephen Watts, in his book The Magic Kingdom, relates a story of Ollie Johnston, one of the era’s best known animators, a member of the famed “Nine Old Men” who would lead the animation duties for Walt Disney features and cartoons for decades. It was Johnston who gave Walt the “benevolent dictator” name, and as Watts explains, “Most employees agreed completely. In indisputable fashion, Walt ran the show and wielded

\textsuperscript{349} Gabler, 206.
\textsuperscript{351} Kinney, 141.
power everywhere. In the words of a close associate, he was a “one-man studio” as he directed the creative planning for the great projects of this era and drove his staff relentlessly for ideas that would supplement his basic vision.\textsuperscript{352}

All of the cartoons from the war era are fertile ground for inquiry—an area of research that is lacking in studies on Walt Disney and the studio. As film historian Thomas Doherty writes, the war years were, “long the most elusive part of the Disney screen legacy.” The DVD release \textit{Walt Disney Treasures: Walt Disney on the Front Lines} (2004) was the first official release of many of these cartoons outside of the entertainment shorts. Along with Disney’s feature \textit{Victory Through Air Power}, based on Alexander de Seversky’s book about long-distance aircraft dominance, the set included many of the training films that were created for soldiers, and other cartoon shorts made for wartime entertainment purposes. Also included in the set, “from the vault,” were the long long-sought after shorts created explicitly for use as propaganda. \textit{Der Fuehrer’s Face}, \textit{Reason and Emotion}, \textit{Education for Death: The Making of a Nazi}, and \textit{Chicken Little} will be my main focus here, as they provide a glimpse into what later critics will say are latent ideological messages in Disney’s output. The ideology in these films is clearly displayed but, as I will argue later in the chapter, they also provide ambiguous readings of propaganda itself. These shorts, no longer elusive to the public, paint a fascinating picture of Walt Disney’s mastery of not only educational films, but propaganda as well. As

\textsuperscript{352} Watts, 188.
Schickel noted as early as 1969, “The war years, seemingly unkind to Disney, were actually of tremendous significance to him.”

These shorts paint a fascinating picture of Disney’s work in wartime animation production. While the cartoons, as I shall argue below in detail, are an impressive testimony to Disney’s mastery of the propaganda form, some of them also show a considerable and surprising degree of ambivalence towards using propaganda. Disney is often portrayed as someone who pushed aside the notion that he was political, that he claimed only to be an entertainer. As he himself once said, “I make pictures for entertainment, and then the professors tell me what they mean.”

Yet, as Richard Maltby and others have argued, Hollywood and its products, though certainly entertaining, are far from just “harmless entertainment.” In the 1930s, even as social problem films emerged alongside musical spectacles designed to distract audiences from the world outside the theater, studio bosses argued they simply deferred to public tastes, evolving with their audience but never presenting overt political messages. But this reading denies the inherently political product of film. Animation, in particular, deemed only for children, despite Disney’s claims otherwise, did provide more than just pleasure. As Henry A. Giroux warns, “recognition of the pleasures that Disney provides should not blind us to the reality that Disney is about more than entertainment.”

This view begins with the notion that entertainment is inherently less important than “art”, that

---

353 Schickel, 268.
354 Walt Disney, (Beverly Hills, Calif: Wisdom, 1959), 76.
it cannot hold the deeper meanings of the culturally accepted modes of artistic and political expression. This view explains “mere entertainment” away as “triviality, ephemeralanity, and an absence of seriousness.”

Disney saw untapped potential in his animated cartoons, and his continually ambitious, boundary pushing alone exemplifies this fact. The Disney Studios operated in the gray area of “art” and “entertainment” in the early years of feature production and beyond, able to be appreciated by both the critics and the masses. *Snow White*, for example, introduced a new level of artistry to the American filmgoer, not only because it was feature length. Disney pioneered the multi-plane camera, brought in professors to give his animators lectures on European masters, lighting techniques, etc. By 1939, *Fantasia* was a clear attempt to merge the high and low, combining appreciations of color and form, Beethoven and Stravinsky, with more “low” sequences of, for example, animated hippos and elephants dancing with caped alligators. Disney, described as “a growing force in our midst” in the first book-length treatment of the studio, clearly tried to do more than entertain. More to the point, Disney was adaptable to the times, though, as one of the earliest criticisms leveled on the studio claimed, he was “artless”, near oblivious to the perspective of his films. His taste “atrocious,” he created nightmares of the times and succeeded if only by not embarrassing himself. Although the wartime cartoons were more explicit in their meanings, readings of them are no less complicated.

---

357 Maltby, 14.
There emerges a fascinating paradox of these Disney cartoons: at the ideological crossroads of entertainment, education, and politics, Disney warned of the evils of propaganda while using it himself. My discussion will focus on *Education for Death* (1943), *Chicken Little* (1943), *Reason and Emotion* (1943), and *Der Fuehrer’s Face* (1943), all of which treat propaganda and education with a degree of ambivalence and ambiguity. Each presents stories of the manipulative and hence harmful potential of education, while drawing attention to their own form—the very thing they warn against.

But in order to understand how the Disney Studios arrived at the crossroads of entertainment, education, and politics in the early days of the war, it is helpful to first chart the trajectory of the company’s rise from upstart to center of innovation, and harbinger of the new modern art of animation—a trajectory closely interwoven with that of Disney the man, from modestly talented artist who started his own production outfit, to popular and critical darling, a trusted American teacher who did not pontificate from behind a desk, but sat at the helm of a powerful movie production studio. The Disney Studios was not alone in their work for the government in either animation or live-action filmmaking during the war, yet Disney was the only studio personality to transform his persona to the world of Television in the postwar era, creating a weekly television program that revolved around his own image and the work he was doing at his studio and theme park. As Schickel observed, it was the Disney name and brand that brought the audience to the theaters, and the recognizable characters the audiences had come to know and love over the previous decade. “He was not, after all, an anonymous maker of parts for war materiel—he was Walt Disney, and his government films were to be seen by the
people who had been the audience for his commercial films and would be his audience again.”

To be trusted as a teacher, he first needed to be proven as a trustworthy and reliable entertainer; his cultural cache, having produced in little over a decade some of the most popular characters and feature films for the screen, earned him government contracts.

During the 1930s, when the Depression had shaken Americans’ faith in their nation and its cultural myths, the film industry had an important role in reclaiming the American Dream and restoring hope. Tino Balio, writing of the confluence of forces that brought cinema to the forefront of American thought and life, explains that the power to both entertain and sway public opinion gave filmmakers a power never before seen:

As a central social institution, Hollywood ranked as the third-largest source of news in the country, surpassed only by Washington and New York. Hollywood satisfied the cravings of its fans by feeding tidbits about its comings and goings to more than three hundred newspaper, magazine, and radio correspondents from around the world permanently assigned to the movie capital. This fascination with the movies revealed itself not only in the public’s preoccupation with the life-styles of the stars but also in the presumed power of the movies as a socializing force.

---
360 Schickel, 272.
Having created films that examined the hard times while also providing escape from the social problems of the day, the industry was “firmly within the American grain.” But Hollywood had become more than just a dream factory; when a cultural town is perceived as one of news production, the paradigm has shifted. Coupled with the fact that roughly 95 million people went to the movies each week during the mid-1940s, the sheer amount of the public receiving their entertainment and information from the film screen would remain unmatched after attendance heights during the war. A cultural force, the messages it spoke to the people could help change minds as it documented plight or left the audience laughing. Helping to guide the nation through Depression and war with information and entertainment, it is, “impossible to think of the era without thinking of the role movies had played.”

World War II took that newfound responsibility a dramatic step further. The entire industry faced challenges during the war years, but attendance reached heights never again seen, and the tone of many films embraced the timely influence of war. As film historian Thomas Schatz notes, the nature of cinema changed, but such changes were vital to both the morale of the country and the survival of the industry:

Never before had the interests of the nation and the industry been so closely aligned, and never had its status as a national cinema been so vital.

The industry’s “conversion to war production” from 1942 to 1945 was

---

364 Ibid.
eminently successful, as Hollywood enjoyed what may have been its finest
hour as a social institution and a cultural force.365

Disney’s shorts were an integral part of such a boom. Along with many other studios
producing morale-boosting cartoons for the war effort, Disney worked directly with the
government to aid the cause. In 7 Minutes: The Life and Death of the American
Animated Cartoon, Norman M. Klein’s history of the American cartoon industry and art
form, it is claimed that roughly half of the cartoons from 1942 until the end of the war
dealt in some way with the war.366 According to Klein, cartoons were used in military
training, “because soldiers often remembered military data shown in cartoon form more
easily than in printed manuals.”367 Disney was at the fore of these productions,
particularly because their successes before the war were so staggering. Since the success
of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, which garnered critical and audience acclaim, the
company had made Pinocchio, Fantasia, and Dumbo, all of which cemented Disney’s
reputation with the movie-going public. Although the animated feature films released
from 1939 to 1941 were popular with audiences, their production costs almost
bankrupted the company; Disney was almost forced to shut down.

Steven Watts makes a larger case for the interpretation of art, cartoons, and
films—particularly those of Walt Disney, and how they were influenced by and, in turn,
influenced politics and history. Watts aims to show Disney’s progress politically, from

366 While Walt Disney and his animators created dozens of war-themed cartoons, they were not the only
studio that produced entertainment shorts about the war. Warner Brothers also created the SNAFU series
for soldiers, Leon Schlesinger Productions created The Ducktators, and many others.
367 Norman M. Klein, Seven Minutes: the Life and Death of the American Animated Cartoon, (London:
Verso, 1993), 186.
his childhood with a socialist father, whom Disney would later don a “friend of the working man,” to a Depression-era populist and finally a political conservative, strikebreaker, anti-communist, and friendly witness to HUAC. He brings to the reader’s attention that Disney was at first lauded as a great modernist artist, at the forefront of this burgeoning craft of the cartoon. Sergei Eisenstein, the master Russian silent filmmaker, praised him, as did the American public. His team’s invention of a multi-plane camera made for the first three-dimensional cartoon, able to sweep through different layers of action. His use of fairy tales with challenging material (death, misbehaving children, and frightening witches) showed that he sought a respected avenue for his seemingly childish art. And yet it is important to remember that theatrical cartoons of the era were not made simply for children. As Michael S. Shull and David E. Wilt contend in Doing Their Bit, cartoons were presented in the same group of entertainment as the newsreel and feature in a movie house, and so they were tailored to entertain both children and adults, “not in any sense simply examples of “children’s literature” of their period.” Because these cartoons were made for various audiences, they hold the potential for multiple meanings, and can be read by different audiences in completely different ways.

Through the Great Depression, Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck emerged alongside Hollywood musicals, the films of Frank Capra and others as great sources of comfort, but their entertainment was laced with morale boosting and thus with the

369 Shull and Wilt, 7.
potential for political readings as well. The challenge of the war years was to transform this mass appeal and proven ability to entertain into a way to educate the masses about the dangers of fascism. As a trusted source, Disney was able to use a stable of well-established characters to instill trust in his, and by extension, the government’s messages. Propaganda cartoons warned the audience about the destructive power an educator may have on a child or nation, and the travails of the “everyman” Donald Duck helped release the frustrations of paying taxes for the first time or heading to an Army boot camp. The images Disney chose to populate his films—Donald Duck as the everyman, the innocence of children, the battle between good and evil, and the simple use of visual metamorphoses reflect his populist roots and display his own flair for using the visual to grip the mindset of a nation at war. The virtues of the common man, his individualism and his power to rise to the occasion when difficulties bogged him down were virtues Walt Disney expressed in his cartoons, even when they did not involve wartime morale boosting.

Disney’s cartoons were at least latently—though often more explicitly--political long before the war. Writing of the cultural power Disney garnered in the 1930s, Robert Sklar links the faith in Disney films to the growing sense that cinema had realized its full potential, having “taken over cultural functions” of the novel. For Sklar, Disney and his animators, “possessed the knack of providing mass entertainment in which intellectuals

---

370 This was true, in more overt fashion, for Left-leaning films throughout the decade and this carried over into the war years as well. For the 1930s films, see William Alexander, *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931 to 1942*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981).
could find both pleasure and significance.”

Throughout these years, Disney dominated his form at both the box office and with critics, his cultural cache and prestige rising with each film released. The Disney Studios won the Academy Award for outstanding cartoon short ten of the eleven possible times from 1932 to 1942, mostly with their *Silly Symphonies*. In 1937, Disney’s *Snow White* was the highest grossing film of the year. In 1940, *Pinocchio* and *Fantasia* both were at the top of the charts, and in 1942, *Bambi* took that honor. Both the public and critics embraced Disney during these years, which helped lead him into war production.

In an early example of the power of his cartoons, we can see how visual metaphors can stand in for—and ultimately comprise-- ideological rhetoric. In the pamphlet for the first ever museum exhibition dedicated to the art of Walt Disney, “In 1933, a big bad wolf, a song, and three little pigs enshrined the prestige of Disney and his medium in an unassailable position. THE PIGS was the most popular picture ever made and had a profound psychological effect upon a fear-ridden world.” At the height of the Great Depression, the studio created an animated version of *The Three Little Pigs* (1933). With the original story elements in place—three pigs building homes, a hungry wolf trying to get in to eat them—the Disney version uses allegory to turn itself into a vehicle for a more political message when two of those pigs merrily, or lazily, dance the day away while their hard working cohort constructs a house of bricks. While the two unprepared pigs sing, “Who’s afraid of the big bad wolf?” their homes are destroyed.

---

371 Sklar, 198.
Only through the mercy of the sound-minded bricklaying pig do they find solace from the ravenous predator.

It is all too easy to see the tale as an innocent play on a classic fairy tale, gently extolling the virtues of hard work and preparation in the face of a coming storm. But when that storm is the economic decline of the Depression, the wolf can stand in for a whole host of villains; it is the genius of such cartoons that they can remain this simple while allowing for more complex examination. The wolf—money woes, Wall Street investors, bankers, or just the embodiment of fear itself—can, if the tale can be said to have a moral, be kept in check by diligence and a little sweat upon the brow.

The formula remained so simple that, once the war came, Disney was able to recycle the cartoon, imbuing it with an even more urgent meaning than before. In a short created for the Canadian government’s war bond efforts, *The Thrifty Pig*, the three pigs are now trying to protect themselves from a vicious Nazi soldier. (Figure 4.1) This and other Canadian shorts, Bella Honess Roe argues, became the testing ground for future wartime shorts, “blending the factual and the entertaining and the sober and the light-hearted,” as the cartoons aimed to drawn in an audience while providing information and morale. 372 In the case of *The Thrifty Pig*, however, a template already existed. The film begins just the same. Two of the pigs sing merrily about playing all day without fear of the wolf. When the wolf appears this time, however, he wears a swastika armband and a Nazi uniform. His sharp teeth are more than just representations of the Depression, or

tools to eat the poor pigs. Now, in the face of a cartoon wolf, the audience can see the face of Hitler. The sharp teeth can be interpreted as harbingers of death and destruction spreading across Europe and the world. The cartoon progresses to the same end. Two pigs lose their homes to the powerful wolf, at which point they run off to the stronghold of the third pig. Now, hanging proudly off the house is the flag of the British Empire. Once safe inside, the two pigs cower in fear, but the third pig has no worries. As the cartoon shows, the wise pig used strong bricks to construct his home. Upon closer examination, the bricks reveal the sturdy construction of war bonds. As the wolf approaches, he huffs and puffs but the house does not budge. His efforts only reveal, as paint is blown off the façade, the gleaming strength of war bonds. It would not be too difficult for the audience to interpret this new morality tale. This time, the threat of Nazism is combated with a strong foundation of citizenry, expressed in their purchase of war bonds.

As the 20th Century came to a close, scholars began to take stock of what is one of the most powerful disseminators of cultural values in America, particularly when it comes to reaching out to children for entertainment and education. As Henry Giroux remarks in *The Mouse That Roared*, Disney has had a profound effect on children for decades, as a “teaching machine” simply for the amount of people who have come in contact with his work over the generations.373 While scholarly work on Disney has focused on the modern Disney Company as a global economic empire and cultural arbiter

---

373 Giroux, 19.
of traditional American values, some of the insights from scholarship on present-day Disney can be applied to an analysis of the company’s role during the 1940s.

Paul Wells usefully summarizes the various and valid approaches to Disney in his *Animation and America*, explaining that even his own take on Disney could be expanded:

“Usually ‘Disney’ is understood either as ‘Walt Disney’, the entrepreneurial animation pioneer—‘the controlling editor’, ‘the charismatic leader’, ‘chief designer’ and ‘the spark plug of production’; or the ‘studio’ and its output; or the ‘brand’ which is the ideological and commercial imprimatur on a range of cultural artefacts from films to theme parks.”

This points to the multiple readings of Disney as an artist and as a corporation, a studio and a producer—or as a mythmaker or purveyor of sexist, conservative, fairy tales. With the rise of Cultural Studies in the 1990s, the Disney product came under fresh scrutiny from critics and scholars. With books such as *Multiculturalism and the Mouse*, *From Mouse to Mermaid*, *Disney Discourse*, among others, scholars began to interrogate the historical, cultural, and ideological aspect of Walt Disney, his films, theme parks, planned communities, and products. Some of this criticism “seeks to simplify him in the extreme.”

Yet what makes the Walt Disney Studios wartime cartoons so fascinating for study is that their historical context and mission requires a modification of critical tools, going beyond, as it were, a focus on Disney films as ideologically inflected education for

---

children. I am not arguing that this axis of inquiry is not important, rather, I argue that wartime propaganda has its own exigencies, agendas, and rhetorical structures. What Disney’s wartime cartoons demonstrate is that, when it comes to propaganda, the ideological contradictions that inhere in every mass cultural text, and certainly in Disney’s animated features, are no longer so hidden, but become overtly visible as contradictions. In other words, the wartime cartoons need to be examined for their self-contradictory nature—which, highly intriguingly, is also something that extends to a meta-level in the cartoons, namely the tension between the films’ warning about propaganda and using propaganda. It’s almost as though Disney as a studio honed its ideological skills (already developed in germinal form in the pre-World War II films) through the task of making propaganda cartoons. Notwithstanding the fact that neither the public nor Disney himself associated Disney films with any form of politics, it was during the war years that Walt Disney accepted the role of an educator precisely out of political conviction, to help the war effort. Indeed, he embraced it and repeatedly pronounced that his role only laid the groundwork for his future endeavors in documentary filmmaking and his theme park attractions. Given the heterogeneity of the cultural products and genres the Disney company ended up developing, the need for a unifying element—some may call it ethos, others brand—seems obvious. This unifier was education, and with it, Disney’s main target group, children, comes into focus.

Certainly, when Disney speaks of children, it is oftentimes with a sense of purpose, to entertain and to educate, and he viewed his enterprises, both in animation and other ventures, as a way to help mold ideal children. "I think of a child's mind as a blank
book,” he once said, “During the first years of his life, much will be written on the pages. The quality of that writing will affect his life profoundly.” Yet, as Giroux points out, "Education is never innocent because it always presupposes a particular view of citizenship, culture, and society.”

With the explicit logistic, financial, and ideological backing of the government, his accrued prestige, millions of adoring fans, and the capital and asset base to accomplish his tasks, Walt Disney’s level of influence was never higher. In their shrewd and unique combination of top-down demagoguery and more subtle insinuations and acts of mythologization, Disney films may be said to have significantly contributed to—in fact, to have partially constituted—what Louis Althusser famously termed the Ideological State Apparatus, a cluster of purveyors of ideology that included schools and other institutions of public education, religious and moral doctrine provided by the church, and the media industries as producers of news and entertainment.

For Althusser, the ISA were insidious not only because their omnipresence effectively disseminated ideology to the public, but because of the particular nature of that ideology. As redefined by Althusser, what makes ideology different from traditional or conventional propaganda is that, in contrast to the latter’s mode of heavy-handed, top-down preaching, ideology is more manipulative in that it more deeply and less noticeably insinuates itself into a person’s psyche, leading the person not only to change their world view but to reproduce these changes over and over again. In other words, the ISA’s production of ideology is all consuming, and constantly reaffirming. Religion reaffirms

377 Giroux, 32.
itself in its ceremonies, just as the family does. For Althusser, the most dominant form of state control was the education system. The forms acting together cannot hold a candle to that of the school. He explains:

It takes children from every class at infant-school age, and then for years, the years in which the child is most ‘vulnerable’, squeezed between the family State apparatus and the educational State apparatus, it drums into them, whether it uses new or old methods, a certain amount of ‘know-how’ wrapped in the ruling ideology […] or simply the ruling ideology in its pure state.378

With captive audiences, the educational system clearly dominates the mind during its formative years. Althusser asks pardon from those “heroes” who try to fight against the system when they stand before the chalkboard, but for him, those brave teachers are few and far between. The sheer length of time a child must spend in a classroom makes the educational system the clear dominant form of instruction in all forms.

Walt Disney saw the opportunity to transform the cartoon into a medium for education. Reflecting on his studio’s conversion from wartime propaganda factory to postwar education leader, Disney would write years later, “More or less unconsciously, we had been preparing for this task for a long time.”379 Later, Disney would discuss his documentaries as “edutainment”, combining the skills his studio has acquired throughout

379 Disney, “Mickey as Professor,” 120.
the years to make the audience engage and laugh, with a desire to educate. In the years after the war, Disney transformed his company into the namesake of a television empire and a fantasy amusement park, creating worlds of both fantasy and reality (and in most cases a mixture of both). It was during the war years that he learned just how powerful his work could be. Disney was seen almost immediately as a teacher, and the headlines used to tout his wartime work show the media’s keenness to accept his films as a way to revolutionize the classroom.

Consider, for example, the article in Fortune magazine, “Walt Disney: Great Teacher,” from the summer of 1942, only a few months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. It relays in detail a story meeting of the Walt Disney staff as they prepared for an earlier cartoon dealing with the dangers of malaria-infected mosquitoes. It was not the first film that Disney helped create for the war effort, but the conversation does offer a glimpse into the process of creating an educational cartoon that also entertains. Repeatedly asking how they might combine the seriousness of the subject with a storyline that might be memorable, the artists and story producers, with Disney’s guidance, decide it will be best to keep clear of gags, though adding the presence of the seven dwarfs might aid in helping the audience connect with the cartoon’s subject matter. At one point, Walt Disney talks about the task at hand, “It’s a serious problem, but we are showing how simple it is. Even Dopey can do it.”


“Walt Disney: Great Teacher,” Fortune, August 1942, 91.
Manipulating the storyline to engage and educate, the Disney artists needed to put the same effort into each and every cartoon produced for the government. The result, according to Fortune, was “nothing less than a revolution in the technique of education.” Only in the planning stages, it was clear that the studio not only took their new job seriously, but saw it as a step toward changing the way American children were educated. “[T]hough he is only well begun on his war job, it already seems possible that this modest, farm-bred young man who never finished high school will be remembered best as one of the greatest teachers of all time,” the article claims, de facto bestowing on Walt Disney the mantle of mass educator. Walt would have it no other way. The author paints Disney’s outlook for the future as one of “limitless” and full of hope:

He has no false modesty about what he and his associates can contribute to international understanding and friendship, and to that mass education by which alone democracy can at last fulfill its founders’ dreams. Happy in his patriotic present, he is frank to concede that it promises great things for Walt Disney’s as well as the world’s future. Every day he and his story men […] are learning new lessons in the technique of teaching. And when his educational films begin to flow out around the world, he foresees the building of a distribution system that will assure an enormous ready-made market for them after the war.383

382 Fortune, 93.
383 Fortune, 156.
Clearly, both Disney and *Fortune* had high hopes for the continuing educational prospects of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. These prospects would continue to increase with the perception that the wartime cartoons had proven effective.

Disney wanted both the critics and the public to believe in the power of his medium. His work during the war years exemplifies his growing belief that the images onscreen held an important place in the hearts of the masses while helping to sway their minds. The war films were simply the beginning of a much larger project, which included the spread of his work worldwide. And yet Disney’s ability to educate and capture his audience’s imaginations was present from the very beginning. What is most fascinating about each and every cartoon is not the visual technique of conversions, such as grease dropping from the sky and forming bullets and bombs. It is not the compelling use of images to show a child transforming into a young Nazi soldier, or even the creative way in which the powers of reason and emotion are personified as cavemen or businessmen. What is paradoxical about the entire project is the use of education not only as a tool for good, but all the while critiquing the education of others as destructive.

In the four shorts to be discussed in depth later in the chapter, it is clear there is ambiguity and ambivalence in the product, even behind the forceful imagery. On one hand, Disney spent the war years espousing the power of education, creating dozens of training films. On the other, he provided powerful examples of how destructive education could be. Sometimes knowledge proves fatal, as it does for the chickens in *Chicken Little*. Sometimes knowledge can drive you mad, as in the case of *Reason and Emotion*. And in Germany, knowledge can shape you into a brainwashed follower of Adolf Hitler. In each
of these cartoons, education propaganda, and cognate modes of manipulation are used and critiqued simultaneously. Many of the cartoons produced depicted an American challenged by fear and, hence, vulnerable to demagoguery, but also ready and eager to be educated into fighting fascism with patriotism and other traditional American values.

In this sense, it wasn’t as though the proximity of education and propaganda in Disney’s own efforts went completely unnoticed by Disney and the company. Rather, the relation between these two became subject to renegotiation from case to case, always with the conviction that education is not propaganda, as long as it is made on behalf of democracy. This negotiation is evidenced in a February 1943 spread in *Life* magazine. *Life*, which ran multiple articles about Disney’s efforts during the war, published an article on *Hitler’s Children* (1943), about the indoctrination of children in Germany, directed by Edward Dmytryk and produced by RKO from Gregor Ziemer’s book *Education for Death*. At the same time the Tim Holt starring film was produced, Disney and his artists adapted the book for their own cartoon. Pictures from the short, titled after Ziemer’s text, ran next to choice quotes from the book, including a passage where a young boy pleads, “Let me die for Hitler. I must die for Hitler.”384 (Figure 4.2)

On the opposite page, an advertisement for Oneida Community flatware explains, “These are the things we are fighting for…the right to teach the truth…not propaganda.” The image accompanying the ad features a young blonde girl in braids, listening intently as a beautiful blonde teacher with curls holds up a pencil, gesturing to a globe on her desk. The girl’s entire head is enveloped with the globe, as if the totality and purity of

---

knowledge surrounds her in this ideal schoolroom scene. The safety of the classroom, where knowledge and truth is bestowed on children, is challenged in this pair of images. In *Education for Death*, the Aryan stereotype Hans is the “blank slate” that Disney claimed he saw in children. Similarly, the Aryan-American child in the Oneida advertisement trusts in the knowledge that she receives from her teacher. The only difference here is context. *Life* equates the idealized versions of beautiful blonde Americans in a schoolroom scene as that which we are fighting for, while Hans’ education is perverted. It is not, then, simply *education* for which we fight, but *American* education.

There are ways in which Disney’s own comments indicate that he was keenly aware that education involves some form of manipulation. In the summer of 1945, Walt Disney clearly stated his admiration and hopes for his art. After his efforts during the war in the film industry, Disney campaigned for the expansion of the educational film into the classrooms of America. In an article written in *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, he tells at length of the power of film:

> The motion picture took a leading part in all phases of wartime education—propaganda and information as well as training. It explained and supported ideas, it showed with impartial fidelity the course of events, it made hidden phenomena visible, and it demonstrated the way to control them. So successful was the motion picture in this task of education for war that close attention was once more given to its capacity as a means for enlightenment and teaching in the work of peace. Educators, scientists,
statesman and prelates have led a chorus of enthusiastic interest in the use of motion pictures for formal instruction. It has been recalled that films were considered educational instruments long before the development of the entertainment industry.\(^{385}\)

This quote reveals Disney’s own manifesto on the power of animation. He would blend his own sensibilities about the art of cartooning and his own Populist beliefs to create educational films that embraced his interpretation of American democracy. Disney’s hindsight is important; he not only uses his propaganda cartoons to preach “impartial fidelity”, clearly a contradiction in terms, while telling his audience that the cartoon can do so much more, he now offers his services to the nation as a true historian and educator. It was during this time that Disney himself began hosting the television presentations on American history in the 1950s. In his essay, he writes of the “enlightenment” that his work can offer, if only because a film camera, and especially a cartoon, can show in scientific detail the hidden wonders of our world.

Disney’s discussion of the value of freedom and culture reveal that, for him, if the studio was able to demonstrate the powers of freedom in animation, then the fields of politics, culture, and art can collide. As Disney spoke on Our American Culture in March of 1942, the goal was an expression of freedom. This address is fascinatingly simple; Disney uses generic terms for art and life to establish what he deems culturally relevant or “beautiful”. Here, Disney claims to be a standard-bearer of cultural freedom and choice. He first speaks of beauty and freedom:

\(^{385}\) Walt Disney, "Mickey as Professor," The Public Opinion Quarterly 9, no. 2 (1945): 119.
As I see it, a person’s culture represents his appraisal of the things that make up life. And a fellow becomes cultured, I believe, by selecting that which is fine and beautiful in life and throwing aside that which is mediocre or phony. Sort of a series of free, very personal choices, you might say. If this is true, then I think it follows that “freedom” is the most precious word to culture. Freedom to believe what you choose—and [to] read, think, say, and be what you choose.386

Choice is what makes us stand apart from the fascists. He then continues along the precise outline of his own wartime propaganda. After linking cultural freedom to beauty and even personal and political freedom, he lauds the United States for allowing this freedom. He speaks for everyone, citing “we Americans” and thanking a higher power for his freedom to express such thoughts:

In America, we are guaranteed those freedoms. It is the constitutional privilege of every American to become cultured or to just grow up like Donald Duck. I believe that this spiritual and intellectual freedom which we Americans enjoy is our greatest cultural blessing. Therefore, it seems to me that the first duty of culture is to defend freedom and resist all tyranny….I thank God and America for the right to live and raise my family under the flag of tolerance, democracy, and freedom.387


387 Ibid.
Propaganda has an explicit purpose, and an explicit meaning. Combining the Ideological State Apparatuses of politics, mass entertainment and education, the Walt Disney Company masterfully placed some of its most affecting cartoons in the classroom. There, the implications of the Nazi state are all too clear. It never needs to be said in these cartoons that the American education system is better because the horrors of the Nazi system are presented as such a clear evil. Their mind control directly implies its opposite, American freedom. Every burned book onscreen reminds us of our full library. Each overbearing teacher calls to mind a pastoral scene with a little red schoolhouse. What goes unnoticed under the impact of this stark contrast is that American values may themselves be ideological, as we saw in the way Disney’s output deeply if subtly insinuated normative notions of politics, culture, race, and gender into what it means to be American. Thus, if propaganda and ideology are not the same, the role of the Disney Company during the war indicates how both remain intricately linked to each other.

Training films, “information-rich, yet lively and engaging.” Helped soldiers and workers to learn their tasks.  

Disney’s animators used their skills to elaborate and bring to light materials in ways previously impossible, “educating the armed forces and the public by his expository films and delighting them with his humor,” wrote one critic as the war production escalated. The Disney style, ever apparent even in these films, oftentimes uses whimsical narratives and humor to help lighten the dense material. As

388 Van Riper, 4.
390 Van Riper, 4.
an effective tool, the turn toward strict propaganda production retains some of the humor, but toward much darker subject matter.

What we can do, then, is show how Disney’s wartime forays into what he would later call “edutainment” are privileged sites for understanding the confluence of ideology and propaganda. Looking at Disney’s war effort enables us to chart the repurposing of entertainment with morale boosting and anti-fascist propaganda, which was an ideological stance taken by most of Hollywood and, as such, was shared by the movie colony’s conservative and progressive camps. The animators were tasked with creating images that were specifically meant to instill patriotism by juxtaposing American values against those of fascism. They did all this by transforming their stable of beloved cartoon characters into soldiers, dutiful housewives, and willing participants in a march toward war. And these images did not just pertain to the cartoon shorts.

Before looking at the cartoons in detail, it may be useful to briefly consider examples of these paratextual elements--posters, comic books, and other Disney-branded materials covered in American flags and shouting out calls for action—for the way they put a particular Disney spin on the industry’s general mobilization of the populace into the war effort. At issue are the Disney Treasury Bonds and their skillful swaying of children (and, needless to say, their parents) into a patriotic engagement with the war. (Figure 4.3) As a gallery of well-known Disney characters look on in admiration from the borders, the bond certifies that the child is an owner of a United States War Finance

---

Committee bond, and is “thereby becoming an investor in this country’s fight for human liberty and the contributor in a world struggle to make life free and forever peaceful for all men.” The pride of these characters, created specifically to entertain children, conflates patriotism with a love for cartoon rabbits and ducks. Comic book covers depicted Donald Duck holding a giant War Bond, reminding the child readers to invest in their country.

Disney also helped to persuade the public to pay their taxes in 1943 with the short, *The New Spirit*, which found Donald Duck learning how to fill out his tax forms and do his patriotic duty to help fund the war. Dick Huemer, who worked on *The New Spirit*, attempted to find meaning in the propaganda shorts through something other than hard data. Secretary Henry Morgenthau Jr., Huemer claims, admitted the drive for war bonds was not due to actual need, but was rather an attempt to keep spendthrifts from creating “artificial shortages in certain commodities and so possibly adversely affecting the economy.” Even their stated purpose—to have citizens pay their taxes, was perhaps simply a way to keep the citizens from being wasteful. The meaning in the cartoons, for Huemer, is to be found in the appreciation of the effort. “How effective films such as these were in helping to win the war is perhaps open to question,” he writes in conclusion to his experiences—only to accept the fact that it was, at least, a great journey. The power of these cartoons, however was undeniable. In 1943 Bosley Crowther, critic for the *New York Times*, hailed *The New Spirit* as “the most effective of the morale films yet

---

released by the government.\textsuperscript{393} That journey dealt with an attempt to educate the masses. With humor, fear, disturbing images, and the cultural capital gained by years of providing entertainment, the Walt Disney Company now hoped to help win the hearts and minds of the American people.

As Walt Disney purportedly exclaimed over contract negotiations for \textit{The New Spirit}, the studio’s tax film for the United States Treasury, using a cartoon character like Donald Duck was like MGM giving up Clark Gable. Granted, self-recognition with a cartoon mallard might be a stretch. It was not his personified upright body, however, that audiences found appealing; it was his anger, his willingness to get into trouble, his big dreams that were oftentimes dashed, as well as his willingness to be unabashedly patriotic. In this sense, Donald was a tool for “edutainment.” The country laughed with Donald Duck during the war years, but also seemed to learn with him or, if he remained impervious to insight, through his negative example. Consequently, he became the studio’s most popular character.

Donald Duck showed Americans the fragility of our world. In short, it \textit{can} happen here, to borrow from Sinclair Lewis’ famous play. Fascism, corruption, laziness, lust, greed—these faults can happen \textit{within} our own borders. The big picture from many of the cartoons created by the Walt Disney Studios during the war years is that we are vulnerable as individuals and as a society. Whispers can bring down walls, a corrupt teacher can be the most destructive force in the world. Our minds are battlegrounds of reason and emotion. With \textit{The New Spirit}, Disney proved that the animated cartoon could

\textsuperscript{393} Bosley Crowther, as quoted in Norman M. Klein, \textit{Seven Minutes: the Life and Death of the American Animated Cartoon}, (London: Verso, 1993), 186.
be used as a powerful tool to convince audiences of an unwelcomed idea. If Donald Duck could persuade the American public to pay their taxes, what else could he do?

**A Fearful Education**

With overseas markets dried up because of the war, a brand new studio to maintain, and a stable of artists who just went through a lengthy union transformation, Walt Disney made the choice to fully engage in government work during the war. “Donald used to be a comedian,” one author noted, “Now he marches as to war.”\(^{394}\) After his experiences on *The New Spirit*, with the finances challenged by the government and his motives challenged by the public, as Walt Disney biographer Neil Gabler puts it, “Reluctantly Walt Disney crossed the line into propaganda.\(^ {395}\) Having already created a feature length cartoon for the C.I.A.A., *Saludos Amigos* (1942), ostensibly a part of the Good Neighbor Policy,\(^ {396}\) Disney animators began work on four explicit propaganda cartoons. These would not be the usual educational shorts about malaria or hygiene. Instead, they would focus on specific anti-fascist themes. *Education for Death* was the first put into production in June of 1942. It was followed by *Chicken Little, Reason and Emotion*, and *Donald in Nutzi Land* (later renamed *Der Fuehrer’s Face* after the Spike Jones song became a hit). *Chicken Little* was released in late 1943, the last of four

---

\(^{394}\) Carroll, 96.

\(^{395}\) Gabler, 390.

\(^{396}\) Disney’s trip to South America and resulting films, *Saludos Amigos* and *The Three Caballeros*, were made to help bridge the divide between the Americas, as Disney characters interacted with and learned from their South American neighbors. For more on these films, see Kaufman, J. B. Kaufman, *South of the border with Disney: Walt Disney and the Good Neighbor Program, 1941-1948*, (New York: Disney Editions, 2009).
contracted cartoons by the Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, a deal that gave Disney $14,000 for each film.

The films became some of the most explicit and pessimistic films the company ever created. For over two years the Disney Studio had been dealing with the United States government, both as one of its propaganda production units as well as an unsuspecting landlord. The series for the C.I.A.A. addressed more psychological aspects of the war and their subjects—death, Nazi education, mental instability and nightmares all prove fascinating in their forms onscreen. As argued above, Disney engaged in propaganda while using it himself, and, as Henry Giroux argues in *The Mouse that Roared*, the shorts manipulate the viewer “while ironically issuing repeated warnings to viewers not to allow emotion to short circuit their critical faculties.”

As is well known, cultural theorists Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno had a lengthy dialogue on the cultural and ideological implications of cartoons in general and Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse in particular. In the transformation of identity, mass culture, and political subjectivity in the years leading up to and including Disney's emergence as a cultural force, critical theory (arguably the original version of what we now call “cultural studies”) discussed these cartoons to examine what Benjamin called the "manifold interpretability" of a mouse so beloved by audiences. The elastic qualities of Mickey's body, the violence his diegetic trials and tribulations occasioned in the safe setting of cartoon diegesis, and the laughter and other bodily reactions elicited from the

397 Shale, 61.
398 Giroux, 137.
audience were of interest to Benjamin in particular, who keenly scoured mass culture for potentially subversive qualities.

For Theodor Adorno, who was much more skeptical about mass culture and, together with Max Horkheimer, used Hollywood as a case study for entertainment as mass deception, Donald Duck was an example of how cartoons exercise cultural control. He initially argues along lines evocative of Benjamin’s reasoning: “Cartoons were once exponents of fantasy as opposed to rationalism. They ensured that justice was done to the creatures and objects they electrified, by giving the maimed specimens a second life.” 400 But this statement is followed by a more pessimistic conclusion: “All they do today is confirm the victory of technological reason over truth.”401 One of the Frankfurt School’s central theses, articulated in The Dialectic of Enlightenment, is a radical critique of reason. Adorno and Horkheimer’s sweeping analysis ends up positing fascism as an outcome of enlightenment culture, under which reason has devolved into a tool that dominates rather than empowers humankind. The authors place reason (in the sense of rationalized organization) at a startling distance from and in direct contradistinction to a more philosophical concept of truth. For Adorno, Donald Duck is the most strident representative of this phenomenon. With a character like Donald, who is interpreted as a common man, cartoons “hammer into every brain the old lesson that continuous friction, the breaking down of all individual resistance, is the condition of life in this society.

---

401 Ibid.
Donald Duck in the cartoons and the unfortunate in real life get their thrashing so that the audience can learn to take their own punishment.\footnote{402}

While this insight can be applied to the wartime cartoons, particularly in Donald Duck’s treatment as a soldier, a new taxpayer, and eventually, in the nightmarish realm of Nutzi Land, the cartoons do not embody the defeatist logic Adorno and Horkheimer saw at work in the angry little duck who stood in for the American public. In fact, the wartime cartoons were strident statements against the very fascism that the authors of The Dialectic of Enlightenment polemically posited as the direct outcome rather than an aberration of the Enlightenment. I read the wartime cartoons as a site that demonstrate that the relationship between reason and anti-reason has mutated from ambiguity to an irreducible, overtly articulated paradox. This becomes especially clear as Disney and his animators use the classroom as a subject.

Disney uses the realm of education in these films to embrace his concept of childhood innocence while arguing that the classroom is the most dangerous place. The propaganda shorts of 1943 provide a convincing critique of fascist propaganda, but they become propaganda themselves. Their critique turns into its own fearful image of education, a site on which reason overlaps with anti-reason and education with propaganda. Whatever one may think of Disney’s political leanings and cultural legacy, it is highly doubtful that he was unaware of this dilemma, but there is more than one way of assessing this awareness historically. Giroux states that “historical perspective on the subject matter sets in relief how Disney's critique of propaganda using the medium of

\footnote{402 Ibid.}
animation inevitably ventures into the realm of propaganda itself." However, Disney knew full well that he was engaging in propaganda. Gabler’s assessment of Disney’s hesitancy reflects more of a decision to stay away from another entangled contractual agreement with the government than a real worry about using propaganda.

*Chicken Little* re-imagines the classic fable as a cautionary tale against the powers of persuasion. At a mere suggestion, a fox is able to destroy an entire community. Here, education, or persuasion is deadly, a warning sign for those in the audience. The film begins with a fox at the chicken coop gate, licking his chops—Foxey Loxey, the villain in Walt Disney’s 1943 short, looks out over the high walls of the chicken coop, trying to figure out just how to get to his dinner inside. “There’s more than one way to pluck a chicken,” he tells the audience before smiling menacingly and yelling out, “Psychology!” Immediately we understand that this is not the usual retelling of the classic fable in which a fox takes advantage of a group of animals, encouraging their fears that the sky is falling. Here, the big walls stand in for isolationist tendencies, and the wolf is a foreign menace, manipulating the masses into hysteria and undermining the power of the community leaders. In the first moments of the cartoon, we are introduced to a handful of unsuspecting citizens. There are gossiping hens, cackling over bridge and knitting and there are slobbering ducks, drinking away every afternoon. There are ignorant young “jitter-birds” decked out in zoot suits, aimlessly disregarding the reality around them, and the intelligent turkeys whose intellectualizing without action is just as bad. Finally,

---

403 Giroux, 137.
404 The image of young chickens dancing in zoot suits could be an allusion to the riots that occurred in California during the summer of 1943, during which Mexican-American youths were attacked by American sailors. However, framed as “jitter-bugs”, and with red, purple, yellow, and blue chickens dancing, this also may just be a commentary on the youth who disregard the seriousness of the events around them.
there is Cockey Lockey, the head of the community—a rooster in charge of production and organization, and Chicken Little, described as being “short on brains” but a good egg. In the end, all of these characters will fall prey to the psychologically savvy fox who licks their bones clean with a smile on his face. The common story of Chicken Little is one of the most harrowing cartoons the Disney unit ever made, encouraging the audience to think for themselves, avoid gossip, and be wary of their leaders. Ostensibly using the fox as a stand-in for fascist leaders who are able to convince an unwitting mass into committing violence or erupting in hysteria, the cartoon carefully asks the audience to question any form of persuasion.

In a complicated way, this short confronts the very nature of propaganda, because it not only cautions against it, but also practices it. In this instance, the fox uses the power of persuasion, “educating” Chicken Little about the world while nudging him toward paranoia and fear. The power of persuasion is seen here as a force for ill while again we see that freedom of thought and choice as powerful American tools for creating an identity outside the strictures of government interference and propaganda. This is a clear contradiction, yet the viewer only sees this manipulation as troublesome when aligned with the fascistic powers the fox is made to represent.

At the beginning of Chicken Little, the fox stalks the outside of a chicken coup, using readings from a psychology book. (Figure 4.4) As Leonard Maltin explains in his introduction to the cartoon on the DVD release, the text was originally intended to be a copy of Mein Kampf, Adolf Hitler’s autobiographical blueprint for the National Socialist Party, but changed when it was deemed a little too obvious—to infect the minds of the
inhabitants and get his dinner. He reads, “To influence the masses, aim first at the least intelligent.” Pulling back a slingshot and sending a chunk of wood sailing at Chicken Little’s head, the fox begins his task of convincing the community of the sky falling. The “least intelligent” Chicken Little attempts to drum up support for his fears, the newly formed bump on his head as evidence of impending doom. In the first instance, the head Rooster, Cockey Lockey, is able to quell the community’s fears, using logic and reasoning to ensure their safety.

With his first attempts foiled, the fox continues on his quest, reading to the audience, “Undermine the faith of the masses in their leaders.” By starting gossip throughout the henhouse, the fox is able to influence the ignorant as well as the intelligent. He whispers to the ducks of Cockey Lockey’s drinking habits, to the intelligent turkeys of his “totalitarian tendencies.” While simple lies help to undermine the power of the rooster, the fox coaxes Chicken Little to take power, after which he convinces the birds to run into the “safety” of a nearby cave. Through only a small effort of speech—a gentle coaxing of the masses into hysteria—the fox is able to use educational means to propel his plan forward. Their leader struck down by the fox, the group eagerly takes flight to the cave where the fox is waiting, bib in hand and “In to lunch” sign ready to post.

Though the narrator consoles the audience that everything will be fine, the fox is then seen licking clean the wishbones of his apparent kills, setting them down in an

---

405 *Chicken Little*, directed by Clyde Geronimi (1943; Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Home Video, 2003), DVD.
orderly graveyard. We realize the fox has succeeded in infiltrating the farm and eating all the birds. He converses with the narrator. “That’s not how it ends in my book,” the narrator gasps, to which the satisfied wolf replies, “Don’t believe everything you read, brother!” This notion that we cannot believe everything we read, hear, see, or are taught runs through all of the cartoons presented here. In *Chicken Little*, the cartoon ends with little fanfare, the audience left to ponder its moral. Complex precisely because it espouses caution when dealing with what we read and hear while preaching a message of its own, the cartoon is a sly deliverer of propaganda, denouncing evil methods of persuasion while clearly influencing the audience all the same. The fox never uses force. In fact, the danger stems entirely from the weakness of the community. Gossip, fear, and unfounded speculations help to destroy the bonds on the farm, while the fox barely lifts a finger. This also challenges the very authority of the narrator and challenges the stability of the message.

*Reason and Emotion* presents the torrent of information and gossip as a terrible force, which must be considered with a well-tempered mind. The overload of information provided by radio, newspapers and even town gossip rattles around in a personified brain, in which a well-dressed man (Reason), must battle a caveman with a club (Emotion) in order to digest news and rule over our impulses. They struggle between our visceral responses to wartime horrors and a more rational approach. Beginning with a shot of a scale, a narrator illustrates to the audience the dynamics of the internal struggles between the two warring sides, declaring that, “Each one of us is equipped with the ability to think, known as Reason and the ability to feel, known as Emotion. Within the mind of
each of us, these two wage a ceaseless battle for mastery.” In *Reason and Emotion*, for example, the character Reason exclaims, “Don’t believe everything you hear!” hoping that his words will quell the character of Emotion, who is about to club him over the head. Depicting the battle in the brain of a man from childhood to adulthood, the cartoon pits Emotion, drawn as a caveman and Reason, drawn as an eyeglass-wearing businessman. Their back and forth dynamic causes the man to humorously get slapped by a woman for crass behavior, but the animation develops a deeper meaning when it dissect the same balance in a German mind.

The cartoon begins by pitting the two forces against one another. As the formula goes, a child is onscreen first, wreaking havoc on himself and his home. He pushes a potted plant out a window, yanks on the tail of the household pet cat, and steps to the edge of the stairs, wanting to walk down. The narrator intones, “let’s take a look inside,” and the camera zooms in to reveal the inside of the child’s head. (Figure 4.5) Instead of different lobes of a brain, we see a compartment fitted with a window from which to look out to the world. Sitting alone in this space is a child-like caveman, excitedly looking out, indiscriminately choosing to satisfy his emotions. It is this caricature that pushes the child to the edge of the stairs in search of adventure. Of course instead of a fun journey, the baby tumbles down the steps, left hurt and crying at the bottom.

At this moment, Reason pops into existence. This business-like baby, complete with briefcase and spectacles insists that if he’d been there earlier, none of the previous events would have happened. The innocent child is no longer. Now with Reason a part of the equation, a dialogue can take place. In short, an educated mind can form, steering
the human being to a bright future. The first dangers presented are done so humorously. Though the situations are not innocuous, they are used to comic effect, slapstick before the more serious issues are presented.

The little boy has turned into a man, with the two battling babes in his head now aged along with him. The caveman, complete with five o’clock shadow and tousled hair sits in the back seat of the brain while the businessman, Reason, steers the wheel. His receding hairline and proper attitude reveal his reserve. This time, trouble shows up when they walk past a beautiful woman. The caveman, drooling with lust, tells Reason they should turn around. He whispers into Reason’s ear, no doubt suggesting a lascivious turn of events, to which he retorts, “That’s no way to treat a lady!” But as they walk by, Emotion gets the better of the body, clobbering Reason over the head and steering them back to the woman. When Emotion pleads his case, “Hey baby, going my way?” he is slapped across the face. This tame example of Emotion getting the upper hand is supposed to show just how simply the balance can sway us toward a dark result.

The narrator then turns to the woman’s head, gently asking if he can look in “her pretty head” for a moment. Inside, a mirror scene is revealed. A buxom woman sits in the back seat, a short skirt clinging to her body as she rocks back and forth, complaining about boredom and her desire for food. Instead of a businessman steering, the woman has a matronly British figure at the wheel, glasses on her face and hair combed neatly beneath a dapper hat. She warns that eating too much will make them fat, suggesting tea and biscuits instead. Again Emotion wins out, and as the woman eats, her figure swells, setting alarms off in her head, Reason sitting defeated in the corner. Clearly, the
depictions of both men as lustful characters battling sexual desire while women battle their urge to eat (and consequently the worst thing that can happen to a man is a slap, while for a woman it is a large figure) are reductive, stereotypical depictions, but they are meant to set up the second phase of the cartoon.

In the second half of the short, more pressing issues are at hand. The cartoon delves again into the notion that knowledge can be a dangerous tool if what we hear and are taught are not the right things. Cautioning the audience that in such pressing times it is important to keep a healthy balance between the easily excited, dangerous Emotion and the steady hand of Reason, we are presented a man seated before the radio, listening to the latest newscast about the war. The torrent of information is transformed; voices are made manifest, like ghosts warning of future doom. As one voice talks about a battle, a bumbling mannequin appears on the arm of the man’s chair. Another voice is personified as a man changing into a braying donkey. The final voice is an elderly woman, fearing that their food will disappear as all of it is sent to Europe while they starve. As she repeats the phrase, “starve to death,” over and over, she simultaneously crawls up the man’s arm and changes into a skeleton. The images are as unsettling as the messages, and all the fearful strains of news and gossip are too much to handle. Information is a powerful tool; the cartoon zips back into the man’s brain, where Emotion is in a tirade, perhaps slipping into madness over the news. He is about to clobber Reason again, this time for good, when the narrator stops him from getting the better of the situation. “Go ahead!” he tells Emotion. That would be just fine, “For Hitler!” The bemused pair of
battling babies listens as the cartoon proceeds to tell them just how education has done
the same thing to the young Nazi.

When the camera moves in on the German man’s brain, the cartoon is no longer a
laughing matter. The same split remains, a caveman and a businessman. This time,
however, the caveman wears a horned crown, just so we get the message that this
caricature is a German, straight out of the *Flight of the Valkyries*. Whereas the
knowledge about the war came from newspapers and radio for the American, for the
German man his only point of reference is the rhetoric of Adolf Hitler. This transition, as
many in this cartoon can be read, leaves the viewer to find comparisons between these
two minds. Is the malleability of one brain any different than another?

The narrator gives examples of each way that the dictator can manipulate his
audience. Fear, pride, sympathy and hatred—these strong emotions are all thrown at the
German people, the tirade so strong that they begin to erode the balance between Reason
and Emotion. When Hitler whines that he only wants peace, Emotion cries with him.
When Hitler yells about the racial superiority of the German people, Emotion throws out
his chest, proudly boasting while Reason shrinks smaller and smaller. Finally, when
Hitler screams hateful words, Reason finds himself surrounded by barbed wire, Emotion
ready for the kill, bayonet in hand.

Again, education here is so powerful it can turn a mind away from logic and right
thinking. Emotions, easily swayed by drama and simplistic views of the world are clearly
at risk when bombarded with propaganda. The cartoon becomes its own subject.
Knowledge, displaced in the form of propaganda, is shown to be most dangerous. What
then, can the audience learn from this message? At what point is knowledge not overpowering and threatening? When it is patriotically American, extolling freedom and democracy, the cartoon explains.

The narrator takes over one last time, telling the captive audience of Reason and Emotion that they have now learned their lesson. The moral of the tale is that Reason and Emotion should work together, strong patriotic emotion combined with well-balanced reason. Yet, the cartoon cannot escape the contradictions that inhere its own mission, as conveyed through its form and specatorial address. Together, says the narrator, they can defeat any enemy. As their pride grows, both Reason and Emotion salute the American ideal of freedom and democracy. Their barren room now turns into a cockpit. Zooming out more, the head of a fighter pilot is revealed. With Reason in the driver’s seat, and Emotion backing him up, they are fearless in battle. The cartoon places responsibility squarely on the individual. Again, just as in Chicken Little, words, speeches, psychology, and imagery become more powerful than force. The individual must be cautious of the messages being sent out, and aware of the dangers of Emotion taking control. This propaganda cartoon calls for discrimination when listening to messages, all while trying to impart its own.

The nightmare of Nazism is depicted as just that in Der Fuehrer’s Face. In it, Donald Duck wakes in Nazi Germany and goes through the horrors of Nazi control. Joining a marching band of Mussolini and Hirohito, Donald moves on to a factory to work long hours putting together shell casings. In Education for Death, the indoctrination of a Nazi youth is shown as the progression of innocence through
education and finally death. What is fascinating about these shorts is their transferability to democratic ideals; the power of education can easily be applied for good as Donald’s hard work and his sacrifice could be positive—if only he were not forced to do it by Hitler.

In this sense, Der Fuehrer’s Face is a primer for the more grim depiction of life in Education for Death. Donald’s nightmare is foregrounded by a ridiculous song by Chuck Jones. Written for the film, the song, titled Der Fuehrer’s Face became so popular it forced the studio to rename the cartoon—originally Donald in Nutzi Land. The invasive presence of the loudspeaker is an ever-present reminder to Donald of what to do. The song mocks this, each line beginning with “When the Fuehrer tells us,” and acknowledging the complicity with each “Heil!” In a semi-humorous way, the audience is shown the bombardment of ideology in the Nazi nightmare of existence. It again points to the instability of ideology, as the song is, on its surface, in praise of the Fuehrer, but holds a different meaning altogether when viewed as a ridiculous march filled with loud Bronx cheers.

Donald wakes and prepares a meager breakfast of coffee and toast, which actually consists of one coffee bean, dipped in water and a piece of toast sawed off an apparently brick-like loaf of bread. After eating, he is dragged out into the swastika-filled landscape to march to work. After working for hours, Donald slips into insanity, entering a dream sequence filled with grimacing bullets and unending screams of “Heil!” As his world slips out of control, he finally wakes up from the dream. Only a nightmare, he begins to heil the shadow on his wall, only to realize it is the shadow of his own statuette of the Statue of Liberty, to which he quickly runs over and embraces. (Figure 4.6) This image is
not meant to confuse the audience about how close symbols of American freedom are to any fascist ideology, but perhaps just how powerful any ideological symbol can be.

What these cartoons examine, however, are the powerful possibilities of education; in Hans’ transformation into a Nazi, American audiences could appreciate their own classroom experiences and freedom from propaganda. In this sense, the films’ assigning of a double valence inadvertently demonstrates how precarious the workings of ideology really are. Donald’s acts of secret rebellion in the early scenes of Der Fuehrer’s Face can just as easily be seen as sacrifice, if only he were openly acting in such a way instead of hiding from the Nazis. Likewise, his marching in the band could just as easily show pride in democracy rather than Nazism and his long hours in the factory making bullets could have been an American effort. The differences, however, lie in the messages behind the work. Here again we see the ambiguity of intent—is education a power for good or evil? Or is the message simply about the power of education itself?

The final cartoon in the series is the animated interpretation of Gregor Ziemer’s work, Education for Death: the Making of a Nazi, one of the most visceral warnings produced by the Disney studio during the war. In it, education is directly equated with power, as a small child is indoctrinated into the Nazi way of life. (Figure 4.7) In an early scene from the short, Hans, the subject is given a lecture on power and weakness at school one day. On the blackboard, a simplistic drawing of a grinning fox and a rabbit comes alive; the sharp-toothed fox launches forward, chasing the defenseless rabbit into the corner where he picks it up in its mouth, swallows it whole and licks his chops in glorious satisfaction. In a moment, the base of a fable has been perverted. Perhaps the
simplistic style of the drawing is to echo its possibilities for interpretation. The teacher, turning to his young students asks for a reaction. Hans, a blond-haired, blue-eyed child meekly responds, “The poor rabbit.” Aghast, the entire classroom quickly turns on the boy, shouting and mocking his innocence and stupidity. Hans is sent to his own corner in shame. After a few moments of listening to his teacher’s invective remarks and the joyous celebration of the power spewing from his classmates’ mouths, Hans rises and cries out, “I hate the rabbit, there’s no room for weaklings!” In this heartbreaking moment the power of the classroom—and of animation—becomes very clear. Hans’ education pummels him into an obedient student, critical of weakness and devoid of compassion.

Beginning with Hans’ birth, his parents present the government with all necessary proof of pure ancestry; they are mindful to reject any of the forbidden names, such as Joshua or Isaac, a point made all the more poignant in an image of other “verboten” names on the government’s list, such as Jacob, Amos, and Sara. Education for Death then follows the evolution of the young student into a mindless automaton for the German army. In a harrowing final scene, the legion of men Hans joins marches off into their future while their bodies slowly fade away to reveal their fate as grave markers.

Ziemer’s text, published in 1941 gives a detailed account of the German education system, analyzing its adroitness at indoctrinating young German children into the ideological constructs of racial superiority. What is compelling, though, is his final chapter, in which he calls for a new spirit of American education. ‘Education for Life’ encapsulates his admiration of the German system. Even if we cannot possibly admire
the message of the Nazis, he argues, we must admit its potential and results have been remarkable. Ziemer is so sure of the effects of such a strong system he worries that defeat on the battlefield will be just one step toward defeating the deeper roots of the Hitler ideologies.

Ziemer calls for a reinvigoration of the American school systems, engaging the students while building in them the spirit he feels has sorrowfully left the classroom. It is the spirit of pride and of sacrifice that Ziemer asks teachers to impart to a generation he fears will “never really thrill to the sight of the American flag until they have lived under a dictator.” Writing about the potentials of the American system of education, he encapsulates the messages that can be revived while celebrating the potential already available:

American schools are the best-equipped, the best-housed, the best-managed educational institutions in the world today. American education has always been an education for life. We have always stressed breadth if not depth, feeling that knowledge of many things will make for more joy in living. We have adopted the theory that those who know something of everything, ‘from the pebbles to the stars,’ will get just that much more personal enjoyment out of their environment and their spiritual and emotional life.

These words embrace the amazing potential of the school systems of America, hoping that with such a system in place, a thirst for knowledge may spread into a more fulfilling

---

407 Ziemer, 195.
life. During wartime, especially after the long years of the Depression, the American mythology of individualism still lay under scrutiny. The classroom became, for Ziemer, the center of ideology.

In the same years Ziemer was writing his work, Walt Disney was engaged in educating America while attempting to reinvigorate the masses with precisely the same spirit Ziemer found lacking. In a laughable, yet disturbing sequence, the cartoon describes Hans’ first exposure to the fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty* in kindergarten. Being taught that the evil witch was democracy, the sleeping princess Germany, and the knight in shining armor Hitler, Hans is molded early on to believe in the righteousness of Hitler and the superiority of the German race. Of course Disney himself would use the exact same tactics in *Chicken Little* and other shorts—displaying the fox as a Nazi and the chickens as impressionable Americans. Hans’ education, if turned toward positive messages, could be ideal for the American system. Pride is great for the United States, but is viewed as dangerous in the context of indoctrination. As Ziemer argues in the text the cartoon is based upon, the methodology is excellent, only the message is disgusting.

What Disney tackles are the same fears of Ziemer and Donald Duck in other cartoons by showing sacrifice and pride as honorable values—if done in the name of freedom and democracy. Much of Disney’s other cartoons of the war period deal with morale building and sacrifice. Extolling the virtues of democracy and fiscal responsibility, these cartoons display a post-Depression spirit in America. Taking a page from Ziemer’s assessment of American education, Disney will follow his advice, “If we are to combat the spirit of German youth with our own spirit of Democracy, it will have
to be a rejuvenated, revived spirit. It will have to be a spirit as fiery in its concentration as Nazism is in German schools.\textsuperscript{408} This new spirit will take form in the everyday trials of beloved characters such as Minnie Mouse and Donald Duck, and most of their trials will involve sacrifice, a defining characteristic of wartime American perseverance.

**Conclusion: A Future in the Classroom**

In the first and only edition of *Dispatch from Disney*, a newsletter put together by the studio for staff serving in the armed forces, Walt included a forward-looking introduction, encouraging his artists to celebrate their current wartime work as it prepared them for a bright future as educators:

Making films for the development of better understanding between North and South America, we look forward to similar work on a world-wide scale. New and better types of educational motion pictures must give cohesion to this torn earth. Light for China and India must reach their millions through the projection machine. Science, Economics and Industry must be given a voice which all can understand. With these and a thousand other problems, the motion picture can be more helpful than any other force. This is the work to which you will return with the ending of war. It is an important part of the work to be done, a good thought to hold. Using

\textsuperscript{408} Ziemer, 196.
the ways and means which the art of animation is acquiring through films for war, you will make constructive educational films for peace.409

What can be said about Walt Disney’s foray into education and propaganda in the 1940s is that it helped launch him into other directions other than the animated film. These future experiments included his theme park, his television programs, documentary work, and his historical films. Unlike the other subjects in this dissertation the war did not necessarily find its way into the subject matter of Disney’s future work, but rather the experience opened up an entirely new outlook on the possibilities for his product.

409 Dispatch from Disney’s, (Walt Disney Productions, 1943). This quote comes from the introductory letter by Walt Disney for employees serving in the military.
Figure 4.1 The Big Bad Wolf as a Nazi in *The Thrifty Pig* (1941)
Figure 4.2 An article on *Education for Death*, appearing in *Life*, February 1, 1943
Figure 4.3 A United States Treasury Bond featuring Disney characters
Figure 4.4 A scene in *Chicken Little* (1943), where the fox uses a psychology book, originally planned as *Mein Kampf*
Figure 4.5 The view inside a human brain in *Reason and Emotion* (1943)
Figure 4.6 Donald Duck embracing the Statue of Liberty in *Der Fuehrer’s Face* (1943)
Figure 4.7 German children pledge their allegiance in *Education for Death* (1943)
Conclusion

Wars cannot be waged without soldiers to fight in them. They are the heart of the forces, guided by their officers while being asked to make the ultimate sacrifices. During World War II, the United States government helped mobilize millions of men and women to fight around the world in an effort to topple the forces of fascism. Among them were hundreds of artists ready to interpret the experiences of war, procure information for the citizens at home, or provide entertainment for the soldiers. The visual culture of the war manifested itself in many ways, and this project considers just a small fraction of the work done during this time. It elaborates on the stories of four men—Jacob Lawrence, John Huston, Bill Mauldin, and Walt Disney, whose work during the war years confronted the various tensions that arise when human beings are sent from their homes and families, trained to kill, and asked by their government to help lead a war effort.

For the artists who went with them, war was not always glorious, and the images they produced reveal an undercurrent of tension that provides the foundation for this project. Although they worked for different branches of the government in far-flung parts of the world, serving in the Coast Guard or the Army, stationed in Alaska or Italy, they all celebrated the goals of the war and the soldiers who fought while simultaneously exploring the hardships and horrors that war inflicts on the people who fight it. That each of these artists are able to create these works while under the auspices of the government or military, shows how some of these contradictions are inherent in war itself. Under closer inspection, they can be read not as subversive acts, but revelatory ones.
Jacob Lawrence’s work explores the tension between his experiences on an integrated Coast Guard vessel. As an artist he was able to interpret these tensions both symbolically and literally—depicting his racially integrated shipmates working in harmony during the war as well as the suffering inflicted on the family members who lost sons and husbands on the battlefield. His work is also a hopeful exploration of how democracy might work when enacted at home, where the community he left behind was far from harmoniously integrated, one of the great hypocrisies of the war.

John Huston’s documentaries can be read as patriotic narratives—indeed on the surface they remain so, offering the viewer a laudatory view of the heroic soldier. Whether facing the dangers on the battlefield or on a bombing mission, the men in Huston’s films are consistently described as strong men who simply want to go home. Many of them do not leave those battlefields, and some who do are psychologically scarred. Over the course of three films, Huston, while continuing to express gratitude for the soldier, shows how war can slowly destroy a soldier, whether they are physically injured or not.

Mauldin’s Willie and Joe stand in for the millions of men who fought on the front lines, lost a friend in a battle, and then were criticized for not standing at attention, or having a button undone. Mauldin’s “dogfaces,” fight, drink, and march their way through the war, stopping intermittently to muse on their place in the universe. They do all this while surrounded by death, a constant reminder that each day might be their last, making medals less of a reward than a pair of new socks.
Walt Disney shows that education can be a powerful tool, and that propaganda can be a corrupting influence. In the wrong hands, an empathetic young man can be corrupted into a faceless machine of war. An apathetic public might be swayed by a simple suggestion that the sky is falling, or take for granted the walls they have built to isolate them from the world. On a broader level, Disney’s animated cartoons critique propaganda while engaging in the very act.

This study is by no means exhaustive, and strands of the conversation started here lead in many different directions. Though I focus on the arts, a section on photography and its mediation of reality during the war, or the interpretive words of poets and novelists could form an extension of this topic. Likewise, focusing on just one artist or one medium could form a valid extension to this project, exposing other issues such as gender or class. The men examined here, I have argued, form a specific subset of artists worthy of further study, in particular because their stories remain largely untold. Furthermore, the tensions and contradictions of war are still with us today. Bill Mauldin’s attacks on politicians who searched for a land of pure Americanism, or his barbs about racism, might not seem out of place on the editorial pages now. Likewise, Jacob Lawrence’s depictions of an integrated military and society finds a corollary in the Black Lives Matter movement. A battlefield in Iraq or Afghanistan could stand in for Huston’s San Pietro. Long after Walt Disney showed how powerful the classroom could be, the fights over how we educate our children continues. What this project reveals is that while soldiers may be at the heart of battle, war affects citizens and soldiers alike. The work
discussed here moves beyond the movie theater or the classroom, revealing the tensions that still exist in our world.
Works Cited

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


Becker, Stephen. *Comic Art in America: A Social History of the Funnies, the Political


“Hitler’s Children.” *Life*, February 1, 1943.


"Walt Disney: Great Teacher." *Fortune*, August 1942.


Wheat, Ellen Harkins, and Jacob Lawrence. *Jacob Lawrence: The Frederick Douglass*


ROBERT RIBERA
98 Mountfort St. #1
Boston, MA 02215
(904) 316-9866
robert.ribera@gmail.com

EDUCATION

Present
Ph.D. American Studies A.B.D.
Boston University
Qualifying Exam Fields: Film Studies, Twentieth Century American Art History, Twentieth Century American History
Dissertation: As a Soldier, an Artist, and a Man: Art and War in the works of Jacob Lawrence, John Huston, Bill Mauldin, and Walt Disney

2008
M.F.A. Film Studies (Honors)
Boston University
Thesis: The Cinema of Joel and Ethan Coen

2006
M.A. English (Honors)
St. John’s University
Thesis: Filming the American Dreamscape: Suburbia in Film

2005
B.A. English (Honors)
St. John’s University

TEACHING

Lecturer, Boston University
-- Television History
-- The Films of the Coen Brothers
--American Cinema of the 1970s

Lecturer, Rhode Island School of Design (RISD)
--Modern American Art 1900-1950

Lecturer, Emerson College
-- History of Media Arts

Lecturer, Suffolk University
-- Screenwriting

**Teaching Assistant**, Boston University


**PUBLISHED WORK**

**BOOKS**


**FILMS**

Associate Producer, “For the Love of Movies: The Story of American Film Criticism”

Associate Producer, “Archie’s Betty”

**REVIEWS**


**EDITORIAL**

Founder/Editor-in-Chief, *Confluence* American Studies Review Journal, Boston University

Founder/Editor-in-Chief, *Light & Shadow* Film Journal, Boston University

Editor-in-Chief, *Focus* Alumni Magazine, Boston University College of Communication

Editor-in-Chief, *The Humanities Review* Academic Review Journal, St. John’s University

Editor-in-Chief, *Sequoya* Literary and Art Journal, St. John’s University

**LECTURES GIVEN/CONFERENCES**


January 7, 2016  “Conquest of the Useless: Transcendence in the films of Werner Herzog”
American Philosophy Association Conference
Washington, DC

November 7, 2015  “After the Hospital: Trauma in John Huston’s Let There Be Light and Paul Thomas Anderson’s The Master”
Film & History Conference
Madison, WI

American Literature Association Conference
Boston, MA

December 6, 2014  “Asleep to Believe it: George Carlin’s American Dream”
American Humor Studies Association/ Mark Twain Circle of America Conference
New Orleans, LA

October 8, 2014  “Emancipations: John Brown, as painted by Horace Pippin and Jacob Lawrence”
Emancipations: Lineages, Legacies, and Limits: NEASA Annual Conference
Roger Williams University, Bristol, RI

March. 28-29, 2014  “The Body and the Black Hills: Preacher Smith and Seth Bullock’s Fictional Relationship in David Milch’s, Deadwood”
The Body of America: EASA Annual Conference,
LaSalle University, Philadelphia, PA
February 24, 2010  
**German Expressionism**  
History of Film Lecture series: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

October 1-3, 2010  
“Don’t Believe Everything You Read, Buster”: The Propaganda Cartoons of Walt Disney  
The Arts and the Public: NEASA Annual Conference, Massachusetts Historical Society

Feb. 10-13, 2010  
“Of Ice and Snow”: Richard Nixon in Ang Lee’s *The Ice Storm*  
Southwest/Texas Popular and American Culture Association Annual Conference, Albuquerque, New Mexico

GRANTS/FELLOWSHIPS/SCHOLARSHIPS

2005  
**Merck-Figueira Scholarship**, St. John’s University

2005  
**Rev. Donald J. Harrington Scholarship**, St. John’s University

UNIVERSITY SERVICE

2015  
**President - Graduate Student Organization**  
American and New England Studies Program, Boston University

2008  
**Graduate Student Representative on Dean Search Committee, Dean of the College of Communication**  
Boston University College of Communication

2006 - Present  
**Residence Life Graduate Resident Assistant**  
Boston University Office of Residence Life
PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

American Studies Association
New England American Studies Association – Council Member
Society of Cinema and Media Studies